

South Georgia Traditions Survey Report 1996-97

SOUTH GEORGIA FOLKLIFE PROJECT,
FOLKLIFE GRANT CONTRACT #41-97-25

Dr. Laurie K. Sommers, Project Director and Researcher, July 1997

1. The South Georgia Folklife Survey focused on Lowndes, surrounding counties, and other counties in the VSU service area. It represents the first time Valdosta State University has supported folklife research in the region.

Other research in this area was conducted twenty years ago by the American Folklife Center during their first field project, done in conjunction with Syd Blackmarr at the Arts Experiment Station of Tifton. More recently, Jerrilyn McGregory's research for the recently released *Wiregrass Country* came as far east into Georgia as Lowndes and Lanier Counties and as far north as Worth and Tift Counties. Students of Tom Rankin at Old Miss have done fieldwork in the plantations of southwest Georgia near Thomasville. Also of note is Dr. Beth Higgs' recent Southside Valdosta Oral History Project, a grant with the Georgia Humanities Council in 1996-97, which provides useful background to contemporary traditions.

The present South Georgia Folklife Survey was conducted by Dr. Laurie Sommers, a Ph.D. in folklore and ethnomusicology and a professional public sector folklorist for fifteen years. This was her first field survey in South Georgia. The grant funded a 28-day survey; however, the grant period also included administrative work and processing of field materials. Thus, the actual number of days spent in the field numbered approximately fifteen, with the remaining time spent identifying leads, doing background research, processing documentation, and attending to administrative details. This length of survey can hardly hope to be comprehensive, but it did provide an overview of the kinds of traditions present in the area. Research focused on the period from January through June, 1997. Many leads and topics for future research were identified beyond those formally documented by sound recording and/or photograph. Due to the limited time frame, Sommers deliberately emphasized certain kinds of traditions. For example, she placed a priority on those which appeared to be more grounded in the history and culture of the region. Thus the distinctive regional traditions of the Okefenokee received attention rather than the campus folklore of VSU or the military folklore of Moody Air Force Base. Sommers assumed that the latter traditions, although certainly deserving of future study, are probably less shaped by the particular characteristics of the region. Emphasis also was placed on the identification of traditional arts and artists rather than folklife in general. For example, Sommers chose not to focus on the culture and lore of high school football (a driving force in Valdosta and elsewhere in south Georgia).

Traditional Music

Music received the most emphasis in the survey, in part because of Sommers' particular interest and expertise in music and in part because of the richness of the tradition. Religious music is the backbone of the region. Thriving musical traditions are embedded within church events such as homecomings and anniversaries, special concerts, regular church services or church conferences and revivals, and church related events such as gospel sings and sacred harp sings. The a capella African American gospel quartet tradition is particularly rich (see for example, Quitman's male quartet, Children of the King, recorded during the June 7 Voices of Harmony concert). There are an abundance of white and black gospel small ensembles in the region which deserve further documentation, among them the Johnson Two and the Voices of Harmony, both of Valdosta.

Of particular interest is the Primitive Baptist lined hymn in both white and black traditions. Sommers was fortunate to make the acquaintance of John Crowley, a VSU assistant professor of history and life-long Primitive Baptist who recently completed a doctoral dissertation on the history of Primitive Baptists in south Georgia and north Florida. Although not an expert on music, Crowley is nonetheless very knowledgeable and was able to identify particular churches which would be both good examples of the most traditional of Primitive Baptist lined hymns and the most receptive to outside documentation. Sommers documented services at St. Luke's Primitive Baptist Church of Valdosta (African American) and the Sardis Primitive Baptist Church near Folkston, an Anglo-American church in the Crawfordite tradition. The contacts with the Crawfordite Primitive Baptists in the counties surrounding the Okefenokee swamp were particularly fascinating. The conservative nature of Crawfordite practice has facilitated the retention of traditional lined hymns and a capella hymn singing from texts in the Lloyd Hymnal (Benjamin Lloyd). The tunes are memorized from the sacred harp notebooks and/or passed on aurally. A closely related style is the sacred harp singing of the region, which currently is being revived by David and Clarke Lee of Hoboken. The Hoboken style of sacred harp is slower and more richly ornamented than elsewhere in Georgia, drawing from the influence of the Primitive Baptist hymns. This regional style of sacred harp has had little influence from the outside until the past two years and represents a distinctive regional tradition which has been little documented.

Considering the overwhelmingly Protestant nature of the region, Valdosta is unusual due to the presence of a synagogue and a large Catholic Church, St. Johns. St. Johns is one of several churches in the area, which are catering to a growing ethnic community. Other churches serving ethnic minorities include Korean Presbyterian Church and various Protestant evangelical and mainline churches with services in Spanish. With the exception of St. Johns, however, the churches merely offer worship services in languages other than English; the music has no particular ethnic dimension. St. Johns, however, is now attracting members of the growing Latino migrant community with its celebration of the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (12 December) which features unaccompanied Marian hymns.

Secular music is also widespread. Perhaps the dominant genres in the region are bluegrass and old-time country. Bluegrass camping weekends occur throughout the region. An interesting regional tradition involves the quail hunting lodges and plantations of southwest Georgia. Henry Rutland's South Georgia Grass of Thomasville is an old-style bluegrass band which plays at the

lodges during quail season (November through January). Rutland is a fine fiddler who currently plays his great-grandfather's fiddle (an instrument played in the Civil War) and mentored with his uncle, the late Bob "Georgia Slim" Rutland. Georgia Silm ran Rutland Music in Valdosta after a career in western swing. Other bluegrass musicians from the region frequently jam at the Mt. Zion Music Hall south of Valdosta. An interesting sidelight to the bluegrass tradition are the Rebelaires, a four-piece group from Valdosta and Waycross composed of great-grandsons of Confederate veterans. Bill Smith, a public school music teacher in Valdosta, co-leads the group. The Rebelaires play at Civil War reenactments and period dances. Their repertoire includes original compositions based on family oral histories.

Foodways

Perhaps the best display of regional foodways can be found at area church functions when a "dinner on the grounds" is held. Cane syrup making, once common on every farm, is still continued on selected farms. Sommers interviewed Linda Paulk of Willacoochee, who learned from her father-in-law. Fig preserves are a common specialty in the area. Certain barbecue establishments, such as J.B. Mitchell's in south Valdosta and Jimbos in Homerville capitalize on the ubiquitous favorite. Pig roasts are a common fundraiser. Fish from the swamps and sloughs and wild game supplement many rural diets. One of the interesting features of Valdosta, with its more ethnically diverse population, is the presence of certain specialty groceries. The Asian Market on north Bemiss Road is owned by Koreans and is a fine full-service Asian food store. The owners, Santos and Kuong, get much of their stock from Atlanta and package certain Korean staples such as kimchee at the store. La Guera Latin Food Store on East Park is owned by Guillermo and Tina Tadeo. They cater to the growing Latino migrant community in the region, which is mostly Mexican with a small number of Central Americans. Finally, Blanton's Market on South Patterson caters to the Southside African American community with its greens and specialty meats frequently advertised on butcher paper signs.

This survey did not identify many food traditions distinctive to south Georgia. One exception is mayhaw jelly. The mayhaw is a member of the haw family which grows in the swamps of the wiregrass region and is harvested in April and May. Franklin Harrell of Nashville was documented making mayhaw jelly. Another regional food is quail, which is featured at several local restaurants as well as being cooked at home. The Tavern at Twin Lakes (Hwy. 41) has guarded its quail recipe since the 1920s. Louell Jackson of Valdosta discussed quail, mayhaw and other food traditions during her interview. "Brooks county ham" was identified but not documented at this point.

The area is full of small community festivals, many of which feature a local food or crop as a focal point. Sommers attended only one, the Hahira Honeybee Festival, which ironically included no locally produced honey or honey products. These festivals are nonetheless a rich source for leads on all sorts of folklife.

Material Culture

The survey to date has identified more traditions for future fieldwork than have been documented. Quilting is perhaps the most accessible form of material culture. The

Withlacoochee Quilters of Valdosta meet monthly and hold an exhibition at the Lowndes Valdosta Arts Commission biannually. The group includes traditional quilters, such as Louell Jackson of Valdosta. Jackson was the only quilter formally interviewed and was recommended by guild members. The survey also identified split oak baskets being sold at the State Farmers Market in Thomasville, African-American hair braiding in Valdosta, and tupelo carved wood pieces and traditional boat making in Hoboken; however, these have yet to be systematically documented.

Occupational Traditions

This is a rich area still to be tapped. Sommers focused on tobacco auctions in Hahira and Nashville, and also interviewed Nashville auctioneer Jimmy Parker, a partner in Planters Warehouse of Nashville. The whole culture of tobacco, as well as that of pecans (another prominent local crop) is of considerable interest to a folklorist. The role of migrant labor in local agriculture needs to be explored more fully, although the transient and largely undocumented nature of this work force makes fieldwork more difficult. The forest industries involving slash pine production deserves attention and provides an interesting extension of the turpentine activity once so prominent in the area.

Select Bibliography

American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Unpublished material from the South Central Georgia Folklife Project, housed at the Arts Experiment Station, ABAC, Tifton, GA.

Crowley, John Gordon. *Primitive Baptists of Wiregrass Georgia*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.

Harper, Francis and Delma E. Presley. *Okefinokee Album*. Athens and London, University of Georgia Press, 1981.

Yonder Come Day, Note Singing and Spirituals From South Georgia, Front Porch Records, 1972 (Arts Experiment Station, ABAC, Tifton, GA).

McGregory, Jerrilyn. *Wiregrass Country*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997.