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Tallying Treasure Tales: A Reconsideration of the Structure and Nature of Local Legends

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After the hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck Louisiana in the late summer of 2005, I found myself interested in exploring the relationship between ideas and folklore forms. In particular, I was interested in finding an indigenous understanding of the relationship between land and water, a relationship that larger discourses portrayed as antagonistic, and yet I knew, based on my time in the state, was far more complex. While commentators and politicians nightly lamented the loss or lack or misuse of wetlands or that too many people lived on, or in, wetlands, I knew that in some parts of the state water was "pumped off" marshes to graze cattle and that it was "pumped onto" fields to grow rice. An inventory of folklore forms quickly revealed that only two extant traditions allowed an analyst to explore how a cultural form enacted, in a compelling way, the relationship between land and water. One set of traditions had to do with the actual shaping and use of the various landscapes, especially agricultural ones, and of the various verbal traditions, only the treasure legends—still quite active in oral tradition—seemed to have an especial concern with the landscape in general and with the interplay of land and water in particular.[1]

The relationship between ideas and narrative forms is especially compelling in the current moment, when the "science of storytelling" seems to have come of age. Thanks to fMRIs, MRI scans during which individuals are given tasks (functions) to perform, scientists have been able to watch human brains as they encounter stories as texts they read, texts they hear, and/or texts they view. The scans, on the whole, have suggested a number of things: that more parts of the brain are active when we encounter a story than when we encounter other kinds of information; that our brains respond to stories in the same way as they respond to experience (mirroring); and that our brains take stories and convert them into our own experiences (coupling).[2] In some cognitive studies of narrative, participants brains appeared to synchronize, with the

same regions of the brain becoming active at the same time. All of these studies are enormously suggestive, and it is hard not to be taken with colored maps of a physical thing that lives within each of us and that appears to be behaving in a somewhat predictable manner given controlled inputs.

If we accept the insights these studies suggest as true, then bringing our own attention back to the segmentation and sequence of folk narrative becomes interesting within an entirely new context: how our brains parse narrative becomes something we can address more directly. Indeed, given the relative lack of attention to matters of sequence and segmentation in the studies cited above, and a great deal more, it would seem that folklore studies has an inevitable contribution to make to the "science of storytelling" by focusing on one of its core concepts, genre. Because what these studies have not considered is the variety of stories that are possible and how the differences manifest themselves within local spheres of interaction.

The idea that genre might be worth consideration and that the shape of stories are located both within texts themselves as well as in the brain is an opportunity too good for folklorists to relinquish. It very well may be that stories have shapes and that we may be able to build a model of those shapes. The first attempt to model folk narrative was, of course, Propp's *Morphology*, which was based on one hundred folktales. The best collective effort outside the folktale has been a series of morphologies that have focused on treasure legends, beginning with the work of Gerard Hurley's mid-century survey and progressing through to Patrick Mullen's reconsideration of the folk idea. While the concept of the folk idea offers a possible revision of morphology, possibly into the realm of ethics, such larger, philosophical horizons are not the focus of the present work. Instead, the focus is on the exploration of a small corpus of treasure legends, some of which still circulate in south Louisiana, and the network of ideas and actions that they realize.

Legends offer several advantages for this kind of exploration: they are frequently the most bare bones of stories; they are often flexible in form, with sequences inverted while meaning remains stable; and, finally, they are often collaborative in nature, involving multiple speaking subjects, assuring us that their meanings are indeed shared.[3] Given such permutability, legends allow us to understand how and why certain ideas stick together, held together by a collection of folk narratives that have long circulated, and continue to circulate, on an American landscape. This exploration begins with a legend in which a pirate figure appears in a tree and threatens a group of African Americans. That text acts as a starting point for a larger corpus of Louisiana treasure legends that are then examined, and the resulting

morphology compared against those derived by Hurley and Mullen and the ideational network compared against that derived by Dundes and Mullen.

A Pirate in a Tree

Our initial text was performed by Oscar Babineaux of Rayne, Louisiana in 2001. Contacted because of his reputation as a "shit talker" and for a particular toast he was known to perform, Babineaux spent an afternoon moving easily from text to text, shifting from poems to jokes, then to legends, before finally moving to personal anecdotes. In the middle of this string of diverse texts, he told a couple of legends about lost treasure as *memorates*, reporting events in the first person that had occurred at an indeterminate time in his own past—the references suggesting the narrator, himself, was possibly a teenager or more probably a young man. One legend included an account of an exchange between himself and a peg-legged pirate sitting in a tree. The story ended ominously, with the pirate cursing the fate of the storyteller, Babineaux, which was told with intense "I seen this myself" honesty.

The story of the pirate in the tree—like some of the other legends told that day, as well as a number of jokes but unlike most of the anecdotes—was not located within any meaningful chronological or historical frame of reference. Interestingly, with reference to the overall session, the change in legends was cued, to some extent, by a shift from the third-person perspective, which dominated the toasts and the jokes, to first-person, with the anecdotes that followed usually offering clearer references to a chronological scheme embedded within Babineaux's own individual biography: for example, he told a few anecdotes from the point of view of being a child. That noted, all of the legends he told me were vivid first-person accounts, rich in dialogue and drama. A number of them featured common motifs found throughout both Louisiana folk cultures generally and legends in particular. Pirates do play a role in Louisiana legends, especially those dealing with treasure, but never before had I come across a talking pirate. In the text that follows, Babineaux stops by his family's home place and discovers his family is, once again, digging for money.[4] He prays with some members of the family, and then he joins his nephew in bringing water out to the people digging. Along the way, they encounter a pirate up in a tree who asks for something to drink. At first they comply, but when they later appear to refuse, the pirate threatens them, at which point a shovel flies through the air, and sticks itself into a tree.

> Like I said my family was weird. They liked to dig for money and stuff. Said my grandfather had left us some money. And they was digging for it. So one day we went, and

I was at work, so I can see, we at a country spot, like our property. So I can see a lot of people dressed in white. So I'm curious me. I said, "Well, shit, what the hell is everybody doing out there dressed in white? I wanna see." So I goes out there. So they tell me, "You're working right now, just go home come back. You know, come back after work."

So I goes back, man, after work. So, they all in the house. We all praying man, everyone's on their knees praying. They got an excavator in the back yard, digging. [Laughs.] You understand? Find this money, I guess. We're on our knees, man, we're praying. It's like in the pit of the summer, like here. No wind, nothing.

They had a wind come through the house. That wind was so strong my aunt was holding onto the door like that, and both her legs was in the air. That's how strong the wind was. In the house.

So they said ... they picked me, my nephew—the one I was telling you that talk all that shit, and my little niece to go bring some water to the workers in back, the one that was doing the work. So we got to walking. We passed on the side of the house to bring them.

So my nephew said, "Say man you see that guy in the tree?"

I said, "Man fuck I don't see nobody in no tree."

He said, "Yeah man he be right there sitting on that limb."

I said, "I don't see nobody man."

I'm getting scared now.

Man I don't see nobody.

But he's seeing this, you know.

So he said—I said, "How he look?"

"It's a guy," he said, "it's a guy dressed in a pirate suit, man."

He said, "He got a pirate hat on. He got a pirate jacket." And he started talking to him.

The guy in the tree started talking to him, while he's telling me this. But the guy in the tree is telling him: shut up don't tell me that.

So he telling me, "Man, look he right there. You can't see him? Look he right there on that branch."

He say, "He want something more to drink."

You know, because what they had did: they'd put a bowl in the back yard, under this tree, with some alcohol in it. You understand?

> And I don't know if it was the sun that would dissolve it, but it would be gone.
>
> Okay, so he say he say, "Man, he want another drink."
>
> So I said, "Fuck man don't tell me that ."
>
> I wanna get back in the house.
>
> I said, "I don't see nobody up there."
>
> So we kept on walking. We went out there. We brung them some water. So on our way back.
>
> Look at him.
>
> He say, "See you, you son of a bitch."
>
> He say, "You don't wanna give me another drink, huh?"
>
> He say, "You gonna be just like me."
>
> He say, "You see this here peg leg?"
>
> He say, "You going to be just like me."
>
> He say, "For this out here y'all are going to have to lose something."
>
> So, man, it got kind of scared. We started walking fast. By the time we got to the house, I broke out a run. A shovel, man, come from the back of the house. I mean full force. That shovel stuck in that tree so deep we had to dig it out with an axe. It stuck … you know with a shovel, it's hard to stick a shovel into anything. That shovel went inside the tree halfway.[5]

Perhaps one of the more interesting contrasts from other Louisiana legends about treasure, as we will see in a moment, is both that the confrontation with the spirit occurs outside the immediate sphere of digging for treasure and that prolonged dialogue is involved. That there is a spirit present and that there is a punishment for the larger enterprise of seeking treasure is no surprise, but the punishment is not directed at the treasure seekers but at the family members, who will themselves be faced with a loss, either of a limb or something worse.

Syntagms

In order to understand the possible meanings, and perhaps discover a possible origin, of a pirate sitting in a tree, Louisiana treasure legends from a number of sources were compiled into a small corpus consisting of twenty-seven texts from oral tradition: four texts from Barry Jean Ancelet's *Cajun and Creole Folktales* (ANC); two texts from Oscar Babineaux (LAU); nine texts from Lindahl, Owens, and Harvistead's *Swapping Stories* collection, with a tenth text from unpublished materials gathered for the collection and made available to me through the generosity of its authors (LOH); and eleven texts from field research

done by undergraduate students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULS).

The twenty-seven texts in the oral collection are folkloristic representations of what was said—while accuracy of discourse is not critical to the current work, having a reasonably faithful transcription of the actual words used is important to the larger project.[6] In addition to these oral texts, sixteen texts from various web fora were collected. Most of the online texts seem to have been copied from print sources, and many of those print sources appeared to have been oral legends gathered as small filler and/or local color stories for area newspapers, conforming to Larry Danielson's description of the process of remediation. That is, these texts probably began as oral legends, and then got written up by a local newspaper, and now have gone to enjoy a tertiary life by being digitized, probably typed, and added to treasure-hunting websites.[7] Given the discussions that both occur in these fora and are alluded to as occurring beyond the confines of the fora, it is possible that the mediation account is higher, and that these texts have re-entered oral tradition, perhaps some distance from their original performance. That noted, the single most poignant feature to distinguish the oral texts from those found on the web are that the online texts tend to focus on the origin of the treasure, while most of the oral texts focus, as the story of the pirate in a tree does, on the experience of looking for treasure, with only a handful treating the origin. This distinctive, but not complete, split in focus suggests a reconsideration of the sequence of components.

Drawing upon treasure stories culled from print collections published largely in the 1930s and 1940s, Hurley concluded in "Buried Treasure Tales in America" (1951) that American treasure tales have three main characteristics: first, that they be "brief and factual"; second, that "their plots have a simple two-part structure"; and, third, that they "usually end with the treasure not being found" (197). Claiming to have collected 250 texts but enumerating 102, Hurley concludes that "their plots have a simple two-part structure, with the treasure being accounted for (or hidden) in the initial section, followed by the search in the final part" (197). Setting aside the other dimensions of the plot that draw most of Hurley's attention in his survey—such as the nature of the treasure's protection or how legends make claims about knowledge of a treasure—I would like to focus on Hurley's simple two-part narrative structure, which consists of, first, the treasure being hidden, and, then, the treasure being hunted for. This structure stood for a quarter century until Pat Mullen revisited it in 1978 in an attempt to work through the implications of Dundes' notion of folk ideas. (More on this in a moment.)

Mullen's assessment of Texas treasure tales collected as part of his larger effort to document the narrative traditions of coastal fisherman is

that they, too, follow a two-part structure, though he notes that a third structural element should be added: "the outcome of the search is success or failure" (209). Like Mullen found with his Texas legends, the majority of the Louisiana texts focused on the search for the treasure, often, as Mullen suggests, to such a degree that that element becomes the dominant, or, really the only element. This was, in fact, something Hurley observed in his survey, where he noted, "few tales give detailed attention to both parts" (199). In the Louisiana collection, only two texts in the oral collection include both origin and experience, which may suggest that there is a larger structure, but not necessarily a morphology, within which these legends operate. For now, the two parts can be named: the experience, dominant in oral traditions, is the *tau* component (τ), and the origin, dominant in written traditions, is the *alpha* component (α). Each component consists of several smaller items, labeled motifs in other treatments of legends of this kind, and might, with a larger dataset, eventuate as functions. Here they are simply referenced as subcomponents with descriptive value within the overall narrative system.

An assessment of the Louisiana oral materials reveals a form largely best described as τ, or, with an eye to a possible larger typology, [α]τ, with the α only inferable as a function of the collection. The relationship between α and τ is interesting when we consider how they are represented in discourse: *tau* is the experience of seeking treasure, often located within the personal past, and *alpha* is the securing or loss of the treasure in the more impersonal, or perhaps *legendary*, past. An inventory of the oral collection reveals that of the twenty-seven texts, nineteen consist solely of the experience of seeking treasure (τ); five are only about how a treasure came to be where it is (α); and three contain both parts.[8] The five texts in the oral collection that consist of only the *alpha* component include three texts from the *Swapping Stories* project (LOH 157, LOH 162b, LOH 163), a legend told among family members (ULS 9), and a report of a legend (ULS 4). Of the three texts that possess both a *tau* and an *alpha*, the two texts from LOH collection feature an inverse ordering: one is in chronological order, *alpha-tau* (LOH-162), and one in experiential order, *tau-alpha* (LOH-160). The third legend (ULS 8) is also in chronological order: there is not enough evidence here to discern which form is preferred currently in the area, chronological or experiential.

An example of the two components will be helpful here. Let us begin with the dominant narrative component, τ, as told by Leonard Gautreaux in *Cajun Creole Folktales* (ANC 89):

> I went to meet an old man in Marrero, and he told me a story.

> He went to look for a treasure with some other men. And there was a controller who had brought a Bible to control the spirits.
>
> And when they arrived at the site, they saw a big horse coming through the woods with a man riding it, and when he dismounted, it was no longer a man on the horse. It was a dog.
>
> And he said the dog came and rubbed itself against his legs. He said it was growling. He said he knew the dog was touching him, but he didn't feel anything. It was like there was just a wind.
>
> And he said they all took off running. He lost his hat and his glasses and he tore all his clothes.
>
> And even the controller ran off and he never saw his Bible again after that.

The first thing to notice is the presence of a preface to the text— "I went to meet an old man in Marrerro, and he told me a story." Such prefaces occur in seventeen of the twenty-seven texts and typically establish the speaker as part of a diegetic chain: *The thing is. Like he said, like Gator said. The thing is back then.* Such chains are a feature of texts, and text-making, that perhaps deserve more attention than they have received. In the case of these tales, the diegetic chains authorize the current discourse through direct personal knowledge of the previous speaker. In some cases, the preface seeks to establish historical veracity, or, in true hybrid fashion, seeks to negotiate the divide that is commonly understood to exist between being the receiver of a story and being able to vouchsafe the historical truth of the story's contents. A brief list taken from just a few of the texts in the corpus contains the following examples: "Me and my brothers would hear this story a lot from one of our neighbor's parents"; "The legend goes"; "Upon hearing this, I couldn't help but think…"; "Later that same day, after my grandmother had told me these stories, I heard almost the exact same story told by a friend of mine"; "I'll tell another little story … a friend of mine told me this story."

After the preface in this short text comes the *tau* component, and it offers up one of two variants within the *tau*: that of the actant who digs for treasure. The other *tau* variant can be seen in the following text from *Swapping Stories*:

> In the little town of Duson over near Lafayette, on Highway Ninety near Lafayette, you'll notice there's a little Catholic church on the left side of the road when you're coming this way, just a little out of town.
>
> There's a man named Judice who was very active in public affairs.

> He had a man plowing his field and the plow hit something.
>
> They opened it up and it was a big chest full of jewels and gold coins.
>
> All of them had early dates, and there were French coins and early American coins. They were buried there. They said it was Lafitte. They don't know who it was.
>
> But this negro man who found this built the Catholic church and the school there with part of the money.
>
> Seven years later, I guess jealousy, it burned down. He rebuilt it. Seven years later, it burned down again. He rebuilt it again.
>
> How much he had left I don't know.
>
> That's one case, and there's well-established fact on it. (LOH 158)[9]

In the second variant of the *tau* component (τ2), the actant does not dig for treasure, though they often engage in other forms of digging, which typically leads to them finding it. The event states for the two forms of tau are as follows:

- In τ_1 the actant goes to a location, digs for treasure, and experiences a spirit.
- In τ_2 the actant goes to a location, performs an agricultural task (plows, gets cows, gathers moss, hunts), and finds a treasure.

Interestingly, the location the actants go to in both variants is often the same: woods dominate, and are either directly mentioned or suggested in six out of the fifteen tau components.

If we compare the two *taus* as a series of narrative states (or functions), then we see that while A is exactly the same, and B is quite often similar on its face, it is C that is inverted. The only explanation for the difference is human intentionality. If you go to a location with the intent of finding treasure, you will not only *not* find it, but you will probably find yourself a spirit from which you will then have to escape. If, however, you go to a location with the intent of doing some kind of work, the kind of work that in some texts is tied to the regular accretion of wealth, like gathering pine knots, then you may very well find treasure. If you do not find treasure, then you will encounter a tomb or stone slab that in other texts is associated with treasure.

Both versions of the *tau* component have their additional complexities, with a number of the texts displaying interesting repetitions of events, which can also be imagined as loops through various states, as Finlayson does in his consideration of Propp's morphology applied to a variety of narrative corpora (2009).

$$\tau_1: A \longrightarrow B \longrightarrow C$$

$$\tau_2: A \longrightarrow B \longrightarrow C^{-1}$$

Figure 1: The arrows in these diagrams are only meant to indicate **followed by** relationships, as would be the case in narratives, and not any form of causality

The five texts in the oral collection that consist of only the *alpha* narrative include three legends from the *Swapping Stories* project (LOH 157, LOH 163) and two reports from the student materials (ULS 4, ULS 8). The legend of the Fisher family gold will serve as our example:

> The man whose story I'm going to tell you as far as I know actually lived, because I played around his grave a lot.
>
> He was buried, still buried, where we lived.
>
> He was buried in the yard where I lived.
>
> They had built a cypress picket fence around it.
>
> By the time I was old enough to know anything, the picket fence was falling apart.
>
> But it was still intact, partially.
>
> This was a guy by the name of Fisher, which is obviously not a Cajun name.
>
> Supposedly Fisher and his wife and Fisher's wife's son, whose name was Billy, came to live in that house.
>
> Where they came from, nobody knows.
>
> The story is, and this is rumor and speculation, that he was a bank robber.
>
> He had moved into that house to sort of disappear.
>
> He was a drunk.
>
> Every time he'd go to town, he'd get drunk.
>
> This would have been Church Point, the closest town.
>
> He'd go on horseback and go to town and come back drunk and beat up on Billy.
>
> One afternoon he came back drunk and Billy shot him. Killed him.
>
> His wife and Billy buried him right there.
>
> That night as it was dark, they left in the buggy, supposedly with a lot of gold.
>
> They came up to Jean Jannise Jr.'s house.
>
> This is not the loup garou, this is his son, who was living—and the house is still there, not the house but the place.
>
> When they got there, she looked upon Jean Jr. as a reliable man.
>
> She stopped there right after dark.
>
> It's always after dark!

> He told her, "If you try to cross this forest at night, you're going to be robbed. Why don't you stay here tonight and tomorrow you can go."
>
> Supposedly she was returning to Mississippi.
>
> That night, supposedly, she buried her money on the other side of Jean Jr.'s house, a lot of gold. Tremendous amount of gold.
>
> She never returned, so the gold is still there.
>
> I had a friend of mine who told me that was true because all drunks have a lot of money to bury!
>
> And that's my reaction to that story.

On the face of it, it seems a rather rambling story with little to recommend it beyond the idea of there being gold still buried somewhere. However, that there is a dead man attached to the treasure and that transportation is involved in the legend is a regular feature in the *alpha* narratives, the stories that tell of a treasure's origin.

Paradigms

There is a lot more to be said about these components and how they play out across the collection, but the focus here is understanding how the pirate in LAU 14 got in a tree and why he is threatening African Americans. With that in mind, an examination of the origin stories reveals the following parallel subcomponents: In one text (BRO 4), pirates shoot a crewman so that his ghost will protect the treasure. In a second text (LOH 162), a family fortune is first buried in a barrel of flour and then when the money is transported west by a family member and *two slaves*, the family member dies and is buried with the money by the slaves. In a third text (LOH 164), a slave is killed after promising to look after the family fortune so that his spirit "would continue to guard the money." And, in a fourth, our rambling story from above, gold is buried somewhere (LOH 157), and a dead man is attached to the treasure; transportation is involved.

A rough sketch of an ideational network suggests the following associations: treasure, tree, dead man, pirates, slaves. (See Figure 2.) Is there, then, a text that allows us to bridge from slaves to pirates in a way that is other than the two occupying the same role within this corpus?

There is another text that points the way: LOH 163 tells the story of famous pirate Jean Lafitte moving to Texas to escape being arrested for all the things he has done wrong, while also referencing what he has done right. Lafitte takes up residence in Galveston, but still conducts business in Louisiana. One day he has to abandon a ship in Sabine Lake, full of treasure. What kind of treasure might be found at the bottom of the lake? As it turns out, there are a number of historical accounts that indicate that

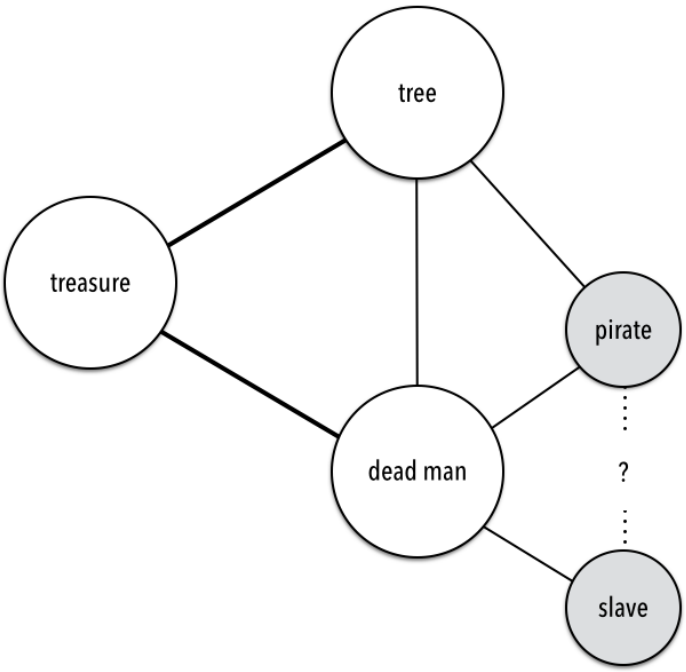

Figure 2: An Ideational Network of Treasure Origins

pirates were involved in the slave trade, and one of those accounts turned up in the web collection of the corpus:

> By 1817 the privateers of Jean Lafitte and his predecessor, Luis de Aury, were capturing numerous Spanish slavers off the coast of Cuba. The pirate's barracoons, or slave pens, on Galveston Island were often swelled beyond capacity, containing a thousand or more African chattels. Many buyers came to the island to buy slaves at $1.00 per pound, and three brothers, John, Rezin, and James Bowie, were among the pirate's best customers. In 1853 John Bowie recorded in "DeBow's Magazine" that the brothers, who channeled their illicit slave trade via Black Bayou on Lake Sabine or via the Calcasieu to Lake Charles, realized a net profit of $65,000 in two years time from the sale of 1,500 Africans in Louisiana. [TN 8]

Such an account as this one reveals a clear association between slaves and treasure, through piracy. Slaves were the treasure, and they were traded in the border areas of the new nation. Without saying it, and perhaps without knowing it directly but feeling the rightness of the connection, Oscar Babineaux maintains a legend with a powerful historical lesson.

Such a mapping, of course, represents a considerable compression of a far larger ideo-historical narrative network that is realized in a wide variety of forms, of which legends are but one. The elision within the network of the historical treasure of slaves with the legendary monetary treasure of pirates and masters is not unlike the commemorative function that such treasure tales serve in Dominica as discussed by Deidre Rose (2009). Returning to our simple morphology again, and to the fork in its outcomes—if you went looking for treasure, you were going to encounter a spirit, or, if you were instead engaged in some practical, usually agricultural, labor, you would find treasure—it is clear that it is something most folklorists will recognize. Its simple binary nature echoes Alan Dundes' structuralist paradigms, themselves anticipated in Hurley's mid-century survey of treasure tales as well as by Mullen in his own reconsideration: "The seeking of the treasure leads to the third element: (3) the outcome of the search is success or failure" (209).

The further revision of treasure tale typologies sketched out here is that the two-part structure is better understood as two ways of knowing and they need not be—and in fact in the case of Louisiana legendry are rarely—co-present in a tale. My version of the typology also offers, or pretends to offer, some degree of semantic, or at least causal, precision: if this, then that. It is a minor improvement of Mullen's revision, which may suggest little more than that treasure legendry, or at least treasure legendry scholarship, has remained remarkably stable for something like seventy years. More importantly, the structural inversion elicited from the Louisiana corpus supports Mullen's contention that American treasure legends are not, as Dundes had suggested, about *unlimited good*. In Dundes' understanding of treasure tales, which he used as a foundation upon which to elaborate the concept of the folk idea, the tales instantiate and/or reinforce the American conception that "there is no real limit as to how much of any one commodity can be produced" (1971:96). He backs up his claim with traditional American sayings, proverbs, that do, in fact, directly reference a world without limits: "There's more where that came from" and "The sky's the limit." The tie to treasure tales is "that most accounts end with the treasure not recovered. This suggests that Americans think that America remains a land of opportunity, that boundless wealth is still readily available to anyone with the energy and initiative to go dig for it" (97).

As Mullen points out, and the analysis here substantiates, if you dig for treasure in these legends, you are not going to get it. Yes, the Protestant work ethic is alive and well, but it's alive in the work you do, and you will be rewarded through doing your regular work, as is the case in the story above which tells of a hired hand who dug up a treasure while plowing. In other stories, individuals find treasures while out doing some other kind of work, but the treasure eludes them in the usual ways. In this next text, two brothers go out into the woods to gather moss, an agricultural activity of some kind, and stumble upon a potential treasure. Like other treasure tales, something arrives that drives them off and removes all traces of the treasure being there:

> The same relative had a husband who went out into the wooded region in that area. Along with his brother, they went looking for cypress moss for cushioning their pillows and blankets. This was way back in the day. As they were searching, they noticed a stone slab on the ground beneath a tree. It was odd because the husband and his brother weren't able to move the slab of stone. It seemed to be stuck in the ground. Then, they got this weird feeling. Something wasn't quite right with the stone. The two men freaked out, and they climbed the tree in fear. When they looked down, the slab of stone disappeared. They jumped down from the tree and ran home. [ULS 2]

In this version of the *work produces reward* variant of the legend, the narrator renders an account that doubles the actants in featuring both her husband and his brother. In looking for something else, they come across a telltale sign of treasure—here a stone slab but elsewhere a tomb or grave or, as we will see in a moment, a plate—and they attempt to dislodge it, to work it free. No manifest spirit appears, simply a sense of something being wrong. They climb out of danger, perhaps moving heavenward, and when the unexpected happens, they ground themselves again and leave.

Mullen's collection of Texas treasure tales led him to conclude that texts such as this are not about unlimited good but about human frailty. As he noted, in some cases treasures are found by children, who are understood as not yet fully formed, or deformed, moral agents. In the case of a legend recently collected in Louisiana, this is emphasized by the role of children's play:

> Me and my brothers would hear this story a lot from one of our neighbor's parents, she said she was a fortune teller. Supposedly, there was treasure buried by a stump and only a child could find it. The treasure would rise up out of the

> ground and appear to the children. The only time a child could find it is if they were playing by the stump, but if they left to go get help to get the treasure, when they came back for it, it was gone. It had disappeared. It didn't pay for a grown up to go look for it because they wouldn't find it. [ULS 5]

So not only is it only a child can find it, but only a child that is playing, which we can recognize as a kind of doubling of the distance from the world of adults. (See Appendix B for three more examples of this legend type.)

In addition to who can find, and successfully seize, treasure, Mullen took a closer look at the losses associated with the search for it. Among the things that happen are: (1) there is a physical loss of the ground itself, or of clues, as well as the potential loss of life, usually by metaphysical forces (e.g., spirits) or (2) the loss of oneself. In both the Louisiana and Texas corpora, treasures are guided by ghosts whose lives may have been taken. Taking such a treasure, it is suggested, would mean taking something which is not yours, and the murder of a human soul is narrative proof of the danger of seeking such riches. Finally, Mullen notes, seeking and/or finding treasure can lead to treachery in the present, a kind of loss of innocence, if you will. None of the Louisiana legends feature a split in human intentionality or behavior in the act of treasure seeking: everyone acts much the same. The consistency in this regard is worth considering, especially if we want to continue to refine the concept of a folk idea.

Assemblies

So many stories, so many varieties of expectation and experience. Legends, it might be argued, draw questions about the relationship between ideas and the stories within which they appear to be embedded precisely because they are so changeable in nature: legend scholarship even created a term to deal with the matter, the legend kernel. Such an innovation is designed to deal with the fact that as changeable as legends are they somehow remain the same. So, the first question we have to answer is about *likeness*: how is this text like this other text, especially when they appear to share so little of their lexicon in common.[10] The second question we have to answer is about *stickiness*: why do certain story elements stick together and why are others optional? It's not always the case that it's the exact same elements, but more often than not it is a reasonably fixed constellation with elements like stars that wink in and out of the larger formation.

Likeness, I think, is a higher level abstraction than *stickiness*. (Forgive my fancy terms: I stole *likeness* from Tim Tangherlini, and I am sure I stole *stickiness* from someone—I just can't remember who

now.) Folk idea is one way of talking about *likeness*: these texts are alike because they are about the same idea. Tale types are another form of *likeness*: these texts are alike because they possess the same story elements, the same motifs, and these elements, these motifs, occur in roughly the same order in most versions. *Stickiness* is what is at issue in the current corpus in trying to understand how pirates and slaves kept getting stuck together. But that was a particular cluster within a larger network of elements to which I would now like to turn. The *stickiness* was a matter of the topics involved within each text and how those topic clusters revealed a network of ideas that informed, in some fashion, many of the texts.[11]

At work in the tension between Dundes' and Mullen's readings of treasure tales is the relationship between folk ideas and types of stories—here, types of legends. Mullen's revision hinged upon a consideration of the tales he had in hand, which suggested that "energy and initiative cannot pay off if forces beyond individual control are protecting the treasure" (212). In the Louisiana corpus, it would seem that the experience of finding treasure, those tales I have previously called type *tau*, really comes down to either/or: either individual control is exercised, dramatized in these narratives as work, or control lies outside the individual, typically in the form of some kind of spirit. Given this dynamic, we do not have the folk idea of limited good, but we do have the idea of "work hard and you will be rewarded," which would make Max Weber very happy.

But if we return to the question of *likeness*, in the case of these legends, we have two subsets of the larger corpus that are, honestly, frighteningly alike in terms of events: an actant goes to a non-urban location—what Oscar Babineaux stated in our signature text as "a place called the country"—where if they dig for money they will be punished and if they work they will, perhaps, stand a slim chance of being rewarded. It is the ambiguous nature of the payoff that I find so compelling. If these legends are manifestations of the work ethic, then the reward for work should be clear. It is certainly the case that actively coveting wealth that is not one's own, and making plans to lay one's hands on it, is discouraged. We have already seen this ambiguity above in the legend about two brothers who come across a stone slab and then get a weird feeling while trying to move it. Two other texts from the corpus display the ambiguity of outcomes:

> He said that two relatives of his went hunting out in the woods one night. When and where exactly, I don't know. They too saw the stone slab. Upon returning to the woods again to find it, it had disappeared. My friend said that the mysterious stone slab never stays in the same place. And if

> one sees it, you're supposed to dig in front of it to find buried treasure. My friend also mentioned how some people see a tombstone instead of stone slab. Some people also see a man standing next to or is sitting on the stone. [ULS 3]

> I had a cousin, he's dead now, he served during Vietnam as a navy seal, and when he came back…. In the same woods, there's like a legend saying that—it's an old Indian legend—that if you find this kind of like plate… it looks kind of like, some sort of like Indian, like Native American… writing, or just mosaics like that, so, if you find this plate, according to the legend, where that plate sits, right underneath is a great treasure. Well, my cousin Glen was in the woods one day, he might have been hunting or something, he finds this kind of plate, and he remembered that legend, so what he did was he tried to make a trail on the way back, like scratching trees, like carving certain stuff in trees, to make sure that he could make his way back, he didn't have shovels or anything. So he comes back, I think with someone else, maybe a friend, to come and dig it up, and where the plate was, was gone, and according to another little part of that legend, the reason why it shows up is the spirits are trying to kind of play a trick on you, to get you lost in the woods, cause he's like "oh, yeah, I wanna come back and" ... he was just smart and scratching his way, like marking his way back. [ULS 7]

In these two texts, part of the subset of the corpus where actants find at least the sign of treasure while in the woods, they leave the thing that signifies the treasure in order to get help and upon their return, the signifier is gone. That is, if they re-enter the woods with the intent of claiming the cache, it is as lost to them as it would be had they started out on a treasure hunt in the first place. In the case of the last example, it is probably just as well that the actant, and later the actant and a helper, cannot find the treasure because it would appear to be the work of malevolent spirits, which is suggested in the first text above by sightings of a "man standing next to or sitting on the stone."

A more elaborate version of the tale can be found in *Swapping Stories*. Told by David Allen, an African American living in Homer, Louisiana (very near the Arkansas border), the text has two prefaces and two distinct narrative episodes, one hinging upon the other. The first preface positions the narrator as someone who has "seen things, heard things" that he cannot, in the moment of the narration explain—and, here, explanation is understood as rational explanation. The second preface offers a version of a kernel for the narrative, while also further

warranting the narrator's account by projecting its validity onto individuals outside his experience, literal outsiders to him and his community, who have heard of his experience and want to use it to seek treasure. In the first episode of the narrative, the narrator experiences a vapor that sings, or moans.[12] Scared, he runs home and tells his father, who then proceeds to investigate, armed with a shotgun, only to come running back to the house. The second episode occurs, in the narrator's words, "twenty-five, thirty years later." In it, the narrator as an adult is approached by two or three men who are equipped with a metal detector, a Bible, and "some other kind of little gimmick." In the first half of the episode, the ability of the group to locate treasure is established by their finding a half dollar. Having done that, the second half gives the narrator the opportunity to refine his recall and locate the treasure "between these two cedar trees." As the group works apparently successfully again to locate the treasure with the metal detector "making this whining noise and going on," they are suddenly beset by a merle of blackbirds. Far from disquieting the group, the narrator's companions regard the blackbirds as confirmation of the presence of treasure, but of a treasure already found. They pack up, but the narrator tells us—as the conclusion to the second episode and to the text as a whole—that he thinks the other men went back out to the location he had shown them and dug the treasure up in order to keep it all for themselves. There is no proof of this, however, and so the text leaves us with a dual ambiguity: did the other individuals in the narrative betray the narrator, and keep with the topic, or idea, of human treachery, or is it simply the case that we can never know. The narrator assures us, after all, that he "wasn't about to go back there himself" to see if the treasure was there **(**LOH 165: see Appendix C**)**.

Whatever the ambiguity, the protagonists in legends rarely, if ever, end up with the treasure. Perhaps this is a matter of self-selection: successful treasure hunters simply are not interested in telling their stories, but for all those other tellers, why keep telling stories of missed opportunities or other-worldly threats or scares? What makes these stories *sticky*? It helps to know more about the contexts of these stories, but nor do those contexts, at least as I have observed and/or experienced them, explain the fascination these tales seem to hold over people in the gulf region of the U.S. In general, these legends surface in conversations among well-established friends, allowing the suspension of disbelief that the legend's metaphysical ambiguities often requires. The result can be the negotiation of richer interpersonal relationships among acquaintances. Just as importantly, these texts require a consideration of the role and nature of spirits in an often deeply religious region, whether Baptist or Catholic, where such spirits are either not a part of dogma or

are, dogmatically, understood as evil. (The agency of the spirits in these tales is quite diverse and worth examination in their own right.)

What is at stake, I think, is the explanatory power of legends: their ability to organize elements, usually understood as events within a plot, into a larger, intelligible whole. It is the organizational ability of narrative that has drawn the interests of others, as Diane Goldstein pointed out in her presidential address before the American Folklore Society (2015), and it has long attracted legend scholars to their topic.

So what do these narrative possibilities mean? Specifically, what do the restrictions on the narrative possibilities mean both for the possible *ideologeme*, as Frederick Jameson once termed it, and for our understanding of narrative in general? The tales as I have encountered them, living for fifteen years in the region, are almost always told with wide-eyed wonder, and, quite frequently, with a slight smile that suggests that there is pleasure in not knowing what can, and cannot, be known. There is rarely, if ever, however, a hint of *you don't get to have riches that don't belong to you in the first place*, which would seem to be the chief morality to be derived from these narratives. More often, there is a sense of *the one that got away*. The tension between the dominant semantic dimensions of the text and the dominant pragmatic dimensions might perhaps be the engine that makes these texts go: *you shouldn't want such a thing, but, oh, wouldn't it be nice to get it!* That is, like George Foster's original assessment that treasure tales among Mexican peasants were a way to explain differences in fortune within a worldview of *limited good* (1965:296), it is possible that these texts embody a similar ability to abate possible social tensions that such differences in fortune often create.

Keeping within the sphere of cultural contexts, it should also be noted that travel into the woods is a fairly common event in Louisiana, where an appreciation for environmental competence is fairly widespread. That is, a significant percentage of residents either hunt and fish themselves or have family members who do so. The import of environmental competence—the ability to go into the woods and hunt for game or go into a waterway and fish or trap—is such a central part of the component that there are relatively limited sets of gender boundaries. So going into the woods does not, in fact, prime listeners of these narratives to expect anything unusual to happen. That does not occur until the actants in these legends do not encounter anything unusual until they find a stone slab, a plate, or a tombstone—or, in a limited number of cases, find coins.

Dundes' concept of the *folk idea* does not seem to have gotten much traction in folklore studies—in its defense, neither did *conceptual metaphors* and *cultural models*, or even Kalcik's *kernel narrative*. At the very moment that other disciplines were making a cognitive turn, which

would, in some instances, lead to a later computational turn, folklore studies was in the midst of a shift to performance studies. The result is, of course, that we have much better renditions of texts and their use in the world. My concern here with trying to grasp the possible relationships between folk ideas and narrative syntax (morphology) will strike many as a throwback to an earlier moment in folklore studies, when we rejected the quantification of human expression for its qualitative interpretation. I also recognize that choosing legends was, perhaps, starting on the deep end of the pool. Legends, like other genres more open to conversational permutations, have a less deterministic structure. This essay is like a legend then: less interested in a determined meaning than in initiating and maintaining a conversation.

Notes

[1] There are, of course, plenty of references to the landscape to be found in various collections of folktales, folk songs, folk and oral histories, and anecdotes. (See Saucier 1962 and Saxon, Dryer, and Tallant 1945 for folktales, Ancelet 1989 and Guillory 2004 for folk songs, and Lindahl et al. 1997 for histories and anecdotes.) In addition to these collections of local materials, I also checked Baughman's *Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (1966) for references across the nation.

[2] Coupling may very well explain how legends get told in the first person. Recent work with fMRIs (functional MRIs, or MRIs where subjects are given tasks to do while having their brains scanned) have suggested that neurons in a listener's brain fire in the same patterns as those in speaker's brain (see, for example, Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson 2010).

[3] This concern with the "bare bones of stories" is not incidental to the larger project. It is time for folklore studies to be more precise in its considerations of folk discourse and its many modalities. As I have discussed elsewhere (2001), following the work of Meir Sternberg, there are other modes of discourse than narrative that are worth our consideration. Indeed, a closer look at folklore forms through the lens of description, location, exposition, and more might lead to a better understanding of the relationship between texts and their contexts (Sternberg, 1978, 1981, 2010).

[4] The story he performed immediately before this one was also a treasure legend, but one of a fairly well-established nature: a spirit bull that appears when the treasure is found. (See Appendix B for text and related text from Ancelet.)

[5] For the record, I have included in this transcript as much of the original spoken discourse as I could manage. Some readers may note the extensive use of "he say" to start lines. As I have already noted, I think it is a mistake to dismiss such clause beginnings as either verbal ticks or simply oral ways of achieving polysyndetic chaining. Rather, I would argue, especially given the evidence of the use of "he said" elsewhere not only in this performance but in other performances, that there is a dimension of traditionalization taking place, as well as communalization, a kind of dispersing of discursive authority through either direct or indirect quotation. (What role such dimensions of oral discourse should play in the larger discussion of computational approaches to folk narrative is something we will have to leave for another time.)

[6] Because the larger project is focused on particular dimensions of discourse, a priority was placed on avoiding bowdlerized texts: "bowdlerized" is used here to describe a number of forms of "cleaning" a text, including removing so-called impolite words, but also otherwise removing repetitions or correcting usage for normalized written forms over the oral form from whence the text came. As I have noted elsewhere, polysyndetic chaining and other apparent forms of repair and/or fill are as much a part of a particular linguistic

performance as other forms. I would argue it's better to keep too much than to risk throwing away too much.

[7] Danielson's discussion of the circulation dynamics of folklore materials in and through media, while dated, largely remains true (1979). In the web collection there are: eleven texts from the TreasureNet website, which describes itself as the "original treasure hunting website"; three texts from Lost Treasure On-Line that appear to have been published in the November 2010 issue of *Lost Treasure* by Anthony Belli; and two texts are from Treasure Trove Dreams, dated 8 May 2012 and copyrighted by Jim Rocha. Of these sixteen texts, those from the TreasureNet site strike me as most folkloric in nature, but such distinctions are best left for more finer-grained exploration and analysis than we will have time for here. The texts from the websites are mentioned here because their nature will provide an interesting contrast with the oral texts when we turn to the question of morphology momentarily and because they are included in the same repository as the oral texts, and are thus available for independent examination and use.

[8] Upon realizing this, that I had so many stories that were so much the same, I double-checked the procedures I had used for acquiring texts: had I left out stories that should be included? Had I intuited earlier than I realized a pattern that then determined what texts I chose to accept into the collection? So far as I can tell, nothing of the sort occurred. I went looking for any and all texts that mentioned treasure in some fashion, whether it was called simply money or gold or coins or anything else. I gradually broadened my scope to include stories that suggested the possibility of an unknown reward or bounty, but such broadening should only have brought more variety to the possible structures of the texts, not a narrowing.

[9] I have, for the purposes of this article, removed the preface from this text, which is as follows: "There was so much Lafitte activity here, then legend glorified it. Then Texas picked up on it at Galveston. There's a lot of stories."

[10] The question of lexicon is non-trivial. If we rule out all the syntactic connective tissue and focus strictly on content words, there is a great deal of variety, especially within the nouns. Some of the comparative work can be done by looking at word positions: which nouns appear with which verbs, but this is a labor intensive process, even computationally. The usual methods for comparing texts rely on larger collections than the one presented here. Tim Tangherlini offers an overview on computational methods in "The Folklore Macroscope" (2013), and especially in regards to legends in "Legendary Performances: Folklore, Repertoire and Mapping" (2010).

[11] Participants in the ISCLR conferences will recall that I hand-coded some of the texts myself, since a straightforward topic model of the corpus, depending as it is does on the actual words used and not their possible synonyms and connotations, would not necessarily have revealed the core relationships. (See previous note about corpora size.)

[12] The kernel narrative, as a form, was first defined by Susan Kalčik (1975) as a brief reference or piece of a longer story that suggests a longer, more structured narrative that is more widely known among the performer and her audience. Often offering the kernel in this way allows not only for the audience to choose whether to hear the story again but also how its meaning will be determined.

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Appendix A

The present corpus draws upon four separate collections for its contents, coded as follows:

> **ANC**: Ancelet 1994 (as published)
>
> **LAU**: Laudun (both materials appearing in Laudun 2012 and unpublished materials)
>
> **LOH**: Lindahl, Owens, and Harvison 1997 (all but one text, LOH 162b, published)
>
> **ULS**: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Student Research Collection

Appendix B

The other three texts that feature children being able to find things that adults cannot are:

ANC 90

> Mom said that they used to dig a lot for money. Lots and lots of money was taken out of the ground like that. And she said that her little brother had gone in the woods to get the cows. And he stayed longer than he was supposed to stay. So his mother spoke to him, and she wanted to know where he had been. So he said he had seen a little tomb in the woods. And he said there was a pile of leaves on the grave. And he

had cleaned the tomb and he had danced on it. So he had had fun on this little tomb in the woods. "Well," she said, "if you did this, come and show me where it is. "He went, but they were never able to find the place.

ULS 1

A relative of ours lived in the country near the woods of Morse and Crowley when she was a little girl. She lived in an house that was stilts so that when a flood came their house would be okay. When she was a child, our relative would play with the other kids under the house during the summer to stay out of the heat. The story goes that our relative, along with the rest of the children, saw a man sitting on a wooden chest beneath the house. This apparition did nothing to the children, although it did frighten them for a time. Strangely, only our relative and the children could see it. Not the adults.

LOH 162b

Her (his wife, Maggie) father one time, when he was a boy, there used to be a store just west of here, Field's. It's still there. He was playing there on the porch, and he had a nugget. One of what they call a drummer, a salesman, come by and said, "Let me see that, son." He looked at it and it was supposedly silver. He gave him fifty cents. Told him, "I'll pay you more if you take me"-- now, there's a little creek out there, Windham Creek -- "If you take me back and show me where you found this."He said he was just about eight or nine years old, playing along this creek. He was sure he could find it, so he took this fellow up there to show him where it was. He never could find the place where he found it.

Appendix C

You know, some people believe in haints and some don't. Ghosts or whatever they call 'em. But it's something. Something that I couldn't explain now. I've seen things, heard things. A lot of people don't believe it. But I have seen things happen on different occasions, living in the country. It's unexplainable. I don't know why or what it was, but I've seen things that I just couldn't explain what it was.

I was trying to remember the time that three fellows came up and asked me to go with 'em and show 'em where I had seen, what they said, the haints, spirits. I actually seen it, and

they said wherever you see somethin' like that, well usually treasure, money buried around. These three fellows came up and asked me would I show 'em where I seen this spirit or whatever it was. I'm gettin' ahead.

What I really seen, must've been about nine, ten years old. About first dark one night, I was on my way home. First I heard something that sounded like singin', moanin' a song or somethin'. I stopped to see what it was, and then when I did see it, it looked almost like them clouds out there. But it wasn't as big as that cloud, it was just like a vapor like. But it was just floatin' through the air.

I couldn't make out what it was, and when I realized it wasn't real, when it passed by the chicken house, the chickens started cuttin' up. And it came in front of me, and went out in the [inaudible] and just settled down. But it was still like it was singin'. By that time, I done got up enough nerve in my feet to run. And I taken off to the house. Run in there and told my dad about it. And so he said, "Oh, it's just somebody out there tryin' to scare you." And he got up, got the shotgun, went outside. I told him, I went out to the porch and showed him where the last time I seen it was.

So he went on out that aways. I come on back in the house, waitin' to hear the gun to go off. Few minutes, still hadn't heard the gun go off, I heard him comin' back runnin'! He said when he got out there, when he raised that gun up to where I had told him that thing was, said somethin' got all over him and that gun. Man, he come back in that house. Said somethin' was out there.

After that, these two men came along must've been about twenty-five, thirty years later, wanting to know where did I see this at. And I told 'em. They asked me could they go back there. Well, the house had been torn down and all growed up out there now. So anyway, I'm takin' 'em out there, and these fellows had one of these treasure things, like you hunt buried treasure with. He had one of those, and one of 'em had some other kind of little gimmick. Another had a little Testament, a New Testament.

I got to the place we was supposed to go. So this fellow with the little Bible, he went out and sat down on a log and started readin'. Fellow with this treasure deal, he started movin' it around on the ground. Finally this thing started makin' some kind of whining noise. Gettin' louder and

louder. And so he said, "Somethin' down here." We got a shovel and dug down in there. Kept in and dug a little more.

Finally didn't did no more. We takin it out the hole, and that's where they found it. When we did find it, a fifty cents piece. Search and search, couldn't find nothin' else. I said, "Well, this ain't where I seen the haint at. It's over here between these two cedar trees." We went over there. He got in between them trees, and I said, "It's closer to the one on the right." And so he went over that way, and that thing started makin' this whinin' noise and goin' on.

At this time, a great big, I say a blackbird. Looked like a blackbird to me, but it was real black. It looked like it was blue. But it had a real yellow beak, and two big orange eyes, and he lit up in that cedar tree and he starts making croakin' noise like a crow. Then another'n, then another'n. The more we searched, the more them big old birds get in that tree.

Finally, them birds, got so many got in that tree it look like it was just leanin' backwards and forwards. This man told me, said, "I tell you what, somethin's been here. But somebody done found it now." Said, "We better go!"

He packed up his junk, we left. But I honestly believe they went back out after I had helped them locate where I thought. I didn't know what was there, but I believe they located somethin' and they went back after they got rid of me. Keep from dividin' with me. If there was anything there, keep from dividin' with me. It was near night, so they carried me back home, and I wasn't about to go back there by myself! But anyway, that's what happened that particular night.