

## Chapter 7 Integration ‘Impossible’

Even before the war years, academic discussions of the “negro problem” were dominated by a diverse group of white Southern planters, sons of planters, confederate soldiers, historians and political economists who believed in the inferiority of blacks and the impossibility of their integration into white culture. Many of these “scholars” were graduates of Northern universities and had published papers in the leading sociological journals.

Of all the white Southern sociologists, Alfred Holt Stone and Howard Odum were the most influential, and provided the strongest examples of the plantation bloc influence on history and sociology. Stone had attended Ole Miss,<sup>i</sup> was a Confederate captain, practiced law in Greenville, owned a large plantation, and served in the Mississippi legislature.

A delegate to the 1890 Mississippi constitutional convention, Stone voted to keep blacks from voting.<sup>ii</sup> Later as vice president of the Delta Council, the dominant planter organization, Stone was considered an expert on the “Negro problem,” lecturing at many universities around the nation. Stone, with no scientific research behind him, preached that racial friction was not a problem during slavery because the blacks collectively accepted the status assigned by whites.<sup>iii</sup>

W. E. B. Du Bois, then a professor at Atlanta University, hated Stone and easily debated Stone’s undocumented theories. A brilliant academic, Du Bois became increasingly unpopular with whites in the South after forming the Niagara Movement that ultimately became the NAACP. Attacks on Du Bois by Stone, and on Stone by Du Bois, resulted in a funding blockade thrown up around Atlanta University “by politically powerful planters, Washington’s Tuskegee machine, President Theodore Roosevelt, the Rockefeller’s General Education Board, and other founders.” Du Bois had no choice but to resign if the university was to prosper.<sup>iv</sup>

Stone’s counterpart, Odum, with a master’s degree from Ole Miss, a PhD in psychology from Clark University, and a PhD in sociology from Columbia University, completed a study in 1910 of African American communities in Oxford, Mississippi and other Southern towns. Presenting a thesis of African barbarism and inferiority, the “father of regionalism” contended, “the Negro easily responds to stimuli, that is, he is controlled by present impulses. This results in almost complete lack of restraint, including both yielding to impulses and inertia.”<sup>v</sup>

Apparently not satisfied with his “study” of Africans, Odum crossed over into the field of music, using hundreds of African American blues songs he collected, and became founder of a racist school of blues criticism “that, to this day, annually generates thousands of scholarly and journalist defamations of the blues, of blues-derived musical forms, and of African Americans.”<sup>vi</sup>

Stone, Odum and other “theorists” of this white supremacist bloc supported the overthrow of the Reconstruction governments, legalization of disenfranchisement, apartheid, and lynching, concluding that blacks must be “completely supervised” and that “scientific evidence” was on their side.<sup>vii</sup>

It was anthropologist Franz Boas, the Father of Anthropology, who advanced successful denunciations of the theories of these pseudo-scientists. A Columbia University physical anthropologist, Boas believed that slavery and peonage had destroyed African Americans’ heritage and oppressed them for generations. In physical anthropology, Boas challenged various uses of the notion of race, and argued that there was no necessary or strong connection between race and culture.<sup>viii</sup>

Earlier, in 1909, an attack on Boas served as the basis for emergence of the cultural-determinist school of social science in the North. The German-American scientist generally opposed evolutionary explanations of human behavior. Boas believed that culture, rather than genetics, strongly determined the overall structure and function of societies.

Where differences between individuals remained, these differences were much more likely the product of conditioned responses than genetic factors such as race. After the War, when combined with Watson’s behaviorist movement in psychology, Boas’ brand of cultural determinism overcame the study of eugenics<sup>ix</sup> in the United States during the 1930s.

In the South, most white academics responded with hostility to the Boas model and its advocates. One Morehouse College professor, E. Franklin Frazier, wrote on the pathology of prejudice and received death threats. He was forced to flee Atlanta.<sup>x</sup>

Professor James Silver, teaching at Ole Miss, was “puzzled from the outset” at his advanced students “who seemed to have little doubt of the Negro’s inherent inferiority.” Silver, a historian, was not willing to take opinion as gospel, and began to collect and study books on the topic of race. In Cambridge, England he found “the answer” during a party:

The best of the anthropologists seem to have emerged from the brain of the learned Franz Boas. It would be a matter of *supererogation* to list even a few of them, but I hasten to say that I read everything I could find on race, from Charles Darwin and William Graham Sumner even to those fanciful theorists, Theodore Bilbo, Tom Brady, and Carleton Putnam... But I still went further, in questioning every racial anthropologist I could locate, from Margaret Mead to the brilliant young Egyptian scientist I met at a cocktail party in Cambridge. She looked at me with withering scorn as I made the usual inquiry regarding black inferiority, answering, “We stopped talking about that in 1911.” Needless to say, I was convinced that there was little scientific evidence for white supremacy.<sup>xi</sup>

During these same years, a growing effort to memorialize the South and its history of slavery, the Civil War, white supremacy, and the Democratic Party under the banner of “lest we forget” came out of this era. Themed museums were created, and related magazines and newspaper articles appeared in Northern journals. “Biographies, multi-volume studies, and even playing cards began to issue forth at a dizzy rate.” Traveling minstrel shows provided one of the greatest influences on Northern urbanites; many of their stars and stories were later pulled into the film industry.

The 1915 film by D.W. Griffith, “Birth of a Nation,” celebrated the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan; the 1935 film starring Shirley Temple, “The Littlest Rebel,” celebrated the Confederacy; in 1939, “Gone with the Wind” brought the white Southern interpretation of aristocratic planter life to the silver screen.<sup>xii</sup>

*The Elaine Massacre*

AT THE END OF World War I in 1918, many white Southerners feared return of black veterans; concerned they might spread political ideas acquired in the military. Theodore Bilbo, serving as governor, “welcomed home” veterans by literally spelling out a warning to returning black soldiers: “We have all the room in the world for what we know as N-i-g-g-e-r-s, but none whatsoever for ‘colored ladies and gentlemen.’”<sup>xiii</sup>

Despite Bilbo and others like him, times were still changing, at least somewhat. The Delta Planting Company, later the Delta and Pine Land Company, owner of 45,000 acres of

cotton lands in Bolivar County, began using scientific management techniques. DPC milled and marketed its own lumber, working 1,000 tenant families.<sup>xiv</sup>

Perhaps sensing revolt and Northern migration in the air, a few Delta planters tried modeling DPC's modern management – using money for luring workers back to the cotton fields while other planters continued to rely on brutality and violence against blacks to force them into their fields.<sup>xv</sup>

But over in the small farming community of Elaine, Arkansas, south of Clarksdale and across the Mississippi River, violence remained the choice of planters in 1919. Even with a high market price for cotton, white buyers and landlords were cheating the black growers.

Coming home from a War that had raised hopes for a better life, some veteran black farmers reacted by taking a new tactical direction – organizing a Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America (PFHUA).

Propertied whites opposed the union and clashed with blacks attending a union meeting in a black church at Hoop Spur in Phillips County, Arkansas. The whites later claimed that blacks first opened fire, but blacks stated they had only returned the shooting started by White Raiders, a Mississippi Klan offshoot from across the Mississippi River.

The first mêlée ended with one white man reported dead and another wounded, after more armed whites entered the county from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, disarming and arresting blacks, and confining hundreds in a stockade, keeping them from communicating with relatives or legal counsel. Some blacks hid in canebrakes and were hunted down by whites.

Up to a thousand planters, sheriffs and other whites from the Yazoo Delta crossed the Mississippi River into Elaine as reinforcements; one journalist described scenes of black men, women and children being shot in cold blood and reported the deaths of “856 negroes and a wounded list probably five times greater.”

For years, lore held that at least an equal number of whites were killed and that hundreds of other blacks had been taken to a school house where they were tortured and interrogated for days, some beaten to death.

Officially, five whites reported as many as 100 blacks were killed. The total death list will never be known, since other estimates were much higher; one teacher who safely hid himself from the gunfire estimated 1,000 dead. Courts further oppressed blacks in resulting trial that violated their due process rights; 122 men and

women were indicted and twelve black defendants were sentenced to death, while 80 others received terms ranging from one to twenty years

The slaughter of blacks in Elaine continued for years afterward, as word of the watershed massacre spread.<sup>xvi</sup> In 1923, over ten thousand people attended a Klan rally in nearby Helena, with Klan members coming from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. . In 1925, the NAACP and others successfully freed the twelve black defendants sentenced to death for the Elaine incident.<sup>xvii</sup>

The most complete report of the Elaine Massacre – from the sharecroppers’ perspective – came from Ida Wells-Barnett who had returned clandestinely to the Delta after she was driven from Memphis. Wells had interviewed men and women prisoners and wives of prisoners, finding that through PFHUA sharecroppers had planned to hire a lawyer and to ultimately buy land for themselves.

Their goal had also been to get croppers to hold their cotton for a higher price. Wells-Barnett saw the union’s actions as a “Declaration of Economic Independence, and the first united blow for economic liberty struck by the Negroes of the South. That was their crime and it had to be avenged!”<sup>xviii</sup>

IN 1920, THE COTTON market collapsed once again and over the following years, black people kept moving to the North.<sup>xix</sup> Those who remained in the Delta became more defiant – while the planters became more oppressive. Attempting to destroy the “New Negro,” there were planters who encouraged a revival of the Ku Klux Klan, resulting in countless acts of violence. New chapters of the NAACP were organizing around Mississippi, mostly in the Delta, and members helped raise funds to support the congressional anti-lynching bill.

Black gun owners had always posed a great threat to planters, especially around the times of disputes over crop contracts or merchant bills. While many rural black people carried guns for hunting and self protection, Woodruff asserts the frequency of armed confrontations between planters and croppers may have increased in the decade following World War I, giving these and other examples:

In 1921 a sharecropper cursed and struck landowner M.F. Humphreys in Stoneville; Humphreys shot and killed the tenant. In Winona, seventeen-year-old John Noey Brewer worked on Mrs. W.C. Brooks’ plantation and was considered a “good negro.” For ten days he had been “been moody and subject to fits of anger” when reprimanded. Brooks asked Brewer to pick up the mail in town. He refused

and she threw him off the farm. But Brewer returned that night and shot Brooks, threatened her daughter, and then shot himself.<sup>xx</sup>

In Greenwood, Hal Winters and George Blakely were lynched in 1927 for killing Wisley P. Martin, a plantation manager who raped Winters' daughter. In another Mississippi case, a mob fired two hundred shots into the body of Dan Anderson for killing a Noxubee County planter. The planter learned that Anderson was leaving without paying his debts. When he went to collect, Anderson shot him. In Itta Bena, D.O. Alexander, a large plantation owner, shot and killed Sam Jefferson over a crop dispute. Alexander heard that Jefferson and his father, heavily armed, were looking for him. In Clarksdale, a mob killed Lindley Coleman after a jury acquitted him of murdering a plantation manager.<sup>xxi</sup>

For some white men, shooting black workers was a sport, like shooting deer or quail. In 1923, the Louisiana governor found himself asking the governor of neighboring Mississippi to stop his citizens from shooting their squirrel guns at black men who worked on the Louisiana-Mississippi Highway, Woodruff reported.

Freedom fighter William Pickens of Arkansas visited the Mississippi River Valley in 1921 and described it as the "American Congo." A field secretary for the NAACP, Pickens was in the Delta to investigate a brutal lynching and observed how "labor is forced and the laborer is a slave... [in] a cunningly contrived debt-slavery, to give the appearance of civilization and the sanction of law."

While Pickens blamed the sharecropping system for increased violence following the war, others would say years later that Pickens entirely missed the growing postwar militancy of the Delta's people.<sup>xxii</sup>

One year after Pickens' visit, in 1922, the Dyer (anti-lynching) Bill was finally passed by the House of Representatives on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January and given a favorable report by the select Senate Committee. A Southern senator led a filibuster against the bill's passage, claiming that anti-lynching legislation would be unconstitutional and an infringement upon states' rights.

Had it passed the senate, Dyer would have provided fines and imprisonment for anyone convicted of lynching in federal courts, and fines and penalties against states, counties, and towns that failed to use reasonable efforts to protect citizens from mob violence. Nonetheless, the long debate concerning the bill may have helped bring about a decline in lynching.<sup>xxiii</sup> Such legislation, in fact, did not pass until June 13, 2005.

Chapters of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) were growing across the country, meanwhile, in response to the continued violence against black citizens. Jamaican-born Garvey spoke of the lynching, burning, and disrespect of Negroes that was "spreading all over the world." "If we in this present age do not go out and do something to stop lynching, every inch of ground in the world will become unsafe for the Negro in the next twenty years."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Garveyism began in black Harlem in the spring of 1918 and rapidly burgeoned throughout the black world. Robert A. Hill and Barbara Bair, in preparing a Centennial Companion to *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, found that "nearly a thousand UNIA divisions were formed, and tens of thousands of members enrolled within the brief span of seven years."<sup>xxv</sup> The Garvey movement "awakened a race consciousness that made Harlem felt around the world,"<sup>xxvi</sup> wrote Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. This growing strength of Garvey's movement, one of the fastest growing black movements in history, would be taken as a political threat by the U.S. government and eventually destroyed.

The Bureau and its federal intelligence partners watched Garvey, combed his speeches for seditious utterances, monitored his private life, infiltrated his organization, broke into his office, and brought him to trial, conviction, imprisonment, and deportation. As beneficiaries and promoters of white supremacy they felt compelled to blunt Marcus Garvey's redefinition of the American Dream for blacks, even if that dream was apocalyptically achieved on a distant African battlefield. White hegemony demanded black acquiescence to existing racial arrangements.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Not surprisingly, Garvey was indicted on February 15, 1923 on technical charges of conspiracy and mail fraud. His trial began March 18, 1923, and lasted about a month, ending in conviction on one count of fraud. The UNIA leader was sentenced to five years in federal prison, and fined \$1,000. He appealed the verdict and lost, serving approximately two and one-half years in Atlanta before President Calvin Coolidge commuted his sentence. Coolidge's action was "designed to allow Garvey's deportation as an "undesirable alien" to his native Jamaica."<sup>xxviii</sup>

If Garvey's movement had succeeded, perhaps the Delta would have begun to change for the better. But this was not to be.

*Joe Pullen's revolt*

If we must die, let it not be like hogs: hunted and penned in an accursed spot!  
If we must die; oh let us nobly die...fighting back. – Claude McKay, 1921

In the cotton ginning Mecca of Drew, the birthplace of Archie Manning, some black elders still talk about a story passed down by their parents and relatives – a story focused on a 1923 gunfight raging into the early morning hours of December 15 when Joe Pullen, a tenant farmer and WWI veteran, settled a debt to plantation manager W.T. Saunders.

Pullen shot and killed Saunders during an argument and then Pullen's own life ended in a ditch at the edge of Drew when he was shot after an all-night gun battle.

The small town had buzzed with rumors that several dozen posse members were killed and possibly hundreds wounded before Pullen was taken down by machine gunners brought in from Clarksdale. Some Drew residents maintain that for years after the gunfight, a good number of people were using canes and displaying other signs of injuries received during the gun battle.

There are several versions of the Joe Pullen story, both written and spoken. In one account, nearly one thousand white men searched the swamps around Drew to find Pullen. Then depending on the source, Pullen killed 4, 17 or 19 whites and wounded 8, 38 or 40 before he was machine gunned down. Pullen either died immediately or was dragged through the streets and then killed. Local news accounts of this event were few.

The weekly Indianola newspaper carried one small paragraph on December 20, 1923 reporting that: "J. L. Doggett of Clarksdale and Kenneth Blackwood of Drew, posse men wounded Friday by negro, Joe Pullen, are reported as improving rapidly as could be expected." Associated Press reports were more complete:

Four men lost their lives in a spectacular gun battle which raged until 1 o'clock this morning between Joe Pullen, Negro tenant farmer, and a posse of several hundred men in the swamps of the Mississippi delta near Drew. Nine other wounded three probably fatally. Pullen was finally captured when four members of the posse stormed the drainage ditch in which he was entrenched. The Negro died an hour later from

bullet wounds. The trouble started when Pullen's employer came to his house to collect a debt.<sup>xxix</sup>

Some of the more interesting accounts are gleaned from the stories told by the people who were living at the time. Fannie Lou Hamer, well-known civil rights activist from Ruleville, often told others the shoot-out occurred when she was a child. Hamer said that Pullen's body was dragged into town and that people cut off body parts to keep as souvenirs. "Mississippi was a quiet place for a long time [afterwards]." While local press claimed that four white men had died "in defense of law and order," Mrs. Hamer recalled that Pullen had killed thirteen white men and wounded twenty-six others before dying.<sup>xxx</sup>

Dr. L. C. Dorsey remembered how as a young child living on a Sunflower County plantation between Ruleville and Drew she heard from her father and relatives the story of Pullen. Dorsey's father often did not receive the money due him as a sharecropper, and Dorsey believed the Pullen incident had much to do with his fear of questioning "the man."

The version she heard was that Pullen died because he stood up for his right not to be cheated out of his labor. After Pullen did not clear anything at settlement time, he made arrangements to go live with another black farmer, according to Dorsey:

When he returned to announce his plan ... white folks got angry ... and decided he wasn't going to move ... [the man] wasn't going to let him take anything off the place. Pullen sent his family away and decided to stay with his belongings ... the furnishings, the livestock, the mules that he needed to work with – and what my daddy called a mob crew, which was really what they called the Klan ... [They] came to the house to take him out and either kill him or beat him up, to put him in his place. He was prepared for them. He shot several of them, killed some of them, and escaped to a ditch and got in a culvert and was able to hold them off for a long time. Eventually, some person poured gasoline in the ditch and set it on fire and he had to come out ... and they killed him. And if that wasn't enough, they tied him to a car and drug him through the streets of Drew, cut off his ears, I think, or castrated him ... and put

it in jars in the city. But every black person knew that legend. Miss Hamer used to tell it. Everybody knew it.<sup>xxx</sup>

Pullen's family protested to the President [Calvin Coolidge] who sent an investigative team "because the man had been in the service, and that was what his family talked about, that this man had served his country and this is how he was treated. He had done nothing wrong and had been killed for trying to defend himself against the crew," Dorsey said.

Woodruff adds to the Pullen story that Sanders may have offered Pullen \$150 to recruit families to work on the plantation, and when Pullen kept the money without providing the service, the fight began.<sup>xxxii</sup> And she terms Pullen's gunfight another "watershed even" much like the Elaine Massacre as blacks challenged the structure of white supremacy throughout the 1920s. Black people with guns had always threatened planter authority, particularly when disputes arose over crop contracts or merchant bills. Despite the threat of terror, black sharecroppers and laborers fought back when their lives were on the line, even if such actions resulted in their deaths.

Many researchers including Woodruff find that Southern black people had always carried guns for hunting and self-protection, but the frequency of armed confrontations between planters and croppers, based on the frequency of reporting, may have increased in the decade following World War I. Still, no black was safe during the cotton harvest observed Clarksdale blues performer Will Stark:

They had to work – or fight! When they come after a man to work, he had to go. For instance, Mister Hobson or Mister Clark or Mister King or Anderson or any of these people out of town wanted some hands to chop the cotton or plow, it make no difference who he was, he must go. They would go into colored people's house and git the children out who had never been worked none – schoolgirls – and make them go out and pick cotton ... Of course the boss didn't do all this, the officers here in town would take um and when they got out on the plantation they had to work – or fight.... They just whipped um up. Some um I heard they whipped to death.... One bossman out here about Tutwiler ... made a man work and chained his wife in bed at night to make sure they wouldn't run away.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

THE RULING WHITE Delta families would keep their immense social, economic and political power; the planters' bloc maintaining its supremacy or hegemony through an efficient capitalist economy rooted in black labor manipulation. Schooling and marriage built strong family alliances, and these white coalitions, much like Mafioso, expanded into local economies, from ownership and operation of cotton gins, to real estate, and banking.

Planters ran all of Mississippi. They frequently formed land companies to buy Delta properties; they held political, military, church and other bonds that established a "powerful, vertical integration" of local businesses into more powerful national bodies "such as the Standard Oil Company which dominated the American Cotton Oil Trust."<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The plantation bloc dominated political office holders – local, county, state, and national officials who enforced plantation regulations. Under these influences, oppression and censorship returned increasingly to pre-emancipation levels.

In 1923, planters again tried to lure laborers home to the Delta, after a mass exodus from the South.<sup>xxxv</sup> Some Blacks actually returned after hearing of planters' promises for better housing and pay, especially after finding it difficult to survive in new surroundings. Nevertheless a growing response to the increased violence and oppression in the Delta was for African Americans to keep leaving, rather than stay and engage in violence.

More than ten thousand blacks left the Vicksburg area alone, over the course of three months according to an investigation: "The through trains passing via this city on the way to Northern communities for more than four months, have been crowded with men, women, and children forming part of another exodus to the North which is due to lynchings and a general state of unrest of the people," a Cleveland newspaper reported.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Some Delta planters tried to halt the exodus by responding somewhat more effectively to sharecropper demands: paying in cash, allowing workers to shop wherever they wanted, and stocking commissary shelves with meat, cheese, coffee and candy as opposed to the traditional meal and lard. But even then, Night Riders of the Klan still drove sharecroppers from their fields and out of the region.

In Ruleville, Isaac Moore and his brother refused to sell their crop to the landowner's brother, and 17 Klansmen broke into Moore's home, sexually harassed

his wife, beat her with a rifle and then stole all of their chickens, crops, mules, corn and hogs. Sexual battery and rape were not uncommon activities for the Klan.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Leroy Percy, known for his outward civility (and by some for his hypocrisy), once told his managers how to treat black tenants who could not make enough wages from cotton to pay for their rent, because of boll weevils: “Take as much as you can get from the Negroes without process of law where they are willing to remain on the place. If they are going to move anyway, it seems to me, you might as well clean them up.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The Delta Industrial Institute, the first black agricultural high school in Mississippi, opened its doors in 1923 as planters finally delivered on one of their promises to improve black education.<sup>xxxix</sup> And yet for every dollar spent on a black child’s education in Mississippi, twenty dollars were spent on each white child. Black students had only one high school in the state, while whites had one thousand high schools. White schools received funds from the state’s white and black taxpayers, while black schools got money from charities. The state spent more than \$1 million for a white reformatory for youthful offenders, while black children went to Parchman.

At a Jackson meeting over black emigration held by a group of black leaders, it was concluded that while Mississippi sent more black soldiers to the World War than whites, black men on their return home still found themselves with no more of a voice in state government, which they’d fought to defend. The group insisted that black people be allowed to vote.

Even though they remained disenfranchised, blacks still demonstrated patriotism: In 1919 a group of black citizens in Rosedale passed a six-part resolution showing that “we pledge our selves and our race to the protection of our government against Bolshevism or any principle that would attempt to destroy this republic.”<sup>xl</sup>

The same year, the Mississippi Chamber of Commerce met and appointed a committee to deal with the exodus; the group determined there was need to improve education, health, and living conditions of Mississippi’s blacks, but then denial took over as it was decided “any and all discussion of the social and political phases of this situation is to be avoided as having nothing whatever to do with the solution of this purely economic question.”

While some large landowners claimed it was the smaller landowners who were the real abusers of black workers, evidence consistently cited by Nan Elizabeth

Woodruff in “American Congo” and others indicates that both large and small planters oppressed their workers in maintaining white supremacy, many using the services of (or themselves belonging to) the Ku Klux Klan. Violence that spread throughout the Delta reflected in part the hard economic times following the war.”<sup>xli</sup>

Some planters responded to black migration by insisting that white labor replace black workers, working closely with the Southern Alluvial Land Association to attract Northern European farmers from the Northern states as a solution. Mrs. Walter Sillers Sr., contributing her part in “strengthening” the economy, suggested that more whites be brought to the Delta to replace African Americans.

Writing for the Bolivar County Daughters of the American Revolution an essay entitled, “Community Farms for Americans Proposed,” Sillers called for the creation of model farms to settle “colonial descendants” on thirty-acre farms. Such a project was essential in order that “this fine race of people may be kept in ascendancy in this nation.” The homes of new white laborers were to be located “...on a highway with an artesian well to prevent farm women from suffering the drudgery and boredom of farm life.”

As the continued exodus of black people raised labor issues, Sillers proposed planters begin recruiting “Anglo Saxon stock from the hill sections,” adding with a flourish, “Those who own land own the country.”<sup>xlii</sup>

Planters still could not admit, however, to the underlying reality of class relations in the Delta, Woodruff concluded. Sillers continued to insist that black people were better off and did not leave the Delta from fears of violence – “No law abiding Negro fears mob violence because he knows his planter will protect him. He not only knows he is valuable to the white man, more so than his mules and fine horses, but he also relies upon the kindly feeling and sense of justice of the white man.”<sup>xliii</sup>

LIFE BECAME WORSE in Mississippi when thousands of people – black and white – were left destitute and homeless in the spring of 1927. The powerful Mississippi River flooded 2.7 million acres across the Delta leaving countless tragedies behind. Louisiana journalist John M. Barry provided an incredible glimpse into the numerous levels of catastrophe in his book, *Rising Tide*.

Barry also left a wake of surprised and angered white people in the Delta when he reported facts apparently new to his readers, that a long-respected and wealthy

Greenville family had not lived up to their expectations during the worst of times. But they were not alone.

Even though the Red Cross provided food, its distribution was placed under planter control, hence keeping food away from those in most need. Donated supplies were stockpiled by distributors who later profited from their sales of the donated food to blacks. Black convicts were treated brutally and often used as human sandbags to stop levees from breaking. And there was indiscriminate murder:

James Gooden had worked all night piling heavy sandbags as fast as he could on the levee. When ordered to return the next morning by a Greenville police officer, Gooden was exhausted and refused. A scuffle followed and Gooden was shot and killed by the officer. To calm the black community, the officer was arrested, and supposedly would be held for trial. County prosecutor Ray Toombs was a reputed Exalted Cyclops of the local Klan, though, and few blacks believed a trial would ever occur.

But it was Will Percy, the son of Leroy Percy, head of Greenville's aristocracy, who went before blacks gathered in a local church. Rather than making amends or trying to calm the group, Percy proceeded to blame the entire black community for Gooden's death, breaking all bonds that existed between blacks and the Percy family. The Delta "had become, entirely and finally, the land where the blues began."<sup>xliv</sup>

As conditions worsened in Greenville, refugees were brought in from outlying sections. Cold weather added to the suffering and the situation was becoming life threatening as the water supply became contaminated and useless and food was nearly gone. Ten thousand people were stranded on the levee and the city was cut off with no rail connections; supplying Greenville would be nearly impossible. This was information known by Will Percy, chair of the relief committee, and he had to do something quickly:

The question of evacuation went to the essence of Will's concept of a worthy aristocracy, of *noblesse oblige*, even of honor. Keeping the refugees on the levee risked their lives. There was no question of what was right and therefore no choice.... Will consulted only his Red Cross committee, Percy loyalists [and] told them the refugees had to be evacuated.... Several committee members objected.... Grudgingly ...

they approved Will's plan.... But Will had not discussed the plan with his father. Senator Percy had been focused on the problems only he could resolve, most recently convincing banks in New York ... to honor checks drawn on Delta banks.<sup>xlv</sup>

What they did next would define their society, Barry wrote: On Monday, April 25, the government steamer *Control* left Greenville with 500 white women and children. The *Minnesota* loaded more than 1,000 refugees, mostly black, at the wharf. Two other steamers, the *Wabash* and the *Keppa*, were standing by. The *Sprague*, *Tollinger* and *Cincinnati* were en route, each towing barges capable of carrying several thousand each. The city would be virtually emptied in a day.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Angry planters could not shake young Percy's determination to evacuate "their" blacks. They confronted Leroy Percy who met with his son. In the end, Will Percy ordered the Red Cross to cancel loading of the refugees and held an emergency meeting of his committee. Every member said blacks must stay on the levee and the young Percy was "astounded."

"How could they reverse themselves? Will Percy argued for two hours, but the committee members were unyielding and finally he gave in and told furious ship captains all blacks would remain on the levee. The steamers did not leave quite empty. The *Wabash*, capable of carrying several thousand, departed with thirty-three white women and children.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Percy's decision had its consequences. President Herbert Hoover had approved the evacuation plan and arrived in Greenville the next morning. Will Percy explained he decided it would be easier, instead, to bring in all supplies for the 50,000 people stranded in the county to Greenville. A refugee camp on the levee would allow the blacks from the camp to provide the workforce to move the supplies.

The same day of Hoover's visit, a black refugee died, after not eating for days and then gorging himself on bananas. The official story was the man's body was rowed into the middle of the river and thrown in. "But rumors spread that the National Guard had thrown him into the river alive as punishment for stealing the bananas." Other rumors had the police chief regularly towing black bodies found floating in the streets to the levee.<sup>xlviii</sup>

An uncle of civil rights activists Sam and Margaret Block, their father's youngest brother, Lennie, lived in Cleveland at the time of the flood. "One of the stories he told us was that the sheriff and the Klansmen would go around together

throughout the Delta and make black men work on cleaning up the aftermath or they would shoot them,” Margaret Block said: “When several whites came to get Uncle Lennie at his home in Cleveland he was sitting on his front porch and he refused to go. They said they would shoot him and he said he would shoot them back. So they left him alone, but they killed another man who was a friend of our uncle’s, Eddie Porter, also from Cleveland. They shot him through the head. They didn’t have to have a reason to kill you, if you were black.”<sup>xlix</sup>

Although the Red Cross would ultimately operate 154 *concentration camps* in Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, only one camp would generate criticism enough to bring intense political pressure on President Hoover – the Greenville camp on the levee. Hoover’s approval of Percy’s change in course would remain to haunt him.<sup>1</sup>

After the flood, there was less reason than ever to stay in the Delta. Homes had been destroyed, belongings lost, and crops ruined. One Greenville sharecropper said that he had to "get my family out of this cursed South land -- down here a Negro man is not as good as a white man's dog." But it was not easy to leave. Planters, after all, still depended on African American laborers and would do virtually anything to keep them from leaving.

The following year, Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1928, recognizing that flooding due to the Mississippi River was a federal responsibility, since 41 percent of the continental United States drains down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. This act called for levees and floodwalls, floodways, channel improvement and stabilization, and tributary basin improvements. Passage of this Act did not stop blacks from leaving the Delta, however.

Chicago was the favored destination of those leaving Mississippi, and from 1920-1930, the city’s population more than doubled. This Great Migration of people was conveyed by a musical migration as Delta blues music moved to Chicago and put down roots in the northern city. Although the North had its own share of racist and discrimination problems, it was still a far better place for blacks, and most that left the Delta seldom returned.<sup>ii</sup>

Powerful legislator and planter Walter Sillers displayed the Delta’s typical state of denial when he opined that continued Northern migration was due to recruitment by “labor agents who wanted cheap labor and servants”<sup>iii</sup> and not because of white planter oppression. But Sillers took some responsibility, in acknowledging “shame of the habitations we furnish our tenants, yet the man who

seeks to better conditions goes in debt, mortgages his property and is finally foreclosed.”<sup>iii</sup>

### *Share Croppers Union*

Thousands of black and white rural families were left without jobs, food, or homes in the 1930s when mechanized cotton production began replacing their hand labor. Cotton prices kept dropping, and in 1932, those laborers who remained working the fields earned \$129 annually, down from the \$333 they made in 1913.<sup>iv</sup>

A largely black underground organization of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and agricultural laborers, the Share Croppers Union (SCU), was becoming the largest Communist-led mass organization in the Deep South. Founded in Alabama in the spring of 1931, the SCU soon picked up members in Mississippi. The SCU’s immediate goals focused on development of smaller farmer and tenant cooperatives and rural unions, based on preventing evictions; their agenda included racial/ethnic cooperation and securing of federal funds for land reform.<sup>lv</sup>

There were other reports of Communist Party activity in the Delta during these years; some party members had traveled through in 1931, conducting a farm survey. Later, flyers were published, urging blacks not to pick cotton at the going wage. In turn, planters punished union members by denying Red Cross food donations, causing some families to starve and even die.<sup>lvi</sup>

Anger and fear were increasing throughout the Delta as ninety-three sharecroppers and their families in Holmes County walked off a plantation in 1932 and moved into a tent colony in the yard of Old Jerusalem Church after the landlord refused to pay them a cash settlement. In nearby Charlotte, a sharecropper’s union organized, responding to some Delta planters’ attempts to force black laborers to work for Red Cross rations.<sup>lvii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> The University of Mississippi calls itself “Ole Miss,” a term that comes directly out of slavery. It was a reference to the wife of the slave owner or the “ole master.” Students, many are sons and daughters of wealthy planters, chose this nickname in the 1940s which remains in use, continuing to add fuel to the school’s racist heritage. At Ole Miss the Confederate flag is still waved by some students at football games. Blacks currently comprise approximately 13 percent of the students, a lower number than at other state supported universities.

<sup>ii</sup> Woods, 100.

---

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., footnote 42, 306. Black leadership near the turn of the century was divided between two tactics for racial equality, economic and political. The most heated controversy raged between two significant black men—Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute, believed in a gradualist economic strategy while DuBois promoted a gradualist political strategy. Washington is remembered for his ‘Atlanta Compromise’ address where he urged white America to provide jobs and industrial-agricultural education for Negroes. In exchange, blacks would not demand social equality and civil rights. Washington believed that political and social equality were less important as immediate goals than economic respectability and independence. If blacks gained an economic foothold, and proved themselves useful to whites, then civil rights and social equality would eventually be provided. He urged African Americans to work as farmers, skilled artisans, domestic servants, and manual laborers to prove that all blacks were not “liars and chicken thieves.” (Robert A. Gibson, “Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois: The Problem of Negro Leadership,” Yale-New Haven Teacher’s Institute, online)

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., 100. Cites Howard W. Odum, “Social and Mental Traits of the Negro,” (New York: Columbia University Press, 1910), 13-14.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> WordIQ.com, “Franz Boas.”

<sup>ix</sup> Eugenics is false science. It is about the selective prevention or encouragement of births for social, racial, or political ends.

<sup>x</sup> Woods, 102. Cites Kelly Miller, “Is Race Prejudice Innate or Acquired?” *Journal of Applied Sociology*, 11 (July-August, 1927), 520-524.

<sup>xi</sup> Silver, “Running Scared,” 21.

<sup>xii</sup> Woods, 96.

<sup>xiii</sup> Woodruff, 69.

<sup>xiv</sup> In 2000, Delta & Pine Land (Mississippi, USA) was the world's 9th largest seed corporation, with revenues of \$301 million. The company was reported to have joint ventures and/or subsidiaries in North America, Brazil, Argentina, China, Mexico, Paraguay, South Africa, Australia, and China. The USDA and D&PL are co-owners of three patents on the controversial technology that genetically modifies plants to produce sterile seeds, preventing farmers from re-using harvested seed.

<sup>xv</sup> Woodruff, 23-28.

<sup>xvi</sup> Herbert Shapiro, “White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery,” (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 149. See also Richard C. Cortner, “A Mob Intent on Death: The NAACP and the Arkansas Riot Cases,” (Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987); see also the account of the incident in Arthur I. Waskow, “From Race Riot to Sit-in,” (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 121-42.

<sup>xvii</sup> Woodruff, 136.

<sup>xviii</sup> Woodruff, 95.

<sup>xix</sup> Notes on Mississippi’s population: Until 1940, blacks were a majority in the state. Mississippi was one of only four states that declined in population between 1940 and 1960, largely because of black

---

emigration. According to the federal census in 2000, whites constituted 61.4 percent of Mississippi's population. Blacks were 36.3 percent, giving Mississippi a larger proportion of blacks in its population than any other state. The black population is particularly large in the Delta, where blacks constitute more than 60 percent of the population of most counties. Only in the Northeastern and southeastern corners of the state do blacks account for less than 20 percent of the population. Asians are 0.7 percent of the population, Native Americans 0.4 percent, and those of mixed heritage or not reporting race 1.2 percent. Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders numbered 667. Hispanics, who may be of any race, are 1.4 percent of the people. (Source *Encarta*, "Mississippi")

<sup>xx</sup> Woodruff, 136-138.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxii</sup> Woodruff, 1.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Robert A. Gibson "The Negro Holocaust: Lynching and Race Riots in the United States, 1980-1950," The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute (online).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Shapiro, 165. Garvey believed that liberty and democracy could not be acquired without bloodshed: The blood was not to be shed in America, but "one day on the African battlefield" in order to repossess what properly belonged to blacks. Africa had given mankind its civilization, had supplied science, art, and literature to whites, but, the time had come for blacks to take back the power they had once held, Garvey held. When Blacks ruled, democracy would prevail. The white man had shown he was incapable of ruling, and "he has to step off the stage of action."

<sup>xxv</sup> Robert A. Hill and Barbara Bair, "Centennial Companion to The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers," (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), xv.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.* Cites Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., "Against the Tide: An Autobiography," (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938), 71.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., "Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925," (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 131.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 350. Footnote no. 5.

<sup>xxix</sup> From copies of news articles found at the Indianola Library. No dates were apparent.

<sup>xxx</sup> Woodruff, 138-139. Author cites the *Drew Leader*, Dec. 21, 1923.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Oral history of L. C. Dorsey.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Woodruff, 138-139. She writes: "Instead, Pullen took the money and repaired his house and purchased other necessities that he believed the planter owed him for work he had performed and never been paid for. When Sanders and John Manning approached him, demanded he turn over the money, the six-foot tall Pullen shot, and killed Sanders with a .38-caliber pistol. As a posse gathered, Pullen seized his shotgun and ran for a ditch. He ambushed the posse, killing one with a shot to the face, hitting another in the head, and striking a third in the side. Although the posse used eight to ten boxes of shells in response, none of them hit Pullen. Posse members then poured a gallon of gasoline into the ditch and started a fire. The posse fired into the flames, but Pullen shot back, hitting another man. They brought in more gasoline while a party from Clarksdale arrived with two automatic rifles and a Browning machine gun. It took a third gallon of gas to reach Pullen. When he finally ran out, they shot and killed him. The posse then tied Pullen's feet to a car and dragged the body into Drew where people came from all over the region to view it. They also displayed Pullen's shotgun. Someone

---

cut off his ear and placed it in a jar to be viewed along with the body. According to freedom fighter Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, a child at the time, after the Pullen murder “Mississippi was a quiet place for a long time. While the newspapers claimed that four white men had died “in defense of law and order,” Mrs. Hamer recalled that Pullen had killed thirteen white men and wounded twenty-six others before dying.” Woodruff cites the *Drew (Miss) Leader*, December 21, 1923.; see also Chana Kai Lee, “For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer,” (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,1999), 16-18.

xxxiii Woods, 93. Cites Lomas, 1993, 206-7, 468.

xxxiv Ibid., 94. Cites Donald Spivey, “Schooling for the New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915,” (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 74.

xxxv Woodruff, 140. The U. S. Department of Labor estimated that between the fall of 1922 and May of 1923, nine thousand black people left the Delta. Bolivar County, by 1930, had lost 8.4 percent; Coahoma, 7.4 percent; Humphreys, 13.3 percent; Leflore, 1.6 percent; and Sunflower, 3.9 percent of its black population. These figures come from the fourteenth and fifteenth U. S. Census (1920 and 1930).

xxxvi Ibid., 140. Cites the *Cleveland Advocate*, July 31, 1920.

xxxvii Woods., 133. Author cites wage hearings transcripts in various Delta towns.

xxxviii Ibid., 150.

xxxix Woodruff, 148.

xl “Negroes Pledge Their Loyalty,” *Cleveland Enterprise*, April 10, 1919.

xli Woods, 131-133.

xlii Woods, 144. Cites interview in the *Atlanta Constitution*.

xliii Woodruff, 150.

xliv John W. Barry, “Rising Tide,” (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 334.

xlv Ibid.

xlvi Ibid., 308.

xlvii Ibid., 309-310.

xlviii Ibid., 311.

xlis Interview with Margaret Block. She and her brother, Sam, were civil rights activists in the early and mid 1960s.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

li “Fatal Flood,” *American Experience*. PBS report (online).

lii Woodruff, 151.

liii Ibid., 150.

liiv Ibid. 153.

liv Woods, 152.

lvi Woodruff, 154. Cites various newspaper reports including the *Arkansas Gazette* September 11, 1931, the *Atlanta Constitution*, September 10, 1931, and the *Chicago Whip*, November 3, 1931.

lvii Ibid., 155. Cites Lement Harris, “My Tales of Two Worlds,” (New York: International Publishers, 1986), 120-128.