

Delta Sources and Resources

Piecing Research into an Online Publication: *Delta Pieces: Northeast Louisiana Folklife* Online Resource by Susan Roach

In 2014 the Louisiana Division of the Arts Folklife Program launched a virtual anthology of essays: *Delta Pieces: Northeast Louisiana Folklife*, focusing on the Delta parishes in the Northeastern corner of Louisiana. Maida Owens, director of the Louisiana Folklife Program, joined me to edit the online work pre-



Lake Providence Baptism, 2009.
Photograph by Susan Roach.

senting over twenty years of research on folklife of the region. While the research has a long timespan, this massive online publication was developed in less than two years. Published on the state folklife website and designed by Nalini Raghavan, *Delta Pieces* was funded by a Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative grant from the Na-

tional Park Service through the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Overseeing the grant and functioning as peer reviewer/editor was Allison Peña, cultural anthropologist with Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve and New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park. The anthology, one of many Louisiana folklife online resources, is located on the state folklife website at the following URL: <<http://www.louisianafolklife.org/deltapieces>>.

The mission of *Delta Pieces* is to make existing research on the Louisiana Delta region accessible to the public, to sustain the traditions, and to honor the tradition bearers. The majority of the existing research on the region had been done for the Delta Folklife Project, a long-term research project begun in 1987 and coordinated by the Folklife Program in the Louisiana Division of the Arts. The goal of this research project was to document, preserve, and present the folk traditions of twelve Northeast Louisiana

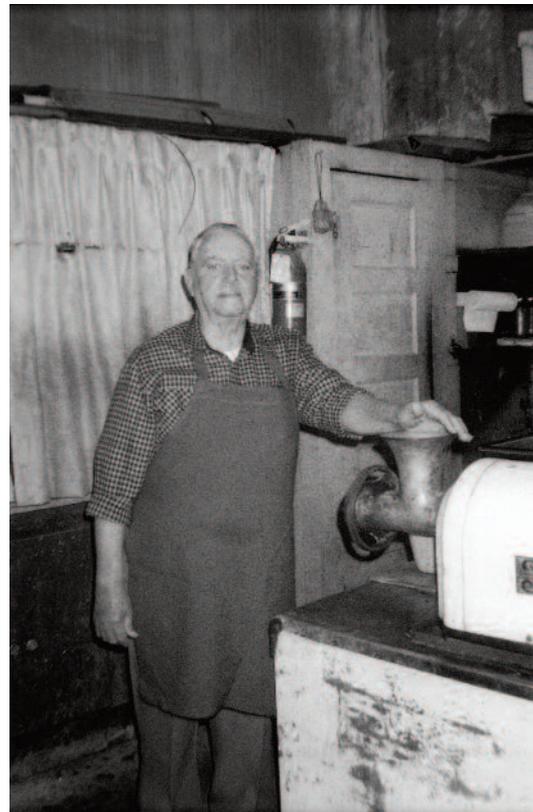
parishes, known as the Delta: Ouachita, Morehouse, West Carroll, East Carroll, Richland, Madison, Franklin, Catahoula, Caldwell, Tensas, LaSalle, and Concordia. This region is bounded on the east by the Mississippi River, which shapes the cultural region. The topography of the parishes along the river features rich

fertile “buckshot” soil. The Ouachita and Black Rivers, Catahoula Lake, and the “hills” mark the west boundary; the bluffs and the Red-Old River bound the south; and the Arkansas state line and hills mark the north.

A patchwork of 68 essays, *Delta Pieces* includes essays based on the Delta Folklife Project research from 1988-1997, along with research on the Delta region conducted during my ten years as regional folklorist from 1999-2009 for Northeast Louisiana. Also included are Delta research articles written for folklife publications such as the *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*, *Louisiana Folklife Journal*, and *Louisiana Folklife Festival Program Book*. Over the years, the Louisiana Folklife Festival presented Delta folk traditions such as Easter Rock, Delta blues, and river folklore, thus providing more traditions which are featured in this work. Another group of past publications in the anthology consists of the essays from the Smithsonian Institution’s *Festival of American Folklife Program Book* that accompanied the 1997 festival, which featured the Mississippi Delta region that year; these essays describe the region and provide contextualization for Delta traditions presented at the festival under the topics of work, play, worship, and homemaking—topics used in this work as well. The editors of *Delta Pieces* obtained permission to include these earlier articles now difficult to find. Because of the online publication, these previously published articles were left in their original style sheets, rather than changed to conform with style sheets of the new essays. Thus, this “virtual anthology” may be best thought of as a quilt pieced by many hands and loosely stitched together; it offers a one-stop collection of work featuring multiple voices, views, subjects, and groups in the Louisiana Delta.

The authors of the pieces reflect a diversity of voices, ranging from academically trained public and academic folklorists and anthropologists who conducted initial research and supervised research of other cultural specialists, graduate students, and community scholars.

These researchers submitted field reports, taped interviews (analog format), film photographs, and essay drafts. The resulting field materials varied in length and depth and covered a wide range of topics, ranging from shape-note singing to Easter Rock to Italian traditions. This research, after considerable editing and expansion, provides much of the material for the new online publication. It includes edited essays based on original submissions by the Delta researchers such as Sylvia Frantom’s “Hunter and Fisherman, Kenneth Hebert” and Marcy Frantom’s “Moses Poole on Pen Hunting in Cata-



M.J. Varino making Italian sausage in Monroe.
Photograph by Stephanie Pierotti.

houla Parish: ‘You’ve Got to Know Your Dog’s Mouth.’” In addition, new essays such as Betty Jo Harris’s “Judge Alwine Louise Smith Ragland: Louisiana’s First Woman Judge,” and April Honaker’s “Italians in the Delta: Pioneers of Monroe” were developed from the interviews and photographs that had been archived since



Poppyseed bread awaits packaging at the Mennonite Olde Dutch Bakery in Lake Providence, 1990.
Photograph by Susan Roach.

the 1990s.

Given the disparate topics of the essays, *Delta Pieces* is organized by region, groups, and genres. An introduction, an inventory of archival materials, and a bibliography frame these general subject headings. The first section of essays focuses on region through descriptions of the river culture and regional history. H. F. “Pete” Gregory, a native of Ferriday and an anthropologist who co-directed with me the initial ethnographic overview of the region, authors the majority of the material in this section, as “Reflections on the Delta,” with various subtitles to indicate their content. Gregory’s “Musings” memoir provides further background on the region in his description of growing up in the Delta. These regional pieces are followed by a section on tradition bearers of various ethnic groups who were documented: Italian, Chinese, Jewish, Mexican, and Native American. The essays reflect the randomness of the re-

search which did not include all Delta ethnic groups. The remaining six sections focus on folklore genres grouped under the titles of working, home making, worshiping, making music, playing, and telling stories.

An interactive table of contents and navigation aids, made possible through the online format, provide more convenient access to the numerous essays. The table of contents groups the 68 pieces into sections, or collapsible blocks that can be accessed by clicking on the title of the chapter. Each chapter listed in the table of contents expands when clicked to reveal all the essay titles in that chapter. For example, the section on occupational folk groups, entitled “Working in the Delta,” expands to list twelve essays. In addition to essays on various genres and groups, special essays in each block or chapter present “Delta Folks”—biographical profiles of Delta tradition bearers. These folk heroes are only some of the many interesting tradition bearers who were documented. Ideally, we would have included profiles of all the major figures interviewed for the project. The “Delta Folks” essays feature a special logo identifying these Delta artists, along with their highlighted parish on the Delta map. For navigation inside each essay, headings are used to divide text into sections, and another menu links to other related resources available on the Louisiana Folklife website.

The online publication also features interactive media components. Essays on music topics contain musical recordings, such as Po’ Henry and Tookie’s “Cotton Pickin’ Blues,” Kenny Bill Stinson’s rockabilly composition, “Taters and Gravy and Chicken-fried Steak,” and gospel singer Penola Caesar’s Dr. Watts hymns. Discussions of rituals such as the Easter Rock in Winnsboro and baptism in Lake Providence feature field video and audio recordings, providing the immediacy of the moment, taking one to the oxbow lake with the sound of boats and to the plantation church with its wooden floor sounding the drum during a *cappella* spirituals. Excerpts from interview recordings with

tradition bearers such as Kenneth Hebert, Delta hunter; Oren Russell, Mississippi River boat captain; and Whitey Shockley, river fisherman, relate their Delta adventures in authentic Delta accents. Each essay includes a menu in the right margin leading to sections with their various headings, audio, or video. The numerous docu-

lication offered benefits over print: free access locally and globally, multi-media presentations; more material at lower cost, and a good fit with the state of Louisiana folklife website <www.louisianafolklife.org>. The online virtual book publication allowed us to stitch together many different sizes and types of pieces with



Hattie Addison Burkhalter and daughter Laketa lead the 2011 Easter Rock in Winnsboro.
Photograph by Peter Jones.

mentary photographs in both color and black and white that accompany each essay can be enlarged with a click to reveal full captions and a full image.

The goal is to represent the complexities and diversity of the Delta, a contested place of extreme wealth and poverty, through a dialogic, multi-vocal approach to provide a broader ethnographic perspective, yet it is only a partial ethnography. Initially, the scholars involved in the project had debated whether the publication should be a virtual book or a coffee table book, but ultimately agreed that an online pub-

photographs and audio and video clips to document, honor, and sustain these regional traditions. Even with the large number of essays and diverse voices, we were not able to include all the Delta folks who had been documented because the grant terms and deadline ultimately dictated the contents. However, the beauty of the online publication is its availability to all who can access the Internet and the possibility of adding pieces to our Delta quilt. ▲▼▲