

The Folklorist in the Marketplace

Conversations at the Crossroads of
Vernacular Culture and Economics

Edited by
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Folklore as a Networked Economy

*Or, How a Recently-Invented-but-Traditional Artifact Reveals the Way
Folkloric Production Has Always Worked*

John Laudun

AS MULLINS AND BATRA-WELL HIGHLIGHT in their introduction to this volume, folklorists have approached economics along some fairly well-worn paths: folk as a social class or category, folklore as artifacts to be produced and consumed, and the dynamics of folklore being best glimpsed within a marketplace of ideas and practices. All of these frameworks have, by and large, arisen as part of the field's own ongoing attempts to place itself within the larger history of the study of such things, especially as folklorists find themselves, as a result of economic opportunities and necessities—and sometimes it is difficult to tell such things apart—that split the field across a range of academic and public-sector institutional or organizational contexts. That is, folklorists themselves must compete in the marketplace of ideas, a competition that so often in the pages of our journals and books we frame as a losing proposition.

That we attempt to act as intermediaries for individuals and groups who are marginalized or misunderstood in some fashion has long been, thanks to our roots in the philological project, one of our core missions. That we obscure our own role in the fashioning of groups and margins is something the field has treated on occasion and will continue to examine as we move forward during what many concerned consider is a difficult economic moment both for folklorists and many of the folk.

The complexities, and nuances, of all this are something a number of folklorists have sought to understand (see Bauman and Briggs 2003, Bendix 1997). Because the valuation of artifacts carries obvious signs of economics, studies of material folk culture have often been iconic within folklore

studies as sites where economic matters get addressed directly. Scholars of material folk culture have been quite good, I would argue, at following the transformation of what were craft activities, the making of stoneware pots or woven rugs or wooden household objects, into artisanal or artistic traditions. When combined with the transformations of the field with the turn toward performance, folklorists in general have provided detailed accounts of the life of artifacts, both material and verbal, as they are trafficked through various social spheres, be those spheres adjacent or distant. At the same time, we have been less interested in following the transformation of the craft tradition, as a kind of “mentifact,” as it found new objects to create and produce.

In Louisiana, the crawfish boat is just such an object. Made of aluminum sheets and steel stock that arrive on flatbed trailers, held together by bolts made in distant factories and welds requiring vast amounts of electricity, and powered by small combustion engines driving complex hydraulic systems, the boats are about as modern as things get. Their diverse materials are a prism onto a global economy which otherwise seems so threatening to things folk. But the boats are made by hand by a handful of makers, all of whom have long ties to the landscape on which the boats work and with the people who work them: in some cases, the boats are made by the men who also operate them in a season that runs from some time in winter to early summer.

To get down to the brass tacks, to use a metallic metaphor, the crawfish boat must be understood in light of it having been, from the point of view of the economy within which it emerged, as a solution to a problem. That economy itself was, and is, fundamentally agricultural. The current context for American agriculture is one in which farmers face myriad complex networks that involve the manufacture of seeds, which now come with intellectual property regimes; the federal regulation, and support, of agriculture and agricultural lands both to protect the environment and to support food independence; and commodity price regimes and their diverse middle men (brokers, millers, distributors, wholesalers, food manufacturers); as well as the usual assortment of natural phenomenon that have always plagued farmers: droughts, storms, weeds, pests, and disease.

The crawfish boat arose in the middle of such things as an object that could harness immediate local interest, with the possible interest of more distant others in the future, as well as offer a “crop” outside the regulated economies of agricultural commodities such as rice and soybeans. (This also meant it was outside the protections of crop insurance or advanced bookings.) Understanding these economics is beyond the scope of this

essay, which can offer only a sketch of such matters as they play out in the development of the form and the eventual development of a manufacturing infrastructure. Put another way, a way perhaps more appealing to folklorists, farmers along the Western Gulf Coast Prairie are part of larger economic systems over which they have little to no control. Within such a context, however, the farmers in the Louisiana portion of the prairie developed an artifact, a machine (a text), which precisely addressed that context, drawing upon only their own ideas and experiences. The machine created additional spaces within the larger economy that gave farmers room to maneuver and, in some cases, to flourish. The machine itself was both part of, and an index of, this ongoing negotiation of economic space. In the process, it also created, quite literally, economic spaces for others, for example, fabricators, to develop, in some cases, businesses focused on the manufacture of the crawfish boat.

Economic spaces are, of course, abstractions, abstractions that reveal the necessary ideational nature of the subject at hand. Such spaces surely exist, but they exist only in the minds of the humans who move about within and across various groups that both they and we imagine as communities but might be better described as networks, with individuals making up nodes in a network that is always in motion, because people are always in motion, but which nevertheless instantiate dependably objective sets of relationships. Thus, the idea of clustering, central to network studies, is readily glimpsed on the rural landscape, as individuals transit between house and shop, between one site and another. They navigate that landscape, of course, by depending upon a network of ideas, which are held together through various discursive forms that emphasize narrative, locative, argumentative, or expository relationships. Like the individuals in whom they reside, these ideational networks are highly dynamic as they prove themselves to be useful and/or interesting, shaping actions in the world and in turn being shaped by those actions.

To understand folklore as a networked economy is to understand folklore as a collection of sociocultural networks whose connections scholars and scientists have only recently begun to trace. While much of that work has focused on rumors, legends, and news that make their way through online social networks, folklorists, and other ethnomethodologists (as Bruno Latour noted), can contribute to the larger inquiry by establishing that social networks have always been a part of the human experience of the world. Tracing such a network of ideas and people is a bit more complex in the field, but it can be done. By focusing on an artifact of relatively recent creation, but drawing upon obviously well-established networks of

ideas as well as well-established lived, social networks, I hope to use the smallness of the subject to advantage, revealing how it draws upon concentric sets of ideas and individuals.

A LARGER HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The overarching set of ideas, or context, for the crawfish boat is agricultural. The Western Gulf Coast Prairie has been transformed over the past three centuries from wild pasturage for small herds of buffalo to managed pasturage for cattle to a fairly productive agricultural region, which now, strangely enough, features aquaculture. Both the growing of rice and the raising of crawfish are made possible through careful terracing of what appears to be a flat landscape but is, in fact, one with rolls of sufficient gentleness to allow fields to be cut into pieces large enough to deploy machinery for harvest. That is, the Louisiana prairies are fundamentally dry but sourced well enough with water both above and below ground to allow for the pumping and holding of water in “paddies.” The reason for flooding fields is to take advantage of rice’s tolerance of water, enabling a fundamental form of weed control.

Rice first came to the Americas in 1685, when a severe Atlantic storm drove a brigantine bound from Madagascar to Europe into Charleston harbor. While the ship underwent repair, its captain passed along some seed rice to a local doctor, who in turn passed the seed along to some of his friends, who were able to grow the Madagascar rice, adding another crop to American agriculture.¹ When plantation owners found that some of their slaves knew how to grow rice, it wasn’t long before demand for such slaves reached back to Africa. It is also quite possible that in the years that followed the eviction of the Acadians from the Canadian maritime provinces, some of the dispossessed would have witnessed these Carolinian plantations, with their complex networks of levees that took advantage of the ability of ocean tides, in raising the water level, to push fresh water into fields, where it could be held when the tide waned. Such a sight would, historian Carl Brasseaux (1992) has pointed out, certainly have reminded the Acadians of the similar structures they had built to reclaim land in the farms they had been forced to leave behind in what would become Nova Scotia.

In Louisiana, the city of New Orleans is founded in 1718 and the first slave ship arrives only one year later. A few records point to slaves with knowledge of rice being sought out, and the general sense is that rice was seen as a crop that could be grown where nothing else would. Its principle market was as fodder for slaves. The rest of the state’s residents were much

more focused on trying to grow wheat for bread or learning to master the many things one can make with the continent's own grain, corn.²

Rice remained an opportunistic crop for much of Louisiana's early history. Several observers noted its presence among Acadian farmers, especially among those who had moved away from the Mississippi River and its immediate tributaries to begin to populate the prairies west of the great Atchafalaya swamp. Among the prairies and bayous, small farmers planted patches of "providence" rice, broadcasting seed in low-lying spots—in coulees and ponds according to Lauren Post—where the grain might take advantage of its natural tolerance for standing water. While the supply was never great, it did cultivate, as it were, a taste for the grain that may have been as important as anything else, keeping it, as it did, rice growing an active part of the region, and thus an active part of the landscape.

Except for a brief moment immediately before and after the Civil War, rice was never subject to large-scale agricultural efforts.³ The key to the transformation of the Louisiana prairies into an agricultural landscape was the completion of the Louisiana Western Railroad in 1881, bridging the gap that had existed since before the Civil War, when two lines had reached as far as Berwick from New Orleans and as far as Orange from Houston. The land through which the railroad ran had been, from the point of view of the powers that be, sparsely populated, filled mostly with grazing cattle. Several companies sprang up to fill this newly opened, and fertile, landscape, which was advertised as "free from protracted droughts which afflict Kansas and other prairies regions" (Dethloff 1988, 372). They bought up large chunks of land and then sold it in smaller chunks, often in quarter sections of 160 acres, to farmers who often came down in tours, sponsored by the companies or by the railroad (now the Southern Pacific), which was anxious to have the land settled and productive. In other words, the key to rice in Louisiana, now one of the iconic foods of the region, was the consolidation of a modern transportation infrastructure.

Thanks to the railroad, the population of the Louisiana prairies doubled in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, from 126,000 to 240,000. As historian Henry Dethloff noted, "Most of the new settlers were farmers from the North and Midwest lured by cheap land and driven by droughts and blizzards that beset the midwestern prairies in the 1880s and climaxed with the terrible winter of 1886–87" (Dethloff 1988, 374). These farmers were used to growing crops, such as wheat, which had never done well in the long hot, and humid, Louisiana summers, but it did not take them long to turn all the equipment they had brought with them—steam tractors, harrows, plows, and threshers—to the task of growing rice (Dethloff 1988, 375).

What they discovered was a landscape practically made not only for holding water but also for working with heavy equipment: under the Louisiana prairies lies an impervious clay pan subsoil that holds water the way cement does and supports heavy equipment, which would otherwise bog in deeper soils. Combined with a growing season that typically accommodates both a first crop and a ratoon crop and abundant rainfall, what had once been a small-scale agriculture intended for local consumption became an agricultural powerhouse whose output practically doubled decade after decade in its first forty years: 834,111 bushels in 1879 became 2,721,059 in 1889, then 6,213,397 in 1899, followed by 10,839,973 in 1909 and 16,011,607 in 1919.⁴ The scope of the mechanization can be gleaned from equipment shipments during these years: the Southern Pacific Railroad shipped 1 twine binder to southwest Louisiana in 884, 200 in 1887, and 1,000 in 1890.

Reading histories of early efforts by the railroads and other private investment companies to settle the Louisiana prairies, you realize that the quarter sections of land that were being marketed to prospective buyers were being sold on the very basis of their mechanizability. It's not clear if the northern and European farmers necessarily expected such machines to be a part of the landscape or if it was part of the overall vision of progress being advertised, but steam tractors were regularly featured as plowing and cultivating in tours.

Contemporary memories of twentieth-century developments suggest that mechanization, or at least a desire to mechanize, is a significant part of farming practice.⁵ While not that many farmers began with steam tractors, it remained a desire to have one. Most of the early agricultural machines were pulled by horses, be they gang plows or threshers or bailers. Self-binding reapers were drawn by rather large mule teams, with the machinery driven by a bull wheel that created the mechanical energy required to first cut the rice stalks, then push them onto a conveyor of some kind, then bind a group of stalks into a shock, which was then dropped to one side as part of the conveyance movement.⁶ The shock, of course, dates back to antiquity and remained a part of agricultural practice until harvesting and threshing were combined into one machine, aptly named the *combine*, perhaps one of the greatest labor-saving devices ever invented.

Both the tractor and the combine did not really come into their own until the 1950s, a moment in which small gasoline-powered tractors became affordable and combines became self-propelled. The oldest farmers at work in the present have memories that date back to that time, and many of them have fond memories of their family's first tractor or combine. Until that moment, horses remained a significant part of farm life in south Louisiana, except on the largest or most profitable farms. The rise in productivity

brought by the introduction of these machines, as well as improved varieties (known as cultivars) and synthetic herbicides, can be glimpsed in the history of rice yields: after the precipitous rise in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, yields hovered around 1,800 to 2,000 pounds per acre throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Only after the Second World War did rice production rise significantly, and then it did with pent-up ferocity, doubling to over 4,000 pounds per acre by the late 1960s. Further rises occurred in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s thanks to the development of cultivars, many of which were the product of the LSU AgCenter's Rice Research Station located in rice country itself, between the towns of Crowley and Rayne. (Such is their faith in technology, Louisiana rice farmers tax themselves in order to fund the research, and the relationship between the station faculty and staff and area farmers is quite open and warm.)

One should not imagine that the tractor, the combine, or other machines simply appear magically on the landscape and everything changes. Rather, they first appear in the fields of more prosperous, or more adventurous, farmers. Other farmers stop and stand at the edge of the fields, observe, wonder if it's worth the investment. There is a great deal of conversation in feed and seed stores, in hardware stores, at the mills, and at church. How is it? What's it like to work? Does it increase yields? Does it damage the land any? The questions are direct. These are men and women who have, thanks to mechanization, always worked alone or in small groups of two or three. As the years pressed on, they worked more and more acres, keeping the same amount of people per farm, resulting in fewer of them.⁷

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CRAWFISH BOAT

As the machines they used became more capable of driving other machines, farmers began to seek out devices that solved particular problems. Sometimes they worked on their own, and sometimes they sought out the help of a local equipment repair shop. No matter the origin, if something worked it would soon find its way onto other farms, with variations the product of particular needs or ideas or experiences. Out of such moments were born PTO pumps, for moving water out of canals and ditches, and PTO ditchers, for creating the shallow, wall-less traces that allow water to drain out of near-level rice fields, as well as side plows and water levelers and a myriad other tools and machines.⁸

All of these things allow farmers to transform the gently sloping landscape of south Louisiana into a series of carefully calculated as-close-to-level-as-you-can-get rice fields that they maintain all year round



1.1. A plan of a rice field divided into cuts. Water is pumped into the top cut, or cuts, and then flows through the terraced levels via a series of gates, drains, or curtains to the bottom cut from which it drains into adjacent ditches, coulees, or bayous. While fields usually follow mapped survey boundaries, cut boundaries follow the land's topography.

by pulling levees up and then pulling them down, by carefully working inside flooded fields with giant tractors in order to make cuts as close to level as you can get. There is never anything perfect. There is never anything complete, especially when confronted with both the uncertainty of cultivating living things while at the mercy of the randomness of the weather, a randomness redoubled by the greed of the commodity markets that are more than happy to punish mistakes and successes alike.

In the face of such forces, the ability to get a side plow made just for your tractor or a boat that works best in the kinds of fields you have seems a small affordance of security, a slight hedge against the many risks. It is no wonder then that the ties between farmers and fabricators are so strong. The men in the shops have, working as they do across farms, the knowledge of what can, or will, go wrong and right that wrong the next time they make

that thing. They are not invested in mass production, and they do not have to wait to retool an entire manufacturing line. While robots and jigs may require weeks, or in some cases months, to be changed, men working with their hands, and minds, can change immediately. The next weld will be twice as long, the next brace, twice as thick.

The same immediacy, and the same knowledge, applies to repairs. A farmer comes into a shop in need of a repair. For him or her, it may be the first time this piece of gear has broken, but in most instances it is not the first time the fabricator has seen that piece of gear broken. A great deal of the gear that farmers use is built by large national, or international, companies who are, in effect, making general purpose machines and equipment. They cannot know the particular uses, and abuses, that their products will encounter in the fields. Farmers in Louisiana feel that that is particularly the case for them: a lot of the gear they use is made with the corn and wheat fields of the Midwest and Plains in mind. Rice is rough, they say. Its hull can wear almost anything down more quickly than any manufacturer has ever anticipated. It is up to the men in the shops nearby to know how to put things right, often improving on things as they go.

The ability to have your general-purpose gear customized or repaired to your particular needs creates a sense of collaboration between farmers and fabricators, and it is this larger sense of everyone being in it together that, in turn, created an economy within which individuals felt free to experiment rather widely when it became apparent that cultivating crawfish in fallow rice fields could not only be a nice supplement to traditional farm incomes but could in fact be a principle income. Catching crawfish was like returning to a previous moment in agriculture, when work and nature were the two dominant factors and not a commodity price index that really measured the minds of men in suits who worked in cities far from the hot sun and high humidity of the prairies.

A more detailed treatment of the years that precede the emergence of the crawfish boat would reveal the highly dynamic nature of the search for a solution that pursued almost every logical possibility, no matter how dead its end might be. Many of the historical accounts I collected focused on the absurdity of the solutions before the arrival of the boat. Many of those stories focused on the image of a lone individual walking through a rice field with either five-gallon buckets in both hands or trailing a child's plastic splash pool behind him or her. In recalling the past in this way, tellers gently make fun of themselves, and, at the same time, the ludicrous nature of the image also emphasizes exactly how hard the work was, how much of it there was to do, and how crippling the available tools were felt to be.

The allure of a cash crop was too strong to wither before such physical vicissitudes, and as yields slowly but steadily increased farmers began to want to find ways to make the process more efficient. They wanted, as they noted, to automate the process, to give it more power. These were men, after all, who were comfortable with a wide variety of farm gear, and, just as important, most had some knowledge of and experience in making or modifying an implement in their own shops or equipment sheds. What happened next is not entirely clear. Memories in the present must reach back forty years and try to piece together, through reference to other events—often to when a child was born or to what grade they were in—that otherwise blend together as part of “life on a farm.” There are few photographs available, even from the men who would become prominent as boat makers. Few farmers take pictures of their tractors, nor do they date when they first used them. The same is true for the crawfish boats.

More than once I have heard these early boats described as little more than “contraptions,” as if that was all there were to say on the subject. Whatever the form of those first few proto-boats, they seem to have had the drive unit in the back, similar to the modern crawfish boat, and somehow managed to make their way through a field. Out of this initial period of experimentation emerged, in the very late seventies, the “tiller foot” boat. Like its predecessor, it was built on commercially available fishing boat hulls with the addition of a most extraordinary assemblage: the lower part of a garden rotary tiller driven by a five-horsepower engine separated by a long boom, made in place. At first one steered the machines with a tiller attached to the assembled drive unit, much like you would the outboard motor of a boat, but eventually someone adapted the power steering cylinder of a car so that steering could be handled more remotely. The tiller foot boats were used for a number of years, but eventually the fact that the drive units were assembled from such disparate parts meant the units were short lived: the transmission gears, though often made of brass, were not intended for such intensive use and would typically fail within a year’s time.

Interestingly, as farmers moved from pulling a boat or tub behind them to driving a powered boat, they realized they needed a better trap. Farmers had mostly been using a version of the pillow trap. Shaped like a pillow on your bed, the trap has two funnels for admitting crawfish at one end and is typically closed by folding the mesh over and keeping it closed with a clothes pin on the other end. As one farmer noted, however: “When we got away from pulling the boat to a mechanized boat, we moved to an open trap. You just couldn’t move fast enough with the pillow traps. We started by making the traps look like a trash can. We made a circle out of expanded

metal, put mesh on the bottom, sewed in two funnels, and left the top completely open. You would dump it just like a trash can.” The trash can trap seems to have worked well enough that at least a few farmers remember using it for a number of years, but it would eventually be replaced by the design that is now the standard: the pyramid trap.

Designed for use in the long, wide, shallow, and flat bottoms of rice fields flooded with water, the pyramid trap is a mesh tetrahedron with a cylinder atop it.⁹ Some stand about two feet high, and some are made a little taller: there are traps with extended chimneys that stand four and a half feet high. Each of the three bottom corners of the tetrahedron, or pyramid, has a funnel in it, allowing more crawfish to enter, and from more directions, netting a greater number of crawfish per bait.

Atop the trap is the chimney, which as aquacultural specialists Mark Shirley and Charles Lutz note, is an especially useful innovation, since it acts as a “combination collar and handle on the top of the trap, which prevents crawfish from climbing out while making the trap easier to grasp, lift and empty quickly” (2009, 2). The first cylinders were made out of six-inch PVC pipe, as many still are. While the first few chimneys were plain, and there are still a few in use, it did not take long for operators to realize that making them easier to grab from a moving boat would allow the work to go a lot more quickly, and someone discovered how easy it is to heat PVC enough to push a in one side of the top of cylinder to form a lip about one inch deep, just enough to catch it with fingers.¹⁰

The pyramid trap, as its description suggests, is not an easy trap to make. As both the traps and boats evolved, they both became simultaneously not only more efficient and more reliable but also more complex. They were less available to ordinary farmers with limited time to spend on building tools and machines. Gone were the days when, as one farmer put it, “three or four guys would get together and make a bunch of boats. Everyone would have one, and they would sell two or three. Everybody didn’t make a boat, but it was a pretty small circle of who ended up with a boat you made.” That is, the economics of trap- and boat-making changed.

Like other changes both past and present, the changes always have larger implications for the delicate, dynamic matrices of society and culture. In the case of the evolving ecosystem of crawfish production in rice fields, the change reflects larger trends to mechanize agriculture resulting in fewer farmers working in the fields. Today’s three-hundred-horsepower tractors can level several hundred acres of fields in a day, if the work is not too demanding, and they can do it with greater precision and, in many cases, with less wear and tear on the human sitting in the tractor cab who is also



ED: I'm not sure if this image will survive halftoning. If it doesn't, let me know and I can see about providing a line drawing.

1.Z. A pyramid crawfish trap. Pyramid traps are distinct from other traps used in natural bodies of water because they are designed to sit on the flat bottoms of shallow rice fields. Integrated stakes keep traps from blowing over in strong winds or being knocked over by overly excited egrets.

now protected from dust and insects. The American agricultural landscape has always been an individualized, and often lonely one, with the exception being harvest time, which is a relatively small portion of the year. It looms large in people's memories, however, and thus also in the larger imaginary that surrounds agriculture in general. Most farmers, however, readily remember the long hours spent plowing, driving around checking on fields, stacking materials in equipment sheds, and tucked underneath or around gear in order to repair or refine it.

The early years of the crawfish boat and the pyramid traps were something of a break from these larger trends. For older farmers, it felt more like the old days, when there were a lot more small farmers. In the case of the crawfish boat, there were a lot of people who were not themselves farmers but who had access to family land and could, in before- and after-work hours, fish fifteen or twenty acres. The increased number of individuals meant there was a lot of experimentation, some of which was simply because smaller operators did not have the desire, or the ability, to afford commercially made boats. The result was a lot of boats that resembled other

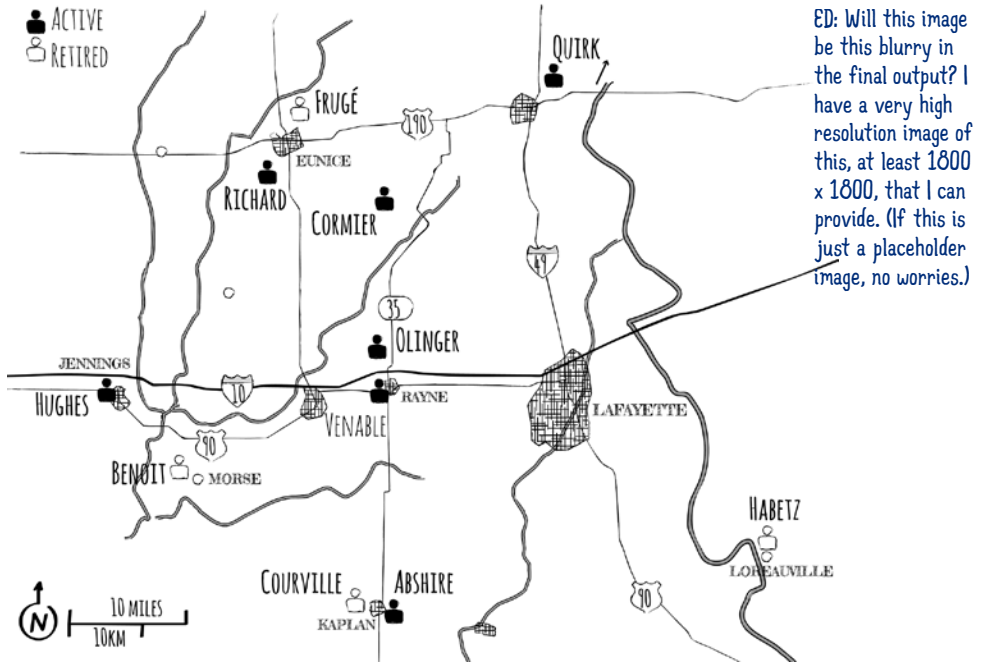
boats in many ways but also bearing their makers' individual marks. Some boats, no doubt, manifested real insights, some of which were taken up by others. Other boats were less than inspirational but worked well enough to be kept running from year to year.

For folklorists, this economy sounds more like what interests us, one where abilities and interests are spread homogeneously through a community. It is important to keep in mind that like other kinds of artisanship, which I am using here to bridge the divide between notions of a craft and an artistic economy, there can be a widespread interest in a form without there necessarily being widespread ability in that form. Everyone can have something to say, which may or may not affect the nature of the form, but not everyone wants to participate actively. One of the very first makers of the crawfish boat found a friend and fellow farmer at his door with a check in his hand, telling him, "Make me a boat just like the one you made for yourself." Sometimes a folk economy is consumptive in nature, depending upon (relative) specialists to commoditize objects that circulate freely within the microeconomy of ideas and practices.

COMMUNITIES AS NETWORKS

Both of the men, Ted Habetz and Maurice Benoit, who first demonstrated working models of what would become the modern crawfish boat—a boat whose mechanics were all run by hydraulics—noted that they had no intention of being in the boat-making business. Both men eventually succumbed to the requests, and the checks, being pressed upon them and entered into an artisanship that, ultimately, neither one particularly enjoyed pursuing. So they eventually left the business to others who had come along, some of whom remain to this day—Gerard Olinger and Kurt Venable—and others of whom took their turn being an active node in a network of makers and operators, fabricators, and farmers, who made various contributions to the boat's development.

It is important to remember when we examine an economy such as this one, which on its surface seems to be dominated by relatively few producers, that diversity lies in its depths. The ability to make useful things out of metal is diffused across the landscape, though perhaps not evenly. It is not uncharacteristic of farmers, at least in Louisiana, to be known for being very attentive to the money they spend, and so some are no doubt motivated to try making a boat out of a desire to save money. But there are others who enjoy trying their hand at making either because they are good at welding, they have a design or novelty they want to try, or they want a break



1.3. A map of active and inactive boat makers. Even now this map is outdated as some of the active makers have left the business and others have stepped forward, offering their own versions of boats. What the map does reveal is how spread out the makers are.

from farming. All of these are reasons to try your own hand at making a boat. And the many different kinds of boats that I have glimpsed through thickets of grass or ivy are testimony to the widely available set of skills that many individuals in south Louisiana first encounter in agricultural shop in area high schools.¹¹

But as the uses of the boats became more demanding—the drive units became more powerful and hulls became stronger and larger to withstand the crossings—the range of makers actively involved in the production of boats slowly constricted to a few individuals who possessed not only the skill set, but also the facilities and the economic wherewithal to make the new, substantially improved form of the boat. The modern “hydraulic boat,” as it is sometimes called, is a far cry from the first boats, which were not much more than two commercially available items, a boat and a tiller, cobbled together. Such a transformation—from an assembly of widely available parts, and parts that were as easily had as the closest Sears—to a custom product requiring knowledge of two kinds of metal work, aluminum and steel, as well as an understanding of gear ratios and power distribution in hydraulic systems, meant that production that was once fairly

evenly distributed across the landscape became centralized to a few nodes.

This particular form of distribution is not new, nor anything to be lamented. It represents a fairly old form of development of an industry, one dependent upon a variety of abilities focused on a particular artifact. Once upon a time, we called such a thing, the intertwining of skills and an object, "craft." The men who possessed the skills that led to particular kinds of products were known as craftsmen.

Craft, as ability and its application, is resurgent in contemporary discourse, both thanks to the maker movement but also to interesting introspections in the face of automation.¹² Folklorists have long taken craft as one of their central subjects, since craft is usually dependent upon a dense network, or, really, set of networks, that intertwine people, ideas, and practices. That is, craft foregrounds the role of culture in our lives. A craft is typically imagined as a set of skills organized around a particular product, be it a tangible object like a boat or a quilt or an intangible one like a legend or a song. In most instances, those skills are probably generally diffused across a group: lots of people sew or a good number can weld, and plenty of people tell jokes and countless others hum a tune while they do something else or to comfort themselves or a child.

Occasionally, however, someone has an especial affinity or ability for a task, or, at least, they apply themselves sufficiently that he or she comes in some way to be noted, marked, for being able to do a particular thing. Not everyone is asked to bake a dessert for a family gathering, and not everyone is consulted for advice about cars or computers. Rather, there are a handful of people within any particular family or community to which expertise has been attributed. To them, we bring our problems. From them, we anticipate solutions or, at least, a very nice slice of pie. These are the artists and craftsmen in our worlds. Too often we transmute their focus and their willingness to practice into something like a talent, a gift given from an ethereal realm as opposed to a hard-won ability that was perhaps, yes, driven by an as-yet-to-be-understood curiosity or desire.

Henry Glassie describes the larger phenomenon in articulating the way Turkish women assemble carpets of intricate design by doing nothing more than knotting together strings. The designs, of course, exist nowhere but in their heads, but how do the designs get there, and how does a woman know how to manifest that design through what amounts to a pixelated drawing, row by row, of a larger scheme? There is no sketch over which paints are applied. There is no plan lying on the floor by her side, occasionally drawing her attention. Instead, "a weaver is alone in concentration and part of a team at work" (1993, 51). Glassie observed that each act of a weaver

“collects the whole of her biography,” since she often grows up playing in the shadow of her mother weaving, first collecting scraps of yarn, getting a feel for the fiber and the colors involved, then making her first few knots and learning first techniques and then designs, finally making a carpet of her own while her mother, family, and friends look on (1993, 52–53). Craftsmanship, in many ways, refracts larger questions about human nature, of human as individuals and as part of a larger group, as Glassie mused, while watching the Turkish weavers: “To be human is to be alone and not alone, at once an individual and a member of society” (1993, 51).

Our farmers and fabricators who went on to become boat makers are no different. They are drawn to it because it represents an intellectual or technical challenge and/or because it represents an economic opportunity. The acumen they bring draws the attention of others. Many want a boat, but either lack the ability or the desire to make a boat for themselves. As we have seen, the initial experimentation was fairly diffuse, with, as an older fabricator once remarked, “all kinds of fellows making all kinds of jackleg contraptions.” But refinement quickly concentrated around a handful of makers, some of whom are still making boats with having moved on to other pursuits. Even the reasons for getting out of the business of building boats are diverse: for some, interest in building boats waned; for others, it was no longer as profitable as it once was. For at least one, retirement called, the next stage in a life already richly lived.

This is a terribly important point that cannot be made often enough: any community seen from the outside, from an initial glance, appears homogeneous to the untrained, unfamiliar eye. One equipment shed on a farm or one welding shop at the end of a gravel drive looks like another when seen from a car traveling too fast on a country road. But the similarity ends there, with the superficial, with the snapshot, with the windshield. Once you are out of the car and into the shed or shop and you have spent some time watching people work and listening to them talk, the differences become apparent. Personality and experience always matter, and they are always different.

A NETWORKED ECONOMY

Understanding of the economics of the crawfish boat emerges out of a consideration of its form and manufacture. The current moment has a relatively small number of makers actively building boats, but a brief history of the boat’s development reveals that not only were others part of the network of ideas, but that their movement was itself guided by economics.



1.4. A crawfish boat parked next to a field. This particular boat was built by Kurt Venable of Rayne. Venable's boats are distinguished by having their forward wheels housed inside the hull of the boat and by the red "Z" shaped steel drive unit which steers the boat at the point of the wheel; other boats either swing the entire drive unit or are hinged at some mid-point.

Just as important as the individuals involved are the ideas in play and how they play out, which are here guided both by local culture and the lack of intellectual property regimes. There are, for example, no patents on any part of the crawfish boat. This is not because the men who make them are not fierce competitors, nor is it because they are unaware of intellectual property laws or contemporary trends in patents and copyrights. In addition to his boat business, Kurt Venable mills a variety of custom parts for other manufacturers using his own CAM system. Gerard Olinger orders parts from his shop in the middle of Roberts Cove via his satellite service. Both of them are fully aware of the full force of the contemporary legal apparatus surrounding technology. On more than one occasion, Olinger has remarked that local fabricators always fill niches perceived as too small or unprofitable by large manufacturers. Both of these men, and any of the others, are fully capable of pursuing the legal steps necessary to mark some facet or another of the crawfish boat as belonging exclusively to him.

And yet no one does. As far as each maker is concerned, their reputations as builders, and the reputations of their boats—obviously, the two are intertwined—are well known throughout the community. Venable prides himself on making the strongest hulls, Richard on flexible hulls, Olinger on dual-wheel drives. Each has also borrowed ideas from the others. Such borrowing is not always from direct observation but can often be in the form of indirect reporting: a farmer admires something on another farmer's boat and then requests that a maker add that to his own boat. Sometimes the

addition catches on more broadly; sometimes the logic of the addition or emendation is obvious to the maker in a way that leads to further innovation.

Creativity draws from the deep well of common knowledge and individual experience. Farming, like any other domain, presents a series of problems to be solved, but how those problems are solved is largely determined by how they are framed or understood, and that understanding is itself a function of individual and collective experiences that are constantly being negotiated not only in terms of content but also in terms of context. Thus, the framework for any solution, and thus the solution itself, is really a function of which individuals within a community are involved, which individuals have contributed, and who has accepted their contribution.

If that sounds a lot like a network, that's because it is. And thinking of individuals as nodes with differential experiences and desires forces us to think of each individual in a community as someone not only with particular abilities and self-perceived roles—only a farmer, a farmer who occasionally fabricates something when he or she needs it, a farmer who actively fabricates for himself or herself and others, a fabricator who farms, or strictly a fabricator—but also in term of personal proclivities. For example, one fabricator is a tinker by personality, another is a born competitor and must win in whatever domain he enters, and yet another is a raconteur of exceptional abilities. Together they make up not a homogeneous community but rather a network of individuals who, through their presence, maintain a network of ideas, and concomitant practices, that have evolved over time. (Those ideas are, of course, situated in a value matrix that has remained fairly stable for at least three decades, and it is reasonable to assume the stability extends further back in time.)

Such an approach highlights what Bruno Latour describes as the fundamental properties of an “actor network.” Latour himself once described actor-network theory (often abbreviated as ANT) as “simply another way to be faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology” (1999, 19). While much of ANT has been focused on studies of science and technology in large industrial or organizational contexts, its orientation toward a rich understanding of the relationships between competence, texts, contexts, economics, and individuals makes its application within folklore studies a fairly straightforward proposition, which should not be surprising given its roots in semiotics, anthropology (particularly Douglas 1966), the genealogy of knowledge (Foucault 1977), and the sociology of science and technology awoken by Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Some may find the confusing—or confused or, perhaps better, simply fused—nature of actants in ANT to be frustrating, but much of it seems to be simply another

way of reflecting within a theoretical framework the idea that people are shaped by ideas and ideas shaped by people. In many ways, ANT is the social construction of reality in a sociological garb.

Its utility, to my mind, for folklore studies is as a possible bridge between the kinds of network studies already taking place, which tend to focus on networks of like objects—of texts, of computers, of cells—and the studies that have begun to emerge of networks of diverse nodes and relationships. These are the networks that constitute things such as ecologies, when we deal with the natural world, and economies, when we deal with the social world of humans, wherein valuation is simply a part of a larger collection of exchanges that are always already ongoing. If we take those same sets of interests and examine a network of individuals, ideas, and objects that reveal both simultaneous invention and diffuse experimentation embedded in the social and economic matrix that is at the heart of modern American farming, we find ourselves with an artifact such as the crawfish boat, an artifact born of modernity, but realizing a number of traditional ideas. Tracing out these various ideas reveals the artifact, be it a story or a boat, to be more than simply a thing in itself. It always expresses something about the individual who made it and the individual who uses it. When those two individuals are part of a larger group with shared ideas, a larger network, the artifact cannot help but express something of that culture as well as the landscape on which the group resides and the artifact operates. It is the peculiar charm of the crawfish boat that its destiny was to be born of an ambiguous landscape. Its mobility no matter the circumstance allows us a glimpse into how creativity has been practiced in a particular place at a particular moment in time. Perhaps no more, but certainly no less.

NOTES

1. Babineaux's 1967 thesis, "A History of the Rice Industry of Southwestern Louisiana," remains one of the central references for people interested in the early economics of rice farming.

2. Indeed, the first accounts of gumbo are of the dish being eaten not over rice but over corn meal mush, or "coush coush," as it came to be known. (The grain is American; its preparation as a mush is European; and its name is African, taken, scholars believe, from its resemblance to couscous.)

3. For about twenty years, between the 1850s and the 1870s, there was a moment in which the availability of steam power to pump water into fields and a depressed market for sugar made rice agriculture an interesting proposition for river plantation owners. But, like the Carolinian planters, they too suffered from the loss of enslaved labor after the Civil War, and given the higher costs of planting, when you actually had to pay people to work for you, it only took a few years of restored profitability in the sugar market to return them to raising cane.

4. These figures are from the United States Bureau of the Census, United States Census (Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC), 3:759, as noted in Dethloff (1988).

5. Perhaps as important as the mechanization was the introduction and diffusion of the idea of forming companies in order to achieve larger goals. One of the first instances of this, after the land companies themselves, was the creation of an alternate system of mills as a response to the oppressive pricing of the New Orleans mills—the latter of which found themselves obsolete within a decade. Another instance, this time in response to the droughts of the mid-1890s, was the development of a number of canal companies. Canals acted not only as means of conveying water from a source, such as a bayou (usually by pumping), but also as reservoirs, holding water until it was needed. Some canal companies offered more than water: they would give farmers land and seed as well in return for a share of the crop. An advertisement by the Vermilion Development Company read: “To any party having working-stock we will build a house and pasture. Any amount of land required will be furnished . . . The seed required will be advanced, same to be returned after harvest. A complete pumping outfit will be rented at cost for the purpose of irrigating the rice field. We pay our share of threshing and furnish our share of sacks. We ask as our share one-fourth of the total crop.” Such a successful engine, technology, and economic cooperation—for inputs such as water as well as outputs in terms of milling—drove land values from fifty cents to ten dollars within a decade, which in turn drove farmers into eastern Texas and, later, southern Arkansas, developing those areas as rice producers.

6. It should be noted that the term “bull wheel” is a later appellation, used first in the oil field and later applied to all such mechanisms. The first bull wheels, however, appeared on farm implements: Cyrus McCormick’s 1834 reaper featured a bull wheel, which remains an important part of agricultural machinery until small gasoline engines became more widely available in the 1920s.

7. Even the need for day laborers, once a space and time within which blacks and whites worked together, slowly wore away, and only while in town will white farmers encounter black city dwellers, and they will have little in common, little to discuss.

8. Tools and machines are locally distinguished, for the most part, by whether or not a device is self-powered. In general, if a device requires external power, then it is a tool. A hammer is a tool, but so is a side plow. A crawfish boat is a machine. A PTO ditcher has a spinning heard that throws the dirt clear of the ditch it makes, but the device itself is attached to a tractor and driven by the power-takeoff: the effect is a hybrid conceptual space, with the ditcher sometimes called a machine but usually called a tool. Thus, tools and machines are as much mentifacts as artifacts.

9. I have heard the cylinder referred to as the throat, akin to the throat of a combine; as a spout, akin to a bottle; and as a chimney, which is the same word often used to describe the tall muddy tubes crawfish make when they burrow on land.

10. This design has been solidified in the cast-plastic tops that are now widely used and are sold separately, either for those wishing to make their own traps or those needing to replace a failed top.

11. Maurice Benoit was at one point in time teaching agricultural shop classes and remembers working with students on drawings for boats as a way to expose them to drafting.

12. Sennett offers an extended meditation on craftsmanship in the era of CAD in *The Craftsman*. Sennett’s treatment is compelling but is weakened by his jumping to antiquity to collect up craftsman when they are probably thousands of such men and women in Sennett’s hometown of New Haven, Connecticut, if he would but look in small shops and equipment

sheds. Matthew Crawford writes about the nature of work in such a small shop in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009), a belletristic examination of the nature of work and the relationship between body and mind not unlike George Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop* ([1923] 1963) from a century earlier. For those interested, Latour has also written on this topic (1986).

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Note

As Malcolm Comeaux (1985) observes, a larger history of boats in Louisiana reveals that the flat-bottoms of pirogues and chalands had long dominated the inland waterways, especially when the boats were used as platforms for trapping and fishing in swamps, marshes, and bayous. I add that the putt-putt and mudboat were, respectively, early and late twentieth-century responses to needs to power through the confused landscape of south Louisiana (Laudun 2016).