

Chapter 8 Under the Microscope

By the mid 1930s, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker and social psychologist John Dollard, both white Yale colleagues at the Institute of Human Relations, traveled into the Delta to study Indianola and nearby Sunflower, making the Sunflower County seat historically significant as the site of the first anthropological studies on non-Native people in the United States.ⁱ

Their classic ethnographies, Powdermaker's "After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South"ⁱⁱ and Dollard's "Caste and Class in a Southern Town," contributed to a "master narrative" of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and the South that viewed class largely through the lens of race.

Powdermaker's field observations during her study of the town she wrote of as *Cottonville* were stunning. In her first few weeks, blacks told her of an incident when the black janitor of a white school was lynched after reporting some of the pupils to the school's principal for throwing stones at school windows.

Powdermaker noted how moods shifted within the white community regarding the possibility of a lynching. One day after a lynching attempt, the researcher journaled her impressions:

[A] group of shabby men, their eyes burning, tramped up and down the road and through the woods, mingling their oaths with the barking of their dogs. The middle-class white men sitting in their offices or homes remarked that of course they did not approve of lynching, but that undoubtedly these Negroes would be lynched, and "what can you do when you have to deal with the primitive African type, the killer?" The Negroes in the neighborhood sat at home all day, afraid to go out. Those in a town thirty miles distant said that things must be getting better because a few years ago, if the mob had not found the men they wanted by this time, they would have lynched someone else.ⁱⁱⁱ

Powdermaker theorized that lynching encouraged blacks to commit violent acts against other blacks, "... because the black person can hope for no justice and no defense from our legal institutions" and therefore must settle his own difficulties, "and often he knows only one way." Dollard's separate work led to development of

a theory of “frustration aggression” through life histories he collected from nine middle-class African Americans. In their respective studies, both scientists stressed the importance of voting and of the deep injustice of the forced caste division they observed.^{iv}

IN 1933, FRANKLIN D. Roosevelt was elected and began implementing New Deal relief policies that in the end worked better for whites than most black – not surprising since federal agricultural policies favored the richer agriculturalists. Roosevelt replaced Herbert Hoover, who did not have a good record for helping Delta blacks. This new president appeared to favor the poor, but only in his words.

A group called African Americans in Mississippi hired a secret investigator who studied Roosevelt’s relief administration around the state, finding that black people were rarely hired by Works Progress Administration (WPA) or the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and those who were hired, received lower pay than whites.

No CWA building projects, such as libraries, were awarded to black communities, and most CWA teaching positions were handed out to whites. Planters and their relatives administered relief programs, always to their personal benefit; blacks were often removed from relief rolls by the planter-run social programs and forced to pick cotton at low wages.^v

Walter White of the NAACP confirmed the investigator’s findings that Delta blacks were losing their federal relief for refusing to pick cotton at low wages, creating a condition that “savors of peonage.”

In Tunica, White discovered a planter’s wife supervised the WPA program and thousands of the twenty thousand black residents of the county were dropped from the WPA relief rolls for refusing to pick cotton. Mrs. Mary Jane Harris, 85, suffered from high blood pressure. After picking cotton for one month, because of health reasons and the need to care for her daughters, she left the fields and lost her monthly WPA relief check.^{vi}

New Deal agricultural programs helped large-scale planters the most, allowing them to withdraw up to 30 percent of the acreage of their cotton crops from production. This parity program, requested by planters in the early 1920s, raised farm prices.

In her Delta study, Woodruff found that a U. S. Senate committee in 1936 revealed Oscar Johnston’s Delta and Pine Land Company received over \$318,000 in parity payments between 1933 and 1935.^{vii} This would be equivalent to \$4.1 million

(\$4,112,647.81 AFI) in 2002. ^{viii} These payments harmed smaller family farmers and offered very little for farm workers. Delta planters, who benefited, “welcomed the program as it gave them opportunity to move faster toward mechanization by boosting their profits.”

Planters obtained a windfall with passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (AAA) that provided a rental payment from the government on retired lands and a second "parity" check. Tenants and sharecroppers were supposed to receive a share of these payments, but in most cases, they did not, with their portion either stolen by the planter or taken as they were fooled into signing away their shares.^{ix}

The AAA eventually led planters to retire croplands; planters could then use the full subsidy payments to hire back sharecroppers as wageworkers at lower costs. The planters' strategy was to support a great number of tenants to place in the relief programs. Thus, the lower their own expenditures would be for “furnish” or what they provided in advance for food and supplies.^x

Unions, and cooperative farms

The Southern Tenant Farmer's Union (STFU), founded in 1934, was a socialist organization that attracted support from a variety of Southern white liberals. This included ministers from a radical movement who followed a social gospel “drawing from the New Testament and Karl Marx.”

Noted theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, deeply committed to fighting Jim Crow and an investigator for the NAACP, was an STFU member, and spent many months in the Delta often as an investigator for the NAACP.^{xi}

The STFU called for the end of evictions, appointment of farm labor representation on agricultural boards, and enforcement of AAA contracts regarding parity payments to sharecroppers. In 1934, the STFU collected evidence for a pamphlet funded by the Socialist Party, “The Plight of the Sharecropper,” which “shocked even members of the AAA.”^{xii}

Angered landowners asked for their own AAA investigation that when completed indicated no problems, since planters controlled this second study. But union officials demanded still another government investigation, and those results were “so damaging, that the head...agribusiness man, Chester Davis, destroyed it.”^{xiii}

In 1935, the Delta's major planters reduced cotton-picking wages from 60 cents to 40 cents per hundred pounds picked. Most pickers brought in about 200

pounds per day, so this represented an average daily loss of \$2.50. The STFU called a strike in Arkansas that met with success. Planters were caught off guard and with this victory union memberships grew. Nevertheless, landowners began evicting union members and blacklisting throughout the Delta, and soon thousands of families were thrown off plantations and out of their homes.

Within four years, the STFU could count eighteen locals and five hundred members in Mississippi, most from the Delta. STFU activities were far greater in Arkansas and received the majority of press coverage. Strikes did occur in the Delta and some were just as bloody.

Some negotiations were successful. In 1946, as part of the National Farm Labor Union, the STFU demanded cotton workers be paid 50 cents an hour or \$5.00 a day for ten hours of work. Planters had lowered wages the year before, from \$3.00 per 100 pounds of cotton to \$2.10 and met secretly, this time, with the USDA Wage Stabilization Board in Greenville to strategize on keeping wages down.

H. L. Mitchell, STFU co-founder, filed a complaint and the Wage Board refused to support the proposed wage reductions, fearing violence and evictions if wages went down.^{xiv}

For the STFU, success was almost always short-lived. Stories of evictions, blacklisting, violence, terror, marches, shootings, convictions, beatings and murder kept building, particularly on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi River where during a cotton choppers strike in the spring of 1936, workers at one plantation put down their hoes and joined a march along the cotton fields. Marchers, including women and children, faced men who rode alongside with guns and ball bats.

While the STFU moved into other parts of the South and California, some members returned to Mississippi in the 1960s to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement. But there were no further successful attempts to organize tenants until Fannie Lou Hamer in Sunflower County formed the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union in 1965.

What was the threat of the STFU? Why did planters employ such extremes to combat it? What did planters fear?

F. Raymond Daniell, a *New York Times* reporter, visited the Delta in 1935, and gave his interpretation of planters' fears: "The average planter and public official is firmly convinced that unless he takes drastic steps, white supremacy, Christianity, the American flag and the sanctity of home and family ties will be overthrown by agents of the Soviet Union."^{xv}

Regardless, evangelist Sherman Eddy of Memphis decided it was time to try something new to help Delta sharecroppers and in 1936 and 1937 started two cooperative farms, in Bolivar and then Holmes counties. Both farms were projects of a philanthropically supported corporation, headed by Eddy, with a goal to help southern agricultural laborers out of their economic plight. The evangelist was a well-known YMCA official who also investigated crimes against union members.

While the STFU goal was not to build cooperative farms, there were still ties between the cooperative farms and the union through William Ruthrauff Amberson, professor at the University of Tennessee Medical School at Memphis, who advised the union group and also served as a trustee of the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms.^{xvi}

Eddy's first cooperative farm was successful in its early months as 19 black families and 12 white families lived and worked together. Vegetation was abundant and a clinic was built to provide the families with medical attention.^{xvii} The Delta farm was sold in 1942 and all farming activities were transferred to the Providence farm.

Like most cooperatives, the farms simply could not provide enough relief for those who were steadily becoming landless. Family farms were declining around the entire nation and small Delta farms, even with federal help, could not compete with large-scale corporate plantations.

A similar farming project was initiated outside of Drew in 1920 that lasted well into the 1970s. Brooks Farm on Freedom Road evolved from a plantation into a community of black landowners through the efforts of Palmer Herbert Brooks and community residents. The black planter's goal was to help farmers achieve their dream of "having a place where colored folk could have a chance to make a decent living without having somebody always taking 'way your crops and wages and looking over your shoulder."^{xviii}

Brooks came to Drew in the early 1900s from Virginia after earning money in the lumber business in Ohio and West Virginia. Finding the soil, climate and labor supply good for farming, he purchased 7,000 acres in Sunflower, Leflore, and Bolivar counties. The collective plantation occupied 2,000 acres in Leflore and Sunflower counties.

Most important to Brooks was that farmers living in the community not remain dependent. "He wanted these black men to become the boss of their own land and men of their own decision," wrote Valerie Grim in a dissertation at Iowa

State University in 1990. Grim analyzed interviews given by some of the Brooks Farm members, learning that when it became clear Brooks wanted to help blacks, “everybody tried to move out here, but at times there wasn’t enough room, so people wait ‘til a house was built or came open.”

Brooks Farm workers appreciated the fair treatment offered in the community: “You was gone be treat well and fair, and if you work hard, you was gone get ahead, ‘cause that was what Mr. Brooks want for us too.” Many believed Brooks was “god-sent.” Steve Hearon, a former plantation manager for Brooks, told interviewers that “God sent Mr. Brooks to help us poor color people, ‘cause he knowed some of us wasn’t being treated right.”

Brooks Farm was in place for over fifty years mostly because of Brooks’ instincts and the black people’s determination to rise above peonage. Further, Brooks saw to it that farmers acquired knowledge and skills that were not only useful in agriculture, but which also gave residents the choice to make a home for themselves in Brooks Farm. Several of the women, Sarah Walters and Carrie Gordon, became licensed midwives and as community members, they often were called to deliver babies.

The community school emphasized a practical education that focused on manual skills, owing to the rural character of the community and the limits that segregation posed to black occupational advancement.^{xix}

In the 1920s, most farm laborers worked for twenty cents a day. Returns were not much better in the Brooks community since cotton prices were low and debts weighed heavily against profits, Grimes observed. Through the 1930s, most of the money residents earned was used for household expenses, but institutional development in the community continued on, with additional churches and schools built along the way.^{xx}

WHAT THE DELTA REALLY needed was a “courageous, incorruptible, intelligently edited newspaper” published by a newsman like Hodding Carter.^{xxi} This was the opinion of David Cohn, a Mississippi writer who asked Carter to consider leaving Louisiana and bring his journalistic talents across the river to Greenville, a unique cotton and river town on the Mississippi.

Carter listened. With degrees from Bowdoin College and Columbia University, he first worked for the wire services and the *New Orleans States-Item* before starting his own newspaper in Hammond, Louisiana, his hometown. Only in his twenties,

Carter was already nationally recognized for taking on the flamboyant and corrupt Louisiana politician, Senator Huey Long.

Asked to write a political analysis on Long for the *New Republic*, in “Kingfish to Crawdad,” Carter showed how using laughter and ridicule was more effective against Long than libel proceedings and investigations. After Long was assassinated in Baton Rouge in 1935, Carter’s mother-in-law and two aunts from London called the newsman’s wife to ask where he was when Long was killed. Carter could account for his whereabouts, they were happy to learn.^{xxii}

Shortly after Huey Long’s death, the Carters lost a key contract for printing the parish delinquent tax list. Facing certain failure, they sold out in the spring and took up on Cohn’s suggestion. After investigating Greenville’s current newspaper, the *Democrat-Times*, the Carters met with a group of financial backers to arrange a plan.

Cohn and several others represented Greenville’s *landed gentry*: William Alexander Percy, “lawyer, banker, cotton planter, published poet, and acknowledged cultural tsar of Greenville”^{xxiii} headed the backing group. William T. “Billy” Wynn, lawyer, planter and a Delta Council co-founder, joined with several other business owners in bringing the journalist and his family to the Delta.^{xxiv} With a young child in tow, Hodding and Betty Carter moved across the Mississippi River to improve Greenville’s newspaper, as part owners of the new *Delta Star*.

Greenville’s population was around 15,000, the Carters discovered – all of Washington County had 54,300 people of which 40,000 were black. Greenville’s towboat industry attracted a more diverse population than other Delta towns: a large Syrian group inhabited the city and an even larger population of Chinese.

A ferry, lighted at night, ran across the river, adding to the town’s charm. Most country clubs around the Delta did not admit Jews, while Greenville’s club had a Jewish president (but no black members).^{xxv} The river town’s white residents liked to believe they were more tolerant and more sophisticated than most other Delta towns.

Greenville depended on the twenty-seven-foot-high, 300-foot-wide levee at the foot of Main Street to keep the river in check, just as the town’s whites depended on a rigid caste system to keep segregation in line. Most of Greenville’s “higher-ups” were either Presbyterians or Episcopalians and a few were Jewish. All of them had black servants.^{xxvi}

With Carter’s talent, the *Star* quickly eliminated its only competition and merged with a second community paper to become the powerful *Delta Democrat-*

Times A shrewd and energetic businessman, Carter, whose friends and family lovingly called “Big,” initially finagled an agreement making it possible to buy out his financial supporters, which he soon did, and to their surprise.

Carter often left Greenville for months and longer, once to serve in the National Guard during World War Two until injuring his eye, and then to become a Niemann Fellow at Harvard; a year later to work as press editor for the *PM* newspaper in New York and to write articles for national magazines and books.

He needed these sabbaticals from the Delta, missing city life, the beauty of his second home in Maine and seeking relief from the growing race battles he faced in Mississippi – encounters that required maintaining his journalistic ethics and his temper while being pounded by other newspaper publishers around Mississippi, his advertisers, and many of his Delta readers, who regularly disagreed with his more liberal (but really moderate) stance.

The journalist, who’d grown up as an unquestioning segregationist, evolved to become a civil rights moderate, risking his life and his livelihood because of his personal integrity. Once an editorial so angered a reader that he called Carter at home on a Sunday morning and said he was coming over to kill him. Carter sat on his front porch with a shotgun and pistol while friends phoned and passed by to offer support. The man never showed up.^{xxvii}

Carter often wrote about race and bigotry, giving him an essential role in the later Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and early 1960s. He did not believe in integration but did believe in the essential dignity and political rights of all citizens and he provided needed balance in news coverage to offset the daily extremes presented by nearly all other Mississippi media.^{xxviii} His son, Hodding Carter III, watched and learned from his father and in 1966, as a supporter of integration, he became the newspaper’s publisher and took his family’s publication further.

Very little was good for Delta blacks in Carter’s time, even as Greenville’s white leaders appeared on the surface more civil than others in most Delta towns. Lynching was slowing down in the South, except for Mississippi, where most incidents were never reported. When a lynching occurred, usually nothing was done and records were lost.

Black people often disappeared. Sometimes it turned out they were murdered or lynched. Others escaped the Delta and never looked back.

The lynch mob was white supremacy’s firmest hold on blacks as their work went “unpunished, sanctioned, and sometimes headed by the community’s leaders.”

Lynching was the system's ultimate guarantor, wrote historian Adam Nossiter.^{xxix} Journalists and academics knew that most every black person understood lynching was an accepted custom: "Many a white deploras lynching yet feels it may serve a beneficent purpose," anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker wrote. "There are good and kind Christians who will explain that lynchings are terrible, but must happen once in a while in order to keep the Negro in his place."^{xxx}

In the first half of the twentieth century, not surprisingly, Mississippi's congressional representatives bitterly and successfully fought proposed federal anti-lynching laws.

In the days moving into World War Two, as always before, profit in the hands of wealthy Delta planters and their family's social status remained top priority – no matter the extreme poverty of those who worked the cotton fields.

Malnutrition and poor health were widespread problems for most black families, and education for the poor – whether black or white – was deplorable, when it was even available. Klan violence went unchecked.

FANNIE LOU HAMER, a wise civil rights leader, singer, and storyteller, grew up North of Greenville in Sunflower County, and often told how her family stayed alive during the hardest years. In winter months Hamer and her siblings followed their mother from plantation to plantation asking landowners for leftover cotton, the "scrappin' cotton."

When the family gathered enough cotton for a bale, these bits of scrap were sold to buy food. On those treks "[Mother] always tied our feet up with rags because the ground would be froze real hard," Hamer said. Undoubtedly music was tied to survival during these treks since Hamer became well known years later for comforting others with soul-filled gospel singing – especially during some of the most difficult moments in the Movement.^{xxxi}

When civil rights workers later moved into Sunflower County they discovered that Hamer had a "unique ability to define the problems that affected African Americans in the Delta in their own vernacular." Hamer was "a leader waiting for a movement [who] believed deeply in the promise of the Bible and in the promise of the United States of America," wrote J. Moya in *Let the People Decide*.^{xxxii}

Mississippi's leadership did not question the brutal mistreatment of blacks. The survival of laborers like Hamer as individuals, let alone their comfort, simply did not matter to those in control, as long as enough people were available during cotton

harvest months to labor and keep the money coming in. This attitude of careless regard had carried through generations of planters who have controlled the state since it left territorial status.

“Part and parcel of this control is that the Delta returns the same old evil men again and again to the legislature and therefore gets seniority and influence out of the proportion to the rest of the state,” George McLean of the *Tupelo Daily Journal* asserted editorially.^{xxxiii}

McLean’s editorial was hard to counter, since rarely were any fairness or true kindness shown to black tenants and sharecroppers. Instead, white planters, who reasoned that blacks would only squander money given to them, more often cheated them of earnings.

If a black cropper did not come to work, performed poorly or violated *Jim Crow*, he or she might be forced to work at gunpoint, beaten or even lynched – even years after the modern Civil Rights Movement formally ended.^{xxxiv} All the while, as McLean observed, the “same old evil men” kept making the laws that kept Mississippi at a distance from its needed change.

Dr. L. C. Dorsey’s parents, like many others who worked the Delta’s cotton, typically fell asleep soon after leaving the fields: “I remember asking questions ... and not understanding [it was] just chronic fatigue.... I’m sure some of them were also depressed,” she said.^{xxxv}

Dorsey’s father, like many other black men, took only so much punishment or threat before reacting to preserve himself and his family. In Leflore County in the mid 1940s, when she was not quite ten, Dorsey’s father left his family picking cotton at on the Lake Henry plantation to find better paying work for himself, a few miles away.

Hearing about Dorsey from other black workers, the plantation manager hauled Dorsey back to Lake Henry and at first tried to force Dorsey into a barn filled with farm equipment, where he could beat him up.

Cultivator blades called sweeps were stored in the barn and L. C. Dorsey somehow knew that her father would throw them at the plantation manager until he, Dorsey, was killed for his actions. “He understood very clearly when he got back in that truck that he may be going to his death,” she said.

The manager, also sensing the depth of her father’s anger, turned his truck around and drove Dorsey back into the field, dumping him out on the ground near

his family. L. C. Dorsey's family spent the rest of the year working for "Mr. Gess" and then moved over to the Ferguson plantation in Sunflower County.

African Americans survived through their own resilience and because they employed whatever resources they could, their strategies often included gun ownership. Like many Delta blacks, including Hamer and her husband "Pap" Hamer, L. C. Dorsey's parents kept loaded guns in their home. "Most houses had guns, and [my parents] had guns for the very simple reason – It was dangerous in the Delta and your life meant little if you had no protection."

Most any sharecropper could name an individual or entire family who "disappeared" when trying to leave a plantation or if they were too outspoken or politically active. L. C. Dorsey remembered when Odell Gray, a handsome young man with "hazel" eyes, suddenly disappeared. "White folks didn't like Odell and [some] said Odell was confronted on the bridge over the river that ran through Tribbett ... and forced to jump." His body was never found and children were not told about such incidents because "they could not be trusted to keep their mouths shut."^{xxxvi}

Robert Keglar of Charleston, a retired teacher and NAACP member, keeps a list of over 20 friends who disappeared from Tallahatchie County: "I don't know what happened to any of them, but I'm very sure some were killed and others left their plantations."^{xxxvii}

A young Delta State University student remembered a story told by her mother, Sadie Wilson Fuller, whose family lived at Cotton Quarters outside of Drew. When she was ten (sometime in the 1920s), Fuller and two friends were walking home from school. They heard a man scream and ran into the bushes to hide, but could see the plantation boss being tortured by white men who put a noose around his neck. The girls ran home, because they knew what was about to happen. The man was lynched, her mother was later told, because he was too nice to the black field workers.^{xxxviii}

John Burl Smith got sick and tired of seeing people getting killed or disappearing, and so he sneaked his family out of Quitman County in the middle of the night: "In 1948, under the cover of night, my family, like thousands of others, escaped. That was the year Strom Thurmond ran for president and helped incite a climate of fear, madness and murder by spewing the fiery segregationist rhetoric of white supremacy."^{xxxix}

Even twenty-five years later, as late as the 1970s, some laborers found it difficult to walk off a plantation. The "Box Project," a small group of advocates, helped sharecroppers with problems of daily living, and if necessary, escape from plantations. A project director spoke with the NAACP's Aaron Henry about the plight of a Grenada family she was trying to help:

The foreman on the plantation pays the men in cash and refuses to give written statements of wages and with-holdings. He with-holds \$4 each week regardless of wages ... the foreman has the men work 12-14 hours a day but refuses to pay over-time and pays only for an 8 hour day. They are charged \$36 for getting their gas tanks filled but the price is always this whether the tanks are empty or half full. They never know what the deductions from wages actually are for. The foreman sold one family on this plantation a second hand wringer washer for \$165. They sell in Jackson, Miss. for \$24 to \$40. The Box Project field worker in Jackson visited the Pritchetts several times and kept in close touch with a local Grenada woman who acts as field worker there.... Mabel took the Pritchetts to the food stamp office [and] they were told to come back next week and bring a statement from the plantation owner stating exactly how much he deducts for Soc. Security, gas and medical bills. Mr. P has received a summary of account from SS Admin. And it shows that his employer did not report any wages for him during 1969. Mr. P. says he will file a complaint. According to Pinkie, the foreman showed them a report which he said was the copy of the one he sent in and that they had nothing to worry about.^{x1}

The Box Project representative told Henry how another laborer's moving plan was progressing:

He has been moving their belongings one piece at a time to his mother's place. However, the plantation hand 2 shacks down from him reported this to the foreman. So when Pinkie and More went to the foreman at the request of the Food Stamp office, he threatened the whole Pritchett family if they tried to leave, or if they pursued the efforts to get food stamps, welfare or get the Soc. Sec. straightened out. He has

this plantation hand watching and reporting to him. And this is why Pinkie didn't want Mabel to come out anymore because she fears for their lives.... She is afraid to write anything for fear Jones (the snitcher) or the foreman will learn their plans. She said the mailman never puts the mail in the box, just throws it on the ground from the window of his car and she never knows who sees the mail before she gets it or even if she gets all of it.... Her husband is permitted to leave the place only on Sundays.... Mabel is afraid to go out to the place because she has a local license plate on her car and the plantation folks can easily follow her home or find out where she lives.^{xli}

What purpose was served by segregation and its meanness? Especially since farm laborers and their families were still needed by the planters. Social psychologist John Dollard, who lived in the Delta while studying the region, placed “defensive beliefs and anxiety” at the heart of the segregated system, “reinforced by the idea that blacks were not fully human beings – that they were children, or brutes; that they demanded constant vigilance, or paternal benevolence; that they were shiftless, immoral, and smelly, and were really quite happy in their lowly stations, if only the meddling Northerner would leave them be.”^{xlii}

Among the tales Dollard collected, one came from a white planter who believed that the black sharecroppers working for him “liked to be cheated, and even expected it at settle-up time.” Dollard characterized such beliefs as “simply useful excuses for [mis]treatment of blacks.”

White planters and their families were outnumbered and surrounded by blacks that they depended upon and yet horribly mistreated. Many planters were actually frightened over possible insurrection and used Ku Klux Klan terrorists to keep “safe” from blacks while also keeping their feudal system intact.

Hard times for bluesmen, too

*Trouble in mind, I'm blue,
But I won't be always
For the sun goin' shine in my back door some-day.*

I'm goin' down to the river

*Take along my rocking chair,
And if the blues don't leave me,
I'll rock on away from there.*
- Anonymous

Like those around them, blues musicians often suffered and saw the suffering of others around them. Bessie Smith, a blues singer and composer on a comeback tour in 1937, was driving through Mississippi when her car was rear-ended by a slow moving truck. Smith's left arm and ribs were crushed. John Hammond wrote in *Downbeat* magazine that Smith was turned away by several white hospitals where she was first taken and by the time she reached a hospital in Clarksdale, she bled to death.

Harmonica-player Sonny Boy Williamson of Glendora was robbed and murdered in 1947. The robber stuck an ice pick through Williamson's skull and stole his weekly takings. Robert Johnson, the songwriter and guitarist, known as "King of the Delta Blues," was poisoned August of 1938 when he and Honeyboy Edwards were playing at a house party in Three Forks, Mississippi. One version says Johnson was "stabbed to death by a jealous husband." Another story is that he was "stabbed by a woman or poisoned by parties unknown." Whatever the case, Johnson died three days later at the age of twenty-seven.^{xliii}

Prison blues were sung from bitter experience. Some blues artists were imprisoned in state and county jails and farms. Arthur Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly^{xliv}, Robert Pete Williams, Champion Jack Dupree, Roosevelt Sykes and Bukka White were part of the inhumane chain-gangs and other forms of forced labor that were profitable for the state and sometimes lethal to prisoners at the Parchman Farm in Sunflower County. From the prison wood lot, musicologist Alan Lomax recorded music of Parchman men at work:

*Rise um up higher, let um drop on down,
You won't know the diffrunce when the sun goes down.*

"These men in striped clothes smiled at the good lines. They drove at the work, muscles rippling in the sun, axes biting big chips out of the logs, chips that occasionally rang against the microphone."^{xlv}

Axes walkin, chipeses talking,
All day long,
All day long.

War, revolt, and opening of the Cotton Curtain

As the years moved closer to World War II, little changed in the Delta at first glance, but revolution once again was in the air. White planters kept up the terror, arresting strikers and sending them to penal farms to work out their fines; landowners held tenants against their will, broke into their homes, murdered union organizers and brutalized the workers on their plantations.

Sometimes these stories got out; usually they did not. Smaller incidents, like the Delta Council allegedly spying on STFU meetings, were only shared by insiders, and almost seemed insignificant.

Yet, slowly more national attention was being paid to the Delta's worst accounts of violence and terror, stories that were finally emerging as STFU and NAACP representatives and others spoke with journalists, invited in photographers, and testified before Congress.

At last the Cotton Curtain was slowly rising, allowing the world more than just a glimpse into this place called the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.

Why is it important to know this background before moving into the history of World War II and beyond? As James W. Loewen points out; the past is prologue to the present and future. In referring to some history textbook authors, he commented:

The authors make no connection between the failure of the United State to guarantee black civil rights in 1877 and the need for a civil rights movement a century later.... Between 1890 and 1907 every Southern and border state "legally" disenfranchised the vast majority of its African American voters. Lynching rose to an all time high.... No textbook explains the rationale of segregation, which is crucial to understanding its devastating effects on white and black psyches.... Textbooks need to offer the sociological definition of segregation: as a system of racial etiquette that keeps the oppressed group separate from the oppressor when both are doing equal tasks, like learning the multiplication tables, but allows intimate closeness when the tasks are hierarchical, like

cooking or cleaning for white employers.... “Unclean!” was the caste message of every “colored” water fountain, waiting room, and courtroom Bible. “Inferior” was the implication of every school that excluded blacks.... The stigma is why separate could never mean equal, even when black facilities might be newer or physically superior.... During the nadir, segregation increased everywhere. Jackie Robinson was not the first black player in major league baseball. Blacks had played in the major leagues in the nineteenth century, but by 1889 whites had forced them out. In 1911 the Kentucky Derby eliminated black jockeys after they won fifteen of the first twenty-eight Derbies ... in 1915, the Ku Klux Klan rose to its zenith, boasting over a million members. The KKK ... proudly inducted President Warren G. Harding as a member in a White House ceremony. During the Wilson and Harding administrations, perhaps one hundred race riots took place.^{xlvi}

With this beginning as background, a number of Mississippians were ready to confront the past like never before. The Second World War would be fought abroad ... and then again at home.

ⁱ Jane Adams, D. Gorton, “Southern Trauma; Revisiting Caste and Class in the Mississippi Delta,” *American Anthropologist*, Vo. 106, Issue 2, 334-345.

ⁱⁱ Hortense Powdermaker, “After Freedom,” (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 32, 33, 53, 54, 173, 174, 332, 335, 351.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Anthropologist Jane Adams D. Gorton on her website pointed out that both researchers’ works had significant impact, but both studies contained flaws that contributed to stereotyping of the white Southern aristocracy that was only myth. Further, Dollard’s psychologically-based work “helped to define the nature of race relations for generations of college students and policy makers” in its stereotyping of “poor whites as vicious and unredeemable racists that has been reenacted in countless films and television shows.” In April 1986, a *Washington Post* reporter following up on the Powdermaker’s earlier study, asserted that Indianola was still dominated by a “propertied white elite

that runs this Mississippi Delta town like an antebellum plantation, ceding power only gradually to the black majority in a manner and at a pace of its own choosing.”

^v Woodruff, 157.

^{vi} Woodruff, 156-157. Cites M.S. Stuart to John Ross, January 25, 1934, box G199; Nat Williams et al., WPA, Tunica, Miss., box C386; and Walter White to Harry Hopkins, September 9, 1936, box C386; all in NAACP Papers, group 1.

^{vii} Woodruff, 158, citing H.L. Mitchell, “Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 120-121.

^{viii} S. Morgan Friedman Inflation Calculator used to calculate AFI figure (1935 – 2002). The pre-1975 data are the Consumer Price Index statistics from Historical Statistics of the United States (USGPO, 1975). All data since then are from the annual Statistical Abstracts of the United States.

^{ix} Woodruff, 158.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid., 161.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid., 161. Cites Grubbs, “Cry From the Cotton,” p. 63.

^{xiv} Woods, p. 153.

^{xv} Ibid., 177-178. Cites F. Raymond Daniell, “AAA Piles Misery on Sharecroppers,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1935, TCF, 48:0958.

^{xvi} William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers. Abstract. Manuscripts Department, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: *Southern Historical Collection*, #3862.

^{xvii} The Jerry Dallas Delta Cooperative Farm Collection, Delta State University. Manuscript No.: M209, Inclusive Dates: 1936-1987, Bulk Dates: 1936 – 1987, Biographical/Historical Sketch.

^{xviii} Valerie Grim, “Black farm families in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta: A study of the Brooks Farm Community, 1920-1970,” *dissertation* submitted to the graduate faculty, Iowa State University, Ames, 1990, 47.

^{xix} Ibid., 148.

^{xx} By the 1940s, the Brooks community had opened four schools, grades first through eighth, and by the 1950s, Brooks offered twelve years of schooling. At some point during the 1950s, “the county voted to provide for the education of blacks and the community no longer needed to provide its own buildings.” While little is known about the human aspect of the black experience on twentieth century plantations Grims’ study is clearly a contribution with its focus on people’s perceptions and interaction among Brooks Farm community members.

^{xxi} Ann Waldron, “Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist,” (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1993), 64.

^{xxii} Waldron, 50.

^{xxiii} William Alexander Percy was the son of a prosperous planter-lawyer and U. S. Senator, Leroy Percy. In 1841 the first of the Percy clan made his way to Mississippi when at the age of 20, Charles Percy left his Alabama plantation and headed to the Delta, settling in Greenville. He established a cotton plantation and built what became the Percy Empire.

^{xxiv} Waldron, 64.

^{xxv} By 2004, the Greenville club was accepting black members, but the Clarksdale club still did not accept blacks per telephone conversations with desk clerks at the Clarksdale and Greenville country clubs. Two years earlier, a black physician had tried to join the Clarksdale club and was turned down. Some club members, say locals, refuse to enter actor Morgan Freeman's five star restaurant, downtown, for reasons of race.

^{xxvi} Waldron, 70.

^{xxvii} Waldron, 89.

^{xxviii} Waldron, back cover copy.

^{xxix} Adam Nossiter, "Of Long Memory," (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 88.

^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 88-89.

^{xxxi} Fannie Lou Hamer, "To Raise Our Bridges," an autobiography. Published by SNCC. Pages were not numbered and the date was not given in the copy available at Tougaloo College archives.

^{xxxii} Moye, 64.

^{xxxiii} John Dittmer, "Local People," (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 22. Cites George McLean, interviewed by Heard, July 10, 1947, Tupelo, Heard Papers.

^{xxxiv} Jim Crow originated in 1832 with a minstrel show song and dance written by Thomas D. Rice. The expression took on racial connotations and became widely used especially by southern writers during the latter part of the 19th century. By the first decade of the 20th century, the term was commonly used when referring to the newly emerging southern segregation statutes and race-separate laws. Journalist David B. Cooper, a retired associate editor of the *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*, observed Jim Crow, living in the South from 1951 to 1958 when he was a college student and then a newspaper reporter. After Miss. Sen. Trent Lott praised Sen. Strom Thurmond on his 100th birthday for his Dixiecrat politics, Cooper decided to explain to "those too young today to have witnessed those years" and who may wonder "what the Lott fuss is about." Here is Cooper's thumbnail sketch of what the South was like in those years: "Almost every aspect of life and society in the South then was segregated by race, by the laws of each state. There were white and "colored" public drinking fountains. The public parks were segregated, and there were few parks for blacks. The public schools were segregated, and the black schools were almost always inferior and with far fewer resources and textbooks than the schools for whites. The Southern states' public universities did not admit blacks....Blacks held the lowest jobs available, if jobs were available. The lack of a decent, state-provided education perpetuated their difficulties in achieving better lives for their children. All public transportation was segregated; black people were forced to ride in the back of the bus. All white-owned restaurants and hotels were closed to blacks, and there were very few black-owned restaurants and hotels. Negroes could buy anything they wanted in Woolworth's and other stores, but they could not sit at the lunch counter and have a sandwich or a soft drink. The most fundamental American right – the right to vote – was denied to most black citizens.... Attempts by blacks to vote or to register to vote were most often met by denial, intimidation, trickery and even violence. Few blacks served in either public office or in public jobs; juries were invariably all white, even when the community was predominantly black. In short, it was a feudal society, in which whites ruled and treated one group of American citizens little better than serfs solely because of the color of their skin. It was also often violent, as the night riders of the

sheeted Ku Klux Klan and other white racists engaged in beatings, arson, bombing and murder to keep Negroes 'in their place.'" Cooper, David B., "An Ugly American Portrait, the South in 1948," *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, December 19, 2002.

^{xxxv} Oral history with Dr. L.C. Dorsey. Born and raised in the Delta to tenant farmer parents, Dr. Dorsey dropped out of Drew Colored School in the 11th grade to care for her family. After completing a GED, she earned a master's degree in social work from State University of New York in Stony Brook, a Certificate in Health Systems Management from Johns Hopkins University in Maryland and a doctorate in social work from Howard University in Washington. She has authored numerous books including *Southern Journey*, *Local People*, *This Little Light of Mine*, and *Free at Last*, and she has received many awards.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 35. Older Delta maps show locations named "Dead Nigger Bayou," "Nigger Landing," and "Whore's Lake." Older Delta blacks maintain that thousands of bodies ended up in these waterways.

^{xxxvii} Interview with Robert Kegl, 2003.

^{xxxviii} Interview, anonymous, Drew, 2004.

^{xxxix} John Burl Smith, "A Lott to Change," *The Dish*, Volume 5, Issue 50, December 20, 2002.

^{xl} This undated report was found in the Aaron Henry Collection at Tougaloo College. Reference is made to a past activity in 1969. The entire collection has since been moved to Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson where it is on loan for 20 years.

^{xli} *Ibid.*

^{xlii} Nossiter, 89. Cites Dollard, "Caste and Class," 364-389.

^{xliii} Terry Johnson, "Robert Johnson: a Biography," *The Mississippi Writers and Musicians Project of Starkville High School*, website updated January 12, 2005.

^{xliv} Leadbelly's famous song *Midnight Special* was written at Parchman prison and based on the train that left Jackson every Saturday night to carry the wives and lovers to the prison for their Sunday visits.

^{xlv} Alan Lomax, "The Land Where the Blues Began," (New York: The New Press, 1993), 267.

^{xlvi} James W. Loewen, "Lies My Teacher Told Me," (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 161-165.