

# Mississippi Folklife



Volume 28, No. 2

Summer/Fall 1995, \$5.00

## Down Around Biloxi: Culture and Identity in the Biloxi Seafood Industry Part II

Running Mules  
in the Mississippi Delta

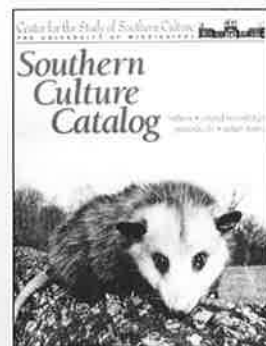
Three-to-Five  
On the Red!  
Fighting Cocks and  
Ritual Betting

Ten Point  
Hunting Club

Marion Post Wolcott  
Mexican migrant workers,  
a photographic essay

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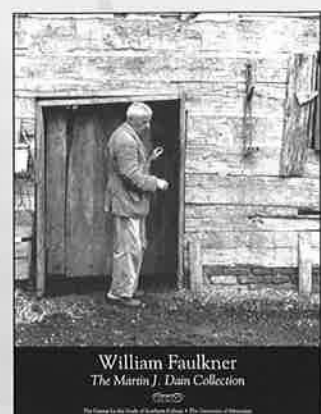
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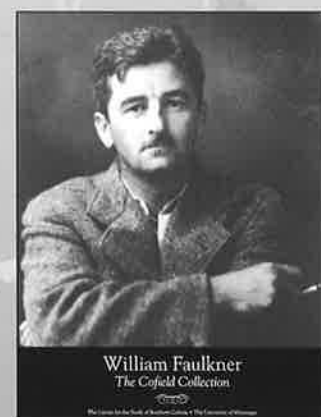
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

This second issue of *Mississippi Folklife* attempts to continue our focus on the diversity of folk culture in Mississippi. From Aimee Schmidt's second part of her two-part look at ethnic identity in Biloxi to Karen Glynn's exploration of the history and symbolism of mule racing in the Delta, this issue strives to take a broad look at meaning within Mississippi folk culture.

While unintentional, this issue looks indepth at the Mississippi Delta. "Running Mules: Mule Racing in the Mississippi Delta" recounts the community mule races that flourished in the 1940s as mules were being replaced by tractors in the cotton fields of the Delta. Alan Huffman's "Ten Point: Snapshots of Hunters in the Last Mississippi Delta Wilderness" takes us to Steele Bayou through the photographs of Huffman's grandmother, Florence West Huffman. Marion Post Wolcott's Farm Security Administration photographs of Mexican-American agricultural workers taken in Bolivar and Cohoama Counties in the late 1930s also give us a glimpse into the relatively unexplored communities of Hispanics in the Mississippi Delta. While all three of these articles take the reader to the Delta, each interprets a very different Delta world.

*Mississippi Folklife* most often publishes articles about Mississippi. However, from time to time we find reason to cross state boundaries in order to better understand our own traditional culture. Jon Donlon's "Three-to-Five on the Red" takes us South Louisiana cock fighting establishments as he discusses traditions of betting, wagering and the community relationships surrounding the fighting rituals.

In the first issue of *Mississippi Folklife* we published two poems. We have decided that in the future we will not publish poetry. There are many journals and magazines that regularly publish contemporary poetry and the abundance of scholarly material and photographic essays on Mississippi folk culture has persuaded us that we should concentrate on non-fiction prose and leave poetry to other publications.

Finally, we are always in search of good material for future issues. Volume 29, No. 1 will focus on material culture in Mississippi. I welcome any submissions and ideas. I also urge readers to send us books, recordings, and media programs for review. Those interested in reviewing material should contact me. *Mississippi Folklife* is published through the cooperative support of the Mississippi Arts Commission, the University of Mississippi, the Mississippi Folklore Society, and you, the members and subscribers. Thanks to all. Please spread the word.

*Tom Rankin*

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## FERRIS AWARDED FRANKEL PRIZE

William Ferris, folklorist, filmmaker, photographer, and Director of the Center for the Study of



Bill Ferris

Southern Culture, was awarded the prestigious Charles Frankel Prize in October for his work in the humanities. One of five Frankel Prize recipients in 1995, Ferris attended ceremonies on the south lawn of the White House where the President and First Lady honored 17 distinguished American artists and humanists for their outstanding contributions to the nation's cultural life.

"The stellar list of honorees includes some of the brightest beacons in American arts and culture," President Clinton observed. "These are the people who lift our spirits and illuminate our lives." The ceremony honored both artists and humanities as the President awarded the National Medal of Arts to 13 individuals along with the Frankel Prize.

Among the 1995 National Medal of Arts recipients was bluegrass musician Bill Monroe. In addition to Ferris, the 1995 Charles

Frankel Prize recipients included Charles Kuralt, CBS correspondent and author; David McCaulay, author and illustrator; David McCullough, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian; and Bernice Johnson Reagon, performer, folklorist, and historian.

## PICTURING HOME: Family Movies as Local History

A project of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, "Picturing Home" collects home movie footage and the work of studio photographers in an effort to preserve the visual history of the region. Especially interesting are images of everyday life prior to 1950. Such images would include: cooking, farming, hunting, recreation, farm buildings, shops, industry, town scenes, sports, celebrations, schools, church activities, and political rallies. For more information, please contact Karen Glynn, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, 232-7811.

## REMEMBERED

### MARY TILLMAN SMITH 1904-1995

A native of Copiah County, Mississippi, Mary Tillman Smith began "making pictures" in the late 1970s or early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Often motivated by her religious faith and the desire to "pretty her yard," Smith transformed her approximately one acre home place into a fantastic art environment of painted tin, wood, and other found and recycled objects. She painted local figures on corrugated tin and mounted the

portraits on her fence, her dog pen, or her son's garage. In the mid-1980s her vegetable garden included scarecrows made of tin, bicycle parts, paint can lids, and painted faces. Once collectors and art dealers located her yard on Highway 51 on the south side of Hazelhurst, her yard changed from a powerful and energetic art environment to a sparsely decorated yard. Smith attempted to keep up with the demand by painting quickly and replacing the bought art, but the buyers were ultimately too numerous.

An honest, unassuming woman who made friends easily and who wore her humility as a badge, she frequently shared her wisdom with visitors. A visitor to Mary T. Smith's yard might have heard her personal motto which she had carefully inscribed above her dog pen: "One face is all right, two face won't do."

The daughter of sharecroppers, Smith married first in 1922. In the 1930s, she married again, this time to John Smith. The couple then sharecropped near Martinsville, Mississippi. Her son, Sherdie Major, remembers that the Smith's were "run off in 1938 because she [Mary T. Smith] could do accounts and figured out that she was not fairly treated." In later years Smith did domestic work and gardened.

Smith's paintings have been widely collected and exhibited. Her many exhibition credits include "Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South" (1987) and "Outside the Mainstream: Folk Art in Our Time" (1988) at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.

1. This obituary was written with the help of two important sources:

Tom Rankin



Mary T. Smith at home, 1995.

Sylvia and Warren Lowe, *Baking In The Sun: Visionary Images from the South*. Lafayette: University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1987; and Chuck and Jan Rosenak, *The Museum of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Folk Art and Artists*. New York: Abbeville, 1990.—TR

### LOY ALLEN BOWLIN "The Original Rhinestone Cowboy," 1909-1995

Loy Bowlin, a self-taught artist who dubbed himself "the Original Rhinestone Cowboy" and created one of Mississippi's most distinctive folk environments, died at the age of 86 on June 14th in McComb. In the late 1970s, Bowlin was a familiar figure in McComb, playing his harmonica and buck dancing on street corners. He trimmed several western suits with braid, sequins and rhinestones, and decorated the dashboard and hood of his 1967 Cadillac with colorful rhinestones.



The Rhinestone Cowboy, McComb, MS.

ored paper, glitter, fabric paint, and rhinestones. A sign over the front porch welcomed visitors to the "Beautiful Holy Jewel Home of the Original Rhinestone Cowboy."

Bowlin sometimes sold or gave away individual pieces of his environment and some of this work has been exhibited in galleries around the Southeast. However, he focused most of his creative energies on his home. "The Rhinestone Cowboy, with all his good humor and showmanship, created an environment that is at once powerful and fragile," says Debra Boykin, Folk Arts Program Director at the Mississippi Arts Commission. In 1992, a National Endowment for the Arts/Southern Arts Federation Regional Fellowship Panel recognized this power with a \$5,000 fellowship award. Efforts are under way to preserve the house and its contents. Those interested in the preservation effort should contact Cassandra McGill, The Rhinestone Cowboy Museum Project, P. O. Box 7270, McComb, MS 39648, 601-249-2658.—TR

Eddie McCall





Vietnamese boat being built in yard, Biloxi, Mississippi 1984.

# DOWN AROUND BILOXI.

## Culture and Identity in the Biloxi Seafood Industry [Part II]

by Aimee Schmidt

Biloxi's latest immigrants to the seafood industry, the Vietnamese, arrived during the late 1970s and early 80s and revived the languid industry by accepting packing plant jobs that more established groups had begun to avoid. They built their own boats, opened businesses, and became a vibrant part of the Biloxi seafood and ethnic community.

Noting the dynamic interaction and adaptation of incoming national and cultural groups in New Orleans, Louisiana, George F. Reinecke utilized the term "creolization" to refer to the result of the interactive forces which led to the creation of a local ethnicity. Though on a much smaller population scale, Biloxi claims a similar history. Here the number of ethnic groups is fewer, but the basic premise the same: the interaction of ethnic groups helped create a community identity and occupational links reinforced it. The multi-ethnic nature of the seafood industry was present in its beginnings and continues today. Slavonians, Cajuns, and Vietnamese have each contributed to the cultural landscape of Biloxi. Their livelihood has been their shared culture, but they also strive to maintain their separate ethnic identities. Biloxi's history illustrates a continuum of ethnic influences in one Southern port city and demonstrates how those diverse elements fashioned a community identity.

### A LIFE OF FAITH, A LIFE OF CELEBRATION

Many claim that the seafood industry built Biloxi. The industry burgeoned around the turn of the century. Polish migrants from Baltimore, Slavonian immigrants, and Louisiana Cajuns provided the labor that laid the foundations for Biloxi's station as "Seafood Capital of the World."

"...That church (St. Michael) was built on shrimp pennies and women picking shrimp and shucking oysters. Yeah, all these people were Catholics. Most of the Slavonians were Catholic..."

—Louis Trebotich

The fisherman is often depicted as a figure of polar opposites. Traditional images include the devil-may-care man with a penchant for wine and women, and the hardworking, God-fearing family man. There is some truth to both of these images. Fishermen admit to being a bit care-free. Being unfettered is part of their independent nature, and they work hard for a living. Yet, their predilection for superstition hints at respect and affirmation of some higher power. Biloxi is a city where piety and secular celebrations mix freely. Along the Gulf Coast, particularly in Biloxi, religious heritage and events rooted in a Christian tradition, such as the Blessing of the Fleet and Mardi Gras, are closely tied to the seafood industry.

The industry's religious affiliation stems from its early days of development. Most of Biloxi's Slavonian and Cajun population working in the seafood industry were Catholic—leading to a preponderance of members of this faith on Point Cadet and Back Bay. St. John parish on Back Bay and St. Michael parish on the Point developed as a result of these incoming ethnic groups. As children, most of the residents on the Point attended St. Michael grade school (once located on Myrtle and First streets). A retired teacher from St. Michael fondly remembers the neighborhood of Point Cadet as one filled with good people holding working-class values and better off for it. "They were different people, good people. The priest used to say when the kids left the Point they'd get the 'uptown ways'... They acted like they were better (than the people from the Point)."

William Gorenflo built Back Bay School on Main Street in 1898. Later, upon construction of a new and bigger complex, Gorenflo donated the old school to the Sisters of Mercy for

the establishment of St. John parochial school. Lazaro Lopez served as chairman of the committee to reconstruct the Church of the Nativity after a fire destroyed it in 1900. He donated the bells which hang in the present Cathedral of the Nativity.

Most members of the community take pride in their heritage. Hard work built character and integrity, and if they ever doubted their worth, they had only to recall, "The meek shall inherit the earth." For much of the community, especially in the early days of the industry, their faith proved to be their stronghold.

One of the rituals of fishermen is to have their boats blessed. A prayer for protection and success would accompany them on the season's voyages. Biloxi's annual Blessing of the Fleet is actually an old world tradition brought from Europe. Biloxians first held the blessing in 1929, and thereafter it became an annual celebration with both Catholics and non-Catholics participating. Regardless of their religious affiliation, they were all fishermen. "The Blessing of the Fleet is for the fisherman a public petitioning of Almighty God's favor on his boat, his work, his family, his life," wrote the late Rev. Herbert J. Mullin who blessed the boats for years. The ritual developed into a public celebration in which the whole city, not just the seafood community, takes part, and it takes place each year before the opening of shrimp season in Mississippi waters (usually the beginning of May).

The festivities begin with a Saturday evening mass at St. Michael for the fishermen, and on Sunday afternoon the boats gather between the small craft harbor and Deer Island. The fishermen drop a wreath in the water in remembrance of those fishermen who have gone before them. Then, the pastor of St. Michael and

the Bishop of the Diocese of Biloxi stand astern an anchored shrimp boat and bless the passing boats, sprinkling them with holy water. Friends and family board the boats to share in the parade, while crowds gather along the harbor or on the island to watch. During this ceremony and on the Fourth of July (which at one time was also a big festivity) women come aboard the boats—traditionally a "man's" territory. The scene amounts to a Mardi Gras parade on water. Music blares from boat radios, and the boats parade by and wave to spectators. The crowds are not as thick as during Mardi Gras, but the attitude is the same: Eat, drink, and be merry. The Blessing of the Fleet is a community celebration of heritage

and identity, and its popularity has grown such that *National Geographic* featured the event in its July 1992 edition.



Blessing of the Fleet, Biloxi, 1994.

Aimee Schmidt



Detail of shrimp boat in Biloxi small craft harbor, 1994.

Aimee Schmidt

A board of directors oversees the preparations for the event, which takes all year to plan. As with the Mardi Gras tradition, a king and queen rule over the weekend festivities. The board elects the Shrimp King from three candidates: one from the Slavic Association and one from the Fleur de Lis (these two clubs were instrumental in initiating the event and remain active participants in it), and one from the community at large. Usually the king is an older fisherman, one who has earned the title from his many years at sea. In recent years, however, the average age of the king has dropped, a sign of the changing times. Fewer Slavonians and Cajuns are going into the industry, and fewer fishermen are participating.

Young women around the ages of eighteen to twenty contend for the title of Shrimp Queen. Local factories nominate the candidates who must be descendants of fishermen in order to enter the contest. Candidates compete in a beauty pageant, an interview, and must submit a short essay on why they wish to become queen. The responses are laden with phrases such as "tradition," "family

heritage," and "not to be forgotten." This could well be an appeal to the judges' sentiments, but the facts must back up these statements. The candidates acknowledge their parents and grandparents, and when asked to list relatives who worked in the industry, the names run off the pages. The young may not enter the profession as they once did, but they continue to identify with it and show an appreciation for it. In 1982, Gwen Lawrence reigned as Queen. Her mother recalls the joy the family felt when she won.

Volunteers do all of the planning and preparations. Since many of the fishermen are members of St. Michael Catholic Church, the parish has for many years been actively involved in the event. If any place embodies the spirit and influence of the seafood industry in Biloxi, it is St. Michael church (most of its members are fishermen or descendants of fishermen). The parish counts many Slavonians and Cajuns among its members and more recently Vietnamese, the newest members of Biloxi's fishing community. St. Michael is historically the fisherman's church. The architecture of the church is emblematic

of this history. While the work camps and most of the original factories are gone, a new St. Michael's church stands visibly on Highway 90 at Point Cadet. Built in 1969, St. Michael's architectural features reflect many coastal themes. Its unique round design actually saved it from destruction during Hurricane Camille in 1969. As the waves hit the building, they rolled off to the sides rather than sweeping it away as they did so many other structures. Camille made St. Michael somewhat of a legend. People still tell the story of the two priests who rode out the storm inside the church as they clung to the statues of St. Joseph and Mary until the water receded.

Long-time parishioner and retired fisherman Frank Peter Barhonovich knows the background and symbolism of both the original and later church structures. At its founding, Slavonians, French Acadians, and Italians comprised St. Michael's parish. When they outgrew the original church, they built the new one on Highway 90 and paid for it in full (\$500,000) at the time of its dedication. Barhonovich said that boats three to four miles offshore could see the church. The roof resembles a huge clam shell, and the holy water fonts are shells also. Inside, the stain glass windows tell a story. Figures of fishermen representing the apostles appear on the glass. A crown symbolizes heavenly reward, and the wheat stalk and grapes symbolize bread and wine. These, and an anchor, and a dish from the Holy Spirit are tied up in the fisherman's nets.

The neighborhoods of Back Bay and Point Cadet have similar histories. Both developed because of the seafood industry and have a similar ethnic diversity. Part of their identity came from an effort to distinguish themselves from others, especially those who would look down on them.



St. Michael Catholic Church and Casino Magic, Point Cadet, Biloxi, MS.

Aimee Schmidt



The residents of the fishing community lived in an area that physically and socially set them apart from other Mississippians, and living in this place shaped their identity. The actual boundaries of the neighborhoods vary according to various sources, but all residents have a general understanding of what these boundaries are. Neighborhood identity, like occupational identity, was almost as strong, sometimes stronger, than ethnic identity. Despite their common history, a rivalry existed between the communities of Back Bay and the Point. Sentiments ran so strong that residents considered their neighborhoods as territory, and it was not safe for outsiders to spend time there after dark. Back Bay and Point Cadet residents say that others often perceive them as lower class, but they are fiercely proud of their working class heritage and defend it vehemently.

Ethnic identity was for many years tied to economic status and neighborhood. With each generation, these ties have weakened. Those Cajuns and Slavonians who worked in the factories and boats wanted "a better life for their children." They stressed education for their young who took better paying jobs, made new friends, and moved to different neighborhoods. It is the classic story of change and success as experienced by each generation, a natural shift in boundaries inherent to the dynamics of culture. The older generation wanted its children to succeed in other businesses, and they speak with pride about the doctors, lawyers, and other professionals that came from the Point and the Bay. Yet to speak too highly of them would belittle their own accomplishments. Tommy Schultz remarked with pride:

My wife has never had to work. I've always made the liv-

ing. My daughter has a four-year degree, and she and her husband work to survive. Not to accomplish what we did—just to survive.

Schultz's feelings, shared by others like him, carry a heavy message. "We had little, but look what we did with it. Don't ever think you are better than us."

The nature of their relationship with people outside the industry contributed to their pride and defensiveness. Those who would look down on them were the "Uptown" people, a stereotype term for the snooty, upperclass people of that area. Years ago the two groups did not mix, reported one resident, though he himself married an Uptown girl. "My wife still kids me now," remarked Andrew Melancon. "A Point Cadet [man] come Uptown and found an Uptown girl and married her. I told her I took her off the streets."

Today the make-up of the neighborhoods has changed. Slavonians, Cajuns, and Vietnamese live throughout the city as well as in Point Cadet and Back Bay. However, people still use neighborhood boundaries to classify people. Biloxi residents, especially older ones, use the terms "from the Point" or "from Uptown" to convey a certain meaning.

Since Slavonians and Cajuns both lived in Back Bay and Point Cadet, ethnic identity cut across neighborhood lines. They lived and worked together, and the nature of their interaction took many forms. Despite their cultural and language differences, their work, religion, and housing arrangements united them. Having to learn to speak English also equalized and united them. Ethnic identity became tied to an occupational identity, which helped bridge cultural barriers. Both groups started with little or nothing and made a

name and a place for themselves in Biloxi. They were drawn together in their work, their church, and their neighborhoods. Ironically, this bridge did not extend so far as to embrace incoming Vietnamese fishermen. The complexities and emotionalism surrounding the introduction of Vietnamese into the industry proved more divisive than conjunctive.

The Slavonians and Cajuns enjoyed a relationship of sportive ridicule. They called each other "coon ass," and "Juga," or "tacko." They got along well but retained a degree of isolationism. Te-Jean Broussard and his wife Lou Skrnich Broussard recall the situation when they got married. "We got along good, but it was unbelievable that [a] Frenchman would marry a Slavonian girl. The first night I went to pick her up, I threw my hat in the door. If it stayed in, it means I'm all right. It didn't come out so it was all right. So we started dating."

Slavic and Cajun identities are like two circles which overlap, sharing a common area—their occupational identity, while forming a separate area unto themselves—their ethnic identity. Both occur within the broader Gulf Coast culture. For the most part created and maintained through the family, ethnic identity for these two Biloxi groups was strengthened by the larger ethnic community. The benevolent organizations founded by the Slavonians and Cajuns were a means of maintaining ethnic identity. They created an "in" group for themselves and excluded those who fell outside the prescribed boundaries.

The Slavic Benevolent Association, whose lodge is located on the corner of Myrtle and First streets on Point Cadet, has served the community since 1913. Originally the Austrian Benevolent Association, and then the Slavonian Benevolent Asso-



Slavonian Lodge, Biloxi MS. Note the Isle of Capri Casino banner on the railing and door.

ciation, the various name changes of the Slavic Benevolent Association indicate that the lodge welcomed members from various Slavic ethnic groups: Croats, Serbs, Slavonians. Outside the lodge stands a statue of their patron saint, St. Nicola. Flanking the statue are cement tablets inscribed with the names of all the Slavic families who have settled on the Coast. In the beginning, only full-blooded Slavonian men could join. However, due to intermarriage and the departure of young people from the city, the club reevaluated its membership criteria. Once again, the dynamics of culture and environment stimulated an alteration of cultural boundaries. Full-blooded Slavonians were hard to come by, and so they opened the doors to men whose fathers were Slavonian. In recent years they have allowed sons of Slavonian women to join. One of the younger members who supported the change said that it was partially an economic matter (because of declining membership) but also a matter of principle. "They are Slavonian too. It's the same attitude, just a different makeup." His remarks are evidence of the younger generation's role in redefining ethnic identity.

The lodge has a large dining/meeting area, a kitchen, a barroom, and card playing rooms upstairs. They host wedding receptions, banquets, and a dinner during the annual golf tournament fundraiser. Hanging on the walls inside are poster size photographs of the old Biloxi schooners. Some of the men can point to a boat and name the builder and/or the owner, the boat's dimensions, and relate remarkable stories about the vessels. When asked about Slavonian heritage and about the seafood culture, lodge members really open up, and the stories come rolling out.

Thursday night is men's night out at the lodge with every third Thursday formal meeting night. Some men gather early for drinks and conversation before dinner. Sitting around the table, they swap stories, discuss the weather or the latest gossip on city politics, and talk about the gambling boats. They know who is related to whom, who a person's father is, what boat he worked on, and what his children are doing now. They have a willingness to share and to have their stories told. They speak with pride about what their community and their lodge have accomplished. For

meetings, they usually have a steak dinner; otherwise, it is gumbo, red beans and rice, or another of the chef's favorites. They laud the chef's cooking skill. "On the boat. That's how he learned it."

Slavonian women have their own organization, the Ladies' Auxiliary. The day before Christmas Eve the Ladies' Auxiliary gathers at the lodge to prepare *pusharatas*, a Slavonian doughnut filled with fruit, cinnamon, nutmeg, raisins, and other delicacies. Each woman has her own recipe—every one different, and none wrong. This is the biggest event of the year for the Ladies Auxiliary. Throughout the day, the kitchen bustles with activity: hands rolling and frying dough, and participants arguing over the correct cooking method or taking time for friendly chats with visitors. Before the day is over they will have sold over 500 dozen *pusharatas* to Biloxians.

Just a few blocks west of the Slavonian Lodge is the Fleur de Lis, or French Club, as it is commonly known. It serves as a benevolent and social organization for the city's French population. "French" in Biloxi means both descendants of the early French settlers and Cajun French. People use the terms interchangeably, but most of the members are Cajun French. Membership is open to anyone with patrilineal or matrilineal ties, or through marriage. The French Club also hosts wedding receptions, dances, and holiday festivals and rents the building to non-members for receptions and other activities. The atmosphere and decor here is similar to the Slavonian Lodge. Old photos of club members hang on the walls. A large mural of a shrimp boat during the Blessing covers a wall in the pool room.

Each Friday night during Lent, the club hosts a seafood dinner (because Catholics cannot eat meat



Lenten Friday night seafood dinner at the Fleur de Lis Club.

on Fridays during Lent). Here again, the men are in charge of the kitchen. The dinner is open to the public, and a few dollars will buy a plate of jambalaya, etouffee, or a bowl of gumbo. The atmosphere is family oriented with children accompanying their parents and grandparents for dinner. Most of them are club members who attend regularly week after week. For them it is a chance to socialize—typically French, one might say.

At one time the French population was quite vibrant. When the Shrimp Festival included a *fais do-do*, a local Cajun band could provide the music. Occasionally a band from Louisiana plays at the Club, but younger members have little interest in the music. "They don't know how to dance to the music, so they don't like it too much. I don't think they want to learn," said one woman. The youth do not embrace this creative expression of their culture. Their musical tastes lie with the country-western and rock-and-roll sound of American culture. The demise of their musical tradition is just an example of how the Cajun culture assimilated into a new environment. This is not to say, however, that the interest is dead. Each September, some

members of the French Club charter a bus to Lafayette, Louisiana, for a Cajun music festival. For them, preserving that aspect of their culture means going back to the land of their roots.

Another tradition that has fallen by the wayside strikes at the very core of the seafood industry and at the root of the ethnic heritage in Biloxi. Men and women once active in the seafood industry have retired, and few in the subsequent generations have chosen the life of a fisherman. In some ways, the older generation is responsible as they encouraged their sons and daughters to finish high school and attend college to become doctors, lawyers, and accountants. Many of their children did just that. When Tommy Schultz's son said that he did not want to take over the boat, Schultz was angry, but he realized that his son had made the right decision. As the son and grandson of fishermen, Schultz fully grasps the meaning of his situation as he faces retirement. "I'm the last of them, the last of the Mohicans."

#### "FREEDOM COUNTRY"— BILOXI'S VIETNAMESE

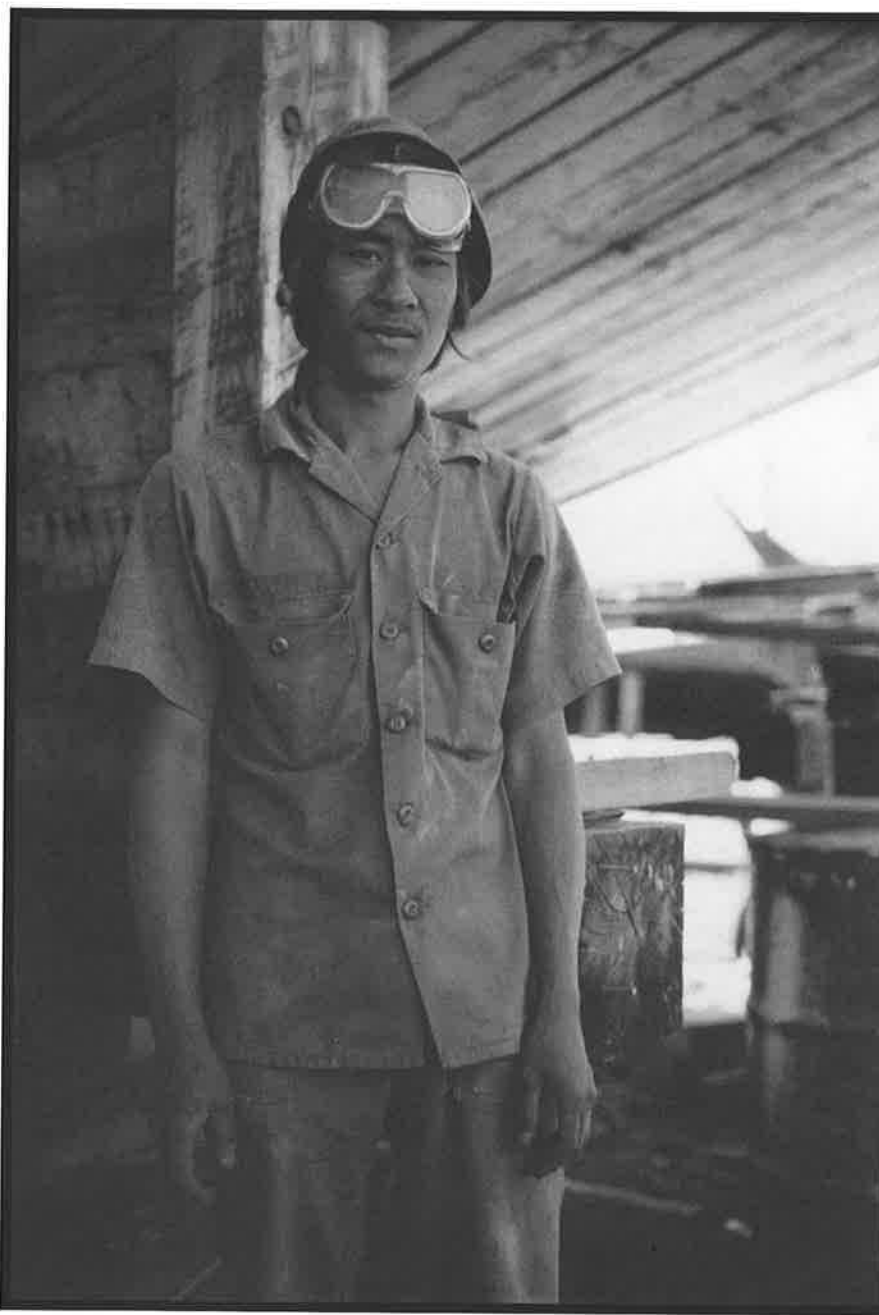
"I don't have any idea on my mind when I come to Biloxi what I do. But only on my mind is freedom. I live with communism three years. So hard ... Even the price high, I had to get out."

—Liem Tran, Biloxi businessman

For almost sixty years the Slavonians and Cajuns formed the backbone of Biloxi's seafood industry. The latest immigrants to settle in the city

are the Vietnamese. Since their arrival fifteen years ago they have become a viable part of the industry and the community. The shift has not been easy—for the Vietnamese or native Biloxians. In some respects, the Vietnamese experience is similar to that of other immigrants to Biloxi: their ethnicity is a common bond, they work in the seafood industry, and they settled in Point Cadet and Back Bay, where earlier immigrants lived. The Vietnamese, however, came not as immigrants seeking prosperity, but as refugees fleeing a war-torn nation and communism. Their refugee status, with its government aid and benefits, alienated them from native Biloxi fisherman, who saw them as economic competition. Their philosophy of life and their attitude toward work and family did not readily mesh with American culture. Their culture and very presence has sometimes placed them at odds with the Biloxi community. In Biloxi and other gulf Coast towns they confronted racial prejudice as well as cultural and language barriers. However, they also met with compassion from people who sponsored their entry into the United States, assisted them in locating homes, and provided them educational and employment opportunities.

Individuals and private organizations sponsored Vietnamese refugees to the United States. The Catholic Diocese of Biloxi took an active role in the plight of Vietnamese refugees. Today a Vietnamese priest serves both St. Michael and St. Joseph parishes in Biloxi, and St. Paul in Pass Christian. Within the church community itself is a Vietnamese community. They hear mass in Vietnamese, have their own choir and youth group, and two Vietnamese nuns work with the youth. The Catholic Social Services Migration and Refugee Center in Biloxi aids Viet-



Vietnamese boat builder, Covacevich boat yard, Biloxi, Mississippi 1984.

namese with housing, employment, and medical assistance once they arrive on the Coast. This center, established in the late 1970's, aids all refugees on the Coast, but overwhelmingly their clients are Vietnamese who live in Biloxi.

The seafood industry drew the Vietnamese to Biloxi just as it did the Slavonians and Cajuns before them. Many of the Vietnamese now living on the Coast came by way of Louisiana. They worked in the

seafood industry in Morgan City, New Orleans, and other coastal cities. Two trailers full of unshucked oysters were responsible for many Vietnamese coming to Biloxi. In 1977, Richard Gollot, owner of Golden Gulf Seafood on Back Bay, could not find people to work in his factory. He heard of Vietnamese shucking oysters in New Orleans, drove a van over one day and brought back a dozen Vietnamese to work for him. After a week he persuaded one family

to move to Biloxi, and others soon followed. Today nearly 2,000 Vietnamese, fifty-one percent of Mississippi's Vietnamese population, live in Biloxi.

The seafood industry offered the Vietnamese employment best suited to their needs. The men became fishermen working together on the boats and pooling their resources. Women and children worked in the factories where they did not worry about their English deficiency, because most of their co-workers were Vietnamese also. As with the Slavonians and Cajuns before them, working became a shared experience, thus reaffirming the community bond. More important than financial success is the independence and freedom they attain for themselves and their families, said Liem Tran who owns a Biloxi trawl shop. "This is my business. I am owner. I run by myself. It was difficult to learn, but every job you go to you have to learn anyway. I am working hard, but I save my money. I do not think for me. I do not think for my wife, but I think for my children. Raise money for them for future."

The influx of Vietnamese in the late 70s and early 80s coincided with a stretch of several poor shrimp seasons on the Coast. Unfortunately, the Vietnamese received the blame for economic woes of Coast fishermen. Cultural differences and misunderstandings compounded by an increase in boats in an already competitive field strained the relations between Vietnamese and Coast fishermen. Rumors spread of free boats and welfare checks for Vietnamese. Native fishermen complained that many Vietnamese owned boats illegally because they were not properly documented. They called for legal measures to protect their livelihood. In some cases their protests took the form of ethnic bashing. Many Americans labeled these Vietnamese



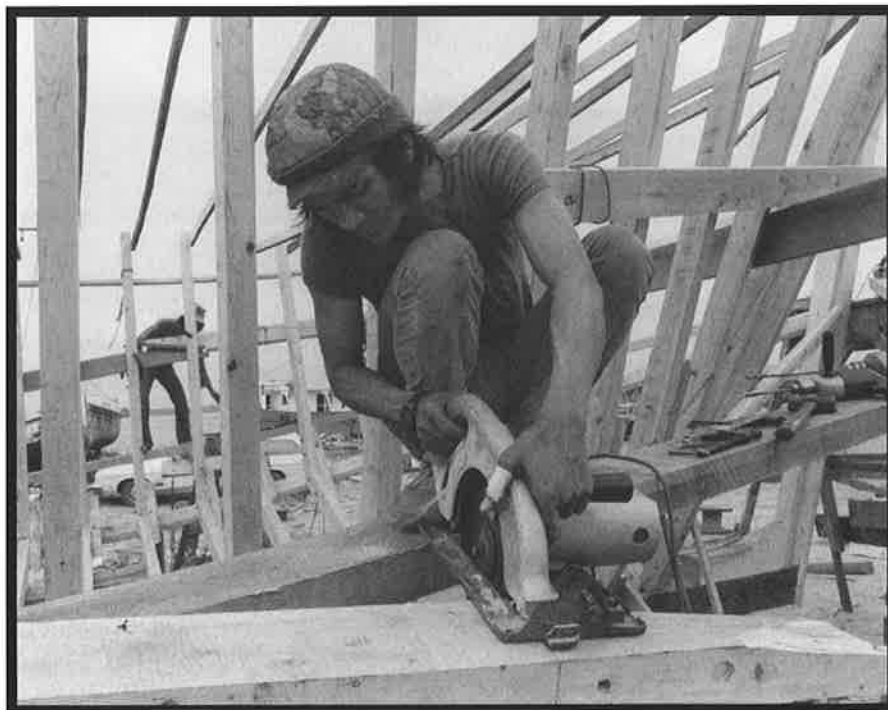


Tom Rankin

Makeshift dwelling, back bay, Biloxi 1984.

"gooks" or "fish breath," and said that the situation that existed was the price of losing a war. Bumper stickers that read "Save Your Shrimp Industry—Get Rid of Vietnamese" appeared on cars along the Coast. American fishermen claimed economic conditions, not racial prejudice, as the cause of their resentment. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese accepted their condition and tried to make the best of it.

Americans have differing opinions of the Vietnamese. Some say the Vietnamese remind them of their immigrant parents and grandparents. They respect the Vietnamese for their dedication to work, but some claim the Vietnamese work the waters too much, too often, and that hurts



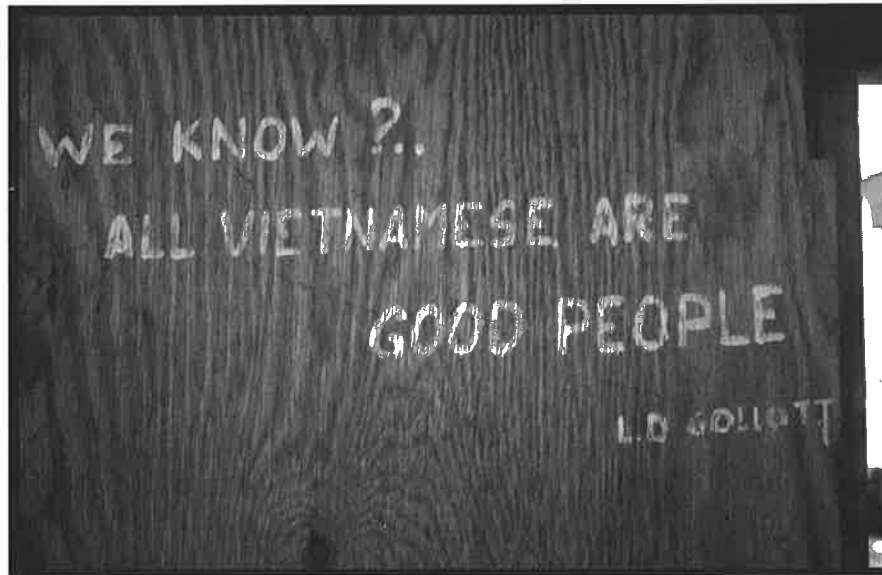
Tom Rankin

Vietnamese shrimp boats, Biloxi, Mississippi, 1984.

Tom Rankin



Amiee Schmitt



Sign showing support for Vietnamese, Biloxi, Mississippi, 1984.

everyone—Vietnamese included.

Most Americans, fishermen included, wanted to help the Vietnamese, but were looking out for themselves, too. In attempts to solve the problems and put an end to rumors, Biloxi held several public meetings in which participants aired their opinions. Often, tempers flared as American fishermen argued that their industry was bearing an unfair share of the burden of employing refugees. Across the entire Gulf

Coast, battle lines were drawn between American and Vietnamese fishermen. In Seadrift, Texas, a Vietnamese man killed an American in self-defense. In Biloxi, police found a bomb aboard a Vietnamese-owned boat. Though they had no proof that Americans had placed it there, this remained a strong possibility in light of the situation. No one died in the Biloxi feuding, but some American fishermen began carrying guns on the boats. There were instances of

shooting nets and sabotaging boats, but the Vietnamese rarely reported the crimes because they did not want to stir up more trouble.

Not all American fishermen showed hostility toward the Vietnamese. They credited the Vietnamese with working the poor beds and trawling for shrimp that American fishermen would pass by. In fact, some Americans went out of their way to help the Vietnamese get started with their boats. The Covacivich family rented space in their boat yard to Vietnamese builders. These Biloxians felt betrayed when the press, the public, and the Vietnamese made the American fishermen out as the villains in the ordeal.

Most of the trouble between the two groups stemmed from cultural differences and the language barrier. Since many Vietnamese could not understand English, they could not read the Coast Guard regulations regarding boat operation in American waters. They did not understand the gauges on their boats that signal the battery power, and so, they sometimes ran their boats without lights while still in the Mississippi Sound. The Vietnamese also had different methods for shrimping and oystering. Americans nicknamed Vietnamese-style boats "chopsticks" because they rigged the nets on two poles extending from the bow of the boat and pushed the nets through the water rather than the standard American method of pulling them. They continued the Vietnamese practice of working the waters North to South, but the American fishermen trawled East to West. In close quarters such as the Mississippi Sound (12 miles wide and 29 miles long), this resulted in tangled nets. American fishermen work the oyster beds in circles, but the Vietnamese dredged back and forth over the beds. Americans called it "reef bust-

ing," and said it damaged the reefs.

A committee composed of Vietnamese and American fishermen, and various city and marine officials, formed to address these problems. In addition to hosting public forums and dispelling rumors about government aid to Vietnamese, they took necessary practical steps to improve relations. They distributed translated version of the Coast Guard rules, including instruction and maintenance of boat equipment, and stressed the importance of abiding by the traditional fishing practices in order to avoid damage to nets and other equipment and to conserve the crop.

Gone are the days when the seafood unloading docks turned away Vietnamese fisherman for fear of losing their local customers. Over time, both sides have reached a tenable understanding and acceptance of each other. Jackie Trieu, the wife of a Vietnamese shrimper, has lived in Biloxi over ten years. She and her husband Hiep moved there from Texas, and their story typifies the Vietnamese experience: "I heard that when Vietnamese first come here for shrimper a lot of American people reacted bad, and suddenly they got used to it. Now they get used to it, to our boats. But the first few families that work in the oyster factories, they doesn't like it. They cursing at us saying, 'Go back where we belong.' And now they get used to it. It's not hard for me, though. I don't care whatever they say...It's a freedom country."

A number of Vietnamese busi-

nesses opened in Biloxi to support the growing community. As with the shrimp boats, these were family run operations as well. On Howard Avenue one can buy food from a Vietnamese grocery, rent a Vietnamese video, eat lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant, and buy a tape of Vietnamese music from a department store. At the Xuan Huong Cafe on Division Street one sees evidence of the blend of American and Vietnamese cultures: Christmas garland and a statue of Buddha decorate the interior. Listing items in both Vietnamese and English, the menu includes such items as American coffee, Vietnamese coffee (Cafe du Monde with condensed milk), and Barq's Root Beer. The owner and customers all speak in Vietnamese, but an American talk show blares over the television. In this setting one sees how the Vietnamese have adapted to American styles, how they have taken

bits of American culture and made it their own, and yet how they have not entirely embraced American culture. They hold it at arm's length, sometimes pulling it close, and sometimes pushing it away.

The Vietnamese community in Biloxi, not yet twenty years old, continues to change. Their culture cannot exist intact in Biloxi as it did in Vietnam because of the influence of the broader American culture. As demonstrated earlier in the case of the Cajuns and the Slavonians, the Vietnamese will continue to make some concessions in order to adapt and prosper. Short of withdrawing from American society completely, there is no escaping its influences and the inevitable mingling of cultures. The Vietnamese in Biloxi have not withdrawn completely. They are a community within a community, but they are *in* and are becoming more so.



Noon-time meal aboard the San Jose, Biloxi, Mississippi, 1984.

Tom Rankin

Aimee Schmidt



Blessing of the Fleet, 1994.

## THE OPENING OF ANOTHER SEASON

"Biloxi is just reliving its history. The Vietnamese are doing what the Slavonians and French did before them. Workin' in seafood and sending their kids to college."

—Richard Gollot.

The annual Blessing of the Fleet now draws together the Vietnamese and American fishermen, as well as the whole Biloxi community. In years past the Slavonian Lodge, Fleur de Lis Club, and St. Michael's parish were co-sponsors, but this year the church took sole responsibility for the event. Tonya Lyons, a member of one of Biloxi's seafood families and a past Shrimp Queen herself, chaired the weekend festivities. She called upon friends and family to help rejuvenate the "celebration of Biloxi's heritage." Included among the events was a showing of the recently produced film, "The Biloxi that Seafood Built," and the creation of the Biloxi Seafood Industry Hall of Fame award, to honor individuals who have bestowed a life time of service to the industry. The "Biloxi Shrimp Festival

and Heritage Celebration" kicked off Saturday morning with a schooner race between the *Glenn L. Sweetman* and the *Mikey Sekul*, and a day of festivities at the pavilion near the Seafood Museum. At 4:00 the community gathered at St. Michael, the traditional "fishermen's church," for a special mass.

Beginning Sunday morning boats gathered between the small craft harbor and Deer Island for the Blessing. The Shrimp King and Queen led. This year fifty-two working boats participated, including several Vietnamese owned boats, one of which was the lead boat. Numerous other pleasure crafts joined the water parade.

In keeping with the celebratory nature, most boat owners decorated their crafts. Decorations ranged from gaudy to playful to political and humorous. Colorful triangular flags stretched from the mast to the stern. Some boats flew American flags and Mississippi state flags, and a few flew Confederate battle flags. Religious items such as crucifixes, portraits of Jesus, and rosary beads made of flotation devices were in keeping with the theme, "May God provide a watchful

hand and abundant harvest."

The Blessing has always included and relied upon the generosity of area businesses to donate money and prizes, such as a free haul out, tune up, and C. B. radios. This year members of the Coast's newest industry—casino gambling—participated in the Blessing of the Fleet. They gave financial support, hosted a party for the past Kings and Queens, and a screening of the film, which the Grand Casino helped fund. Chefs from the casinos also participated in the Best Shrimp Dish contest at the Festival.

Since legalization of dockside gambling in Mississippi in 1992, the state, the coast, and Biloxi in particular, have experienced changes that were unimaginable two years ago. With gambling came an explosion of construction, employment, and a new workforce arriving to fill the need. Presently, fourteen casinos operate on the Coast (Harrison and Hancock counties), and ten of these are in Biloxi. Another eleven licenses for Coast casinos await approval. Gambling has supplanted the seafood industry to become the city's top money-making interest. Each day 60,000 visitors—not locals—gamble at Coast casinos. In June the tax receipts from the casinos in Biloxi totaled \$38.4 million, over one-third the total for the state. That is just one month alone. Unemployment has dropped as well. According to the Chamber of Commerce, the industry created 15,000 new jobs initially, and 75% of those hired were Mississippians. Unemployment dropped from 8.2% in August 1992 to 6.2% in June 1994.

Ironically, the gambling interests have moved into Point Cadet and Back Bay—once the focal point of the seafood industry. All the seafood dealers and canneries on the beach sold out to casino companies and moved their operations or simply closed



down. Two long-time beach side Biloxi restaurants, The Factory and Baricev's, once owned and operated by Slavonians, have closed down. Fisherman's Wharf, one of the city's last beach side restaurants remains open under casino ownership.

Shrimp boats still dock at Biloxi's small craft harbor where neon billboards loom in the background. All the seafood industry operations have moved to Back Bay. Two casinos already operate there, and discussion continues over whether to allow further gambling expansion on the Bay. If it expands, said Richard Gollot, "Biloxi will lose a \$40 million (seafood) industry. It will be a Las Vegas on a peninsula."

Long-term effects of gambling will not become apparent for some time, but the immediate effects have reached into almost every aspect of the Biloxi and coast community. The issue has divided the population into pro-gambling and anti-gambling forces and has been a hot political topic since first proposed. Some of those initially in favor of gambling, including people in the seafood industry, are having second thoughts. They cite a rising crime rate, traffic and noise pollution, and unforeseen maintenance costs as the source of their change of heart.

Economically, gambling has had a whirlwind effect—changing the job market, the tourism industry, and, of course, the seafood industry. The casinos and new construction have altered the physical landscape, while the new labor pool and new ideology have altered the cultural landscape. Some residents are selling their property to gaming interests and moving out of Point Cadet, the neighborhood now known as Casino Row. Spending an evening at the Slavonian Lodge is not as appealing as watching a heavy-weight boxing match at a casino. The casinos are in heated

competition to draw locals and tourists alike to a new source of entertainment.

Meanwhile, the role of the seafood industry in Biloxi's culture and economy is still changing, and its fate is unknown. The number of boats has increased, but the children of fishermen are seeking opportunities elsewhere. Even among the Vietnamese—the majority in the industry now—some have moved on to other jobs, and their young are pursuing professional careers.

David Veal, of the Coastal Extension and Sea Grant Office, explains that it is too early to determine the exact nature of the relationship between the industries. Gaming is just one more factor contributing to the major overhaul that the seafood industry has been experiencing for the past decade. The shrimp population has remained stable over the years, but the harvesting capacity has grown. More boats with greater horsepower and bigger nets are taxing the resource. Competition from foreign imports has weakened the Gulf shrimpers control of the market and leveled out the price. "The seafood industry like the automotive industry is coming to grips with a global economy," said Veal. "It may ultimately be displaced in Biloxi, but I don't think it will disappear completely."

The seafood industry is at the heart of Biloxi's culture and history, and ethnic diversity is at the heart of the industry. Changes in the industry affect not only the fishermen but the whole city. Biloxians are starting to realize the unique identity of their city and are making efforts to maintain it. They have even reached out to the Vietnamese community by holding a public symposium on Vietnamese culture and issuing a newspaper series titled "The People Within," which focuses on the Vietnamese

community within the larger Coast fabric. Biloxians see mass culture as both a threat and a blessing, and they try to walk that fine line between adaptation and conformity. The seafood industry gave it that identity, and the Polish, Slavonians, Cajuns, and Vietnamese built the industry. Woven together, these various ethnic groups created a city with many cultures and identities all rooted in one industry. The gambling influences are another thread in the cultural makeup of Biloxi. They will make their fortunes from the sea in a different manner than those before them, and in time the lasting impression of this industry will surface. Biloxians remember what built their city and celebrate its history. They have erected a Seafood Industry Museum acknowledging the great debt owed to those who made it the "Seafood Capital of the World." Through the generosity of private donors, the city directed a project to build reproductions of the great white-winged schooners, the *Glenn L. Swetman* and the *Mickey Sekul*. They cherish their own ethnic identities, and they acknowledge and respect their shared experiences. That is why Slavonian women still teach their daughters how to make *pusharatas* and why a Vietnamese couple can hold their wedding reception at the Fleur de Lis Club. Their identity and their Biloxi culture is part of the whole American experience. They are part of this city, one with many faces and many voices. They are Slavonian, Cajun, Vietnamese, Point Cadet, Back Bay, and Uptown, and they are all Biloxi.

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# RUNNING MULES

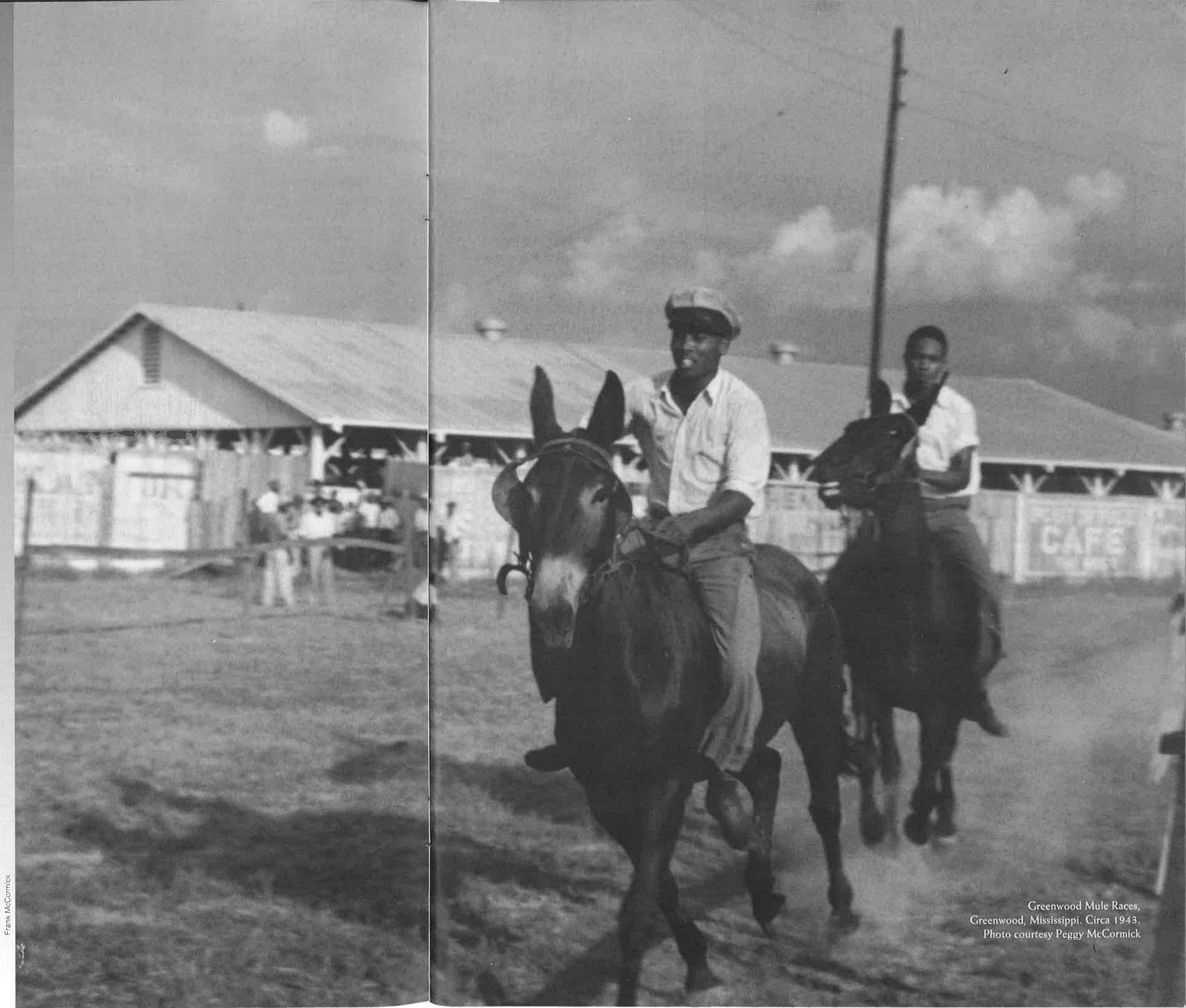


## Mule Racing in the Mississippi Delta

By Karen Glynn

A 1940 silent home movie from the Mississippi Delta shows a young white boy in a red satin shirt and cap riding a pony from under a canopy of trees. Blowing a horn as he rides, the herald announces the opening of the 1940 Rosedale Mule Races at the Walter Sillers Memorial Park. The movie camera moves smoothly from the mounted messenger to a grandstand covered by a brown, pavilion-style tent flying red, white, and blue pennants from its peaks, reminiscent of descriptions of Medieval jousting matches. The grandstand overflows with white onlookers in light-colored summer clothing and hats. They mill about in groups along a walkway between the grandstand and a white rope fence girding the improvised race track. Continuing its sweeping panoramic shot, the camera glances upon a handful of African Americans clustered under an isolated grove of trees, and finally rests on a parking lot filled with automobiles.

Though New Englanders raised mules for export prior to the Revolutionary War, George Washington's breeding activities



Greenwood Mule Races,  
Greenwood, Mississippi. Circa 1943.  
Photo courtesy Peggy McCormick

Frank McCormick





Clarksdale area, Summer 1940, Library of Congress, (LC-USF34-55049E).

with imported stock from Spain and Malta after the war aggressively introduced the animal to American agriculture. Washington's breeding work produced a line of riding mules as well as draft animals.

By 1850 mules comprised ten percent of the draft animals in the South, and by 1860 twenty percent of the draft animals on the plantations of the Lower South, primarily in the lower Mississippi Delta, the Alabama Black Prairie, the Upper Coastal Plains, and the lower Piedmont of Georgia. By the end of the 1870s, with the revival of the plantation system, and the expansion of cotton planting into Oklahoma and Texas, mules made up one-third of the draft animal population. Their numbers reached 2,468,000 by 1900 and peaked at 4,465,000 in 1925 when the effect of tractors began to be felt in the Southern economy.<sup>1</sup>

In most of the South the mule

dealer was "the biggest man in town," according to Robert Byron Lamb, "and his mule barn was the center of trading activity."<sup>2</sup> Ray Lum's mule and horse barn was a key trading institution in Vicksburg, Mississippi, from the early 1900s through the 1950s when he switched to selling cattle. Ray Lum recalled:

The Delta was a booming place for mules in the 'thirties. If you didn't have mules, you wasn't in the farming business. Those farmers bought them by the hundreds. Some good farmers had a barn that would hold fifteen hundred mules, and they'd ring a big farm bell every morning to call the men to work.<sup>3</sup>

Amateur movie maker Emma Knowlton Lytle captured the tolling of the plantation bell on her documentary film and used it to regulate

the flow of the work day in a movie on cotton production shot in 1940-1941. One of the first scenes in the film shows African American farm hands slipping into the mule corral before dawn to identify and bridle their mules in preparation for the day's labor.

From the Depression until World War II the overall mule population declined along with the reduction and concentration of cotton acreage. Throughout the 1930s, with payments from federal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Agency, cotton planters bought tractors. Pete Daniel describes the transition from mules to mechanical power:

Mechanization in the Cotton Belt actually started in the western growing areas and spread east. Oklahoma, Texas, and the Mississippi River Delta mechanized first. The change from mules to tractors proceeded gradually. Large farmers bought tractors to replace old mules, and tractors and mules coexisted. In the late 1930s James Hand, an implement dealer in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, took trades of mules for credit on tractors.<sup>4</sup>

Daniel adds that the plantation South "lagged behind other areas in tractor purchases; in 1930 only 3.9 percent of southern farmers owned tractors, compared with 13.5 percent for the country at large." According to livestock trader Ray Lum, "California was the first place to put in tractors. I began to buy mules in California 'cause tractors was taking their place ... as the tractors would come in, the mules would go out... But they were still using mules in Texas and Mississippi, and that's where I went with mine."<sup>5</sup>

Wherever men worked mules

they found time to race them. The earliest citation is the 1835 Maury County fair in Tennessee. On the last day of fairs planters often organized a mule race using their slaves as jockeys. Part of the ritual required spectators to do everything they could to "retard the progress of the steeds and make them fly the track."<sup>6</sup>

In the 1840s, the annual Huckleberry Frolic held in Long Island, New York, on the nation's first official race course, the New Market track, listed mule races on its "bill of performance." In antebellum Natchez, freedman William Johnson, an avid turfman, noted in his diary in October 1843: "Shooting match and Riffle [sic] shooting and mule Racing out at the tract this Evening So I am told."<sup>7</sup>

Racing provided the entertainment at many get-togethers in the South from agricultural fairs during the antebellum period to informal barbecues at the turn of the twentieth century. Mules frequently shared the racing program at these events along with ponies, harness horses and native running horses. County fair premium lists from Kentucky featured mule races among the regularly scheduled events as well as competitions for the best mule stock. The 1880 Exhibition of the South Kentucky Fair Association held near Glasgow, Kentucky, listed prizes of ten dollars for five categories of mule stock from colts to aged, as well as two mule races. On the first day of the fair, authorities awarded a ten dollar prize for the *hindmost* mule to run one mile. On the second day, the fair awarded ten dollars for the *fastest* mule to run a mile.<sup>8</sup> The 1885 program of the twentieth exhibition of the Nelson County Agricultural Association of Bardstown, Kentucky, mentioned two mule races. The last race on the final day of the fair offered a ten dollar prize: "Fastest mule, any age, to run around the out-



Clarksdale area, Summer 1940, Library of Congress, (LC-USF34-54756D).

side track three times, five or more to enter, all to start at the tap of the drum."<sup>9</sup> People attended races at county fairs until the Depression of 1929 when harness racing and running horses became too expensive to maintain and racing programs ended at the fairs.

Additionally, plantations held mule races as part of larger racing programs put together to provide local entertainment. Tom Wilburn, a native of east central Mississippi, remembers attending them as early as 1928:

It'd be little social gatherings around here. And they'd have these impromptus, just on a straight away, mule race. And then different plantations would bring in their mules and some of the black riders, and its competitive, local competition among local places.

...Always betting on the side... And at the same time, usually the white owners would be riding their horses and there'd be impromptu straight away races.<sup>10</sup>

Wilburn stresses that the races were competitions between plantations; that planters, the largest white landowners, regularly matched their stock in performance against each other. In fact, the mule races occurred frequently enough that some planters kept mules that did nothing but compete on the track. Wilburn explains:

...runnin mules, they were not very big, they were more streamlined and medium sized. And ... they were kept by different places strictly to run. They were never worked... Keep in mind, a mule that size



Clarksdale area, Summer 1940, Library of Congress, (LC-USF34-55052E).

is kind of like a goat. It doesn't cost anything to keep it.<sup>11</sup>

Performing well on the track was a matter of honor and helped determine the planter's status among his peers.

Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, white farmers and their sons raced mules at agricultural exhibitions and county fairs all over the country. In the plantation regions of Mississippi, however, the racial caste system orchestrating the social interaction and public behavior of the black and white communities, prohibited white planters from riding mules in public. Tom Wilburn remembers racing with his African American and white playmates, on his family's plantation in Lowndes County, Mississippi:

I never did ride a mule in a race but we rode them out here,

you know, among, we'd race each other out here... So if you had a horse out there, well immediately, if a gang of us got together, immediately we would say, "let's race." We would go out in the pasture and race. And then we'd say, "all right let's get some mules." And we'd race mules. And then ponies, we'd race ponies... but even as kids we thought it was a little bit inferior to be mounted on a mule... But now, we always had black kids with us, our friends, our playmates. Now they would be mounted on mules.<sup>12</sup>

When promoted as draft animals after the Revolutionary War, mules were scarce, highly esteemed, and costly animals. As they became a more common sight toiling in the fields, swamps, and forests of the

Southern landscape, their status changed, taking on cultural values. In the Delta, the mule came to symbolize the endless drudgery and manual labor of farming. With the development and expansion of slavery in the antebellum period, blacks increasingly worked the animals. As the lives of mules and slaves intertwined in the plantation South, one came to symbolize the other, and people of wealth strived to distance themselves from the working animal just as they physically separated themselves from the black laboring population.

Mule racing continued this long association extending it into the social life of the Delta. During the long, hot, humid cotton-growing months mule races, baseball games, and traveling minstrel shows entertained the populations of these Deep South agricultural communities.

Though the mule population in the South peaked in 1925, its decline was irregular throughout the region. In Mississippi, the mule population actually contradicted regional patterns by increasing twelve percent from 1925 to 1930. Between 1930 and 1935 when the first annual Delta mule race, the Pryor Derby, began in Washington County, Mississippi, the mule population had dropped a barely noticeable four percent.

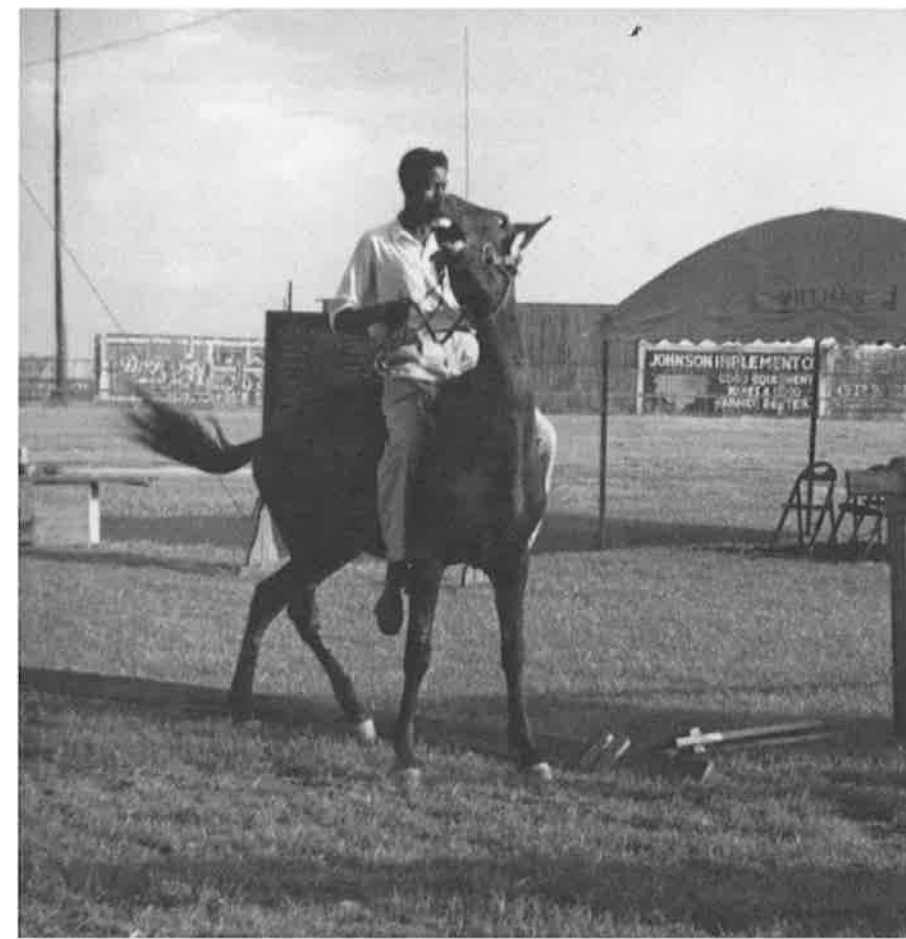
The Pryor Derby, a gala event held at Larry Pryor's Silver Lake Plantation, took place on the first Saturday after the Fourth of July. Robert Allen Carpenter attributed organized mule racing to Larry Pryor in a *Delta Review* article. "Pryor first became noted for his parties in the depression years of the 1930's," Carpenter wrote. "He decided, bad times or not, something unusual should be done to commemorate the Fourth of July... he decided on a mule race."<sup>13</sup> In 1938, inspired by the popularity of the annual Pryor Derby, Bolivar County planters, with the help of

Larry Pryor and Harold Council of Greenville, started the mule races at the first Plantation Festival in Rosedale. Three years later, Larry Pryor and Harold Council assisted the Greenwood Junior Auxiliary stage the first Greenwood Mule Race.

Innovative fundraising events organized by planters and middle class whites, the mule races parodied thoroughbred horse racing using black farm workers in place of jockeys and plow mules in place of pedigreed steeds. The organizers scheduled the first races during layby, a pause in the labor intensive production of cotton between chopping and picking, when the plant is left to grow. Abundant pre-race publicity, pari-mutuel betting, novelty events, and wild mule breaking attracted large crowds of whites and African Americans. According to Florence Sillers of Rosedale, "over a thousand spectators annually from all parts of the Delta," attended the races.<sup>14</sup>

The Greenwood and Rosedale Mule Races were social occasions as well as community events. Local newspapers covered the races on the front page as well as in the society columns. "The center of interest today for social and military circles of Greenwood and the Mississippi Delta is the Junior Auxiliary's third annual Mule Races..." noted the *Greenwood Commonwealth* August 5, 1943. Society columns in the *Greenwood Commonwealth*, and the *Bolivar County Democrat* named out-of-town visitors, where they came from, and who was entertaining whom at the numerous "Open House" and cocktail parties celebrating the races. Money raised through entrance fees, box seats, and gambling filled the coffers of the Greenwood Junior Auxiliary and paid for the up-keep of the Walter Sillers Memorial Park, also known as the Rosedale country club.

People enjoyed reminiscing



Greenwood Mule Races, Greenwood MS, circa 1943.

about the mule races. Whites remember them warmly as community events where everyone had "good fun." Stories told by white people generally focused on the unpredictable nature of the mule. Conversely, African Americans remember the men who performed and the excitement of watching their friends and acquaintances ride competitively.

Jimmy Love from Rosedale described the thrill of the races in the African American population as "a great big event and we all look forward to it all the time. And we be at home wondering who's going to ride and who's going to win."<sup>15</sup> People remember going to the races with their families, arriving on foot and by wagon. Joe Pope worked on the Dattle place and went to the Rosedale races: "Yeah, I went to the race because I had never seen a mule race.

And so me and my parents, all went out there, come out to the golf course to see the mule race."<sup>16</sup> Though the people who attended often lived and worked on the plantations that entered mules, they were not necessarily related to the riders. Frank Duncan, a former chauffeur from Duncan, Mississippi, traveled to Rosedale to see the races:

Bunch of them go. When there was a mule race, just head out to the road and you'll find company and when you get there you got too much company.<sup>17</sup>

Lilly Wade went to the American Legion Ball Park in Greenwood to see her son, Johnny, ride: "[The mule race was] for the whole black community. Anybody could come what wanted to. They had the bleachers



# Winners

Greenwood Mule Races, August 2, 1944

Mule	Rider	Owner
<i>1st Race</i>		
Little Joe	Flash Gordon	Charles Whittington
Chicken Will	Ned	L.L. Walker
Overseas	Alec	O.F. Bledsoe
<i>2nd Race</i>		
Doughboy	Hot Stuff	Foad Malouf
Jr. Auxiliary	Slim	Charles Whittington
Hot Shot	Joe	Wildwood Plantation
<i>3rd Race</i>		
Foots	Mister	Whittington
Bushwhacker	Sugar	Luther Wade
Old Bru	Little Rock	J.S. Euen
<i>4th Race</i>		
Bazooka	Peckerwood	Charles Whittington
Pippin	Cal County	Arthur Killebrew
Sea Biscuit	Hot Dog	O.F. Bledsoe
<i>5th Race</i>		
Baby Buzzard	Mammy's Chile	J.H. Huges
Flame Thrower	Rising Sun	Charles Whittington
Peanuts	Sunflower	E.V. Long
<i>6th Race</i>		
Miss Victory	Ol Man River	Charles Whittington
Stormy Weather	Christmas	Ralph Redditt
Churchill	Lindberg	Arthur Killbrew
<i>Sweepstakes</i>		
Pippin	Cal County	Arthur Killebrew
Stormy Weather	Christmas	Ralph Redditt
Baby Buzzard	Mammy's Chile	J.H. Huges

up there."<sup>18</sup> Wade refers to the segregated bleachers as proof that blacks as well as whites attended the events.

The African American community stressed the skill of the riders as the attraction of the races. Like the lure of the rodeo for those familiar with horses and cattle, black farmers went to watch the best hostlers perform.

Members of the white community attended expecting to see a spectacle of mules running every which

way around the track. Frank McCormick, a Greenwood photographer, noted that riding bareback increased the probabilities of mishaps: "part of the thing is, its harder to stay on without a saddle."<sup>19</sup> Eleanor Fiore of Greenwood described the attraction of the races for the white audience:

Oh, it was a delight, I never had so much fun... You never

[knew] whether they were gonna sit down, those mules would just sit down all of a sudden, they get so confused.... And they might could run backwards, run in the opposite direction. They do everything. Head out across the middle of a field. You never knew what they were gonna do, or just start buckin all of a sudden. Those mules weren't trained for anything but plowin.<sup>20</sup>

Mary Hamilton, a member of the Junior Auxiliary, also believed the unpredictability of the mule was the main attraction of the races:

They were mules, you never know what they're going to do...they'd have them all lined up, and they'd start out and maybe one of them, all of a sudden, changes his mind, turn around and go back, jump the fence and go out. So nobody knew what they were going to do. And I think that was one thing that made it so much fun.<sup>21</sup>

Most written mule race information comes from the *Greenwood Commonwealth*. The day after every Greenwood race the newspaper reported the first, second, and third place winners, naming the animal, rider, and owner. Sometimes the paper listed all of the entries in each race. The newspaper record combined with home movie footage and personal interviews, indicates that between six and eight mules ran in a race. Mule owners entered one animal per race and the number of races depended upon the number of mules entered.

Pre-race articles in the *Bolivar County Democrat* and the *Greenwood Commonwealth* encouraged large

landowners to enter mules by listing the names of planters who had already done so, in the process creating the impression that only white planters entered mules in the races. However, the *Greenwood Commonwealth* also actively countered that impression by clearly stating on the day of the races that African Americans and whites could enter mules in the events. The following article appeared July 23, 1942, the day of the second Greenwood Mule Race:

A hundred mules, fresh from the cotton rows, race here today for charity and the owners, whether sharecroppers or plantation proprietors, compete on equal terms.

Some of the owners, including negroes from the city's Catfish Alley and planters from mansions built by cotton fortunes, will ride their steeds to the races, what with the tire rationing and the like.

Clyde Aycok, a white man who worked at the pari-mutuel booth during the Rosedale races, confirmed that African Americans and whites could enter animals: "There wasn't any, any excluding anybody if they wanted to..."<sup>22</sup> Freddie Anderson rode for John Gourlay, his employer, as well as for Howard Walker, one of three African American men known as "big renters" in the Bolivar County African American community. Anderson recounted that Howard Walker, Munch Love, and Kid Piggy entered mules in the Rosedale Mule Races though their names are not listed in the existing copies of the *Bolivar County Democrat*.

African American farm hands and hostlers rode the mules bareback, usually for their employers. Men wanted to ride in the races. On some plantations competitions were held



Greenwood Mule Races, Greenwood MS, circa 1943.

to determine the best riders. Prior to the races, men often trained their mules by running them in the turn rows of the cotton fields. Besides the thrill of performing at a large community event, the races provided an opportunity to earn cash, an important feature for people earning as little as \$1.50 a day. At the Rosedale Mule Races, men received \$2.50 to \$5.00 for each race they entered. Additionally, they had an opportunity to win prize money. In 1941, riders at the Rosedale Mule Races collected \$10 for first place and \$5 for second, while the winner of the Sweepstakes won \$25.00. Tips from spectators also filled the pockets of the riders. Hostler Freddie Anderson rode frequently and described the pre-race promenade:

Just before race time you walk your mule or ride your mule up and down that line and then people would be betting on

your mule, but now you don't know who's betting on you because you steady riding. Only thing you know if somebody comes up and tells you, "are you going to win this race? [I'd] say, I'm going to try. What they tell you, [they'd] say, "if you win this race you got 50 or 45 or 30" or whatever...Now this isn't what you was paid, this was the tip they gave you for winning the race. "If they gave you 50 or 45 dollars, what do you think they won?"<sup>23</sup>

The riders made money. The bettors made money. The organizers made money. Thousands of dollars were raised in Rosedale to support the Walter Sillers Memorial Park.<sup>24</sup> Though figures for the Greenwood Mule Races cannot be found, the Junior Auxiliary used racing proceeds to finance the building of a community center among other projects.



Greenwood Mule Races, Greenwood MS, circa 1943.

## Rosedale

In 1938, members of the new, WPA-built Walter Sillers Memorial Park organized the first Plantation Festival and mule races in Rosedale. The races drew crowds of people, generating so much money through the pari-mutuel betting system that the following year the town continued the races without the Plantation Festival. Rosedale resident Will Gourlay, son of planter John Gourlay, remembers being told, "the law says that pari-mutuel horse racing was against the law in Mississippi, didn't say a damn thing about mules."<sup>25</sup> All of the money raised contributed to the maintenance of the Walter Sillers Memorial Park. The mule races followed an afternoon baseball game in a long, festive day full of political speeches, games, music, food, and dancing at Walter Sillers Memorial Park.

Home movie footage from 1940 shows seven politicians, including Governor Hugh Lawson White,

delivering speeches to a white audience before the races from a platform elaborately decorated with patriotic bunting. Dressed in white shirts, ties, trousers, and hats, men lounge on the grass in groups while women wearing floral dresses and hats sit on chairs under tall shade trees listening and fanning themselves.

According to the October 10, 1940 issue of the *Bolivar County Democrat*, the third annual races, portrayed in the 1940 home movie footage, were scheduled at two in the afternoon on October 15th. Tickets could be bought in advance and at the gate. The paper also listed some of the people who had entered animals, including home movie film maker Dixon Dossett. The article noted that the Delta State Teachers' College band would play at the races; concession stands would offer cake, candy, and cold drinks; a barbecue supper would be available after the races; and the evening would close with a dance at the club house.

The following description is based on footage of the 1940

Rosedale Mule Races found in the home movie collections of Lawrence Wilson and Dixon Dossett. Both men filmed the 1940 Rosedale Mule Races concentrating their cameras primarily on the activity of the track, rather than the audience.

Dossett recorded a close-up at the starting post revealing six African American riders wearing regular clothing, billed caps, and large numbers on the backs of their shirts. The official starter, a white man standing to the front and side of the mules, drops his arm, and the animals take off. Immediately, a very fair-skinned rider takes the lead. The mules wear bridles and some have blankets made from feed sacks on their backs. Both cameras record a gray mule as it approaches the finish line ahead of the others. The rider, wearing a red cap, hugs the outside of the track. A white spectator wearing a white boater appears to check a pocket watch, clocking the gray mule as it passes him. The runner-up passes the camera and crosses the finish line as the third place mule abruptly veers from the inside of the track directly across the course at an extreme angle. The rider just manages to check his mount before it goes through the fence, but gets turned around in the process and ends up facing the wrong direction, losing his third-place position.

Out of the 10 minutes and 16 seconds of collected mule race footage that was the only near-accident recorded. While racing mules was potentially dangerous and the riders took falls, no one remembered any instances of serious injury. This reflected the skill of the riders, the training of the animals, and just plain luck. Talented riders who won frequently, like hostler Freddy Anderson from Bolivar County, exercised some control over the choice of animals they rode in competition.

When Rodie got to running, she'd stop all at once and make you...come over her head see. So, I didn't want to be out there and some of the other mules running and run over you and hurt you and kill you. So I rode her one time and hung her up.<sup>26</sup>

Wilson filmed white spectators lining both sides of the track, though only men appear to be on the infield. Race officials ride their horses onto the track, around the infield, and through the crowd. Everyone else is on foot except the mule riders. A large scoreboard along side the grandstand announces the number of the race and the names of the animals and their owners. A photographer runs into the frame to snap pictures as the riders come around the curve of the track. In between races small planes fly over the grounds of the Walter Sillers Memorial Park. A mule crosses the finish line and people turn away from the track.

Riders generally wore trousers and light colored shirts with large numbers fixed to their backs. Some white informants recalled riders wearing satin shirts in the colors of the plantation they represented. In fact, one rider in the 1940 home movie footage of the Rosedale Mule Races wore a red and white satin shirt, but the rest of the men dressed in plain clothing.

Dossett filmed the start and finish of the third and final horse race. Six men, two black and four white, compete. Three men carrying curved handle canes help the riders get their mounts into position at the starting post. It is a sunny, hot day and the back of one man's shirt is soaked with sweat. The crowd presses against the white rope fence separating them from the track. A white rider wins.

Both home movies from the 1940

Rosedale events show horse races alternating with mule races. Unlike the mule races, white and black men rode against each other in the horse races. Interrupted by World War II, the Rosedale Mule Races resumed in 1946 without horse racing.

Dossett filmed the last recorded mule race, a sweepstakes with six competitors including the fair-skinned man and the man wearing the red cap. The camera caught the winning gray mule as it galloped down the track and over the finish line carrying the man in the red cap to victory. The victor appears in the next shot riding his mule, with a wreath of cotton bolls and flowers around its neck. He heads to the stands for the inspection and acclaim of the crowd. The camera records the winner's smile as young white boys and a small enthusiastic black boy in a white tee shirt run toward him and his mule. The winning rider continues to smile as he rides out of the frame.

The excited African American child running toward the winner is one of two images of the black audience documented on the 1940 home movie film. Dossett and Wilson's footage reflects their interest in the competition on the track and their lack of interest in the spectators. At the 1946 Rosedale Mule Races, Emma Knowlton Lytle concentrated on filming the crowd rather than the track. Intent on recording her friends and relatives, Lytle's camera moved fluidly, at eye level, through the crowd, giving the viewer an intimate, first person sense of the event. She engaged friends in conversation, and filmed them in close-up while they spoke, recording everyone else in wide shots.

Lytle's film showed white people clustered around the betting booth and zooms in to a close-up of a woman's hands tearing a perforated

ticket from a booklet. A man smiles at the filmmaker and fans out his tickets like a hand of cards as the camera catches him leaving the counter of the pari-mutuel betting booth. Lytle follows two white men as they stroll through the white crowd and into the black section of the track. Two African Americans wearing numbers on their backs, one leading a mule, walk in front of the white men. Abruptly, three riders enter the scene from the left, ride across the frame, through the black spectators' section, and onto the track. The camera follows their movement to the right, panning over the backs of the African American enthusiasts facing the track.

Lytle's roving camera recorded the segregated crowd and located the animal holding area behind the black section of the track. Most likely that is where the three mounted riders were coming from when they cut across the film frame to enter the track.

The 1946 footage hints at the size of the crowd and the array of activity. People are everywhere. Older men line the benches in front of a band stand. A heavy set man chats with the bench sitters from astride a light-colored horse. Young men in white shirts and ties carry plates of food into the club house. Young women in large hats carrying white gloves smile and talk to the film maker. A quick shot of the scoreboard reads "RACE NO. 5." The camera documents riders as they form a group at the starting line of two or three abreast. About six men take off as two white men in hats back away from them. A rider wearing a soft, white, snap-brim cap backwards, canters a white mule easily across the finish line. An excited winner jumps up and down in the judges' booth.

The black and white home movie





Greenwood Mule Races, Greenwood MS, circa 1943.

footage conveys the small town ambiance of the crowd. Many people know each other and the filmmaker. Lytle's subjects appear pleased to see her and amused by her camera.

Between races on the Rosedale track, skilled African American hostlers broke wild mules that bucked and reared like broncos at a rodeo. Jimmy Love of Rosedale described the appeal: "Some people would tick for that. Man says this mule aint never been rode, some of them want that, want to ride him, just cause he aint been rode."<sup>27</sup> After the races, black horsemen gave performances on the track and sometimes riders arranged match races among themselves. The Rosedale Mule Races ended in 1950.

## Greenwood

The Greenwood Mule Races, organized by the women's Junior Auxiliary, ran from 1941 through 1948, straight through the war. Pro-

ceeds funded the charity work of the organization. Junior Auxiliary members, mostly wives of planters and other prominent men in town, worked to alleviate the health care problems of poor white children.

The number of displaced white sharecroppers in Leflore County grew throughout the Depression as white planters replaced them with black sharecroppers and day laborers.<sup>28</sup> The planters' labor practices provided their wives with a steady supply of destitute children to care for. Indicative of the times, the women observed the color line, assisting only poor white children though the population of Leflore County in 1934 was 76 percent black.<sup>29</sup>

The Greenwood mule races differed from the Rosedale races in several ways. The races stood alone, unsandwiched by political speeches, baseball games or dances. They were held in the evening rather than the afternoon and at the American

Legion Ball Park rather than the Greenwood Country Club. Beginning in 1943, military men from the Greenwood Army Air Field and Camp McCain participated in the races, competing against each other on borrowed mules. In 1948, African American delivery boys from local drugstores rode against each other on bicycles. An undated Mule Race poster hanging on the wall of the Cottonlandia Museum in Greenwood lists the following admission fees: *Adults .75, Enlisted men, Children, Colored .25.*

Promotion in the local white newspapers began at least a month in advance. During the week of the event the *Greenwood Commonwealth*

and the *Greenwood Morning Star* featured the races with front-page headlines and articles. Inside the papers, the names of out-of-town visitors and lists of mule race parties filled the society columns. Memphis, Clarksdale, and Greenville papers ran stories and photographs sent them by the 1948 Junior Auxiliary Mule Race Publicity Committee. The high powered Publicity Committee blanketed Mississippi with 175 radio advertisements promoting the races, including spots on the "Breakfast Club Program," a national radio show on NBC. Cafes, grocery stores, dry goods stores, drugstores, beauty parlors, filling stations, and taverns in Greenwood and nearby towns displayed mule race posters.

Universal Newsreel heard about the first Greenwood Mule Race after the fact, called the Junior Auxiliary and asked the organization if they could run them again for the camera. The women's group discussed the possibility with the Chamber of

Commerce before declining. Universal Newsreel did film the second annual Greenwood Mule Races in 1942. *Time* magazine covered the races in the August 12, 1944 issue and noted that five thousand people attended the event. The Junior Auxiliary stopped holding mule races in 1948, however, the Greenwood Jaycees resumed the sport in the 1950s and ran them until the early 1960s.

Home movie footage preserved the actuality of the mule races for over fifty years, surviving the races and the mules. Today the film is an historical resource offering a richer, deeper understanding of life, ritual, and celebration in the plantation region of the Mississippi Delta.

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## Mississippi Writers



## Directory and Literary Guide

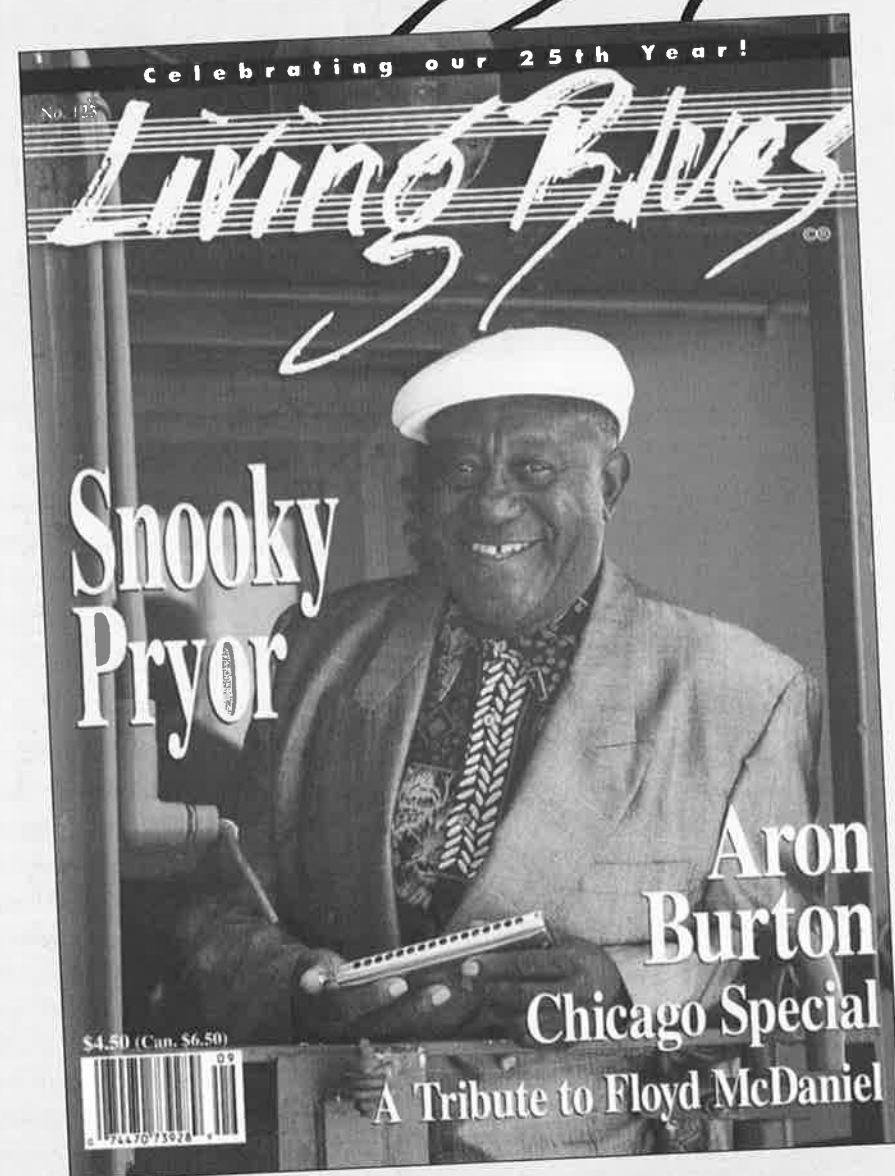
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# Living Blues



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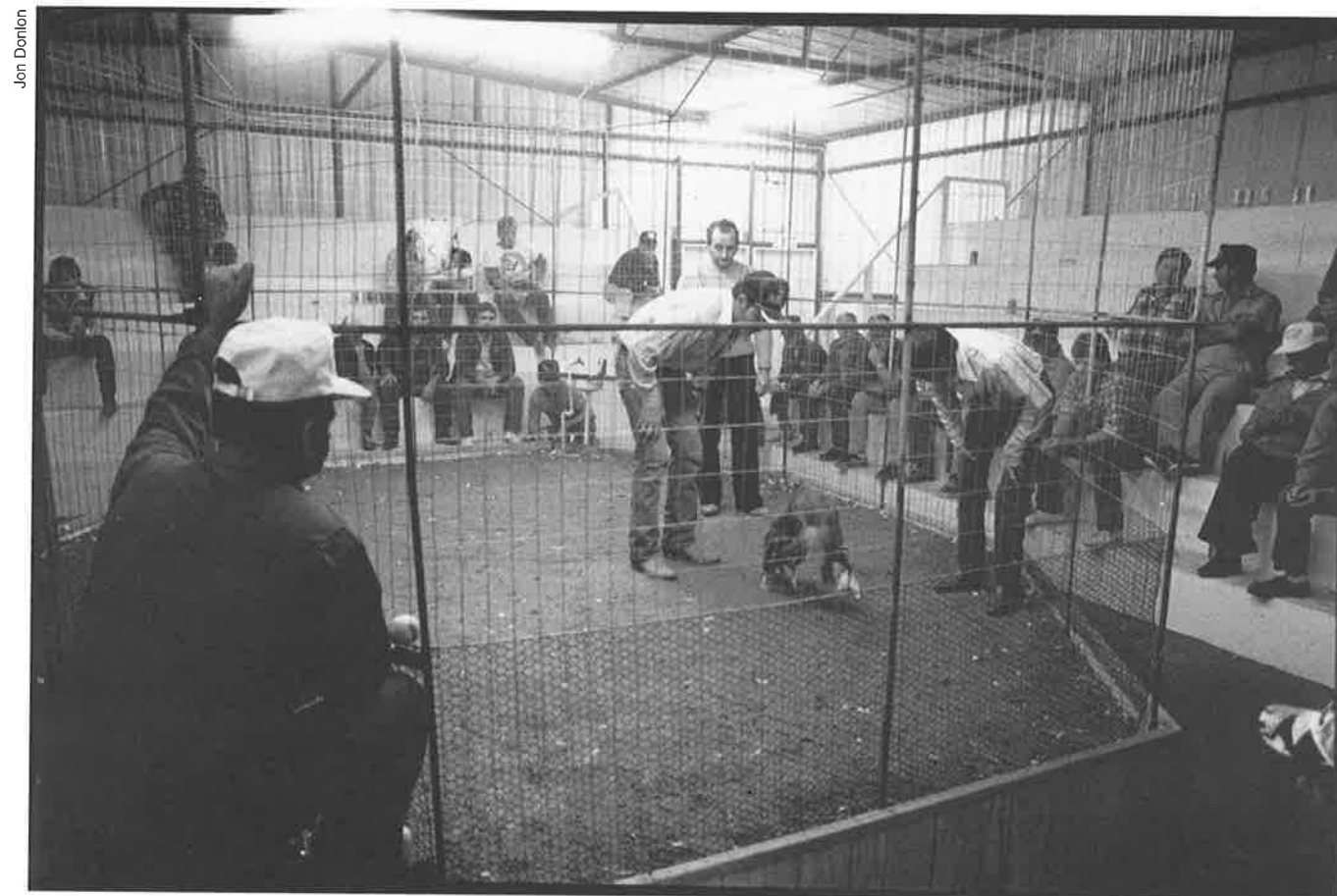
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## THREE-TO-FIVE ON THE RED! THREE-TO-FIVE ON THE RED!

**Fighting Cocks, Ritual Betting, and Wagering Skill in South Louisiana**

by Jon Donlon



Cocks battle it out as the handlers chant a relentless drone of encouragement to their birds. Here at "Alpha," much of the equipment—such as the pit enclosure and the bleacher seating—is obviously homemade. Above, however, powerful contemporary heating and cooling units control the climate in the quick-fab metal building designed for this sport.

**T**he sport of cock fighting is very old. Alexander's men probably fought fowl in India, or at least wagered at the events; certainly game cocks were common at Roman garrisons in ancient England. Puritan law struggled to suppress the past time and its associated wagering in colonial America just as contemporary law does today in many areas of the United States. Free participation in cock fighting and associated wagering at cock fights is

generally restricted in the United States.

Still, the events are apparently fairly common and often appear to act as edge boundary markers helping to define a region. A focus on betting at cock fights shows that, entirely apart from the fun of play involved, such sport binds groups together, nurtures inter-group solidarity, and defends edge or boundary zones. The site of a cock fight lends itself to folk value propagation, role-playing opportunity, and the relatively "safe" acting out



of aggressive modes of conduct.

While the substance of my research is largely based on my own observations of cock fights in South Louisiana, the literature of the sport, which is studded with references to the behavior associated with betting, offers additional insight to the role of wagering and gaming within cultures.

I visited pits in the Acadiana region of South Louisiana two or more times a year between 1985 and 1993. During these visits I observed the actual fights (or, more accurately, observed the social setting of the fights), discussed the sport with participants on and off the site, and accumulated comments regarding the events from residents not engaged in cock fighting. Participants include owners, trainers, and breeders.

The resulting body of accumulated notes was compared and contrasted to the text record associated with cock fighting. One feature almost immediately apparent is the similarity between cock fight episodes across cultures. The literature provides vocabulary characteristic of the sport, literary references, and uses of the image of the bird in advertising and in folk art.

## Sport in a Southern Tradition

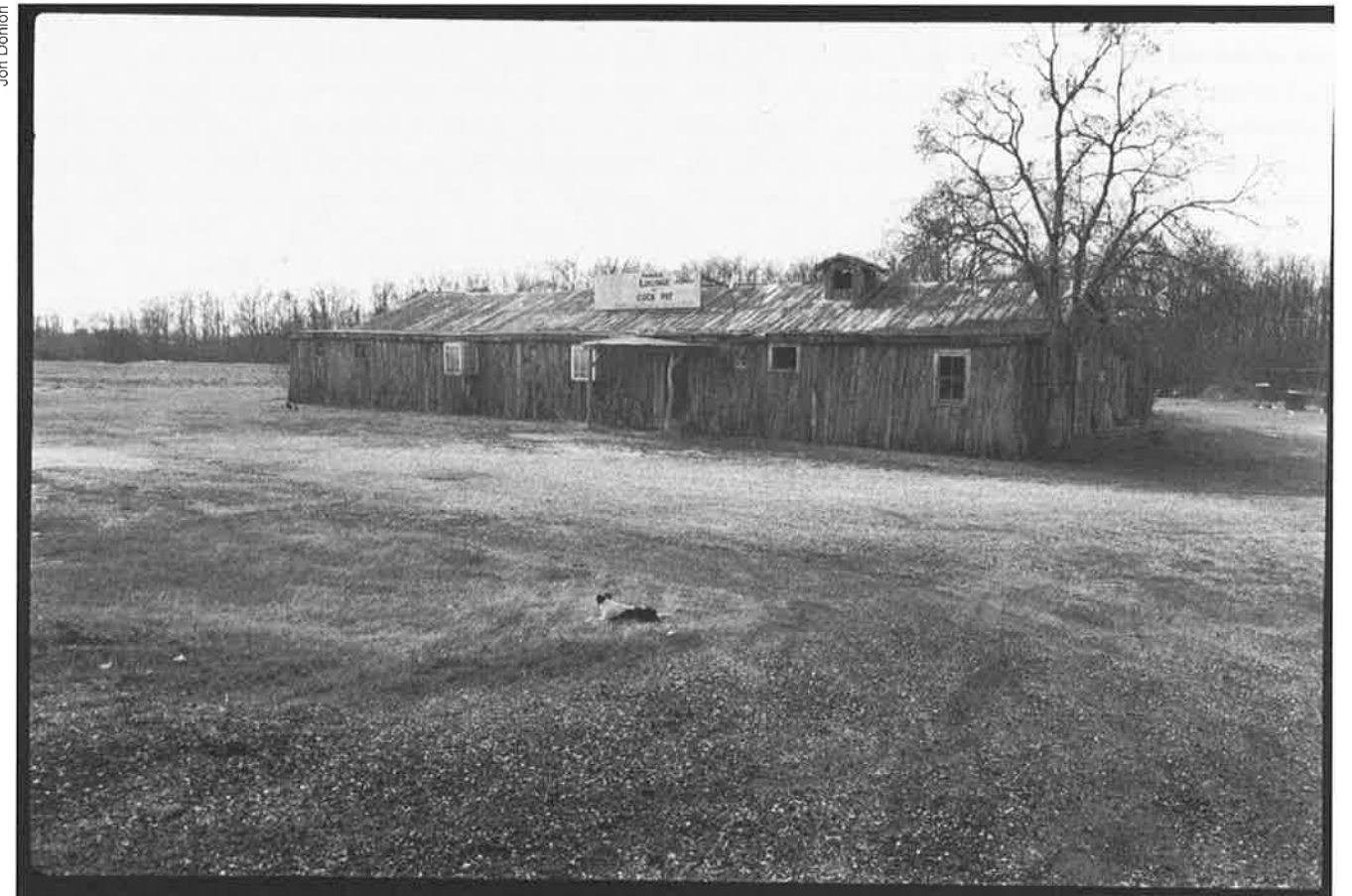
This article relies on the tradition of southern gaming to provide perspective for our understanding of the ritual elements of such sport, particularly its gambling features, as a "legend" of participation and membership.

Wagering is an integral part of cock fighting. Though closely related to other sports betting, traditional betting at local pits possesses additional unique attributes. Reliance on luck seems to be associated with ritualized betting (note the use of family icons, apparent omens, or micro-coincidence, as when a horse and one's child have the same or similar name). Because of this, many cockers bet, at least in part, to indicate kinship or cohort links or other special relationships. As a result, bets are placed in conformation to the demands of a ritualized program of moves, not as a display of individual prowess. Although the sport seems to be growing, some long-time participants complain that newcomers have little understanding of cock fighting. Rather than being integrated into the community of cockers, these upstarts merely seek to engage in the



A well-known pit on the Rayne-to-Sunset route just north of Lafayette, Louisiana, advertises the next events on its standard formed-plastic, internally-lit "winkin-n-blinkin" roadway sign. When the PBS documentary series *Fat Man on a Bicycle* filmed a segment focused on the Cajuns, it was this pit which allowed a film crew to shoot on the premises.

Jon Denlon



"Bravo" pit was long a regular host of cockfights (in the rear section) and rock-n-roll music (in the larger, front section). Now defunct, its once colorful sign, resplendent with a pair of leaping cocks, slowly returns to dust as the decorative veneer peels away from the walls of the disused structure.

fight. "They don't belong," one participant reported, "they come here, they buy a few birds, they fight 'em. That's not right. They don't even know the feller they match; they don't know the people; they can't raise their own birds, but they want to barge on in there and pit something!"

Within the narrow confines of the cock fight pit area, reducing the unknown is tantamount to exhibiting a more skillful eye for "gameness," the almost magical quality of spine ascribed to a real, as opposed to a "dunghill," rooster. This is a rare opportunity for local "experts" to exhibit prowess in public—an important benefit among men who are typically reticent to indulge in personal display. Accumulated success becomes a sort of social collateral. Winning is not everything, though everyone talks about the winner and a participant's reputation is built on success.

One important gaming characteristic which seems to exist in betting at cock fights and which is not necessarily typical of all wagering is the demonstration of support or antagonism communicated by the act of betting. Clifford Geertz described this feature in his Indonesian

study, Bertram Wyatt-Brown noted similar phenomena in his discussion of the Old South, and Stephen Del Sesto and myself documented similar field observations in South Louisiana. The American South has traditionally been viewed as more carnal, "hotter" blooded, more likely to nurture a sporting mentality.

Cock fighters interviewed in South Louisiana claimed that the fight itself represented only part of the sport—for some a relatively minor part. "If that was all there was to it," a respondent from Rayne, Louisiana, told me, "it would not be worth it. I wouldn't do it." Yet the fight itself is a marker of both skill of rearing and training and of astute, strategic choice of competitor. As mentioned, success is a powerful marker.

Furthermore, the pattern of wagering at a cock fight clearly delineates social groups. This quality of the wagering event, articulating and describing boundary lines, seems to weaken as the betting environment becomes increasingly commercial. Neighborhood tavern betting pools, for example, or the local sports "line," may be thought to occupy a mid-range. Carole Case and Marvin Scott have very ably described the environment

of horse tracks, both front and backstage, as virtually self-contained communities. The track, in this sense, has both a commercial and communal face. Fully commercialized sites (Las Vegas, Reno, Atlantic City, Tunica, and so on) are relegated to the provision of opportunities to participate with the game itself as simply a commercial venture.

At a local level, these events have a community-building effect. Timothy Breen, invoking the work of Geertz, has described the ritual space held by wagering in early Virginia. In a sense, he felt that the sporting life contained the markers by which the topography of society might be read. According to Breen, these markers are (or at least, were) prominently displayed while gaming:

In many societies competitive gaming is a device by which the participants transform abstract cultural values into observable social behavior. In his now-classic analysis of the Balinese cock fight, Geertz describes contests for extremely high stakes as intense social dramas.

Breen's interpretation of the planter's behavior coincides with the contemporary reading of cock fights and similar "grass roots" events. For the Balinese, betting on cock fights has special significance, according to Geertz. According to my field observations and those of Del Sesto, cock fighting in South Louisiana has similar significance. "Rural peoples," Del Sesto notes, "such as the Cajuns regard the cock fight as more than a symbolic representation of bravery and courage."

Betting reaffirms social border and boundary areas, maintains social position, and demonstrated notions central to the society. Del Sesto notes:

That various individuals are members of primary groups becomes clear by observing practices. One is able to ascertain which rooster an individual supports by following his betting habits. A person always bets with his group rather than trying to pick the winning rooster. Regardless of the quality of the roosters in the match, an individual always backs the rooster of his own group rather than the other rooster which may be the better of the two. Under no circumstances does an individual support the rooster of another group over his own. If he does, he suffers possible ridicule and humiliation from other members of his group...

Likewise, during the South Louisiana cock fighting

episodes that I observed, wagering was clearly an important part. There seemed to be no betting "just for fun." Bets may have been trivial: who drives home, who pays for the next round of drinks. But overall the event conformed in a general way to what J. Huizinga called "serious play." There is, of course, a good deal of variety in the actual betting transaction. Comments such as "I gotta bet on him," or "Can't bet on him" (literally meaning the game cock but figuratively meaning the handler, breeder, or owner) are frequent in the vicinity of the active pit. Contrary to what we might have guessed, the pattern did not seem to carry to race lines. Presumably, kinship and race margins do not often intersect at stage front in South Louisiana. Gender lines are more discreet.

Continuing a theme introduced above, historian Wyatt-Brown suggests that enduring social values are played out in sports. This is particularly true when sport is looked at regionally.

Southerners, like their Scots-Irish and English forbears, loved sports, hunting, games of choice and skill—in fact, any event that promised the excitement of deciding inequalities of prowess among men, or among men and beasts.

Wyatt-Brown's comments here reiterate what Geertz claims about Indonesian cock fighting, that it exists partly to support membership in the community, and pointedly underscores fears exhibited by the pious. Historically, these fears were clearly articulated by William Penn. He worried that, in a fair competition, gaming might exclude churchliness.

Wyatt-Brown continues, speaking to the traditional roots of what has been described as a unique Southern style of life:

Gaming, no less than hospitality, brought the code of honor into serious play because of its intimate connection with both personal and group status, which depends so largely upon public perceptions.

Reinforcing this idea, Breen, discussing the colonial Virginia gentry, points out the place of betting as conflict management:

Gaming relationships were one of several ways by which the planters, no doubt unconsciously, preserved class cohesion... These non-lethal competitive devices, similar in form to what social anthropologists have termed "joking relation-

Jon Donlon



At pit "Alpha," the plastic-pipe sink and related accoutrements, including the lemon, are visible in the left foreground as the cockfighters, center and somewhat to the right, adjust the wraps on a gamecock's gaff.

ships," were a kind of functional alliance developed by the participants themselves to reduce dangerous, but often inevitable, social tensions.

Since individual place in the community is at risk, in the case of fighting game fowl, demand to perceive fairness runs high. Cheating at the pit is something more than a fiscal faux pas. In this special milieu, failure to bet with the appropriate other—cousin, 'podner, boss—conveys a species of cheating. Curiously, however, at least one cock fighter was sensitive to what might be called soft honor edges at the wagering site. "It was the Cubans," he claimed, recalling the infusion of Cuban immigrants two

decades earlier, "who cleaned up the sport. They put the birds under baskets, with a rope on top; they leave the pit, and they pull the rope. The best bird wins. None of that twisting the gaff going on."

## Mechanics and Details of the Fight

In South Louisiana the birds arrive immediately prior to the events, which are called sets, derbies, bouts, or occasionally other novel names, in custom-made cages that remind one of nothing so much as portable typewriter cases. Owners and trainers arrange the matches by weight. There is a period of highly ritualized attachment (when appropriate) of the weapon or weapons followed by display of the game cocks to the crowd.

Interestingly, two major variants exist: knife and gaff or metal spur fighting. Even within the insular world of Cajun cock fighting, a good deal of seeming hostility exists between the two camps which together compose most of the fighters. Also, not infrequently, cockers may compete in both, depending on the structure of the derby.

Strong feeling exists about this weapon choice. In part, the relative speed of the knife fights seems to alienate those cockers with a high investment in the stuff of the overall event, the breeding, rearing, and training components. They say the knife causes luck, rather than skill (on the part of the bird and so on the part of its owner/handler) to be unduly important. "That's not fightin', man, that's show," one respondent told me as he mopped the floor of his rural bar, "you might as well toss a coin, you know, throw a dart in the [racing] form."

Fast fights, as the knife variety are likely to be, circumvent the use of entire bodies of ritual behavior: sucking or biting the head, rubbing the chest, "talking"



or "calling" to the bird, and even the "praying" performance of almost spent game cocks (when the bird strolls slowly as if praying). The powerful legacy of pre-fight training and extraordinarily arcane feeding programs are also masked by the speed of the outcome—any supposed superior stamina and skill of the bird has little time to manifest itself for public view and peer consumption.

During a fight, as conditions change virtually blow-by-blow, or the texture of the competitors seems to alter, wagers are constantly offered and rejected or accepted. Because the birds are thoroughly examined by a pit official prior to the bout the idea seems to be that a fair, even handed event has been initiated.

Although gamecocks fight bare heeled (with their own spurs), with blades, or with puncturing-style gaffs, the weapons are considered to be devices acting to even the matched competitors out, not tools to increase carnage. The skill of the breeder and the skill of the trainer is reflected in the performance of the bird; the skill of one or another better is reflected in the pattern of the wager. Wagering, as Del Sesto's and my own research points out, is mediated by group connection and affiliations.

## Conclusions

Close reading of Geertz's text and the description of similar events in South Louisiana embellish our understanding of cock fighting as well as our notions about gambling. Just as the regularities of the sport seem to act as edge boundary markers, so does the wagering pattern outline similarities and differences.

For example, though in Indonesia and elsewhere instrumental considerations might be involved in the bet, the goal may often be more to reaffirm social relationships and somewhat less to gain remuneration. The bet is on the real or symbolic "home" team, not necessarily the superior competitor or potential winner.

Meanwhile, it is necessary for the bettor to negotiate the appropriate social posture for a given region or area: betting indicates membership and may signify, or actually show, prowess at the ring. Tension is established between the desire to exhibit the above mentioned prowess while still acquiescing to pro forma demands in order to maintain group cohesion. A ritual vocabulary of bets coexists with other modes of wagering.

Fortunately, the ritually necessary bet and the strategic bet may often be the same—after all, the breeder who is an outsider may also be a game cock expert. Moreover, entirely ritual bets ("He's my boss, I gotta put

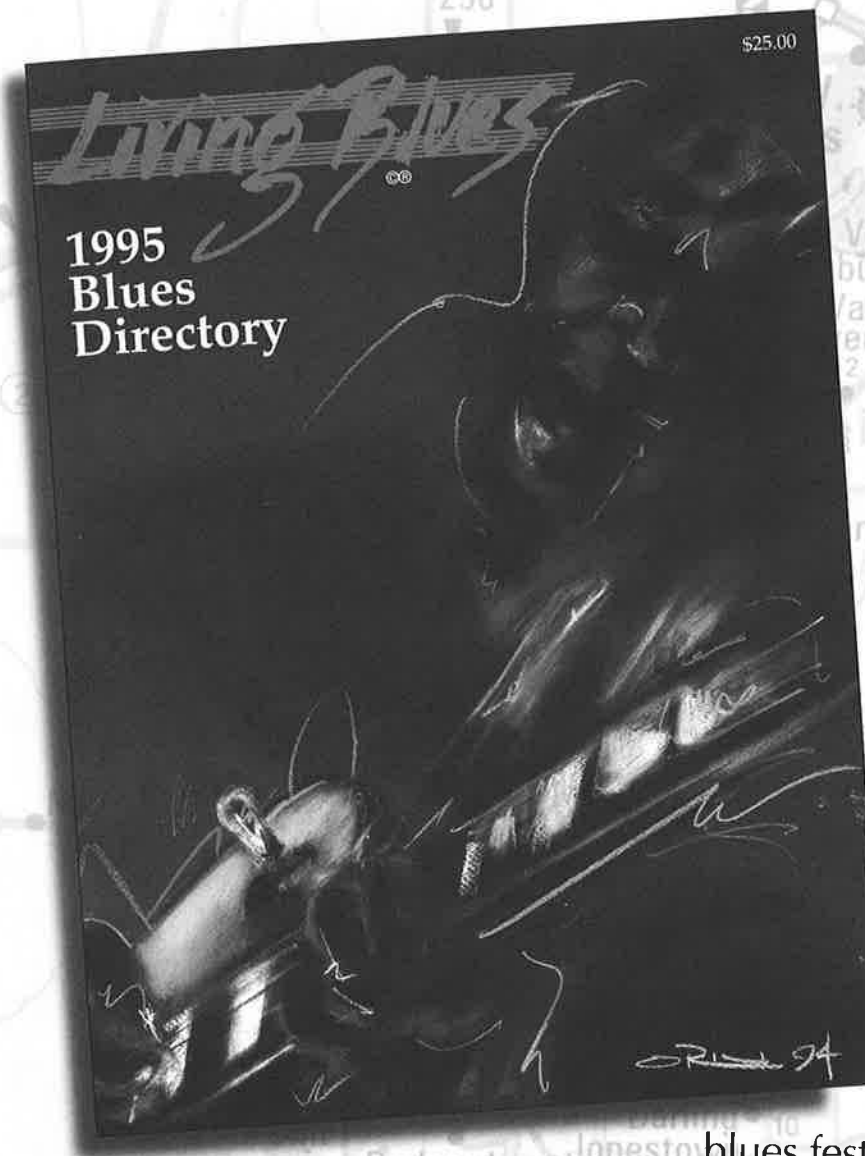
a dollar on the red!") may be trivial. Occasionally, big bets are made across the normal pattern and the result, especially if the bettor wins, may yield long-term, though fortunately usually low-grade, rancor. Temporarily, the refusal to conform replicates the kind of gaffe associated with a stranger or outsider who does not know how to act within a social region.

## Acknowledgments

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Hunters with dogs and deer in front of clubhouse.  
(Paul King Huffman 2nd from left)

# TEN POINT

Snapshots of Hunters in the Last Mississippi Delta Wilderness

By Alan Huffman

*Vanishing point: The point where parallel lines receding from the observer seem to come together, a time, place, or stage at which something disappears or ceases to exist.*

In the early 1950s, when suburbia was making its first great strides into the countryside of post-war America, my grandparents, Paul King Huffman and Florence West Huffman, immigrated from the growing city of Jackson to the sparsely populated, almost impenetrable swamps of Issaquena County, Mississippi.

The move was counter to prevailing trends, and a complete departure from my grandmother's upbringing in the genteel plantation society of the upper Delta. Swamps, in most people's minds, were for avoiding or draining. Few people of the era—and particularly few Mississippians—recognized the value of the wilderness that so many had labored so long to beat back.

Florence Huffman was diligent almost to the point of obsession in documenting their foray into the surviving wilderness of the Delta. Her record is both comprehensive and detailed. From her letters and diaries, it is clear that one question was perennially on the minds of her family and friends: Why would anyone want to go to this inhospitable tract of overlooked swamp-land to live?

Among those who did venture into the big woods to hunt or fish, most stayed only briefly. Women, in general, were rare. But in Issaquena County my grandmother saw a world perfectly tailored for her and my grandfather, who shared her lifelong interest in nature. Their sojourn in Issaquena County became inextricably woven into the fabric of their life together, and resulted in one of her crowning achievements: A remarkable collection of photographs of early hunting and fishing scenes spanning the decades of the 1920s through the early 1960s. This collection would be valuable if only because so few people thought to photograph such pastimes. But their value is heightened by the high quality of the photographs, and by their comprehensive nature, focusing as they do upon one group of people over the course of forty years involved in every aspect of hunting

wildlife abounded. Issaquena County was the last stronghold of the prolific bottomland hardwood forest that had once spread over hundreds of thousands of acres of the Mississippi Delta. Their decision to move there permanently in the 1950s was a nod toward a way of life that was rooted in the frontier, which had attracted them for three decades, during which their frequent visits ran into weeks, and then months.

Mama Florence, as we called her, appears to have been undaunted by the hostile side of this wooded paradise—the frequent high water and the legions of mosquitoes, ticks, red-bugs, alligators, snapping turtles and snakes that were even more at home in Issaquena County than she was. She took every aspect of nature in stride.

As a child, I remember the cutouts of wild animals she had mounted on homemade cardboard stands and



Florence Huffman, who chronicled life at Ten Point hunting club with her camera in boat on the lake.

and fishing in a primeval world that is now lost.

When my grandparents first visited the wilds of Issaquena County in the late 1920s, they found a wooded paradise where deer and other

arranged on her mantel, and the prints, clipped from magazines, of ducks, moose and deer, which she framed to hang on the wall. In her guidebooks, she dutifully recorded every species of flower, tree and ani-





Mr. Myrick with deer strapped to car hood, 1940.

mal that she had personally observed, and in the back of her journal for 1941, she listed each river she'd been on and every kind of tree she'd seen in Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and South Carolina.

But it wasn't nature alone that inspired her love of the relatively rugged life that Issaquena County offered. It was the camaraderie she experienced with my grandfather and the friends and family members who loved the big woods. In the majority of her photographs we see the faces of people who shared her affinity for the wilderness, their names penned in the margin in her own hand.

For most of the time that they visited or lived in Issaquena County, my grandparents were unaware that the way of life that had drawn them there was doomed. But from the beginning, for the sake of posterity, Mama Florence carried alongside her shotgun a Hollywood Reflex camera. The resulting snapshots, the best of which

she arranged in albums or framed to hang on the walls of the Ten Point Deer Club house, proved to be the greatest trophies anyone took from the Issaquena woods.

Over time, she developed a compulsion to chronicle her experiences in the wilderness, and by 1962 had produced a collection of more than three thousand photographs, a score of movies, and numerous diaries and scrapbooks. Though the collection contains many scenic landscape shots, the focus of her effort was more on individuals and shared personal experience than the majesty of an isolated natural world. There is nothing reminiscent of the landscape photo imagery of Ansel Adams or Elliot Porter in her collection; instead, there are poignant snapshots of a small group of people enjoying hunting and fishing in the wilderness of the Deep South. Mama Florence had no academic, historical or artistic goals. Her aim was to preserve the ephemera of a world she loved. She

thrived on the personal connections she made in the context of the Issaquena woods—with her friends, with her husband, with the old ways, and with nature. The photographs were her way of giving something in return.

Looking back now, it is easy to confer greater meaning upon the photographs than Mama Florence originally intended. Whether she knew it or not, Mama Florence was oddly poised to document one of the last great communications between civilization and the primeval world of the Delta wilderness. Her photographs today represent a comprehensive and vivid record of a personal, cultural and historical crossroads: A time and place where conflicting trends of American history—the relentless drive of progress and the persistent draw of nature—met, embraced, and then collapsed upon one another in the Delta.

Any collection documenting such

a crossroads would be significant, particularly since the culture of early hunting and fishing in the South has been so little explored and the photographic evidence is so rare. But the value of Mama Florence's collection is heightened by its completeness and intimacy.

Archaic rituals and familiar faces provided her with a broad range of subjects that defy the stereotype of the southern hunting experience as the sole province of white men. And the quality of the work belies the limits of her equipment, technical knowledge and training. Many of the photographs are interesting as historic snapshots, but others reach the level of documentary art.

The setting of Mama Florence's photographs changed little over the course of three decades. Her photographic forays began in the late 1920s, on hunting and fishing expeditions with my grandfather and a group of friends who were mostly doctors, lawyers and businessmen

from Jackson. Together, they formed the Ten Point Deer Club, which oversaw the final years of one of North America's most fabled hunting grounds from 1929 until 1962.

The first trips the group made were in wagons and T-Model Fords, to a remote tract of land bordering Steele Bayou and the Yazoo River. They camped in canvas tents, chased deer on horseback to the sound of baying hounds, brought down their prey with simple shotguns and cooked their meals on open fires. They performed all the old rituals: Smearing blood on the face of the hunter who had made his first kill, cutting the tail from the shirt of the hunter who missed. They spent hours fishing with cane poles from boats or from the banks of the numerous rivers, bayous and lakes. Later, they built a rustic camp house, high on stilts on the banks of the bayou, which eventually became my grandparents' permanent home.

The clubhouse, which also

became the gallery for Mama Florence's photographs, was as comfortable and convenient as the wilderness allowed, which is to say it was large and well lit, but without telephones, television or paved roads for miles around. Electric power was drawn from a generator, heat from a wood stove, and water from cisterns that captured rain. It was a place from which the members could set off through the old woods to hunt or fish, and at night, retire to feather beds on the high sleeping porch to watch the fireflies drift or listen to the hoot of the owls echo across the bayou.

During the time that she was there, Mama Florence seems to have recorded every unfolding scene. The photographs were treasured by the Ten Point members from the beginning. But only later would their value—and the value of the big woods themselves—be fully reckoned. Though Mama Florence never read the works of William Faulkner, it

P. K. Huffman



Florence Huffman with dog, Blackout and bait bucket. March 17, 1946





Young hunters, clubhouse yard, September 4, 1946.

was he who most accurately assessed the fate of her beloved Delta woods, which would eventually confer greater meaning upon her photographs.

In his short story "Delta Autumn," published in 1940, Faulkner's character Ike McCaslin mulled over the disappearance of the wilderness, which

by then had been largely cleared but for the southernmost and lowest part, where Issaquena County lay. McCaslin saw in the declining wilderness a parallel of his own life, which reached its highest value as its time played out, "...because it was still wilderness... He had watched it, not being conquered, destroyed, so much

as retreating since its purpose was served now and its time an outmoded time, retreating southward through this inverted-apex, this V-shaped section of earth between hills and River until what was left of it seemed now to be gathered and for the time arrested in one tremendous density of brooding and inscrutable impenetrability at the ultimate funnelling tip."

If a sharp eyed woman had been present in Ike McCaslin's camp, totting a camera, she might have produced photographs such as Mama Florence's. It was at that "ultimate funnelling tip" that the members of Ten Point found themselves between 1929 and 1962.

Issaquena County was a place where the lines of civilization and frontier, of river and hills, of past and future, converged. And then, in the blink of an eye, the lines broke. In early 1962 came the first harbinger of the end of the Issaquena woods as the Ten Point hunters had known them: a bridge spanning Steele Bayou, opening the wilderness to a new, paved highway that passed within view of the clubhouse. With the highway came powerlines, telephones, and new opportunities for development that would be rapidly exploited.

By the end of 1962 the land upon which the clubhouse stood had been condemned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a floodgate across the bayou and system of levees that would lead to the clearing of most of the remaining old woods. The world that had given Ten Point its highest value was suddenly closing in for the kill.

With the condemnation of its land, the Ten Point club as it existed for Thirty-five years disbanded. A few members remained behind to hunt the surviving forests, which lay outside the protective levees, but the clubhouse was razed and my grandparents took refuge in the wooded hills of Choctaw County, in Missis-



Kathleen and Inez fishing on Steele Bay, 1946.

sippi's northeast hills. Most of the old, familiar faces disappeared from the Issaquena landscape, and the woods themselves were not far behind.

From that point on, Issaquena County underwent a compressed history of the entire Mississippi Delta, and the greater South, as civilization crept and then thrashed its way into the wilderness. By the early 1970s, when the price of soybeans passed the lucrative \$10 per bushel mark, the Issaquena wilderness was rapidly being subdued—its bayous dredged and leveed, its huge trees pushed into windrows and burned, thousands of acres at a time. The destruction was equal in scale to what we see occurring in the rain forests today. Panthers were soon the stuff of legends, and the few surviving bear were forced into the open, where many were hit by cars or shot. The remaining hunters found themselves competing with droves of newcomers who buzzed the shrinking woodlands on



Mr. Smith and Mr. Ballard with deer in front of Ten Point clubhouse.

four wheelers.

Today, the wooded remnants of Issaquena County are small, natural islands in a landscape radically altered by man. Steele Bayou itself is a muddy, pesticide-laden ditch, and virtually everything recorded in

Mama Florence's photographs is gone.

Tellingly, Mama Florence's record comes to a halt just prior to the end. There are no photographs of the destruction. After leaving Issaquena County in 1962, she seldom picked

up her camera again. But she went to her grave satisfied that she had faithfully captured on film what had mattered most in her life.

"Maybe we didn't have much business being out there anymore," she told me once, as she sat in an easy chair in her Choctaw County home. "Paul's health was bad. We didn't have a phone. We couldn't come and go when the water was up except in the boat. I got to where I worried, living out there with him alone."

But lifting a photograph of my grandfather astride his horse on the banks of the bayou, she smiled at the memory of a time and place where everyone and everything came together under a seemingly endless mantle of mossy trees.

After staying up late many nights looking through the photographs with Mama Florence and listening to her Steele Bayou stories, I realized she had produced something more than a record of love or friendship or of a lost and beautiful world. Though the stories and relics kept Ten Point alive long after the place itself was gone, it was the photographs, framed in composites, arranged in albums, tucked away in their original sleeves from Jackson's Standard Photo Company, that fascinated me most, and honoring my recognition, she gave them to me before she died. Over time, I realized the value of the collection transcended my family, and that as a painstaking record of a vanished time it should be preserved. Under the guidance of Patti Carr Black, then-director of the Old Capitol State Historical Museum, I placed the majority in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and embarked upon the compilation of a book, which is still in progress.

The photographs were the essence of folklife documentary. They were the product of a good heart and a good eye, of a woman

who found herself in an exceptional setting with people she loved. Mama Florence was attentive, observant and diligent, and in the end, history bore her out. I can think of no more fitting epitaph for Mama Florence's life or for the lost, old woods than the photographs she left behind.

In many ways, it is as if a photographer had ventured back to record scenes in the original frontier of the Delta. Yet there is the tenuous, unmistakable overlap of twentieth century life—the jeeps, the motorized boats, the prominent presence of women, children and black men in what historically would have seemed the province of white men. The odd contrast and harmony are evidence that the photographs could only have been made by someone situated as Mama Florence was.

Today, a new historical moment is unfolding. Changing economics and persistent floods have resulted in the reforestation of many of the farm fields that were wrested from the lower Delta wilderness. With so little public hunting land available in the Delta and the value of hunting rights at a premium, countless new refuges and wildlife resorts have appeared in the young forests. There is widespread interest in mitigating past losses, and the continuing flood control works of the Corps of Engineers, which enabled the destruction of the '60s and '70s, are under siege by environmental and hunting groups. Nestled between Mississippi 467 and the Yazoo River, a facsimile of the Ten Point Deer Club still clings tenaciously to its small domain.

But if the tide has now turned in favor of the woods, there is no going back. Of the original Mississippi Delta wilderness, all that remains are the occasional virgin cypresses towering above the landscape, a few relics and old stories, and photographs such as these. Without the

presence of Mama Florence and her Hollywood Reflex camera, the period of denouement of the original Delta wilderness, and the happy times that accompanied it, would exist only in the imagination, like each epoch that preceded it.

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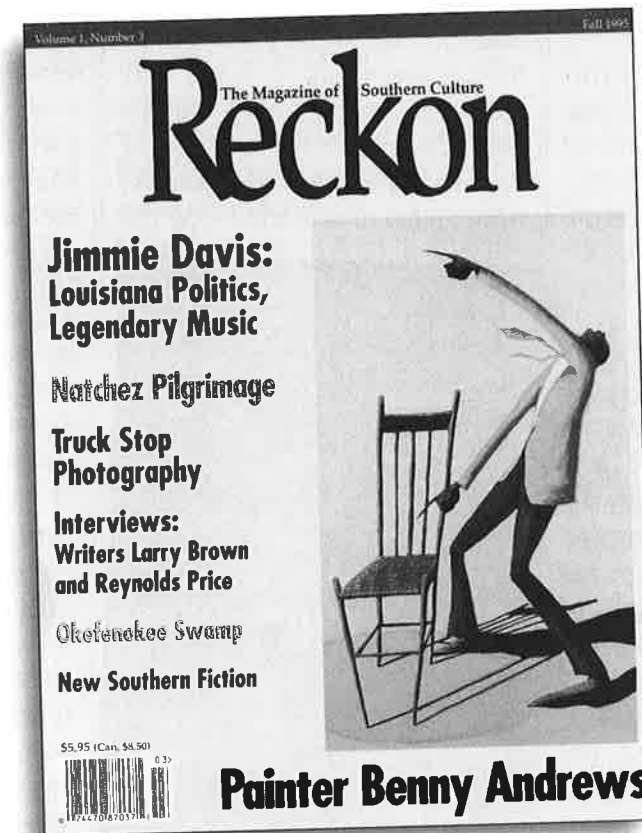
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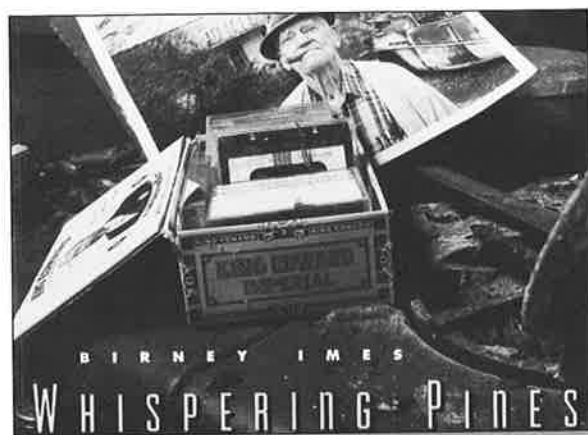
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compelling collection of color and black & white photographs documenting the spirit of life at a declining roadhouse in rural Lowndes County, Mississippi. In photographs taken from 1984 through 1993, Imes presents the final days of Whispering Pines, a roadside joint identified on an aging envelope in one image as "5 miles north of Brooksville on Highway 45." Imes' images document the decline of "the Pines" and its owner, Blume Triplett, from the perspective of a regular visitor and friend who nevertheless remains fundamentally an outsider. Amid impressions of Triplett's last years are intertwined carefully constructed cigar box arrangements of artifacts extracted from Triplett's vast store of "all that stuff." Imes' photographs evoke the vitality of Blume Clayton Triplett and many of those who walked within the walls of Triplett's place: Rosie, T.P., Clara, Mary, Shoemaker, and Mary Dora, as well as geese, chickens, and dogs.

According to "The Pines A Remembrance," an essay accompanying his photographs, Imes first visited Whispering Pines in the mid-70s and began the transformation into one of its regulars. The essay provides a useful tool by which readers gain a more complete understanding of Imes' relationship with Triplett and "The Pines" as well as Triplett's relationship with "The Pines," its patrons, and Rosie - longtime cook and confidant to Blume and his wife, Eppie. However, while the essay offers important insight into the

work, its primary function remains as a complementary piece to Imes' photographs.

The first photograph offered conveys an essential message to viewers of the collection. In the introductory image, Blume and "T.P.," an African-American and presumed regular at Whispering Pines, greet outsiders at the front door with the watchful, inquiring eye of men with something to protect. At the points where Triplett's shoulders are left uncovered by his white, tank undershirt, his bare



skin glows with the red neon gleam of a Miller High Life sign in the window. The mystical, nearly mesmerizing glow of neon lights coupled with three storefront scales and a string of mysteriously miscellaneous items across the building's face draws the viewer closer. At the same time, the two men block the entrance with a look of confrontation. Blume, in particular, appears to be thinking with a self-assured grin, "Now, what do we have here?" The implication seems to be one of cautionary advice: Enter if you choose, but understand, you are a visitor to a place vested with great significance.

The Whispering Pines that

Imes portrays is a shadow of its previous self, but there remains a great sense of majesty which emanates from the place through Imes' lens. Opening the Pines with his wife, Eppie, on Saturday, October 8, 1949, Blume Triplett remains the king of his castle through Imes' eye. Triplett returns in picture after picture wearing a hounds tooth "crown" and wielding a King Edward cigar like a smoldering scepter. As the photographs pass with the turning of the pages, the viewer becomes accustomed to the vivacious old man and, as Trudy Wilner Stack intimates in her introductory essay, comes to expect his presence. At the same time, Imes illuminates Triplett's decline with depictions of a weathering, thinning body and an image of spent bullets adjacent to a juke box label of "Best Thing that Ever Happened to Me" by Gladys Knight & the Pips.

As the pages turn, Blume fades physically. Then, like a gunfighter of the Old West, goes out in a blaze of gunfire as he takes Dylan Thomas' advice to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" and fires his .22-caliber pistol into the sky, New Year's Eve, 1988—his last at the Pines.

Imes fittingly follows the portrayal of a defiant, yet declining, Blume with his essay and a series of rephotographed images from Blume's personal collection. These images reestablish Blume's life after his death and reaffirm his vitality and the life of the Pines as well.

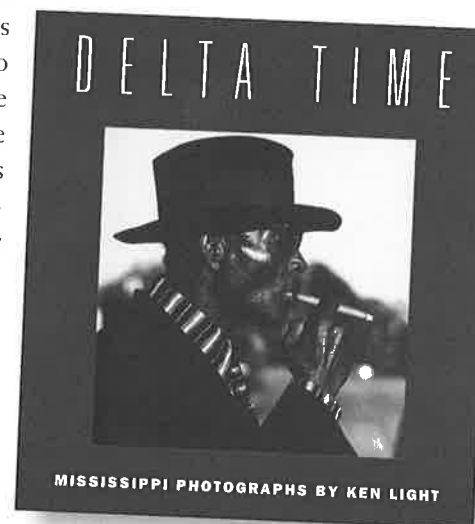
Like the King Edward cigars Triplett smokes, the objects and

people Imes portrays are "carefully selected-aged-blended" into a mixture which is taken-in, enjoyed, and exhaled to linger indefinitely in the viewer's conscience like the smoke of a cigar savored by its buyer. Imes' attention to the detail of his images contributes to this savory sampling. Details like the spray paint outline in the gravel to Blume's right as he holds a chicken in front of his place contribute to a literal grounding of the images in real life. Magic Chef "ready to eat" pickled pig's feet jars; pale blue rollers in Rosie's hair; the gold rings attached to Triplett's undershirt with a safety pin; bullets and then spent shells in cigar box scenes Imes constructs to convey time and meaning. All attach Imes' *Whispering Pines* to a world where real people existed and interacted and lived. These are not abstract renderings but rather images which appear to capture the souls of the participants and transcend the crumbling of the place and way of life that it represents. Like the remembered friends that they are, Blume Triplett and *Whispering Pines* live in Imes' memory and, fortunately for the viewer, in his photographs.

Driving south on U.S. Highway 45 as it crosses through the prairie land of Lowndes County, travelers pass a decrepit, overgrown shell of a building whose peeling white walls and unlit neon sign speak the soft, melancholy tribute of a gravestone. "Whispering Pines," the faint shapes read above the building's front overhang. The traveler imagines that the thick bushes out front cover an affectionate epitaph as well as the dates of birth and death for the

deceased. The building stands like a thousand small community plots across the South that yearly recede into the thick underbrush of a fading past. Birney Imes experienced and photographed a part of the life that preceded this particular grave. In doing so, he contributes its story to that of Mississippi and all of its inhabitants.

—Charles M. Yarborough



## DELTA TIME

By Ken Light  
Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995

In the afterword of his handsome new picture book, *Delta Time*, Ken Light says he has seen a lot in his time as a social documentary photographer, but nothing quite like the long-suffering Mississippi Delta. "Over the last twenty-four years," he writes, "my education has been through the viewfinder of my camera. It has taken me to the heart of America. I have witnessed seven-year-old children in America's agricultural fields picking tomatoes for 34 cents a bucket. I have watched in total darkness as thousands of

undocumented aliens have run and been chased across U.S. borders. I have photographed third world countries and urban poverty in America. I can truly say that nothing has torn at me so heavily as what I saw in Mississippi."

What Light saw in four and a half years of travel through the Delta—or at least what he wants us to see—is reduced to 104 stark and generally cheerless black and white images. Paging through them, it is apparent that they come in no uncertain order. Rather, they are paced so as to capture the cadence of life in the region. And Delta life as Light sees it is no pretty picture.

For sure, Light, author of three other books including *To the Promised Land* (1988) and *With These Hands* (1986), takes us to some interesting and, no doubt for some prospective book buyers, exotic places. Places with quirky names like Midnight and Alligator, Lula and Sugar Ditch. We see black faces almost exclusively, often in settings that—while shot no earlier than 1989—look straight out of the 1930s. There is the strong countenance of 70 year old Cleo Cotton outside her tarpapered shack; plantation hands chopping cotton under a dark and menacing sky; Elder John Irving Jr. power preaching in a Tutwiler church; children being baptized in the murky, cypress-studded waters of Coahoma County's Moon Lake; juke joint dancers in Clarksdale; three small children under the ragged covers of their bed in a squalid house in Tunica County's infamous Sugar Ditch Alley; and finally, a hearse streaking past a Coahoma County cotton field.



## Reviews continued

Such is the cycle of life Light presents, a life generally of grinding poverty, of grueling work, of release both sacred and secular, of certain death.

Light's point seems to be that nothing much has changed in the Mississippi Delta, that it remains a kind of lost world where pride lives but where the people are still stuck in a desperately poor, primitive sort of existence just this side of slavery. Delta civil rights legend Robert Moses (of Algebra Project fame), in the book's foreword, credits Light for capturing "the tyranny" of the region.

But looking at Light's photos, it is hard not to feel somehow that his message is forced, misleading, an exaggeration. Light, who lives in Berkeley, California, writes that television accounts of Mississippi civil rights violence he saw as a child left him "filled with anticipation" as he first drove from Memphis into Mississippi "in the dead of night." Maybe it was overanticipation that accounts for the cliché quality of many of his pictures. It seems as though Light is thinking: *My God, look at all that cotton. Look at all that black skin. Look! Those people are actually working in that cotton! We get, then, lots of ho-hum photos—shotgun shacks surrounded by billowy fields of cotton, a white boss directing a black field worker, barefoot children, black prison work gangs. Some seem more than a little contrived: a shot of a hooded Klansman on a television screen; a glum-faced young field worker peering through the metal fencing of cotton wagon.*

These pictures might be fine if they were balanced by the rest of

the story in the Delta. Here, we are asked to believe in a backward, black world from which there is no escape, no trace of modernity, no Wal-Mart. Real poverty, of course, can be found in the Delta, and Light has proven there is no trick in finding it. But he uses it to cobble the most hardcore portrayal possible of the region. His portrayal is too pat, too easy. It leaves out too much. A book called *Delta Time* could, and ought to, do more.

Another, earlier book by—oddly—the same title points up the glaring flaws of Light's work. Tony Dunbar, in *Delta Time: A Journey Through Mississippi* (1990), paints a more balanced—and real—portrait of both black and white life in the Delta. In one chapter, Dunbar takes a day's car ride through the little towns of Midnight and Louise with a black school worker, Tiny Man Brown. Their conversation is more illuminating than Light's pictures. Federal money has brought school lunches and clean water, notes Tiny. Brick houses with running water and indoor toilets have pushed aside many, but not all, the plantation shacks. Catfish rivals cotton as the Delta's top crop. Folks have cars to drive to good stores, and blacks hold elected office. Looking at a white woman no longer gets you killed, and the Klan is finished. "Don't nobody hoe no more," says Brown, surveying a highly mechanized plantation.

Well, Light found some who do. He found much of what still ails the Delta. Credit him for offering a strong point of view in his book. But his *Delta Time* is regrettably misleading.

—Wesley Loy

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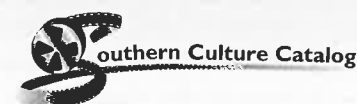
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Karen Glynn earned her MA in Southern Studies from the University of Mississippi in 1995. A documentary film researcher, she currently works with photographs and home movie collections at the University of Mississippi.

Alan Huffman is a freelance writer and partner in a writing and research business in Jackson, MS. He is currently working on the text for a book on the photographs of Florence West Huffman, and on a novel, *Zion*.

Wesley Loy is a graduate student in the Southern Studies program at the University of Mississippi. He received his undergraduate degree in journalism in 1984 from the University of Tennessee, and later wrote for newspapers in Orlando, Florida, and Anchorage, Alaska.

Tom Rankin is Associate Professor of Art and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi.

Wiley Charles Prewitt, Jr. is a doctoral candidate in History at the University of Mississippi. He is currently curating an exhibition for the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science on the history of the conservation movement in Mississippi.

Aimee Schmidt served as a documentary field researcher on the Ichauway Documentary Project and currently is Folklife Specialist for the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture. Part I of her two-part series on Biloxi appears in Volume 28, No. 1 of *Mississippi Folklife*.

Marion Post Wolcott worked for the Farm Security Administration from 1938 to 1941. She traveled to the Mississippi Delta at age 29 where she made the photographs included in this issue.

Charles M. Yarborough, managing editor of *Mississippi Folklife*, teaches history at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. His most recent publication is a cultural history of the Georgia-Florida Baseball League in the *Journal of South-west Georgia History*.

# Mexican Farm Workers in the MISSISSIPPI DELTA

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARION POST WOLCOTT

Introduction by Tom Rankin

In 1938, Marion Post Wolcott, then 28 years old, joined the Farm Security Administration as a documentary photographer. Her first assignments were in the South where she traveled photographing agriculture and rural culture with an emphasis on the effects of the Depression and the work of the Farm Security Administration.

Wolcott traveled to the Mississippi Delta in 1939, returning again in 1940. Wolcott's challenges were similar to those faced by other FSA photographers during the same period. As F. Jack Hurley explains in his biography of Wolcott, this often meant having a deep understanding of southern culture and finding ways to move between races and classes. "Obviously many of these programs [agricultural relief programs] were controversial," asserts Hurley in *Marion Post Wolcott: A Photographic Journey*. "Wealthy cotton planters, for example, did not like to see a federal agency offering their laborers a better way of life."<sup>1</sup> Photographers such as Wolcott had to develop ways "to get along with local administrators or even police chiefs who might not share the central office's views on race relations or collective farming or planned villages for stranded workers."<sup>2</sup> Wolcott brought to her task as a documentary photographer a knowledge of the cultural context, sympathy toward her subject matter, and the ability to move from a meeting with a planter in the big house to the laborer in the field. All this took time, remarked Wolcott in a letter to Roy Stryker, director of the Historical Section of the FSA: "If you only knew what it takes and *how long* at times, to estab-



lish oneself at a place with people. They don't just say, go ahead. They have to personally escort you and tour you around, or have a manager or someone else do it."<sup>3</sup>

In October 1939, Wolcott left Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she had been photographing in the Carolina Piedmont in collaboration with Howard Odum, and drove to the deep South to document the cotton harvest in the Mississippi Delta. The cotton was ready to pick and Wolcott focused on the harvest. The pictures below portray Mexican



Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30562-M4.

migrant labor, often used by Delta planters to pick cotton. Though seldom acknowledged in written or photographic descriptions of the Delta, Mexican labor played a major role in the agriculture of the Mississippi Delta. Wolcott's photographs of Mexican labor at Perthshire Plantation near Gunnison in Bolivar County and from an unidentified plantation in Cohoama County depict African American tenants working alongside the migrant laborers in the final years of hand-harvested cotton. While many Mexican farm workers moved through the Delta and on to another

region at the end cotton picking, some did stay as evidenced by the Hispanic populations of Bolivar County today.

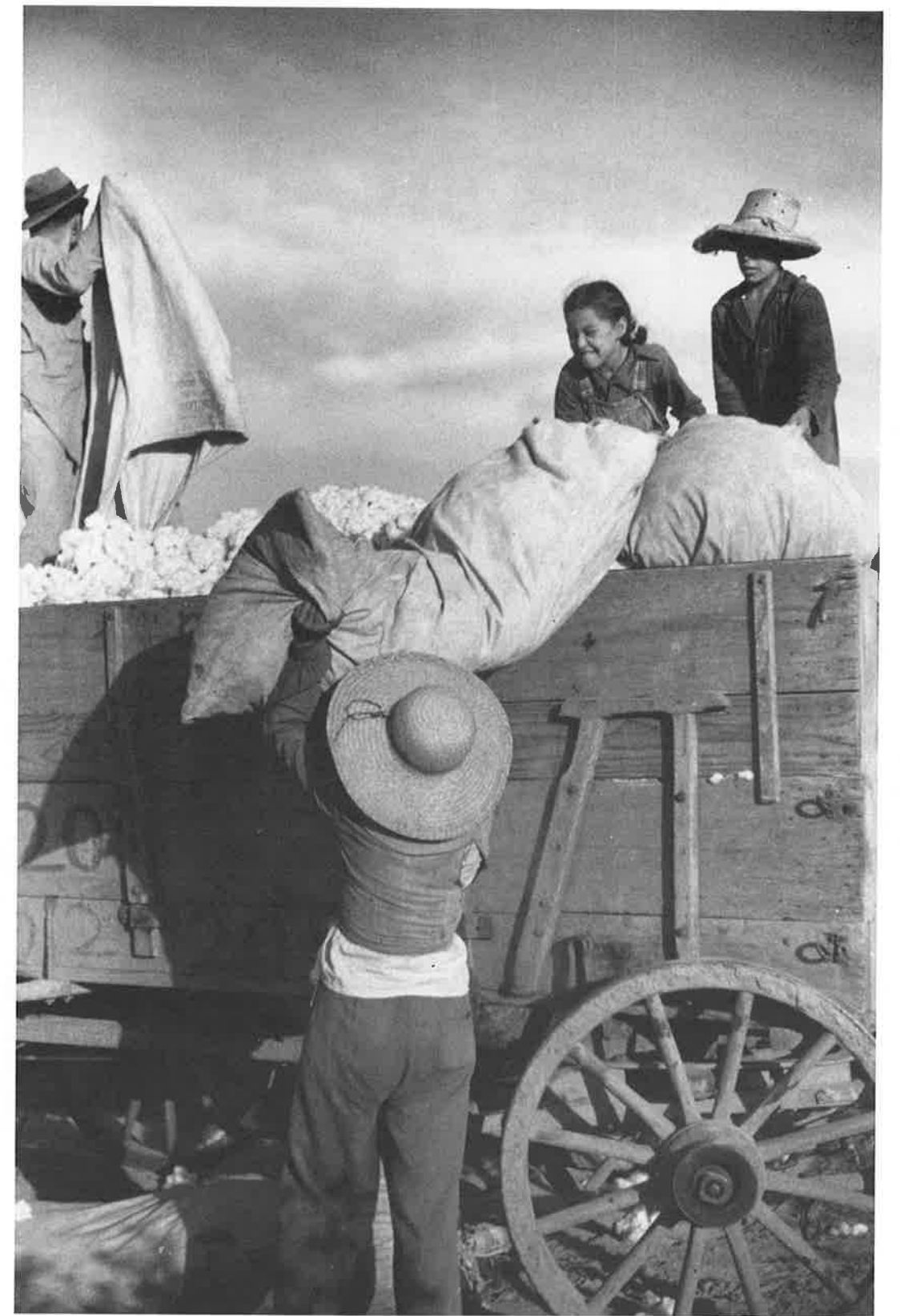
## Notes

1. F. Jack Hurley, *Marion Post Wolcott: A Photographic Journey*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), p. 27.
2. Ibid, p. 30.
3. Post to Stryker, October 25, 1939, Stryker Papers, Photographic Archive, University of Louisville.





Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30560-M3.



Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30563-M4.





Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30536-M1.



Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30560-M1.



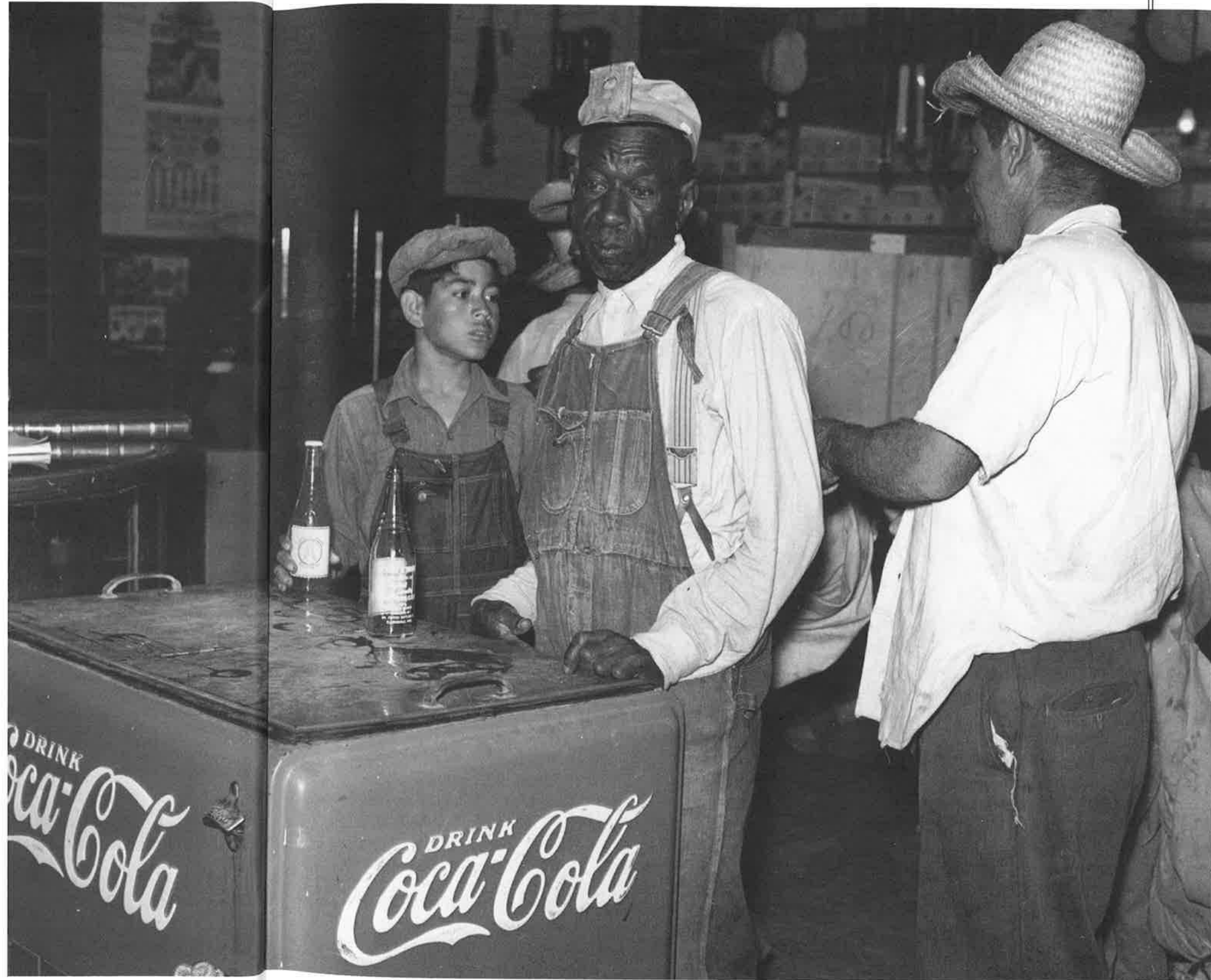
Clarksdale area, August 1940, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30622-M3.



Perthshire Plantation Commissary, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF34-52242D.



Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF34-52247D.

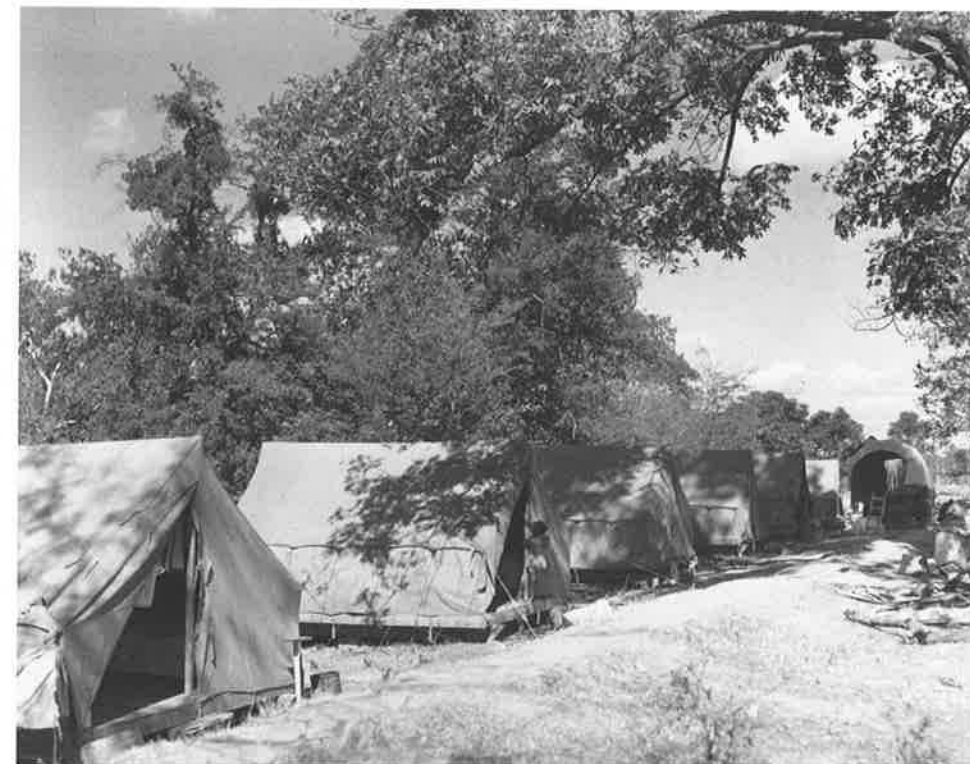


Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF34-52248D.





Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October, November 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30643-M3.



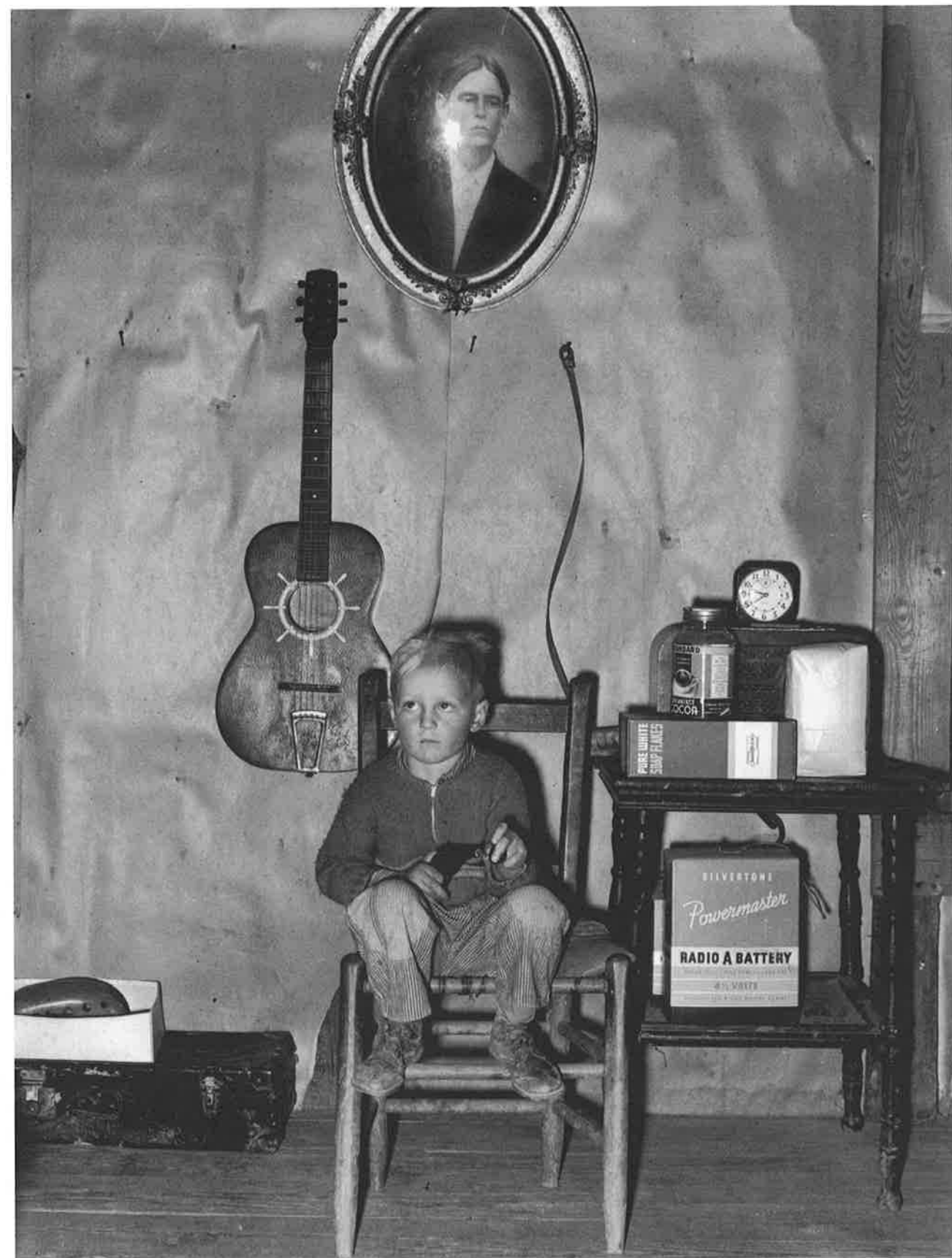
Perthshire Plantation, Gunnison MS, October-November 1939, Library of Congress, LC-USF34-52592D.



Clarksdale Area, August 1940, Library of Congress, LC-USF33-30644-M3.



# PARTING HANDS



Russell Lee, Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress

Near Pace, MS, Bolivar County, 1939.

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