

# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

A JOURNAL OF POLITICS & CULTURE

VOL. XXII NO. 2 \$5.00

## Black, White and Brown

The hard lessons learned  
40 years after *Brown v.*  
*Board of Education*

**ALSO** *The Great Riverboat Gamble*  
*Swamps and Slave Rebellions*



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# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

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*From the Editor*

**W**hen we published a special cover section entitled "Poverty, Inc." last fall detailing how predatory lenders exploit the poor, we knew it was an important story. Reporters Mike Hudson, Barry Yeoman, and Adam Feuerstein exposed how millions of low-income and minority consumers have been targeted by pawn shops, trade schools, and other financial predators owned by corporate giants like Ford, Westinghouse, and American Express.

What we didn't know was how much attention the story would receive. Calls have been coming in from *The New York Times*, *ABC Prime Time Live*, and consumer advocates fighting for tougher lending laws. Project Censored at Sonoma State University ranked the investigation among the top 10 stories of 1993 ignored by the mainstream media (our second such selection in four years). The story was also chosen as a finalist for a National Magazine Award (our second) and an Alternative Press Award (our seventh), and was further honored with the Sidney Hillman Award (our second).

Shortly after the Hillman Award was announced, we heard from our friend Sol Stetin, former president of the Textile Workers Union of America. He wasn't writing to congratulate us, though. It turns out he had a bone to pick with us about an article in our spring issue on the 20th anniversary of the landmark union victory at J.P. Stevens in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina.

"Your otherwise excellent article was marred by an error in fact," Stetin wrote. In summing up the history of the organizing drive, we mentioned in passing that TWUA "was on its last legs financially" when it merged with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) in 1976 "to avoid bankruptcy."

"On the contrary," Stetin informed us, "TWUA went into that merger with net assets totaling \$13,607,000. TWUA merged with ACWA to create an even larger, stronger union, to mobilize and help Southern textile and clothing workers to become unionized, and to carry on the struggle for a first collective bargaining contract at J.P. Stevens. That struggle was successful in 1980. In unity, there is strength!"

To set the record straight, Stetin included a copy of the TWUA financial statement for 1976, as well as a commentary on the merger that appeared in the December 1977 issue of *The Nation*. "Sol Stetin's surrender of his office stands out as a notable exception to the egocentricity of labor's captains," the article noted. "His sacrifice made possible some of the most progressive developments now taking place in the American labor movement, for had he not relinquished his presidency there would today be no nationwide boycott of J.P. Stevens products and no serious drive to organize that huge Southern textile company."

Our erroneous information about the financial status of the union came from an October 29, 1980 article in *The Guardian* entitled "Union Wins Stevens Contract." The newsweekly — usually a reliable source for labor news — reported that the failure of organizing drives in the South coincided with a steady decline in TWUA membership in the North "to the point where the union nearly went broke."

In an ironic footnote, *The Guardian* itself was forced to close up shop a few years ago. It went broke. Sol Stetin, at 84, is still fighting.

—Eric Bates

*"Sol Stetin's  
surrender of  
his office stands  
out as a notable  
exception to the  
egocentricity  
of labor's  
captains."*

## NEW SOUTH, NEW FLAG

**A**s black Southerners continue to pressure officials across the region to remove racist symbols from state flags and school functions, South Carolina high school student Shellmira Green has found herself caught in the crossfire over the Confederate battle flag.

On March 1, Shellmira and two dozen other students at Stratford High School in Goose Creek attended class wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the "New South flag." The increasingly popular symbol of black pride makes over the Confederate battle flag in red, black, and green — the same colors used in the Black Liberation flag designed by Marcus Garvey.

Some white students considered the shirts "offensive" and complained to school officials. When the principal ordered the students to remove their shirts, all but Shellmira complied. She was told to leave school.

"White students wear T-shirts that bear the Confederate flag in the traditional colors all the time," Shellmira's mother, Clarion McNeil, told the *Charleston Chronicle*. "Some have racial remarks on them like '100 percent Cotton, You Picked It.' But when my daughter wore a shirt that has nothing offensive on it, she was suspended."

When Shellmira returned to school on March 4, officials suspended her for another seven days for allegedly threatening a student who harassed her in the hallway. Faced with media attention over the suspension, school officials

## BUSINESS CENSORS ANTI-RACIST ART

**T**wo Tennessee artists were censored recently when they took part in an art exhibit to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the strike by Memphis sanitation workers and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Nineteen artists from the region participated in "Windows of the Dream," a series of 11 installations in the windows of empty buildings in downtown Memphis along the path that the striking sanitation workers traveled in daily marches to City Hall during 1968. One installation, "The Dream Deferred," was covered and then removed after owners of the commercial building where the piece was on display received several complaints.

The piece included two doll-like caricatures, one black, the other white, lynched from a tree set against a backdrop of garbage. Nashville artist Barbara Bullock, who is black, created the black figure and Ath-

ens artist LeeAnn Mitchell, who is white, created the white figure.

Albert Fulmer, spokesperson for the building owners, claimed the company had received a number of calls from people who found the sculpture "offensive." Dismissing the piece as "a political statement," Fulmer said removing the work was not censorship, but rather a "problem" with the message.

"If a piece gives the wrong or unclear message, then that's what needs to be addressed," he told the *National Campaign for Freedom of Expression Bulletin*.

A public symposium addressing the role of public art, free expression, and what is and isn't acceptable for "public visual consumption" followed the opening of the series. But according to artist Barbara Bullock, the forum "solved nothing" because those who dismantled the project refused to participate. Artists are planning a second forum to develop strategies to combat censorship.

portrayed Shellmira — an honor student who hasn't missed a day of school in over two years — as having a history of disciplin-

ary problems.

Although Shellmira has returned to school, she may have to repeat the 10th grade if she cannot make up her absence. "She's a walking target," says her mother. "We know that she'll be punished for the least thing she does."

On March 6, more than 200 people attended a community rally at a Charleston church to support Shellmira. The local NAACP is calling her the new Rosa Parks. And the New South flag, which began as a promotion for a local rap group called da Phlayva, is becoming a widely respected symbol of Southern black liberation.

"It's time to move forward and leave the past behind," says Mel Davis, vice president of Vertical Records in Charleston, which designed the flag. "Transforming the

Confederate battle flag with the African-American colors and claiming the victory for black and whites alike is a way to take away the power from the old symbol and what it represents."

The battle over the "Stars and Bars" is nothing new in South Carolina. The first Confederate state is the last to fly the flag above its Capitol. Lawmakers raised the banner 32 years ago in response to the civil rights movement.

In April, more than 100 demonstrators gathered outside the legislature to protest during a public hearing on the future of the flag. Black activists want it removed, calling it a symbol of hate, while some whites argue that the flag of the Confederacy represents all Southerners.

"It's a little of both," white demonstrator Sam Loftis told *The Atlanta Constitution*. "On my part, it's hate. I don't like blacks."



SHELLMIRA GREEN WEARS THE NEW SOUTH FLAG.

Photos by Tom Spini/Poli and Courier

State Senator Darrell Jackson has proposed flying the flag only on the Capitol lawn during the month of April, which would be designated Confederate History Month. The plan calls for implementing the study of Confederate history in public schools — even though the state has never developed a curriculum for Black History Month.

African-American activists condemned the proposal. “This resolution states that Confederate history is worthy of our respect,” talk-show host Listervelt Middleton told the South Carolina Black Media Group. “This gives official recognition to the flag on a level it had not enjoyed before.”

—Rafael Murray

## FREEDOM RIDERS RETURN SOUTH

George Houser's voice falls, and he begins to sing softly:

*“You don't have to ride Jim Crow.*

*You don't have to ride Jim Crow.*

*On June the third, the High Court said:*

*When you ride interstate, Jim Crow is dead.*

*You don't have to ride Jim Crow!”*

Houser and fellow civil rights activist Bayard Rustin penned that song in 1947 as a musical accompaniment to the very first “Freedom Ride” — the non-violent campaign to desegregate Southern buses. In March, Houser sang the lyrics once more as he accompanied four other veterans of the Journey of Rec-

onciliation who retraced their route through the region for the filming of a documentary entitled *You Don't Have to Ride Jim Crow*.

Houser, Rustin, and 14 other activists organized the Freedom Rides a year after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation in interstate busing was unconstitutional. Traveling in interracial pairs, the men challenged Southern mores — and local Jim Crow laws — by sitting together in the front seats of buses across the upper South.

For two weeks, they rode Greyhound and Trailways buses from Washington, D.C. to Lexington, Kentucky, lecturing at mass meetings along the way. In a time of relative quiet on the civil rights front, the young riders — many of them ministers and pacifists — were arrested, sentenced to hard labor, threatened with mob violence, and nearly lynched.

They challenged bus policy 26 times, and they were arrested 16 times. A mob of angry taxi drivers threatened four riders who were arrested in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, hitting one in the face and vowing to burn down the house of the local minister who sheltered them.

For Nathan Wright, however, the confrontation in Chapel Hill was not nearly as frightening as a

later trip through Tennessee. “It was a night of terror that I shall never ever forget,” recalls the black priest. “A purported lynch mob plotted in my hearing just when and where they would take me and the others off the bus, and then lynch us, presumably. Nothing happened to us, fi-



GEORGE HOUSER AND WALLY NELSON (RIGHT) RETRACED THEIR FREEDOM RIDES FOR A DOCUMENTARY.

nally, but all through the night we felt almost certain that we were to be lynched — it was just a matter of where and when.”

How much has changed since those days of terror and intimidation? “I don't think we've achieved total equality — except in public transportation,” says Joe Felmet, a rider from Asheville, North Carolina. “But certainly in society as a whole, in my view, the status of African Americans has improved mightily.”

Felmet points out that 50 years ago, he and his compatriots couldn't stay in the same hotel. But on this year's journey of remembrance, they rode together on the bus, shared hotel rooms, ate in restaurants as a group — even strolled casually together through police stations where they had once been arrested.

Other surviving riders agreed that the civil rights movement produced tremendous change, but emphasized that African Americans and other oppressed peoples face more complicated and subtle forms of racism today.

“There is plenty of

racism in the United States,” says Houser, a white minister who helped found the Congress of Racial Equality, an activist group which sponsored the Freedom Ride. “We run into it all the time, but not in as simple a form as we are used to. It is different in that it deals with the problems of education, jobs, homes, poverty, drugs — the whole ball of wax.”

Houser notes that black people have more power now than they did a half century ago. “Therefore, they can express their rage in a way that they could not in the pre-civil rights revolution period. They now are able to take action, even though it may be violent and illegal. They can get away with it. And that's tough for whites to take.”

## MISSISSIPPI MUD

A Mississippi manufacturer has found a particularly dirty way to get rid of toxic waste — just dump it in your neighbor's sewers. For the past three years, Thomas & Betts has been using the Memphis sewer system to dispose of waste containing up to 200 times the legal limits of zinc, copper, and other hazardous metals. Mississippi officials weren't monitoring Memphis sewers, and Memphis officials lacked the authority to regulate a Mississippi company. As a result, city officials say the firm has “the most consistent record of documented violations” of any firm in the area. Thomas & Betts spokeswoman Barbara Drabowicz insists the company is “really concerned about the environment.”

## FOOL'S GOLD

Forget about the information superhighway — Texas A&M is still trying to come to terms with the Dark Ages. A project by Dr. John Bockris drew fire from his colleagues as well as a university audit last March after he used a \$200,000 private donation for his alchemy experiments. Despite centuries of research to support the contrary, Bockris says his efforts to turn mercury and other base metals into gold showed “tiny, scientifically interesting” success.

African Americans do feel a sense of rage, says Wright. "That is a good sign, because when blacks get angry — as they should have been doing — then things will change. You cannot expect to be liberated by the efforts of your oppressors. You have got to bring that about yourself."

Wally Nelson, a black pacifist and fellow Freedom Rider, agrees. "If you allow yourself to be a slave," he says, "you are participating in your own slavery."

Refusing to ride Jim Crow, adds Nelson, was just one way to take a stand against oppression. "This was my way of saying, 'Take your foot off my neck. You must treat me as a human being.'"

— Liz Enochs

## SOUTHERN CHILDREN LACK INSURANCE

As the debate over national health insurance heats up in Congress, a new study indicates that the constituency most in need of reform may be the one without a vote.

According to a report by the non-profit Children's Defense Fund, 8.5 million children in the United States are not covered by

health insurance. Most defy stereotypes of the uninsured: More than two-thirds are from families with incomes above the poverty line and married-couple families, and three-quarters are white.

"Contrary to much popular conventional wisdom," the report states, "children without health insurance are not mainly poor, minority children from unem-ployed, single-parent families."

In fact, the most striking discrepancy in coverage is based on geography. According to the report, Southern youth are 50 percent less likely than other children to have insurance. Every Southern state except Tennessee and Georgia has an insurance level worse than the national average. Texas, where one in four children is uninsured, ranks dead last.

"A child's ability to get health insurance should not depend on a geographical accident of birth," says the report, entitled *The Health Insurance Crisis for America's Children*. "If health reform with universal coverage is enacted, a child in Texas will be entitled to the same access to health care as a child in Minnesota."

What's more, the report notes, the lack of health insurance for children is getting worse. Between 1987 and 1992, the ratio of children covered by employer-based insurance fell to less than 60

## INSURING THE FUTURE

Nearly one in six Southern children is not covered by health insurance — a rate far worse than the national average.

	# Uninsured	% Uninsured
Alabama	204,382	18
Arkansas	130,275	19
Florida	558,536	18
Georgia	200,513	12
Kentucky	122,405	14
Louisiana	211,133	19
Mississippi	136,407	17
N. Carolina	209,604	14
S. Carolina	139,705	15
Tennessee	147,906	12
Texas	1,100,963	23
Virginia	229,804	14
W. Virginia	64,017	14
<b>South</b>	<b>3,453,650</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Non-South</b>	<b>4,814,350</b>	<b>10</b>

Source: Children's Defense Fund

percent. If the trend continues, barely half of all children will be covered by employer-based insurance by the year 2000.

Children aren't losing insurance because their parents have stopped working. "The decrease in employment-related insurance is not due to changes in the working status of family members," the report emphasizes. "Despite the recession, the percentage of children living in families with at least one working member has barely fluctuated."

The report blames employers and insurers for slashing benefits and raising premiums. "For two decades, employer cost-cutting and the rising cost of health insurance have forced millions of children out of the private health insurance system," says Marian Wright Edelman, CDF president. "Children's health and the public treasury are left to pick up the tab."

The report warns that such cost-cutting may save business

some money in the short term, but will cost everyone more in the long run. "The greater the number of uninsured children, the greater the cost to our society in both human and financial terms. Early preventive care and access to medical care in general produces a healthier child and therefore a healthier adult. An investment in the good health of our children is an investment in a healthier future citizenry."

The only way to insure that investment, says Edelman, is to enact health care reform that guarantees universal coverage. "Too many employers have ignored their responsibility for the well-being of their employees' families. Too often, families who work lose care for their children. We need to change the system to make sure that every American child has health security that can never be taken away."

For a copy of the report, contact the Children's Defense Fund, 25 E Street NW, Washington, DC 20001.

## GEORGIA CUTS TREES FOR BILLBOARDS

Two years ago, an environmental group called Trees Atlanta began a multi-million-dollar project to spruce up the city in time for the 1996 Summer Olympics. The plan: plant thousands of trees to provide shade and greenery for the millions of spectators expected to travel to Atlanta to watch the games.

Unfortunately, the 3M National Advertising Company has a different idea of what's beautiful.

## RAISING A STINK

Louisiana residents who live along the toxic corridor known as "Cancer Alley" are accustomed to unpleasant odors from nearby petrochemical plants. But when 50 trucks unloaded oil waste at the Campbell Wells dump in Houma last March, the stench was so overpowering that many residents complained to the state. An inspection concluded that the waste may have contained hydrogen sulfide, commonly known as "rotten egg" gas. Exposure to the fumes can cause headaches, dizziness, convulsions, and comas.

## A MESSY SHOT

Nashville golfers can rest assured that nothing will come between them and their game. When a sewer line that runs through McCabe Park golf course began leaking last March, city officials decided to delay repairs to keep the greens open. As a result, raw sewage overflowed from manholes in a nearby neighborhood. While golfers played through, children played in a field strewn with used condoms, sanitary napkins, and other waste. "I couldn't figure out why the snow wasn't melting," said resident Susan Fletcher, "so I went out there to look and it was toilet paper."





## SMOKING BANS GO UP IN SMOKE

**B**acked by the powerful tobacco lobby, Tennessee lawmakers have taken a giant leap backward in the fight to protect non-smokers from the dangers of second-hand smoke. In April, both houses of the state legislature passed a bill giving the state sole authority over smoking regulation — effectively preventing local governments from enacting anti-smoking ordinances.

"The General Assembly intends to occupy and pre-empt the entire field of legislation concerning the regulation of tobacco products," states the new law. Although many legislators were confused about the intent of the bill, only five members of the House and eight members of the Senate voted against it. Tobacco is the

top cash crop in Tennessee, bringing in \$227 million a year.

"The tobacco lobby got what they wanted," says State Senator Bud Gilbert, a Republican from Knoxville. "They don't have the resources to influence every city and county government, and now they don't have to."

State Representative Roy Herron of Dresden was one of the few lawmakers who voted against the bill. "My father died of heart disease and my brother-in-law died of cancer," he told the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal*. "Both of them were smokers. I can't vote for any bill that would keep local governments from protecting their citizens from second-hand smoke."

When 22 trees growing in downtown Atlanta began to block billboards advertising Kodak film and Coca-Cola, 3M lopped five feet off the tops of the offending sugar maples, elms, and magnolias.

"We basically have the right to maintain the visibility of our advertising displays," 3M District Manager Arnie Roesse told *The Atlanta Constitution*. "We also secured permission from the property owner to trim the trees."

In fact, many of the trees were on city property — and Georgia

is the only Southeastern state that forbids billboard companies to trim trees on public land. "If we cut trees on city property, then we made a serious error," Roesse said.

The downtown trees weren't the only ones assaulted to clear the way for billboards. More than a dozen

large trees at the subway station on Piedmont Road fared even

worse when officials allowed Capitol Outdoor Advertising Company to do some "light pruning." When the company was

done, more than 10 feet of growth had been whacked off the 15-year-old trees.

"Those trees gave dignity and greenery to concrete-covered swaths along Pied-

mont Road," said Marcia Bansley, head of Trees Atlanta. "They were

*A new study shows that planting trees can save millions of dollars.*

like an oasis, but now that's gone."

Other civil leaders were also outraged. "I am furious," said Ronnie French, head of Atlanta Downtown Partnership. "If something is not done to prevent it, we're going to have many city trees with flattops by the time the Olympics get here."

Something is being done — but not to save the trees. The Outdoor Advertising Citizens Advisory Council of the Georgia Department of Transportation met in April for the first time since it was established in 1980 to approve guidelines that would allow billboard companies to trim thousands of trees along state roads.

Billboard backers say the trees are hurting the Georgia economy. "Travelers aren't able to read the signs," says State Representative Jimmy Benefield, chair of the council. "The DOT has letters from a number of out-of-state businesses saying they won't locate here until the tree issue is resolved."

A new study by the U.S. Forest Service, however, shows that planting trees in cities and suburbs can actually save millions of dollars by naturally cooling buildings, reducing pollution, and preventing erosion.

"We think beauty is good business for the state," says Jay Dee Agee, chair of the Garden Clubs of Georgia. "The eyes of the world will be on Georgia in 1996. People won't come to Georgia to see billboards. We think it's wrong to destroy the natural resources of the state for the economic benefit of a few."

— Raphael Murray

## BURNING WEAPONS SPARKS PROTEST

**P**eople in Anniston, Alabama don't often question the Army. The military is the area's largest employer, and grassroots activism isn't very fashionable in this conservative community.

So when 300 residents marched down Main Street in April to protest plans to burn aging chemical weapons stored at



## SEE NO EVIL

Tennessee apparently turns a blind eye to dangerous drivers. In April, Lyal Salyer was sentenced to three years of probation for striking and killing Donald Adams and his eight-year-old son Joel while the two were bicycling. Salyer is legally blind — and has a valid driver's license. Shortly after the fatal accident, the state Department of Safety sent Salyer a form letter offering to renew his license. When widow Suzanne Adams asked the court to bar Salyer from driving again, she was told that he can legally be back behind the wheel once he completes his probation.



the nearby Anniston Army Depot, it was bound to attract attention.

Carrying signs saying “No Burn” and “Incineration Emits Poisons,” the marchers rallied in opposition to Army efforts to burn tens of thousands of nerve and mustard gas munitions stored at its sprawling installation about 10 miles west of town. One organizer called the demonstration “invigorating.”

“I’m very concerned,” says Vickie Tolbert, a graphic designer and leader of the opposition to the planned incinerator. “I think it’s evident that if people do not stand up and voice their concerns about this issue, we will be burning in Anniston.”

After years of studies and snafus, plans for the embattled incinerator are burning brighter. A trial incinerator is up and running on a remote island in the Pacific, and a Utah plant is undergoing start-up tests. Anniston is next; after a long-awaited report by outside researchers in February offered

qualified support for incineration, the Army announced it will begin work as soon as the state provides the needed environmental permits. Similar facilities are planned for six other chemical stockpiles nationwide.

risks. At the Pacific island facility earlier this year, human error led to a nerve gas release above federal limits.

“I think that incineration is unsafe, it’s unhealthy, and it has not been adequately studied by the

out burning them.

Army brass now acknowledge that neutralization should have been studied more closely, but insist that extensive safeguards have been added to the incinerator. What’s more, a few of the decaying weapons have sprung leaks, and officials say the risk of continued storage outweighs the danger of incineration.

Incinerator opponents are continuing a congressional letter-writing campaign, but it may be too late to stop the burning. Congress has imposed a deadline of 2004 to dispose of the arms, and the Army has already spent \$1.6 billion on the overall program.

Still, Suzanne Marshall and other incinerator foes remain determined. Community opposition is growing. Delay long enough, Marshall says, and the day will come when the government concedes that another destruction technology is viable.

“I have to believe that,” says Marshall, “because that’s what we’re working for.”

— Sean Reilly

Compiled by Rafael Murray. Illustrations by Steven Cragg.

Readers are encouraged to submit news

articles to Roundup. Please send original clippings or photocopies with name and date of publication, or articles of no more than 500 words.



**THE ARMY SAYS BURNING CHEMICAL WEAPONS IS SAFE, BUT MANY ANNISTON RESIDENTS DISAGREE.**

Despite government assurances that incineration is safe, residents in Anniston and several other locations worry that burning decades-old rockets, mortars, and land mines will spew hazardous by-products carrying unknown health and environmental

Army to see what comes out,” says Suzanne Marshall, a history professor at a local university. She and other incineration foes want the Army to take a closer look at neutralization, a destruction method used in the 1970s to chemically alter weapons with-

## POULTRY GROWERS TAKE ON GOLIATH

“Once meek and private in their grumblings, contract poultry growers have risen up like figurative Davids taking on Goliaths,” a farm magazine observed this spring. A lot of credit for the turnaround goes to a North Carolina grower, one-time teacher, and Peace Corps volunteer, Mary Clouse.

Five years ago, Clouse told *SE* that raising poultry “is like being a serf on your own land” (“Ruling the Roost,” Summer 1989). Farmers go in debt to build chicken houses, then must depend on processors like Tyson and Perdue for a steady supply of chicks and feed. If the company doesn’t like their operations or their attitudes, it can stop the contract — and the cash flow they need for loan payments.

Understandably, few farmers talked as openly as Clouse. Soon after “Ruling the Roost” hit the national press, Townsends ended its longstanding contract with her family. With help from the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI-USA) and the Institute for Southern Studies (publisher of *SE*), she became a one-person army, reaching out to other growers, speaking at county meetings, tracking lawsuits against processors, mobilizing farm allies.

Slowly, she found other brave growers and became a clearinghouse for their grievances. With a list of 200 names, she began a newsletter. “It broke down the isolation,” Clouse recalls. “Growers realized they weren’t alone, that the problems weren’t their fault. And they learned they had real rights under the Packers and Stockyards Act (P&SA).”

Several legal victories proved farmers could beat the proces-

sors; one jury ordered ConAgra to pay \$17 million to 268 farmers it had cheated. In other cases, federal judges ordered birds put back on the farms of dissident growers. P&SA officials began speaking to hundreds of growers at meetings organized by a new cadre of farm leaders. Organizations like Farm Aid and the Farmers’ Legal Action Group offered financial and technical assistance. In October 1991, Clouse and RAFI-USA hosted a weekend workshop for leaders from nine states, and the National Contract Poultry Growers Association was born.

Today, the association has chapters in 15 states, and the *Poultry Grower News* reaches more than 30,000 readers. NCPGA pays a staff, runs the newsletter, holds education sessions, provides legal referrals, lobbies for laws to end one-sided

agricultural contracts, and is gearing up for a major campaign to strengthen the Packers & Stockyards Act. Member dues and services pay for everything.

“This has been remarkable,” says John Morrison, a Louisiana grower who is now NCPGA executive director. “It’s a testament to the magnitude of the problem and the courage of a lot of people to make things change.”

Poultry companies still label NCPGA members as radicals out to destroy the jobs of others. But a 1993 survey by Tyson Foods proves otherwise. More than half of Tyson’s growers don’t trust the methods used to calculate their pay, yet two-thirds would like to continue being poultry farmers.

“We are not out to force the companies into bankruptcy,” emphasizes Arthur Gaskins, a Florida farmer and president of

NCPGA. “We just want to work with them and have all of us make a good living.”

Processors are clearly on the defensive. This spring, Tyson, ConAgra, Gold Kist, and other companies shelled out \$90,000 in political donations to Alabama legislators, but only narrowly killed a bill giving growers more contract protections.

“We’re gaining strength,” says Gaskins. “It will take time. Ultimately, we need national legislation to get bargaining power to negotiate these contracts. Until then, I wouldn’t feel comfortable letting my son go into this business. You are just not treated fairly.”

The struggle has empowered many growers to speak out. “Losing our contract was probably the best thing that ever happened to my husband and me,” says Mary Clouse, who now works full time

*Photo by Rob Amberg*



**POULTRY GROWERS HAVE FORMED AN ASSOCIATION WITH CHAPTERS IN 15 STATES. “IT’S A TESTAMENT TO THE COURAGE OF A LOT OF PEOPLE,” SAYS LOUISIANA GROWER JOHN MORRISON.**

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### National Contract Poultry Growers Association

P.O. Box 824  
Ruston, LA 71213  
(800) 259-8100

### Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA

P.O. Box 1198  
Pittsboro, NC 27312  
(919) 542-1396

### Center for Women's Economic Alternatives

P.O. Box 1033  
Ahoskie, NC 27910  
(919) 332-4179

### Helping Hands Center

107 E. 2nd Street  
Siler City, NC 27344  
(919) 742-6100

with RAFI on poultry and related issues. "Until we stopped, we didn't realize how hard we worked for so little. It was really a life of drudgery. Getting out and meeting all these growers, going to new places, that was fun. I had to learn a lot about organizing. It's been hard work, and still is, but I'd never go back."

## POULTRY WORKERS FIGHT BACK

Poultry workers have also scored a few victories since "Ruling the Roost," though often at great cost. The devastating 1991 fire in Hamlet, North Carolina, produced a series of important reforms in the state's occupational safety and health laws, including more inspectors, stiffer fines, better training, and mandated safety committees in some plants.

But the benefits of those reforms have yet to materialize. Two years after the Hamlet fire, a poultry worker died in a nearby Carolina Turkey plant while cleaning a grinding machine that was not properly turned off. Wages remain low, fast assembly lines continue to cripple workers, and fear remains a potent obstacle to consistent organizing.

Several union drives have stalled after key activists lost their jobs, but workers have prevailed with new locals in the Deep South. The United Food & Commercial Workers has a new contract at one McCarty Foods plant in Mississippi, won an election at a sec-

ond, and is organizing a third. UFCW has also launched a concerted campaign to organize Simmons Industries in northwest Arkansas, a poultry stronghold and home base for Tyson Foods. "We're making a bigger commitment to organize poultry and service the locals we already have," says Debbie Berkowitz, UFCW health and safety director.

Nearly all the workers in the Deep South plants are African American, while those in north Arkansas are predominantly white and Native American. Latinos, who make up the industry's fastest growing labor pool, are waging a battle in east Texas against Bo Pilgrim, the legendary toughman who pays farmers even less than normal and who was caught handing out \$10,000 checks to state legislators during a battle to gut workers compensation.

Latino workers have filed dozens of claims against Pilgrim Pride, and the state has launched an investigation.

In North Carolina, chicken companies have paid thousands of dollars to settle complaints that they cheated workers out of their full pay. Federal officials have fined more poultry plants, but inspections remain a rarity and the injury rate hovers at twice the rate for other workers.

The Institute for Southern Studies and the Episcopal Diocese have helped launch a community-based organizing and health care project in the state's central region, and a second effort has begun in the Carolina Turkey area

with support from Black Workers for Justice. These two projects have now joined the Center for Women's Economic Alternatives (CWEA) in several joint actions, including hosting a Southwide poultry workers conference in June.

CWEA continues its battle with Perdue Farms in eastern North Carolina, where workers still face dangerous conditions. "We work in 28-degree temperature with water and chicken parts on the floor for eight hours," says Nancy Graham, a former worker. "And the smell of chlorine is so strong it makes you have dry coughs."

State officials claim a 1991 agreement with Perdue to reduce repetitive trauma disorders at its plants is working. "We've learned a great deal about how to prevent these injuries," says Mary Carol Lewis of the state Department of Labor. "This agreement is a model for what we'll offer other employers to cut down ergonomic problems." The program includes warm-up hand exercises and safety training, sharper knives and adjustable chairs, medical monitoring, and job rotation to reduce stress on the same few muscles.

But CWEA says the program doesn't address the central problem — the speed workers must perform their jobs — or correct other harmful conditions. "We've approached the state Labor Department numerous times," says CWEA director Liz Sessoms. "Their response has been they don't have enough inspectors. The women who file for worker compensation wind up getting fired or forced out. What happens is you have women unable to provide for their families ending up on welfare. What can a permanently disabled person do?"

Dissenting workers have yet

to experience the protection from retaliation that farmers gained under the P&SA. Out of 35,836 harassment complaints received from workers during the Reagan-Bush years, the U.S. Department of Labor litigated only eight cases. A coalition of labor advocates is trying to overhaul federal OSHA, pointing to the need for in-plant health-and-safety committees to replace absentee inspectors. But industry allies have thus far sidetracked reform efforts in Congress, saying stronger regulations are too costly and will mean fewer jobs.

In effect, the industry is being subsidized by a steady supply of low-wage workers — and the subsidy continues with government disability or welfare programs for the maimed and displaced. In the long run, ending this trickle-up system of subsidies would advance rural economic development far more than all the nice-sounding strategies proposed by liberal politicians and think tanks.

— Bob Hall

Bob Hall is research director with the Institute for Southern Studies. Contributing editor Ron Nixon assisted with this article.

*In North Carolina, chicken companies have paid thousands of dollars to settle complaints that they cheated workers out of their full pay.*

# The Great Riverboat Gamble

MISSISSIPPI BETS FLOATING CASINOS  
WILL PAY OFF IN JOBS AND TAXES,  
BUT THE WAGER HAS ALSO RAISED  
RENTS AND HIGHWAY DEATHS.

By Jenny Labalme

**TUNICA, MISS.** — Evon McGee has fresh tar on her street, but she still has tarpaper on the walls of her home.

McGee and her two children live in a rotting wooden house in a poor neighborhood called “the old subdivision.” Her street was paved recently, thanks to millions in tax revenues generated by six riverboat casinos. The barges float in ringed-off pools on the Mississippi River seven miles outside of town, their decks overflowing with weekend gamblers from Memphis and Nashville, Little Rock and Birmingham.

Unfortunately, few of the coins that tourists drop in the slot machines find their way back to local residents like McGee. She can’t get a job on the riverboats because she doesn’t own a car, and no buses run from her neighborhood to the casinos. Since the riverboats dropped anchor two years ago, her rent has jumped by 22 percent — an extra

expense she can barely afford on her fixed monthly income of \$605 in welfare and food stamps.

“I’m barely keeping food for the kids,” she says. “But we make do.”

Mississippi has gone gangbusters



EVON MCGEE AND HER SON

after riverboats since 1990, when it became the first of six states to approve waterfront gambling. With a low wagering tax, lax regulation, and no limit on the number of boats, Mississippi now ranks second only to Nevada for the most casinos in the nation.

“Mississippi’s whole philosophy has been we’ll let anyone in who’s honest and let the best people survive,” says Larry Pearson, publisher of *Riverboat Gaming Report*, a casino industry newsletter.

Pearson and other gambling proponents say the casinos bring jobs, tourists, and tax revenues to the cash-strapped state. But the flotilla of boats also brings a fleet of problems.

Cities like Tunica deluged with boats spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on road, water, and sewer improvements that aren’t funded by casino dollars. Small-town merchants watch in frustration as tourists spend most of their time and money

on the boats. And in a black-majority county that ranks among the 30 poorest in the nation, the casino boom has raised rents, created a housing shortage, and done little to raise the standard of living.

"We still have poverty," says Calvin Norwood, president of the Tunica County chapter of the NAACP. "All the money from casinos is going for new roads."

Charles Dawson, a fellow NAACP member, is more blunt. "The casinos haven't done anything," he says. "They haven't done nothing for nobody."

### NEVADA VAULTS

Southern gamblers have always found plenty of ways to lose their hard-earned money. Riverboats have sailed the Mississippi since the 1830s, and bets have long been placed at horse races, dog tracks, cock fights, county fairs, itinerant carnivals, and crap shoots.

In recent years, more and more Southern states struggling to make ends meet have looked to legalized gambling to help pay the bills. Georgia expects to rake in a record \$1.1 billion in the first year of its state-sponsored lottery, and Louisiana has upped the ante with video poker machines.

Mississippi has led the way with riverboat gambling. After two years, the state already boasts two dozen riverboats — more than half the nation's total — and the number could reach 41 by the end of the year.

Louisiana has four boats open for business, with more on the way, and other Southern states and Indian reservations may soon follow. A Dallas corporation has hired high-powered lobbyists to persuade South Carolina legislators to legalize casinos, and several Memphis officials want to sell Mud Island to a Native American tribe as a gambling resort.

"Texas and Florida will be the best

markets," says Daniel Davila, a gaming analyst with JW Charles Securities in Boca Raton, Florida. "Look at the demographics — especially in Florida, where there's a lot of disposable income with the elderly population."

Despite the conservative religious streak in the South, riverboats have failed to conjure up the Sodom and Gomorrah images of land-based casinos. "The American people — and I don't know why they decided this — think

legalized gambling activities is a naive government," says John Kindt, professor of commerce and legal policy at the University of Illinois.

Even so, the cash is pouring into state and county coffers. According to the Mississippi State Tax Commission, the state has collected \$98 million in tax revenues and local governments have garnered \$33 million since the first riverboat license was issued in July 1992.

But critics say that even larger volumes of cash are being washed away like silt down the Mississippi River. In the end, most of the riverboat money winds up in the vaults of Nevada casino giants like Lady Luck, Bally's, and Ameristar.

"No wealth is added to the community because you have Las Vegas people running the boats," says William Thompson, professor of public administration at the University of Nevada. "You're exporting the bulk of the money back to Las Vegas."

### "HURTS SO GOOD"

Nobody understands the elusive nature of casino money better than Tunica Mayor Bobby Williams. The riverboats flooded Tunica County with \$5 million in taxes last year — and this year the payoff should reach \$13 million. Before the casinos opened, the entire county budget was \$3.5 million.

But the city of Tunica doesn't get a dime. Since the boats are in the county — outside city limits — the money stays in the county. Yet the city has been forced to increase its spending to handle the crime, fire, and sewage generated by the boats.

"Casinos are tearing us up, they're costing us money," Williams says. "But it hurts so good."

The good: People are working. Since the boats arrived, the mayor says, jobs are plentiful. Local unemployment



Photos by Lauri Lawson

**ONE-ARMED BANDITS KNOWN AS SLOT MACHINES ATTRACT GAMBLERS LIKE OLA MAE OF MEMPHIS, BUT MOST OF THE COINS WIND UP IN LAS VEGAS.**

casino gambling on a boat is not as evil as on land," says Larry Pearson of *Riverboat Gaming Report*.

In Mississippi, most of the riverboats aren't even boats. The casinos are generally built on floating barges which remain dockside, allowing gamblers to come and go as they please. The state has lured casinos by allowing them to remain open 24 hours a day, and by offering a bargain-basement wagering tax of eight percent, compared to 20 percent in most other states.

Many say the low tax rate cheats the public out of its fair share of gambling profits. "Any state that's charging less than a 50 percent straight tax rate on all

dropped from 26 percent in 1992 to less than five percent during the first quarter of this year.

The bad: The city police department budget increased \$70,000 this year — a leap of 50 percent. The town of 2,000 also needs a new city hall that will cost taxpayers \$700,000.

"Before the boats, all we worried about was getting the mosquitoes killed in the spring and the garbage picked up," says the mayor. "Now we got sewage problems, we need a bigger police department, and we have to pay some volunteer firefighters."

A few casinos have given money to the city. Two oversized checks from the boats Splash and Lady Luck — each for \$100,000 — adorn the walls of the mayor's office. But neither that money nor inconsistent contributions of \$10,000 from all the boats to a fire fund are enough to pay for new equipment the fire department needs should a riverboat go up in flames.

"I think boat owners are a little ticked because we haven't hired any more firemen," Williams says. "But how can we if we don't have the money?"

As local business has picked up, the city has received some money from increased sales taxes. Retail sales jumped by 50 percent during the first year the boats opened, generating more than \$8,000 in revenues. Most of that money has gone to strengthen police protection.

Still, local officials complain that most of the business goes elsewhere. A few new restaurants have opened in town, but almost all the new motels are outside the city limits — and thus outside the reach of city sales taxes.

Area residents "are making good money, but they're spending it in Memphis and Desota County" north of Tunica, says Webster Franklin, director of the county Chamber of Commerce. "So Tunica County isn't reaping the benefits from retail sales."

### "NOT CASINO RICH"

The Blue & White Restaurant, popular for its meat and gravy dishes, has seen business double since the boats docked. Wiley Chambers, owner of the Blue & White since 1972, has doubled his seating capacity. Business seems brisk — until he sits down and scrutinizes his books.

"We're making a little more, but the overhead has increased quite a bit," he says. "We're not making a lot. We're not casino rich."

While business in Tunica has not

their three-room trailer near a bog, they shell out \$550 a month.

"I think it's way too much for a trailer," Laura says — especially considering the couple pays an extra \$50 a month for a wall that divides the back bedroom into two rooms. "It's kind of cheating that way."

Property values in Tunica have also skyrocketed. In 1992, an acre of land in the county sold for an average of \$250. Last year, the average going price was \$25,000.

Casinos dismiss such gloomy economic side effects, insisting that riverboats create jobs, and jobs boost the local economy. Harrah's casino, which opened six months ago, lists its economic contribution on a fact sheet: up to 3,000 customers daily, 900 local jobs, and an annual payroll of more than \$12 million.

Steven Rittvo, president of New Orleans-based Urban Systems Inc. and a leading gaming consultant, insists that 75 percent of all riverboat jobs are new. "What about the construction jobs the boats create?" he asks. "Those are all new."

But economics professors nationwide argue almost unani-

mously that casinos create few new jobs. With residents dropping their money at blackjack and poker tables, consumers actually spend less at area stores.

"Jobs are lost because dollars are drained from a scattered area," says Earl Grinols, economics professor at the University of Illinois. "It's a person laid off at Wal-Mart; it's a waitress working three-quarters time instead of full-time; or a restaurant that didn't expand because of the riverboat."

John Kindt, the commerce professor at Illinois, agrees. "It's not true to say this is economic development," he explains. "For legislators to look to it as a quick fix — for tax dollars up front — is poor legal policy."

Some Southern officials also doubt the wisdom of building an economy on slot machines. "A lot of states have



**HARRAH'S AND MOST OF THE OTHER RIVERBOATS IN TUNICA ARE NOTHING MORE THAN PALATIAL STRUCTURES BUILT ATOP DOCKSIDE BARGES.**

exactly boomed, residents have been stunned by how quickly the cost of living has soared. When Yvonne Woods was transferred to Tunica a year ago to manage the T-W-L variety store on Main Street, the cheapest house she could find in a neighborhood she liked cost \$400 a month.

"I couldn't find a place to live because the rent was so high," Woods says. So each day she commutes a half hour to Tunica from Helena, Arkansas, where she can afford her \$225 monthly rent.

Seven miles from Tunica, near the grassy levy that separates the riverboats from the cotton fields, stands a new, drab-gray trailer park with about 40 units. Robbie Alderson and his wife Laura have lived in the complex since Robbie came to work for a casino construction company six months ago. For

hooked their economies to gambling revenue, funding everything out of lotteries and casinos,” says South Carolina Governor Carroll Campbell. “Then all of a sudden they go down, and the state is stuck.”

### HIGH WAGES, HIGH SKIRTS

Tunica County remains ferociously poor — annual income is less than \$6,500 per person — and residents who have found jobs aboard the riverboats are glad to have them. Gale Williams, 22, had never worked before she signed up as a food server and hostess at Splash. She earns \$5.50 an hour — enough to move out of her parents’ home into her own place.

“It’s helped me get a lot of things I couldn’t get,” says Williams. “I have a place to live, clothes, and I can pay my bills.”

Williams wears a typical white restaurant cook outfit, but other riverboat employees sport vastly different attire. Kimberly Koehler, a cocktail waitress at Splash, wears shimmering skin-colored hose, a black leotard, black shoes, and a short-waisted tuxedo top. The emphasis is on leg exposure.

“I hate the outfit,” Koehler says. “I had dreams I was a penguin and trapped under ice when I first started here.”

Koehler is paid \$2.13 an hour but collects about \$100 a day in tips. Her monthly take of \$2,000 finances her sculpture work in bronze, marble, and aluminum.

The dress code bothers her, but it’s no different at the other boats. “It’s either a low-cut bustline or a high-cut skirt,” says Koehler, a Memphis resident. “It’s very sexist. I’ve gotten used to men looking at me like I’m a piece of meat. And 10 times a day I get told I’m the most beautiful woman in the world.”

The casinos encourage more than leering. Russell King, who earns \$8.50 an hour as a cage cashier at Bally’s, often cashes paychecks for employees at other boats — and then watches as they spend it all drinking and gambling.

Both Koehler and King say there’s a serious alcohol problem among riverboat workers. Since employees are forbidden to gamble on the boats where they work, they go to other boats when they finish their shifts.

All the drinks on the boats are free — and alcohol has its effects. “One guy saw two dealers come over from another boat and they lost all their paycheck money,” King says.

King isn’t worried about losing his wages at the tables, but he is worried about losing his life. At night when he



**RESIDENTS LIKE EVON MCGEE PAY HIGHER RENTS SINCE THE CASINOS CAME TO TUNICA, STILL ONE OF THE 30 POOREST COUNTIES IN THE U.S.**

finishes work, he drives 27 miles north to Memphis on Highway 61. As many as 10,000 cars travel the two-lane road each day — a staggering number in a county of 8,000 people.

Local residents consider the route a highway of death. According to state records, 18 motorists have died on Highway 61 in the two years since the casinos opened — compared to 20 in the preceding five years. In April, the state transportation department announced it would expand Highway 61 to four lanes, but the project won’t be completed for three years.

“They’re scraping them off that highway all the time,” says Bud Lane, a Tunica store owner. “If you’re driving the speed limit, you know you’re going to get killed from behind. I try to go with the flow.”

With two more riverboats scheduled to open this year, the flow of local traffic has been increased by casinos competing for business. Splash buses gamblers from far-away spots, offering free round-trip charters and free buffet meals for tourists from neighboring Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee. The riverboat even took to the air this spring. “We have flights from Atlanta daily for \$99,” says Rebekah Alperin, marketing director for Splash.

Yet for all the outreach, 65 percent of riverboat gamblers come from Memphis.

“Tunica is trying to draw on Memphis, and it’s not in the numbers,” says Daniel Davila, the Florida gaming analyst with JW Charles Securities. “Almost everything going on there is just horrifying.”

### “PLAYING CATCH-UP”

State regulators don’t really have any way of knowing what’s going on at the riverboats. The state-wide growth in casinos has overburdened the enforcement division of the Mississippi Gaming Commission.

“We’re barely keeping our heads above water,” says J. Ledbetter, chief of gaming enforcement. “It con-

cerns me very much. We can’t do anything pro-active and at times we’re barely keeping pace. I’m sure there’s stuff getting overlooked because I don’t have the manpower.”

Ledbetter has only 10 agents in the field to police some two dozen casinos operating around the clock. By contrast, New Jersey has 175 investigators for 12 casinos.

The commission will add 36 more agents in July. But until then, the small staff will continue logging plenty of overtime double-checking weekly casino reports and reading computer tapes on slot machines.

“The problem was the industry took off and ran and we’ve been playing catch-up ever since,” says Ledbetter. “That’s not the way to do it.”

The lack of regulation suits the

riverboats just fine. Mississippi is the only state that does not require casinos to report their earnings by boat, permitting owners to conceal how much they make on slot machines and gaming tables, and how much the average customer loses.

"There's going to be a lot more gambling in the United States," says Dave Kehler, president of the Public Affairs Research Institute of New Jersey. "Policymakers need to know what's going on as future policy unfolds."

All it takes to license a floating casino in the state is to park a boat in any puddle of water along the Mississippi River or Gulf Coast. "Some of these tributaries are questionable," says Klaus Meyer-Arendt, associate professor of geography at Mississippi State University in Starkville. "Some boats are in a ditch with a pipe so they have water exchange."

In Tunica, only one of the six casinos is a real boat. Lady Luck is nothing more than a plain square structure atop a barge, painted institutional green with a vivid purple front. Southern Belle, with its Roman-arch windows and huge staircases, resembles a large plantation mansion. Harrah's looks like any luxury hotel.

Splash, nearly two football fields in length, is pastel pink with walls of nouveau-California stucco. It sits in an aquamarine tub of water — a far cry from the muddy chocolate of the river. Rebekah Alperin, the marketing director, explains that the casino colors the water with a dye called "super blue."

"It's not toxic," she says. "Plus, it goes with our semi-aquatic theme."

## HOUSE RULES

Casinos like Splash may be in the pink, but Calvin Norwood of the NAACP remains unimpressed by the rosy facade. Like other residents, he



**"WE STILL HAVE POVERTY," SAYS CALVIN NORWOOD OF THE NAACP.**

worries that the riverboats will simply sail away when the gambling money runs dry. "I'd rather see industry come in because I know they'd stay," he says. "The boats can leave."

Lady Luck isn't leaving the county, but it is picking up and moving to a new spot. Riverboats in Iowa have pulled up anchor and sailed to more profitable locales.

While Norwood would prefer more stable forms of economic development like schools and factories, he acknowledges that the casinos have brought a measure of pride to Tunica. "The jobs have been good because they've lifted black folks' spirits."

Several storefronts have gotten face lifts as new businesses have come to town. There's a Chinese restaurant on Highway 61 and the local Planters Bank

plans to merge with First Tennessee Bank.

On the other hand, there are some new businesses that community leaders would prefer not to see. Two loan companies have set up shop in Tunica in recent months, profiting from the flow of casino dollars.

"They're bad; they're worse than the casinos," says Mayor Williams. "They tear you up."

Tower Loan of Jackson opened a Tunica branch last July. Tony Valasek, the local manager, acknowledges that the majority of his customers are county residents who work at the casinos. He refused to say what interest rates the finance company charges.

Norwood says too many residents know from bitter experience how the loan companies operate. "If you get \$1, then you have to pay back \$2 to those places."

Norwood knows that most of what is going on in Tunica is beyond his control, but that doesn't stop him from trying. The NAACP is pressuring the casinos to provide money for housing and education, but so far only one

riverboat has responded — with a check for \$1,000.

Sitting at a concrete checkerboard table in a grassy strip that runs down the middle of Main Street, Norwood ponders the rapid changes that have come to Tunica during the past two years. As he haphazardly moves some stones around the checkerboard, he ticks off a list of community needs. Affordable housing. Better education and health care. Stable economic development.

But Norwood and other Tunica residents can't move casino chips and dollars like the stones on the checkerboard. Most of the players are in Las Vegas, and they control the game. □

*Jenny Labalme is a reporter with The Indianapolis Star.*



# Black, White & Brown

Equality must be  
attained, but not at the  
expense of diversity  
and democracy.

By Eric Bates

It started with a school bus in Summerton, South Carolina. Black parents, tired of watching their children walk miles to school each day, sued the county for the same bus service white children enjoyed. Thurgood Marshall argued their case before the United States Supreme Court, and the justices unanimously struck down the Southern system of school segregation on May 17, 1954.

A lot has changed since the court issued its landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The decision helped spark the civil rights revolution and dismantle state-sanctioned apartheid. Despite massive white resistance, Southern schools in the region now rank among the most integrated in the nation. A study by the Harvard University Project on School Desegregation shows that 40 percent of Southern black children attend majority-white schools — up from none in 1954.

Unfortunately, much of the remarkable progress has been lost in all the media coverage of the 40th anniversary of *Brown*. Most stories have focused on the “failure” of school desegregation — how whites abandoned the public schools by fleeing to the suburbs or creating private academies for their children. Many have cited the Harvard study, which found that federal inaction has allowed schools to begin resegregating — producing another wave of poor, predominantly black schools that provide an inferior education.

“There have been some gains,” says Zepora Roberts, a black PTA leader and civil rights activist in DeKalb County, Georgia. “But for the most part, we have missed out.”

Whatever the successes and failures of *Brown*, however, its original intent should not be blamed for the mixed legacy of integration. Black parents who petitioned to end the myth of “separate but equal” enshrined by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 weren’t trying to eliminate the “separate” — they were trying to ensure the “equal.” Forcing schools to educate blacks and whites together, they felt, was one way to ensure equity. Desegregation was a means to an end — equal educational opportunities for all children — not an end unto itself.

The problem was, integration never involved a merging of equal partners. In practice, it resulted in the subordination of African-American education. Black schools were closed, their

teachers and principals fired, their students assigned to white institutions that used color-coded policies like “tracking” to reserve the best teachers and classes for white children. In effect, integration ended black control of one of the community’s most important institutions, a place of empowerment and pride.

“There was never an integration of curriculum, of school boards,” says Leon Davis, a history professor at Emory University in Atlanta. “Primarily, the emphasis was on moving blacks into a situation with whites.”

Today, four decades later, many educators and activists are realizing that racial diversity was sacrificed in the struggle for racial equality. “None of the scholars or community people miss the age of segregation,” observes David Cecelski, a research fellow here at the Institute for Southern Studies, “but they recognize that something valuable was lost in the process of the great civil rights victory that integrated the public schools.”

To learn the lessons *Brown* has to offer, we return to the town where the struggle began — and where schools remain among the most segregated in the nation. We recount the history of one black community that fought to retain control of its schools, and we speak with a scholar researching the good qualities of black segregated schools in the South. We journey to Mississippi, where a community group strengthens black schools by drawing on the rich natural and human resources of the Delta, and where a new court case is expanding the struggle for educational equity.

Many Southerners fighting for school reform today focus not on integration, but on the educational needs of black children. Equality must be attained, they say — but not at the expense of diversity and democracy.

“Like most blacks, my disillusionment with *Brown* is not that it did not end school segregation, but that it did not make black educational attainment equal to that of whites,” says Isaiah Madison, executive director of the Institute. “To my mind, *Brown* did all that it could have done. It demonstrated that something more is needed to fulfill the substantive educational needs that have always been the primary goal of the black community.”

In short, we should not be too quick to give *Brown* a failing grade. True equality in education has yet to be tried, let alone achieved. After four decades in the classroom, integration gets an incomplete. □

Eric Bates is editor of Southern Exposure.



**LATASHA HENRY, WHOSE GREAT-GRANDFATHER HELPED LAUNCH THE CASE THAT STRUCK DOWN SCHOOL SEGREGATION, WANTS TO BECOME A TEACHER.**

# “What Tomorrow Can Bring”

Forty years after Summerton won its historic fight for integration, segregated schools still hold the town back.

Story by Jeff Miller

Photos by M.L. Miller

**S**UMMERTON, S.C. — LaTasha Henry is only 17, yet she’s already thinking about future generations. When she graduates from Scotts Branch High School next spring, LaTasha plans to go to college, then return home to teach.

Education runs in the family. Her mother works for state educational television in Columbia. Her grandmother, a teacher’s aide, instilled LaTasha with a love of learning. And her great-grandfather, Gilbert Henry, helped launch the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* that abolished school segregation.

That legacy inspired LaTasha to be a

teacher. “It just seemed like the right thing to do,” she says. “I realized it was very important.” She hopes to earn her way to Duke or some other good university on a scholarship.

It’s a big dream for a kid from

Summerton. Students in Clarendon County District One rank at the bottom statewide on almost every measure of academic performance. Rampant poverty is one factor. About 95 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, a level twice the state average.

Summerton schools are also among the least integrated in the nation — all

but 26 of the 1,300 students in the district are black. Last year, only two white students out of 568 went to LaTasha’s school in grades seven through twelve.

Segregated schools spurred black parents to fight for equal education for their children more than 40 years ago. Back then, white children rode buses to brick schools with indoor plumbing. Black children walked miles to ramshackle shanties with outdoor privies. In 1949, Clarendon County spent \$179 on each of its 2,375 white students but only \$43 on each black student.

Gilbert Henry was one of 20 black parents to sign a petition courageously seeking equal facilities. Harry Briggs, the first to sign, lost his job at a gas station. Others were fired, denied credit, burned out, or fired upon. The Reverend J.A. DeLaine, an inspired A.M.E. minis-

ter and organizer, fled the state after he shot back.

"The people of Summerton — particularly the whites — were just stunned that the people who put their names on that petition stood their ground," says James Washington, head of the Clarendon County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

When the white school board refused the petition, Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP argued the case of *Briggs v. Elliott* all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court — and won. Combining the Summerton case with four other lawsuits under the heading *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the high court unanimously struck down school segregation in South Carolina and 16 other states that still practiced it.

But little changed in Summerton. Eleven years would pass before the first black student entered a formerly white school. White parents blocked efforts to integrate, offering students the "freedom of choice" to pick the school they wanted. Twenty-eight blacks enrolled in formerly white schools, but no whites went to all-black ones.

In 1969, when the courts abolished the "choice" plan and ordered Summerton schools to integrate, white parents responded by sending their sons and daughters to private academies or schools in other districts with fewer black students. "It was just like they abandoned their family," says James Washington.

Like many who grew up in Summerton, LaTasha Henry doesn't consider whites who refuse to attend school with her racist. It's more tradition, she says, and "stubbornness."

Outside the schools, whites and blacks in Summerton walk the same streets, shop the same stores and, occasionally, eat at the same restaurants. But their children grow up virtual strangers.

Asked how many friends she has who are white, LaTasha Henry answers plainly, "None."

## BALLOTS AND BONDS

In the four decades since *Brown*, Summerton has grown accustomed to



**"SEGREGATION INSTILLS HATE," SAYS JAMES WASHINGTON OF THE NAACP. "THAT'S WHAT SUMMERTON IS TEACHING."**

being put under the media microscope every so often. At regular intervals, reporters from large newspapers or national magazines pass through to record how segregation hangs on in an isolated, Deep South community. Many flocked to the town two years ago after Carl Rowan, here to research a book on Thurgood Marshall, wrote that, "Not a damn thing has changed."

The outright harassment of earlier years is gone. Summerton now has a black police chief. But on the whole, things remain as Rowan said, with the status quo holding fast.

"The younger generation wants it to change," says Washington of the NAACP. "But you've got some diehards who are willing to let the place die rather than change. When it comes right down to real issues, it's still, 'I've got mine and you've got yours.'"

Lately, however, blacks are showing renewed interest in challenging the white power structure for a share of community leadership. A poor black area west of Summerton launched a drive for town annexation. A black minister ran for mayor. And the NAACP is pressing for

redistricting that would increase black representation on town council.

Although Summerton is 54 percent black, only one black has ever sat on the council. The current council is all white.

Summerton schools are also pushing ahead. Scotts Branch High School has joined a state project which encourages teachers to experiment with creative approaches to education. In one move, the school will schedule classes in two-hour blocks next year to give teachers and students more time for one-on-

one instruction.

Perhaps most important for students and the community is the opening this fall of the new Scotts Branch High School — the first school built in the district since *Brown*. Whites and blacks worked together to pass an \$11 million bond referendum to build the new school and renovate its dilapidated predecessor into an elementary school.

Still, the effects of segregation linger. Under a 1984 law, the state was forced to step into the district this year to try to reverse the poor performance of students. The intervention, the second in eight years, means the district will receive additional funding and consultation from the state education department for three years. Barbara Nielsen, the state school superintendent, says Summerton "has my full attention."

Despite such assistance, no one is sure if Summerton is ready to move beyond the racial legacy of its past and come together as one community with a shared

interest in its future.

"There are some people here who look beyond and see what tomorrow can bring," said the Reverend Malachi Duncan, the black minister who ran for

**"The younger generation wants it to change. But you've got some diehards who are willing to let the place die rather than change."**

mayor. "We just don't have enough of them."

## CLEAN STREETS

Summerton — population 975 — lies at the southern end of Clarendon County, midway between Charleston and Columbia, the state capital. The drive is one hour in either direction.

Wealthy white planters settled the "Summer Town" in the last century. But it was blacks who created the fields of high cotton out of swampland, who chopped and picked it. Today the only large industry in town is Federal Mogul, which makes gaskets. The last two cotton gins were torn down earlier this year, marking the end of King Cotton's reign in Summerton.

When Interstate 95 opened in the early 1970s, diverting tourist traffic from the town, many of Summerton's hotels were forced to close. Attracting new business is vital because property taxes shot up 70 percent to pay for the new high school.

Prospects are limited. Summerton has little water and sewer capacity and a workforce that's untrained for high-tech jobs. The area tries to sell itself to light industries and to use nearby Lake Marion to attract tourists and retirees. A new citizen revitalization task force is studying new economic strategies, and leaders are seeking designation — and special tax credits — as a federal enterprise zone.

"Short streets, long memories," says a new brochure designed to attract residents to Summerton with visions of "lovely old homes . . . peaceful streets . . . canopies of dogwoods and bursts of azaleas." For history, visitors are directed to tour a working grist mill and the Richardson graveyard, where six South Carolina governors were laid to rest.

There are some glaring omissions, though. The state-funded brochure makes no mention of the historic desegregation case, the only one from the Deep South that was part of *Brown*. In addition, the brochure pictures no black residents at all.

Summerton's black neighborhoods aren't likely to show up in a tourist brochure. Some of their "short streets" are



**"BLACK AND WHITE GET ALONG REAL GOOD," SAYS THE MAYOR, TAKING A BREAK FROM GRADING A BALL FIELD FOR THE ALL-BLACK LITTLE LEAGUE.**

little more than rutted dirt alleyways. Hurricane Hugo destroyed many rickety homes, forcing residents into trailer homes squeezed onto lots beside shotgun houses.

The division between white and black in Summerton stretches beyond housing. Two-thirds of black residents live below the poverty line, compared to only six percent of whites.

Many of the poorest blacks live beyond the town limits in unincorporated West Summerton, an area Reverend Duncan describes as "a depressed neighborhood where a bunch of people who have lost hope in their lives live day-to-day, falling into drugs and alcohol."

West Summerton tried to become part of Summerton last year. But the council rejected its annexation request, saying the added property tax revenues wouldn't cover the extra service costs.

Duncan maintains that the council rejected West Summerton because it would make the town 70 percent black and shift the balance of power from white hands. "Until we get annexation, we can't make a change," he says.

Mayor Charles Allen Ridgeway insists that the annexation bid is still pending. "We didn't vote it down," he says. "We just tabled it until we could afford it." Besides, he adds, "They got all the services that in-town has got, they just don't have the tax bills." He dismisses those seeking annexation as "just the same people wanting political power."

Duncan is minister at Liberty Hill African Methodist Episcopal Church,

where the original *Briggy* petitioners met to plan their strategy against the school board 45 years ago. On Sunday mornings, visiting whites are given a place of honor near the front of the church to hear Duncan preach on the need to "walk through the door of opportunity" that Christ provides.

Duncan's decision to challenge Ridgeway for mayor in the March election marked the first time a black had sought the office. In his campaign, Duncan talked about unifying the community. Ridgeway focused on his record of "cleaning up Summerton," saying he

had used his own money and equipment to clear several overgrown lots and remove litter from the streets.

"There isn't anyone who wouldn't admit that it is cleaner here than it was three years ago," the mayor campaigned.

Though Duncan lost by about 100 votes, he claimed moral victory in having brought more than 170 blacks to the polls, though not all gave him their vote.

Blunt-spoken and impatient for change, Duncan wanted to boycott Summerton businesses last year after a black woman said the town's white pharmacist roughly tossed her out of his shop. Washington and the NAACP refused to go along, calling the plan unnecessarily divisive.

Duncan viewed the refusal as another example of traditional black leadership falling in step with the white power structure. "All the fault is not the white folks' fault," he said after his electoral defeat. "I'm honest. There's some black folks, too, that believe that whites are supposed to be the leaders."

Mayor Ridgeway says the fact that he received black support indicates how well blacks and whites get along in Summerton. "I think we're doing fine," he says, taking a break from grading a new baseball field for the almost exclusively black Taw Caw Little League. "Now, you get some outsiders come in and cause trouble, but we get along.

"Local people, we need one another," he adds. "People that grew up here together — black and white — get along real good."

## WHITE FLIGHT

Not everyone feels so optimistic. After six years of trying to turn the school district around, Summerton Superintendent Milt Marley is resigning.

Marley worked in school desegregation programs during the 1970s and served as assistant school superintendent in Columbia. Whatever high hopes he once nurtured, though, are now thoroughly grounded in the reality of the schools and community he inherited.

Summerton schools have been immersed in chaos for years. Both of Marley's predecessors were fired, one over allegations of financial mismanagement. Marley has put the district on better financial footing, adding \$87,000 in grants to its \$5 million budget last year. But state budget cuts in the middle of the school year forced Marley to lay off his grant writer along with four teachers, two teacher aides, and a secretary.

"You've got to do magic," he says.

The district manages to keep per pupil spending at about the state average, but the state only covers about half the cost of employee fringe benefits and pays nothing for construction or building maintenance.

"That's why over 40 districts are suing the state over equity," Marley says.

Summerton has a hard time attracting and keeping teachers. The district hasn't had a student-teacher in five years. Only 25 percent of its teachers have master's degrees, compared to a state average of 42 percent. Annual pay is about \$3,000 below the state average, but Marley doesn't believe that's a major factor.

More often, he says, teachers just don't want to live in Summerton. Many drive in from larger towns. When they get a year or two of experience, they leave for jobs in less-troubled districts, usually in urban areas. "Basically, rural districts are training institutes for new

teachers," Marley says.

Marley lives in the district, but none of the three school principals does.

The faculty's lack of training, experience, and knowledge of the community doesn't help when it comes to understanding and addressing the problems of Summerton's overwhelming population of disadvantaged students.

The schools themselves are dilapidated. At the old Scotts Branch High School, students don't have enough equipment for a class to work on a project together, or any lockers to keep their books and coats in. The roof leaks, some classrooms are without heat, and the basketball team shares its locker with visiting squads and fans who need to use the restroom.

The problems extend beyond the school walls. Poor and poorly educated, most Summerton parents are ill-equipped to help their children learn. Blacks 25 or older are half as likely as white parents to have a high school diploma. A college degree is even rarer. Of the 85 people in Summerton recorded during the last census as having four-year college degrees, only five were black.

Above all, Marley is resigned to the fact that little can be done to entice white parents to send their children to Summerton public schools. "White parents feel pressure — social pressure — not to send their children here," he says. "And it comes not only from the parents but the grandparents."

According to Marley, the prevailing attitude among white parents is, "I don't want my children to be the only ones."

As a result, whites have almost completely abandoned the Summerton schools. Rough estimates based on census and school enrollment figures suggest there may be only 50 to 200 white, school-age children living in the district. Even if they all returned to the public schools, whites would still account for only 16 percent of total enrollment.

Marley, who is white, says the white flight has hurt the three public schools in Summerton. "For any successful school system, you need a broad array of support, and there has been no tradition of that since the whites abandoned the school system."

## BUSES AND MERCEDES

The private school that most white children in Summerton attend is Clarendon Hall, a non-denominational Christian academy founded in 1965. Although it was established at the height of the battle to integrate the public schools, officials insist that the religious academy was created in response to the 1963 Supreme Court ruling that prohibited prayer in public schools.

The school, grades kindergarten through 12, has about 250 students. All are white but for five East Indian children. Miles Elliott, the 31-year-old headmaster, says the school does not discriminate.

According to Elliott, no black child has ever sought admission to Clarendon Hall. Tuition runs about \$1,600, with additional fees for registration and building maintenance.

Elliott insists that his students have no difficulty getting along with blacks even though they don't attend the same schools. "We don't teach racism here. We don't teach hate here. None of those things are taught. The children here are very comfortable to move onto situations that are different from here."

The school program is basic. No art, no computers, and no instruction for handicapped or learning-disabled children. Elliott describes his student body as "average to above average in ability, about 90 percent middle class."

The school was built for \$215,000, with residents donating much of the materials and labor. Elliott says the community still supports the school and appreciates the "strong Christian foundation" of its curriculum.

Elliott, a Clarendon Hall graduate, is the great-grandson of R.W. Elliott, chairman of the Summerton school board when Harry Briggs and other black parents sued. But he says he doesn't know much more than the general outline of the case. He also dislikes discussing Summerton's public schools or the attention Clarendon Hall receives for having no black students.

"We rock along smoothly out here,

**Elliott says his only interest is the students — "not to satisfy the people from *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post* who come down here and take pictures of our bus next to a Mercedes."**

yet we find ourselves on the defensive a lot, which we despise." Elliott says his only interest is the students — "not to satisfy the people from *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post* who come down here and take pictures of our bus next to a Mercedes."

## TEACHING HATE

What difference does it make to black students that whites won't go to school with them?

"It's kind of hard to explain," says Ken Mance, the Scotts Branch principal, who is black. "Almost all of them go through an adjustment period dealing with whites. I even notice the way they

treat white teachers here. They have a little attitude toward them."

You can hear that anger in the voice of Eric Felder, a 15-year-old student who left New York City to live with relatives in Summerton. He sits on a milk crate watching a pick-up basketball game across the street at Wausau Park. The park also has a baseball field, but the jungle gym has been torn out and the sand in the sandbox was just dumped there in a great heap.

"This ain't nothing but a slum down here," Felder says. "There's no jobs. It's no wonder somebody's son is out selling drugs. What do little kids got to play with? Nothing. Nothing ever gets done too much down here.

"We're long overdue for a school. 'Bout time they got it built. Forty years gone by and this is the first school being built out there and the white people still won't go," Felder adds, casting a long glance down the pot-holed street.

"The only time things get done is when you speak up on something. If you don't speak up, nothing happens."

James Washington of the NAACP says segregation hurts white children, too. "It instills in these children that integration is not for blacks and whites. That's what instills the hate. That's what Summerton is teaching."

The sharp racial divisions in Summerton are not unique. John Dornan of the North Carolina Public School

## A CLASS ACT

If you want to improve education in Summerton, says Alice Doctor-Wearing, don't focus on segregation. Focus on poverty.

"If you come from a home that's impoverished and parents don't know what education means, they can't express that to their children," she says. "There are just a lot of problems in these poor communities. When I drive around, I see kids whose parents are involved in drugs and alcohol."

Five years ago, Doctor-Wearing quit her job in Washington, D.C. and returned home to help revive Summerton. She started the Scotts Branch '76 Foundation, named for her high school class, to find ways to combat poverty and improve education.

The grassroots organization works with the poor every day. People drop in to its offices in a converted tavern in West Summerton for help with housing, loans, and job applications.

"People come in and out of here all the time," says Doctor-Wearing, sitting at a large desk in her office. "No one else was providing these services. Since we started, people are more motivated to find out what grants and programs are available. These questions would never have been asked before."

The foundation has a bi-racial advisory board and works on community projects that benefit blacks and whites alike. The group has staged youth plays with anti-drug themes, planted a "victory garden" along Main Street, and sponsored Summerton's first African-American festival.

"There was a need for me and this organization to be here," Doctor-Wearing says. "And I feel that we have made a difference."



**ALICE DOCTOR-WEARING AT THE SCOTTS BRANCH '76 FOUNDATION.**

Working at the grassroots has made Doctor-Wearing wary of traditional approaches to community problems. She was recently named to a revitalization task force trying to attract jobs to Summerton, but she doubts that it will make a difference.

"It's the same people saying pretty much the same thing all the time," she says. "A lot of times we talk about people who need help the most, but those people aren't at the table."

Doctor-Wearing views her organization as an alternative to traditional black groups like the NAACP. "The so-called leaders we have in the community haven't helped anyone," she says. "They haven't done anything in 40 years since *Briggs*."

Both the foundation and the NAACP have announced plans to build cultural centers in Summerton that would honor the history of the 1954 school desegregation lawsuit and provide badly needed recreational facilities. Summerton has no theater, bowling alley, or library.

Doctor-Wearing is also skeptical of how much the new Scotts Branch High School will improve education, which she

sees as the key to improving life in Summerton. "If the kids could be educated, everything else would fall into place. You wouldn't have to worry about economic development, because that would come."

But in the end, she says, it doesn't matter whether the new school helps integrate Summerton schools. "If we can't integrate, fine. I'm not all about integration. All I'm worried about is self-esteem."

— J.M.



**"WE'RE LONG OVERDUE FOR A SCHOOL," SAYS ERIC FELDER OF SUMMERTON. "FORTY YEARS GONE BY AND THIS IS THE FIRST SCHOOL BEING BUILT."**

Forum studied rural at-risk districts in Mississippi and Georgia for a regional research group called SERVE. Like Summerton, the districts were exclusively black, with whites attending private academies.

"By and large, people see schools as theirs and ours," Dornan says. "One of the things I was shocked by was that it had been like that for so long. It seemed hard for people to imagine anything other than the separation of black and white."

Dornan notes that such districts almost always post the lowest scores on state-mandated standardized tests. In Summerton, four out of five eighth graders scored below average on a recent test, and less than half of all 10th graders passed the state exit exam required for graduation.

But Dornan emphasizes that improving classroom performance requires a community-wide effort. "If we really want to address the problem of low performance, you're going to need a team approach that goes beyond the walls of the school," he says.

In the communities Dornan studied, strong local leadership produced better schools. In one district, a local black official complained that white businesses weren't involved in the schools — but admitted that he had never sought their

help. By contrast, a military retiree in another district galvanized the mostly white chamber of commerce to rally behind the schools, on the grounds that the economic survival of the community depended on it.

Summerton's economic health is also tied to its schools — and everyone involved agrees that improving them will take the sustained support of the entire community. "The economy is driving things now," says Barbara Neilsen, South Carolina school superintendent. "Those communities are going to die if something's not done. They have got to address this problem together."

### **COMPUTERS AND SATELLITES**

The two other public school systems in Clarendon County outside of Summerton don't share their neighbor's problems.

Turbeville, at the far end of the county, is about the same size as Summerton. But the three schools in the district have a white enrollment of 56

percent and offer a diverse range of class choices and special programs. The elementary school is the only public school in South Carolina with a Montessori kindergarten. Students at the middle school can learn in a \$90,000 computer lab. Last year, every 10th grader at East Clarendon High School passed the graduation exit exam.

Manning, the county seat, has its own school system even though it's just 10 miles from Summerton. Its schools have a 65 percent black majority. Unlike Summerton, however, whites stuck with the public schools through integration.

Sylvia Weinberg, the Manning superintendent, credits local leaders such as State Senator John Land and his wife Marie for putting their children in the public schools and convincing other white families to do the same.

Land acknowledges that Manning whites didn't abandon their schools in part because they have a higher percentage of white students than Summerton. "We had a better mix," he says.

Manning also has fewer people struggling with poverty and more of a tax base than Summerton. The district recently burned the mortgage on its 12-year-old high school, which looks about as good as when it was dedicated.

Manning is just as far from major colleges as Summerton, but it doesn't feel that way. Teachers have earned master's degrees from the University of South Carolina, which brought the courses to them. A similar partnership enabled teacher aides to

earn credits from South Carolina State University in Orangeburg.

The district has also worked to keep

**"Those communities are going to die if something's not done. They have got to address this problem together."**



students from feeling isolated. At Manning High, they can let their imaginations soar in Air Force ROTC or take Japanese over a satellite feed from a teacher in Nebraska.

"We think it's one of the best," Weinberg says of the high school. "Our top honors graduate last year went on a full scholarship to Princeton University."

## THE DREADED WORD

Despite such academic achievements, the other districts in Clarendon County aren't without their racial divisions. In May, a week before the anniversary of the *Brown* decision, nearly 100 black citizens in Turbeville marched on school headquarters to protest what they consider disproportionately harsh punishments meted out to black students accused of using alcohol and drugs.

"This is part of a broader problem," says the Reverend Eddie Mayes, who helped organize the protest. "All but one of our six school board members are white. It all goes back to the dreaded word — racism."

Now and then, the topic of consolidating the three districts comes up. A study two years ago suggested the county could save \$500,000 a year, mostly in superintendent salaries and support staff, and expand course offerings.

But there is little support for the idea. Other districts don't want to take on Summerton's problems — and Summerton has its own reasons for wanting to hold on to its own system. "To be honest," says State Representative Alex Harvin, "there was no more enthusiasm in Summerton for consolidation than in Manning or Turbeville."

Harvin, who lives in Summerton, says the school board is the one political office where blacks have gained sizable influence. Six of the seven board members are black. Only four, however, are elected. The other three are chosen by a county board appointed by Harvin, State Senator Land, and a third legislator from a neighboring county. The same board



**SUMMERTON SCHOOLS REMAIN AMONG THE LEAST INTEGRATED IN THE NATION. ALL BUT 26 OF ITS 1,300 STUDENTS ARE BLACK.**

also picks the entire Manning school board. Turbeville is the only district in Clarendon County where the public directly chooses the full governing board.

"That was the communities' consensus," says Land. "They wanted it that way."

Land and Harvin are political anomalies in South Carolina: white legislators representing majority-black districts. Land gets a chuckle out of being called "a brother" by his black colleagues, and he moves easily through the black communities of his district.

Even so, Land admits that the racial divisions plaguing Summerton schools are a complete puzzle to him. "I've been in office 20 years, and I've never found the key, found the handle," he says. "It goes back to the people in that county. They have got to do it."

## A PAINFUL REMINDER

Folks with long memories still refer to old Scotts Branch High School as a "Jimmy Byrnes" school after the former U.S. Supreme Court justice elected South Carolina governor in 1950.

Hoping to stave off integration by showing the courts that separate schools could be equal, Byrnes convinced the General Assembly to equalize pay for

black and white teachers and to spend the phenomenal sum of \$175 million to build new black schools. About \$900,000 of that was spent in Clarendon County.

In August, the new Scotts Branch High School will open on the outskirts of town on the highway to Manning. Many hope the modern and attractive building will draw white children back into classes with black children. But if history is any guide, a new building may not be enough.

Forty years ago, before the interstate was built, cars streamed through town past Summerton High School on Highway 301, the main road to Florida. Tourists seldom come this way anymore, but the former white high school remains, a boarded-up shell of its past life and a constant, painful reminder of the educational struggles that continue to this day.

"For me," says outgoing Superintendent Milt Marley, "this is a community problem, and the community has chosen over the years to ignore it. You choose to live or die together, and this community has chosen to die. Unless they decide it's important to educate these children in a diverse, multicultural setting, it won't happen." □

*Jeff Miller is a reporter for The State in Columbia, South Carolina. M.L. Miller is a freelance photographer in Summerton.*

# Remembering the Good

**Vanessa Siddle  
Walker uncovers  
the forgotten  
history of  
segregated black  
schools.**

*Interview by Eric Bates*

**W**hen civil rights attorneys argued the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* before the U.S. Supreme Court, their goal was to ensure equal education for all children, regardless of race. They wanted to integrate white and black schools — and to do that, they had to convince the court that segregated black schools were inferior to white schools.

They made a compelling case, exposing the all-too-real and brutal inequities of segregation. But in the process, they also fueled the popular notion that all segregated black schools were entirely “bad” — nothing more than dilapidated

schoolhouses with poorly trained teachers who offered impoverished black children a second-rate education.

For the past five years, Dr. Emilie Vanessa Siddle Walker has been researching what was “good” about

African-American schools during segregation — what teachers, students, and parents valued about them. As an elementary student in North Carolina, Walker witnessed desegregation firsthand when she was transferred from an all-black school to a newly integrated institution. She went on to earn her doctorate in education from Harvard University, and is now assistant professor in

the Division of Educational Studies at Emory University in Atlanta.

But Walker found herself drawn to stories she heard in her community about segregated schools. Her research has led her to produce both a film and a forthcoming book tracing the history of the Caswell County Training School from 1933 to 1969. Both are subtitled simply: “Remembering the ‘Good’ in Segregated Schooling for African-American Children.”

**SE:** How did you get into researching African-American schools?

**Walker:** I am originally from Caswell County. I was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, but went home during the summer that the school board was talking about closing Dillard Junior High School, which during segregation was



**PRINCIPAL DILLARD (FRONT LEFT) RECEIVED HIS MASTERS DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, AND IN 1953 OVER HALF HIS TEACHERS WERE INVOLVED IN GRADUATE TRAINING.**

called the Caswell County Training School. There were a lot of conversations in the air about the school, and a lot of lamenting among members of the community that the school board was getting ready to close it.

In particular, I remember the conversations with my mom. She would say, “Oh, you know, they’re getting ready to close the school,” and “Oh, Mr. Dillard worked so hard for this school,” and “Oh, it was such a wonderful school, and it’s getting ready to pass from the scene and nobody will ever know what it was like.” And I’d hear the same thing when I would go to gas stations and around in the community. I was privy to these conversations by virtue of the fact that I was a product of the community. They weren’t talking to me as a researcher.

In ethnographic research we talk about “making the familiar strange.” That summer, something that had been familiar to me — I’d known about this school all my life — suddenly became very strange. It clicked that what people were saying to me was not the same as what I read as a professional about black schools. When I read about them, everybody talked about what was wrong with them. Yet here I was in the community,

listening to people talk about what was wonderful about a poor, black, segregated school and bemoaning the loss of its memories if it were closed.

That was the beginning. I visited with the wife of N.L. Dillard, who had been the principal, and with a couple of former teachers. These weren’t really formal interviews, but just following through to see: Am I really understanding these people to say that they *liked* their segregated schools? Is that really what I’m hearing? After several informal talks, it became very clear to me that that was exactly what I was hearing. And that’s how the project started.

**SE:** *Once you were convinced that there was something worth researching, what did you do to try and understand it better?*

**Walker:** For starters, I began conducting open-ended interviews with former teachers, students, parents, and administrators who had been involved with the school. This included interviews with those who had a close relationship with the school, as well as those who did not. I wanted to understand what was good about the educational environment from the perspective of those who were

participants.

Using the perspective of the participants is an important distinction. In this research, “good” is not based on external variables such as test scores, or the number of PhDs students received, or something like that. “Good” means: This was an environment that the participants valued. *They* deemed it as good. So I wanted to understand: What did they think was so good about it?

I also began collecting documents to confirm that what people were saying was true in “real time” and not just nostalgic. From the vantage point of now, our past usually looks good. Last year looks good to me now, because I didn’t have a daughter then and I could take a nap. The collection of documents was thus very important because I needed to know that this was the evaluation of people at the time it was happening and not just a nostalgic account.

Unfortunately, most school-based documents from the era had been destroyed. People apparently assumed there was nothing significant about the segregated schooling of African-American children, so there was no reason to keep anything. The school only has two or three yearbooks and a very thin file

folder — that's all. So we had to recover a document base from people's attics and drawers — yearbooks, pictures, letters, school newspapers, teaching bulletins, books, etc. In addition, we reviewed all available public documents, such as school board minutes, newspaper accounts, and principal's reports.

One of our most important finds was a Southern Association report when the school was accredited in the early 1950s. I have the hand-written notes of the principal and faculty members as they surveyed the school to prepare for this external evaluation. Because they are hand-written notes and not the formal report, I think we can be fairly confident that they reflect how the participants were seeing themselves at the time. I also have the evaluation that the Southern Association sent back to them, which shows how other people rated the school. Since these documents confirmed the interview data, I can be reasonably confident that the themes I'm finding aren't just nostalgic, but that they reflect what was really going on.

Once I understood what people valued, I conducted much more focused interviews. I wanted to understand the parameters: For whom was the schooling good? Under what circumstances? Who got omitted? I was much more likely to call up someone I'd already interviewed and say, "Mrs. Boston, I understand that the parents and the school interacted very comfortably for the most part. Can you give me some examples of when they didn't?" We now have hundreds of pages of documented material and over 100 interviews.

**SE:** *In your work you talk about two things that were "good" about the school — interpersonal caring and institutional caring. What's the difference?*

**Walker:** Caring means that if I'm interested in your well-being, I'm going to attend to your needs. When people think about the importance of caring in schools, they generally think about interpersonal relationships between students and teachers.

These relationships existed in the

school, but I'm also saying there are other things that teachers and administrators did that can't be reduced to interpersonal caring. In fact, the institution, through its *policy*, tried to understand the needs of its students, and to see that those needs were met — which is also caring. It is the human interactions and more, because it involves a planned structure for caring about students.

**SE:** *What are some examples of interpersonal caring?*

**Walker:** The teachers and the principal actually assumed responsibility to be certain that children learned. A child would not be allowed to come into a classroom and disengage, either by going to sleep or refusing to participate.

The teacher took the responsibility to pull that student aside and ask, "Did you have breakfast this morning? Did you have a fight at home? What's wrong?" One teacher I interviewed told a student, "Why are you so evil and snappy today? We've all got to live in this classroom and get along with each other. If I can help you, let me know." And the students would generally respond by telling the teachers what was wrong.

Teachers cared about more than whether the child could make subjects and verbs agree.

They took responsibility

for the whole student — to understand that child as a person and any problems that might interfere with his or her learning. They cared about who the students were as people. They knew them.

Before school and after school and during study periods, students would go to classrooms and just sit down and talk to teachers. Teachers would take time to talk to them about life, what it meant to be a student, and why education was important. Teachers told them that as black children, they had to be "better" — that was the word that was often used — in order to be accepted.

Even the principal made himself available to talk to students. One of his ways of managing was to walk the halls. He was constantly in the halls. Students said, "You didn't have to make appointments to go and see him. You always

knew he was going to be there."

Even in the last years when there were something like 1,000 students, the principal knew the name of every student in that school. One student reports, "You could have your back to him and be running away from him, but he could get on the intercom and say, 'So-and-so, come to the office.'" So a student couldn't just fade into the background and be invisible. The students were known.

There are even numerous instances of the teachers and principal giving money to children. If they didn't have money for lunch, for example, someone gave them the money. One of the most moving stories I heard was from a former student who talked about how her parents couldn't afford to send her to college. She had not even signed up to take the SAT. The day of the test, the students were already on the bus to go to a neighboring high school to take the exam. The principal came up to her classroom, got her out of class, put a ticket in her hand for the SAT that he had already paid for, gave her two pencils, and put her on the bus to go take the SAT. She took the test, and he helped get her into college and get a scholarship.

Today she is a teacher. She talks about how, but for that intervention, she would not have been able to do that.

She's not the only example. A librarian asked a student, "Where are your gloves this morning?" It was very cold. The student said, "I don't have any." For Christmas the librarian brought the student some gloves and wrapped them up and gave them to her as a present.

Students remember these examples of interpersonal caring more than teaching methods. It wasn't the methods that motivated them — it was the way the teachers and principal cared about them as human beings. They responded to that caring by not wanting to "let the teachers down." They talk about how they felt like a family, and they would try to excel in their school work as a result. So school, then, became personal.

**SE:** *What are some examples of institutional caring?*

**Walker:** I emphasize institutional caring because I think people might reduce the segregated school into, "Oh, yeah, wasn't that wonderful and touchy-feely. Oh, people were just nice." And they were nice. But they did other things that demonstrate a planned approach to caring about students.

Caswell County is small and rural,

"In spite of all the inequities, African-American teachers were able to create learning environments that functioned successfully for children."



**CASWELL COUNTY TRAINING SCHOOL OFFERED 53 DIFFERENT CLUBS BETWEEN 1934 AND 1969, GIVING STUDENTS OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN AND LEAD.**

and written documentation of the era demonstrates that educators were very clear about the needs of their students. They talk about how the county had no museums, no lyceums, no forums — no nothing except a few pool halls and a couple of theaters. Other than church, students had very few opportunities to do anything. They didn't go see things, and they didn't get to do things.

So the school felt a responsibility to expose students to things they wouldn't ordinarily have the opportunity to see. They wanted to give them opportunities to develop leadership skills, to learn how to talk in front of audiences and things like that. You see it in their written philosophy, and you hear it over and over in the interviews with teachers. They're very clear — they wanted to push each student to his or her fullest potential.

How do they do that? One way is through special activities. Lots of schools had activities and clubs; what's significant is that they overtly designed these activities to meet the particular needs of their students. I've been able to count as many as 53 different clubs that were offered in the school between 1934 and 1969. For a rural school, that's quite phenomenal.

You name it, they had it — courtesy clubs, debating teams, history, science, Future Teachers of America. There were academic clubs, clubs that would teach you about certain kinds of hobbies, clubs

that worked on moral development. Where else would a child in rural Caswell County learn how to do photography, but for a Lens and Shutter Club? Where else would they get to practice debate if they didn't have the opportunity to do that at school?

Consider a normal year, in which perhaps 20 clubs might be available. That meant there were four opportunities for leadership available in each club — president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. That's a total of 80 leadership spots. "If you couldn't be president of the student government," one student told me, "there were still lots of other things you could do if you wanted to be a leader."

That to me is an example of the institution identifying the needs that its students have and overtly trying to meet those needs. The chapel program is another response. Once a week the entire school met in the auditorium, and students from each club were responsible for presenting the program. Students learned how to be in an audience and how to be the speaker, and the principal got a chance to talk to them as a group about the importance of education.

Another example of institutional caring is the homeroom teaching plan. They had homeroom teachers in ninth grade that rotated up with them through twelfth grade. In education we are now talking about this as a "school within,"

but they were doing this a long time ago. Do you know why? Because they said, "Students need to have a sense of belonging in the school. So if we give them the same homeroom teacher every year, then they will have a feeling that this teacher is looking out for us."

These things weren't incidental. They were planned ways of meeting the needs of the children. That's why I call it institutional caring.

**SE:** *How did your research make you think about your own schooling? Did it change your understanding of your own past in any way?*

**Walker:** I'm a product of both integrated and segregated schools. Though I remember very little of it, I attended Caswell County Training School in first, second, and third grades. I was in another segregated school up until the fifth grade, when the schools integrated.

I never really thought about segregated schooling at all, in terms of what kind of influence it had on me. It was just a fact of my life. Listening to people talk about it has helped me rethink what I experienced in the segregated school environment. I am now beginning to realize, "Geez, even though I was a child, I, too, am a product of all the things the institution did to make children feel good about themselves." How important was it for me to have experienced that kind of warmth in the early

years of my education? I don't know, but it certainly has raised that question for me.

I also cannot help comparing what I experienced in the integrated environment with what people had experienced 10 years before me in the segregated environment. And the truth of the matter is, I did not have the opportunity to do all the things that they talk about. That's sad. The opportunities simply were not placed before me in the same way that they had been before.

**SE:** *How did the teachers you've interviewed feel when the schools were integrated in 1969? Did they regret losing their school?*

**Walker:** Asking that question is not a part of my research, although it has come up informally in some conversations. I can speak from that perspective only.

The opinions vary. Some teachers were amazed at the resources that white children had. Others felt their own school was quite good. Those who have talked about it certainly seem to feel that the education their children received was good.

Many teachers lament that they were not able to push African-American children to excel in an integrated setting. They couldn't single them out, so they felt as though they couldn't communicate the values they had tried to communicate before.

**SE:** *Did you get a sense from them how they felt the process of integration could have been handled differently?*

**Walker:** I've never heard them talk about it. My project is not about whether integration is better than segregation — that's not the research question. The teachers and the principal saw integration as a political process and they stayed away from the politics. The only question I have heard them raise is an academic one: "What's going to happen to the children?"

I will say this. When Principal Dillard died in February 1969, the administration was divvying up his teachers — making decisions about which would stay with him at the junior high school and which would go over to the former

white high school. He was not an old person — he was in his early 60s — and nobody thought he was sick enough to die. He had a lot of concerns about what was going to happen to the children under integration. His wife says he said over and over, "What is going to happen to the children?" People in the community think that integration killed him — that his concerns were significant enough to cause an earlier death than he might otherwise have had.

**SE:** *I can imagine people reading about this small, rural school from the*



**"PERHAPS PEOPLE ARE LOOKING AT HISTORY BECAUSE THEY ARE LOOKING FOR ANSWERS," SAYS VANESSA SIDDLER WALKER.**

*past and thinking, "Sure, but the world's a different place now — drugs and crime in the school, families breaking up, students under stress. We can't do the things they did today."*

**Walker:** One of the things I've argued over and over is that I don't think that we should just take everything they did back then and move it to a different setting. That won't work. They were creative and figured out how to address the needs of their students within the constraints imposed upon them in their time. It seems to me we have to be equally creative in thinking about the constraints imposed upon us and figure out how to solve the problems in our time.

Not that we should minimize what they did in their time. Here were people who were being denigrated by the larger society. They were not being given facilities. They were not being given re-

sources. For many years, the teachers were not making as much money as their white counterparts. They had no more hours in a day than there are now. But one thing they did have was a different definition of what it means to teach.

Does that mean we need to adopt their definition of teaching? Not necessarily. I think that this school provides a context, a launching pad if you will, where we can begin to think about school reform. In other words, it helps us ask the right questions.

For example, one question people today often ask is, "Why are so many African-American children not performing well in school?" We center reforms on the *students* — what's wrong with them, and why can't they do better?

When we understand something of the history, though, we also see the importance of asking questions that relate to *teaching*. Where does teaching begin? Where does it end? Do we have common definitions of teaching? Do we utilize models of teaching that worked successfully for at least some African-American students in the past?

I often hear the question raised: "How do we get parents — usually meaning black parents — to be interested in their children's school?" If you know anything about the history of

segregated schools, you know that the parents *were* involved. So the question isn't how do we get them to become involved, the question is why did they cease to be involved, and how do we get them to come back? If we ask the wrong questions about reform, we'll get the wrong answers. The historical context should help us ask better questions.

**SE:** *You seem very conscious that your work could be misinterpreted to advocate a return to segregation: Black schools were good for black students, therefore we should have separate school systems.*

**Walker:** I do not doubt that some people will try to interpret it that way. The only way I can counter that is by making very sure, both in my writings and in my conversations, that I'm very clear about what I mean.

I am *not* saying that segregated schooling was all good. In the first chapter of the book, I spend a lot of time talking about the inequities that African Americans faced — the poor resources, the lack of equipment, the failure of school boards to respond to needs of children. That is the part of the picture of segregated schools which we documented to get the *Brown* decision, and nothing I've done discounts the truth of that picture.

What I argue, however, is that that is only part of the picture. We have not focused on how, in spite of all the inequities, African-American principals and teachers were able to create learning environments that functioned successfully for children.

Take the Caswell County Training School. When the school system integrated in 1969, the segregated black school was larger than the white school. It had a two-story auditorium with a balcony, a gym, and more classrooms. Unlike the white school, it was accredited by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. Yet it became the junior high school. Black children left their accredited, segregated school to go to an unaccredited white school which had fewer facilities. I think that flies in the face of everything we think about integration.

If we're going to understand the segregated schooling of African-American children, we have to understand not just what was done *to* us. We also have to understand how people worked around that system *for* children. That's why we need the whole picture. It helps us to understand black children at a time when they were learning.

**SE:** *The subject of what was good about segregated schools has been off-limits for a long time. Why are scholars beginning to return to it now?*

**Walker:** Frankly, I don't really know. Perhaps people are looking at history because they are looking for answers. It seems to me that integration has not given us all we hoped. It's given us facilities and resources, but in the process, as Principal Dillard predicted, we've lost something our children needed. That something is missing is evident in almost every research study you pick up. By and large, African-American children are not succeeding as we would like them to in school, whether they are in integrated or de facto segregated settings.

People are trying very hard to increase the educational success of African-American children. Perhaps looking back at segregation is just one way of trying to get a whole picture — to help us understand how to create reform that will be lasting and meaningful.

**SE:** *What reforms would you initiate if you were running the schools today?*

**Walker:** I don't think my research gives answers, but rather raises questions. For example: Do institutions still demonstrate caring about African-American students and their success? Are African-American children being given opportunities to get up on stage? To demonstrate their multiple intelligences? To develop leadership skills in school?

An African-American student at one inner-city school told me how he took a field trip to jail. As far as I could tell, this was not a part of a class. While they were there, some of his friends started misbehaving and the teacher said, "Lock them up." They were locked up, and one of them was actually left in the cell while the other students went for lunch. A policeman told some of the others, "Come here, let me fingerprint you. You look like you'll get in trouble, so we'll see you again."

This young man was terrified. The school may have been well-meaning — attempting to help students understand where they did not want to wind up — but that's not the effect it had on this student.

I asked the same student, "Do you ever get to participate in school assemblies?" He looked at me like I'd dropped off the moon. He said he seldom gets to go to assemblies, much less participate in one. From our conversation, it would appear that nobody's looking at what he may be able to do and giving him opportunities to showcase his talents. Why isn't he getting to do that?

I asked him, "Do you all have clubs in your school?" Know what he told me? He said, "Yeah, but those are just for the white folk. They think black people are too dumb to be in their clubs. One of my friends tried to go get in the performing

arts club and he was told that he was not cooperative enough."

Here we have a child who's in school — well, he was. He's dropped out. But was he being cared about on an interpersonal level? Did the institution have policies that demonstrated a commitment to him as a human being?

Reform is not just a checklist: Do we have assemblies? Do we have clubs? It's a deeper issue: Who are the children? What are their needs? And have we put institutional policies in place designed to meet those needs?

A teacher at Caswell County Training School had a child who was driving her nuts because he talked all the time. She punished him for being disruptive, but she also found a way to utilize his abilities as a talker. She put him in charge of the class science project, so when they had the school science fair, he was the one who presented how their volcano worked. He's a talker? Fine — put him on the debating team.

I wonder if talkers in school today are sent to the debating team, or if they are sent to detention hall? These are some of the kinds of questions we need to ask.

These are hard questions, and I don't raise them to indict teachers and principals who are working under very difficult circumstances. I have been a teacher, and I understand how intense the pressure can be. But I think they're the questions that have to be raised if we're going to start to look at reform.

The answers for each school may be very different. For me, there's not a reform agenda that mandates what we do for every student, every teacher, every school, everywhere. It's more individual than that.

I think we have to take history and use it as a mirror. Let's look into the past and let it help us see ourselves for who we are now. Then we can begin to ask the questions that will help us figure out how to better educate our children today. □

*Eric Bates is editor of Southern Exposure.*

**"I wonder if talkers in school today are sent to the debating team, or if they are sent to detention hall?"**

# Along Freedom Road

**How black citizens  
in one North**

**Carolina county  
staged a year-long  
boycott to save  
their schools**

*By David Cecelski*

**L**ike chimneys standing in the cold ashes of a tragic fire, the old school buildings endure in rural communities across the South. A few have been reincarnated as textbook warehouses, old-age homes, or cut-and-sew factories. More commonly, though, they sit vacant and deteriorating in older black neighborhoods. People called them the "Negro schools" in the era of racial segregation, when millions of black children enlivened their classrooms.

As school desegregation swept through the region in the 1960s and 1970s, white Southern school leaders routinely shut down these black institu-

tions, no matter how new or well located, and transferred their students to former white schools. No commemorative markers reveal what the black schools used to be, who once studied and taught in them, or why so many closed their doors a generation ago. Behind their weathered facades and boarded-up windows lies an important, hidden chapter in American history.

The mass closing of black schools was only part of a broader pattern of racism that marred school desegregation throughout the South. In its 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that

racially segregated public schools were unconstitutional, but the court left local school boards with the power to implement its ruling. Instead of reconciling black and white schools on equal terms, white leaders made school desegregation a one-way street. Black communities repeatedly had to sacrifice their leadership traditions, school cultures, and educational heritage for the other benefits of desegregation.

Throughout the South, school closings and mergers eliminated an entire generation of black principals. From 1963 to 1973, the number of black principals in North Carolina secondary schools plunged from 209 to only three. By decade's end, not one of the 145 school districts in the state had a black superintendent, and 60 percent of those districts employed no black administrators.

The effect of school desegregation on



black teachers was less severe but profound. An estimated 31,051 black teachers in the South were displaced by 1970. In a five-state survey, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) confirmed that between 1968 and 1971 alone, at least 1,000 black educators lost jobs while 5,000 white teachers were hired. The phenomenon was so widespread that in 1966, when New York City faced a severe teacher shortage, it developed Operation Reclaim specifically to recruit black teachers fired below the Mason-Dixon line.

Blacks lost important symbols of their educational heritage in this process. When black schools closed, their names, mascots, mottos, holidays, and traditions were sacrificed with them, while the students were transferred to historically white schools that retained those markers of cultural and racial identity. White officials frequently removed plaques or monuments that honored black leaders and hid from public view trophy cases featuring black sports teams and academic honorees. The depth of white resistance to sending their children to historically black schools was also reflected in the flames of the dozens of these schools that were put to the torch as desegregation approached.

For many black parents, desegregated schools too closely resembled former white schools in values, traditions, political sensibilities, and cultural orientation. In losing black educational leaders, they also felt deprived of an effective voice in their children's education.

This educational climate and the loss of community control alienated some black citizens so thoroughly that they found it difficult to support the new schools. Many parents also observed a decline in student motivation, self-esteem, and academic performance. Racist treatment of black students within biracial schools only worsened an already

difficult situation. Black students repeatedly encountered hostile attitudes, racial bias in student disciplining, segregated busing routes, unfair tracking into remedial and other lower-level classes, low academic expectations, and estrangement from extracurricular activities.

By 1966, few black communities failed to raise objections to school clos-

*Photos courtesy NC Division of Archives and History*



**GOLDEN FRINKS (NEARER) AND MILTON FRITCH OF THE SCLC STAND NEAR THE CENTER OF A PROTEST RALLY AT THE HYDE COUNTY COURTHOUSE.**

ings and teacher displacement. Black North Carolinians had organized several formal protests, and pressure on civil rights and political leaders for racial equality in school desegregation began to surge. Between 1968 and 1973, school boycotts, student walkouts, lawsuits, and other black protests challenging desegregation plans grew common at the Southern grassroots.

One of the strongest and most successful protests, the first to draw national attention to the problem, occurred in one of the South's most remote and least populated counties. The school boycott in Hyde County, North Carolina in 1968 and 1969 signaled that black Southerners, in the words of an HEW official, "were tired of having to bear the burdens of school desegregation."

## **"SOMETHING BELONGING TO US"**

For an entire year, black students in Hyde County refused to attend school. They did so to protest a HEW-approved desegregation plan that required closing O.A. Peay and Davis, the two historically black schools in this poor, rural

community surrounded by swamps and coastal marshlands. Black citizens held nonviolent demonstrations almost daily for five months, marched twice on the state capitol in Raleigh, and organized alternative schools in their churches.

In the year after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the school boycott became one of the most sustained and successful civil rights protests in the South. Though the size and resolve of black dissent was clearly exceptional, Hyde County was basically a microcosm of school desegregation throughout the region.

For Hyde County blacks in 1968, the O.A. Peay School embodied a rich educational heritage that

dated back at least a century. Despite terrible underfunding, racial discrimination, and official neglect, black residents had conspired for five generations to create schools that fostered racial advancement and intellectual achievement. Teachers drew on the church and family to create a caring, supportive atmosphere insulated from Jim Crow. They set high standards for students, many of whose parents had almost no formal education, instilled in them a sense of social responsibility, and challenged them to further their education by attending college.

Hyde County blacks had never intended to sacrifice those achievements for the sake of school desegregation. They had hoped to merge their schools and way of schooling on equal terms with whites. Instead, white school leaders who had bitterly resisted desegrega-

tion since 1954 now succumbed to federal pressure and moved to control the terms of integration. With the approval of the state and HEW, they initiated plans to close Peay and Davis and transfer black students to the white Mattamuskeet School.

Excluded from the planning process, the black community was stunned. "They do not have the right to take something belonging to us," said O.A. Peay alumnus Golden Mackey. When the school board refused to negotiate, the O.A. Peay School Alumni Association began organizing community opposition.

Joining forces with Hyde County churches, they formed a local leadership committee and contacted Golden Frinks and Milton Fitch, state leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. With the support of the SCLC, they decided to boycott all county schools until white officials agreed to listen.

"We decided that they couldn't implement their plan without students, so that we would boycott the schools until they . . . agreed to keep [our] schools open," said Abell Fulford Jr., head of the leadership committee. "That was our goal: to keep the schools open no matter what. We wanted integration, but we would have taken anything so long as we still had our schools."

On September 4, the first day of the academic year, only a handful of black parents sent their children to the Mattamuskeet School. Day after day, the boycotters held marches and mass meetings. An average of 150 to 200 demonstrators marched most afternoons from Job's Chapel to the county courthouse in Swan Quarter.

Despite the unprecedented revolt, the county board of education refused to negotiate, claiming that HEW was forcing them to close the black schools. In reality, officials were frightened and psychologically shaken by the boycott. They had been accustomed to having total power, and the mass protest had turned their world upside down. Farmworkers and oyster shuckers over whom they had exercised unchallenged authority had suddenly demanded a share of power and control over the schools.

"In private discussion you could

physically see the fear in them," recalled Dr. Dudley Flood, who served as one of Governor Robert Scott's envoys to Hyde County. "They were so preoccupied with that fear that it began to skew the whole picture. Having what was right done was secondary to the encroachment on their power."

### "TEAR THIS PLACE DOWN"

A county government agency sparked the protests that would draw national attention to the boycott. On November 1, nine weeks into the boycott, county welfare director W. A. Miller warned 31



**OVER 125 PROTESTERS WALKED 200 MILES ON THE FIRST MARCH ON RALEIGH, PASSING THROUGH BELHAVEN ON FEB. 11, 1969.**

families that the department would rescind benefits allotted for their school-age children if the children did not enroll in classes by December.

The idea that Miller would intimidate such vulnerable families appalled Hyde County blacks. On the afternoon of Friday, November 8, 150 young people occupied the county welfare office in Swan Quarter. Calling themselves "the Martin Luther King Crusaders," the children informed officials that they would not vacate the building until Miller withdrew his warning. County and state law officers removed the demonstrators using Mace and tear gas, but the Crusaders continued the agitation across the street.

They renewed their protest on Veterans Day, the next Monday morning. At about 9:30 a.m., 24 young activists occupied School Superintendent Allen Bucklew's office on the second floor of the courthouse and demanded a meeting with him. Outside, more than 100 stu-

dents demonstrated and sang protest songs. Bucklew met briefly with the students at about two o'clock. When they again refused to leave the building, he asked law enforcement officers to evict them.

According to United Press International correspondent Jack Loftus, who witnessed the scene, Sheriff Cahoon and three state troopers wearing gas masks threw smoke and tear gas grenades into the second-story room of the courthouse and slammed the door, then held it shut for at least two minutes. Pandemonium broke out among the two dozen children trapped in the gas and smoke.

Some of the "young bulls" — in the words of a witness — managed to break out, but officers confined most of the children within the building. Many ran to the windows gasping for air. In the blind push of bodies, 17-year-old Mamie Harris fell or jumped out of a window. She broke her pelvis on hitting the ground two floors below and was rushed to the Beaufort County Hospital in Washington. Other protesters leapt more carefully and were not hurt.

The incident almost provoked a riot. "We ought to tear this place down," teenager Jimmy Johnson cried out. When the tear gas

cleared, several parents and children had restrained their angriest companions, but demonstrators still blocked every road through town. They pounded on cars and pleaded with state troopers to arrest them. Two girls lay across a car's hood. Six teenage boys were finally arrested for impeding traffic — the first arrests in the 10-week-old school boycott.

The injury to Mamie Harris put the school boycott on the front page of the *News and Observer* for the first time. The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the major television networks immediately sent reporters and photographers to Hyde County. A correspondent from the British Broadcasting Corporation arrived within the week. *Jet* magazine and other black publications also sent reporters, and several school boycotters appeared on NBC's *The Today Show* in New York City. The school boycott remained in the national news for the next two weeks.

## THE “CHICKEN PROTEST”

After Mamie Harris’s injury, school boycott leaders decided to organize demonstrations that would provoke arrests — enough arrests, they hoped, to overcrowd the small county jail and compel negotiations. Some 125 people marched the next day from Job’s Chapel to the courthouse; troopers arrested 52 who locked arms and blocked the highway.

The children crowded into the musty brick jail appeared “rather composed” to state troopers. They decorated their cells with pink curtains that afternoon and continued to laugh and sing “Ain’t gonna let no nightstick turn me around” while several dozen junior high-age youths stood outside the jail singing freedom songs. The jail was already so overcrowded that Sheriff Cahoon released the 30 girls that evening.

The school boycotters held more protests and provoked further arrests daily. Older black citizens demonstrated outside the county jail the next day in support of their children and grandchildren. When they marched back out of Swan Quarter toward Job’s Chapel, a smaller group of about 25 young people led by James “Little Brother” Topping, a teenager from Lake Landing, marched into town carrying chickens, a gesture that goaded law officers into arresting 18 of them. A 13-year-old rushed to catch up with her friends, calling out “Hey, wait for me, Mr. Trooper, I want to be arrested too!”

The day after the “chicken protest” — Thursday, November 14 — 30 to 40 teenagers conducted a demonstration by blocking traffic and tossing a basketball in the intersection of Oyster Bay Road and Highway 264. The Highway Patrol arrested 34 of the protesters, jailed 11 girls and two boys, and released 20 under the age of 16 as juveniles. The Hyde County Jail had been filled and the sheriff now scattered the arrested demonstrators among small-town pris-

ons 60 to 90 miles away.

More than 100 marchers, including many parents and toddlers, held a prayer service at the courthouse the next day. Marching back toward Job’s Chapel, 15 to 20 teenagers left the procession and began skipping rope on the highway. When state troopers arrested them, they dashed rambunctiously toward the jail



**RACIAL TENSIONS WERE HIGH WHEN THE HYDE COUNTY MARCHERS ENTERED THE STATE CAPITAL ON FEBRUARY 14, 1969.**

until a squad of troopers interceded and corralled them into an orderly line.

The protests had already filled so many of the closer jails that Sheriff Cahoon transferred a dozen girls to the Greene County jail in Snow Hill, more than 100 miles west of Swan Quarter. Business leaders in some closer towns had grown worried that the prisoners would inspire demonstrations by local blacks, and at least two sheriffs would no longer accept detainees from Hyde County.

The protests continued incessantly, day after day. By the time district court convened on December 11, Judge Hallet Ward Jr. discovered the cases of 166 demonstrators on his docket. The next day, before an overcrowded courtroom, the judge found the first seven teenage boys on trial guilty, gave them suspended four-month prison sentences, and placed them on probation.

When court officers requested that the people in attendance stand for his exit, black citizens neither rose from their seats nor said a word. The judge repeated the order, but the crowd was again silent and immobile, and Ward ordered Sheriff Cahoon to remove the protesters. Though outraged, Ward did not hold them in contempt in order to avoid heightening tensions during the remainder of the court session.

Judge Ward was not so patient when district court reconvened in Swan Quarter on December 18. Confrontations, including another attempt to block the buses at the O. A. Peay School, had occurred daily during the court recess. When Ward found 29 more activists guilty that morning, 75 young people returned to the courtroom during the lunch adjournment and demonstrated against the verdicts by stomping their feet and singing movement songs. They were still at it when the judge reentered the courtroom at two o’clock, and they neither halted nor stood when Sheriff Cahoon called the court back into session.

Ward found everybody not standing — 99 people in all — in contempt of court and had them carried to jail by state troopers.

## MARCH ON RALEIGH

As winter descended on Hyde County, heightening its isolation, the struggle began to broaden. More than a dozen SCLC activists visited Hyde County, including veteran James Bevel, a leader of the Selma march and the Nashville Movement.

## THE CHILDREN

On the afternoon of January 16, SCLC leaders welcomed home the last 67 demonstrators jailed under the contempt-of-court order. They then joined a mass meeting at a local church where black citizens debated and prayed over the school crisis until midnight.

The next morning, SCLC leaders announced that the Hyde County school boycott was no longer a local issue but a civil rights struggle of state and national significance. School boycotters halted the local demonstrations that had been held almost daily for five months, while Golden Frinks announced a march to the state capitol in Raleigh the next month. Boycotters hoped the march would galvanize public support, inspire other civil rights protests, and foster new momentum for negotiations.

Preparing for the marches required an enormous effort. Under the leadership of Milton Fitch, who coordinated the marches for the SCLC, Hyde County activists had to arrange transportation, find places to stay, and prepare food for an entire week. They had to meet with local civil rights groups along the march route, and for their own protection they had to discuss their plans thoroughly with state and local law enforcement agents.

The first march, called simply the March on Raleigh, began at Job's Chapel on the dismal, rainy morning of February 9. More than 125 demonstrators walked west on Highway 264 followed by a caravan of 55 automobiles, U-Haul trailers, and buses carrying food, bedding, and chaperones. Over the next six days, marchers traced a

Leaders of the school boycott realized that they needed to develop a "movement culture" in Hyde County that could sustain the protest through confrontations, threats, and the frustration of temporary defeats. To this end, they held community meetings almost nightly after the protest marches, rotating the location among the county churches.

Years later, participants still remembered the exhilaration and energy at those gatherings. Singing and worship formed the heart of every meeting. Visiting civil rights leaders frequently gave inspirational or educational speeches, and SCLC activists often conducted workshops on civil disobedience. "Everything was aired at the meetings," recalled Alice Spencer, a teenager at the time.

As the boycott continued, young people like Spencer assumed many of the day-to-day responsibilities for running the movement. Spencer and Charlie Beckworth kept the financial books for the entire operation, with help from two other young women. Ida Murray, in her early twenties, coordinated transportation. Linda Sue Gibbs, a teenager from Scranton, directed a choir that sang movement songs during meetings and protest activities.

By mid-October, more than 400 children attended "movement schools" organized in seven local churches. The schools offered an alternative education and a supervised environment, helping to build community unity and to strengthen the movement culture. The schools affirmed both the independent tradition of black education in Hyde County and the new sense of black pride emerging during the school boycott.

Black citizens, especially the children, developed a self-conscious awareness that they were living in an historic moment. They were determined that they would, in one's words, "stand up once in our lifetimes." The young people felt that Hyde County had never before had this extraordinary potential for social change, and they were afraid to let the moment slip away from them.

"If we do not do something now, it will never happen," the children told Dr. Dudley Flood. He was impressed that "they had become convinced that they owed it to future generations."

With this attitude, the young people threw themselves into the civil rights struggle, ignoring the risks and devoting every moment of every day to it. "You walked, talked, ate, thought . . . lived for the movement," recalled Alice Spencer. "It was all you did."

"I felt like I was giving myself completely to something larger and more important than myself," recalled Thomas Whitaker, who would have been a senior at the O. A. Peay School that year. This awakened community spirit made them only more determined to hold onto their schools.

— D.C.



YOUNG PEOPLE PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN THE SCHOOL BOYCOTT.

200-mile route to the state capital, parading through towns and, between them, boarding cars and buses.

The marchers spent the first two nights at black churches in Belhaven and Washington, two coastal towns not far from Hyde County. They traveled the next three days through the heart of the

Tobacco Belt and spent the evenings in Greenville, Farmville, and Wilson, the largest tobacco markets in the world. Along this route, local black residents displayed signs of solidarity. Many walked in the procession through their town, and civil rights groups held support rallies in Belhaven and Greenville. In Wilson, several hundred black students boycotted high school for a day to join the march, then accompanied them part of the way to Raleigh.

Bolstered by busloads of demonstrators from home on the final day, 600 marchers arrived in Raleigh on Friday afternoon, February 14. A crowd of supporters led by several hundred black students from Shaw University and St. Augustine's College welcomed them to the capital.

State political leaders and other curious citizens crowded downtown Raleigh to watch the procession. Every available police officer was on duty. Three dozen state troopers stood nearby in case they were needed. Riot police wearing bullet-proof vests and anti-terrorism gear waited at the Municipal Building, and National Guardsmen were on standby alert at the State Fairgrounds. Large numbers of plain-clothed SBI and FBI agents wandered the crowds and closely monitored the march.

The marchers proceeded slowly into the heart of the government district and held a long rally in front of the State House, with a keynote speech by the Reverend Andrew Young, who was then SCLC's executive vice-president. Afterward, Young and boycott leaders met with the governor to express their concerns.

## MOUNTAIN TOP TO VALLEY

When they returned from the first march to Raleigh, boycott leaders began to organize a second almost immediately, timing it to commemorate the first anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The Mountain Top to Valley March would approach the state capital from the opposite direction than the March on Raleigh. School boycotters planned to travel, again mostly by bus, 250 miles in 11 days, from Asheville in the Blue Ridge Mountains east to Raleigh.

But the march was marked by tragedy before its first step. On March 24, a carload of youths — one of several “advance teams” that had spread out along the route to organize local support — swerved into a pickup truck on a highway in Wilson, 100 miles west of Swan Quarter. Lucy Howard and Clara Beckworth, teenage girls from the Slocumb community, were killed on impact. The three other passengers were injured but not gravely.

Hyde County blacks were profoundly shaken by the wreck. Years later many people remembered the accident and the subsequent weeks of mourning more vividly than any other moment during the boycott. Most grew more determined to see the school boycott through, in Fitch’s words, “not wanting to let Clara and Lucy down” by failing to honor their example.

The Mountain Top to Valley March proceeded on April 4, following a meandering course from Asheville to Raleigh. The 75 marchers frequently changed their itinerary to respond to local events. In Madison County and Statesville, they helped black activists to consolidate school desegregation campaigns. They walked picket lines with textile workers striking at Cannon Mills in Kannapolis. White civic leaders greeted them as civil rights heroes in Valdese, and the Black Panthers welcomed them into Greensboro with open arms.

The most memorable episode of the march occurred in Concord, where the Ku Klux Klan waited in ambush for the Hyde County demonstrators. As the marchers neared the Klan, a sympathetic local white minister frantically spread word of the impending clash to black students at a high school and at Barber-Scotia, a black Presbyterian college. Hundreds of the students quickly left their campuses to join the Mountain

Top to Valley March, and the Klan shrank back before their overwhelming numbers.

The marchers arrived somewhat disheveled in Raleigh on April 18, three days later than planned. Racial tensions were even higher in the capital than when the school boycotters had last visited, and they inflamed an already tense community. The Hyde County youths initiated their own nonviolent demonstrations and joined a peaceful march of several hundred from the Walnut Terrace housing project into downtown Raleigh. However, their stay also coincided with a series of fire bombings at the bus station, two state liquor stores, and several other public places. The Hyde County protesters could scarcely attract attention to the school boycott in so besieged a city.

Though most boycotters returned home after a few days of protests in Raleigh, several dozen remained in town for more than two weeks. Desperate to keep the school boycott in the public eye, the Hyde County activists attempted protests that were too ambitious to succeed so far from their local support. Golden Frinks of the SCLC conducted protests at the state capitol, obstructed access to the General Assembly, and tried to establish a “tent city” near the downtown area. When police arrested two boys under the age of 16 for interfering with traffic, he was charged with contributing to the delinquency of minors. District Court Judge Ed Preston Jr. gave Frinks a stiff one-year sentence on May 7, signaling the end of the campaign to occupy Raleigh.

### VOTING AND VICTORY

The school boycott was still strong when the school year ended in early June. Black students had missed an entire year of classes, and some older children who might have graduated had instead left the county or found jobs, but black leaders declared that the sacrifice had been worth it.

In the end, they prevailed. Worn down by the sustained black protests, three school board members and Superintendent Bucklew stepped down. Their successors gave blacks a stronger voice in desegregation planning and expressed a willingness to keep black schools open.

That fall, white leaders essentially put the issue before the voters, asking them to decide a bond issue that would raise \$500,000 to pay for enlarging the Mattamuskeet school. Faced with the

threat of more black protests and higher taxes, even white voters rejected the original plan to expand the white school and opted instead to convert Peay and Davis into elementary schools.

The final settlement hammered out by biracial committees representing students, parents, and teachers did more than save the black schools. It retained black principals and teachers, incorporated black students fully into all extracurricular activities, preserved black cultural events, instituted an African-American history class, and established permanent committees to ensure parents a voice in their children’s education. Last, though hardly least important, the O.A. Peay school retained the name of its founder, who symbolized the educational aspirations and achievements of the black community.

For black citizens, sustaining the school boycott for an entire year had been a remarkable act of endurance requiring them to overcome poor weather, jail, the deaths of Clara Beckworth and Lucy Howard, and their own fears for the children’s educations. Yet they carried their struggle twice to the state capitol, and their school boycott fueled a broader movement for civil rights in Hyde County.

Today, two and three decades removed from those battles, a reassessment of school desegregation is beginning to occur. A few prominent black scholars have begun to emphasize what their communities lost during school desegregation, and others have started to rediscover the good qualities of African-American schooling in their search for new and better ways to teach children today. And in many Southern school districts that have drifted back to de facto segregation, black parents and educators are fighting against any school mergers, redrawing of districts, or busing that would dilute black community control by reintegrating the local schools.

In these ways, the complex issues that colored school desegregation a generation ago — issues of political power and cultural survival, ethnic traditions and community control — are again entering public discussion. The school boycott in Hyde County offers valuable insights into these challenges encountered in the attempt to create better schools and communities for all children. □

*David Cecelski is a research fellow with the Institute for Southern Studies. This story is adapted from his book *Along Freedom Road*, published this spring by the University of North Carolina Press.*

# Beyond Brown

**A new court battle  
in Mississippi has  
sparked a massive  
political struggle  
to preserve and  
extend educational  
diversity.**

*By Isaiah Madison*

**O**n the last day of April, more than 10,000 people gathered on the grounds of Jackson State University. They marched to the Masonic Temple, where they stopped for a prayer, and then moved on to stage a giant rally on the grounds of the state Capitol.

"Save Historically Black Colleges and Universities," read one banner. "It's about equity in education," announced another.

It was a few weeks before the 40th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark case that struck down public school segregation in 1954. But the Mississippi marchers had a more recent Supreme Court ruling on their minds.

Two years ago, in its first sweeping decision on college segregation, the high court ruled in *Ayers v. Fordice* that Mississippi continues to operate a segregated

system of state-run universities in violation of the U.S. Constitution. Ninety-nine percent of white college students in the state are enrolled at five historically white institutions, while 71 percent of the black students attend three historically black colleges.

African-American students and parents who filed *Ayers* in 1975 want Mississippi to upgrade black schools, where the state spends an average of \$2,500 less per student each year than at white colleges. But the court remained silent on the issue of institutional enhancement for black universities, and instead left it up to the state to decide how to "educationally justify or eliminate" all traces of its dual system.

The state had its own idea of how to eliminate inequality. Arguing that it cannot afford to make each of its eight existing institutions equal, the State Col-

lege Board announced in October 1992 that it would close historically black Mississippi Valley State University and merge predominantly black Alcorn State University and predominantly female Mississippi University for Women into larger, majority-white coeducational institutions.

The announcement hit alumni and supporters of the three universities like a bomb shell. Since then, African Americans and women across the state and nation have joined forces to save the schools. They staged the broad-based protest march in April, and less than a week later they took the fight to court.

On May 9, the case of *Ayers* resumed in U.S. District Court in Oxford, Mississippi. At issue is whose vision of the future of higher education will prevail. On one side are black students and parents who want to increase access for African Americans at historically white universities and upgrade historically black colleges into first-class, culturally diverse institutions. On the other side are predominantly white, male state leaders who are determined to eliminate or merge black colleges into larger, historically white institutions.

It is widely believed that *Ayers* will

produce the most important judicial pronouncement of national educational policy since *Brown*. But focusing on the narrow legal controversy misses the real significance of the case. However it is resolved in court, the lawsuit has already sparked a resurgence in grassroots organizing as black Mississippians assume responsibility for securing equality in higher education. The struggle promises to have long-term political implications not just for Mississippi, but for the nation as a whole — particularly for areas in the South where communities of color comprise significant portions of the population.

"Ayers has put the subject of education on the lips of the common people in a way that has not existed in Mississippi since *Brown*," says Leslie McLemore, professor of political science at Jackson State University. "Increasingly, *Ayers* is a focal point for discussion of a wide variety of important black-white issues."

## THE CASE

Few people understand the case and its importance as well as McLemore. In 1974, he helped organize the Black Mississippians' Council on Higher Education to give leadership to the lawsuit.

"I remember all the community meetings we held in the early '70s leading up to the filing of the case," he says. "We were trying to fashion a theory for *Ayers* that would best serve the unique educational needs of black students. The case was designed to ensure that the desegregation of black higher education moves forward for the black community and not backwards."

McLemore and others on the Council examined how successful historically black institutions had been in educating black students. They also evaluated the impact of school desegregation on black



**MORE THAN 10,000 PEOPLE MARCHED IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI TO SAVE HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND EXTEND EQUITY IN EDUCATION.**

communities throughout the South — the massive closings and downgrading of formerly all-black schools, and the demotions and dismissals of black educators.

"We were shocked by the large numbers of black students being pushed out of the public schools," McLemore recalls. "It was a result of student tracking, unfair discipline, the stigma of assignment to classes for the mentally and educationally retarded, and the discriminatory impact of standardized testing."

Historically black universities must be preserved and enhanced, the Council concluded, to provide a strong education for black students and train a new generation of black leaders. "Thus, we decided to focus the *Ayers* case on both maximizing access to historically white universities and on upgrading historically black universities," explains McLemore. "We felt this was necessary to prevent the black community from again suffering the kind of devastating educational losses it was already suffering on the elementary and secondary level."

Victor McTeer, a lawyer who helped craft the legal theory for *Ayers*, emphasizes that enhancing predominantly

black universities is a valid method of remedying the "historic pattern of discrimination" identified in *Brown*.

"The strategy employed in primary and secondary education to eliminate this pattern of discrimination was to close down the black schools and put blacks into the white schools," McTeer says. "For the most part, that meant that whites left and enrolled in private institutions. We decided in *Ayers* that on the university level a more productive strategy would be simply to strengthen the African-American schools by giving them a fair share of the pie. Any resistance to this argument is race-based."

Strengthening rather than closing black schools represented a bold new legal strategy in the fight for equal education. "We didn't buy the theory that integration must always rest on the shoulders of black people," says Hollis Watkins, a Mississippi organizer who helped develop *Ayers*. "It's a responsibility of whites as well as blacks. The white leadership never talks about adequate funding for black institutions to make them attractive to whites. The argument that blacks want to preserve historically black universities as 'exclusive black enclaves' where they can discriminate against whites is just a smokescreen to divert attention away from the real truth of the matter — that we still have a lot of racism and discrimination in many white-controlled institutions."

Watkins calls the proposed "merger" of Alcorn State and the Mississippi University for Women "a takeover on the part of the white male-dominated universities. Education should be made more accessible to students. Merging and closing institutions do not make education more accessible to blacks. In fact, it is more often than not used to prevent blacks from receiving a higher education."

Clyda Rent, president of the Missis-

issippi University for Women, agrees. "The *Ayers* case should not be about integration — doing away with segregation — but about providing learners in Mississippi with the best educational environment we can. Research shows that historically black universities do a disproportionately outstanding job of helping black people be successful. The same is true for majority-women institutions."

## A DEMOCRATIC RESURGENCE

Supporters of black universities have little faith that *Ayers* will produce an outcome beneficial to the black community. The U.S. Supreme Court apparently rebuffed plaintiffs by refusing to order Mississippi to upgrade black colleges, and the white male leadership of the state has made its position all too clear.

Representative Bennie Thompson of Mississippi says he is "not optimistic" about the outcome of the lawsuit. "The remedy we offer is reasonable," he told *Black Issues in Higher Education*.

"But at this point, all indications tell me that Mississippi judges have a tough time ruling against their friends, church members, and golf partners when African Americans are involved."

Accordingly, African Americans are looking beyond the courts to wage a long-term political struggle around the issues raised by *Ayers*. A national mobilization has been launched by the Black Mississippians' Council on Higher Education, the NAACP, and a statewide student-led group called HBCU Watch that is organizing youth nationwide, educating the black community, and registering black voters.

"Students in historically black universities are beginning to get involved and express themselves in a way that is clearly related to the student activities of the early '60s," says Hollis Watkins, former activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. "Then, students got involved in sit-ins because they were prohibited from going into many places that were open to the public. Closing some historically black institutions and putting others under the domination and control of historically white

institutions is seen by today's black students as a denial of their right to receive the best education and the education of their choice."

Indeed, not since Governor Ross Barnett dispatched state police and white students went on an all-night rampage to prevent James Meredith from enrolling in the University of Mississippi have



**BEN CHAVIS, DIRECTOR OF THE NAACP (CENTER), JOINED MARCHERS DEMANDING EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION.**

state-run universities been the focal point of so much public attention and political controversy. More important than the legalistic debate about the "educational justifiability" of maintaining racially identifiable institutions, the push to enhance historically black universities represents a growing demand by black Mississippians for meaningful involvement in decision-making about higher education.

"The *Ayers* case has unified and woke up black people and brought us back to our roots," says the Reverend Eugene McLemore, pastor of Lynch Street CME Church of Jackson. "Going back to our roots always takes us back to our churches, our civil rights organizations, and our black political leaders."

The case has also spurred women to mobilize politically. One of the most promising consequences of *Ayers* is the strong coalition being forged between blacks and women — an alliance that presents a powerful challenge to traditional white male dominance in Mississippi politics.

Lillie Blackmon-Sanders, an original plaintiff in *Ayers* and the first woman

ever to serve as a circuit judge in the state, calls the decision to merge Mississippi University for Women (MUW) with male-dominated Mississippi State University "an act of an institution being dumped on because it is populated by women."

"Like majority-black institutions, MUW presents an easier political target than the white male-dominated institutions," she adds. "MUW has lots of programs that are unique from those of other state universities. There is no reason to stop funding them. It's a power thing: The white male political hierarchy is determined to stay in charge."

## FROM COURT TO BALLOTS

In many respects, the current organizing around *Ayers* reverses a pattern among black Mississippians that dates back to their disenfranchisement following Reconstruction. Lacking proportionate political representation, African Americans have long depended primarily on the federal courts to protect and vindicate their

legal and constitutional rights. But conservative judicial appointments by Republican presidents have made the courts less friendly to communities of color — and enforcement of the 1965 Voting Rights Act has begun to ensure serious black representation in Congress and the state legislature.

When *Ayers* was filed in 1975, only one black sat in the state legislature. Today, 42 of 174 state legislators are black — nearly one-fourth of the total. Over the same period, the number of African Americans in elected office throughout Mississippi increased from 192 to more than 751.

Given the increased political clout and increasingly hostile courts, *Ayers* may usher in a new era of "political litigation." Unlike *Brown*, based on which the court seeks to definitively resolve substantive issues, activists are likely to use the court to focus debate and support negotiations in the political arena.

The political response by the black community has been given additional urgency by recent efforts to undercut electoral gains by African Americans. Next year, the governor plans to put a proposal



on the ballot to reduce the state legislature to 50 members — less than one-third its present size.

Ben Jealous, field director of HBCU Watch, puts it bluntly: "We have to win the legislative downsizing issue in order to win *Ayers*."

State Senator Johnnie Walls, an original member of the Black Mississippians' Council on Higher Education, also recognizes the connection between the assaults on black legislators and black universities. "Depriving blacks of university education will limit the number of blacks capable of qualifying for powerful and influential positions in the state," he says. "Limiting black legislative participation will seriously diminish the ability of black Mississippians to participate in high-level leadership and decision-making. It's okay as long as blacks remain employees and under the direction and control of whites; but most whites can't accept blacks being in positions where they have the final word. This is what the attacks on black universities and black legislators is fundamentally about."

In the long run, says Walls, closing predominantly black universities will hurt democracy. "Whites know that closing black universities will diminish the ability of black Mississippians to be productive citizens and contribute to the state as a whole."

## FROM DOMINATION TO DIVERSITY

During his visit to the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville took a ride down the Ohio River. On one side was Ohio, a free state; on the other was Kentucky, a slave state. On the Ohio side of the river, he observed much human enterprise: productive farms, industrious people pursuing numerous vocations — driven to achieve and contribute to society. On the Kentucky side, he witnessed pervasive dependency and unproductivity: slaves resigned to a virtually subhuman level of existence, living in abject poverty, whose work was half-hearted; and slave owners compensating for the meaninglessness of their lives by giving themselves excessively to sports, military exercises, and numerous violent activities — including abuse and rape of their slaves.

Mississippi once depended on a slave economy and still bears the material and psychic scars of its dehumanizing, debilitating past. Consequently, throughout

the state can still be seen the lingering effects of its unenterprising, "colonial" heritage. Nowhere is the impact of this unfortunate legacy felt more painfully than in Mississippi's continuing low educational achievement and widespread material poverty.

Mississippi would be a far more productive and hopeful place in which to live if its women and citizens of color were free to become all that they can be. This cannot happen as long as the traditional paternalistic order systematically assigns white men to the most prominent and powerful leadership positions, while characterizing blacks and women unwilling to accept subordinate assignments as "uppity," "masculine," or "out of their place."

White male-dominated universities should not try to replace or "swallow up" historically black and women universities. Each of these institutions has a distinct educational function which it is best suited to serve. Black universities are depositories of the cultural memory and resilience of a people who in a little more than a century broke the back of chattel slavery, placed thousands of their kind in highly influential national and international positions, and made extraordinary contributions to the betterment of humankind.

There is no symbol more needed in Mississippi today than the triumphant emergence of African Americans from slavery to freedom. On this score, historically black universities have much to teach all Mississippians, regardless of race; and historically white universities — notwithstanding their obvious material advantages — have much to learn.

"It seems like the white leadership in Mississippi wants to keep black people unproductive, dependent, and satisfied with living at an almost slave level of existence," says Robert Young, an original member of the Black Mississippians' Council on Higher Education who teaches at Grambling State University in Louisiana. "They complain about blacks being on welfare while doing everything they can to keep blacks economically unproductive. The real tragedy is that they don't seem to realize that when they keep blacks down, they also keep themselves down." Young quotes Booker T. Washington: "You can't keep a man in a ditch without staying in there with him."

Plaintiffs and supporters of *Ayers* take issue with the declaration in *Brown* that "racially separated facilities are inherently unequal." Instead, they have

forged a broad-based consensus that the principal impediment to equal educational opportunity for blacks is not *segregation* but *domination*. They point to a recent meeting of white university presidents that excluded top black administrators as symptomatic of what is wrong with higher education in Mississippi. At the very heart of their demands is a simple request to be included in decision-making that affects their lives. Indeed, much of the frustration among black Mississippians over the threat to black colleges is rooted in their exclusion from the decision-making process.

A court-imposed "resolution" of the critical public issues in *Ayers* will only serve to exacerbate this pervasive sense among black students, alumni, university administrators, and public officials that they are being politically discounted. As long as white paternalism remains a vital force in Mississippi, blacks and women will continue to be outside the critical decision-making processes where substantive public issues, such as those raised by *Ayers*, are effectively resolved. This is why, particularly on the campuses of Mississippi's predominantly black universities, a new Freedom Movement is struggling to be born.

"The black university is the cultural nurturer of African-American people," says Robert Walker, a former mayor of Vicksburg who helped prepare *Ayers*. "The destruction of the black university leads to the destruction of the black community just as surely as night follows day. And since the uniqueness of the United States is its rich cultural diversity, the death of the black university — no less than the death of the Jewish, Irish Catholic, or Native American university — diminishes the cultural and spiritual vitality of us all. We Mississippians must celebrate our cultural diversity to create together a prosperous society."

"Without a vision," the saying goes, "the people perish." The vision to keep black Mississippi colleges from perishing apparently does not exist in members of the State College Board or in the federal courts. But it clearly resides in abundance in the *Ayers* plaintiffs and those who have helped to develop and guide the case. They are well equipped to give leadership to creating a future in Mississippi big enough to accommodate all its peoples. □

*Isaiah Madison is the executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies and was the original lead attorney for the plaintiffs in Ayers v. Fordice.*

# “Use What You Have”

White flight impoverished many public schools, but one community group enriches students by tapping human resources.

Interview by Eric Bates

**W**hen federal courts began ordering schools to integrate in the late 1960s, many white parents across the South sent their children to private academies. The widespread resistance to interracial education impoverished many predominantly black public schools and left them strapped for resources.

In Holmes County, Mississippi, a group of activists is working to enrich the public schools by tapping the wealth of human resources in the community. With a staff of three and a small budget, the Community Culture and Resource Center has created alternative school

projects that enliven education and empower students. We asked executive director Ann Brown and project coordinator Rayford Horton about their work and the legacy of segregation.

**Horton:** As a graduate of the public schools here in Holmes County, I

understand some of the problems in the system. Many schools in the state are on academic probation, but all you hear is blame shifting. The teachers say, “The kids can’t learn,” and the kids say, “The teachers can’t teach.” No one focuses on who suffers — the kids.

I did a survey of high school students,

particularly dropouts and potential dropouts, to understand what was missing. They told me there was no reason to go to school — there was nothing exciting happening. Teachers lectured from a manual, and the kids felt, “I can read, so why is this teacher reading to me out of a book?” It was boring. The only extracurricular cultural programs were band and athletics — no drama, no art, nothing.

I’ve always felt that young people have creative energy — they need to express themselves. If the energy doesn’t come out in a positive way, it’s going to come out in a negative way. Holmes County schools didn’t have any cultural programs to allow kids to express that creative energy. So you had kids on drugs, in street gangs, or just being the class clown.

I made it my mission to work with young people after school, on weekends, and across the summer to design projects

that were educational and exciting. We wanted to design creative educational models that can be replicated by other communities.

We discovered there are young people who have tremendous talents — speaking, acting, singing, playing instruments — that they never had a chance to express. So we began by having kids put together plays based on local history and culture. This year we put together a 45-minute performance on gospel and blues. The young people identified local artists and interviewed them to get their stories about how their careers in music have helped better their lives. Then we created a dramatization to tell the story, and invited the artists to participate.

The projects show young people that everyone has a talent. There's a talent in the way everybody talks, there's a talent in the way everybody walks. If they can use that God-given skill, they can help better their lives and the lives of those in the community.

The projects also help close the gap between the community and the schools. Most of the time when we conduct interviews with people, they have stories they've been wanting to tell for years. They're excited to be able to share their experience and their knowledge with young people — about local history, their role in the civil rights movement, their art and music and way of life.

Young people can relate to things that are local — and it gives them a perspective that isn't taught in school. They read what their textbooks say about life here in America, and they compare that to what they learn from talking to people who have experienced it. It gives them an in-depth look at themselves and their communities. They say, "I didn't know this happened right next door to me — and it's still happening!" They learn that history is made every day. It motivates them to want to learn.

These programs prompt a lot of young people to want to go to college and continue their education. I would say 80 percent of the kids who were part of the first projects I worked on are in college right now.



**HOLMES COUNTY STUDENTS ENJOY A REHEARSAL FOR THEIR PLAY ABOUT LOCAL GOSPEL AND BLUES ARTISTS.**

**Brown:** We also have a youth environmental project in a high school located in the Delta where many families have never had running water. They have to haul water and store it in containers in their homes for long periods of time. Large plantation owners in the Delta use a lot of chemicals that poison the drinking water, but there was nothing in the curriculum about it. So we developed a project to do educational awareness of groundwater and health hazards.

Our environmental coordinator Wilma Powell works in the classroom along with an earth science teacher for six weeks. She brings in resource people to lecture and show films, and students test the water and soil in their area for chemicals. When they tested the water at their school, they discovered there was no chlorinator on the water supply!

Once the students learn about the health risks of hauling and storing water, they become actively involved in organizing to get running water brought to their communities. They also plan to go to the school board to get the project institutionalized districtwide as part of the curriculum for the 1995 school year.

One of our main efforts is to organize the community to give everyone a voice in the decisions that affect them. We need a fundamental, institutional change in our school system, and that's why we make sure to involve youth in every aspect of our work. Working side by side with adults helps young people develop leadership skills so they are not afraid to go to the school board, get on the agenda, and speak up on their behalf.

Under segregation, the three black

high schools in Holmes County were called "Attendance Centers for Negroes," and after desegregation they were still called "Attendance Centers." When a group of young people in one of our programs learned how the schools got their names, they launched a campaign to change them. After a year and a half of organizing, they were successful in getting the names changed to ones chosen by the communities — the names of the first principals of the schools.

**Horton:** It's not just the names that are left over from segregation. In many ways, the school system is still playing catch-up from that era. Even after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the schools were still segregated. When whites created private academies, they stripped the public schools — they didn't leave anything behind. We got new facilities, but we lacked the resources that whites had.

It all goes back to that dollar. Teachers and administrators always say, "We could do more if we had the money." That's a real problem, but it's not enough to simply give up. We say, "Use what you have." The community has tremendous resources — let's put them to use. Let's make students part of the decision-making process — then you'll see them getting more involved in their own education.

**Brown:** We're trying to show that there are some things you can do without money. All you need are the bodies, the resources that you have. With the environmental project, we work with the ground, the water, the people. The people are here. They exist. They have stories they want to tell. The schools say, "We can't teach it because it's not in the book." But it's real.

We need to make education real. We tell school officials, "You may be in charge, but these are our schools and our communities, and we have to have a voice in what happens here." □

*Eric Bates is editor of Southern Exposure.*

# Resources

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## ORGANIZING

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**BLACK MISSISSIPPIANS' COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION**  
P.O. Box 20088  
Jackson, MS 39289  
(601) 922-3426

**MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY NATIONAL ALUMNI ASSOCIATION**  
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**OFFICE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PUBLIC BLACK COLLEGES**  
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# HOLDING IDA

By Darnell Arnoult

**L**ast night there was all kinds of commotion. Ida Hedgecock came home all huffed up. Grabbed up into an old pickup full of men and held down in the back by her arms and legs by foreigners who talked gibberish. She prayed to Jesus and found herself sitting right on her front porch. She'd never had a prayer answered so fast. They didn't really hurt her, thank God, but if not for sweet Jesus they surely would have. Praise him, she thought as she sat on her front porch glider thinking about how she'd kicked one of them fellows good when they was getting her in that truck bed.

All that was bad enough. Roused by strangers. Man-handled by foreigners. Then to top it off, she couldn't find a match to light the cook-stove. Ida never liked that electric. Couldn't get it to work any more anyway. Whatever Ida did the eyes stayed cold and black.

Old ways are the best, but only if you have matches. No matches, but she found food in the icebox. She ate Fig Newtons and bologna, took a whore's bath, and went to bed. Damn him. She went to bed all by herself and was cold and stiff all night.

**I**da Hedgecock is peering out her kitchen window this morning. She is dressed like she has dressed every other day of her adult life, a cotton print, today navy with tiny yellow roses, cinnamon beige stockings rolled and tucked in place below her knees, black lace-up shoes with just a little bit of heel and worn at the balls of her feet to the point they might crack open at any moment. Over her dress she wears a bibbed cotton apron, faded and speckled with yellow and white daisies, two large patch pockets at the bottom and white bric-a-brac at every seam. Her hair is white, tinged with yellow, tucked and pinned into a roll below the crown of her head.

Illustrations by Jacob Roquet



She turns from the window and, with a slight tremor, reaches for her black-rimmed glasses. She is 81. She is troubled.

To begin with, Ida's husband has not come home in several days. Ida has lost count. His habits have been mighty strange lately. He doesn't eat anymore, and he never sleeps in the bed. Until a short while ago, he had slept in that high poster cherry bed every night for 65 years.

She saw him yesterday walking

through the south pasture toward the river. She followed him for quite a ways but never really came close enough to call his name so he could hear it. He hadn't heard good since he came back from the war. He said an explosion had blown out his eardrum. She was right on his trail until strangers stopped her. Said she shouldn't be out by herself and took hold of her. Put her in a truck and brought her home.

They never hurt her, though. She thanked God for that. No thanks to Hedge who should be God's agent in such things. Not that she is questioning God. She knows better than that.

Recently Hedge has been coming around talking to Ida at odd hours of the night when he should be sleeping or in the middle of the day when he should be tending to horses or cows

or chicken coops or feed corn. And he speaks on strange subjects. He says he is salvaging, collecting parts of things and holding them in a special place. "When the time is right you'll see," he tells her.

Talk like that and all his carrying on is getting on Ida's nerves. Every bit of it. But just as he has done for that same 65 years, when her hackles get raised he touches the small of her back in the spot that has always seemed made just for the resting place of his hand, and he says, "You'll see." It has always paid off for her to trust him when he says that. But these days it is hard trusting anything he says or does because he isn't acting himself.

This morning, as if Ida isn't having enough troubles, there is a man in the yard. A strange man in blue-gray coveralls and a yellow hat has been in the front yard all morning digging post holes. Chuck. Chuck. Chuck. It started just after light.

It is not Ida's habit to speak to strangers, and this surely is something Hedge should be tending to, but he isn't on hand. So unlike him. So unlike Hedge to leave her unprotected.

Why would a strange man be digging holes in my yard without so much as a may I? she says to herself. What could he be planting in those little holes?

"Hedge!" she hollers on the chance that he'll come. Nothing.

Ida begins to feel hot. Everything around her fades into whiteness and then comes back. She moves toward the window as she recovers, putting on her glasses.

"Who the hell is digging holes in my yard?" she says in a loud voice. Ida cranes her neck to get a better look at the man through the kitchen windows over the sink. She can't see him well. He has just moved beyond the shrubs, but she can hear him chuck, chuck, chucking into her grass. Probably into her flowers.

Ida drags a turquoise dinette chair screeching against the peeling linoleum rug until she has it positioned in front of the

sink. She slowly climbs up onto the chair. Once she has both feet unsteadily placed on the seat, she lifts her right foot to put it into the sink.

"Mother! What in the world are you doing?" Nancy's voice gives Ida such a start from behind that she jerks and begins listing too much in one direction. She can feel

herself falling as if in slow motion. She makes a little noise as she falls. "Ughhh."

Nancy's hands go nimbly around Ida's body and the two women, as one, stagger backward and fall. Nancy cushions Ida's fragile bones as much as she can.

"Mother," Nancy speaks as if to a child she has lost all patience with but still refuses to yell at. "What were you doing climbing in that sink? God."

Ida says nothing.

"Please roll over," Nancy says to her.

Ida grunts.

"Careful," Nancy says. "Are you all right?"

Ida grunts again and moves to the right. With a little thud she is off Nancy's stomach and lying on her side, her wrinkled cheek against the clean cool familiar linoleum.



*Ida's young face rests against the cool linoleum. She is wearing nothing but a white petticoat. It is July and sweltering hot. Ida's mother is sitting on the davenport looking at photographs with Aunt Osie. They are laughing at something they remember about their father while Ida traces the pink flowers of the new linoleum rug in the parlor. The old linoleum has been moved to the kitchen as always and the pretty new flowers are in the front room. Her mother's shoes are inches from her face, all those hooks and string going up under her*

*skirt and petticoats. Aunt Osie's two-tone shoes from Chicago have buttons. Aunt Osie's feet are smaller than her mother's because Aunt Osie is so short, only four feet ten inches. She is like a little bitty grown-up. Ethel can already wear all Osie's fancy shoes and plays in them when Osie is not around. Ida is not supposed to tell this.*

*Ida's child body melts against the smooth chill of the floor, a relief from the wavy heat she has just seen rising from the ground outside. Her tanned limbs sprawl, trying to get as much of the cool surface against her body as possible. But her mother reaches for her, lifts her up saying, "Ida, honey, don't lay on the parlor floor like that. It's not lady-like. Jump up and take your father his lunch."*

*Ida likes to walk the three miles to the hosiery mill, even when it's hot. Sometimes she pretends to be a Bible character, someone fleeing Egypt with Moses, walking across the dry parched bottom of the Red Sea, hurrying before God lets the waters crash together to drown Pharaohs' men. She likes to hear the whistle at the mill too. When she gives her father his pail and a jar of cool, fresh buttermilk, he gives her a penny to buy jaw breakers or licorice.*

*"Jump up, now," Ida's mother is saying.*



ut it is Nancy's hands pulling her up.

"Mamma, please help a little bit," she is saying.

Ida tries to push up with her left hand.

"That's it, Mamma. Almost," Nancy coaxes.

Nancy is pulling and coaxing and pulling.

Ida's hand slips as Nancy pulls her to her feet.

"Now what were you thinking? For Christ's sake!"

"Don't blaspheme," Ida says.

"Getting on that chair and into the sink for goodness sake!" Nancy waits, rubbing her hands up and down the legs of her jeans and the backs of her arms, straightening her short brown curled hair. Nancy is in her early forties. Her blue eyes have deep dark circles under them. She reaches for her mother's arm.

"Let me see." Ida closes her eyes and tightens her mouth. Something about a man in a yellow hat, she thinks. "Humph," she says, turning back toward the sink and pointing out the window, her tremor growing more exaggerated. "There's a man digging holes in my yard. I tried to see who he was, but he moved past the snowball bush." Ida looks hard at Nancy, irritated. "So I climbed up to see if I could get a better look."

Ida jerks her arm away from Nancy and swats at her.

Hedge should be here to see about this. Ida puts her right hand to her head, and her thumb and forefinger begin separating and spreading across her eyebrows. Over and over she rubs them. Her voice becomes shaky. She sits in one of the turquoise dinette chairs by the table.

"Then you, you come along and scared the hell out of me. Here, get me some buttermilk." Ida takes a glass from the table and holds it in front of Nancy.

When Nancy sets the buttermilk in front of Ida she smooths the red and white oil cloth, and she points out the window again. "Child, you go tell that fellow that he must have it wrong. This is the Hedgecock place. He best fill in those holes he's dug and get on to his rightful place before Mr. Hedgecock catches him."

"It's Fred out there, Mamma. He's just digging post holes. He knows what he's doing."

"Well, I don't! Mr. Hedgecock don't!" Ida's arm moves up and down, in and out, first pointing to herself then to nothing. "And who the hell is Fred? I don't remember Hedge saying nothing about no post holes nor no Fred. He tells me these kinds of things you know." Ida's tremor begins to worsen again.

"Okay, Mamma. Just calm down." Nancy holds Ida's shoulders. "We don't know what else to do."

Nancy's face is so pained that Ida becomes more uneasy. Where is Hedge? She can't count on him at all lately, and it just ain't like him. She can't remember asking for post holes. She has a little white fence with a gate that Hedge put up when her mamma died and left the house to the two of them. He was so proud to have a place of their own. Hedge loves this place and he has made a fine home for Ida. He has always been a homebody. But now days he comes to the door and walks through the house and says some little something he's said a million times before, and then he leaves. Just like that. It beats all get-out to her that he can leave her out to dry that way. After all these years together.

Ida looked all over for him yesterday. Spent the whole day looking for him before she spotted him heading for the river. He hadn't been home to sleep in his own bed in so long she could hardly remember when.

He better get home and take care of things, she thinks, or there will be holes all in his yard, and he'll step in one and break his neck. Not that it wouldn't serve him right. Tears roll down Ida's face.

"Mother don't cry." Nancy searches her sweater pockets for a tissue. She refolds the tissue she finds and wipes Ida's eyes.

"Hedge won't come home to bed or chase this Fred man off

our land. And I hate that gun. I don't like to use it, and he knows it." Ida's lip quivers as she nervously rubs her fingers against the sweat on the glass of buttermilk.

"Lord, Mamma, I wish you would get it in your head that Daddy is dead. And Fred, you know Fred. You love Fred."

Ida nods her head and cries quietly between sips of buttermilk.

**E**thel walks outside. It must be Ethel, she is always upset about something, always thinking she's been slighted. Ida is confused about things. Things she ought not be confused about. Like whether it's her turn to take Pa his dinner at the hosiery mill. Seems like Ethel took it last, maybe not. Ida can't find her mother to ask her. Ethel keeps saying it's all history. But Pa will want his buttermilk, history or no. And Pa can be a hard man when he's angry. Ethel ought to know that.

Ida gets up from the table and walks to the icebox. Her right leg and hip are hurting for some reason. She puts cold fried chicken and quick biscuits in a paper sack and reaches for a jar for Pa's buttermilk.

**T**hings go white again and in a minute they're normal. Ida can hear Fred chucking away at the hard clay near the back door, yet she doesn't really hear it.

When Ida finally makes it outside it's dark. She has a hard time getting out the door. She walks a few feet until she runs into something, and she can't go any farther. She sits down on the ground by a fence. It must be a mill fence. She leans back into the chain links, shining in the moonlight, and waits for the whistle.

*That Hedgecock boy is standing by a mulberry tree. He's watching her. He's good looking, and she knows he's soft-spoken and good-hearted. He sat with her at the church picnic back in spring and came with his daddy to buy a cow last month. She knew he was watching her hang clothes on the line,*

*but she didn't look back. He makes a good dance partner too. She's seen that. And he likes her all right. But she is tired of waiting for him to make his move.*

*"You just gonna stand back and gawk at me?" she says.*

*"Nope." He comes closer, and she offers him her smooth white hand and he helps her to her feet.*

*"Well, what are you gonna do?" she says.*

*"You'll see," he says.*

**I**da wakes up and squints into a bright morning sun. Her neck and bottom hurt and her knees are stiff. She works hard to straighten her legs, and notices that the mill fence is much closer to her house than it should be. She thinks maybe she is dreaming. Her faded blue gown is damp with dew.

The dark-haired woman comes out the back door. For a minute Ida thinks it is Ethel, but then she remembers Ethel is dead.

Nancy walks over to Ida and slides down the fence and sits on the ground. Nancy takes one of Ida's hands into her own and slides the loose spotted skin around over the prominent bones and veins of the old hand. For a moment, only a few seconds, Ida recognizes her yard and sees that the fence is not the mill fence. She knows she should recognize the woman who is staring at her old tough hand, making little ridges with the skin and then smoothing them away. But Ida cannot come back that far.

Ida puts her free hand on top of the younger woman's and says to her in a loud voice, "Hey, honey. Have I told you I had a good husband and two pretty babies once? I don't know what happened to them anymore, but once upon a time I used to have everything I wanted."

Nancy stands up and helps Ida to her feet. The two women go into the kitchen for breakfast. □

*Darnell Arnoult grew up in Henry County, Virginia and now works for the Center for Documentary Studies in Durham, North Carolina.*





# Racial Reading

By Jerry W. Ward Jr.

**E**very human society needs stories. In fact, story is obligatory, a means of defining and embellishing humanity. Our lives are saturated with what I call imperative fictions — stories and myths that influence our thinking and our behaviors. In America, we use one kind of imperative fiction — *race* — to classify and differentiate, provide warrants for our notions of superiority and inferiority, buttress certain public policies, and produce a wide range of psychological conditions in the body politic. “Race” is the most powerful concept in the national mind and the most problematic item in the American social contract.

Literature — as well as other forms of telling and writing that evade easy definition — gives us some of our most revealing conversations about race. And in no region of America are the production and consequences of these fictions more brilliantly displayed than in the South. We Southerners have always been linked to the invention of race, to the social inscription of race in our civic covenants. Race is never absent from our actual experiences nor the language we use. It is broadcast in our thought and culture at all ranges, particularly at the “lower frequencies” in which Ralph Ellison’s nameless, invisible man hinted he might be speaking for someone.

Southern writers are virtually condemned to voice that pervasive power in their works, and unless we want to play deadly games of self-deception, we do not evade the presence of race as we read and make meaning of literature. As Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it with nice discrimination in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, “American literature and literary study both reflect the existence of ethnic groups — the very contours of which are, in a certain sense, the product

of racism.”

Many years ago, I was accused of taking literature too seriously, of believing that writers of fiction and nonfiction actually intended to create works that make a difference for their readers. The accusation was accurate. Like singer Isaac Hayes, I don’t mind standing accused of believing that the discourse of race in Southern fiction influences our understanding of how American culture and thought get arrested by words. After all, why do many Southern conversations resemble debates between Richard Wright and William Faulkner?

There is an urgency in my remarks about race and Southern literature as I write a collection of essays on the subject. The need to confess ethnic-specific habits of reading comes from my having lived in the South for nearly half a century and from understanding where the everyday conversations of my generation are anchored. The urgency comes also from the pleasure of finding in Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* a confirmation of how productive it is to redraw the boundaries of literary and cultural studies. My recent writing and editing have caused me to meander in the tropic zone of race, Southern literature, and imperative fictions. I call these meanderings “digressions.”

**D**IGRESSION ONE. Writing about the Southern rage in *Tell About the South*, Fred Hobson (one of the better intellectual historians) claims “in essence all writing about the South, fiction or nonfiction, seeks in one way or another to explore and explain the region.” Such writing explains more than region, however — it explains human action and reaction in a space that is language, and in a place where we do things with words.

To the extent that this “fiction” named race constitutes the bulk of America’s master narrative, we can profit by backtracking to the 1960s. Questioning the meaning of the civil rights movement is one way of exposing what is present but often hidden by the distortions of color.

Much of Alice Walker’s work provides instances for questioning the 1960s. Her essay “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” appeared in *American Scholar* in 1967. The subtitle gives the false impression that the movement was over; in fact, there is something timely, very fresh still about this essay. After reviewing the reasons that the disaffected offered for announcing that the movement was dead, Walker proceeded to write how the movement had provided “an awakened faith in the newness and imagination of the human spirit.” The awakening is not couched in terms of race, but the racial implications seem as obvious as do those pertinent matters of gender.

“Part of what existence means to me is knowing the difference between what I am now and what I was then,” Walker writes. “It is being capable of looking after myself intellectually as well as financially. It is being able to tell when I am being wronged and by whom. It means being awake to protect myself and the ones I love. It means being a part of the world community, and being alert to which part it is I have joined, and knowing how to change to another part if that part does not suit me. To know is to exist; to exist is to be involved, to move about, to see the world with my own eyes. This, at least, the movement has given to me.”

The ability to see, to know, to do that Walker speaks of was gained in the 1960s and ’70s for many by assaulting

the more obvious signs of institutionalized racism in the South and elsewhere, and by forcing the American legal system to either make constitutional promises real or stand naked before the world as a paragon of systemic inequality. By contrast, recycling race in Southern history and literature produced grand illusions. One imagines that Alice Walker's need as an artist to tell about the complexity of the civil rights movement was grounded in the recognition that personal change was real; social change was at best cosmetic.

In *Meridian*, her story of the 1960s South and the consequences of the civil rights movement, Walker provides a frame through which we gaze upon racialized scenes in the American Dream/Nightmare (take your pick). It warns us of the delusions in our rememberings about the 1960s, the South, and America in general. The color-coding of "race" and the magic of fiction often make us blind. Once we account for the black and white of social struggle, we think we have knowledge. Instead, all we have is the conflicted mindscape to which race has directed us.

Yes, we sit and break bread together in spaces that were forbidden 30 years ago. And the more we talk about the past in the light of the present, the more the bridges we thought we had made collapse. We have to perform the civil rights movement all over again. *Meridian* intensifies the feeling that talking about the South and race and humanity is inadequate. We must coordinate action and talk.

**D**IGRESSION TWO. Before the advent of reader response theory, say in 1955, asking what happens when a black Southern male reads narratives by a white Southern female might have been considered, at best, an oddity, and, at worst, an excuse for the good old boys to sponsor a lynching. Now it is okay to say race and gender expose some qualities of the "South-

ern" in such writings. The subjective black male perspective liberates something for which we still do not have a

embraced by the black woman (the mammy surrogate) of whom he asks directions in Atlanta.

Photos by UPI/Bettmann



**WHY DO SO MANY SOUTHERN CONVERSATIONS RESEMBLE DEBATES BETWEEN RICHARD WRIGHT . . .**

good name from the musty closets of the unsaid.

As a black male reader, I am caught up with the white female writer's use of language (especially in capturing the deeper rhythms of Southern talk), manipulation of plot, and sense of place. But my fascination is disturbed and displaced by the writer's seemingly inevitable smirk — the attempt of Southern whites to seek their salvation in the arms of Southern blacks. I recall in particular the moment when Nelson Head, the grandson of Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger," feels the desire to be

What emerges in my reading differs depending on the writer. Ellen Douglas, for example, does not smirk, and her novel *Can't Quit You Baby* is an honest, stellar example of the writer's problems with race as social construction, as a filter for the interdependence of white women employers and their black women domestics. It is no accident that the tone of her novel is controlled by the poignancy of Willie Dixon's blues.

By contrast, the controlling music in Ellen Gilchrist's short stories and her novel *The Annunciation* is not the blues but the pavane — a stately European court dance. That makes all the difference, producing the strongest contrast of consciousness between myself as a reader and Gilchrist as a writer.

As a writer, Gilchrist is conscious of a South that has to do with plantations (land, privilege, and shallow aristocracy), with class and its symbolic costumes and rituals, with great expectations that are often reduced to flags in the dust, with woman's plight, and with the hysteria that inadvertently makes the male myth of Southern white womanhood primal in the enactments of race.

As a reader, I am conscious of a South that has to do with small towns (the grubbiness of making a living), with the necessity of

group interdependency where class as such must be secondary, with finite expectations that often rise to surprising heights, with male assertiveness and sexism (the endless contest for power, especially in the bitter not-to-be-spoken-of complicity of males, black and white, in their separate and unequal campaigns to keep women in their places), with the drama of racial discord, and the heavy burden of responsibility for self and others.

The values implicit in my consciousness and that of Gilchrist are in conflict, for they are derived from parallel South-

ern histories that are marked by race and gender. In short, the laws of physics make it possible for white women and black men to be located in the same geography, but the laws of consciousness ensure that we inhabit very different conceptual spaces.

My immediate response to Gilchrist's fiction is that it is well-crafted, turning as it does all the clichés of Southern fiction inside-out and upside-down. My more cautious valuation is ambivalent. The fiction contains wonderful insights about the modern South, its individuality, and its quest for liberation. But it is "self-centered" and indulgent. It is embroidered with its own stereotypes of the Chinese, the Jews, and Southern blacks (perpetuating myths of kindness, innocence, and sexuality). And it invokes the black voice that speaks for the white, as if the white voice is incapable of speaking for itself. (Check out how many stories depend on the maid's telling the story of her frustrated mistress.)

To view Gilchrist's work from the perspective of a black Southern male is to see at once the benefits and the shortcomings of the Southern fiction of race. Hunting around in the swiftly resegregating South for the better nature of humanity is one hell of a task, especially when some of the fiction is working against you.

**D**IGRESSION THREE. There is a primal myth of interdependency in Southern literature — a hedged movement toward a longed for and unattainable racial transcendence. This governing myth is expressed neatly in a snatch of dialogue between two Vietnam veterans from Mississippi in Larry Brown's novel *Dirty Work*. Braiden Chaney, a black veteran, tells Walter James, a white vet, a story that highlights our Southern heritage of black-and-white conflict, dependency, and denial of genuinely human affinities: "You think you got trouble? You

don't know what trouble is. Trouble when you laying in a rice paddy knowing both your arms and legs blowed off and



... AND WILLIAM FAULKNER?

are they gonna shoot the chopper down before it can come and get you. Trouble when they pick you up and you ain't three feet long. The people in my fire team started to just let me lay there and bleed to death. Cause they knowed I'd wind up like this if I lived. Knowed I'd lay like this no telling how many years. They ever one of 'em has come to see me. And they each said the same thing. You know what that was?

"We wish we'd left you, Braiden.

"You been sent to me, Walter. You been sent and I ain't gonna be denied."

My American and racial experience

forces me to talk back to the novel: "You wanna bet, Braiden? The bond between you would not be the same if you and Walter weren't both the damaged resources of war. It would not be the same at all."

The importance of Larry Brown's work is that he is one of the few voices for the good old boys, the poor and lower-class whites, the voice that gets muted in Faulkner. Faulkner's protest fictions speak *about* that voice, not *in* that voice. Larry Brown is forcing a confrontation with the ignored Other (white) who is the racial Same (white). And that is a very good thing, because Brown inspects "whiteness" from the inside. He provides a special window through which I can direct the gaze of my "black" eyes. When Brown's first book, *Facing the Music*, won the literature award from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, many members of the august Institute shook their heads in dismay and disbelief — "But he doesn't speak for us." No he doesn't. He speaks *to* you.

The urgency to do my own kind of telling about race and Southern literature is fed by the sense that we are all other than what the fictions claim we are. The fiction of race as social instrument will not disappear, nor will the literary fictions produced under the anxious influence of race. The imperative is in the rhythm of American history and life. Whether you sense that or

not depends on whether you are blind, like the man who bumped into Invisible Man, or blessed with an eagle's eye.

Perhaps imperative fictions can give eyesight to the blind. But it is not easy to be an American or Southern reader. You keep discovering that you are a character in the story. □

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# Fattening Frogs

By Junebug Jabbo Jones

**S**ometimes the strangest things get connected in your mind. I'm sitting here reading the newspaper about Rodney King's suit against the City of Los Angeles and it reminds me of

James Brown with sweat dripping all down his hard-working, well-processed head singing, "If you don't work, you don't eat!" The old people would always tell us the same thing when I was growing up.

Nobody ever had to beg me to eat, so I took to work like a duck does to water. Fact of the business, I actually enjoy working — especially when it has to do with food. I figure that if I don't like the job or the people I'm working with, I can always get plenty to eat.

I can do just about anything that there is to be done around a farm. Passing through Detroit a few years back, I worked on the Ford assembly line, and in Seattle I built airplanes for a while. I have raised skyscrapers in New York and drilled tunnels for the subway lines in San Francisco. I've been a cowboy and a merchant marine. I have covered the waterfront and then some.

One time, while traveling in Florida, I was almost out of money. Buddy, you don't want to run out of money when you as much as fly over Florida. Florida *deserves* the reputation that they used to save for Mississippi. It wasn't that long ago when Florida would put a black man up under the jail for dropping orange peels in the wrong waste basket. There're some sections of Florida right now that

you have to have a signed certificate from Jesus Christ and four other responsible white men just to pass through! And don't get arrested! If you don't have \$10 to put down for a telephone deposit,

you have to sign up for welfare and be approved before you can call your momma to tell her the shape you're in. And you can forget about a lawyer . . . why do you think that those Haitian boat people have been stuck in those Florida jails for so long?

I was getting desperate for a job. I didn't even have enough money to get a bus ticket to Waycross, Georgia. In a moment of weakness I signed up to take classes at the University of Florida. At the time they had all kinds of jobs you

could get if you signed up to go to school. I was about 10 years older than most of the other students, but I loved to read and they guaranteed me a job, so I signed.

**A**t first I was doing all right! I went to work for the student security patrol. We had uniforms and badges and everything, but no blackjacks or guns. I had never had a job like that and being that I loved to work so much, I looked at it as a new experience.

Our job was to do the things that the Campus Police didn't want to do, as their job was to do the things that the regular police didn't want to do. The two things I ended up doing the most of was guarding the Campus Lake in the evenings and on weekends I "guarded"

the President's Parking Lot.

The main thing at the Campus Lake was to walk around it two or three times in an evening to make sure there was no illegal sex going on in the nooks and crannies. Most of the time it was pretty uneventful work. The work at the President's Parking Lot was pretty plain too, except on days when there was a football game.

I was beginning to enjoy my job and being a student. What I found out at that time is that college students don't live in the same world that everyone else lives in. If I hadn't been living in a cheap hotel in the middle of the black ghetto, it would have been easy to forget the conditions that ordinary people lived in.

Even so, it does not make me proud to tell you that just being on the campus all day every day soon got me to the point where I was beginning to see myself as "different" from ordinary people, in some ways even better than they were. Of course I didn't think it was *their fault* — "they just didn't have the same opportunities that the rest of us did." If my grandmother had caught me *looking* like I had such an idea, she'da cuffed me upside the head and said, "If you take a fool and educate him, you ain't got nothing but an educated fool."

But Mamaw couldn't help me get prepared for the fact that the main product of a certain kind of education is to make you act like a fool anyway.

**I**t was a very prestigious thing to be assigned to work at the President's Parking Lot, even if it wasn't a football day. The President's Parking Lot was right next door to the Office of the President of the University. All the big shots who had business with the Presi-

*"If you take a fool and educate him, you ain't got nothing but an educated fool."*



dent parked there. Occasionally there'd be other visitors too. But on non-football weekends the only people who tried to park there were graduate students on the way to the library or who worked in the theater, which was also nearby.

One Saturday afternoon, I was sitting in the call box guarding the empty parking lot. I was reading a very important book when this graduate student came speeding up.

I casually lifted my white gloved hand. I might have looked like the "Interlocketer" in a Minstrel Show. I just glanced up, expecting to smile and wave whoever it was

through to the empty lot. But before I could see anything more than the graduate student sticker on his window, he gunned his motor and sped on through

my post, with absolutely no regard for my authority!

I was pissed!

I slammed the book that I was reading down on the counter and took off running across the parking lot. I was definitely going to give this guy a piece of my mind. I ran after the speeding car, thinking, "This Dude has got his nerve! Wish I had a gun or at least a night stick. . . ."

All at once I felt like a character in one of those movie cartoons. It was like I stopped and stayed suspended in mid-air.

"What am I going to do with this guy when I catch him?" I thought. "I was go-

ing to let him park there anyway, so why am I doing this?"

The only reason I wanted to catch him, I had to admit, was because he had

defied my authority. I could hear my Mamaw saying, "Ain't you got nothing better to do? You're just fattening frogs for snakes."

I came down to the ground, turned around, and went back to my booth, packed up my things, went to headquarters, and turned in my badge that day.

I have often thought about how my life might have turned out if I'd had a gun or even a night stick that day to go along with my badge and uniform. I might have ended up like that gang of peace officers that beat up on Rodney King. The only reason they had to beat that poor man so bad was because they thought he had disrespected their authority. They probably still haven't figured out that all they were doing was "fattening frogs for snakes." □

*Junebug Jabbo Jones has been working for food since the '60s. He sends along stories from his home in New Orleans through his good friend John O'Neal.*

*"Ain't you got nothing better to do? You're just fattening frogs for snakes."*



**A MEMORIAL SHRINE COMMEMORATES YOSHI HATTORI, WHOSE SHOOTING DEATH TRIGGERED ANTI-GUN ACTIVISM FROM BATON ROUGE TO JAPAN.**

THE SHOOTING  
OF A JAPANESE  
EXCHANGE  
STUDENT IN  
LOUISIANA  
CARRIED A  
CLEAR  
WARNING:

DON'T DISOBEY  
THE MAN WITH

THE  
GUN

# Freeze!

BY MOIRA CRONE

Last November, in the upstairs parlor of an elegant mansion blocks from the White House, I sat with Mieko Hattori, a mother and teacher from Nagoya, Japan. She'd just had a private meeting with President Clinton, who apologized to her from his heart. She'd been surrounded by media all day, and over the preceding year, millions had joined her crusade against American gun violence. She was accompanied by Mike Beard, the leader of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, the oldest gun control organization in the nation, who had been received in the

White House for the first time in more than a decade. They brought with them millions of petition signatures and hundreds of thousands of letters. They also brought triumph — the same week Hattori came to the White House, the Brady Bill finally passed.

"What has been the most unexpected part of your visit?" I asked her.

"I was so surprised by my son's death," Hattori told me, eyes wide, staring ahead. "Nothing can surprise me anymore."

Her eldest son, Yoshi Hattori, was the exchange student who was shot in Octo-

ber 1992 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana when he went to the wrong house in search of a Halloween party. The killer was Rodney Peairs, a 31-year-old meat cutter at a Winn Dixie. Yoshi's death touched a nerve in this nation: There have been Yoshi Days in several cities, scholarship programs have been launched, an article in *Family Circle* magazine generated an unprecedented number of letters, a quarter of a million Americans signed petitions against the easy availability of guns in Yoshi's name, and the President said he was sorry more than once.

But early last summer, to the horror of the Japanese and the chagrin of many Americans, Rodney Peairs was acquitted of manslaughter in the 19th District Criminal Court in Baton Rouge.

## NO URB

The trial in the case of *The State of Louisiana vs. Rodney Peairs* ran exactly one week, from a Monday morning straight through the weekend. The jury came in with its verdict a little after five Sunday afternoon. Outside the courthouse in the streets that day was a fair called "Fest-for-All" — there were stands for Chinese food, crawfish po-boys, and fried dough with powdered sugar. The music of blues and jazz ensembles floated by on a small breeze. The festival is one of several yearly attempts by city promoters to persuade householders to set foot downtown after business hours.

Baton Rouge once had a lively downtown shopping district, abandoned over the last 20 years because of the fear of crime, racial tensions, and the growth of suburbs. Back then, the city-parish was not as populous. In the '60s and '70s, the area experienced a boom in the petrochemical industry. Newcomers soon outnumbered the natives. According to Robb Forman Dew, a writer who grew up here, the quick expansion made Baton Rouge society more exclusionary, less "tolerant of eccentricities" than the average Southern town.

Now, after another boom in the early '80s and a subsequent bust, the parish population tops 300,000. There's still a concentration of office and government buildings downtown, including the State Capitol, filled from nine to five. Basically, though, the city is all suburb, no urb. Miles of brick ranchers and slab

homes stretch away from downtown in every direction. The newer, fancier homes for the richest people are the farthest out. Some of the wealthiest citizens live in a guarded enclave full of French colonial plantation revival architecture in a southeast corner of the parish called "The Country Club of Louisiana." Ads for the Country Club read, "We all remember a simpler time" — that is, a time that was safer, more predictable, and white.

Baton Rouge occupies one of the most heavily industrialized corridors on the continent. The white country people in the northern part of the parish arrived in the last generation to work for petrochemical giants like Exxon, which has a vast refinery along the Mississippi River. Some country people remained in the hamlets of Baker and Zachary during the booms, while the city surrounded them.

In the northeast quadrant of the city, in a predominantly white group of developments called Central, 12 miles from the oldest parts of Baton Rouge, is Brookside Drive and the brick ranch home where Rodney Peairs shot Hattori, a slender, smiling, eager 16-year-old boy who loved American dance and music. Peairs used an enormous gun, a .44 Magnum Smith and Wesson, called in the trade, a "hand cannon."

On the evening of October 17, 1992, Yoshi and his host brother, Webb

Haymaker, set out for a costume party for foreign exchange students. The host, seafood dealer Frank Pitre, had a girl at his house, Maki Iwasaki, from Tokyo. Yoshi wore a tuxedo, impersonating John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. He and Webb headed toward the Central neighborhood. Finding a house decorated early for Halloween, they pulled up. They had transposed two numbers on the address. Pitre's was a few doors down.

At the front door, they rang the bell.

No answer right away. In a few seconds, they heard blinds rattling at a door from the rear of the carport which faced the street. Rounding the corner, the two saw Mrs. Bonnie Peairs, a short woman with glasses and frizzy hair, standing in the doorway. When Webb said, "Excuse me, is this? . . ." she slammed the door.

Walking away, confused, they heard Rodney Peairs opening the same carport door. Yoshi, apparently believing the first door slam was a mistake, or a Halloween joke, skipped back to the house from out by the street lamp, laughing.

Peairs, a pale man with a brown mustache, crouched in his doorway with his huge stainless steel gun. He shouted to Yoshi to "freeze."

Webb, who couldn't move as swiftly as Yoshi because his neck had recently been operated on, didn't realize what

Rodney put down his gun, went out back, and threw up.

Outside, Webb was screaming for help. Bonnie called 911.

Rodney came back inside again and took a seat at the kitchen table, where he'd been eating grits and sugar a few minutes before. While Yoshi died, Peairs put his head down and wept over his gun. "He'd been hit with a sledgehammer," his friend said. "He couldn't believe that what took place, took place."

### "PROTECTING MY FAMILY"

That Sunday in May, when word came that the verdict had been reached, the camera and sound men from nine networks — four American, five Japanese — came alive. For a week they'd been lingering in the heat, talking about

how safe it was in Tokyo's streets, how dangerous in New York, how dead in Baton Rouge.

Yoshi's father, Masaichi, his translator Yoshinori Kamo, and Webb's parents Richard and Holley Haymaker were locked out of the courtroom when the jury filed in — the space had filled with journalists and townspeople before they could be summoned. This lock-out was symbolic of the way sentiment had been going locally and in the courtroom all week. The local TV news



Photo by Bill Feig/Morning Advocate

**RODNEY PEAIRS, FLANKED BY HIS WIFE BONNIE AND ATTORNEY LEWIS UNGLESBY, WAS PORTRAYED IN THE MEDIA AS AN OVERGROWN 4-HER.**

Peairs had in his hands until he made it around the side of the cars in the drive. By the time he shouted at Yoshi to stop, it was too late: Peairs had shot Yoshi. Spinning around, Yoshi landed on his back not far from the threshold, gushing blood. Rodney, Bonnie behind him, backed inside, slamming the door.

Inside, Rodney could hear this boy moaning. As many times as he had shot a deer or rabbit, this was like nothing else. "It was like somebody else pulled the trigger," his friend told me after the trial.

referred more than once to "the invasion" of the Japanese press, prompting some natives to side with the homeboy. Most Japanese attending the trial were resigned that Rodney would be exonerated from the start. "Yours is a society in decay, a resource to us, like India," one told me during jury selection. "The Japanese won't understand. In Japan, if someone's killed, someone's guilty."

After jurors were let back in the box, the forewoman, a middle-aged white divorcee, stood to read "Not Guilty."



The jurors polled agreed. There were low groans, and loud cheers. The American correspondents rushed out, some with a look of disgust on their faces. The Japanese were slower to leave and better behaved, and a little stunned. "It's very sad," said Mori Towara, senior correspondent for the Mainichi Papers, "but we don't say it's wrong."

The courtroom cheers, when reported in Japan, caused Mieko Hattori much pain at home. They came not from the Peairs family but, sources say, from supporters of his lawyer, Lewis Unglesby. A smart, blue-eyed man with expensive suits and a close associate of oft-indicted Governor Edwin Edwards, Unglesby had set out for a flashy win. When interviewed before the trial by a TV movie script writer, the defense attorney reportedly predicted that the only story in the courtroom "will be me."

"What state do we live in?" Holley Haymaker, Yoshi's American host mother, asked me upon hearing the verdict. A few tears formed in her bright green eyes as we entered an elevator to meet with Doug Moreau, the popular Republican district attorney who had just lost. Moreau's a square shooter — dark plain suits and a pretty, graying Nick Nolte face. He wants to be governor. He's already a god to many — he played football for LSU and the pros before becoming a powerful lawyer.

Holley knew the answer to her own question. She's lived in Louisiana almost 20 years. A physician in family practice, she works with women, the indigent, and children at risk. She's an activist, pro-choice woman doctor, a rarity in South Louisiana. She and her husband Richard, a physicist, are idealistic, utilitarian, thoughtful people, not given to dramatics. Yet, when Rodney Peairs killed their charming temporary son Yoshi, they

chose to try to add to the national discussion about Americans and guns. After scores of appearances on national TV shows and radio talk, they became gun control celebrities.

Their activism began in solidarity with the Hattoris, who started their movement — a petition to President Clinton about gun control — at their son's funeral. Thanks to their ceaseless efforts and the constant attention they generated in Japan, the American media were unable to ignore what happened to Yoshi. Over and over, his death was used as a lead-in to the revelation that, among industrialized democracies, America is completely unique in its tolerance of guns. In Japan in a recent year there were 87 gun homicides. In the United States, 10,000.

In Baton Rouge, unfortunately, the

son, McCallister and other officers questioned Peairs. To the investigators, Peairs seemed incoherent and unresponsive, as if in shock.

Peairs: My wife went to the door, and, uh, I don't know whether she opened the door or she went to lock the door, but she hollered at me to go get the gun. So I ran. I didn't ask questions. I reached in the top of my closet and pulled my suitcase down that I keep my gun in. And I opened it up, pulled it out and started for the front of the house. And, when I got there I didn't see anything. I looked out the door. I didn't see anybody."

Officer: You opened the door?

Peairs: I, I opened the door.

Officer: Was it locked?

Peairs: Un — I really don't remember. It, uh, happened so fast I didn't

remember,

Officer: You opened the door and you didn't see anything?

Peairs: I didn't see anything at first, but then I saw something moving behind my pickup truck, to the right I mean, and a few seconds or split seconds later here comes this guy and it's kind of hard for me to describe how he looked or dressed or . . .

Officer: Um, huh, do the best you can.

Peairs: He looked, he appeared to have a white suit and he

was waving something in his hand, and saying something or appeared to be laughing, but he saw me standing there with the gun. And I had it pointed not at him but towards him and I told him to freeze. And he continued forward, seemed to speed up a little bit. And, and, uh, I guess I must have shot him.

Officer: You don't know if you shot him or not?

Peairs: Uh, I, I must have, because he . . .

Officer: Did you say anything after



Photo by Lori Waselchuk/Morning Advocate

**MASAICHI AND MIEKO HATTORI REMAINED COMPASSIONATE THROUGHOUT THE TRIAL, BLAMING THEIR SON'S DEATH ON THE "GUN CULTURE" IN AMERICA.**

gun-control activism by the Hattoris and Haymakers may have moved public opinion in favor of Rodney Peairs. The night Yoshi was shot, Richard and Holley were told of his death by phone. Arriving at the sheriff's substation in Central about nine o'clock, they were met in the parking lot by Danny McCallister, a young officer who knew Holley from her work with rape victims. "This didn't have to happen," he told her. "There's no excuse for something like this!"

While the Haymakers met with their

you shot him?

Peairs: I, I don't even remember.

Officer: You say anything to your wife?

Peairs: I just remember saying, "Why didn't he stop, I told him to stop."

Officer: Back when your wife told you to get the gun, what were you thinking? Do you know?

Peairs: I was protecting my family.

Officer: Did you know what you were protecting against?

Peairs: No sir, I didn't.

## BACKDOOR NEIGHBORS

After making his statement, Peairs was not charged. Nor was he tested for drugs or alcohol; a source inside the department told me the station "screwed up" in that regard. The fact is, Rodney had been drinking that night, before the boys rang the bell. Although prosecutors presented no such evidence in court, the attorney representing the Hattoris in a civil suit scheduled for trial in September said Bonnie Peairs has offered a sworn deposition that her husband was drinking whiskey that evening.

At the time, investigators seem to have been confused about the facts and how to interpret them in light of Louisiana law. One factor was a famous "Halloween shooting" some years back in Baton Rouge, where two young boys in fatigues with fake machine guns startled a homeowner, who got out his real gun and shot one. The man, Robert Bouton, who lived in a subdivision not far from Peairs, was found innocent. His defense was that the "flash" on the toy gun startled him, and his gun "went off."

There is a doctrine in Louisiana law that a person who brings on a difficulty cannot claim self-defense, or justifiable

homicide. Bursting out of your own door with a huge gun, after no more provocation than the sound of a doorbell, and attracting two unarmed boys back from out by the curb, as Peairs did, might be considered "bringing on a difficulty."

But Louisiana, like many states, also has a popular legal doctrine known as "Shoot the Burglar." The law states that a homeowner can claim self-defense if he is inside his dwelling and he shoots an intruder.

Among whites like Peairs, from rural backgrounds, a carport is a substitute for a back porch, a feature lacking on the brick tract homes they live in now. Many entertain, cook, hold dances, and work in their carports.

Stan Lucky, who lives next door to Peairs, has a couch in his carport, and potted plants. It has the feel of a Florida sunroom with a car parked in it. Lucky told me his carport was part of his house, of course. I pointed out that his front door is completely blocked off — any stranger who wanted to see him would have to enter his carport to get to his door. As I stood there, not far from where Yoshi fell, Lucky declared his right to shoot me, should he discern I was an "intruder." I saw myself toppling over, knocking down his spider

plants in their wide yellow pots.

Lucky, who has an unlisted phone number, was not upset that his lack of any neutral ground put all strangers approaching his home in mortal danger. Country people have a saying, "Backdoor neighbors are the best kind." Some, like Lucky, only have backdoors. Others, like Rodney and Bonnie Peairs, only answer their backdoors. Faced with

the diversity of suburban and modern life, the assumption is, if they are strangers, they are enemies.

The morning after Yoshi died, officers decided to go back out to the scene of the crime and see what really happened. Once again they went over the events of the night before with Peairs: once again he was not charged. "There was no criminal intent," Major Bud Connor of the sheriff's department told the local paper.

Not everyone in the department supported that conclusion. Some of the younger detectives believed Peairs had committed murder. Frank Pitre, who was hosting the party for foreign exchange students, walked on the scene a few minutes after Yoshi was shot, in time to see the ambulance pull away. "As far as I'm concerned," an officer told him, "Peairs is going to the electric chair."

Later, during the trial, defense attorney Lewis Unglesby criticized officers who thought Peairs ought to do time. He pointed out that officers themselves have killed men in mistaken self defense — victims who later turned out to be unarmed. This happened twice in Baton Rouge in the year preceding Yoshi's killing. In neither case — both involving innocent black males, one of whom was retarded — did the district attorney make an indictment.

## GUNS AND RAIN

On the Monday after the shooting, the Hattoris flew to Baton Rouge from Japan and met with the Japanese Consul in New Orleans. Later, the Consul met with Governor Edwin Edwards and District Attorney Moreau. Not long after, Moreau announced a grand jury investigation, which charged Peairs with manslaughter.

Unglesby was not shy about fueling the belief that the charge resulted from political pressure. "We all know what the Japanese want out of this case," he said loudly in court during jury selection.

Potential jurors had mixed reactions to the shooting. Some seemed accustomed to teenagers dying from guns. "I don't see what the big deal is," said one, a black woman. "This happens all the time."

Others were extremely upset. "I have

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INTRUDER.

children in this neighborhood,” said a white man who lived near Peairs. “Two teenagers who come and go. They have to be able to walk up to a guy’s door.” People who expressed such sentiments were dismissed.

Jurors could be forgiven if they confused the central legal question in the case — did Peairs shoot in self-defense, or did he bring the difficulty on himself — with advice given to some homeowners by local law enforcement officers. In 1983, my husband interrupted a robbery at our home in Baton Rouge. The burglary detective who came to the scene instructed us to go out that night and buy a gun. If the man came back to finish the job, he said, we should shoot him and drag the body into the house.

According to Richard Aborn, the head of Handgun Control Inc., officers in Baton Rouge are not the only authorities in “Shoot the Burglar” states that suggest such action. Sources in the Baton Rouge Sheriff’s Department say they no longer give out such instructions.

During jury selection, Moreau told me he was surprised so many potential jurors were against Peairs. He had bought the idea that Baton Rouge was overwhelmingly on Rodney’s side. Perhaps this was because of the success Unglesby had in instilling pity for his client in the popular press. No sooner had he taken on the case than Unglesby announced that Peairs wanted to tell the Hattoris how remorseful he was.

Close to the time of the trial, in a prominent Sunday feature in the Baton Rouge paper, Peairs came across as a simple man destroyed by the events of October 17th. He was a victim of the Japanese media who hounded him from his home, and of his employer, Winn Dixie, which asked him to take a leave of absence. He loved animals, it was emphasized: He was an overgrown 4-Her, not Dirty Harry. In the same interview, his father said that what people should learn from



SNAPSHOTS OF YOSHI AT AGE 4 IN JAPAN . . .



WITH A FRIEND AT AGE 13 . . .



AND SHORTLY BEFORE HE LEFT FOR AMERICA.

the shooting was that Webb and Yoshi were guilty of disobeying Rodney’s authority — they didn’t stop when the man with the gun said “Freeze.”

As a piece of propaganda, the inter-

view was masterful. Those in Baton Rouge still confused by the case may have felt it was easier to hate the Japanese and professors and liberals like the Haymakers than to parse out the complexities of why and how what Peairs did was wrong. Since most residents also oppose “people taking our guns away,” they were unable to imagine how Peairs might have responded to his fear if he didn’t have a gun. To them, a society without guns is something impossible, like a society without, say, cars, or maybe even rain.

Besides, according to the paper, Peairs had an outpouring of support, throngs at his side — the bandwagon appeal. Actually, public opinion was divided. According to Connie Hardy, an office manager who answered the phone for Lewis Unglesby, calls against Peairs were even with calls in his favor. It was “like abortion,” she said — people were fierce in their feelings, for or against.

Hardy, a young white country woman who wears boots and wide buckles and speaks her mind, was convinced Peairs was a killer. The day after the verdict came in, she said, Unglesby accused her of “leaks” to unspecified parties and fired her.

## HUNT THE PEDESTRIAN

The trial revealed that the ambivalences in the law are in people’s hearts. The prosecution focused on the first half of what Peairs did, his criminal behavior in the seconds before he pulled the trigger — asking no questions, getting his gun, coming out ready to fire, endangering himself, his wife, and two lost boys he attracted back into his carport. It was a case of shoot the burglar becoming hunt the pedestrian.

The defense focused on the second half of what Peairs did, his behavior in the moments *after* he picked up his gun — calling warnings to a stranger in an area he consid-

ered his domicile, and blasting when the stranger came toward him. This was harder to call in terms of what is justifiable homicide in Louisiana.

Unglesby made much of the fear Peairs felt — although he presented no evidence that the remote subdivision of Central was prone to violent crimes. He successfully put the blame everywhere else. He blamed Webb Haymaker, who has a slight stutter. (Why, Unglesby wondered, didn't Webb simply approach Peairs and say, "Hey, y'all, no problem" like a Southern gentleman?) He blamed Webb's parents, whom he portrayed as neglectful liberals. He blamed Bonnie Peairs, who took the rap on the stand with copious tears, saying, "I just didn't think." He even blamed Yoshi, who he claimed broke a "social compact" by coming right up and not pausing to give Peairs space. Unglesby blamed Yoshi because his eager movements were "erratic," because he didn't know that "a pointed gun is communication." In this logic, Yoshi was guilty for being innocent of the terms of deadly force.

With the help of Nina Miller, a psychological consultant who helped with the jury selection in the Mike Tyson trial, Unglesby had rehearsed the case in a pair of mock trials. He was worried about certain aspects — the fact that the gun was so huge, the fact that "you could blame Bonnie, but since she wasn't on trial, people might go after Rodney." He thought he couldn't have any women on the jury, but he learned that wasn't so. And the fact that Yoshi was a 16-year-old boy, no problem.

Most of all, he wondered whether jurors could ignore the fatal outcome and just look at the shooting from Rodney's point of view. He found some had no trouble identifying with the man who held the gun. "So I went into the courtroom with confidence," Unglesby told me later.

During the trial a Baton Rouge reporter — the author of the Peairs-is-a-hero interview — found it unseemly that the prosecutor held up Yoshi's dark brown blood-soaked tuxedo and gave it to the jury to inspect. He was not interested in putting his readers in the position of the wearer of those clothes, the dead Japanese boy. Much more comfortable, after all, to identify with Rodney, the man with the Magnum.

Guns are part of life in Baton Rouge,

an absolute given. To blacks and whites I've talked to, a gun is a ritual object, like a talisman — it's there to ward off danger, and because it's there, you are blessedly safe. If there is an "intruder in your home" — or anywhere near it, apparently — you will exist at the end of the encounter, and he will not. It is righteous for you to do this blasting, but not righteous to have this blasting done to you. This fundamental appeal of the gun-selling industry is repeated by traders at the frequent Baton Rouge Gun and Knife Shows in the town's civic center, by the media, and by the monthly magazine of the National Rifle Association.

According to the FBI, only 300 of the over 30,000 gun deaths in the United States every year involve someone killed while actually committing a felony. Thus, only 300 are "justifiable." Overwhelmingly, people in this country use guns to kill people they know — friends, family members, or themselves. Sarah Brady, appearing with the Haymakers in Baton Rouge in July, spoke of the great embarrassment of the Peairs case around the world. She criticized the subtext of the increasingly popular "Shoot the Burglar" laws: Americans hold property more valuable than human life.

Still, many in Baton Rouge were confounded by the acquittal of Rodney Peairs. They couldn't blame guns, or the law, or Yoshi — after all, he was an innocent, laughing boy. Something was clearly wrong. In a way, it would have been easier on people if Peairs had been guilty of something, if they could point to someone abnormal. They couldn't.

Instead, they were left with a disturbing new interpretation of the Shoot the Burglar doctrine: Property owners may simply shoot anyone on their land, no questions asked.

"What about the plainclothes cop who runs across a person's lawn after a criminal?" one sheriff's department official asked me during the trial. "What about the UPS man? Is it getting to be you get scared, you come out blasting? I've been shot at by homeowners, trying to do my job. What happens to civil order?"

## BEER AND BARBARISM

Throughout the trial and afterwards, the Hattoris remained compassionate. They blamed their son's death on the

presence of guns in homes. Peairs, they said at Yoshi's memorial service, was a victim of his "gun culture."

The evening the verdict was handed down, Masaichi Hattori talked with his wife in Nagoya. She tried to persuade him to take up Rodney Peairs on his offer to talk to them, to say privately those things that he had indicated publicly were in his heart.

The next morning the two families crossed paths at a local TV station. Bonnie Peairs initiated a conversation by pointing at Hattori. "I just want to know if he understands," she began, to the astonishment of the translator. "If his boy had been an American, this wouldn't have happened. Does he understand that? Does he?" The encounter was halted by Unglesby, the translator says, who started yelling profanities at him.

Leaving Hattori and the Haymakers after the trial that Sunday afternoon, I made my way through the army of newspeople. The stands at the Fest-for-All were beginning to close. The video cameras moved in on the two attorneys; others swarmed behind.

"I just want to get on with my life," Peairs said, solemn and scared-looking. When asked if he'd shoot again, he said, "I doubt it."

Japanese correspondents ventured into the crowds. A group of white boys in t-shirts, drinking beer, were asked by a Japanese woman in a blue linen suit how they felt about the verdict. One said, "Wonderful."

At the same time, off to my side, Fuji television was catching a female medic parked at the edge of the festival, her ambulance on standby. "Not all Baton Rouge is like that," she said. "How are we supposed to do our job? I have to go places at night, knock on unfamiliar doors. That's my work. And what about our kids? How can anybody live like this?"

The next day, the editorial in the Japanese paper *Asahi Shimbun* would describe the "barbarism that is eroding American life." That afternoon, the ambulance driver's pleas were drowned out by the boys across the street, who began hooting cheers for Rodney. □

*Moira Crone is a novelist and short story writer who teaches at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.*

# Community Clinics

By Jen Schradie

**U**nderdevelopment and oppressive health conditions in the Black Belt magnify the depth of the national health care crisis. According to the Census Bureau, 40 percent of those with incomes below the poverty level live in the South. Low wages prevent many workers from paying the high premiums and deductibles of health insurance, leaving 13 million Southerners without coverage.

Health conditions in the region rank among the worst in the nation, in part because Southerners have the least access to health care. Most rural areas lack hospitals and clinics. The South has the fewest doctors per patient, and fewer still accept Medicaid or Medicare. Residents who can find and afford a doctor cannot make many appointments, since public transportation often consists of paying a neighbor \$20 for a ride. To make matters worse, dismal health conditions are compounded by unsafe workplaces and toxic waste in Black Belt communities.

Since 1978, the North Carolina Student Rural Health Coalition has been working to improve health conditions and empower local citizens in rural communities. Working with the Community Health Collective, we have helped six rural communities set up their own "People's Health Clinics." In the absence of other health care facilities, the clinics provide free medical check-ups, health education, school physicals, occupational health surveys, and basic screening exams like pap smears, blood pressure, and cholesterol tests.

At each clinic, the goal is to empower individual community members to take charge of their own health. As one 91-year-old grandmother in Tillery said, setting up the clinic "gave me the feeling that I can do something to make changes in my life."

A health committee in each community controls and organizes the monthly clinics. Initially staffed by members of the coalition, the communities themselves have gradually taken on more and more responsibility. We helped the committees start the first two clinics in 1987 in Tillery and Fremont. Since then, clinics have opened in Shiloh, Blommer Hill, Garysburg, and Warsaw.

While all of the clinics were founded on the principle that everyone deserves

tional injuries, and now provides occupational exams at the monthly People's Clinic.

Each committee developed its own goals and services for its clinic based on the needs of the community. Some conducted full-scale community health surveys, while others relied on committee members to identify local health problems. In most communities, heart disease and high blood pressure are major problems. In others, cancers or work-related injuries rank high.

To ensure that the services they provide are effective, the committees also identified barriers that prevent residents from receiving adequate care. Many cited no nearby doctors, no car, no medical insurance, no time off from work to visit a doctor, or racist attitudes among physicians and other health care providers.

Next came the question of where to house the clinics. The answer again varied from community to community. If a suitable facility already existed in the area, the community used it. For five years, Concerned Citizens of Tillery used their community center as a clinic building, transforming the kitchen into a

lab and hanging sheets and using storage closets for exam rooms. The Blommer Hill Health Committee used an old church and school, offering physical exams in former classrooms and bathrooms.

While hardly ideal, such buildings afforded free space to get started. Whatever the facility, though, the emphasis is on services, not aesthetics.

**M**edical supplies and equipment used in the clinics are also based on the needs of the community. If diabetes is a major problem, for instance, residents make sure that they can perform glucose tests in the clinics. If work-related injuries are common, educa-

Photo courtesy NC Student Rural Health Coalition



**RURAL RESIDENTS HAVE SET UP "PEOPLE'S HEALTH CLINICS" TO IMPROVE HEALTH CONDITIONS.**

equal access to quality health care, each grew out of a different community struggle. In Shiloh, for example, residents set up a clinic after years of pressuring federal regulators to clean up groundwater contamination.

In Warsaw, the clinic grew out of a workplace struggle at a textile plant that had closed down after injuring workers. "The owner had been taking money out of our checks to pay for health care," says Pat Hines, a former worker who now chairs the Duplin Health Committee. "But we found out that he was not turning the money in to the insurance company, so we had no insurance." The committee started by screening workers for occupa-

tional materials from the Labor Department are made available.

Getting expensive medical supplies is not easy on shoestring budgets, but a little creativity and collective effort goes a long way. Although most of the supplies are donated, clinic supporters raise additional money by selling refreshments in the lobby while patients wait to register, hawking raffle tickets, holding fish fries — even sponsoring gospel singing events.

Residents also try to be creative in publicizing the clinics, identifying the best way to spread the word in each community. Sometimes the coalition helps by leafleting homes in neighborhoods or factories where people work. Church announcements can be an effective means to pass on information, and many radio and television stations run public service announcements about the clinics.

The health committees recruit and train local residents, especially youth, to handle many of the routine tasks of running the clinics — registering patients, taking temperatures and other vital signs, and acting as clinic coordinators. They also help identify doctors, nurses, phlebotomists, nutritionists, and others who might be willing to help. Many health care providers agree to volunteer at the clinics twice a month or on weekends, while others offer to accept referrals. If they have a private practice, their liability coverage can be applied at the clinic as well.

To assist the professionals, the Student Rural Health Coalition recruits medical students from four participating universities — Duke, East Carolina, North Carolina Central, and the University of North Carolina. We take care to find people who are friendly and helpful, but we don't leave their attitudes to chance. We also hold orientations for both students and health care providers. We teach them about the history, culture, and health problems of each community. We give them specific guidelines about how to be sensitive to differences in race, class, and language. We help them understand the people they are serving, and how to interact with them more effectively.

As a result, people who come into the clinics are treated with respect and dignity. Many patients say that for the first time in their lives, someone actually listens to their complaints without dismissing or downplaying them.

Sometimes that means going beyond

## TOOLBOX

For information contact:

### Community Health Collective

P.O. Box 2783  
Rocky Mount, NC 27802  
(919) 985-9865

### North Carolina Student Rural Health Coalition

P.O. Box 92218  
Durham, NC 27708  
(919) 286-1129

### Workers Want Fairness Coalition

P.O. Box 1244  
Fremont, NC 27830  
(919) 242-3126

specific medical problems to address social or personal issues. Clinic volunteers help patients with their taxes and explain simple medical terms that can be frightening. We realize that if people are worried about problems other than their health they are not likely to get well.

We found, for example, that one of the biggest obstacles for many rural residents is transportation. Offering free services at a clinic doesn't mean much if a patient can't get to the clinic. To address this need, the health committees organize car pools and enlist volunteers with cars to transport their neighbors to and from the clinics.

**W**e know the People's Clinics cannot cure the staggering range of health problems facing impoverished rural communities. But in areas that lack the most basic medical facilities, such clinics can have a significant impact.

Patients who need follow-up care use our network of doctors to find colleagues willing to take referrals from the clinics. Some laboratories offer discounts on tests, and the Community Health Collective has organized a program to provide discount medicines to senior citizens.

In essence, the People's Clinics have become cornerstone institutions in these Black Belt communities. In Tillery, the clinic has outgrown its makeshift home in a sheet-draped community center. Residents have renovated an old potato curing barn as a permanent clinic and senior center. They call it the "Curin' House."

Above all, the clinics give people a

sense of empowerment that comes from collectively taking control of their lives. "When I started with the health work, I was much more shy and not a leader," explains Bessie Artis, chair of the Fremont Health Committee.

"Now, through my involvement, I speak out and even run meetings."

Thanks to the clinics, hundreds of residents like Artis have received basic health education and training in how to perform CPR, take blood pressure, and recognize the symptoms of various illnesses. Others have learned computer skills, navigated their way through Medicaid and Medicare, and studied proposals for health care reform. Workers organize forums on occupational injuries and diseases and receive free health screenings.

One of the most exciting programs to emerge from the clinics is the Pre-Health Career Internship, which encourages African-American students to pursue careers in health care and return to serve their communities. Students spend several days learning from experienced health care professionals at the four universities that participate in the Student Rural Health Coalition. The program not only helps students gain clinical and field experience, but also provides an environment that promotes social and community responsibility. One graduate of the program said it helped her decide to become a family doctor, since there were none in her community.

Through their work with the clinics, residents have also become empowered to tackle the politics of health care. In Fremont, local citizens demanded and won funding for the clinic from the town council. In Garysburg, members of the health committee helped defeat a proposed toxic waste incinerator. More recently, the clinics have served as a base for organizing support for single-payer national health care.

As medical costs continue to soar and reform proposals wind their way through Congress, "People's Health Clinics" offer rural communities an immediate and powerful response to the health care crisis. By providing free care, the clinics can help reduce the number of people who needlessly suffer from preventable illness every year. By empowering rural citizens, the clinics can help lay the groundwork for a more just and humane health care system. □

*Jen Schradie is medical coordinator with the North Carolina Student Rural Health Coalition.*

# Visions of Freedom

By Brenda Stevenson

**GABRIEL'S REBELLION:  
The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of  
1800 and 1802**

By Douglas Egerton  
UNC Press, 262 pp, \$39.95

**TUMULT AND SILENCE AT  
SECOND CREEK:**

**An Inquiry into a Civil War  
Conspiracy**

By Winthrop Jordan  
LSU Press, 391 pp, \$24.95

**R**evolution is a recurring, reinvigorating theme in American history, and there is little wonder why scholars find it fascinating. Revolution is, after all, high drama — the stuff of which the American Dream was first and continues to be built. What, then, is the relationship between the revolutionary tradition in America and slave resistance? For scholars, the study of slave rebellion during a period of revolution yields important insights into the American experience. Slave rebellions also help us answer one of the most important questions about slavery: What was the slave's response to enslavement? Did slaves oppose their bondage, and how was that opposition expressed?

The challenge of determining whether the slave fundamentally opposed the institution of slavery has produced provocative and sometimes brilliant historical treatments. Such is the case with two recent books: *Gabriel's Rebellion* by Douglas Egerton and *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek* by Winthrop Jordan. Although the backgrounds of the authors and their approaches to the topic differ dramatically, both works offer valuable contributions to Southern history.

Egerton, a history professor at LeMoyne College best known for his illuminating biography of Virginia statesman Charles Fenton Mercer, now turns his talent for political history to the institution

of slavery. *Gabriel's Rebellion* seeks to expose the intricate detail of two related slave plots in post-Revolutionary Virginia. The first rebellion in 1800 was masterminded by Gabriel, a 24-year-old blacksmith owned by Thomas Prosser of Henrico County. The second plot was led by Sancho, a ferryman belonging to John Booker of Amelia County and one of Gabriel's "extended" band. These plots, if successful, would have involved thousands of slaves, wreaked enormous havoc, and perhaps destroyed the institution of black slavery in Virginia.

Dismal weather, communication mishaps, and informants destroyed the dreams of black freedom and equality fomented by Gabriel, Sancho, and their followers. But the response to their efforts went far beyond the repetitious swing of the hangman's noose. Despite their failure, the rebels sparked enough fear to rekindle serious consideration of legislative plans for gradual emancipation and colonization. When such measures did not bear fruit, lawmakers reacted by significantly tightening restrictions on residency, literacy, mobility, privacy, and occupations for both slaves and free blacks.

Egerton's work has many merits, but particularly commendable are his meticulous research and his thoroughly entertaining writing style. He uses Gabriel's rebellion as a lens to magnify the lifestyles and concerns of early 19th-century urban slave artisans and watermen, their expansive communities, and their innovative lines of communication. *Gabriel's Rebellion* is a joy to read — it is both intelligent and exciting history.

This book is particularly significant because Egerton uses his subject to wrestle with a central question of slavery scholarship: What forces had the most profound impact on the institution of slavery? For this scholar, the undeniable answer is revolution. The American Revolution, he argues, influenced the con-

sciousness not only of the slaves, but of slave owners as well. It was at the root of both slave plots and had a tremendous impact on slave life in Virginia throughout the pre-Civil War era.

Much of what Egerton argues in *Gabriel's Rebellion* has been carefully established by other historians. It is certain, for example, that some Virginians at the time of the Revolution struggled with the irony of pursuing their own "liberty" and "freedom" while holding slaves themselves. Their moral "dilemma" helped to create the liberal manumission law of 1782 and influenced plans drafted by Thomas Jefferson and St. George Tucker in the late 1700s to gradually abolish slavery.

It is also certain that slaves of the Revolutionary War era understood the vulnerability of Virginia's slave society. Slaves both observed and actively participated in the military and political crises of the day. Some, like Gabriel, also were aware of political and economic tensions between whites of different classes, and conversely, the shared needs and hopes of blacks and whites of the same classes, particularly black and white artisans.

This history, although already outlined by other scholars, is crucial to understanding the potential for racial division and unity in American society. The principal objective of Gabriel's rebellion — its truly revolutionary aspect — was to establish a society of expanded liberties that would embrace and benefit whites and blacks alike.

Egerton makes a strong case that Gabriel, born in 1776, benefited ideologically and tactically from stories he heard about the American Revolution. The author concludes that Gabriel naively assumed that white society in Virginia faced a crisis of enormous proportions in 1800 spawned by the partisan politics of competing Federalists and Republicans. These divisions, Gabriel hoped, would shatter the solidarity of urban whites and bring white artisans into his fight for a more egalitarian

society across race and class lines.

Egerton is less convincing and clear, however, regarding the political ideologies of Gabriel's followers. He makes clear, for example, that they wanted emancipation for slaves and, in the case of free blacks, a more expansive freedom. But he fails to elaborate the kind of society they envisioned and the place of whites of any class in that society. Even less clear are the feelings, ideals, and proposed place of the majority of blacks — the unskilled, rural slaves who seem not to have been involved in either plot.

Indeed, the one significant flaw of *Gabriel's Rebellion* is its elitist nature. Rarely does Egerton offer readers a chance to learn much about the larger Virginia populace, white or black, and the impact of the slave plots on their lives. Nor does he provide a precise enough picture of slavery to fully support his conclusions about differences in its character during colonial and Revolutionary-era Virginia. Egerton excels at carefully excavating the details of the rebellions and the responses by local and state authorities. Yet his analyses of Virginia slavery and the relationships between masters and slaves, unfortunately, are superficial and dated.

**W**inthrop Jordan, by contrast, exhibits little hesitation in breaking new ground in *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek*, his "construction" of an insurrection that may have been planned by slaves in Mississippi during the summer of 1861. A senior scholar who achieved tremendous acclaim several years ago with the publication of his award-winning book, *White over Black*, Jordan is, as ever, masterful. The result is an incredible contribution to slavery scholarship and methodology.

*Tumult* focuses on an insurrectionary plot supposedly initiated by slave carriage drivers in Adams County at the outbreak of the Civil War. Jordan approaches his construction of the plot with the kind of obsession and remarkable expertise that produces seminal works. He leaves little in the way of detail or nuance untouched. His diverse methodological skills allow him to comment on the visual, the aural, and the oral as well as written texts, and to probe the complex psychology of slave and master. *Tu-*

*mult* is panoramic, a 3-D view of a slave plot that reaffirms Jordan's preeminence in the field of slavery scholarship.

Indeed, the author's craft is on such spectacular display that, alas, it is sometimes difficult to focus on the subject of the book — the slave plot itself. As a result, the plot probably will be remembered more for the author's superior effort to recover it from obscurity than for its actual impact on slavery, the South, or even Mississippi history. Jordan generously teaches us new lessons on historical research and analysis, but his methodological innovation comes at a price.



Etching courtesy Oxford Press

#### SLAVE REBELLIONS OFFER INSIGHTS INTO THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION IN AMERICA.

In the end there are so many details, actual and nuanced, that bare outlines of the plot are somewhat obscured.

Moreover, many readers who are not particularly interested in the exact nature of the historian's craft may be less than enthusiastic about combing through pages of explication of the process of historical examination and construction. But even nonspecialized or nonchalant readers will be impressed when they compare the juicy steak Jordan serves to the bare bones of primary source material he had to work with.

Ironically, Jordan's ability to present information in an unpredictable and thoroughly enlightening fashion might leave some readers hungry for more — especially more analysis of the lives and morality of the slaves involved in the plot. Jordan invests much energy, for example, in discussing the ideals of freedom which underlay the slaves' plans for insurrection. But he is unwilling to conclude that their goals were linked to any larger philosophical or historical tradition, in the way that ideals of freedom in the American Revolution are often

linked to an Enlightenment tradition.

The reader is left with a similar sense of unfulfillment with Jordan's account of the supposed decision by the rebels, in the wake of a victory, to "take" or "ravish" certain slaveholding women. This phenomenon is of particular interest, not because of its obvious sensational quality, but because, as Jordan so forcefully documents, it is unique to this particular slave plot in the American South. As such, he dedicates substantial time and energy to its analysis, but with few observable rewards.

Certainly it is reasonable for him to insist that black and white men viewed women, white and black, as "property." It is also reasonable for him to assert that individual white women were pinpointed for rape because they had been abusive to slave women related to the male participants. In both instances, Jordan is getting at notions of slave manhood, an important key to understanding the methods and motives of slave resistance.

Yet Jordan ignores the other side of this gendered reality — the varied roles slave women played, not so much in the actual plans for the revolt, which he asserts are minimal, but in the lives, fantasies, and

worldviews of the male rebels. Only by exploring the "place" of slave and slaveholding women in the minds and worlds of the rebels can we fully understand what these men hoped to accomplish through their insurrection — that is, what was to happen at Second Creek, and why.

Such criticisms are not intended to detract from the brilliance of Jordan's work, but rather to suggest avenues for future research. *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek* is a masterful piece of historical craftsmanship, and *Gabriel's Rebellion* is both thoroughly enjoyable and well researched. Together the two books make a significant contribution to our understanding of the link between Southern slave rebellions and the revolutionary tradition in America. The task now is to broaden the scope of such history to include the voices and visions of those too often neglected — the majority of rural slaves for whom freedom remained an elusive vision. □

*Brenda Stevenson, a native of Virginia, is assistant professor of history at UCLA. Her book, Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South, will be published next year by Oxford University Press.*



## THEATER

**A**lternate ROOTS, a Southern theater organization that serves performing artists who create original community-based works, has published an exciting collection of its plays combining regional drama with grassroots activism. The goal, former ROOTS director Ruby Lerner writes in her introduction, "is to be part of the transformation of the region — by acknowledging and critically assessing its past, uncovering its buried history and untold stories, and celebrating its heroes." Included are works by *SE* contributing editors John O'Neal and Nayo Watkins, and long-time friends Rebecca Ranson and Jo Carson. To order, send \$20 to:

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# Swamps

By Mary Lee Kerr

**W**hen cartoonist Walt Kelly created the character Pogo and his friends, he made their home the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia. The cypress trees, still water, and alligators that inhabit swamps like the Okefenokee have become imprinted in the national mind as archetypical Southern scenery.

"It's more than the climate," says Buck Reed, a biologist with the National Wetlands Inventory in St. Petersburg, Florida. "It's the whole geologic history of the South that makes it conducive to swamps."

After the ocean receded from the North American continent 18,000 years ago, the flat coastal plain gradually became saturated with water, creating thousands of acres of wetlands where cypress, pine, tupelo trees, and shrubs now grow. In the South, these forested bottomlands, or swamps, range from the Atchafalaya in Louisiana, north to the Great Dismal in North Carolina and Virginia, down to the Okefenokee in Georgia and the Big Cypress bordering the Everglades in Florida. According to Reed, nearly half of the nation's swamps are in the Southeast.

As humans populated the region, swamps became intertwined with their culture. Swampland, alive with deer, bear, bobcats, birds, carnivorous pitcher plants, lilies, and trees, provided fish and game for Indians and European settlers, a hiding place for runaway slaves, and a money-making enterprise for loggers.

"Old-timers used to kill alligators or spread trap lines and catch raccoons and otters," recalls Johnny Hickox, a lifelong swamper and chief guide in the Okefenokee for 32 years. "Their main supply of fish was out of the Okefenokee."

Some capitalized on the raw materials in the swamp. "There was a small town right in the middle of the Okefenokee on Billy's Island back in the early 1900s," says Jimmy Walker, manager of the Okefenokee Swamp Park near Waycross, Georgia. "There were little railroads that ran right to the center of the swamp and that was the way they hauled out big cypress logs. The money was in logging."

But while some Southerners depended on swamps for their livelihood, others saw them as a hindrance to development. George Washington wanted to canalize and drain the Great Dismal Swamp to speed commerce. Farmers in the Mississippi Valley have long changed swampland, rich in peat and silt, into cropland. And in Florida, a population boom and modern

agribusiness are shrinking and poisoning Big Cypress and the Everglades.

As a result, huge swaths of Southern wetlands have vanished. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southern states have lost an average of 48 percent of their wetlands since the 1780s. The national average is 30 percent.

State and national parks, refuges, and preserves protect some swampland, but federal policy toward wetlands remains weak. "Most of the legislative movement at the national level is toward providing less protection for these areas," says Richard Hamann, a researcher at the University of Florida in Gainesville. In 1991, then-Vice President Dan Quayle tried to redefine about half the country's wetlands, including swamps, out of existence.

Scientific reports on the value of wetlands — combined with direct citizen action — have forced officials to back away from efforts to open the watery acreage to development. "Wetlands are an essential component of the plumbing system of the planet," says David White, Southeast Counsel for the National Wildlife Federation. "They are extremely important for water supply, wildlife habitat, and flood storage."

In the Everglades, the Federation is battling sugar growers whose farming practices contaminate the swamp with phosphorous. Florida citizens are pushing for a penny-a-pound tax on raw sugar to make the industry pay for the damage. Miccosukee

and Seminole Indians who live in the Big Cypress Swamp want the state to halt agricultural pollution and end oil and gas development.

The challenge is to find ways humans can make a living and swamps can stay healthy. "It's difficult to preserve a swamp," says Margaret Shea, director of science and stewardship in the Kentucky office of the Nature Conservancy. "You have to protect the whole watershed." To that end, the Conservancy bought 284 acres of prime swampland to save it from agricultural pollution. "We try to work with the landowners in the watershed to promote good land management practices," Shea adds.

For those who grew up in and around the swamp, such efforts are essential to preserve their way of life. "When I go in the swamp," says Okefenokee guide Johnny Hickox, "it's just like taking a dose of medicine." □

Mary Lee Kerr is a research associate with the Institute for Southern Studies.



Photo by Mary Lee Kerr

**THE ENTIRE GEOLOGIC HISTORY OF THE SOUTH MAKES IT CONDUCTIVE TO SWAMPS.**

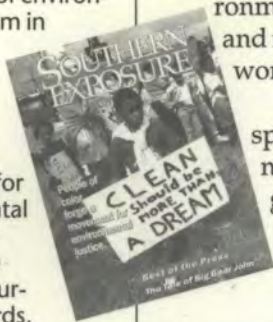
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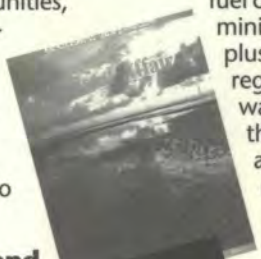
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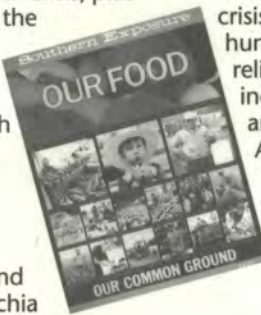
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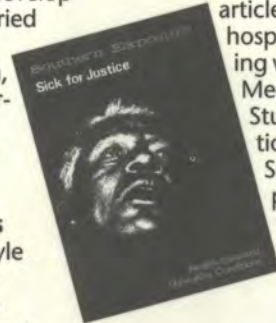
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