Both Sides of the Border
Abernethy, Francis Edward, Untiedt, Kenneth L.

Published by University of North Texas Press

Abernethy, Francis Edward and Kenneth L. Untiedt.
Both Sides of the Border: A Scattering of Texas Folklore.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7381.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/7381

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=164465
Henderson Shuffler, Director of the Institute of Texan Cultures, and O. T. Baker, creator and first director of the Texas Folklife Festival
PACKAGED FOLKLORE: 
THE TEXAS FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL—
STORYSMITHING AND SHAPESHIFTING

by John L. Davis of Seguin

Many are the definitions of folklore. From the professional side it’s what people create and do in terms of traditional beliefs, customs, language uses, survival skills, stories, music, tools, decorations, entertainments, foods, and so forth that informally move across generations in changing patterns. Tradition . . . useful tradition. Today, any group maintaining shared traditions is considered folk. And today, folklore includes material close to its origin, as the definition did not, earlier, allow. Folklore is also an academic field pursued in literate, technological cultures; otherwise, the whole bucket is the province of ethnologists and anthropologists. These remarks mostly follow Richard M. Dorson and Ab Abernethy.

Colloquially, folklore is what grandparents did, or what older people did when young. It is mostly oral or imitative and can be recounted, remembered, or collected, whether it is definitely outdated or still useful. It is often displayed for various reasons, including pride, curiosity, validation, amusement, propaganda, or profit—or all of the above. And this folklore—these traditions that have been preserved through generations—is sometimes packaged for public consumption.

One way to package folklore for public consumption is to hold a folk festival. In this package the folk, whoever they are, are invited to demonstrate what they do in front of a usually paying audience. The invitations include mostly “older” folk activities
Vernon and Norman Soloman playing on The Mall at the American Folklife Festival in 1968
(such as using an aebleskiver pan or a draw knife) or things not often done by the anticipated audience (clogging, pear burning, or hog slaughtering). Usually not included are contemporary crafts like constructing a hamburger or driving a city bus.

Thus, in various ways, folklore can be packaged for consumption like a video of a bullfight or a frozen steak, but it is no longer the whole cow.

And these thoughts were more or less in the minds of the people at the Institute of Texan Cultures when they put together the Texas Folklife Festival as a public event.

There’s a great amount of interest today in what is called public and applied folklore. Paraphrasing Steve Siporin (1992), public folklore has always included the concepts of a handler of someone else’s culture and the application of the lore in unhistorical ways. In terms of this kind of packaging, folklife festivals and community history days have been around for a long time.

In some respects, the recounting of a myth in, say, classical Greece—with the attendant display of survival skills (running, foods, ceramics, weaponry)—was quite similar to some folk festivals—including commercial vendors. Pausanias catalogued a few, although the central point, admittedly, was not merely to amuse a paying audience.

The Texas Folklife Festival, now an annual event sponsored by the Institute of Texan Cultures, can be seen as an outgrowth of the packaging of folklore that did not begin in the 1930s but was greatly expanded in those years. Of note was the 1936 National Folk Festival, started a couple of years earlier in St. Louis and held in Dallas on the occasion of the Texas Centennial. In terms of the use of graphics, multiethnic content, and public display, the 1936 event was one of many definers of the successes and problems of a folk festival.

Similarly, the Texas Folk Festival is a prime example of packaging, greatly admired by staff, participants, visitors, and professional folklorists. The event has also been damned by various staff,
participants, visitors, and professional folklorists. A few individuals have been on both sides of the fence—at the same time.

Thus, the origin and development of the Festival is an instructive and curious story for anyone interested in the care, handling, and feeding of folklore. The event has even spawned folklore of its own in the form of activities and stories. It has been examined by folklorists and journalists, one social psychologist, and even a couple of historians. But its history has not been written, nor the full analysis done. That job would require books, and if attempted, too few people have died to avoid charges of libel.

But here are two details of that story: the Festival as a generator of folklore and certain effects packaged folklore can have on the folk, in about three examples.

In 1968, the Institute of Texan Cultures was invited to cosponsor the Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C., with the Smithsonian Institution. Cosponsoring this folklife event meant bringing music, foods, demonstrations, crafts, and such to a new venue. As noted, the idea was not new. Folk festivals had been held, in various forms, for decades.

Many people in Texas were on a roll that year, certainly at the Institute, which had been created over a year earlier to be the Texas pavilion at San Antonio’s HemisFair, the world’s fair of 1968. The Institute was also established as a permanent humanities research center specializing in the cultures of Texas, then often called ethnic groups.

Washington, including the White House, was well stocked with Texans at the time and amply troubled by race riots. Of course, Lyndon Johnson might have had something to do with the invitation, but Smithsonian officials did see the event as not only a professional gesture but also, perhaps, capable of cooling off a troubled city. Who better to invite to help than the crazy Texans? Besides, the date was July 4.

O. T. Baker of the institute was an organizer if he was anything, and director Henderson Shuffler was a fine manager who could make positive, creative decisions—most of them correct.
And I was a young, naïve, colleague. In many ways, we nearly knew what we were doing. We did seek advice from folklorists to the foggy east, and did have wonderful talent and advisors on deck, including much of the Lomax family, John Henry Faulk, Bill C. Malone, and Ab Abernethy, among others.

Under the pressure of getting the job done quickly, we picked participants from whom we knew, often from Baker’s and Shufller’s lists of acquaintances. The assembly of participants is too complex to detail here. Some of these were traditionally taught folk, in terms of music and foods and crafts, among others doing reenactment demonstrations and replica performances. Some fake. At the time, it was all self-defined as folklore.

And this was also the setting for the creation of folklore. As one example, the packaging job generated tall tales just about as efficiently and creatively as if William Alexander Anderson Wallace had been on the marketing staff.

Arnold Griffin, friend of O. T. Baker and Texas rancher and businessman, provided his own trucks and labor to transport loads of raw materials such as logs for woodwork, cooking pots, a blacksmith’s forge, and a chunk of Texas the size of a football field. Not a great deal of the earth, of course, but plenty of brush, maguey, prickly pear, and samples of grass to plant in Washington.

The event was held on The Mall which, before we arrived, stretched in pristine form in front of the Smithsonian. The National Park Service took care of that mall. We had three hundred plants. But, no matter, the guardian park rangers had been told to let the Texans dig and plant all they wanted. We did, under the rather unfriendly glare of the rangers and the amazed stare of office workers.

One journalist, who apparently chanced by, was incredulous, until told we were The Texans. “Oh,” he said, glancing away in the direction of Lyndon and the White House, “that explains everything.” And that became a story.

Even the participants’ trips to Washington created narratives that have passed into the storytelling domain. Braniff was in the
process of instituting new, direct flights from Texas to the nation’s capital largely to take care of migrating politicians and their followers. An initial flight not only carried dignitaries but many of the Texas bunch including Shuffler, the Baca band, KJZT Czech dancers from Corpus Christi, Tigua Indians, and Hondo Crouch, a professional persona creator among his many talents. For departure and arrival publicity, some wore dress as appropriate—the Tiguas, a few of the Czechs, and Hondo in Texas-country garb.

Overall, this was the stuff of story, approaching legend, if not epic. Reed Harp, writing in *Texas Parade* (September 1968) had a lot to do with the creation of story. One of his well-turned descriptions of the journey was “as if the State of Texas were put in a vacuum and sent motor freight to Washington.” A delightfully mixed metaphor if ever there was.

Now those were the days when boarding a commercial aircraft was a fairly casual event. Hondo stepped up with what he admitted was a sack of rattlesnakes. This was a small flour sack (later to become a gunnysack) with, indeed, attached rattles. He was waved aboard.

The flight was not uneventful. At one point, the Czech band, spontaneously but part of the package at the time, began a performance at the back of the airplane, thus attracting most passengers. The pilot called for a move of the concert more amidship because he could not trim the craft in flight. When this was suggested as being somewhat unnecessary in terms of flight control—which it isn’t—the fact quickly was added to the story that the pilot simply couldn’t hear the music well enough.

Then, somewhat before landing, Hondo ceremoniously crawled the length of the plane’s aisle looking for an escaped rattlesnake. Now Hondo, in rural garb, was strange enough to pique curiosity, but two conditions made the search memorable. First, Hondo was amazingly articulate in explaining what he was doing to those under whose seat he searched and, second, not all passengers on the flight were a part of the Texan crowd.
Henderson Shuffler (sixth from left) and the Texas delegation on their way to Washington, D. C., and the American Folklife Festival in 1968
Eventually the stewardesses (no stewards, then) restored order and the joke was explained. Still, the pilot radioed ahead asking that security meet the airplane on arrival.

This story was subsequently embroidered on by a host of tellers including, but not confined to, O. T. Baker, Guich Koock, Ace Reid, Bill Brett, myself, and certainly Hondo. Amazing were the variants as they sprouted in Texas. The story has even received a bit of attention by students of folklore.

By comparison, here’s an original version by Reed Harp in *Texas Parade* (September 1968) . . . without narrative analyses or motif comparisons:

And Hondo Crouch came tripping through the terminal in his customary slouch hat and Levis with a pillowcase full of chewing tobacco and rattlesnake skins over his shoulder. Four big rattles protruded from his sack. He didn’t blink an eye. But the crowd gave him plenty of room.

Flight 107, Braniff International turned into a hoop-tee-do. People were standing up, walking around, singing, playing instruments and having a blast as the big jet roared across country. The excitement never let up during the flight. Harmonicas moaned an appropriate background to the tall tales being swapped that night on Flight 107.

For further comparison, here’s Henderson Shuffler’s later words in a thank-you letter sent to certain participants and friends—and to people he thought might just help support such an event in Texas: “The Secret Service has been in a fluttering dither ever since they found one of Hondo’s rattlesnakes in the President’s bathtub and a Tigua tomahawk in Ladybird’s favorite flowerbed.” This is creation of Texas myth on a drive-through basis but, even with the stereotyping, it has a delightful side.
And the Washington event was a success. By one count, 500,000 people attended and the city remained peaceful—while the Texans lived up to legendary status. And the event became the Texas Folklife Festival.

Rather expectedly, in retrospect, various Texans who were in Washington for the 1968 event, high-placed and otherwise, asked “Why don’t you do this in Texas?” So we did, although planning took three years for the event to open on home turf.

And the Festival (as well as the national event) was soon confronted by a specific (if not peculiar) generation of folklorists who pointed out that to present folklore at a festival was taking the activities out of context—and therefore rendering them inauthentic. But worse, by providing a package-performance venue for the folk we were also destroying lives—or at least changing lives. Although these charges, in several variants, were delivered in the jargon of professional folklore, we were accused of falsifying folklore and playing God—or Satan. As had others, long before us.

Both charges are true. Certainly, inviting and bringing in a traditional storyteller or chair caner, clogger or baklava maker to a public event was, indeed, taking the folklore out of context. Certainly—to that degree at a minimum—what is displayed is not what happens at home.

And in providing a venue for a demonstration or performance, we were in fact a Satan in the garden. Perhaps with different motives, but with no less power to effect shape shifting. The Festival has hosted a couple of traditional storytellers who immediately decided they were ready for Hollywood. We invited chair caners whose private business (conveniently advertised through the event) remarkably blossomed as compared to the chair caner in the next county who wasn’t invited. The Festival offered a venue to purveyors of folk medicine who, suddenly offered an audience, felt validated and confirmed in their claims about the beneficence of mesquite wine, prickly ash, powdered snake tongue, and reconstituted armadillo milk.
In addition to legitimate ethnic community participation, the Festival was approached by a few purely social or commercial groups who claimed to be able to professionally replicate the folk dances of the sturdy Norse, the cautious Japanese, or the happy Bolzenians. In most cases, research avoided these replicas.

And research efforts at the Institute heavily overlapped the content of the Festival, but in doing so, the Festival was said to have not only packaged folklore, but perhaps to have created ethnic groups. In some ways, this is also true.

The obvious examples are the Texas Wends, the Lusatian Serbs, and other Slavic Europeans. While numerically powerful groups, such as the Germans, taken as a whole, manage to superficially preserve some rapidly changing Old World customs, small groups, especially when under economic stress, cannot.

The Wends were faced with harsh conditions in their new land, nowadays near Serbin in Lee County. During hard times in a new place, so-called folk costume, ceremonial dancing, even traditional foods and a native language are secondary considerations in life. Not that pride of origin and a desire to preserve a way of life disappear. But when acculturation to new conditions becomes survival, non-essential ceremony and skills inefficient in a new setting fade or disappear until a later and more affluent generation takes pride in honoring, reviving, and sometimes selling the “old ways.”

For the Wends in a new homeland, a lot of the old country had been left behind. Some thirty years ago field researchers found discarded Sorbian-language books and few artifacts deemed of much value by locals. But some customs, some items had been kept—among them, wedding dresses. The Wendish wedding dress was black, to some minds representing a woman’s hardship in marriage—a strikingly rational view. Dresses turned gray, then disappeared into the white of “everybody else”—like much Wendish custom—although a few stories and customs remained in older heads.

Still, a few early workers—some from their own ranks—had written about the Texas Wends. Some Wends prospered and thus
had discretionary time and money on their hands. This makes preservation, or at least replication, possible. The Wendish Cultural Club was born, along with ideas for a local festival and museum.

The Institute supported some of the fieldwork in the settlement area, in part for an exhibit at the Institute. Sylvia Ann Grider did competent folklore and historical research—and finished a book published in 1982 by the Institute. During all of this, participation in the Texas Folklife Festival had been offered and planned.

Wendish research efforts in support of festival participation made available European foods, costume, dances, music, and much never done in Texas or even brought along. These replications became part of the self-definition of the Texas Wends in their annual Wendish Fest near Serbin and for parts of some of the exhibits at the Serbin museum. The Wends do not claim all this material was ever a part of the Texas group experience, but as presented to outsiders at the Texas Folklife Festival and at Serbin, that can be the impression.

And is this folklore? Of course it is. Some not exactly as traditionally linear as elder folklorists would define, but much of what the folk do is folklore. Even the activity of participating in a codified, public event becomes traditional craft, whether at Serbin in Lee County or in downtown San Antonio.

The Wends are, with all the change, replication, self-definition, and genuine preservation, a community. Rather than call the Institute’s role one of “creation,” I prefer the word “encouragement.” To others, this is tinkering with reality.

Some time ago, most folklorists redefined performance to include backyard, in-context situations (even admitting they were changing lives while in the backyard, recording and interviewing). And demonstrations at folk festivals were legitimized in a different sense.

The latter is certainly packaged folklore but is still folklore.