

BOOK ONE

History to Learn From

“Adlena McKinley Hamlett was my grandmother. She had picked me to be a civil rights lawyer when I was a young girl – she and my grandfather, both – but my mother was afraid I would be in danger and so I became a professional secretary and then a teacher.

“My grandmother came from a family with land, and that was very important to them. After the Civil War, her mother Julia McKinley was given forty acres and a mule when she was freed. I have a quilt that my great – grandmother made. Her family acquired more land over the years and my grandmother was born and raised on their dairy farm near Scobey, Mississippi in 1888, where I am from, too.

“Grandmother Adlena was killed when she was 78 years-old outside of Greenwood, Mississippi – she and her close friend Birdia Keglal were forced off the road on their way home from testifying in Jackson about jobs and voting. I know this because my cousin’s wife told me what he learned and I saw her body in the funeral home in Charleston. At Fox Funeral Home the manager was upset and told us that only one family member could view my grandmother’s body. My brother and I went into the room together and something was very wrong with her head and her arms. Her head seemed too small. There was a horrible expression frozen on her face and one of my aunts started screaming when she saw her, later on. I know that my brother examined her body, but he would not let me touch her. I have never let this go. Sometimes others tell me to give up the search for answers about my grandmother’s death because it happened too many years ago. But I know that she fought for the right to vote and this is why she died. One day she took me with her to the courthouse in Charleston. She got a ballot and someone took it away and tore it up. She told me not to worry, because some day this would change and I would be able to vote. I think of my grandmother Adlena and sometimes I still want to cry.”

—*Nina Black Zachary, 2005*

Chapter 1 From the Delta

IN THE SUMMER of 2003, a new magazine was launched in Cleveland, Mississippi, a small and comfortable college town representing the heart of Mississippi Delta ethos. The September issue of *Delta Magazine* featured a guest editorial penned by Wyatt Emmerich, a Mississippi native and newspaper owner. Reframing the social climate which made possible the Mississippi Delta blues, Emmerich wrote:

[T]he delta attracted adventurous souls who would risk their very lives to make it rich. The risk was real. Yellow fever and malaria were rampant. But for those who survived, the money flowed like wine.... Stuck out in a cash-rich swamp, surrounded by death, Deltans took to making hay while the sun shined. They threw huge parties that lasted for days. The money was good and life was for the living.... Another critical factor, also molded by the soil, was race. African Americans were needed to pick cotton. The whites, from the very start, were a minority in the delta. This led to a cultural mingling between whites and blacks on a scale never really experienced by the rest of the country.... The ultimate manifestation of this cultural cauldron was the blues.... Somehow, there is something in the Delta that seeped out and spread through music, until it altered the very notes the entire world expects to hear in their songs. That's pretty amazing.ⁱ

Early times in the Delta were amazing but the better Delta stories are not of moneyed “risk-taking” white planters and their lavish lives, but are accounts of courageous blacks who often fought the system, both winning and losing their dreams and ambitions – and too often, losing their families or their lives. From a cadre of these talented African Americans came the blues.ⁱⁱ Whites simply contributed their own special horror in shaping the release of this creativity.

When cotton was King, the Delta’s enslaved Africans, who were kidnapped and torn from their far-away homes because they were “needed to pick the cotton,” often rebelled instead of working – by tearing down fences, hanging animal stock

upside down and hiding or stealing the “master’s” tools. Disgusted over the systemic abuse of their families and themselves, some of the kidnapped Africans faked sickness, practiced work slowdowns and sabotage, and sadly, self-mutilation. And there are countless stories of other Delta slaves exacting revenge by forcing openings in critical levees when floodwaters were high.

Inside the planters’ homes, a white family member might fear death from poisoning or becoming the subject of a slave’s African *hoodoo*. Still other enslaved Africans reacted more fiercely to their frequent whippings and torture by setting fires or stealing the “ole massa’s” gun to use on the “ole miss.”

The kidnapped and enslaved Africans were excellent agrarians, a critical resource to their owners. Some of the worst plantation owners would pay a price for their brutal mistreatment and forced labor – at best, missing a lavish party or two due to slaves’ payback for frequent abuse. At worse, the planter and his family could lose their lives.

From the Delta

Most Mississippians know that saying they are *from the Delta* refers to Mississippi’s region of flat farming lands, reaching from the Chickasaw Bluffs below Memphis to the Walnut Hills above Vicksburg, a unique expanse of great wealth and greater poverty. Few could describe the Delta more eloquently than David Cohn, a popular white writer coming from a region producing an array of talented writers and artists. Cohn in 1935 offered his creative portrayal of the Mississippi Delta – “The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg.”ⁱⁱⁱ

His description was so good that nineteen years later William Faulkner offered the same quote as his own, with a twist: “Mississippi begins in the Lobby of a Memphis, Tennessee, hotel and extends south to the Gulf of Mexico.”^{iv}

Cohn painted the Delta as a land of excess: “The hot sun, the torrential rains, the savage caprices of the unpredictable river. The fecund earth, the startling rapid growth of vegetation, the illimitable flat plains, and the vast dome of heaven arching over all of them: these environmental influences almost seemed to breed in the people a tendency toward the excessive.”^v

Even with a century of clearing, cultivating, draining and land leveling, the Delta’s earthy beauty stands out at sunset when the sun’s burnt orange rays press into murky waters of swamps, bayous, and oxbow lakes. As Cohn observed, this

region still retains much of its rural and agricultural past – with an economy that remains close to the land.

Fall's cotton fields blanket the Delta like soft snow. Wheat, rice and sorghum crops are separated by large and very shallow catfish farm ponds, often outlined by flocks of dinner-seeking and protected snow-white egrets. The handsome birds were once imported to the Delta for their perfect hat feathers, but now irritate pond owners with their “pound-a-day” fish-eating habits. Nonetheless, Mississippi is now the largest catfish producing state.

Geographically, the entire Mississippi delta is massive. Stretching North into Canada and south to the Gulf of Mexico, east to New York and west to New Mexico, the total delta of the great Mississippi River covers 41 percent of the continental United States.

The much smaller Yazoo-Mississippi Delta (“the Delta”) is one of the region's many smaller basins. Once called “the most Southern place on Earth,” by historian James C. Cobb, because of its cotton-rich history and defined culture, this flat triangle of fertile land, about two hundred miles long and seventy miles across at its widest point, covers 7,110 square miles.

On a map, the Delta looks like half a football with its western edge following along the mighty Mississippi River's path, but it was a mean spirited ballgame that was played on this field. With a reputation for harboring a sweltering summer heat, the Delta became an endless supplier of cheap black labor beginning in the 1800s, enabling thousands of white families to become rich and forcing generations of black families to work their entire lives for nothing, to live and die in poverty, illness and despair.

Traveling around the Delta seems one of the best ways to get in touch with the region's rich history; the intensity of the Delta's unforgiving past runs through miles of vine-covered railroad tracks and sweeps across the small country bridges spanning innumerable muddy rivers and streams, small lakes, cane breaks and mossy tree-silhouetted bayous.

Associated stories of evil curse through abandoned cotton gins rusting in the centers of near ghost towns where their tales are etched into crumbling red brick that once gave structure to active retail stores, cafes, movie houses, Masonic halls, Baptist churches and “colored” and white schools.

Today's Delta countryside remains dotted with white one-room churches that served sharecroppers as schools and houses of worship, sometimes morphing later

into freedom schools, NAACP meeting halls or unsafe quarters for “outside agitators.” Along most back roads near the small churches or along the edges of cotton fields are occasional, small run-down sharecropper houses, mostly abandoned but some still in use. Nearby are small cemeteries, some overgrown by kudzu vines but most carefully tended.

When seeking formal historical accounts, not surprisingly, the Delta has its dedicated gatekeepers. Some represent old-line aristocratic families trying to keep their spin on the past; others believe that hiding “embarrassing” Mississippi moments is their inherent responsibility, and good for the states economics. One Delta blues historian when preparing a brochure on the history of the Drew Blues Tradition was instructed to remove a pivotal story involving a gunfight in the town’s blues alley that influenced the movement of prominent bluesmen to Chicago.

Gate keeping takes place in so many ways. Sometimes it involves hiding notes, diaries, tapes, books, and papers of people who were closely involved in important activities. At one small Delta library, “someone lost all of the oral history tapes.” At another, “the librarian locked up the Emmett Till scrapbook in the safe,”^{vi} and at still another reading spot are two shelves of dated “Old South” classics, but only one copy of Fannie Lou Hamer’s biography is “available.” On that day it was “checked out.”

Many historical markers give travelers insight into the “white” Delta, but none describe the horrors of slavery,^{vii} the cruelty shown to kidnapped African Americans and their children, even in Natchez, a major home to slave marketers. Few signs display the Delta’s *Jim Crow* past or the continued march of African Americans into Mississippi’s civil rights era.^{viii} Most Mississippi historical markers call attention to famous plantations, prosperous planters and white Confederate Civil War heroes (with twisted tales of their heroics), with a scattering of “blues” markers here and there. In Indianola, a significant black history event was finally celebrated in 2003 with placement of a marker near the post office honoring an early black postmistress who was pressured out of her job by a white politician – one of Mississippi’s most zealous racists.

Black history museums are rare. Exhibits in the “Cottonlandia” museum in Leflore County are remarkable for their lack of mention to African American contributions to the entire agricultural cycle and culture. Enslaved Africans not only planted, grew and harvested the crops, but also were also responsible for clearing land and for nearly all farming-related activity. White settlers were their “overseers.”

(In Tallahatchie County, retired civil rights activist Rev. Willie Blue complained his town once acquired cultural tourism funds and then used “thousands of dollars” to honor “a famous pig” raised there some time ago.)

Civil rights activists from the small Delta town of Marks in 1968 kicked off a Mule Train headed for Washington, D.C. as part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s (SCLC) Poor People’s Campaign. The unforgettable event drew thousands of poverty stricken people to Washington, D.C. from the four corners of the United States and captured the world’s attention. Yet in 2003, when a small group of blacks wanted to put up a sign greeting visitors to Marks and honoring the Mule Train story, white city council members objected.

History-blocking was found in fights over archived civil rights materials: At Tougaloo College in Jackson in 2003, the college president agreed to move all of the school’s archived civil rights collections to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, leaving some white and black researchers saying that Aaron Henry, one of the state’s most famous civil rights activists, would “roll over in his grave” if he knew that all of his important papers wound up in the state’s possession, since Henry was for most of his years an enemy of the state.

Instead of Tougaloo archives, others question why the papers of Medgar Evers were donated to the state archives and wonder if they will all be appropriately categorized, maintained and protected. One hundred percent availability of these documents is another concern in this state with a record of mishandling and “losing” critical historical (and governmental) records.

At the public University of Mississippi, none of the papers donated to the law school library archives by the family of the late, legendary racist Sen. James Eastland were available for viewing as late as June 2005. One would further think the school’s most significant historical event, the entry of the first black student and resulting campus crisis, would merit a formal historical plaque, but only a line on one sign is dedicated to the singular 1962 event that could have brought on a second civil war.

Hernando de Soto “discovered” the Mississippi River in 1540 and has more historical markers dedicated to him than the Native Americans who lived along the river long before the explorer visited the region. Along one of de Soto’s expedition routes lies the Delta community of Clarksdale, where Highway 49 intersects Highway 61 – the mythical (and historically inaccurate) site where bluesman Robert Johnson “sold his soul to the devil” in exchange for learning to play a mean blues guitar.

*I went down to the crossroad
Fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord "Have mercy now
Save poor Bob if you please.*

– Robert Johnson

A hand-painted sign on two weathered boards marks the imaginary “Crossroads” spot. But the real site of Robert Johnson’s “conversion” lies about 30 miles south on an old dirt road between the Dockery plantation and Parchman prison – two well-known Delta institutions that once capitalized on the blood, sweat and tears of black folks ... the true *Ground Zero* for the Mississippi Delta blues.

ⁱ Wyatt Emmerich, “Embrace the Uniqueness of the Delta,” *Delta Magazine*, September 2003, 96.

ⁱⁱ Alan Lomax, “The Land Where the Blues Began,” (New York: The New Press, 1993), 64.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Cobb, editor, “The Mississippi Delta and the World; The Memoirs of David L. Cohn,” (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), xi.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v James Cobb, “The Most Southern Place on Earth,” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 311. Cobb cites David Cohn, “Where I was Born and Raised,” (Boston: University of Notre Dame Press, 1948), 320.

^{vi} In March of 2005, a cherished scrapbook was donated to the Delta State University Archives, said Dr. Henry Outlaw of the school’s Delta Center. Once donated to the Charleston Library, the scrapbook was handed over to Outlaw, at the request of its original owner, Frank Chamblin of St. Louis. “When Chamblin was a young man living in Sumner, the Emmett Till trial was going on. He was a paper boy, and his mother suggested that he fill a scrapbook with news clippings, because she knew this would be a very important historical event some day in the future, and of course it is,” Lawless said.

^{vii} Abolish Slavery International (online). More than 27 million people are enslaved today worldwide – more than at any time in history, according to this organization.

^{viii} Indianola is one exception with four or five historical markers that honor African American achievement.