I had spent a year in gathering and culling over folk-tales. I loved it... So I slept a night, and the next morning I headed my toe-nails toward Louisiana and New Orleans in particular.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935)\(^1\)

Although Zora Neale Hurston, the John Lomax family, Benjamin Botkin, and others helped pioneer the scholarly study of American folklore, the novelist Kate Chopin wrote important works about the Louisiana folk during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chopin was a Saint Louis native who began writing fiction after she moved to the lower Mississippi Valley to wed a Louisiana Creole (a native Louisianan of French ancestry). Chopin was not trained as a folklorist, nor did she see herself as using folkloric method. In an 1894 letter to a publisher, she described her method in writing the popular short story collection *Bayou Folk* (1894):

I shall go on writing stories as they come to me. It is either very easy for me to write a story, or utterly impossible; that is, the story must “write itself” without any perceptible effort on my part, or it remains unwritten. There is not a tale in “Bayou Folk,” excepting the first, which required a longer time than two, or at most three sittings of a few hours each.\(^2\)

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2. Ibid., passim; “About the Lomax Family Collections,” American Folklife Center, Library of
Dubbed a local color artist by early critics, Kate Chopin was in fact the first American author to understand and communicate the important cultural distinctions between Louisiana Creoles and Acadians (Cajuns) to a national readership. *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), not the Creole-centered *Awakening* (1899), first gained Chopin a national audience as she took her readers on a journey to meet the Creoles’ country cousins, the Cajuns. They resided in central Louisiana, near Cloutierville and Natchitoches, along the Red and Cane Rivers and the Atchafalaya bayou country, where Chopin once lived. For the first time in American history, readers heard stories of the “’Cadians,” “’Cadian Ball[s],” “little ’Cadian” children living on the “’Cadian prairie,” “them Cajuns,” and rural folk described by one of Chopin’s characters as “dem low-down ’Cajuns o’ Bayeh Teche!”3

We earlier learned some of the methods of professional folklorists and can use them again now to glean an abundant harvest from *Bayou Folk*.

We get a taste of Cajun food—broiled and “glistening perch and trout,” breaded chicken “fried in bacon fat” and “chicken-pie,” chicken “gumbo-file,” and “pecan broulet” served with “café au lait” or “ink black coffee.”5 We hear folktales

Congress, https://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/, accessed Feb. 2, 2018; Kate Chopin to Waitman Barbe, Oct. 2, 1894, in *Kate Chopin’s Private Papers*, ed. Emily Toth and Per Seyersted (Bloomington, Ind., 1998), 205 (qtn.). Chopin is discussed in chapter 4, this work.


about visions and premonitions, and we also hear the music of fiddles and guitars. At a Cajun ball, the dance caller “call[s] the figures,” shouting, “S’lute yo’ partnas!” as the dancers move “fus’ fo’ard an’ back!” and “right an’ lef’ all ’roun’! Swing co’nas!”6 And, of course, we attend Catholic mass, burn candles, “hum ... the Kyrie Eleison,” and “read our litany together in the morning and say a *chapalet.*” In one tale, young lovers exchange holy water with their fingertips.7

Kate Chopin’s skill in writing vernacular English is comparable to that of Mark Twain. Because she was writing for American English speakers, Chopin does not weave in as much French as Louisiana folks spoke at the time. But her Cajun English is peppered with French, some of it translated in footnotes. Daniel Rankin notes that her “skillful handling” of vernacular English is “discreet,” adding interest to a story without distractions.8

For example, Kate Chopin’s Cajuns “make their Easters” when they receive Easter communion each year. And when the little Cajun girl Fifine takes a mind to get rid of her father’s fiddle, she declares, “I’m goin’ smash it, dat fiddle, some day in a t’ousan’ piece’!” In another story, Chopin introduces the “soft, rhythmic monotone” of the plantation manager Pierre Manton describing his work: “W’en a chimbl y breck, I take one, tw o de boys; w e patch ’im up bes’ we know how.” Pierre explains, “We keep on men’ de fence’, firs’ one place, anudder.” And when one of Chopin’s Cajun matriarchs, Baptiste, warns her husband Tontine that he is treating an Indian servant girl too harshly, she implores,

> You been grind that girl too much. She ent a bad girl—I been watch her close, ’count of the chil’ren; she ent bad. All she want it ’s li’le mo’ rope. You can’t drive a ox with the same gearin’ you drive a mule. You got to learn that, Tontine.9

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8. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and her Creole Stories*, 137–38.
Black English is interwoven with the French English vernacular, as it was in historic Louisiana. Chopin’s character La Folle says, “Oui, madame, I come ax how my po’ li’le Cheri to, ’s mo’nin.” When the irresponsible Chouchoute cries out that his horse is missing, a “sullen-looking mulatto” man grumbles, “Who you reckon tech yo’ hoss, boy? … You did n’ have no call to lef’ in in de road, fus’ place.” Chopin’s Black plantation worker La Chatte (“the female cat”) criticizes a New Orleans businessman for his attentions to the bethrothed heroine Euphrasie: “Dat young man, ef he want to listen to me, he gwine quit dat ar caperin’ round Miss ’Phrasie.” Her work mate retorts, “Law! La Chatte, you ain’ gwine hinder a gemman f’om payin’ intentions to a young lady w’en he a mine to.”

American folk speech, folktales, and history all come together in Chopin’s (very) short story about Old Aunt Peggy, an aged Louisiana plantation slave entering her new life as a free person because “the war was over.” Indifferent to the pivotal events surrounding her, “Aunt Peggy went to Monsieur, and said:— ‘Massa, I ain’t never gwine to quit yer. I’m gittin’ ole an’ feeble, an’ my days is few in dis heah lan’ o’ sorrow an’ sin. All I axes is a li’le co’ner whar I kin set down an’ wait peaceful fu de en.’” Aunt Peggy is given a nice cabin and a rocking chair, and “she has been rocking ever since,” but Chopin ends the story with a little surprise. Employing a recurrent tale motif (also used by Mark Twain), Chopin concludes dryly, “Aunt Peggy is a hundred and twenty-five, so she says. It may not be true, however. Possibly she is older.”

ALLIGATOR HORSE, ALWAYS

Kate Chopin’s stories mirror an interesting niche within a huge body of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mississippi

9. Ibid., 137; Chopin, Bayou Folk, 53, 8, 112. Chopin translates Pierre’s expletive tonnerre as “thunder and lightning!”
10. Chopin, Bayou Folk, 60, 118, 15.
Valley folk traditions. While it is impossible to systematically discuss all contemporary Mississippi Valley folkways, this chapter will look at a small sampling of folk heroes, religious practices, food, and workways in the traditions of southern Jews, Cajun cowboys, houseboaters, and rivermen. A good place to start is a modern folk hero type with strong connections to America’s antebellum era.

Prior to and during the 1985 Sugar Bowl game in the New Orleans Superdome—featuring the arch rival Miami Hurricanes and Tennessee (UT) Volunteers—Southeastern Conference (SEC) college football fans were treated to a customized version of the 1950s country western hit “The Battle of New Orleans.” The new lyrics came from UT fans, whose Volunteer mascot celebrates Tennesseans’ army enlistment rates when Andrew Jackson fought the real Battle of New Orleans in 1815. As the Tennessee coach Johnny Majors prepared for kickoff, the UT Pride of the Southland Marching Band played the tune that had been airing on Knoxville radio stations for a month: “On New Year’s Week Johnny Majors took a flight / Down the Mississippi with his men of orange and white / The Vols had made a promise to win by any means / They had a date for battle in the town of New Orleans.” The song went on to name nearly a dozen star players for the “Orange of Tennessee” and praise their “fired-up” defense and offensive players so fast they arrived in the “end zone with not a Hurricane in sight.” “With a bunch of Volunteers that had turned into a team,” the song concluded, “That’s how we won the Battle of New Orleans!”

“The Battle of New Orleans,” the 1950s recording penned by Jimmy Driftwood and sung by Johnny Horton, was a spiritual if not literal descendant of “The Hunters of Kentucky,” written by Noah Ludlow a few years after Andrew Jackson’s famed 1815 victory. Like the original tune, Driftwood’s tribute tells the story of Jackson’s sharpshooting militiamen outwitting their hapless British foes. Though omitting Ludlow’s famous reference to

Jackson’s men as “Alligator Horses,” the song proclaims, “We fired our cannons ’til the barrel melted down / Then we grabbed an Alligator and we fired another round.” It was left to the Florida Gators to keep SEC football fans directly connected to their Alligator folk tradition. In Florida’s stadium—known as “the Swamp”—thousands of rabid fans show their support via the “Gator Chomp,” a ritual of slapping their extended arms together. Indeed, SEC football players, alongside their Big 10 brethren, must be “half horse, half alligator” to triumph in the college football stadiums of the Mississippi Valley states once known as the Old Southwest and Old Northwest. The Alligator Horse is still alive and kicking.13

Although the American folk hero genre that began with Crockett, Fink, Henry, and Lovingood has continued to the present day, there have been interesting detours and variations along the way. When we last discussed the Alligator Horse, the Mississippi Valley archetype had given up his hatred of machines and embraced the railroad engine (Casey Jones), steamboat (Mark Twain’s Stephen W.), modern warfare (Sergeant Alvin York), and airplanes (Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart). And as the twentieth century advanced, he (and sometimes she) fully embraced modernity, racing stock cars, running moonshine on winding mountain roads, playing college football, and performing jazz, blues, country western, and rock music. Just as the old southwestern hero made the transition from oral lore to popular almanacs, newspapers, melodramas, and songs, his modern heir began to appear in movies, television shows, and recorded music. Whether he was behind the wheel of a NASCAR racer or strapping on a Fender Telecaster guitar, the Alligator Horse continued to represent the individualistic values of the

Mississippi Valley frontier. The modern Alligator Horse became, and remains, a “contemporary ancestor.”

_Mosquitoes_ (1927), the Mississippian William Faulkner’s second novel, provides a telling reference to the old oral tradition. In an outrageous aside, Faulkner’s “hero” Dawson Fairchild, a New Orleans writer, tells a gullible Englishman about Old Hickory Jackson and his horse farm and “dude ranch” in Florida. After Jackson turned all his horses loose, Fairchild yarns, they got mixed up with swamp alligators and interbred—creating a “half horse and half alligator” species. A generation later, Old Hickory’s “direct descendant,” Al Jackson, inherited both the ranch and the tall tale business. When Al began raising sheep in the swamp, the evolutionary process escalated, begetting “half sheep, half fish” and, ultimately, a critter that was “half Jackson, half shark.”

As Faulkner penned the above passage in the 1920s, the identity of the Alligator Horse had begun to branch into two distinct yet connected streams. The Jazz Age saw the alligator part of the Alligator Horse metaphor join African American vernacular English and New Orleans jazz slang. An alligator, or a “gator,” was a Black jazz musician, a character known for musical skills, fast living, promiscuity, and, occasionally, violence. An important vestige of this era is the parting salutation, “see you later, alligator,” or “later, gator.” As gators migrated north, their mystique was integrated into that of the Black urban ghetto hipster. At his worst, the ghetto gator was an addict shooting up “horse” (heroin), but in his stride, he was a trickster, hustler, player, and fast talker. Just as Mike Fink, Davy Crockett, and John Henry had verbalized their prowess in elaborate boasts, Black street tricksters still “play the dozens,” exchanging rapid-fire insults, talking trash in contests to talk down one another. Like their folkloric ancestors, these Black tricksters had a violent


side, and sometimes carried knives and guns. Yet this violence and braggadocio could be mainstreamed and even commercialized, as in the meteoric rise of the fast-talking Louisville boxer Cassius Clay—Mohammed Ali—a contemporary American folk hero who, it was said, could “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.”

Meanwhile, the horse part of the Alligator Horse idiom began to drift towards the world of the redneck, the modern descendant of the nineteenth-century cracker. Hillbilly musicians called one another “Hoss,” and country songs often featured a cracker hoss hero—a wise-cracking trickster fond of horsing around. Hank Williams was a hard-drinking Alligator Horse whose 1940s and ’50s honky-tonk songs reflected the cracker mystique. Williams was followed by George Jones, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and their heirs Dwight Yoakum and Junior Brown. Waylon Jennings sang, “When you cross that ol’ Red River, Hoss, that don’t mean a thing / Once you’re down in Texas, Bob Wills is still the King.”

Braggart Alligator Horse language precedes lyrical fistfights in country music. In 1970, Merle Haggard warned Vietnam war protestors and traitors, “When you’re runnin’ down my country, Hoss, you’re walkin’ on the fightin’ side of me.” In the cult movie Payday (1972), the country singer Maury Dann (played by Rip Torn) sprinkles his down-home talk with hoss language and allusions. “It’s over, Hoss,” he angrily ends an argument with his manager. Greeting the boyfriend of one of his sexual conquests, he says, “How you doin’, Hoss, pleased to meet ya.” But he soon


suggests, “Why don’t you just hop on your damn horse and ride on outta here” before killing the boyfriend in a knife fight. Then too, the hoss could be mainstreamed into a softer yet equally compelling pop culture hero: throughout the 1950s and ’60s, Dan Blocker, of Paris, Texas, charmed Americans while playing the character Hoss Cartwright on television’s popular series *Bonanza.*

In a related vein, 1950s Mississippi Valley rock-and-roll musicians inherited the Alligator Horse mystique from jazz and country artists and modified it once again. In both folk life and folklore, the rockabilly stars Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent, and Johnny Cash were beer-swilling, girl-chasing rockers. So too were the Black rhythm and blues men Chuck Berry, Ike Turner, and James Brown. Berry, Turner, and Brown faced off law enforcement officers over varied criminal charges, including tax fraud, assault, and consorting with teenaged girls. Jerry Lee Lewis’s career crashed for more than a decade after he married his teenaged second cousin. Wanda Jackson of Oklahoma added a literal *growl* to the male bop cats’ vocal whoops and hiccups, all the while consuming her share of alcohol and assorted drugs. In 1955–56, Jackson shared the bill on a tour with the sensational Mississippi rock-and-roller, Elvis Presley.

Although Elvis Presley was known for his good manners and humility, an important part of his appeal was his mythic wild and dangerous side, which frightened staid Americans while titillating his fans. Elvis never married his first cousin, but he did host his teenaged fiancée Priscilla Beaulieu at his Graceland estate for several years, mentoring her and subsidizing her parochial school education until she reached marriageable age.


Elvis led the rockabilly revolution, and the bop cats’ oiled hair (combed into pompadours), tight jeans, and electric guitars lent a menacing touch, and a modern technological flare, to their mystique.

Meanwhile, young white and Black Americans danced to the rhythmic new music. A popular dance called the Gator swept 1960s Mississippi Valley college fraternity parties. Encircled by other dancers, single males danced on the ground in an alligator crawl; one of the dance’s recurrent moves was the lewd simulation of sexual intercourse. More benign gator motifs showed up in fraternity apparel in the form of popular colored polo shirts with small embroidered alligators on the breast. The University of Florida, as noted, was the most famous of dozens of southern college and high school sports teams adopting a Gator mascot. When, in 1965, University of Florida coaches asked consulting physicians to develop a beverage to help players compete in stifling southern heat, Gatorade—and the popular sports drinks industry—was born.21

From the time Red Grange was dubbed the “Galloping Ghost” of the University of Illinois 1920s Fighting Illini football team, the Mississippi Valley’s Big Ten and SEC conferences spotlighted athlete heroes. As mentioned, football heroes exemplified Alligator Horse traits of strength, courage, and athletic prowess, and they were often hard-living tricksters. The 1950s southern entertainer Andy Griffith served up a funny portrait of the college game in his monolog “What It Was, Was Football.” Watching two opposing “bunches” of players sparring over possession of the ball, he recalled,

> Both bunches wanted that thing. One bunch got it and it made the other bunch just as mad as they could be! And Friends, I seen that evenin’ the awfulest fight that I ever have seen in all my life! They would run at one another and kick one another and throw one

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another down and stomp on one another and grind their feet in one another and I don’t know what—all and just as fast as one of ‘em would get hurt, they’d tote him off and run another one on!!

Joe Namath exemplified the mythic SEC football star as a hard drinker and party animal. Born in 1943 in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, a tough steel factory town six miles from the Beaver River’s juncture with the Ohio, Namath was recruited by the legendary coach Bear Bryant to play quarterback for the University of Alabama’s Crimson Tide. He soon became famous in Tuscaloosa for both his dazzling play and his love of alcohol and women—“I like my Johnnie Walker Red and my women blonde,” he later boasted. At the close of Namath’s stellar sophomore season, Bryant had to suspend him from the team’s Sugar Bowl finale for breaking curfew. Namath continued to flourish on the field and in the barroom. He left Tuscaloosa in 1965, at the end of his senior year, taking his “rocket arm,” newly acquired southern accent, and hard-living ways to New York City and an unprecedented half-million-dollar contract with the New York Jets. “He was like a rebel with a cause,” his teammate John Dockery recalls of Namath’s professional career. “It was like traveling with a rock star.” Soon after, University of Alabama football fans welcomed Kenny “the Snake” Stabler, a native Alabamian who matched Namath in both football prowess and alcohol consumption.

Although Georgia’s Herschel Walker gained fame and respect for his football prowess without the baggage of drinking and promiscuity, he was also known for flashes of violent anger both on and off the football field. The Auburn University star Bo Jackson, however, flourished with an aura more like that of Daniel Boone (or John Henry) than Big Mike Fink. After leaving Auburn, Jackson simultaneously played two professional

sports—baseball for the Kansas City Royals (and Memphis Chickasaws) and football for the Los Angeles Raiders.\(^{24}\)

One of the most important contemporary Alligator Horse heroes is the stock car racer. The term “stock car”—in modern parlance, NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing)—is in fact a misnomer because it refers to automobiles identical to those sold on car dealers’ lots. Although 1940s racing stock cars did closely resemble their commercial counterparts, that soon changed; today, radical customization has rendered the NASCAR nearly unrecognizable when compared to its commercial version. However, one thing about stock car racing has not changed: the individualistic, freedom-loving, courageous mystique of the man (and woman) behind the wheel.\(^{25}\)

The first legendary stock car driver was Robert Glenn Johnson, Jr., known as Junior Johnson. Tom Wolfe took many stories circulating about Junior to produce his lively 1965 *Esquire* Magazine piece “The Last American Hero.” Born in 1931 in North Carolina, Junior Johnson was raised in a family of moonshiners and came of age transporting illegal liquor in fast hot rods over treacherous Appalachian mountain roads. In 1955, his exploits landed him in prison for nearly two years (thirty-one years later, President Ronald Reagan pardoned Johnson—alongside Merle Haggard—of his crimes). Once out of prison, Junior employed his driving expertise and mechanical skills to become a successful automobile racer. Meanwhile, Johnson’s personal connection to fast cars and illegal liquor led to many stories that rapidly transitioned from oral tradition to popular culture, launching a new contemporary ancestor hero type.\(^{26}\)

While the eastern Appalachian foothills spawned the tales of Junior Johnson, “King Richard” Petty, and several other NASCAR driver heroes, the Mississippi Valley was close behind. Ival

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Cooper reputedly learned his racing skills driving logging trucks on winding Arkansas roads before moving across the river to the state of Mississippi and taking up a stock car racing career (he died in a 1984 race). Ricky Stenhouse, Jr., of Olive Branch, Mississippi, is a more recent lower Mississippi Valley stock car standout. Upriver, Danica Patrick revolutionized the auto racing world to become the first woman to compete in the Indianapolis 500. Patrick grew up on the Rock River in Rockton, Illinois, where she remembers developing a “lead foot and road rage” and frequent visits with local police and highway patrolmen. “I’ve probably done 130 [miles per hour] on the street, but that was once, when I was 16,” she jokes. Patrick also works as a professional model. Photographs of her wearing swimsuits and provocative evening dresses reprise the old Alligator Horse’s sexuality and virility in a contemporary female folk heroine. 27

Only a few years after the stories of Junior Johnson began to circulate, Hollywood moviemakers discovered the marketability of Alligator Horse bootleggers in fast cars. The 1958 movie Thunder Road starred Robert Mitchum as Luke Doolin, a contemporary Appalachian mountaineer liquor runner. Behind the wheel of a 1950 Ford two-door (fitted out with liquid storage tanks), Luke faces off against both federal revenuers and organized crime bosses. Tom Wolfe’s Esquire article followed Thunder Road by seven years and begat the 1973 movie The Last American Hero, starring young Jeff Bridges as Junior Jackson, the pop culture version of Johnson. Yet it was the 1977 Burt Reynolds and Sally Field movie Smokey and the Bandit that best captured and marketed the stock car racer tale type. 28

Burt Reynolds is Hollywood’s greatest contemporary Alligator Horse movie hero. A Waycross, Georgia, native who played halfback for the Florida State Seminoles, Reynolds was half-horse, half-alligator in both life and art. After learning the actor’s

trade as a stuntman and in 1960s television westerns, he first earned celebrity in the dark Appalachian mountain moving picture *Deliverance* (1972). His lively portrayal of a southern moonshiner in *White Lightning* (1973) led to a sequel, *Gator* (1976). Reynolds was thus a natural for the role of Bo “Bandit” Darville in *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977). Directed and co-written by Hal Needham, of Memphis, Tennessee (who had worked alongside Reynolds as a stuntman), *Smokey* tapped into the abundant oral and popularized lore of Junior Johnson and his contemporaries.\(^{29}\)

Needham and colleagues showed genius in the ways they embellished the basic moonshining and fast cars storyline with folk-based variants. Instead of hard liquor, the Bandit is running Coors beer across state lines for a big party staged by Big Enos and Little Enos Burdette (Pat McCormick and Paul Williams) to celebrate their Southern Classic stock car race. They offer to pay Bandit $80,000.00 to deliver four hundred cases of Coors. In the 1960s and ’70s, Coors beer had developed a folkloric status. Brewed from fresh spring water in the Colorado Rockies, upstart Coors was feared by large corporate brewer competitors because of its high sales; big labor unions disliked Coors for its nonunion shop and the conservative politics of its owners. Claiming that Coors beer was a health risk (it was unpasteurized), opponents successfully lobbied legislators to prohibit its sale on the Pacific Coast and east of the Mississippi River. Yet market forces countered and created a cult, as young men crossed state lines to haul illegal cases and kegs of Coors to thirsty partygoers. To these beer-swilling youngsters, Coors’ spring water brew not only tasted good—it was an outlaw beer representing freedom borne of anti-authoritarianism.\(^{30}\)


\(^{30}\) Ibid. Most of this is based on the recollections of the author, who in 1968 made his first Coors run from Ellensburg, Washington, to Post Falls, Idaho, and back, driving a 1956 Packard Clipper and obeying the 60 mph speed limit. In between runs, the author saved empty Coors cans to take to parties, surreptitiously fill with legal beer, and drink in the most conspicuous manner possible.
Hauling four hundred cases of beer requires a semitrailer, and so the Bandit enlists Cleatis “Snowman” Snow (played to the hilt by the country singer Jerry Reed) and his eighteen-wheeler. With Cleatis hauling the contraband brew, the Bandit will run point in his black 1976 Pontiac Trans Am, racing ahead, doing reconnaissance, and blocking and delaying pursuing law officers. In this way, two contemporary ancestor icons—the long-distance trucker and race car driver—are allied. The comic villain is Buford T. Justus (Jackie Gleason), a redneck Texas sheriff whom Cleatis calls “Smokey,” a trucker term for highway patrolmen (who wear Smokey the Bear hats). Driving a 1977 Pontiac LeMans, Buford is in hot pursuit of both the Coors shipment and a young woman named Carrie, who has jilted his son at the altar. Thus, Smokey and the Bandit’s crowning touch is the addition of a southern pistol—Sally Field as Carrie—to ride shotgun and create a romantic interest for the Bandit. Together they race alongside the Snowman, from Georgia to Texarkana and back again in twenty-eight hours. As the Bandit reflects, they race “for the good old American life. For the money, for the glory, and for the fun. Mostly for the money.”

There is even more to Smokey and the Bandit’s comedy and action. Citizen band (CB) radio trucker vernacular punctuates the script and helped foster a late 1970s national CB craze. Snowman, who sports an American flag on his vest, rides with a basset hound named Fred by his side. Jerry Reed’s composition “East Bound and Down” (“loaded up and truckin’”) serves as Smokey’s theme song and rose to number one on the country music charts. Then, too, Jackie Gleason’s portrayal of Sheriff Buford T. Justus, always bumbling (and grumbling, “Sumbitch”), adds an important variant to southern movie lawman types that span from Rod Steiger’s Academy Award–winning role as the police chief Bill Gillespie in In the Heat of the Night (1967) to Harry Morgan’s goofball Sheriff Slade in The Flim Flam Man (1967). While Confederate flags abound in Smokey, Sheriff Justus is upbraided and dazzled by a Black Arkansas sheriff (George

31. Smokey and the Bandit, DVD.
Smokey features car wrecks galore; the production team destroyed three Trans Ams and two police cars in filming. Of note is the use of western motifs, cowboy boots, hats, and art throughout Smokey and the Bandit, bringing home the mythic connection between cowboys and rednecks. The Bandit always appears wearing his (black) felt cowboy hat—the only times he doffs it is to have sex. “Take your hat off. If you want to,” Carrie at last requests, to which the Bandit responds, “I want to.”

Smokey and the Bandit is a good example of how oral traditions can be successfully modified and woven into popular culture. The movie spawned many late twentieth-century contemporary Alligator Horse variants, including the 1979–85 television series (and 2005 movie) The Dukes of Hazzard. In the twenty-first century, this took the form of reality TV shows on cable networks like Discovery Channel, History, TruTV, A&E, and Animal Planet. Shows such as Ice Road Truckers, Ax Men, American Loggers, Swamp Loggers, Swamp People, Gold Rush (formerly Gold Rush Alaska), Deadliest Catch, The Crocodile Hunter, and Gator Boys all featured half-horse, half-alligator men and women who battled the forces of nature as they drove trucks, logged, fished, mined for gold, and hunted gators across North America. Like Smokey and the Bandit, this television subgenre is exemplary low art, and we will leave it to others to conduct critical analysis of its interweaving of the myth and reality. Billy Bob Thornton once said, “You know, down South we consider Smokey and the Bandit a documentary.”

32. Ibid. For the southern sheriff movie types, see chapter 6, this work. For cowboy, redneck, and cracker connections, see Allen, Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination, 11.

“In a town where everyone was either Lutheran or Catholic, we were neither one,” recalls Garrison Keillor in *Lake Wobegon Days*. “We were Sanctified Brethren, a sect so tiny that nobody but us and God knew about it, so when kids asked what I was, I just said Protestant. It was too much to explain, like having six toes. You would rather keep your shoes on.” Although Keillor’s Lake Wobegon is a fictitious town, he draws its stories in part from his own Mississippi River hometown, Anoka, Minnesota. And having grown up an evangelical Protestant among Lutherans and Catholics, he has some stories to tell. Keillor’s novel *Lake Wobegon Days* and weekly radio show *Prairie Home Companion* featured running gags about Lake Wobegon’s rival churches and comparisons of sensible, boring Lutherans with emotional fundamentalists and the ornately traditional parishioners of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.\(^34\)

In Lake Wobegon’s annual Memorial Day parade, the Knights of Columbus “are definitely the flashier outfit … in their smart black suits and satiny capes with silver sabers at their sides and gorgeous white plumes on their black tri-corn hats.” Even car ownership “is a matter of faith in Lake Wobegon”: “Lutherans drive Fords, bought from Bunsen Motors, the Lutheran car dealer, and Catholics drive Chevies from Main Garage, owned by the Kruegers… Fundamentalist Brethren, being Protestant, also drove Fords.” One Lake Wobegon exile composes *95 Theses*, a remarkable diatribe against his parents’ brand of Lutheranism that teaches God “is going to slap me one if I don’t straighten out fast.” Taking off his own gloves, Keillor skewers the Kruegers, who celebrate the Christmas holidays by watching “The Perry Como Christmas Special” and drinking “martinis, a vicious drink that makes them sad and exhausted.”\(^35\)

From Lutheran Minnesota to Catholic New Orleans, with the Protestant Bible Belt in between, religious roots run deep in the soil of the Mississippi Valley. This religiosity is based on

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important historical trends discussed previously. Although New England was home to the First Great Awakening, it was Jacksonian Americans west of the Appalachians who spearheaded the Second Great Awakening, influenced by the enthusiastic Black slave church. From 1830 to 1844, Mormonism swept from upstate New York across the Midwest to Independence, Missouri, and then back to Nauvoo, Illinois, before the main body of Saints departed for Utah. In the 1830s, Cincinnati boasted twenty different churches, including Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Catholic, and a Jewish temple. Frances Trollope commented, “No evening in the week but brings throngs of the young and beautiful to the chapels and meeting-houses, all dressed with great care, and sometimes with great pretension.” Venturing into the countryside and upon a camp meeting, Trollope made careful note of Second Great Awakening revivalism and the emotional religiosity it fostered:

No image that fire, flame, brimstone, molten lead, or red hot pincers could supply; with flesh, nerves, and sinews quivering under them, was omitted. The perspiration ran in streams from the face of the preacher; his eyes rolled, his lips were covered with foam, and every expression had the deep expression of horror it would have borne had he, in truth, been gazing at the scene [of hell] he described… Groans, ejaculations, broken sobs, frantic motions and convulsions succeeded; some [congregants] fell on their backs with a slow motion and crying out—“Glory! Glory! Glory!” I quitted the sport and hastened to the forest for the sight was too painful, too melancholy. Its sincerity could not be doubted, but it was the effect of overexcitement, not of sober reasoning.  

As the nineteenth century progressed, Mississippi Valley church folk retained their fundamentalist Protestant core amidst increasing diversity in the Great Valley. At the most radical end of the spectrum was Hoodoo, a lower Mississippi Valley blend

of African and Caribbean magic beliefs with French Catholicism. Zora Neale Hurston, a native Alabamian and Floridian who became a novelist during the Harlem Renaissance, conducted the first serious study of the religion called Hoodoo, or “Voodoo as pronounced by the whites.” Hurston drove south from Columbia University in 1928 to New Orleans, “the hoodoo capital of America,” where she apprenticed under Luke Turner, who claimed to be the nephew and pupil of the famed nineteenth-century “queen of conjure” Marie Laveau. Turner taught Hurston the Hoodoo beliefs and rituals she later described in her book about Black southern folk life, *Mules and Men*.37

Hoodoo worship is partly composed of magic spells from the Caribbean and those used by antebellum American slave conjurers. Worshippers go to the Hoodoo doctor (a term synonymous with priest in this context) to attain desired results—to make an errant husband obey his wedding vows, to win a new lover, or to run off a troublesome in-law. The remedy is often a potion and a ritual—sprinkling salt, red pepper, vinegar, or mustard seeds, chanting and singing, and even tossing beheaded chickens out a car window. In one ritual for a female believer who seeks to run off a man’s wife (so she can marry him herself), the Hoodoo doctor instructs her to write the couple’s names nine times on a piece of paper and embed the paper in a lemon and bury it “bloom-end down … where de settin’ sun will shine on it.” Also woven into Hoodoo are identifiable Christian motifs such as the altar and candles and “the power of water to sanctify as in baptism.” Luke Turner’s account of Marie Laveau confirms her connections to Judeo-Christian traditions. At her celebration of the “feast of St. John’s,” Laveau reputedly arose out of the waters of Lake Pontchartrain with a “great communion candle.” Then, she “open[ed] the waters” like Moses and “walked upon the waters to the shore” like Jesus.38

Mississippi Valley Judaism is a good example of religious diversity and tolerance in America’s cultural hearth. To be sure, Jews represented a minuscule portion of the overall population

(today they constitute only one-half of one percent of the
American South’s entire population), and anti-Semitism and
persecution persisted well into the twentieth century. Yet, when
studying this kind of prejudice and other shameful aspects of
American history, one should always ask, Compared to what?
How did Mississippi Valley Jews fare in comparison to members
of other global Jewish communities?

From its inception, America was one of the few places in the
world where Jews could live in relative peace, practice their
religion, and secure clear title to land and property. Most ancient
Jews were extirpated from the Middle East and spread across
Europe, where they survived in ghettos and shtetls through the
Middle Ages and into the early modern era. Some adventurous
immigrants came to America, including the American South, and
by 1749 there were small Jewish communities in Savannah,
Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina. During the American
Revolution, Charleston’s Jews formed a patriot militia unit that
the locals called the Jews’ Company. Later, while Polish and
Russian Christians were launching a series of nineteenth-
century pogroms, small, sturdy Jewish communities had become
part of the culture of Cincinnati, Saint Louis, Memphis,
Nashville, Vicksburg, Natchez, Greenwood (Mississippi), Hot
Springs (Arkansas), Donaldsonville (Louisiana), New Orleans,
and the adjacent hinterland, a trend that continued into the
twentieth century. Thus, a list of prominent Mississippi Valley
Jews includes Judah P. Benjamin (secretary of war then of state
for the Confederate States of America), Erich Sternberg and
Bernard Goudchaux (founders of New Orleans’s Goudchaux
Department Store), E. J. “Mutt” Evans (mayor of Durham, North
Carolina, 1951–63), Reuben Greenberg (the Black Jewish chief
of police in Charleston, South Carolina), Jack Cristil (for five
decades the radio voice of Mississippi State University Bulldog
football), and Shelby Foote (Memphis novelist and Civil War
historian).39

39. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg, eds., Jewish Roots in Southern Soil (Lebanon,
N.H., 2006), 1–17. The standard works are William Penack, Jews and Gentiles in Early
American (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2008); Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, eds., Jews
Mississippi Valley Jews seem to have done well. Compared to what? Today, New Orleans boasts approximately thirteen thousand Jewish residents, seven thousand fewer than all the Jews in Poland. In Baghdad, Iraq, the Jewish population is estimated at seven or eight, while in Cairo, Egypt, there are seven Jews.40

Nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley Jews immigrated along three paths—directly from Europe; via South America and the Caribbean; or indirectly from the above via the cities of the northeastern and southeastern American Atlantic coast. The immigrants included both Sephardic (Spanish and North African) and Ashkenazic (German) Jews. Saint Louis traces the first of its Jewish citizens back to 1807, four years after the Louisiana Purchase. The Shaaraai Chesed Reformed congregation formed in New Orleans in 1828, thanks to the patronage of the merchant Judah Touro. Two years later, the Ohio state legislature chartered the first Orthodox synagogue west of the Appalachians. Antebellum Natchez, Mississippi, hosted a Reformed synagogue and a lively population of Jewish businessmen and their families, some of whom were minor slaveholders. Memphis Jews followed suit, and their Temple B’nai Israel continued the trend away from Orthodox Judaism to English-language Reformed observances more in keeping with American democratic religiosity. By the eve of the Civil War, two thousand Jews resided in New Orleans alone, and the Confederacy could claim many Jewish sympathizers and soldiers.41

41. Walter Ehrlich, Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis, 1807–1907 (Columbia, Mo., 1997); Walter G. Cowan et al., New Orleans Yesterday and Today (Baton Rouge, La.,
Following the Civil War, Jewish merchants across the Cotton Belt took defeat in stride and immediately moved to fill the economic vacuum left by the defeated planter class. Jews provided groceries, dry goods, loans, and credit to whites and Blacks alike in the emergent sharecropping economy. Increasing numbers of eastern European Jewish immigrants fleeing the Russian pogroms arrived. They found work as brokers and cotton agents, tailors and shoemakers, grocers and butchers, and rural peddlers, fanning out across the Mississippi Valley in a Dixie Diaspora. In the early twentieth century, a common career trajectory for a Jewish peddler was to work until he saved enough capital to marry and open a small dry-goods store in a country town or crossing, fostering a class of rural “Jew Store” (in cracker parlance) proprietors and their families. While the 1915 lynching of the Atlanta businessman Leo Frank is continually discussed as an example of southern persecution of Jews, it is in fact a despicable exception to the general rule of amicable relations. True, there was anti-Semitism, but compared to what? How does southern white bigotry towards American Jews compare to eastern European pogroms, or soon-to-be emergent Nazism? White southerners, including the Ku Klux Klan, ranked Jews far below Negroes on their hate lists and targets. Indeed, a disturbing fact about Leo Frank’s famous lynching is that it stands alone alongside hundreds of lynchings of southern Blacks that gained no newspaper headlines at all.

It was beneficial that many southern whites considered Jews to be members of a race as well as a religion. “Philo-Semitism”—a love and respect for the Old Testament Hebrews—was (and remains) a strongly held belief among white Protestant fundamentalists. Jews also learned that in parts of the South it was more important to be religious than it was to belong to a certain religion. Equally important to Jewish success was their


42. Ferris and Greenberg, Jewish Roots in Southern Soil, 8–9.
43. Leo Frank is discussed in ibid., 13, but the analysis is my own.
rapid assimilation to selected aspects of mainstream culture. Mississippi Valley Jews sent their children to public schools and on to state colleges, adopted Mississippi Valley vernacular English, and began to cook and serve traditional southern dishes (including pork) and drinks on their dinner tables. They joined in community sports and celebrations, and contributed to local causes and charities. The poet Eli Evans has described the southern Jewish experience by using the metaphor of challah, the traditional braided bread of the Jewish holidays. Like challah, the southern Jewish experience is a braid: the result of weaving together three cultures—Jewish, Southern, and American.44

Stella Suberman’s memoir The Jew Store provides an evocative portrait of the world of a Jewish family in the rural Mississippi Valley in the 1920s and ’30s. Suberman was born in Union City, a town of five thousand in northwest Tennessee, near the Kentucky state line. Her father, Aaron Bronson, was a Ukrainian Jewish migrant to New York City who had sailed to Savannah, Georgia, looking for opportunity. He earned the chance from merchant employers in Nashville, Tennessee, to be “set up” in a “Jew Store … selling soft goods—clothing and domestics (bedding, towels, yard goods)—to the poorer people of the town—the farmers, the sharecroppers, the blacks, the factory workers.” In 1920, Aaron and Reba Bronson and their children Joey and Miriam drove a horse-drawn cart from Nashville into Union City (renamed Concordia in Suberman’s memoir) where they lived and prospered until 1933. Suberman returned to the South as a college student and has lived there ever since. “Jews went wherever there a living to be made, and the South was virgin territory,” she recalls. “Once Jews came South, they loved it—the comfort, the ease of living. Many of them [eastern European Jews] had come from very tiny little villages in the old country, and the rural South was in many ways like home. Prejudice might have been a challenge, but they had already been dealing with that for centuries.”45

44. Bain, Shalom Y’All, passim.
As they work to build up Bronson’s Low-Priced Store in Concordia, Aaron and Reba initially face some anti-Semitism, and their close relationship with their Black employees Lizzie Maud and Seth (who live in a neighborhood the locals call Niggertown) makes them some enemies. But a supposed Ku Klux Klan threat to stop their store from opening, or boycott it, never materializes. The simple reason is supply and demand—Concordia needs a “Low-Priced Store” and Black and white customers alike soon create a brisk business. Then, too, there is Philo-Semitism, as the Bronsons find a patron and protector in Miss Brookie, an eccentric but respected townswoman who has met Jews in college and welcomes the Bronsons. Racism is most evident in the treatment of Negroes (who are fitted for shoes in the alley) and the harsh reaction of some whites when Aaron hires Seth to wait on white customers.46

Much of the dramatic tension in The Jew Store comes as the family assimilates to local customs. For the children, assimilation is relatively easy. Joey attends public school, makes friends, and begins to adopt the language and culture of his peers. Weekly, Stella makes “the Sunday school rounds with a selection of Baptists and Presbyterians as well as Methodists.” Initially reluctant to conform, Reba learns from Lizzie Maud how to batter and fry chicken and comes to find great pleasure in rural life. She flourishes as a flower and vegetable gardener, a new experience for a New York City woman. When Miriam reaches her teens, her “social life [is] exceedingly active” and includes a group of twenty friends who meet at the ice cream parlor, take turns hosting parties, dance the Charleston (with steps Miriam learns from Lizzie Maud), and begin to date. When Miriam falls in love with Joey’s best friend, “T,” Aaron is surprised to find himself considering the possibility of a gentile son-in-law.47

Indeed, Aaron Bronson has assimilated remarkably well into the culture of the Mississippi Valley. He loves his store and the

46. Suberman, The Jew Store, 12, 64, 106–109, 121–25. Suberman has given pseudonyms to all of Concordia’s residents.
47. Ibid., 171, 239–41, 166–67, 287.
financial stability and status it has brought him. He has insinuated himself into Concordia’s local business and political class, and most townspeople have come to respect him. Long before Reba, Aaron develops a love for the South’s rural lifestyle, and during a trip to the Northeast, “the strain of New York City weighed more heavily… He saw it as a place that even on a sunny day was dark.” By the end of the 1920s, Suberman writes, “my father thought of Concordia as his home”:

My father guarded against sentimentalizing Concordia, going “too easy” on it, as he said… He wasn’t a fool… [But Concordia] was okay by him. And why not? Having in Russia been tormented, chased, and attacked by Cossacks, having in New York been insulted and ignored, whatever maltreatment he had endured in Concordia was minor league. The Ku Klux Klan? Their threats had not materialized. Though my father did not kid himself. “It wasn’t because they loved me so much,” he would say. No, it was more that having experienced a Jew store, they were now convinced that having one in Concordia was a good thing.

All of this comes to a crashing halt when Reba’s sisters Sadie and Hannah arrive from New York City for a visit. Sadie is scandalized by the degree to which the family has veered from their Jewish traditions (Stella’s ill-timed parlor performance of “Oh What a Friend We Have in Jesus” does not help matters!). Reba sees the error of her ways, and insists Joey return with her sisters to New York City to study for his bar mitzvah. Later, when Miriam begs for a weekend visit with T, who has begun to study for a degree in agriculture at the University of Tennessee, Reba lays down the law and Aaron relents. After thirteen years, the Bronsons will leave Concordia.

If the 1929 stock market crash and ensuing Great Depression played a major role in the Bronsons’ decision to leave, Suberman does not say so. Indeed, as a parting gesture Aaron helps organize a campaign to save the town’s failing shoe factory, pledging $22,000.00 of his savings in matching grants to ensure the local economy survives the Depression. However, he also sells

Bronson’s Low-Priced Store, and the family moves on. A lengthy farewell article in the local newspaper declares, “The Bronsons leave many friends in Concordia. The Sentinel wishes them well.” A farmer and loyal customer is less formal: “What’s a fact is we was beginning to think of y’all as kin.” And Miriam and T’s friend Erv declares, “Good-bye to you Jews. Having Jews was the best thing Concordia ever done.”

Southern Jews played an important role in the Black freedom movement. Andrew Young, a New Orleans civil rights activist and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, recalled there were many Jewish civil rights activists working “before I joined the movement” and that Jewish synagogues were sometimes the sites of civil rights meetings. Young notes that because of their long history of struggle in the Middle East and Europe, particularly the German Holocaust experience, “Jews totally identified with the civil rights movement and … were much less racist” than other southerners. Although some contemporary activists (and later historians) criticized Jews for failing to stand united against segregation, this was not the view of the Ku Klux Klan, which saw Jews as allies of Black civil rights organizers. While their hardships were minuscule compared to those of Blacks, Jews witnessed the 1958 bombing of Atlanta’s Hebrew Benevolent Congregation Temple and the 1963 murder of the Jewish civil rights workers Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman alongside their Black colleague James Chaney in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Following the September 1967 bombing of Beth Israel in Jackson, Mississippi, Rabbi Perry Nussbaum declared of the perpetrators, “These are not Americans.” And following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Memphis rabbi James Wax proclaimed,

This city shall witness a new spirit and the memory of this great prophet of our time shall be honored. There will be the bigots and the segregationists and the so-called respectable but unrighteous people who will resist. But in the scheme of history, God’s will does prevail.

49. Ibid., 292–94.
Like the Bronson family in *The Jew Store*, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Mississippi Valley Jews continue to walk the line between tradition and assimilation. There have been some big changes. The lone merchant families and scattered rural Jewish communities have slowly disappeared and been replaced by a more modern, urban Jewish lifestyle. Towns like Natchez, Greenwood, and Donaldsonville have lost nearly all their active temple congregants, and the summer camps (like Blue Star Camp) where Jews once sent their children to meet, play, and learn with other Jewish youth are all gone. Also vanished are the annual courtship weekends, wherein young Jewish men and women from across the South met to socialize, dance, and find spouses (all under the attentive eyes of elder Jewish chaperones). In place of this old Jewish world is a more sophisticated urban one that has in many (not all) cases increased assimilation and the number of marriages to gentiles. By 1986, the loss of the old lifestyle had become so pronounced that the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience formed to preserve the artifacts and written records of the vanished rural southern Jewry. Reorganized in Utica and Jackson, Mississippi, as the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, the organization’s professional staff members have added education, music and art exhibits, movies, and television shows, and rabbinic services to their museum and archival work.\(^51\)

The new urban Jewish immigrants have also taken up different jobs. Traditional merchant Jews have been joined and replaced by Jewish journalists, professors, teachers, doctors, software engineers, and corporate employees and executives. They continue to involve themselves in local festivals and celebrations, like the Natchez Confederate Pageant (renamed the Natchez Historic Pageant) and Memphis Cotton Carnival. And gentile

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Mardi Gras parade officials, always known for fierce traditionalism, have even agreed to the participation of two Jew Krewes (bands of coordinated marchers) in the annual Mardi Gras parades. Meanwhile, Jews’ numbers continue to grow in direct proportion to overall population increase. Of tens of thousands of Jews in the Mississippi Valley, New Orleans claims 13,000, Memphis 8,500, Minneapolis–Saint Paul 40,000, and Saint Louis 55,000.52

Assimilation remains the overall characteristic of the southern Jewry, but with important exceptions and variants. Reformed worship, with Americanized variants, was dominant throughout the nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley, yet Orthodoxy has returned. This began slowly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with eastern European immigration and has accelerated in the past few decades. Indeed, so many Jewish families keep kosher tables that the popular supermarket chain Kroger employs a full-time rabbi to keep kosher meat departments and kitchens in some of its stores and the hotels it supplies. Meanwhile, in Atlanta and Athens, Georgia, the popular Varsity Drive-In restaurants feature kosher hot dogs and chili onion rings on their menus, and they cater kosher parties. Thus, the above challah metaphor of interweaving cultures can also include hot dog buns and onion-ring breading. And although one might doubt the veracity of a contemporary southern Jewish folktale about the fellow who claims to dip, bread, and deep-fry his gefilte fish, a reported foodway of Jews who add a little Louisiana hot sauce to their matzo ball soup sounds probable (and promising).53

52. Ferris and Greenberg, introduction to Jewish Roots in Southern Soil, ix, 14, 17; Bain, Shalom Y'all; Gunther Plaut, The Jews in Minnesota: The First 75 Years (New York, 1959); Cowan et al., New Orleans Yesterday and Today, 191. See Stuart Rockoff, “The Fall and Rise of the Jewish South,” in Ferris and Greenberg, Jewish Roots in Southern Soil, 284–303. Atlanta, Georgia, is home to 85,000 Jews.

53. Rockoff, “The Fall and Rise of the Jewish South,” 284–303; Ferris and Greenberg, Jewish Roots in Southern Soil, 10–11; Bain, Shalom Y'all. Kroger’s was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio.
“HIP ET TAIAU”

The folk life of lower Mississippi Valley Cajuns is much better known than that of southern Jews. In the second half of the twentieth century, Americans from all regions began to listen to Louisiana Cajun music and zydeco, and the Cajun food dishes gumbo, jambalaya, and red beans and rice appeared in restaurants outside the lower South. Reality TV producers added Cajuns to their cast of contemporary ancestors, and shows like Swamp People, Gator Boys, Cajun Pawn Stars, My Big Redneck Vacation, Duck Dynasty, and Bayou Billionaires proliferated. However, there is one important part of Cajun culture that is relatively unknown outside the lower Mississippi Valley: Many Cajuns are, and have always been, cowboys. Cajun cowboys thus form a small but important contingent of the most iconic of American folk hero types.

When the folklorist Alan Lomax, Jr., and his father first heard Cajun musicians singing the song “Hip et Taiau,” they thought someone “was pulling our legs.” The tune’s title and refrain—also spelled and pronounced “Hippy-Ti-Yo,” “Hippy-Tai-Yo,” “Hippitiyo,” and “Hip et Taïauts”—sounded much like two old Texas cowboy tunes, “Whoopee Ti Yi Yo (Git Along Little Dogies)” and “Come-a Ti-yi Yippy Yo.” How did Texas cowboy language find its way into the Louisiana swamps? Digging a little deeper, Lomax learned from the musicians that Ti–Yo was in fact the name of an old Louisiana cattle herding town, and that “Ti-yi” and “Ki-yo” were old French and French Canadian cattle calls—expressions mounted cowboys spoke or shouted at the cattle as they were herding them. Like all folkways, oral traditions have anonymous origins, and it is impossible to find definitive documentation of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century provenance. But in this case, the Lomaxes appear to have solved a mystery: The Texans’ “Whoopee Ti Yi

Yo” and “Ti-yi Yippy Yo” are probably descended from French Louisiana Cajun cowboys.55

Certainly, Spanish and Mexican charros and vaqueros contributed significant language, workways, and material culture to the American cowboy lifestyle. Because the southern Great Plains cattle frontier began in Texas following the Civil War, many Texas cowboys were Hispanic, as evidenced by the terms “lariat” (riata), “lasso,” “chaps” (chapperias), “rancho,” and “rodeo.” Yet herding workways came to the southern Plains from places other than Spain and Mexico. In his classic Trails to Texas, the historian Terry G. Jordan looked to the southeastern United States to prove the truly multidimensional nature of cowboy culture. Jordan documented the significant role of Anglo- and, especially, Celtic-American herders in creating Great Plains cowboy folkways. The term “cowboy” is itself English, and Scottish and northern Irish Celts were known for their droving expertise on both sides of the Atlantic. The Carolinas, Tennessee, and upland South were home to Anglo- and Celtic-American herdsmen (a famous Carolina Revolutionary War battle is named for cowpens). These southern drovers migrated west to Texas during the antebellum and postbellum decades and exerted an influence equal to that of the Mexican vaqueros.56

In Trails to Texas, Jordan also began a discussion of Louisiana cattlemen that has since grown into a new body of scholarship. As in Texas, there were several influences. Louisiana’s first cowboys were local Caddo Indians who rode Spanish horses and herded Texas Longhorn cattle that had strayed east or that they bought from the Spaniards. After French settlements took root in the early 1700s, Spanish and Mexican vaqueros herded


Longhorns across Louisiana on the Old Spanish Trail—by way of Natchitoches to Biloxi, Mobile, and, later, New Orleans stockyards and shipping docks. This was one hundred fifty years before the transcontinental railroads shifted the Texas cattle trade to the central Plains. Later, Louisiana did indeed become a midway point for southern Anglo- and Celtic-American cattle herders working their way west to Texas.57

The important point, however, is that by the mid-eighteenth century, Louisiana was home to its own cattle herding tradition—one that was not primarily Indian, Spanish, or Anglo- or Celtic-American. French Louisianans had themselves begun raising cattle on their own vacheries—the Louisiana term for ranches—and a Franco-American ingredient was added to the cowboy culture gumbo. The French Louisiana cattle kingdom arose west of New Orleans and the Atchafalaya River basin, where Attakapas Post (renamed Saint Martinville) became its headquarters. One visitor described it as “the centre of the land of shepherds and the paradise of those who deal in cattle.” By 1766, 165,000 head of cattle grazed on the prairie in what Terry Jordan describes as a “seasonal rhythm” from springtime until “the frosts of autumn, then retired into the cane brakes and bottom forests for winter foraging.”58

Louisiana ranching grew even more rapidly with the 1760s arrival of a new group of Frenchmen, Canadian exiles later called Cajuns. The Cajuns’ ancestors inhabited Poitou, the marshy southwestern region of France, where herdsmen had for centuries raised cattle on the coastal prairies. Migrating from Europe to French Canada in the early 1600s, some continued their cattle-herding ways in the marshy Nova Scotia lowlands known as Acadia. However, the colonial wars between France and Britain (circa 1701–63) led to French defeat. As portrayed in Longfellow’s dramatic poem Evangeline, the victorious English deported thousands of rebellious Acadians across North

58. Jordan, Trails to Texas, 47; Jordan, North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers, 188, 121 (qtns).
America. Those who ultimately arrived on the Attakapas Prairie—the area naturalists call the Chenier Plain—found an ideal environment to continue living as they had for centuries. Thus, French-Canadian herdsmen became “Cajun” (a slurring of “Acadian”) cowboys.59

Southwest Louisiana’s Attakapas Prairie, or Chenier Plain, is bordered on the west by the Sabine River and Texas and on the south by the Gulf of Mexico. Its name is drawn from the Attakapas Indian inhabitants and translates literally as “man eaters.” Beginning in 1765, Cajuns began farming, fishing, trapping fur, and raising cattle and sheep there. Whereas previous Louisiana cattlemen had carved out a Spanish Trail from Natchitoches to New Orleans and the gulf, the Cajuns herded their cattle due east to New Orleans via the so-called Creole Trail. Their herds were turned into jerked and salted beef, tallow, lard, and tanned cowhides, all highly marketable goods. Spain oversaw all of this because Louisiana had changed hands following the French and Indian War; Spaniards governed Louisiana until the early nineteenth century, when they returned the province to the French, whose leader Napoleon immediately sold it to the United States in 1803.60

In 1805, a federal surveyor, William Darby, described Cajun cattle country:

Continuing westward, a new and astonishing scene would open: the wide green Attakapas and Opelousas, varied by the irregular chains of woods, narrow and indented. The face of the earth exhibits an expanse of grass, interrupted only by the occasional clump of oak or pine trees… The winds breathe over the pathless waste of savanna.

Darby saw “thousands of horses and cows, of all sizes, scattered over the interminable mead” and “active horsemen who guard them.” By 1800, the ratio of cattle to Cajuns was fifteen to one,


grazing at about one cow per acre (much less land than a typical Plains herd requires). Most Cajun cattlemen were squatters, building farms and grazing on the public domain. But they were serious about property rights in beef—they branded their cattle, and inspectors kept meticulous records going back to the famed mid-1700s Saint Martinville Brand Book. Cattle thieves felt the wrath of Cajun vigilante committees who served as sheriffs, judges, and jury.\(^61\)

While Cajuns herded cattle much like the Spaniards, Anglos, and Celts, there were important Franco-American variants. “Marsh horses,” as they were called, were trained to work in mud and water. Cowboys made palm frond “skeeter brushes” to spare their horses the full force of mosquito swarms. Swimming cattle across bayous was a common mode of herding them throughout the year and especially during the semi-annual cattle drives (Plains cowboys swam their herds across rivers much less often). And dogs played a bigger role in bayou herding than on the late nineteenth-century Great Plains. Demand for beef increased in the antebellum years, but the Civil War ended the good times. In occupied Louisiana, Yankee foragers and raiding parties confiscated horses and decimated the Cajun cattle herds. Afterwards, the Cajuns slowly began to rebuild.\(^62\)

By the late nineteenth century, Cajuns were no longer of pure French extraction. They had courted and married Louisianans of all racial backgrounds, and families of mixed Anglo, Celtic (both Irish and Scottish), and German ethnicity spread across the bayous. American Indians also married Cajuns, adding an important Native element to the racial gumbo. In *Louisiana Cowboys*, Bill Jones uses oral history to tell the stories of Black *vachers*—the Louisiana French equivalent of *vaquero*. One cowboy recalled Floyd “Mano” Clifton, a top hand, horseman, and legendary roper from Opelousas. Clifton spoke Cajun French and, alongside Tom and Peanut Ryan and a small cadre of Black cowboys, worked the famed Gray Ranch during the

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decades of the mid-twentieth century. He was a “rough and tough” chain smoker. “When you say ‘work,’ he was there. Mano would rope anything that come up. Oh, he was a good roper.”

North of the Attakapas lived a parallel group of Black, French-speaking cowboys in rural communities founded by mid-eighteenth-century free Black Louisianans. Many of these “Creoles of color” (in the food section below we will discuss Louisianans’ complex use of the term “Creole”) were also cattlemen who, it is said, gained their herding expertise from African ancestors. Though many chose or were forced to live and work in a segregated, Blacks-only society, others married outside their race, and there was considerable intermingling. All of this greatly affects the study of the history of American cowboys. A generation of scholars identified postbellum Texas as the birthplace of African-American cattlemen, the evidence being that during Reconstruction thousands of Black freedmen went to work on the Plains cattle frontier. While this certainly did happen, these scholars were wrong in saying that it was unique. The cultural geographer Donald W. Davis writes, “It is highly likely that southwest Louisiana was the birthplace of the black cowboy.”

Cajun cowboys began to experiment with cattle breeding in the late 1800s, replacing the old Longhorn cattle with Brahman mixes. The Brahmans (Bos taurus indicus) originally came from south Asia and were much more resistant to heat and mosquitoes than American cattle breeds. Brahman cows are also excellent mothers and, when necessary, can graze belly deep in water. Horse breeding programs followed much later and, like all North American cowboys, Louisianans were drawn to quarter horses,


64. For Creole cowboys, see Jensen, Bayou Cowboys of Louisiana, and Brasseaux et al., Creoles of Color, 7, 15, 19, 20, 23, 26–42, 44, 45, 69, 136, 144. For a discussion of Creole ethnicity and the controversial noun “Creole,” see Brasseaux et al., Creoles of Color, xi–xii, and the Kate Chopin and food sections, above and below, this work. Creole French dialect is distinct from Cajun French. Phillip Durham and Everett L. Jones, The Negro Cowboys (New York, 1965) is a pathbreaking book that points to Blacks’ significant role in Plains cattle ranching, but misses their Louisiana origins.
or quarter horse mixes. Quarter horses are named for their great speed at short—quarter-mile—distances. Yet in a sign of things to come, Cajun cowboys found alternatives to horseback herding and long drives, using railroad cars, steamboats, and barges to ship cattle over difficult terrain and eliminating some (not all) of the “big swims.”

World War II was a turning point for agriculture and herding throughout the American South. The South was an economic backwater until World War II, and the postwar era ushered in the full benefits of the industrial revolution and accompanying agricultural improvements. By this time, most of the Attakapas had been divided into ranches of three hundred to five hundred acres, with some common pastures remaining. Cajun cowboys’ work retained its seasonal rhythm, but with variants. Like ranchers out west, Cajuns had always moved their cattle to better feed in the spring and fall, the time of the roundups, for branding and doctoring the herds. Herding was a very difficult business in open marshland, but following World War II, Cajun ranchers invested in building “ridges”—cow trails that stood above the damp prairie marshes and mud. The result is reminiscent of rice paddy path systems, but the ridges are built ten to fifteen feet wide to accommodate cattle herds. And the ridges work in conjunction with improved transport—cattle trucks and river barges. Indeed, high-speed, maneuverable airboats also expedite cattle herding in bayou country.

Technology did not entirely replace the mounted herdsmen. Archie Berwick, a cowboy on the Johnson Bayou born in 1916, boasted, “I only worked two regular jobs in my life” for about two months. Instead, he “farmed, worked cows, ran some of my own, and trapped—just rode horseback all I could. You know, there


aren't many folks who can make that statement.” But Berwick's generation saw technology change the nature of Louisiana cowboying. The “big swims” ended and trail drives continued in only vestigial form. Today, journalists and documentary filmmakers are drawn to an annual cattle drive and roundup near Holly Beach and Johnson Bayou, on the Gulf of Mexico. Photographs and movies of mounted cowboys herding cattle along the beach with the broad Caribbean in the background are striking. However, a closer look reveals far more mounted cowboys than necessary for the number of cattle they are working. Like many modern roundups out west, the Holly Beach trail drive has become a community celebration, a time for rural folk to gather and reenact the workways of their ancestors. Although there are still working Cajun cowboys, the Attakapas has been changed forever by railroads, diesel towboats, the Intercoastal Waterway, cattle trucks, and airboats.\footnote{67 Davis, Washed Away, 96–97; Jones, Louisiana Cowboys, 53 (Berwick qtn.), passim; Jensen, Bayou Cowboys of Louisiana.}

“I always wanted to be a cowboy,” Boo Ledoux reflected in an interview with Bill Jones. Born in 1912, Ledoux had as heroes the Cajun horsemen “Wesley Fruge, a top hand around Sweet Lake, and a black cowboy named Victorian Caesar.” Although Ledoux achieved his goal, he eventually chose to leave Attakapas cowboying and follow a more sedentary lifestyle. He concludes nostalgically:

I'd a rather stayed on the ranch. You could saddle a horse and ride a day without ever getting off Miss Matilda's [his employer] land. I liked everything about working there, breaking horses, driving cattle, I just liked everything... We were kings out there.

The Cowboy Code—a set of beliefs ascribed to North American herdsmen—lives on among a small number of Louisiana cowboys and flourishes in the beliefs of their fellow Louisianans. Cowboy Code values of individualism, work ethic, loyalty, courage, humility, equality, hospitality, common sense, and anti-intellectualism are strong on the Attakapas, and the
Cajun cowboys’ love of their horses is legendary. Even the Plains cowboys’ famed laconic speech patterns have a Cajun French version. Donald Davis is no doubt overly romantic in his conclusion that southwest Louisiana cowboying “has not changed much since its inception.” It has changed plenty. But Davis is quite correct in his conclusion that, as in the American and Canadian West, “horses, cowboy hats, boots, cattle, bridles, ropes, belt buckles as large as small plates, and jeans” remain an important “part of the culture of the Cheniere Plain.”

The popularity of Louisiana rodeo reflects that state’s continuing fascination with cowboy culture. American rodeo was born on the Great Plains during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and appears to have arrived later in Louisiana. There were informal competitions and ranch rodeos at Attakapas roundups and cattle drives, and small rodeos began to emerge. Houma, Louisiana, hosted a rodeo in the early 1940s, and Alexandria followed in 1948. While New Orleans boasted a 1953 LSU Rodeo event, the best Louisiana college rodeo team was (and remains) the McNeese State University Cowboys of Lake Charles. In another corner of the state, the famed (and infamous) Angola Louisiana State Prison rodeo recently celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Early Louisiana inductees into the rodeo division of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame (now the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, in Oklahoma City) are the roughstock rider Felix Cooper and the bullfighting clown Rick Young. More recently, the ProRodeo (Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association) Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs inducted two Louisiana cowboys, Clyde Vamvoras and Steve Duhon. Vamvoras, a native of Lake Charles, won the Louisiana


High School Rodeo All-Around Championship and went on to qualify for eleven straight National Final Rodeo (NFR) appearances (1963–73), winning two world bareback bronc riding titles (1967–68). A little more than a decade later, Duhon, of Opelousas, turned down an LSU football scholarship to follow his true love—steer wrestling. He qualified for eight National Final Rodeos and won the world steer wrestling championship buckles in 1986, 1987, and 1993. His 1986 3.0 run held the NFR arena record until tied in 2001. The 2016 world champion steer wrestler was Tyler Waguespack, of Gonzales, Louisiana. Meanwhile, back in Johnson Bayou, one of the cowboys regularly riding the famed Holly Beach cattle drive is Josh Barentine, a local hand who has ranked atop the professional bull riding circuit.70

A parting look at three Louisiana equestrian folk festivals shows exceptionalism as well as mainstream elements of North American cowboy culture. Horseracing is ubiquitous in the Bayou State, as are the drinking and gambling that accompany formal and informal matches. Cajuns also stage horseback tournaments in which the young men dress up like medieval knights, wearing facsimile armored uniforms. In addition to racing, these remarkable tournaments feature mock jousting competitions and the selection of a festival king and queen. In one event, the knights ride at a full gallop around an arena, attempting to spear a hanging ring with their lances (the winner presents the ring to his lady). Finally, there is Mardi Gras, a pre-Lenten Caribbean festival most Americans associate with colored beads, New Orleans French Quarter parades, and public drunkenness. Yet out west on the Attakapas, some celebrate Mardi Gras on horseback. A tradition among Cajun men is to don masks and costumes and ride as a mounted posse to all the

neighboring farmsteads. At each stop they demand chicken, fish, sausage, or a bag of rice for their communal Mardi Gras gumbo.\textsuperscript{71}

While Louisiana horsemen boast exceptional characteristics, most of their folkways fit into North American norms (the jousting tournament royalty, for example, look a little like the high school homecoming king and queen, and the Mardi Gras posse ritual resembles Halloween trick-or-treating). Cajun cowboys certainly work in an environment far different from that of their far western brethren, yet as we have seen, their workways have much in common. The point here is that the archetypal Great Plains cowboys learned from the Cajuns, just as Cajuns learned from the far westerners. All cowboys share skills and techniques, Cowboy Code values, a love of horses, rodeo, and western mystique. Perhaps Gino Delafouse, a ranch-raised Creole zydeco musician, best sums up the similarity of Louisiana and Plains cowboys when he reflects, in understated cowboy style, “I think the biggest competition between the Louisiana cowboy and the Texas cowboy is over who can two-step the best.”\textsuperscript{72}

\section*{VITLLES}

Food and drink references are woven throughout the stories of Alligator Horses, southern Jews, Cajun cowboys, and, as we shall see below, towboat and houseboat folk. Foodways are important enough to merit a separate discussion here. Mississippi Valley foods—victuals, or vittles, in common language—are coarse, filling, energizing, and gratifying. Although Americans served many of their ancestral European (especially English and Celtic) dishes on the dinner table, American food became and remains exceptional.

Mississippi Valley food has always been described by outsiders, especially Europeans, as indelicate and unhealthy. The historian John Lauritz Larson summarizes the Englishwoman Frances Trollope’s view of 1830s American mealtimes: “Men (whether

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{72} Delafouse in Jensen, \textit{Bayou Cowboys of Louisiana}.
\end{thebibliography}
gentlemen or tradesmen) ate like animals at table, stuffing their mouths with food, hardly bothering to chew, pausing not to converse but only to wash down their crude repast with vile corn whiskey.” Trollope complained constantly of folks who subsisted on “salt meat and dry biscuits,” and she referred to “the never-failing accompaniments of American tea-drinking, hung beef, ‘chipped up’ raw, and sundry sweet-meats of brown sugar hue and flavor.” Of watermelon, she wrote, “Foot-long” pieces “are applied to the mouth, from either side of which pour copious streams of the fluid, while, ever and anon, a mouthful of hard black seeds are shot out in all directions.”

The Frenchman Constance Volney, who traveled the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys around 1800, remembered Americans breakfasting on hot tea and coffee and “swallow[ing], almost without chewing, hot bread, half baked, toast soaked in butter, cheese of the fattest kind, slices of salt or hung beef, ham, etc.” For dinner, they ate boiled pastes under the name of puddings … all their sauces, even for roast beef, are melted butter; their turnips and potatoes swim in hog’s lard, butter, or fat; under the name of pie or pumpkin, their pastry is nothing but a greasy paste, never sufficiently baked … they take tea almost instantly after dinner, making it so strong it is absolutely bitter to the taste, in which state it affects the nerves so powerfully that even the English find it brings on a more obstinate restlessness than coffee.

Thus, “the whole day passes in heaping indigestions on one another.” An English contemporary of Volney provided a pithy summary of frontier cuisine: “They eat salt meat three times a day, seldom or never have any vegetables, and drink ardent spirits from morning til night.”

Culling out the prejudices of elite European travelers, the above accounts describe the hearty Mississippi Valley cuisine that endured until well after World War II. As we saw in studying cracker culture, frontier folk needed lots of calories to survive and work, and they got them where they could. Pork and corn were dietary staples, with corn serving triple duty as side dish, bread, and alcoholic beverage. Warm climate necessitated heavily salting meat to preserve it; fresh meat was cooked long and at high temperatures to kill worms and parasites. Green European-style vegetables were initially scarce; Indian vegetables besides corn were popular, especially pumpkins, squash, and beans. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, butter beans (cousins of the lima), great northern and pinto beans, and black-eyed peas found their way onto dinner tables, cooked in a fatback (pork) and onion broth. On New Year’s Day, Mississippi Valley families cooked up pots of black-eyed peas with a ham hock to bring good luck in the New Year, a tradition that endures. Other popular green vegetables were wild “poke salat” (salad), its domestic cousin collard greens, and green beans, all cooked with the ubiquitous pork and onions. Okra was breaded in cornmeal and fried, and potatoes were served fried, mashed, or, later, in potato salad. Raw green onions (scallions) were served with salt for dipping, and apple orchards provided hearty fruit that could be eaten whole year-round and cooked up into sauces and desserts. Pectin, an apple by-product, facilitated the preservation of fruit jellies and jams.  

African-American slaves and freedmen adopted this cuisine and added their own variations. By the mid-twentieth century, the name soul food was attached to Black foodways that were, and had always been, the same as those of Anglo and Celtic 

75. Ibid.; Grady McWhiney, Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways of the Old South (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1988), 80–83, 86–89; John E. Uhler and Glenna Uhler, eds., The Rochester Clarke Bibliography of Louisiana Cooking (Plaquemine, La., 1966). Loyola University of New Orleans Special Collections possesses several of the cookbooks cited. For apples, see William Kerrigan, Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard: A Cultural History (Baltimore, Md., 2012), and chapter 2, this work. Thanks to Jody Ann Matthews for the pectin information.
Mississippi Valley folk. For example, the New Year’s Day black-eyed pea dish was found on both Black and white folks’ stovetops, and sweet potatoes, an Indian crop, often appeared as side dish and dessert. Wild rabbit, possum, squirrel, and raccoon meat were fried and baked. Vegetables were always overcooked in fatback broth (“pot liquor”). Fried fish was very important to this diet, because the western rivers provided bountiful fatty, bottom-feeding catfish, perch, and bass. Cooks served small catfish (fiddlers) whole, and they cut the big ones into steaks (ribs) cut vertically to the bone. Then, they breaded the fish in cornmeal or flour and fried it golden brown in about a half-inch of lard or bacon grease.76

The addition of poultry and dairy cows to developing farmsteads greatly enriched Mississippi Valley food. Fish were now dipped into an egg and buttermilk batter before being breaded and fried; they were served with hush puppies (fried corn meal, milk, and egg patties) and coleslaw, a cabbage salad heavily dressed in mayonnaise (eggs and vinegar) and white granulated sugar. Of course, cooks also battered, breaded, and fried chicken pieces—legs, thighs, wings, breasts, backs, and innards—creating the classic southern dish. Where crackers raised cattle, they cooked the cheaper beefsteak cuts the same way, eventually naming the dish chicken-fried steak. After frying fish, chicken, or beef steaks, cooks’ pans contained rich dregs of meat and grease. Stirring in and browning a little flour and adding milk at high heat produced rich milk gravy to be spooned onto the meat, vegetables, and biscuits. Served at noon, meals like this provided the calories needed to work hard and enjoy life west of the Appalachians.77

The evolution of riverboat food over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries mirrors much of the above. Early keelboat, flatboat, and rafting crews partook of a coarse diet. One observer

remembered a French-Canadian keelboat crew that daily cooked up “bacon and maize which they call gue” and “seem to prefer above everything.” John James Audubon recalled that, for supper, boatmen “preferring Bacon would Cut a Slice from the Side that hung by the Chimney and Chew that raw with a hard biscuit.” One Kentucky flatboatman bragged in 1806 of procuring a “kettle of milk,” the first he had drunk in two months. Yet by the mid-1800s, a Wabash flatboatman could describe a “glorious” dinner of “wheat bread … fried ham—fried eggs and to top all hot coffee … [and] homemade cake sugar to sweeten it.” Boatmen as “hungry as wolves” feasted on “hot biscuit, pure white honey, hot coffee, et cetera,” and some ate “peach dumplings” for dessert.\(^78\)

As steamboats slowly supplanted nonsteam craft, river cookery evolved to feed hungry crew members and fare-paying travelers. Although nineteenth-century steamboat cuisine was somewhat refined, it retained strong ties to foodways of Mississippi Valley folk on shore. The steamboat galley or cookhouse was located midship, between the main decks, with adjacent space for slaughtering poultry. There was a cooler for fish, meat, and dairy goods, bins for root vegetables, pantry shelves stocked with canned goods (a late nineteenth-century innovation), a large work table for the cook (often called “Cookie”), and a scullery sink for cleanup. The riverman and author Alan Bates recalled the cookhouse was “hot as the very hinges of hell” from coal-fired cooking stoves that were never extinguished. Although the passengers’ dining room was on the main deck, the crew ate midship, where the food was “good, plentiful, and filling… The meals were heavy, but so was the work… Breakfast included a couple of meats, fried potatoes, biscuits, eggs done several ways, jellies and jams, and coffee. Dinner (there was no luncheon!) consisted of meats and

vegetables and desserts such as pie and cake.” Before retiring for the night, Cookie prepared plates piled with cold cuts and trimmings for the hungry crew’s midnight snack.79

Steamboat cabin passengers ate more upscale fare, though European travelers unanimously refuted any American claims to meeting continental standards. Steamboat companies apparently tried to make up for quality by stressing quantity. One passenger remembered serving tables “literally covered with dishes, wedged together as closely as a battalion of infantry in solid square,” and another recalled a single meal with more than thirty separate dishes to choose from. These included “relishes,” a flexible term Americans used to mean almost anything added to or served alongside an entrée.80 The enormity of these repasts still characterizes American all-you-can-eat buffets, including those in gambling casinos that succeeded the Mississippi steamboat gambling rooms.

Aboard steamers, platters were piled high with venison, bear, beef, pork, lamb, wild and tame fowl—a regimen strong on protein and starch and light on vitamins. Some surviving menus list both English and French entrées, side dishes, and desserts in a collage one traveler described as “a most unfortunate attempt to match English and French cooking, without the rude cleanliness of the first and the savory refinement of the latter.” Yet steamboat cookery progressed while retaining its earthy roots. The Delta Queen Cookbook lists appetizing twentieth-century steamboat entrées such as baby back ribs, chicken and andouille gumbo, marinated pork tenderloin, navy bean soup, pot roast of beef, southern-style fried chicken, turtle soup, and, for dessert, strawberry shortcake, beignets, and Delta Queen bread pudding covered in bourbon sauce. Captain Fred Way, who saw all this cuisine change during his career, wrote sarcastically that “a real steamboat cook could make any of those exotic concoctions with a bucket of lard and ten pounds of sugar.”81

80. Louis C. Hunter, Steamboats on Western Rivers, 399–402.
By the end of World War II, most (not all) of the old steamboats had been replaced by diesel-powered, snub-nosed towboats whose cooks were also respected for their hearty fare. Towboat deckhands counted their meals as part of their pay, declaring, “The more you eat, the more you make.” Although there was variety in dishes, many towboat cooks worked around a traditional schedule still seen to this day: Fried chicken on Sundays, pork and beef roasts and chicken and dumplings during the weekdays, fish on Friday, and steaks on Saturday night. Towboat cooks always served their big meal of the day (dinner) at noon, with leftovers and a new entrée for the evening supper. And a good cook left the crew snacks on the counter and in the pantry. Dick Bissell described the dining experience of a 1940s upper Mississippi River boat crew in his autobiographical 1950 novel, *A Stretch of the River*:

One thing about it, we had a cook who wasn’t shy at ordering. We carried the damnedest assortment of food aboard that old tugboat—sardines, pineapple, liederkranz, pork sausage, salami, strawberry preserves, lemon extract, black-eye peas, pickled herring, brown sugar, picnic slices, brick cheese, mayonnaise, grape juice, lunch meats, plum butter, clover honey, smelts, store cookies, vanilla extract, sweet rolls, spareribs, muskmelons, pigs’ feet, Mapeline, Salada tea, pie apples, red grapes, watermelons, youngberries, iceberg lettuce, long johns, Postum, celery salt, buliener, Clabber Girl, hot relish, Indian pudding—only thing missing was pickled eggs and Major Grey’s chuntney.\(^{82}\)

Inevitably, modern health concerns and dietary trends entered the towboat kitchen. Twenty-first-century Americans are concerned with living healthier lives by reducing obesity, and


towboat cuisine is a likely target for transportation company executives concerned with rising health insurance premiums. Dawn Null is a pathbreaking towboat consultant and dietician who stresses healthier diet and exercise for rivermen. Liz Young, a cook for the Ingraham Barge Lines, uses whole wheat macaroni, Greek yogurt, almond milk, and low-fat cheese in some recipes, and serves no fried food except on Friday, “catfish day.” “I grew up on Southern cooking, so I can replicate those tastes,” she states. “I just do it in a more healthy way.”

And though some old river rats may wince at the idea of low-fat towboat food, that alternative is certainly better than another trend in the modern towboat industry—getting rid of cooks altogether. In a cost-cutting strategy abetted by prepared meals and declining culinary standards, many towboat companies simply stock their boats with a freezer full of frozen entrées and a microwave, and crew members are left to fend for themselves. In 2012, one angry towboat man complained that American Commercial Barge Lines (ACBL) “did away with that one little bit of home that their workers enjoyed—they fired all their cooks.” In the good old days, he recalled, one ACBL captain “insisted his cooks bake a big ham on Sundays along with the fried chicken; this would be so his deckhands could have home-baked ham sandwiches all week.”

Corporate cost-cutters, dieticians, and nutritionists notwithstanding, there are plenty of barbecue cooks on the banks of the western rivers carrying on old Mississippi Valley traditions. Like all folk idiom, the word “barbecue” has obscure origins. It descends from Indians by way of the Spanish noun *barbicoa*—a platform on which Caribbean Indians apparently smoked meat over firewood. Colonial and Revolutionary era Virginians and Carolinians barbecued meat, and the word appears in early national references to Jeffersonian and

Jacksonian Democrat outdoor campaign parties. However they used the term—wood-fired cooking device (an open pit barbecue), the meat served therefrom (folks ate barbecue), a mealtime gathering (politicians hosted barbecues), a condiment (chicken basted in barbecue sauce), or a cooking method (to barbecue some pork ribs)—Americans became passionate barbecuers early on and remain so. There are, arguably, four major traditional American barbecue types—Carolina, Memphis, Kansas City, and Texas styles. Our focus here is barbecue prepared and consumed in Memphis, on the lower Mississippi, and Kansas City, astride the lower Missouri River.

The core of the barbecue foodway—meat roasted over a smoky wood fire—was and is found throughout the Memphis and Kansas City areas from the nineteenth century to present. Cooks in both regions utilize open-pit and enclosed smokers, cooking their meat slowly at low temperatures (pork ribs, for example, are cooked at about 250 degrees for four and a half hours). Yet major variants appear. While Memphians are partial to hickory wood, Kansas City cooks fuel their smokers with a variety of woods—cherry, oak, apple, and pecan, alongside hickory. While Memphians almost always barbecue pork, Kansas City cooks prepare pork, beef, chicken, turkey, mutton, sausage, and even fish. Most important, Memphis barbecue is “dry” while Kansas City boasts a “wet” barbecue style.

Pork ribs and pulled pork sandwiches stand atop the menu of every Memphis barbecue joint. The modifier “pulled” means the meat is neither diced nor cut into uniform slices; rather it is pulled off the bone in stringy shredded pieces. Before smoking, the pork is coated with a thick dry rub consisting of a paprika base, salt, pepper, garlic, oregano, celery seed, chili powder, and other spices. While the meat is slowly cooking, Memphians “mop” it with a sauce they make by adding a little water and vinegar to the rub. The cooking continues until the meat is so tender that it nearly falls off the bone. Although Memphians

85. Robert F. Moss, Barbecue: The History of an American Institution (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2010), 7–8, 11–53.
86. Ibid., 150–59.
disdain thick, sweet barbecue sauce dressings, they will eat pulled pork sandwiches and barbecue ribs complemented with a thin, vinegary tomato sauce akin to the rub. But Memphis barbecue spotlights the meat, not the sauce. Cabbage coleslaw swimming in sugar, vinegar, and mayonnaise provides the finishing touch on Memphis barbecue plates.\(^{87}\)

Despite important variants, Kansas City barbecue is related to the Memphis style. Probably too much credit is given to Henry Perry, a Black west Tennessean who moved to Missouri in the early nineteenth century and began smoking meats (the standard chamber of commerce blurb credits Perry with founding Kansas City barbecue). Surely the Memphis style filtered west by way of more than one cook. Yet Perry’s barbecue joint loomed large in the Eighteenth and Vine African American neighborhood that also became home to Kansas City jazz, professional Negro league baseball, and the speakeasy and sin trade overseen by “Boss” (Mayor) Tom Pendergast. Kansas City barbecuing matured, using slow-cooking methods to prepare a variety of smoked meat plates accompanied by slaw, baked beans, fried potatoes, and generous portions of sweet, spicy tomato and molasses barbecue sauce. “Burnt ends”—the crusty end pieces of smoked beef and pork roasts—remain a unique Kansas City entrée.\(^{88}\)

In his study of early national American food, James McWilliams found that Americans balanced European “refinement” with American “provincial ruggedness” while retaining their patriotic pride:

> The refinement of the idealized English (and European) diet was now a quality that young Americans could overtly condemn (rather than, as they once had, praise) without completely dismissing its welcome trappings. Through the virtues that American food embraced—frugality, simplicity, pragmatism, unpretentiousness—the United States could grow into a sophisticated nation while avoiding the enervating habit of complacency into which the British had fallen.\(^{89}\)

Our brief study of Mississippi Valley food takes McWilliams a step further—geographically, chronologically, and analytically. Once Americans crossed the Appalachians, their eating habits evolved, à la Frederick Jackson Turner, in a decidedly more rugged direction. But as time passed, did their diet stay that way, or moderate back in the direction of European norms? Exceptionalism seems to be the rule. And Louisiana and Minnesota—two states often viewed to be very different—provide a final look at Mississippi Valley foodways in the modern period.

Because of its French and Spanish heritage, Louisiana is mistakenly viewed as an American state with decidedly European culture. Architecture, language, and selected folkways lull us into this false analysis. Although Louisianans certainly possess unique cultural traits, they are nevertheless decidedly American. Exceptional Louisiana foodways are celebrated and much discussed. A good way to examine them is to look separately at Louisiana country and city folk—Cajuns and Creoles—and, allowing for variants, identify some patterns.

Like all American immigrants, Cajuns brought cooking styles from their native land, southwestern France, adding elements they learned in Maritime Canada before their mid-eighteenth-century exile southward. Certainly, the tomato sauce bases Cajuns favor were common in their corner of Europe. But in Canada they encountered new kinds of meat, vegetables, and fish, and in Louisiana they learned African foodways and grew fond of hot and sweet peppers and red beans. White rice, introduced to the Americas by the Spanish and Portuguese, is today affectionately called “Cajun ice cream.” Poor but proud, these rural folk of the bayous—that region Kate Chopin called the “Cadian Prairie”—ate wild meat they trapped and shot. They developed a rough cuisine akin to that of crackers and Blacks, complete with cornbread, biscuits, greens, red beans, and bread.

89. McWilliams, “Cuisine and National Identity in the Early Republic,” 7–8; McWilliams, Revolution in Eating.
90. Moss, Barbecue, 229; Calvin Trillin, The Tummy Trilogy (New York, 1994), xi.
91. Uhler and Uhler, Rochester Clarke Bibliography of Louisiana Cooking, passim.
puddings. Their diet might be called Cajun soul food. At the same time, Cajun gumbo (an African word), jambalaya, and dirty rice dishes melded highly spiced peppers, onions, and okra with the meat of rabbit, squirrel, raccoon, opossum, nutria, beaver, muskrat, black bear, deer, duck, goose, chukar, dove, turkey, pheasant, quail, multiple species of fish, shrimp, crawfish, turtle, frog, and alligator alongside chicken, beef, domestic pork, and wild boar. One remarkable Cajun recipe, deep-fried muskrat, calls for marinating the meat in a garlic and pepper mixture for six hours before breading it in flour and frying “until golden brown on all sides and meat floats to surface of the oil.”

The term “Creole” is subject to great debate, which spills over into our discussion of food. Originally, “Creole” described only American-born Louisianans of French and Spanish heritage, as in Kate Chopin’s writings. However, as we saw in the cowboy discussion above, slavery and the rise of a free Black population slowly led to a growing number of mixed-race Louisianans who also claimed the name. Today, most use “Creole” as a term to describe the latter group, but here we use it in the historic Franco-Hispano-Louisianan sense. While many Creoles resided in rural areas, historic Creole culture remains strongly connected to an urban New Orleans (versus rural Cajun) lifestyle and that city’s presumed European foodways. True, some New Orleans restaurateurs aspired (and aspire) to continental standards. Like 1920s and 1930s writers and artists, they imagined New Orleans as a kind of American Paris in which they somehow substituted the Mississippi for the Seine!

However, New Orleans cooks tell a more complicated story. “My earliest restaurant memory is Commander’s Palace,” states the contemporary New Orleans chef John Besh, reminiscing about his family’s 1970s visits to the Crescent City. “Going into the city meant you had to wear your Sunday suit. So, that meant you were taking mom out to a very nice restaurant.” Although

92. John D. Folse, *After the Hunt: Louisiana’s Authoritative Collection of Wild Game and Game Fish Cookery* (Gonzalez, La., 2007), 323 (muskrat recipe), passim.
93. Brasseaux, *Creoles of Color*, xi–xii. For artistic aspirations to create a Left Bank of the Mississippi, see chapter 4, this work.
the Commander’s Palace of Besh’s memories was indeed “a very nice restaurant,” it was not serving haute cuisine. And when discussing his own cooking, Besh confesses, “I’m the first generation from my family away from the farm... Secretly, I love anything fried... The perfect food would be a hot French fry, dipped in mayo when nobody’s looking, at least not my cardiologist.”

Paul Prudhomme, a Cajun chef originally from Opelousas, Louisiana, never worried about cardiologists; he was extremely generous with butter as he introduced bayou foodways into the big city. The restaurateurs Ella and Dick Brennan hired Prudhomme as head chef of Commander’s Palace in 1975, and he immediately brought things down to earth. “I was the first American they’d hired as an executive [chef],” Prudhomme recalls. “It was always Europeans.” Ella Brennan remembers, “The French had intimidated America with their supposed better knowledge of cooking. But we eventually became less intimidated.” Although the Brennans insisted on calling Prudhomme’s cooking “nouvelle Creole,” it exuded his Cajun upbringing. A good example is his signature Commander’s Palace gumbo, a thick, spicy Cajun stew. True, Prudhomme peppered the dish with andouille, a French pork sausage. But at his gumbo’s base was an indigenous roux—a heavy flour and cooking oil thickener.

The gumbo I did at Commander’s was a roux gumbo … it became a staple. It was chicken and andouille gumbo. It was down-and-dirty Cajun. It was what Mama used to do. I’d go into the country and buy the andouille from the guy I’d known since I was a kid. We didn’t have andouille in New Orleans until later.

Far upriver, Minnesotans face a daunting task in putting on airs.

Despite the fact that today’s Twin Cities (alongside Chicago) are home to many faux Euro restaurants, it is hard to be urbane in the upper Mississippi Valley. Like Louisianans, the original European settlers of the upper Midwest brought their native foodways with them.\(^\text{96}\) However, theirs were often Scandinavian customs, not French, and this has somehow led to the myth of bad upper midwestern food. Garrison Keillor plays this theme with a heavy hand: “Good old Norwegian cooking, you don’t read much about that,” he states drolly in *Lake Wobegon Days*, before adding, “or about good old Norwegian hospitality.” Then come the inevitable jokes about lutefisk, “a pale gelatinous substance beloved by all Norwegians, who nevertheless eat it only once a year.”\(^\text{97}\)

Midwestern food jokes about lutefisk, prune whip, chicken surprise, Jello molds, and tuna noodle mushroom soup casseroles, like many tales, have some basis in fact. After all, Betty Crocker is the fictitious creation of the Minneapolis-based General Mills packaged food corporation. Yet there are southern versions of maligned midwestern dishes—Jello is ubiquitous in southern “meat and three” joints, and many lower Mississippi Valley dinner tables have seen casseroles with potato chip toppings (midwesterners prefer canned fried onion rings) and cheese grits. Throughout the South, precooked hams are warmed and served in Coca-Cola sauces. When southerners eat this way, it is somehow seen as quaint. Minnesotans have been treated so unfairly. And, besides, *Betty Crocker’s Cookbook* has some pretty good recipes.\(^\text{98}\)

Keillor knows all of this. His joking about the “Moonlite Bay supper club” (with “forty booths with table cloths and candles in glass bowls that reflected on the mirror on the back bar”) belies a firsthand knowledge of the little joints that lined the upper river, serving fried fish entrées and T-bone steaks. They

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still serve deep-fried frog legs on the upper Mississippi. Midwest folks prefer yeast rolls (Parker House), but biscuits appear at breakfast, and pans of cornbread are plentiful. On Sundays, there are fried chicken dinners, with green beans, mashed potatoes, and milk gravy. Upper Mississippi Valley cooks also make cream sauces out of milk, butter, and cornstarch; creamed onions make an excellent complement to a fried walleye dinner.99

Like the Louisiana bayous, the swamps of the upper Mississippi Valley flyway produce an abundance of ducks and geese for roasting or pan frying. After the wheat and corn are harvested, hunters harvest pheasants in the fields, and they too are floured and fried. Pork roast is extremely popular, and beef comes by way of Nebraska, Dakota, Iowa, and Chicago feedlots. Rare beef is more common nowadays, but a generation ago, midwesterners still cooked their roasts “stringy,” like their nineteenth-century ancestors. On the side, they eat fried or baked potatoes (the latter served with rich midwestern butter and sour cream) and corn on the cob, heavily salted and buttered. The German-American descended cooks of Wisconsin and Minnesota are no strangers to potato salad, served chilled, American style.100

What’s for dessert? The molasses and Karo syrup do not flow as readily in the upper Mississippi as the lower. Midwesterners like apple and cherry pie, and they like apple strudel (also Americanized). Cold midwestern winters lend themselves to baking, which reaches a crescendo at Christmas time. “Baking begins in earnest weeks ahead,” Keillor writes. “Waves of cookies, enough to feed an army, enough to render an army helpless, including powerful rum balls and fruitcakes soaked with spirits (if the alcohol burns off in the baking, as they say, then why does Arlene [Bunson] hide them from her mother?).”101

100. Wolf, Fried Walleye and Cherry Pie, passim.
In 1982, Maggie Lee Sayre resided in the Decatur County Nursing Home in Parsons, Tennessee. Still spry and mentally alert at sixty-two years of age, Maggie had been placed in the home by relatives because she was deaf and could not speak. Summoned to the reception area at 8:00 p.m. one evening, Parsons found the folklorists Tom Rankin and Bob Fulcher waiting for her. The three exchanged written notes as Maggie learned the men sought her out because she possessed a record of her fifty-one years living aboard houseboats on western rivers. In the late 1930s, Sayre had acquired a Kodak box camera, and for three decades she took hundreds of photographs of her family’s riverboat world. Though Maggie Sayre was deaf and speechless, she could speak volumes. As soon as she ascertained the men’s purpose, she went to her room and returned with two large photo albums. The three spent the evening poring over pictures of the lost world of Mississippi Valley houseboat folk.

“Of all the dwellers in the valley of the great river, those who live in the houseboats have, by far, the most picturesque environment,” wrote Clifton Johnson in his 1906 book *Highways and Byways of the Mississippi Valley*. “You find them everywhere, from St. Paul to New Orleans, and not only on the main rivers but on all the larger tributaries. There are many thousands of these water-gypsies in all.”

Like Cajun cowboys, stock car drivers, SEC football stars, and New Orleans chefs, houseboat folk possess a mystique. In a sense, Americans who lived on western rivers houseboats continued the traditions of ancient Egyptians inhabiting Nile riverboats, Chinese fishermen families whose craft lined the banks of the Yellow River, or the houseboaters seen today on the Rhine, Seine, and Thames Rivers. Yet American houseboating was exceptional, born in the nineteenth century of its own


geographic uniqueness and the interplay of economic necessity and a romantic urge to live on the river. The folklorist Jens Lund writes, “The houseboat was indispensable to a little-known way of life that persisted on North American rivers for almost 150 years.”

American houseboat folk do not include those who worked on presteam and steam vessels or modern diesel boats. True, these workers did (and still do) inhabit the river for long stretches of time; some contemporary towboatmen spend eight months of every year of their working lives on the river. However, their towboats are not really homes, and their fellow crewmembers are not literally families. Their cramped cabins and workdays spent amid the sound of screaming diesel engines form a lifestyle so unique it will be described separately below. Tourists traveling the western rivers also got a taste of living on the river, but their stay was too brief (and luxurious) to qualify as houseboating. The term “houseboat folk” cannot be applied to today’s Mississippi Valley populace whose “cabins” (some, not all, of which feature modern plumbing and electricity) line the western rivers. Nor does it describe contemporaries who own flat-bottomed, aluminum lake and river craft they take out for weekends and extended fishing and water sport adventures.

Houseboats were “locally built barge[s], with a cabin superstructure, commonly used by itinerant people” in the Mississippi Valley from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century. Houseboats were a subtype of flatboats—the small, wooden pre-industrial versions of modern steel-hulled river barges. The floating barge portion of a houseboat averaged twenty-five to thirty-five feet in length and ten to twelve feet in width. A house or cabin built of lumber and salvaged driftwood was built atop the barge, leaving room for narrow walks on the port and starboard sides; there were also small bow and stern decks that served as work stations and points of entrance and exit. The house was usually made up of two rooms—a bedroom and a kitchen and living room—with

a door on each (bow and stern) end; sometimes there was a third room. The roof was usually flat, with a stove chimney protruding. Though most often called houseboats, these craft were also referred to as “cabin boats” and “camp boats”; “shantyboat” was a term used, sometimes derogatorily, by landsmen. One folklorist has noted the architectural resemblance of the houseboat's living space to modern, singlewide trailer houses, homes also inhabited by itinerant folk.106

Houseboat folk simultaneously lived and earned their living on the water. Folklorists might call them an occupational folk group, but their occupations varied widely and included both subsistence and market endeavors. Many houseboat men and women fished and sold fish; they harvested mussels from the river’s bottom. They also gardened, hunted deer and game birds, trapped rabbits, and gathered edible plants like poke greens. Houseboat residents built and sold boats and furniture, and dealt in firewood and lumber (which they gathered and logged for free); some made and sold shakes and shingles. Houseboat peddlers sold pots and pans and dry goods. There were houseboating photographers, musicians, and showmen. There were prostitutes, bootleggers, and itinerant preachers, at least one of whom staged big fish fries (picnic dinners) to draw crowds to his sermons. Finally, houseboat men could always secure work as steamboat deckhands while the women worked as cook and chambermaids.107

Like flatboatmen, houseboat folk navigated downstream only. They lacked the keeled prow and steam or diesel technology that enabled boats to travel upstream. The typical houseboat family worked its way slowly downriver, earning a living until

resources grew slim, at which time they untied their lines and floated further downstream in search of a new (rent-free) bank to tie to. The time spent in one locale could vary dramatically, depending on conditions that included the local sheriff’s benevolence. Houseboat folks’ locations could sustain them from a few weeks to several years. While the lifestyle was often solitary, it was not uncommon to see groups of boats gathered together in small houseboat villages at the mouths of rivers. “In Louisville, at the mouth of Beargrass Creek,” Alan L. Bates reminisced in the Waterways Journal, “there was a colony of several hundred. We went to school with the kids and played on their fleets.” While the average houseboat’s lifespan was multiple years, it was not unusual for a family to sail a new boat for one navigational season, then break it up and sell it for lumber. They returned upstream on foot, wagon, horseback, or on the deck of a northbound steamer, built a new boat, and started the next season afresh.108

Before the Civil War, houseboaters made up a subset of the larger class of flatboatmen. They lived on the river year-round, earning their livings wherever they tied up. While some locals on the bank called them “chicken thieves,” most earned an honest living as produce merchants, peddlers, blacksmiths, tanners, tavern keepers, and professional entertainers and prostitutes. One 1850s Ohio riverman named Jamson kept a bee boat, which he navigated in accordance with the weather and the availability of “fresh ‘pastures’ for his bees.” Store boatmen flew calico flags to attract customers to peruse and buy their inventory; they returned annually (in new boats) to serve regular customers along their routes.109

Writing during an 1890s river trip, the historian Reuben Gold


Thwaites romantically described houseboat folk as “a race of picturesque philosophers” and “followers of the apostle’s calling” and referred to their “honest-like open-faced sobriety.” Four decades later, the Depression-era sociologist Ernest Tiller characterized them in terms reminiscent of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis: “The free squatting and floating privileges” and “self-help opportunities” that characterize houseboat lifestyle “are survivals of the frontier traditions rather than unique adjustments induced by the depression.” The adaptive survival skills of houseboaters have “since pioneer days … enabled and predisposed” their survival. Tiller estimated the 1930s houseboating populace at approximately 50,000.

This large number of houseboaters was nurtured in part by a boom in mussel fishing in the early decades of the twentieth century. The industrial revolution had seen huge growth in clothing factories, and they all needed buttons manufactured from the shells of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys’ plentiful mussel fishery. Muscatine, Iowa, became known as the “Pearl of the Mississippi” because its factories produced 37 percent of the world’s pearl (mussel shell) buttons; by 1905, Muscatine was producing 1.5 billion buttons per year. Using crowfoot hooks, mussel gatherers (known as “clammers” or “musselers”) harvested nearby stretches of the upper Mississippi and the lower Rock, Iowa, and Des Moines Rivers. They used the meat for fish bait or marketed it as animal feed, and they sold the occasional pearl to local jewelry dealers. As the beds near Muscatine were depleted, mussel shells arrived in barges from other Mississippi Valley fisheries, notably the Tennessee River towns of Savanna, Tennessee, and Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and the Cumberland River town of Nashville. By the late 1930s, however, the button boom was over. Foreign competition, technological inefficiencies, union radicalism, changing fashions (including zippers), overharvesting, and of course the development of plastic buttons all combined to end the pearl

button era. Musselers, including many houseboaters, had to seek new opportunities.111

As noted earlier, Maggie Lee Sayre left a detailed record of the life of a houseboat girl through her black-and-white photography. Born on April 4, 1920, to Archie and May Sayre, Maggie spent nearly all the first five decades of her life on her family’s Tennessee River Valley houseboat. Her fisherman father built a huge (sixty-foot) houseboat from which he caught catfish, buffalo fish, and carp to market in river towns like Smithland, Johnsonville, and Paducah, Kentucky. Maggie Sayre’s nomadic river life was briefly interrupted by two stints at the Kentucky School for the Deaf in Danville, where she learned to read and write. Later, she wrote captions for more than two hundred fifty photographs. Looking over one picture of her family home, Maggie remembered,

My father made the boat. He did it himself. I was a baby. And this was in Paducah, Kentucky. He worked slow and built the boat. It’s a three-room boat. There’s a bedroom, and there’s another very small room, and then there’s a larger room. We had a dresser and then my father’s bed was in the first room, and then a closet in the first room. In the kitchen area we had a stove where we could make biscuits, and we had a box outside for ice. We drank water from a creek. It was nice water. A spring. My father had a big, big jar that he used for the water.112

Combined, Maggie Sayre’s photographs and captions provide a comprehensive record of houseboat life, “a pictorial narrative of family, place, work.” She photographed her family’s boat from all angles and made pictures of her father’s trot lines and hoop nets and his gas-powered motorboat. She photographed her mother at work, and family gatherings afloat and ashore. But most of

all she photographed the fish that provided her family a living. There are many pictures of huge bottom feeders, the catfish, carp, and buffalo fish that Mississippi Valley folk loved to flour and fry. Like all fishermen, the Sayres liked to keep pictures of the big fish they had caught.¹¹³

Maggie Sayre’s photographs document the twilight years of houseboating. With the waning of the Great Depression many houseboat families sought jobs and homes ashore. “Prosperity brought on by World War II wiped [housboating] out,” Alan Bates recalled. Moreover, the Depression created a federal government large and powerful enough to end the free and independent houseboat lifestyle. In the heart of the Maggie Sayre’s world, the Tennessee Valley Authority built a series of hydroelectric dams. While the dams brought flood control and electricity to change many people’s lives for the better, houseboat folk suffered because of them. The dams backed up the rivers to form lakes, and locks brought diesel towboat barge traffic far upstream. Entire river communities were covered in water, and the patterns of river life and fishing never returned. At the same time, new federal bureaus began to police the boats’ waste disposal for pollution. Houseboats could never pass the safety standards imposed on inland vessels by the United States Coast Guard. Zoning officials and planners, wharf police, the Army Corps of Engineers, public school administrators, and social workers set their sights on taming the houseboaters. By the time Jens Lund conducted his 1980s field work on Ohio Valley fishermen, the few remnant houseboats were no longer actual homes; they were being used as floating fish markets or had been hauled up on shore for that purpose.¹¹⁴

Yet the houseboat mystique lived on in popular culture, because the free, roving lifestyle of houseboat folk proved a popular topic among romantic novelists and children’s writers. Books featuring houseboat heroes had appeared in parallel with the second phase of the American industrial revolution; as

¹¹³. Rankin, “Photographs of Maggie Lee Sayre,” 121.
Americans grew into more modern folk, they simultaneously romanticized houseboat folk. In Arthur M. Winfield’s *Rover Boys on the River* (1905), the reader meets Dick, Tom, and Sam, who sail down the Ohio on the houseboat *Dora* in search of freedom and adventure. Incongruously, the *Dora* is replete with “eight sleeping rooms” and hired help! The boys have many brushes with danger, most of which involve protecting their girlfriends from villainous Lew Flapp, “the bully of Putnam Hall” (Dubuque riverman and author Dick Bissell had much fun lampooning the book’s stylistic failings and historical inaccuracies). Laura Lee Hope echoed the Rover Boy adventures in her 1915 juvenile tale *The Bobbsey Twins on a Houseboat*.115

The most ambitious and historically accurate of the children’s books is Lois Lenski’s 1957 *Houseboat Girl*. A native of Springfield, Ohio, and prolific author of children’s literature, Lenski published more than two dozen titles during the decades following World War II. While some of her books classify as historical fiction, her favorite genre was occupational literature, telling the story of a child growing up within an occupational folk group. These books include *Bayou Suzette* (1943), *Blue Ridge Billy* (1946), *Cotton in My Sack* (1949), *Texas Tomboy* (1950), *Corn Farm Boy* (1954), and others. Lenski’s own drawings adorn each book.116

In the foreword to *Houseboat Girl*, Lenski states she was inspired by Harlan Hubbard and his 1953 nonfiction work *Shantyboat*. With Hubbard’s help, Lenski sought out the Henry and Lou Story family of Metropolis, Illinois, whose lives Hubbard had chronicled. In the summer of 1954, Lenski lived with the Storys aboard their houseboat near Luxora, Arkansas. Using field notes, she wrote *Houseboat Girl*, portraying the lives of these “rugged wholesome people.” The itinerant houseboat folk, Lenski writes in her foreword, are “daring and courageous,

resourceful, and independent, poor perhaps in the world’s goods, but sweet, loveable, and good.”

Like John Henton Carter’s 1890 flatboat novel *Thomas Rutherton, Houseboat Girl* is a work of fiction from which the reader learns a good deal of social history. Written for advanced elementary and secondary school children, *Houseboat Girl* describes the Story family’s summer odyssey down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers from southern Indiana to northeast Arkansas. Lenski’s illustrations lend artistic detail, and the reader can follow the storyline using her hand-drawn map. She changed the name of the Storys to Foster and made daughter Irene Story into her heroine Patsy. *Houseboat Girl* stresses family ties, community, and work ethic; the women work alongside the men as they fish the river. *Houseboat Girl* also reflects social prejudice against houseboat folk as Patsy suffers the insults of children calling her a “shanty girl” and “river rat.” However, her mother retorts, “There’s just as good people on the river as on land.” Interestingly, *Houseboat Girl* ends with the Fosters moving permanently onto the bank. Yet they haul their houseboat ashore to use as their new home and continue to live near the river wilderness of their nomadic past.

The Dubuque towboatman Richard Bissell experienced houseboating during the exact time that lifestyle was transitioning from occupational to leisure. In 1939, Bissell was newly wed and helping to manage his father’s Dubuque clothing factory (an experience that eventually led to his novel *7 1/2 Cents* and the Broadway musical *The Pajama Game*). He and wife Marian caught “houseboat fever,” and he reflected in *My Life on the Mississippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain*, that they loved houseboating because “everything you do is more fun on a houseboat, even washing dishes.” The Bissels searched for “a houseboat we could really live on full time, forsaking the land utterly and floating, floating all day and night in watery bliss together with the wedding presents, the bullterrier, and the upright piano.”

118. Ibid., 2, 81, 163–76. For Carter’s *Thomas Rutherton*, see chapter 4, this work.
They soon salvaged a sunken Army Corps of Engineers crew barge and named her *Prairie Belle*. Eighty feet long and two stories high, the *Belle* featured “a gable roof, overhanging Swiss balconies at each end, with forty twelve-light windows, it was an awesome sight.” They moored the boat in Dubuque Harbor (mile 580 on the upper Mississippi) and fitted her out with a living room, two pantries and a kitchen, sewing room, bedroom with a four-poster bed, bathroom with full-size tub, and music room complete with a piano. “We had no other home,” he remembered. “Everything we owned was in this boat, afloat on the Mississippi.”

However, the romance of houseboat life evidently wore off, and after a few years Dick and Marian sold *Prairie Belle*. Then in 1948, yearning for “a houseboat to retire to from time to time,” they paid $800 for a much smaller (two-room) “shantyboat.” This one featured a “plop-plop-into-the-river toilet” built by splicing “an outhouse on one end which stuck out over the water into space.” The Bissells never lived on the *Floating Cave* (the name was a family joke). They moored the *Cave* in Dubuque Harbor, and each summer it served as the family’s wilderness retreat. They would sail a few miles south and tie her to an “island above Shinkle’s Bar, across from Nine-Mile Island.” Bissell fondly remembered,

Tied up just inside the point of the island, we could see all the towboats go by right close up. We had a camp ground, a big tree house, a garden, and a big bull snake. The house was empty all week, the doors were never locked but what you could get in with a jackknife or a claw hammer but in those times we never lost a thing.121

However, like Huck and Jim’s journey south on a raft, the Bissells’ idyll also ended. The success of *The Pajama Game* induced them

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119. Richard Bissell, *My Life on the Mississippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain* (Boston, 1973), 149–51; Richard Bissell Induction File, National Rivers Hall of Fame, National Rivers Museum, Dubuque, Iowa. Bissell’s *Pajama Game* is discussed in chapter 6, this work.


121. Ibid., 209–13.
to “gorge on the great immovable cultural feast of the Northeast coast” (like Mark Twain, Bissell could not resist the pull of the eastern literati). The *Floating Cave* was relegated to a slip in East Dubuque. There, beavers “built a house around one end and underneath” and vandals broke out the windows. Visiting in 1972, Bissell saw mallard ducks “lounging on the deck” and, inside, “six duck eggs under the icebox.”

Obviously, Dick and Marilyn Bissell differed greatly from earlier houseboaters. Bissell did not earn a living on his boat. Although he did much of his writing afloat, there is a huge difference between someone who fishes, dives for mussels, or rafts timber from their houseboat and someone pecking out screenplays and novels on a Royal typewriter in the study on a two-story houseboat with a piano and four-poster bed! This difference reflects a changing American economy and culture. Yet the two worlds are tied together by a romantic desire to live on water. Though he was pulled irreversibly in the direction of the “immovable cultural feast” of “civilization” on “the bank,” Bissell clung to his river days and the freedom of life away from the bank. Nor could the retired towboat captain ever resist the urge to poke fun at posers, contemporary houseboaters who purchased expensive modern craft for occasional weekend retreats:

Now, you take one of the new houseboats that “sleep eight.” Well, you know that means that eight people can lie down somehow and get through the night. After one gay weekend as guests the wives will think of really outlandish excuses to get out of a repeat. There’s no room for real comfort on any conventional factory-built cruiser, or sailboat either, until you get into the yacht class; and this is no fun either because all large yachts are owned by people who say things like “Bimini” and “Pipe yourself aboard and we’ll buy you a (a) snort (b) drinkie (c) grog (d) martooni.”

Although houseboating has changed over the past two hundred years, the urge to live on a riverboat remains in fiction and fact.

122. Ibid., 218–19.
123. Ibid., 155. See also Bates, “Free Life,” 33.
Mud (2013), a movie written and directed by the Arkansan Jeff Nichols, uses houseboat people as the characters for a modern river thriller with echoes of Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. In the real world, western rivers marinas moor thousands of flat-bottomed lake and river boats with cabins. A few owners live in their boats year-round, though very few make a living on the water like the characters in Mud. The houseboat today reflects the affluence and leisure time of modern Americans who long for what they see as a simpler, romantic past.¹²⁴

Thus no one should have been surprised when groups of twenty-first-century investors decided to build condominium barges. One such company, River Cities Condominiums, advertised “attractive and affordable condominium communities” that would sail the western rivers with between three hundred and fifty and four hundred residents in as many as two hundred condos. “Once we have built your home, River Cities will staff each vessel with pilots, crew, and managers who will safely navigate between ports to provide you with a worry-free, yet adventurous living experience.”¹²⁵

“We said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all,” Huck reflects in Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. “Other places do seem so cramped and smothery, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.”¹²⁶ Had Huck drifted past a condominium barge, he might have “lit out for the territories” even sooner to get as far away from “sivilization” as possible.

¹²⁴ Jeff Nichols, dir., Mud (2012; Lionsgate, 2013), DVD.
¹²⁶ Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884; repr. New York, 1977), 96.