

**“Shaking out the clothes for spiders”:  
Folklife Traditions Along Louisiana’s Cane River Lake**

Organizer and discussant: Shane Rasmussen

Panel Participants: Margie C. Armstrong  
Rev. Henry Edwards  
Bobbie Jackson  
Lily Wilson

As a folklorist I have always been far more interested in hearing what the folk have to say about their lives and their lore than what folklorists say about what the folk have said. Whenever I read an ethnography I skip ahead to the quotations directly from the folk; I can read the analytical interpretations by the fieldworker later on. In fact, if a scholarly ethnography has few or no words directly from the folk, I will often have little interest in reading it. As important as exegetical explication can be (and when it is done right it can be of great worth), the raw “data” from the folk, their own words resonating with lived experience, speak to me in words that are often more necessary and vital than the words of scholars. Rather than mine the following conversation for the occasional quotation for use in a formal essay, I opted instead to leave the transcript untouched in order to let the folk speak for themselves. I trust that they say enough that is interesting, instructional, and insightful to obviate the need for further intrusion from me. I am confident that you will come to the

same conclusion. – Shane Rasmussen, June 2010

Note: The following conversation was ably transcribed by Sheila Richmond. I consulted with several of the panel participants in order to check the accuracy of the text.

Shane Rasmussen: Thank you so much for being here. I’m Shane Rasmussen. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. In fact, as long as we’ve thought about the Conference this is what I wanted to do with my panel is have this round table discussion. I want to ask a few questions of the folks here, but if you could talk to each other, more than you talk to me, in fact, that would actually be a better way to go because I’m not the person that’s important in this panel. This panel is called ““Shaking out the clothes for spiders’: Folklife Traditions along Louisiana’s Cane River Lake.” If you could just introduce yourselves really quickly? Could you start?

Margie C. Armstrong: I have to stand, I don't know why I do it, but that's just the way I have to do it. My name is Margie C. Armstrong and I've been living here for seventy three years.

Rasmussen: Were you born here?

Armstrong: I was born right here right down Cane River and I've got three children, Reverend Edwards, Leroy and a daughter. My husband deceased sixteen years ago. Where I came from is down Cane River. And we had – it wasn't good, but whatever we had God had a blessing over. I have to praise the Lord, because we can't make it without Him. And my daddy was living on an old farm, had to walk to school. Mama used to cut cane. I remember when my mother used to strip cane. Back then is when you made syrup. People don't know anything about that.

Rasmussen: This is Reverend Henry Edwards and this is his mother. And this is my first time that I've met Margie Armstrong. It's nice to meet you. Thank you so much for coming. You haven't even met me and yet here you are.

Lily Wilson: I'm Lily Wilson and I'm from down Cane River. I've been down there now ninety two years. I move up this year in Natchitoches. So I thank the Lord for being here, and I enjoyed being there. So I thank you all for being here."

Bobbie Jackson: How old are you? Ninety two?

Armstrong: Ninety two.

Rasmussen: Ms. Wilson, what's your nickname?

Wilson: Lily.

Henry: Mama Lily.

Rasmussen: What does everyone call you?

Wilson: Mama Lily.

Rasmussen: Why do they call you that?

Wilson: Cause I'm the mother to all the children down our way. [Laughs]

Rasmussen: How many children do you have?

Wilson: I have twelve.

Rasmussen: And how many grandchildren?

Wilson: About a hundred and something. I have twelve children. [Group laughter]

Rasmussen: Do you have any great grandchildren?

Wilson: Yes, I do.

Rasmussen: About how many?

Wilson: About ten.

Rasmussen: Well, they're getting started.  
[Group laughter] Please. [Motions for the next panelist to introduce herself.]

Bobbie Jackson: Bobbie Jackson, and I have not lived in Natchitoches all of my life. About twenty miles out of Natchitoches I lived on a farm called Timon, Louisiana. That's where I was raised. And to get to the story a little bit more, I'll let Reverend Edwards introduce himself.

Edwards: Ready to talk about Natchitoches. I'm Reverend Edwards from the Natchitoches Cane River area around the Cane River area located on the Pan Am. We called it the Pan Am side of Natchitoches in the area of James Stacy, the Prudhommes, the Murphys. I was raised up between the Prudhommes' and the Murphys' farms. I know quite a bit nicknames, and I know how to be a sodbuster.

Rasmussen: A sodbuster? What is a sodbuster?

Edwards: A person who tills the soil, who knows the season of planting, a person who knows the almanac, a person who uses the almanac as a way to go to the dentist. If the Ram is up you're going to bleed a lot, if the fish is below you're not going to bleed a lot, you're going to get your teeth pulled.  
[Laughs]

Rasmussen: Now that is pretty much exactly what I wanted to talk about. I remember I met Reverend Edwards some time ago, and we sat down in my office to do a half hour

interview. Two hours later we ran out of tape. I could not believe when I talked to you about your childhood growing up along the Cane River. It just came pouring out of you – this tremendous amount of folklife and traditions that I, frankly, had never known anything about. Not only that, but that it was so important to you. That was some time ago, and I knew that I wanted to get this on tape because there are some things that are fading. Folklore is all around us all of the time. We are seeing folklore today. Some folklore does fade. Some folklore we might lose. Some traditional ways we might lose. I wanted to get this on tape today so that we don't lose all the memories and the history of growing up along the Cane River Lake some time ago in comparison of what it is like now. One of the things you just said that was so tremendously – it resonated in my head – was that a lot of these folklife traditions came out of getting by. Times were tough. People didn't have a lot of money. You told me that the people often didn't have rope. They didn't have twine. They didn't have clothes pins, so they would hang the clothes on the barb wire. When you take them down, you had to shake them out to get the spiders out before you could bring them in. As soon as you said that, I knew we had some gems here.

Edwards: Well, just to speak in behalf. I'm fifty-four years old. This is my mother. I was raised by my grandmother. The three G's were always common in my home life and my upbringing through Jesus, with grace and God. By having that, I believe, we

could live a very productive and very resourceful life. I have learned how to improvise. We talk about the economy now and the economical situation now, but my grandmother always had that old saying with us, "A rabbit in your hand is better than one in the bushes." It kept us out of Sav-a-lot and Wal-mart to where we could eat and be still not hungry in what we were able to do. Some things that really kept me in life was the fact that during my infant years, being raised by my grandmother, I was able to see a lot of things and do a lot of things that now everyday children just don't really have or if they did have it would have a fit about doing it. We had a cistern, and we'd go draw water from the cistern. Not running water. We'd go to Cane River. We had a #3 tub. It was a family tub. It wasn't like you have a bath and a half in the house. I still have some at my house now. A matter of fact I still make it now. I make lye soap even now. I'm not talking about Palmolive.

Rasmussen: You still do.

Edwards: I'm not talking about Dial soap. I'm not talking about Ivory soap. I'm talking about lye soap. I know how to pick the ashes. I still have a little bit of bluing. I'm not talking about Clorox. I'm not talking about Gain. This is one of the things we would use in the clothes to give the clothes a really clean look.

Jackson: What is the bluing for?

Edwards: You don't have it any more. I just have an old bottle left that hard. It has a

little bit left in it. It was used during that time at the rubboard. I'm almost all hand. [Everything was done by manual labor, or by hand.] I guarantee you that. I've used a hoe in my life. I know how to hoe cotton. I even did a little picking on the end. When we would get home in the evening, before we did homework, we worked to make a little money. We picked the end of the cotton, so that when the cotton picker would turn around, it wouldn't take all of the ends off. I was about 11 years old. I really didn't know how to pick it real good. In between the boll and the cotton, it would skin your hand back.

Jackson: How young were you when you picked cotton?

Edwards: Eleven. Twelve.

Jackson: Twelve? When you started picking cotton?

Edwards: When I attempted to. [Laughs]

Jackson: When you attempted?

Edwards: I attempted. Usually they had the regular sack with the shoulder hanging out. But my grandfather took a pecan grass sack and got an ice pick. For all of you not familiar with an ice pick, an ice pick is what we would use for a lot of home sedative, I would say. When my shoes got bad, my grandfather would take an ice pick and drill a hole in there and get a pair of pliers and roll it around because times were hard. I can go look in my closet now and wonder which

pair of shoes I'm going to wear. I just had to go get the same pair of shoes over and over and over again. We would do that. When it was time to go to school in many areas, my grandmother would make up a starch with water and put the old iron by the fireplace. We had a double fireplace. Sometimes she would iron those clothes, and you could stand them up. You felt like you could be in the Marine Corps. That was part of it. Another thing that was part of it was I didn't have corn flakes. I didn't have raisin bran, but I'll tell you what I did have. I challenge anybody to try it. My grandmother would get that Aunt Jemima corn meal and not make a corn bread but make corn bread cous. My grandfather would go out and milk the cow with a basin and a dipper. I'm quite sure some of you don't even know what a basin and a dipper are. He would bring that back to the house. We had two stoves. We had a heater stove you would put the wood in. Then we had a kerosene, and the old terminology "coal oil," but we say kerosene. I used an old slang term "co-oil." The regular coal oil stove that they would use. She would make these corn bread cous and pour hot milk over it, sometimes with a little cinnamon and nutmeg. You thought you were eating at Outback or Chili's. This was part of it. I'll let somebody else talk. I could go on and on and on.

Rasmussen: OK.

Edwards: And the haircut was out of this world. I didn't really feel good about a haircut until I was about twenty because

they had these old clippers that they had to use. Sometimes they would catch your hair. There wasn't any regular three-in-one oil. When we would kill a hog, we would go to Latea Ackel. Latea Ackel was a little store near Kaffie-Frederick's [Department Store]. They would buy like four of those big old cans. We didn't buy Crisco. We all now know about Crisco and all these other kinds of oil. We killed a hog, and we had this big old antique barrel that we would wash clothes in it, too. We never did buy any oil. We called it lard. They would keep this lard all year round. As a matter of fact, in the winter time, I heard somebody say, "You didn't have any winter." Back in the sixties, fifties, you had winter. As time has progressed, winter has become less with global whatnot. Then we had to get up in the morning and move. Sometimes you would be ashy. They didn't have regular lotion. You didn't have Royal Crown. You would get a little of that lard. If your shoes were a little nasty, you would put a little lard on your shoes to make them look shiny and to keep them from cracking. I'm going to let somebody else talk.

Rasmussen: I was thinking how Reverend Edwards brought up how he makes lye still, lye soap still. He mentioned that he doesn't use this kind of soap or that kind of soap because he uses lye soap, but he doesn't need to. He could just go buy Ivory. Are there things that you've been maintaining, traditions you've been maintaining?

Armstrong: Lye soap is good for your body. After so many children.

Rasmussen: How is it better?

Armstrong: Because with the lye and with so many children, you would bathe sores. It's good for kids. Sometimes when they had sores in the head, my momma used to take it and wash heads. It would kill that germ. Children get so many germs. I use it right now with my great-grandchildren. I've got a little boy's hair to bathe. The clippers were bad when the guy cut his hair. I told him when I stopped him from going there. I told the guy, "I'm glad you showed me. Be sure you clean your clippers because somebody else can come by and get that same germ." That's why we use things.

Edwards: And one of the common things was when you get (just a side-track from what my mother said) usually you would get ring worm in your head. Just about a year ago, my little nephew got a ring worm in his head, and we got some over-the-counter medicine about seven or eight dollars. My niece said it wasn't doing any good. You know what the best thing for that is? Those of you who know about fig trees? If you've got a fig tree, you pop that green leaf. In that green leaf, you'll see a little milk. Take that milk and dab it. Same way with a dog. Many times when a dog has got the mange, more folk will buy that stuff out of the store, but the best thing to use for it is oil and sulfur. It makes it straight.

Rasmussen: I noticed you nodding your head while you are going on. You remember these things as well?

Wilson: Yes, I do. I sure do.

Rasmussen: Can you remember any folk cures or things like that?

Wilson: Oh, yes, I remember some things like that. We used to have wasps. We'd go around the house, and wasps would build nests. We'd pull the big wasps down, and they'd come down stinging. They'd pull you clothes off and take you to the doctor, and you'd swell up. We had to take the wasps down, and the wasps got on my little brother. They stripped him naked, took him to the doctor and he swelled up like a big bat. Take about a week or two before it would work.

Jackson: Take snuff to put on it.

Wilson: Momma stuff, tobacco and all on it, and it still swelled up.

Edwards: And another thing what Mama Lily and my mother said about wasps, most people raid the wasp's nest. The best thing for it is washing powder mixed with water. Dash it on it and it kills that wasp nest.

Rasmussen: Really?

Wilson: Mm hmm.

Edwards: Try it.

Jackson: Washing powder and water?

Edwards: Mix a half a cup of washing powder with water. Let it get soapy. Dash it on the wasp, it will freeze it right there. Most of the time we will buy wasp and hornet spray for it.

Jackson: And it freezes it?

Edwards: Most of the things that came out of your country life were you had to learn how to improvise. A lot of things were right at hand.

Armstrong: I raised a lot of white children. I raised a lot of them. A boy got stung. He cried until I got by him and I asked him, "What's wrong with that baby?" His mama said, "You know nobody can touch him but you." I said, "What's the matter, my baby?" He said, "A wasp stung me, and I don't want them to touch me." You know that stuff that that lady put in her lip? Snuff. "Give me some of that and put that on." Now this was a little white kid I was keeping. I put it on him, and it went away. His mama said, "Well, I tell you what. If I don't come home this afternoon, you can take him home with you till I come home." See that's what all that's like. When you are keeping children, you've got to know what to do.

Rasmussen: Yeah.

Edwards: I'm going to respond on that, too. Like I said, I'm fifty-four years old. I'm going to respond on that, too. In those old houses, that we were raised in, usually we didn't have vinyl rugs. It was just one by two, one by four shiplap lumber that you

had to bring in together. A lot of times they had a lot of splinters in the wood. Kids would run through the house and get it in their foot or something. One of the things that . . . . You had a lot of home remedies such as asafetida, turpentine, Castor Oil, Ex-lax, and Three Sixes. That was some of the main home remedies that we had. When I had the mumps, we got some sardines and got the oil out of the sardines.

Rasmussen: Sardine oil?

Edwards: And wrapped it. . . .

Rasmussen: Does it work?

Edwards: Oh, yes sir! You smell like sardines, but yes, sir!

Rasmussen: But you might be embarrassed to go to school the next day smelling like that.

Edwards: You'd be smelling pretty, but it's a good relief. Some things that may be bad to you are good for you in a big, big, big, big manner.

Rasmussen: That's what I tell my students.

Edwards: I had a high fever during the sixth grade. My grandmother didn't have any green alcohol rub. She had a little bit of this Vick's Salve that she used on my chest. I had a wheeze. What my grandmother did, we lived in front of Cane River. She went down the Cane River. They had those elephant ears that grow along the river front.

Rasmussen: The big leaves.

Edwards: The big leaves. She went down there and pulled a whole bunch of them and placed them on me. What it's supposed to do, I'm going to believe in a higher power. They would draw up, and she said they would draw the fever.

Rasmussen: You've heard of that, Bobbie?

Jackson: Since I've been here.

Rasmussen: Have you ever tried that?

Jackson: No

Edwards: I haven't tried it in a long time.

Rasmussen: Does it work?

Edwards: It did then. It did then. I was going to mention quite a lot about tradition. I feel like there was a closeness, a bond, a wisdom that grew out of their lifestyle. Going back even now, not to be separate of any concern. Before the Fourth of July, we black folks knew about 19th June. That was our culmination.

Rasmussen: Juneteenth.

Edwards: Juneteenth we called it. When we were on the farm, we would have that day off, make a big old thing of lemonade. A lot of people could play the guitar. They would have a smokehouse and maybe a beef or a hog that we would have on that given

day. Celebrate. I caught a little bit of that. As I got older, it became sort of a hidden thing. At the beginning on the farm, that's what we'd do on the 19th.

Rasmussen: Is that sense community cohesion, that closeness, is that faded a bit?

Edwards: Yeah.

Rasmussen: In what way?

Wilson: Really now.

Edwards: It's a racial thing.

Wilson: It's generational. The 19th is just the 19th.

Rasmussen: Not just on Juneteenth, but generally, when people are together, is there less of a sense? I guess another question is where things better then?

Wilson: To me it was.

Armstrong: Cause you could enjoy yourself. [Now] you are ducking for a bullet to come through or one of these drug addicts to come. Back then we didn't know anything about that. You could have a good time.

Rasmussen: What do you think, Bobbie?

Jackson: It's different. You don't have the closeness that you did then because everybody was mothers and everybody was fathers. Everybody raised the children on

the farm. You just didn't have one set of parents. That closeness is gone.

Armstrong: Yeah, that's gone. Kill a hog, and this person would get a piece and that person would get a piece. Kill a hog now, they would probably pass it all over and say, "Go to the store and get yourself another piece." It's not like that now. They don't divide.

Rasmussen: Even when they killed a hog before, they divided among the neighbors because it would go bad, otherwise. Now, I want bacon, I just go buy [some with] two bucks, you know.

We'd like to open it up for a second to all of the presenters as well as, not me, but our panel. We have a few minutes for questions.