# Racial and Ethnic Groups in the Gulf of Mexico Region

# Croatians

## Introduction

As part of a larger project that examines demographic and community-level changes in the Gulf of Mexico region[1], we reviewed racial and ethnicity literature for eight key groups with significant influence in part, or all, of the region. The Gulf of Mexico region is incredibly diverse, with more than 13.5 million residents who trace their origins to scores of places in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America (see Table 1).

Of these various groups, we have focused our reviews on eight specific racial, ethnic and ancestry groups: African Americans, Cajuns, Creoles, Croatians, Latinos, Native Americans, Vietnamese and Other Asians (not Vietnamese). Although some of these groups may be small in number, their effects on the region have been substantial (see Table 2). For instance, although only about 7.8 percent of the residents in the region identify as Cajun/French, this group has had significant effects on shaping the cultural and economic climate of the region through the tradition of Mardi Gras, ethnic food ways, commitment to Catholicism and the culture of revelry.

These eight groups emerged as significant through the existing literature that details their unique influences in building the culture, economic stability and political climate in the region, as well as their ties to the oil and gas industry operating in the Gulf of Mexico. For each group, we have focused our review on common elements such as the culture, history, immigration, ties to the oil and gas industry and the economic standing of each group. In addition to these common elements, we examined other prominent themes that emerged for particular groups. For instance, the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the Vietnamese fishermen living in southern Louisiana was widely discussed by scholars and thus became a prominent discussion in our review of the literature on Vietnamese living in the region.

Below you will find the fifth in a series of reviews. This review discusses the experiences of Croatians in the region. although relatively small in number, Croatians have had considerable influence in the southeastern United States, particularly in the economic life of southern Louisiana. Commonly known as having transformed and substantially grown the oyster industry, Croatians also have a complex history and culture that has been examined extensively by scholars in a variety of fields[2].

[1] For the purposes of this project, the Gulf of Mexico region refers to the states of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. These states were chosen because they have parishes/counties within the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management and they border the Gulf of Mexico.

[2] Although many scholars have examined the experiences of early Croatian immigrants, less has been written about the more recent experiences of Croatian-Americans living in the region. This study is meant to summarize the existing literature and give readers a better understanding of the historical roots that Croatians have in the southeastern United States. With the gap in the existing literature, it should be understood that Croatians living in the Gulf of Mexico region are dynamic and have made many lifestyle changes in the past 50 years, especially after Hurricane Katrina devastated much of their livelihood.

Table 1. Diversity in the Gulf of Mexico Region

| Ancestry Category | Percentage of Total Population | Number |
|---|---|---|
| British | 15.36% | 2,147,789 |
| French | 7.81% | 1,092,377 |
| German | 8.71% | 1,218,236 |
| Middle Eastern | 0.49% | 68,544 |
| Northern/Eastern European | 5.24% | 733,424 |
| Southern European | 3.09% | 432,724 |
| Subsaharan African/West Indian | 1.22% | 170,670 |
| | Total Population: | 13,985,914 |

*Data from ACS 5-Year Estimates.*

Table 2. Groups of Interest in the Gulf of Mexico Region

| Racial/Ancestry Group | Percentage of Total Population | Number |
|---|---|---|
| African American | 19.14% | 2,568,703 |
| Cajun | 7.81% | 1,092,377 |
| Croatian | 0.05% | 6,422 |
| Latino | 29.72% | 3,988,491 |
| Native American | 0.64% | 85,455 |
| Other Asian | 2.95% | 396,007 |
| Vietnamese | 1.15% | 154,669 |
| White | 63.72% | 8,912,239 |

*Data from ACS 5-Year Estimates and 2010 Decennial Census. Numbers do not add to 100 percent because individuals can indicate more than one race, ethnicity or ancestry group. "Other Asian" refers to Asian groups other than Vietnamese.*

## Introduction & Terminology

For our purposes, the term Croatian refers to any immigrants who self-identify as Croatian that are from a variety of nations (Prpic 1971, Kraljuc 1978). Many scholars consider Croatians to be a "race;" but Croatians themselves rarely use this term and more often refer to themselves as a people, a nationality or a nation. Most often they refer to themselves as an ethnic group (Prpic 1971). In addition to the various countries of origin and the reference to the group as both a race and an ethnicity, there also has been a variety of terms that refer to the group that we now know as Croatians.

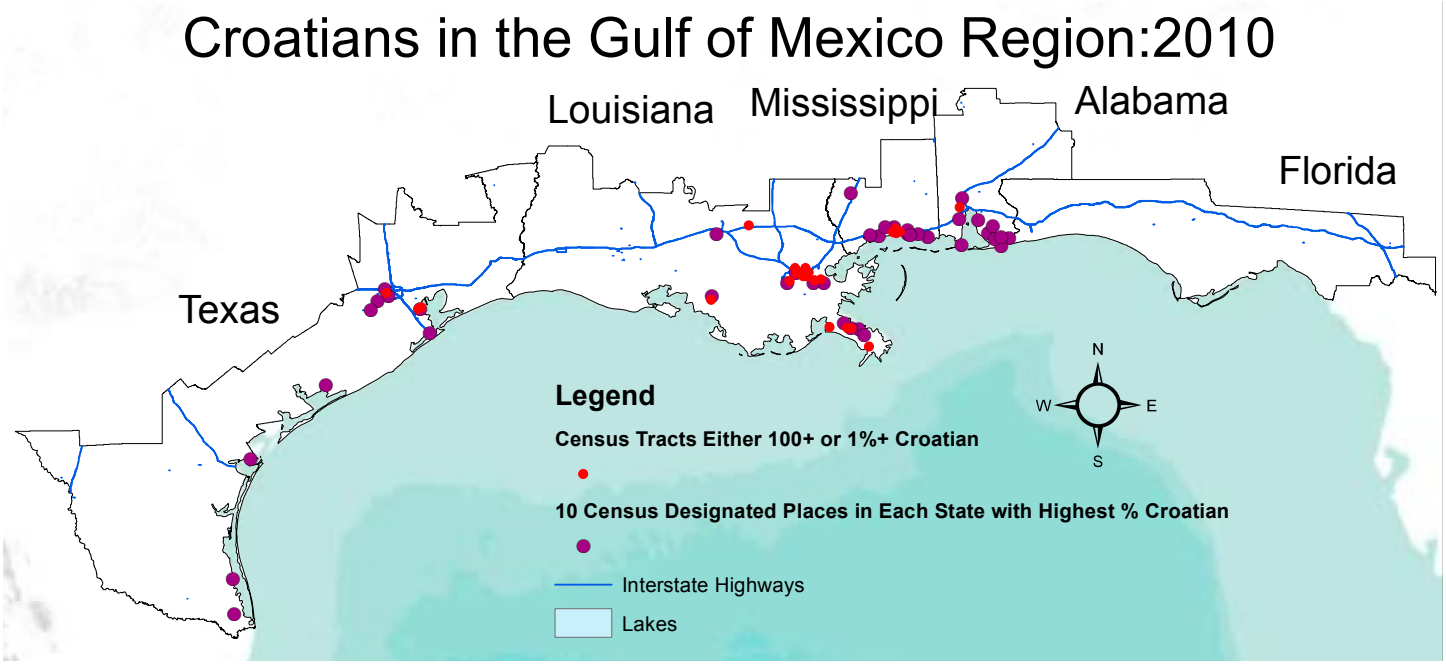
During their early immigration in the 19th century, this group often referred to themselves as "Slavonian." This was a purposeful label meant to encompass all South Slavs (Lovrich 1967, Vujnovich 1974). At the time, the idea of a unified Yugoslavia was developing, so Croatian seemed too narrow a term and Austrian was abhorrent, leaving Slav as the preferable term (Prpic 1971). Onian was added to it and meant to encompass *all* South Slavs. In general, Slavs are broken into three groups: the eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians and Bjelorussians), the western Slavs (Poles, Czechs and Slovaks) and the southern Slavs (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and Bulgarians) (Vujnovich 1974). The southern Slavs are those we've come to know as "Croatians" in America. As a result of this early terminology, many Croatians still refer to themselves as Slavonian even though there is neither a geographical entity nor nationality that corresponds to the term (Lovrich 1967). Similarly, many early scholars writing about Croatians referred to the group as Yugoslavians since in 1918 Yugoslavia became an official country, uniting Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Vujnovich 1974). When referring more specifically to the Croatians living in the Gulf of Mexico region, the term Dalmatian often has been used, since many of the early Croatian settlers in New Orleans were from the Dalmatian coast (Vujnovich 1974). Thus, the people once known as Slavonians or Yugoslavs now are commonly known as Croatians (Ware 1996). In contrast, Dalmatian is used to refer to a specific group of Croatians from the region of Dalmatia. For the purposes of this paper, the terms Yugoslavian, Slavonian and Croatian are used interchangeably.

## Origins, History and Migration

Legend places the earliest Croatian immigrants in the United States during the 1500s. This story originated because there were several Dalmatian ships that sailed toward America and never returned. Some believe the ships sank off the coast of North Carolina, leaving those on board to intermingle with the Native Americans residing in the region (Prpic 1971). The only evidence to support this legend, however, is a tree discovered in 1590 with the word "Croatoan" carved into it, eerily similar to "Croata" (Prpic 1971). Despite this speculation, the legend has been largely refuted and is no longer accepted as credible among scholars.

The earliest documentation of Croatian immigration to the United States is found in the early 18th century records of Dubrovnik, a city on the coast of present day Croatia in the region of Dalmatia, suggesting the Dalmatians were the first Croatians to arrive in the United States (Prpic 1971, Shapiro 1989). Although Croatians eventually settled across much of the United States, common early destinations included Cuba, San Domingo, Philadelphia, New York and California (Roucek 1935, Prpic 1971). These instances of the earliest documented immigration from Dubrovnik typically were individuals or families rather than a large number of people. The earliest mass migration began in 1715 as some 1,200 Croatian and Slovenian Protestants arrived in Georgia seeking freedom of worship (Prpic 1971). This mass migration has no credible documentation, however, although it is widely discussed among American writers.

Despite the presence of Croatians throughout the United States, their presence in Louisiana remains particularly notable due to their long history in the region and considerable influence on the economy and culture of south Louisiana (see map). With Louisiana becoming an official U.S. territory in 1803, contact with Europe increased, and boats began arriving more frequently from France, Spain, Austria-Hungary and Italy to the port in New Orleans (Lovrich 1967). The first South Slavs to come to Louisiana were Dalmatian sailors primarily from Dubrovnik. Dubrovnik was a maritime republic that depended on the sea and maritime trade for economic stability, resulting in the development of a large and effective maritime industry and workforce. During the 1820s and 1830s, however, with an oppressive Austrian government, many of the sailors saw the maritime trade and their travel to ports such as New Orleans as a means to move on and start a better life in America (Vujnovich 1974). New Orleans was particularly appealing to Croatian immigrants for its mild climate and flourishing work on the ships coming in and out of the port (Prpic 1971, Vujnovich 1974). Many of the new trade ships coming into New Orleans were manned by Dalmatian seamen, and by 1820, when ships would dock in the New Orleans port, it was not uncommon for the maritime workers to fail to return to their ships – deciding instead to settle permanently in New Orleans (Kane 1944, Lovrich 1967, Prpic 1971).




*Data from 2010 ACS 5-year estimates)*

Early Croatian settlers typically resided in boarding houses, and since many of them had been sailors, they found work on ships along the New Orleans waterfront (Lovrich 1967, Vujnovich 1974). Most commonly, they were single men who sent home for their wives after several years of working and saving money. The boarding houses were known as drustvas and were either cooperative or had a house boss who paid for the cooking and cleaning and managed the household. As the Yugoslavs became more established in New Orleans, the practice of residing in drustvas declined, but they were undoubtedly an important social institution for the earliest Croatian settlers in the region (Lovrich 1967, Vujnovic 1974). Saloons also were important social institutions since they helped early immigrants meet basic needs such as purchasing boat tickets, sending money home and meeting fellow immigrants. It was not uncommon for weddings to be held at the saloons (Lovrich 1967). Even into the late 20th century, the saloon was prominent among Louisiana Yugoslavs as a place for drinking, socializing and gambling (Lovrich 1967).

With time, Dalmatians started finding their way down the Mississippi River into the deep Delta country (Lovrich 1967). Around 1830, they began exploring the area south of New Orleans in what is now Plaquemines Parish. It was here that they realized the Louisiana coast was ripe with oysters and used their fishing skills from home to transform the local oyster industry (Lovrich 1967). Today, the oyster industry is a more than $1 million business in Plaquemines Parish and has transformed the local economy (see section on occupations, Lovrich 1967).

In contrast to the Dalmatian sailors and fishermen settling in Louisiana, the turn of the 20th century brought a period of increased Croatian immigration among peasants who were fleeing their homeland in response to a decline in available farmland and the persistent deterioration of economic conditions there (Prpic 1971, Kraljic 1978). In addition to difficult economic times at home, this also was around the time Austria-Hungary introduced a law that required military service of all male citizens. When the law passed, more than 8,000 people left Austria-Hungary to avoid military service (Prpic 1971). In fleeing economic strain and military service, these immigrants were willing to take work wherever they could find it, and, as a result, the apex of Croatian immigration to the United States occurred between 1900 and 1914 (Roucek 1935, Prpic 1971, Shapiro 1989). These immigrants settled across the United States anywhere they could find work. Between 1891 and 1900, every sixth immigrant who came to America was from Austria-Hungary. Of those, more than 10 percent were Croatian (Prpic 1971). From 1900 to 1912, more than 166,579 people left Croatia for America, with 1905-1907 being the years of highest immigration rates (Prpic 1971). These numbers are conservative, however, because they only account for the number of passports issued, and a majority of Croatian immigrants traveled without a passport.

Most of the inland Croatian immigrants arriving in the early 20th century and settling across the United States were male peasants who came from villages known for

farming and had little education (Prpic 1971, Kraljic 1978). More than 60 percent of the early Croatian immigrants were farm workers, and more than a third were illiterate (Kraljic 1978). Similarly, most of the men were under the age of 40 (Prpic 1971). It was not until 1904 that women began to appear in Croatian settlements because the men who had immigrated saved enough money to send home for their wives or a bride (Prpic 1971). Most of the immigrants arrived in America with less than $30 and had to work for a number of years before sending home for their families (Kraljic 1978). New Orleans was a center of this spike in Croatian immigration during the early 20th century, with more than 2,756 Yugoslavs entering Louisiana from 1899 to 1910 (Lovrich 1967). Because of this surge of immigration in the New Orleans area, those who could not readily find work moved to the surrounding fishing communities of Olga, Empire, Buras, Ostrica and Venice (Lovrich 1967; Ware 1996). Also around this time, many Croatians moved along the bayous near their oyster beds in Bayou Cook and Bayou LaChute. This area continues to serve as a center of Croatian American life in Louisiana, although Hurricane Katrina pushed some of the Croatians living in these areas to move once again (Riden 2003).

In total, more than 30,000 Croatians immigrated to America in 1914, just before World War I broke out. As a result of the red scare in America during 1919 and the early 1920s, however, many Croatians were viewed with suspicion, and immigration into America among Croatians essentially halted (Prpic 1971). Fewer than 600 Croatians, Slovenians and Dalmatians came to America during the war, while almost 19,000 Yugoslavians returned home during the same period (Prpic 1971). Today, America is home to more than a fifth of the world's population of Croatians, and research indicates that more than 10 percent of these immigrants are solely from the islands of the Dalmatian Archipelago (Kammer 1945, Prpic 1971, Eterovich n.d.). Similarly, the Gulf of Mexico region maintains a small, but noticeable, number of Croatians who have influenced the culture and economy since their arrival in the region (see Figure 1).

There were simultaneous pull-and-push factors that motivated Croatian immigration to the United States. Economic hardship at home was the primary factor driving emigration, but limited access to land ownership, a declining fish population in the Adriatic Sea, overpopulation, and oppressive taxes also contributed to the decisions of many Croatians to leave their homelands (Lovrich 1967, Vujnovich 1974, Kraljic 1978, Riden 2003). Many of the early immigrants had ready access to the sea, a boat and knowledge of other Croatians living in the United States that could aid in the transition. For many of the post-WWII Yugoslavian immigrants who acted as seamen in the war, they refused to return to a devastated Yugoslavia after the war and made their way to Louisiana, where they had friends or knew of Yugoslavian populations already residing in the state (Lovrich 1967). With economic gain the primary goal of immigration, the pull factors specific to Louisiana were the promise of decent wages, opportunities in the maritime industry and the potential for business ownership (Vujnovich 1974).

Immigration also had significant political, social and economic effects on the countries immigrants were leaving. For instance, in Austria-Hungary, agricultural workers became scarce, since many of the immigrants to the broader United States during the time of peak immigration from 1900 to 1914 were peasant farmers. This drove up wages for the workers who remained (Kraljic 1978). Similarly, as immigrants returned home, the value of land increased, since land ownership was regarded as essential. Because most Croatian immigrants living in the United States sent much of their wages home, the peasant class remaining in Croatia also became more economically stable. It has been estimated that between 1905 and 1910, more than $270 million was sent to Austria-Hungary from

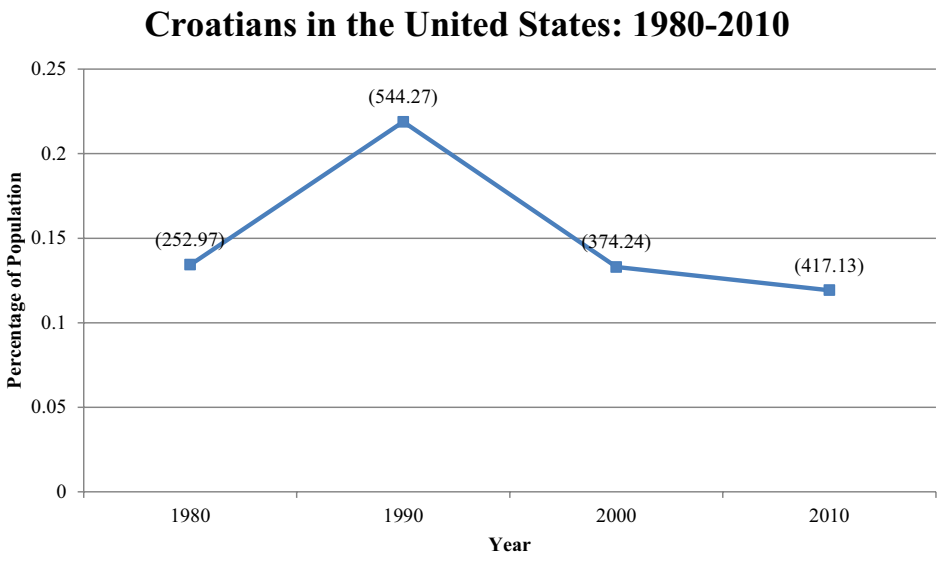



*Figure 1. Data from American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Percentage of total population presented as data label.*

immigrants living and working in the United States (Kraljic 1978). Bear in mind that this figure only accounts for money sent through public banks, so it is likely a gross underestimation (Kraljic 1978). Of course, these effects vary by region. In contrast to the broader effects of immigration on Austria-Hungary's economy, most of the men living in Dalmatia had little choice but to emigrate since conditions remained bleak at home.

There also were social effects from the mass Croatian immigration. Since many of the early immigrants were men, there became an influx of women and children living in coastal Croatia. Similarly, the Croatian military suffered due to this exodus of young men (Kraljic 1978). Despite the effects on their homelands, many of the Croatian immigrants eventually returned home after a brief stay in the United States. For those living in south Louisiana, however, even if they returned home, it was not uncommon to later send a son to also become an oyster farmer in the Gulf of Mexico region. As a result, some families have been working in the oyster industry in south Louisiana for as many as four generations.

**Repatriation**

Although thousands of Croatians have come to the United States through the years, and more than 50 percent of them have decided to remain here permanently, more than a third of those who came repatriated or voluntarily returned to their country of origin (Kraljic 1978). Since many of these immigrants came to the United States because of political, economic and social stressors at home, many of them planned to migrate temporarily until their home countries were more stable (Kraljic 1978). Others saw immigration as a means to improve their economic standing and return home once they had acquired a certain amount of capital. For those who arrived in the United States during the time of highest Croatian immigration (1900-1914), 20-40 percent eventually returned home (Kraljic 1978). Their average stay in the United States was five years.

Although much of this repatriation was anticipated, the majority of it was driven by policy changes in the countries of origin that were meant to manage the economic, social and political effects of mass out-migration (Kraljic 1978). One example of such policy changes is evident in Austria-Hungary. Until 1883, Austria-Hungary did not actively regulate emigration, and early policies meant to do so were relatively ineffective (Kraljic 1978). In 1902, however, the government began more closely regulating immigration by limiting the ability of citizens to obtain passports (Kraljic 1978). Policies such as this not only limited out-migration but encouraged some immigrants to return home to their families.

**Measurement Issues**

Accurately measuring the number of Croatian immigrants has been challenging for several reasons. The primary issue is that the U.S. census historically either did not recognize Croatians as a distinct group or often misclassified them as another racial or ethnic group (Roucek 1935, Prpic 1971, Kraljic 1978). Misclassification was common because Croatians often self-identified by their region of origin rather than the country (Roucek 1935). For instance, many of the Dalmatians living in Louisiana were counted as Russian or Italian (Ware). In 1908, the census began considering nationality and from that time to 1930, during the peak of Croatian immigration, more than 775,877 Croatians came to America. Of those, 434,942 remained here beyond 1930 (Roucek 1935). Prior to this, we can only estimate how many Croatians came to America based on records from the country of origin. For instance, it is estimated that between 1880 and 1890, almost 14,000 people left Dalmatia for America (Prpic 1971). These early numbers are problematic, however, because they rely only on the official records of immigrants who obtained a passport or registered with their home country – a relatively small percentage of total immigrants (Prpic 1971). Certainly, the various terms meant to refer to Croatians, such as Slavonian, Yugoslav and Dalmatian, also complicated the existing measurement issues.

Other scholars rely on public records such as death certificates, marriages and baptisms to predict the time and rate at which Croatians were arriving in the United States (Kammer 1945, Eterovich n.d.). For example, the first baptisms of Croatians in the Delta were done on Dec. 4, 1864 on Louise Buras and Josephine Zibilich at Our Lady of Hood Harbor in Buras, La. Zibilich is an apparent Slavonian name and a name that still appears in Buras today, meaning that Croatians likely were residing in this area prior to 1864 (Prpic 1971).

In more recent times, changes to the census have resulted in difficulty accurately measuring Croatians in the United States. Prior to 1990, respondents self-identified their racial or ethnic origins by picking from a list or writing in an unlisted race/ethnicity. Croatian was considered a distinct group if respondents chose "other" and wrote in "Croatian." In 1990, however, an open-ended ancestry question was added to the entire census form, and Croatian was listed as an example of a potential ancestry group. As a result of Croatian being listed as an example in 1990, there was a surge of people reporting Croatian ancestry that year. When the 2000 census was constructed, Croatian

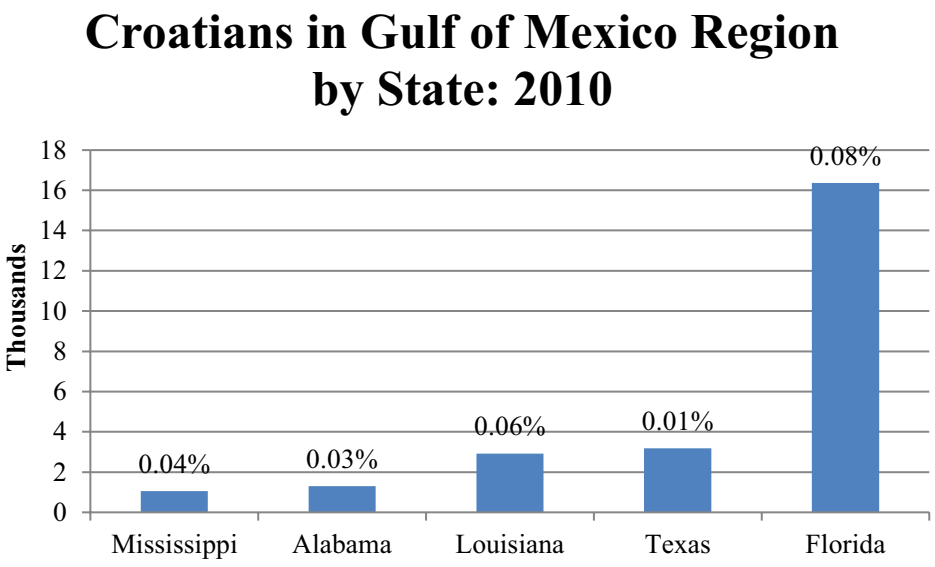



Figure 3. Data from U.S. Decennial Census and American Community Survey 5-year estimates. The total number of Croatians is presented in parentheses by the thousands.

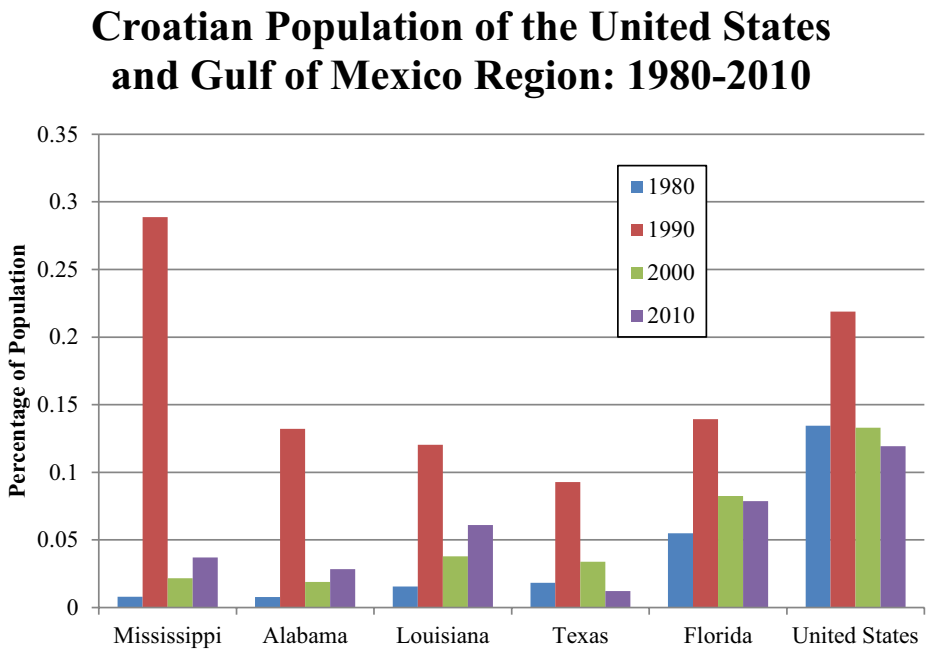



Figure 2. Data from U.S. Decennial Census and American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

was no longer listed as an example, and that resulted in a steep decline in the Croatian population when the report came out (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division). For example, in 1990, 5,081 individuals in Louisiana reported being of Croatian descent. Remarkably, however, this number dove drastically to only 1,691 Louisiana Croatians in 2000 – a drop of about 33 percent. In 2010, measurement of ancestry was transferred to the American Community Survey and removed from the Decennial Census, further adding to the difficulty of accurately tracking the Croatian population across time. These methodological problems are evident when considering the presence of Croatians in the Gulf of Mexico region, and in the nation, from 1980 on (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

## Culture

Like many Slavs, the Croatians have a love for their homeland that is reflected in an old Croatian saying: "Moja kućica, moja slobodica," which roughly translates to "My home is my castle." (Lovrich 1967) An estimated half of all Croatians no longer live in their homeland, so negotiating their heritage and the new residence is a central theme for many of these immigrants (Winland 2002).

In the Louisiana setting, the early Dalmatian settlers resisted the tide of complete "Americanization" or assimilation, maintaining their ethnic identity and to a very large degree their old ways of life (Lovrich 1967). As second, third and now fourth generations have been born and raised in south Louisiana, assimilation has increased, and today some Croatian descendants are indistinguishable from the broader population. Because of the respect for homeland, however, early immigrants brought many traditions and customs with them in the forms of food, drink, religion, gardening and the establishment of Croatian communities and traditional families (Prpic 1971). Some of these customs still can be found in the Croatian communities in the Gulf of Mexico region, although often in an altered form.

### Fraternal Organizations

Despite the strong French heritage in south Louisiana, early Croatian immigrants largely resisted assimilation through participation in fraternal organizations (Kammer 1945, Eterovich n.d.). This commitment to each other is expressed in a common Croatian saying: "Svaka ptica svome jatu leti" or "birds of a feather flock together" (Vujnovich 1974). Not long after settling in Louisiana, the Yugoslavs began forming fraternal unions and societies that were meant as a source of entertainment, to promote cultural

heritage and to aid those of Yugoslavian descent in need.

One prominent example of such an organization is the United States Slavonian Benevolent Association of New Orleans (formed in April 1874), the second oldest Yugoslavian Benevolent Association in the United States (Vujnovic 1974). A small group of Croatian men started this organization when they called a meeting to discuss forming a group of mutual assistance (Vujnovic 1974). Within a matter of days, more Croatians joined and by mid-May there were 54 members. Only men and their male descendants can become members, and new members must have the recommendation of two members in good standing (Vujnovic 1974). The current mission of the United States Slavonian Benevolent Association of New Orleans is "to help its less fortunate members, to support the widows and orphans of deceased brothers and to pay the doctor and hospital bills of sick members" (Lovrich 1967, Prpic 1971). Despite being primarily a benevolent association, the Slavonian Benevolent Association of New Orleans also was a prominent social organization that helped the immigrants not to feel isolated (Vujnovic 1974). Other examples of such organizations are the Yugoslav-American Club of NOLA (founded in the 1940s), which caters to younger Yugoslavs and their non-Yugoslavian spouses, The Croatian Fraternal Union, and the Croatian Catholic Union of the United States.

Today, there are more than 4,500 Yugoslavian fraternal organizations that frequently influence not only the lives of Croatian immigrants but also historically have influenced the conditions in Yugoslavia (Roucek 1935). For instance, a few of the benevolent organizations in south Louisiana were aimed specifically at spreading and supporting political movements here and abroad. The Louisiana Citizens for a Free Croatia was a relief group that aided war-torn Croatia through a number of fundraising projects, although it has since transformed in both name and purpose (Ware 1996). Similarly, the Mir Group, no longer in existence, once aimed to provide information from Medjugorjie, Bosnia- Herzegovina, through a bimonthly magazine that featured inspirational articles (Ware 1996).

**Religion**

Most of the Croatian immigrants maintain their Roman or Greek Catholicism upon settling in the United States (Roucek 1935, Vujnovic 1974). For Croatians residing in southern Louisiana, Catholicism is a central part of their lives, with christenings and first communions being some of the largest celebrations (Ware 1996). In their homeland, each village has a patron saint such as St. John, St. Kuzma, St. Damien, St. Anthony and St. Joseph. On each saint's day, a feast and mass celebrate the patron saint. Upon immigration, these celebrations have diminished and are less formal that in the homeland (Ware 1996). Today, families are more likely to gather and have a special meal than to host a daylong celebration. Since Louisiana's Croatian population is relatively small and broadly dispersed, Croatians have never established their own parish or church, but instead serve in existing parishes (Vujnovic 1974).

**Music**

Music also is a common means of maintaining the Croatian ethnic identity and was once most evident during holidays when Croatians played the *gusle*, a long single-stringed instrument, although this is no longer common practice (Prpic 1971). The folk songs played usually remembered the homeland and family left behind. In south Louisiana, traditional music is less prevalent and typically is played informally by self-taught musicians at special events (Ware 1996).

**Language**

Language is an important means of maintaining ties to homeland. Several American-born Croatians speak Croatian fluently, and most speak at least a few words (Prpic 1971). Early immigrants learned English based on the need to do so. Those employed along the Mississippi River learned enough to maintain employment, but the isolated oystermen had little need to learn the English language and thus learned very few words (Vujnovic 1974).

Today, the degree to which Croatians speak their native language can be thought of as a continuum with Croatian on one end, English on the other end and an Americo-Croaticized diction in the middle. This Americo-Croaticized diction uses English words with Croatian endings that have been adapted from the original Croatian. An example of this is the word "grandjanin" (Croatian for citizen), which in Americo-Croatized diction becomes "sitizen" (Prpric 1971). Croatian is still commonly spoken at social gatherings or in the homes of older Croatians residing in Louisiana (Ware 1996). Similarly, in homes where both parents are Yugoslav-born, it is not uncommon for Croatian to be the only language spoken at home (Vujnovic 1974). The post-1950 immigrants are better equipped for lingual adjustment, since many of them are educated and likely took English classes in their country of origin, but several know at least a few words of Croatian and many continue to speak it fluently (Vujnovic 1974).

**Education**

Although few of the early Croatian immigrants had extensive formal education, they quickly realized the challenges that resulted

from this and made educating their children a priority (Vujnovic 1974). Most Croats are willing to go to great lengths to ensure their children receive a decent education, and as a result of this dedication, many second- and third-generation Yugoslavs have done exceedingly well in professional fields (Vujnovic 1974).

### Food Ways

Food is another way Croatians maintain and celebrate their ethnic heritage. Common foods include pork, lamb, olive oil and onions (Prpic 1971). Even during economic hardships, many Croatians in south Louisiana have an abundance of food (Ware 1996). Some of the most commonly known foods are Dalmatian cookies known as *krustula* or a lemon bread known as *kolach* (Ware 1996). Figs and wine also are important features of the Croatian food ways (Ware 1996).

### Art

In Croatia, almost all women are taught to do needlework by female relatives or in school. Knitting, crochet and embroidery are common skills among Croatian women, and this tradition has carried on to the younger generations living in south Louisiana, although it is diminishing with each generation (Ware 1996).

### Gardening

Keeping gardens was a common practice in the homeland that was initially transported to the United States among early Croatian immigrants. In Louisiana, it was once common for Croatian families to grow cabbage, greens, tomatoes, lettuce and fruit trees. Younger Croatian American women don't readily think of gardening as a Croatian tradition, but the contents of the gardens are similar to those in Dalmatia and seeds often are transported from the homeland (Ware 1996).

### Festivals

In south Louisiana, the Croatian culture becomes particularly evident at local festivals such as the Orange Festival, the Cut-Off Oyster Festival and St. Anthony's Day Celebration (Ware 1996). These celebrations, although not exclusively Croatian, typically feature oysters, dancing, music and singing.

Despite a strong sense of tradition and commitment to homeland, most second- and third-generation Croatians are almost indistinguishable from other Americans. Many Croatians have even changed their names to be more "American" (Prpic 1971). Although many immigrants have maintained strong ties to homeland through cultural traditions, as second and third generations are born and raised in the United States, it is likely this commitment to the culture of home will decline, if not disappear altogether. This being said, many American-born Croatians visit their homeland and are rediscovering their Croatian roots.

## Occupations

Arguably, there are four characteristics of Croatian immigrants that made their transition to American life relatively smooth: they needed to earn a living, their strong constitution, a driving will to work and an ability to adapt (Vujnovic 1974). Early immigrants in the early 19th century had no trouble finding work, and by the 1850s, many of them operated successful businesses in New Orleans (Vujnovic 1974). For much of history, Yugoslavs and Dalmatians have been regarded as excellent mariners, sailors and shipbuilders. Thus, the earliest immigrants to the United States followed these customs and often worked in industries related to the sea (Lovrich 1968).

The Yugoslavs who settled in New Orleans are no longer concentrated in definite areas but now are scattered throughout the community and also are represented in a variety of occupations such as ownership of restaurants, oyster growing and other pursuits related to the sea, which rank high in the types of occupations held by the Yugoslavs. There also are members in professional groups, represented chiefly by second- and third-generation Yugoslavs (Lovrich 1967). Dalmatian businessmen also are engaged in a number of different occupations in New Orleans and the area south of the city. These include hotel owners, storekeepers, loan and real estate operators, druggists, truckers and tugboat operators (Lovrich 1967). Many Croatian immigrants also significantly contributed to American progress through scientific, educational and literary contributions (Roucek 1935). Despite this occupational diversity, there is one industry that remains dominant among Croatians in the region: oyster harvesting.

The Dalmatians began settling in Louisiana in the 1820s and quickly discovered that the region around the Mississippi Delta was well adapted for the cultivation of oysters, so they began the development of the oyster industry and the construction of many Gulf fisheries (Lovrich 1968, Prpic 1971). Louisiana's coastal waters are perfect for oyster cultivation because the fresh water of the Mississippi, Atchafalaya, Sabine and Pearl rivers mixes with the salt water of the Gulf to create the proper salinity for oysters (Vujnovich 1974). Initially, the early settlers found oysters growing wild along the shore and realized that nobody in the region had attempted to actively cultivate them.

Luke Jurisich, a Dalmatian, is credited with being the first to actively cultivate oysters (Lovrich 1968, Prpic 1971, Riden 2003). He began in Bayou Cook during the Civil War and ushered in what today

is a multimillion dollar industry that has resulted in prosperity for thousands of Dalmatians living in the Delta. Success in the oyster industry resulted in many Croatians expanding their businesses to include oyster houses, marine stores and the acquisition of fleets of oyster luggers as well as canneries. Expansion was not limited to the oyster industry, and many Croatians opened restaurants and grocery stores as a result of the economic gains in the oyster industry (Lovrich 1968).

**Oysters**

Prior to Jurisich's cultivation of oysters, oyster harvesting had been a tumultuous process of collecting oysters from a natural reef until its stock was depleted. It was the Dalmatian immigrants who experimented with relocating young oysters, constructing artificial reefs and tending oysters year-round (Kane 1944; Vujnovich 1974). This experimentation was lucrative and produced high quality oysters. Early cultivation was very primitive since the Yugoslavs removed oysters with their bare hands. Similarly, planted oysters were done one at a time by hand to ensure each had enough room to grow and to protect them from predators (Vujnovich 1974).

As business grew and the demand for oysters rose, the Croatians developed more sophisticated methods of planting, harvesting and cleaning oysters that involved modern tools and luggers (Vujnovich 1974). Commercial fishing is now the most common occupation among Croatian men in south Louisiana, particularly oyster fishing (Ware 1996). Approximately 35 percent of the oyster harvesters in Louisiana self-identify as Croatian/Yugoslavian and are mostly concentrated in Plaquemines Parish (Deseran and Riden 2000). This tradition has been passed down, and now third- or fourth-generation Croatians continue to become oystermen (Ware 1996). Today, more than 80 percent of the Plaquemines Parish Croatians are involved in the oyster industry (Lovrich 1967). This also has created a number of jobs for other Croatians in the region, since rarely does a harvester work alone but rather he typically hires other Croatians to help (Kammer 1945, Eterovich n.d.).

Oyster harvesting is both time consuming and difficult manual labor. Frank Lovrich outlined this complex process in his article, "Work Among the Yugoslavs on the Mississippi Delta" (1968). The first obstacle is finding suitable land that is semihard, not shifting and with a bottom of moderate depth where the water changes regularly with the tide. The oyster bed must also be free of pollution and maintain an abundant food supply for the oysters. In 1908, the process of searching for land was formalized when the state began leasing water bottoms for the purpose of oyster cultivation (Padgett 1960). Early oyster holdings leased from the parish averaged approximately 49 acres in size (Lovrich 1968).

Today, these leases often are much larger. Louisiana grants 15-year leases of up to 1,000 acres for $2 per acre annually (Keithly et al. 1992; Melancon 1991, McGuire 2006). These leases are renewable, heritable and transferable. At the end of the 20th century, more than 400,000 acres of productive bottomland had been leased out (Louisiana DWLF 1999). Since the 1990s, however, there has been a moratorium on new leases as the result of a lawsuit against the state.

Once the location is decided upon and the necessary lease secured, the bottom must be dredged, and old shells must be cleared away. Empty oyster shells are then transported to the breeding ground and scattered discriminately to prevent overcrowding and malnutrition. A lugger is then used to go out to sea and fish "seed" oysters from the Louisiana coastal region. These seed oysters are dredged up mechanically and within two to three days are taken back to the bedding grounds to be deposited. The seed oysters then reproduce, and the young "spat" (offspring) must attach to a hard, clean surface – hopefully the empty shells that the harvester deposited earlier in the process. For almost two years the oysters remain in the bedding grounds to fatten up (McGuire 2006). Once the oysters have grown, the crop is gathered, and small oysters are re-bedded to continue growing. By the mid-20th century, anywhere from 70 percent to 90 percent of the oysters coming from Louisiana were farmed this way (Keithly et al. 1992).

According to Lovrich, the oysters harvested by Dalmatian fishermen fall into three classifications: steam canned, raw shop and counter stock (1968). The steam canned oysters are dredged from the natural reefs of Louisiana, transported to canneries and opened under steam pressure (Lovrich 1968). Raw shop oysters require greater cultivation. Shop oysters usually are taken from natural reefs, cleaned, separated and placed on bedding grounds leased from the state to fatten up. They are then transported to packing houses, opened, packed and shipped across the United States (Lovrich 1968). Finally, the counter stock oysters are of the highest quality and are the most carefully cultivated. These are the oysters served on the half shell in bars and restaurants. These oysters also bring the highest prices to the sellers (Lovrich 1968).

In addition to being incredibly time consuming and painstaking work, oyster harvesting is also precarious work, because the oyster has many enemies both natural and human-made (Lovrich 1968). The

greatest natural hazard to oysters is Dermocystidium marinum, a waterborne parasite that attacks the oyster in the summer and destroys entire oyster beds. Predators such as the black drumfish also are problematic for harvesters in the region (Ware). Other hazards result from changes in the water due to pollution or industrial waste (Lovrich 1968).

Although the oyster industry began as a small pursuit, it rapidly expanded, and Croatian immigrants became known for their fleets of oyster luggers, fishing boats and canneries. This success allowed the Croatians to branch out into other businesses such as oyster houses, marine stores, grocery stores and restaurants (Lovrich 1968). The 1980s were the height of the commercial fishing industry in Louisiana, as the oil bust was happening and fishing industries increased (McGuire 2006). Oyster harvesting appears to have peaked in 1985, with many problems looming in the future. For instance, in 1991, the FDA instituted regulations that required oyster sellers to issue a warning about the risks of eating raw oysters, which deterred some consumers (McGuire 2006). Similarly, a drought occurred from 1985 to 1991 that brought the salt content in the wetlands too high for oyster reproduction. This resulted in a 66 percent decrease in production during these years (McGuire 2006).

More recently, like many in the fishing industry, Louisiana's oyster harvesters have faced growing problems, such as increased regulation, increased operating costs, loss of wetlands, industrial pollution and declining water quality (Riden 2003, McGuire 2006). In her dissertation, "Staying In or Getting Out: Social Capital and Occupational Decision-Making Among Louisiana's Croatian Oyster Harvesters," Carl Riden outlines not only the challenges facing oyster harvesters today but also their commitment to the industry (2003). Because oyster harvesting is more like farming than fishing, it is particularly difficult to adapt to new challenges quickly (Riden 2003). Despite these barriers, many harvesters have expressed their commitment to the industry, and Louisiana has become one of the nation's leading producers of oysters (Deseran and Riden 2000, Keithly and Roberts 1988; Keithly, Roberts, and Brannan 1992).

These challenges are compounded by the decline in oyster production in recent years. During the previous decades, there has been an increase in leases and the amount of land leased while oyster production in Louisiana has remained relatively stable (Keithly 1991; Keithly and Roberts 1993; Van Sicle 1976). In other words, the per-acre oyster production is decreasing while harvesting efforts are increasing. Most likely, this decline in production is due to the natural and human-made problems that oyster harvesters are facing today (Riden 2003). Faced with increasingly stringent regulations, environmental degradation, labor shortages, decline or stagnation in prices, negative media coverage and an influx of harvesters from surrounding states, the Croatian community in Plaquemines Parish, so long held together by shared interest in oyster harvesting and associated businesses, is at a turning point (Riden 2003, McGuire 2006).

**Hurricanes and the Oysters**

Hurricanes also pose a threat to the oyster industry in south Louisiana. According to the Mayan records, the first Gulf hurricane happened in 1462, and since then, every so often, oystermen have to cope with the effects of the destructive winds and waves that come with each storm (Vujnovich 1974). Although shrimp and finfish have some ability to swim out of harm's way during a hurricane, oysters must endure the storm where they are attached.

After Hurricane Andrew in 1992, Louisiana invested a significant amount of time, energy and resources into ensuring the revitalization of the oyster industry (McGuire 2006). At the time, Louisiana's fishing industry was highly visible and vital to the tourist industry. Because of this, the fishing industry wielded a significant amount of political power and was able to pressure legislators to seek federal relief and to get the state to match those funds (McGuire 2006).

After hurricanes Rita and Katrina, hundreds of square miles of private leases and public seed reefs in the Louisiana coastal wetlands were damaged. Much of the infrastructure for harvesting, processing and marketing oysters was destroyed and the workforce was displaced (McGuire 2006). But the state has done little to secure federal aid or provide state financial aid to the fishing industry after those storms. Hurricane Katrina pushed directly through Louisiana's oyster industry – across Grand Isle and Barataria Bay; over the Plaquemines Parish fishing town of Empire on the bank of the Mississippi River; then through the upper reaches of Breton Sound and its working waterfront; the oyster, crab and shrimp villages of Hopedale, Delacroix and Ysclosky; and Shell Beach in St. Bernard Parish, the parish that abuts New Orleans's now-infamous Lower Ninth Ward (McGuire 2006).

Based on the impact of Hurricane Andrew, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries predicted Katrina would result in more than $340 million dollars in losses for the oyster industry between retail and dockside expenses. This figure only included the six parishes most directly affected by Katrina that

housed 426 wholesale and retail seafood dealers, 4,767 commercial fishermen, 4,935 commercial fishing vessels and 325 recreational charter boats (McGuire 2006). In addition to direct damage from the storm, wetlands also were polluted by sewer treatment plants, oil facilities and industrial chemical spills (McGuire 2006).

Just after Katrina, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries halted harvesting on private leases. For the most part, harvesters consented to this temporary stop because they had lost essential equipment in the storm and feared the FDA would shut down production indefinitely should any contaminated oysters make it to market (McGuire 2006). Eventually, Louisiana freed up Hurricane Ivan restoration funds to investigate and begin cleaning up the oyster reefs. Despite this effort, once state wildlife and fisheries officials opened the seed grounds, there were only enough seed oysters for a 12-day harvest rather than the September to April harvest fishermen rely on (McGuire 2006).

Private organizations such as the Oyster Task Force also contributed to the revitalization of the oyster industry in Louisiana after Rita and Katrina. The Oyster Task Force launched a five-year recovery plan and an aggressive marketing campaign that proclaimed "Louisiana Oysters Are Back and Hotter Than Ever" (McGuire 2006). With this plan, the Oyster Task Force called for the repair of 2,000 grounded oyster-harvesting boats, the restoration of dry-dock facilities and the cleaning of clogged access canals and locks (McGuire 2006). They also addressed the labor shortage by creating a program to attract temporary workers.

Before the storms of 2005 struck the Louisiana coast, the oyster industry already was reeling. Public concern existed over the risks of consuming raw shellfish, pollution had jeopardized production and labor was becoming hard to attract and hard to retain in a backbreaking industry (McGuire 2006). Worse yet, hurricane destruction further added to the challenges oyster harvesters already were facing. Historically, the Louisiana oyster industry has been resilient. Hurricanes are a relatively regular occurrence that kill oysters, destroy boats and affect infrastructure. In the past, these events have been overcome – damaged reefs have been repaired and re-seeded, and equipment has been restored (McGuire 2006). This time, however, the effects of Katrina likely will take years to resolve economically, physically and socially.

**Deepwater Horizon Spill and Oysters**

Few scholars have written about the specific effects of the 2010 British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon Spill on Croatian oystermen. The mouth of the Mississippi River provides 25-30 percent of the seafood in the United States, and many of the oystermen in this region estimate that more than 70 percent of the oysters were killed not by the spill but by the diversion of fresh water from the Mississippi River meant to push crude oil away from the marshes (Fertel 2011, Horst and Horst 2011). In other words, while the spill itself may have done minimal damage to the reefs, the cleanup and recovery efforts have all but destroyed them.

## Ties to Oil and Gas Industry

The oil industry is of particular concern to oyster harvesters because of the pollution and seismic operations that are the results of deepwater drilling. Oil has been discovered throughout south Louisiana, and the first well was drilled in 1938 in Golden Meadow in Lafourche Parish (Kammer 1945, Eterovich n.d.). Since that time, a number of rigs have been built both on and off shore.

Historically, the oil industry has had an effect on oyster harvesting since its equipment cuts access canals through the marsh, pulls seismic equipment and drilling barges across the waterscape, dredges navigation channels to expedite the collection of crude oil from tank batteries and, with time, builds a vast web of pipelines through the marsh from thousands of production platforms to inland refineries (McGuire 2006). Perhaps the most aggravating hazards of the nearby oil industry are the periodic seismic operations carried on by the oil companies in the area. In testing for oil, seismic teams explode dynamite charges and then chart the waves to determine whether or not an oil pool is nearby, disturbing oyster beds in the process (Lovrich 1968).

As the oil industry moved offshore in the 1950s, the bigger rigs and platforms required deeper and wider channels from supply centers that were on land. The widening of channels resulted in increased salt content and wave action that decreased oyster production (McGuire 2006). In the time of accidents and disasters, these risks increase exponentially. For instance, during Hurricane Katrina, in addition to typical storm damage, many of the wetlands were wrecked by oil releases such as the one at Murphy Oil in St. Bernard Parish (McGuire 2006). Oil spills are dangerous because they often leave the oyster inedible, if not dead.

## Ties to the Land

Historically, many of the Croatians living in the Delta depended on the land and the sea for their livelihood. From the sea, they cultivated and harvested the oyster, and from the land, the Louisiana orange (Lovrich 1968). Fewer Yugoslavs

who came to the United States selected land-based agriculture as an occupation when compared to oyster harvesting. Yet, several early Dalmatians established themselves as apple, apricot, pear and grape farmers in California.

In Louisiana, the orange became a source of income for many early Dalmatian immigrants (Vujnovich 1974). The soil that is brought down and deposited along the Mississippi River over time aided in producing more than three crops a year – making orange harvesting particularly lucrative here (Lovrich 1968). For many years, some 300 Dalmatians successfully and profitably grew more than 5,000 acres of citrus along the Mississippi River (Lovrich 1968). This abundance in citrus led many of the early Dalmatian settlers to establish family wineries that specialized in orange wine and brandy (Lovrich 1968, Ware 1996). The citrus industry declined in the 1960s, however, as repeated freezes and hurricanes destroyed many of the citrus groves, and few are still in operation today (Ware 1996).

In addition to their reliance on oysters and citrus, many early Dalmatian settlers maintained livestock such as swine, sheep, goats and poultry that were used primarily for home consumption as well as periodic community events, although this is a rare practice today (Lovrich 1968). Vegetable gardens where they grew peppers, garlic, onion, cabbage, snap beans, tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers, peas, scallions, cauliflower, kale, eggplant, radishes, beans, pumpkins, squash and watermelons for home consumption also were common among Croatians living in the Delta. Most early immigrant families also had an orchard near the house with apple, peach, pear, plum, fig and pecan trees (Lovrich 1968). Few Croatians continue to garden due to lack of space and time. Because of their economic reliance on the oyster, however, many Croatians craft their lives around the changing seasons and the land and the harvest (Lovrich 1968).

## Politics

Croatians historically have become a strong political force in the United States. Some scholars suggest that Woodrow Wilson's small margin over Hughes in California in the 1916 presidential election was determined by the Croatian vote. If this is true, the Croatian vote would have been the deciding vote in the 1916 presidential election (Prpic 1971). During WWI, many Croatians were still Austrian citizens and worried they would be regarded as enemy aliens should the United States go to war. Wilson promised to keep the United States out of the war, which prompted many Croatians to vote for him (Prpic 1971). Of course, on Dec. 7, 1917, America declared war on Austria-Hungary anyway. It should be noted, however, that not all Croatians share political, social or cultural outlooks (Roucek 1935).

## Conclusion

With a long history in the United States and with more than 50 percent of all Croatian immigrants settling here permanently, Croatians have undoubtedly affected the economy, politics, culture and social life of the communities in which they reside. These effects are most evident in the south Louisiana communities that are home to a number of Croatian fishermen and their families. Those fishermen have revolutionized the oyster industry, which has allowed them the economic stability to remain relatively isolated. This isolation has resulted in a strong Croatian identity and a sense of tradition that is evident in family life, commitment to homeland, religion, celebration, language and reliance on the land.

Although few of the Croatian immigrants work directly in the oil industry, many of them are affected by the activities and decisions of oil companies in the region. Not only are oil spills a threat to the oyster industry, but the everyday activities of finding and drilling for oil are threats to the oyster beds that so many Croatians rely on. Certainly, because of these and other threats and their commitment to education for the third- and fourth-generation Croatians, the future of the Croatian commitment to oyster harvesting and the strong sense of identity that historically has been common in Croatian communities will be called into question, and it is likely that with time, both will decline.

# Appendix

Overview of Croatians in the Gulf of Mexico Region

| Section | Broad Conclusions |
|---|---|
| Origins and History | Croatians are from a number of nations and represent many nationalities, although traditionally they are primarily southern Slavs. There have been many terms used to describe the group such as Slavonian, Yugoslavian and Croatian along with various understandings of what these terms refer to (race/ethnicity/people group). |
| Migration | With many push-and-pull factors for immigration, primarily economic decline at home, Croatians began arriving in the United States looking for economic growth and stability. Legend places the earliest Croatians in the United States during the 1500s with peak immigration occurring from 1900-1914. Since that time, Croatians have only trickled into the United States, and most of those are joining family already living here. |
| Culture | Early Croatian immigrants had a strong sense of identity and commitment to home that was reflected in their language, music, food, religion and family life. This traditional culture is fading, however, as new generations assimilate into American life. |
| Occupations | Croatians work in a variety of fields ranging from restaurant workers to business owners to scholars. The primary occupation among Louisiana Croatians is oyster harvesting. |
| Oil and Gas Industries | Although few Croatians work directly for the oil and gas companies that are in the Gulf Coast Region, those working in the oyster industry often are affected by the daily decisions of oil companies as well as the accidents that happen in the Gulf. |
| Ecology | Many of the Croatians rely on the land for not only their income as oyster harvesters but also for their livelihood. Many have or once had family gardens, livestock and orchards that provide food and additional income for the family. |
| Politics | Historically, Croatians have been a strong political force in the nation. Many believe Croatians were the deciding vote in the 1916 presidential election. Much of their political force is now exhibited through their fraternal organizations. |
| Oysters | Croatians living in the Gulf of Mexico Region are most noted for revolutionizing the oyster industry by actively cultivating oysters. This has become a multimillion dollar industry that contributes to the regional economy and the tourist industry in the region. |

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**Acknowledgements**

This research was funded in part by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management as part of a larger project studying ethnic groups and enclaves in the Gulf of Mexico region. We would like to acknowledge Harry Luton from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management for his feedback and encouragement throughout this project. We also would like to thank Diane Austin, Thomas McGuire, Britny Delp, Margaret Edgar, Lindsey Feldman, Brian Marks, Lauren Penney, Kelly McLain, Justina Whalen, Devon Robbie, Monica Voge, Doug Welch and Victoria Phaneuf from the University of Arizona for providing a database of literature and support. Similarly, we would like to acknowledge Helen Regis, Carolyn Ware, Bethany Rogers and Annemarie Galeucia of Louisiana State University for their comments and feedback. Finally, we would like to thank Huizhen Niu, Louisiana State University, for her assistance with GIS mapping.


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Research Report #119 (275) 1/13