

CASTING A WIDE NET

A Heritage Conserved



An Essay by C. Paige Gutierrez, Ph.D.
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CASTING A WIDE NET: A HERITAGE CONSERVED

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Introduction

In this essay I speak as a folklorist and native Biloxian. Folklorists study traditional culture, those art forms, skills, beliefs, customs, and areas of knowledge that are passed from person to person, usually down through the generations. Traditional or folk culture is often associated with a particular group of people—ethnic, regional, occupational, religious or a combination. It can be old or new. It is not standardized. It is not invented by marketing specialists, and it does not depend on mass production or advertising campaigns for its existence. Traditional culture and a familiar natural environment combine to produce a "sense of place."

The public image of a folklorist is the eccentric collector of old songs, stories, and superstitions. Many say the folklorist is like the butterfly collector—an interesting hobby, if you have nothing better to do, but hardly relevant to everyday life. The very name of the discipline—folklore—is laden with connotations of academic obscurity.

In reality, the job of the folklorist as trained professional is to help communities identify and preserve their heritage, to tell their own stories, through museums, displays, festivals, concerts, books, exhibits, video recordings, sound recordings, and teaching. The work of the folklorist offers an antidote to the cynicism of mass media and the numbing effects of mass advertising and mass marketing. Folklorist Alan Lomax warns that:

Cultural variety lies under threat of extinction. A grey-out is in progress which, if it continues unchecked, will fill our human skies with the smog of the phony and cut the families of men off from a vision of their own cultural constellations. A mismanaged, over-centralized electronic communication system is imposing a few standardized, mass-produced and cheapened cultures everywhere.

Culture is not simply something with a capital "C" that is born in New York or Los Angeles and beamed out via satellite to the provinces. Sometimes folklorists must first

convince people that what they have is indeed valuable. After all, many people suffer from second generation syndrome, or they have been criticized for having old fashioned ways, or for local ways, or, as in Biloxi's case, for living in the stereotyped "sin city".

Folklorists identify and document traditional culture in its many forms, such as music, stories, cookery, work skills, crafts, festivities, religious customs, games, dances, and other expressions. Traditional culture in coastal Mississippi includes various ethnic folkways, such as African-American Gospel music, Yugoslavian pastry, Cajun waltzes and two-steps, Italian St. Joseph's Day Altars, Vietnamese Tet celebrations, Irish humor, or Southern screened porches. All of the above represent creative adaptations to the environment or artistic expressions—some help the survival of the body, some sustain the growth of the spirit.

As time goes on, folkways intermingle and some become part of a regional tradition. Indeed, it is the composite of these folkways that helps to define the special quality of the Mississippi coast as part of a region that lies "south of the South."

The Third Coast

Americans take it for granted that this country has two coasts, the Atlantic and the Pacific, the East Coast and the West Coast. We sing about this land "from sea to shining sea." This image is such an ingrained part of how Americans view America that television comedians can joke about the differences between the two Coasts, and people who live on neither can understand the humor. But there is a third coast of the United States, the South Coast, bordering a third sea, the Gulf of Mexico.

On the north central rim of the Gulf of Mexico, stretching from east of Mobile Bay to Galveston, there is a cultural region distinct from the rest of the American South. Cutting across state borders, the boundary of this region stays close to the shoreline in Alabama and Mississippi, but in Louisiana it moves northward above Lake Pontchartrain and along the Mississippi River, past Baton Rouge and the upper Atchafalaya River basin, before descending to the Gulf near the Texas-Louisiana border.

What is this region like, and why is it different from the rest of the southern states? Let us answer this question with special attention to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Ethnic Diversity

First, this region is a land of great ethnic and cultural diversity, with a French

Catholic underpinning not found elsewhere in the South. Biloxi was the first settlement (1699) in lower French Louisiana and was the mother city to New Orleans, a strategically positioned city that became a magnet for immigrants.

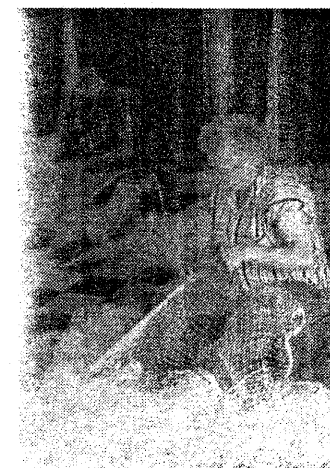
Through the years many newcomers of very diverse ethnic origins found their way to lower Louisiana and adjoining Gulf coastal areas: native Americans; various peoples of French extraction (continental French, Canadian French, Acadian French, Caribbean French Creoles); African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-American slaves; free persons of color originating both from within Louisiana and from Haiti; Germans and Swiss; Canary Islanders (Islenos) and continental Spanish; Cubans, Mexicans, and various Latin Americans; upper Mississippi and Ohio valley frontiersmen; British, Irish, and Scots people; Italians, Sicilians, Greeks, and Croatians; Polish and Lithuanian people; Lebanese; Jews; Filipinos; Chinese; midwesterners; and non-coastal Southerners, both black and white. The more recent newcomers include American military retirees; Vietnamese, Laotian, and Haitian refugees; and casino workers from various places.

Although Biloxi and nearby coastal settlements entered the union as part of a state called Mississippi, the cultural and kinship ties with lower Louisiana remained strong. The ethnic diversity typical of south Louisiana occurred in coastal Mississippi as well.

Today, two neighborhoods on Biloxi's east end illustrate the diversity that is so unlike the rural South: Back Bay and Point Cadet. These neighborhoods were entry points for seafood workers: Yugoslavian (Croatian) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Louisiana Cajun French in the early twentieth century; and Vietnamese since the late 1970's. These groups on



Capt. Tommy Schultz



Lettie Illich and Capt. Tommy Schultz at their netting.