

THE MOST SOUTHERN PLACE ON EARTH

The Delta Center for Culture and Learning



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PORTFOLIO WRITTEN AND DESIGNED BY JAKE SHERIDAN AND LAWTON IVES
ROBERTSON SCHOLARS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM
DUKE UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA-CHAPEL HILL





DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Dr. Rolando Herts

The Delta Center for Culture and Learning is honored to have presented for a ninth year The Most Southern Place on Earth Institute through generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

As participant evaluation comments throughout this portfolio attest, this powerful summer professional development program offers experiences that are intellectually enriching and personal. These experiences provoke deep thought, inspire a desire to engage with and express authentic feeling, and engender a passion to imbibe local knowledge and share lessons learned from the region that the National Park Service calls “the cradle of American culture.”

Immersion in primary source material regarding the paradoxical, contrasting nature of the Mississippi Delta figures prominently in the Most Southern Institute. Arguably, this is a key ingredient in the mystical formula that leaves participants transformed and even transfixed to such a degree that they find themselves returning to the region repeatedly.

Summer 2018 saw an expanded emphasis on direct engagement with Mississippi Delta residents whose lives have been touched and shaped by significant historical events and social movements. Residents were empowered to share their stories with our NEH scholars in diverse ways. At GRAMMY Museum Mississippi, there were two staged readings of the locally researched and authored play “Beautiful Agitators” about voting rights activist Vera Mae Pige, a hidden figure of the Civil Rights Movement in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Participants also interacted with local residents at the rededication of the historic marker at the Tallahatchie River where Emmett Till’s body was recovered after his brutal murder in 1955.

During the institute, participants visit one of the legendary crossroads where Robert Johnson may or may not have sold his soul to the devil, as well as one of the gravesites where he may or may not have been interred. They go to Ruleville, the home of voting rights and racial integration icon Fannie Lou Hamer who lived a mere five miles from her archenemy, the staunch segregationist Senator James

O. Eastland, their two social milieu totally different and separate yet entirely co-dependent.

They engage in a life-altering panel discussion at Tallahatchie County Courthouse, the site of fourteen-year old Emmett Till’s murder trial and learn firsthand how Till’s tragic death sparked the Civil Rights Movement. They learn how the Mississippi River created the Delta and how the Great Flood of 1927 destroyed it, as well as launched the Great Migration of African Americans to Chicago and other urban centers in the North.

Another key ingredient is the Delta’s creativity, as well as the region’s cultural diversity. Participants learn why the Mississippi Delta is known as “The Birthplace of America’s Music” and the home of the Blues, entering places where innovators Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Charley Patton, Ike Turner, B. B. King, and Bessie Smith once were. They hear directly from descendants of Jewish and Chinese immigrants who came to the Delta, experiencing vestiges of their influence, as well as understanding the influence of Lebanese, Italians, Native Americans, African Americans, and others by reading the “invisible landscape.”

They learn stories of historic Mound Bayou, a black town founded by former slaves and hailed by President Teddy Roosevelt as “The Jewel of the Delta.” They visit renowned museums that pay homage to the region’s enduring creativity and cultural diversity, including the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center; the Stax Museum of American Soul Music; and the National Civil Rights Museum, where participants received a behind-the-scenes tour of the special collections archive featuring rare material culture from the Jim Crow Era.

Perhaps the most powerful ingredient of all is the strong bond that participants forge with each other, with presenters, and with The Delta Center. They are encouraged to experience the Delta and the institute as a multifaceted, interactive text through readings, music, food, film screenings, oral histories, the built environment, and interactions in the field and the “mobile classroom” that travels Blues Highway 61 and the Emmett Till Memorial Highway, among other storied Delta roads.

Participants also are challenged to assume a critical intersectional lens as they engage with Mississippi Delta people, places, and stories, learning how socially constructed human identities have coalesced to shape systems of power, privilege, and oppression in the past and in the present, in the Delta, and in their own communities. To quote James Cobb, author of The Most Southern Place



on Earth, “As socioeconomic disparity and indifference to human suffering become increasingly prominent features of American life, it seems reasonable to inquire whether the same economic, political, and emotional forces that helped to forge and sustain the Delta’s image as the South writ small may one day transform an entire nation into the Delta writ large.”

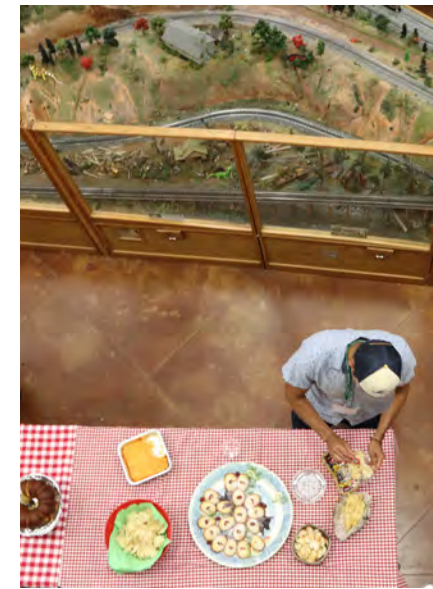
I invite you to continue to explore the NEH Most Southern Institute website to learn more and to view portfolios like this one from our past workshops. In addition, our series of blog posts containing images and documentary-based participant reflections have enhanced our efforts to provide and preserve educational resources for our participants, as well as to continue The Delta Center’s legacy of stimulating and engaging creativity, learning, and reflection in and about the Mississippi Delta region.

Many thanks to our gifted and highly dedicated team members – co-director Lee Aylward; budget manager Shelia Winters; and media team members Michael Fagans from University of Mississippi with our brilliant Robertson Scholars Lawton Ives and Jake Sheridan from UNC Chapel Hill and Duke University, respectively – for making this another great Most Southern summer!

OPENING RECEPTION

A warm welcome to the Mississippi Delta

The workshop opened with a reception at the Martin & Sue King Railroad Heritage Museum in downtown Cleveland. Over the course of the evening, The Delta Center welcomed teachers from every region of the country, while participants enjoyed homemade Delta delicacies and chatted about the upcoming week.





DAY 1: THE RIVER

*Creator and Destroyer of
the Delta*

INTRODUCTIONS

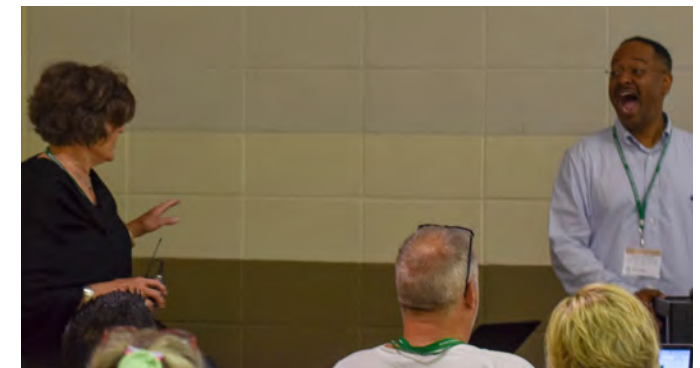
In the opening session, workshop directors Dr. Rolando Herts and Lee Aylward of The Delta Center for Culture and Learning set the week's logistical and intellectual foundations. Lee gave a quick lesson on the Delta's progression through time, beginning with its status as the nation's inhospitable "last frontier" and touching on its role in the civil rights movement and the development of Blues music. Meanwhile, Dr. Herts encouraged participants to see "place as text".

Place-based learning is at the core of the workshop. A place-based learning experience creates more than intellectual understanding. First-hand experience, the foundation of place-based learning, builds personal understanding to place knowledge in the context of life. In this workshop, people, places, and things replace words and pages. Intersectionality, which Dr. Herts defines as the conjunction of multiple identity markers such as race, class, and gender, is necessary in seeing place as text. Dr. Herts implored the group to think critically about how



multiple identities impact the experiences of those living in the Delta and how identity forms the lenses with which they perceive the Delta.

With expectations for the week set, the group split into pairs to learn about one another. Then, they introduced each other to the rest of the participants. As each teacher was introduced to the group, one thing became clear: this group had an incredible amount of diversity in origin, interest, and experience.



SENATOR'S PLACE

At lunchtime, the group headed over to the Senator's Place. At the restaurant, which is owned by Mississippi State Senator Willie Simmons, participants got their first true taste of soul food — fried chicken, boiled okra, and everything in between.



LALEE'S KIN

After lunch, the group dove into the stark realities of the Delta by watching "Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton," an Oscar-nominated film documenting poverty, race, and education from the perspective of one poor Delta family. The documentary paints a bleak picture of impoverished childhood in the Delta, highlighting what Senator Robert Kennedy once described as "America's Third World". The documentary also follows Reggie Barnes, superintendent of West Tallahatchie School District, as he struggles against a damaging system and culture to give his students a quality education and avoid a state takeover.



REGGIE BARNES

Following the screening, Reggie Barnes, the now-retired superintendent featured in Lalee's Kin, visited the workshop to discuss his experiences fighting for the West Tallahatchie schools and confronting cyclical poverty. Sixteen years after the release of Lalee's Kin, the issues it depicts - such as illiteracy and adolescent pregnancy - continue to plague the Delta. He explained that in trying to fix an educational system, people must begin by confronting the underlying problems facing a community.

In an impassioned plea, Barnes reminded participants that problems on the "other side of the tracks" in many US cities and towns are just as pressing as those that people face in far flung parts of the world.

As teachers, the participants connected personally to his anecdotes. Participants teaching today across the nation from West Tallahatchie to the big island of Hawaii shared remarkably similar stories about the challenges their students face at home.

THE 'MOBILE CLASSROOM'

If places are to be seen as text, then roads are sentences. Throughout the week, participants traveled around the Delta aboard a bus aptly called the "mobile classroom". On the bus, every moment represented an opportunity to learn and grow. Documentaries and music primed participants for sites on the itinerary; Lee, Dr. Herts, and local guests told stories to contextualize the passing scenery; space for reflection was created, allowing participants to better understand the many people and places they confronted. Time aboard the traveling classroom was strategically used to lay contextual foundations, give participants a chance to catch their breath and bond with each other, and help scholars digest what they learned.



THE RIVER

After a 30 minute drive, the bus turned west, rolled over a dirt path, snuck up a levee, and stopped. Lee had given participants a brief overview of the Flood of 1927 on the way, but nothing could prepare them for this. Teachers got out of the bus at the top of the levee and took in the Mississippi River.

Luckily, the levee at Mound Landing didn't look like it did when it broke during the Flood of 1927. Instead, participants were met by warm sun, humid air, and a cool breeze at the river. However, many voiced surprise at the sheer scale and power of the river.

With ample bug spray on to ward off the infamous 'red chiggers,' they headed down towards the riverbank. Some took off their shoes and dipped their feet in the water. Others stared far away to the wide river's other side. Many were experiencing the river for the first time. All were in awe of it.

After enjoying the surprisingly refreshing riverside, participants made their way back to the bus. There, Lee explained the Delta's simultaneous reliance on and fear of the river, a river which gives life to the region and can easily take it away.



AIRPORT GROCERY

The last stop of the day came at Airport Grocery, a local restaurant famous for fried catfish. That dish acted as the workshop's first "Taste of the Day," while hush puppies, coleslaw, and green beans rounded out the meal.

The food and hospitality helped to immerse the group in Southern culture, but the Blues took it a step farther. Keith Johnson, The Delta Center's resident Blues musician and great nephew of Muddy Waters, provided music as participants enjoyed their meals and sang along.





DAY 2: DIVERSITY IN THE DELTA

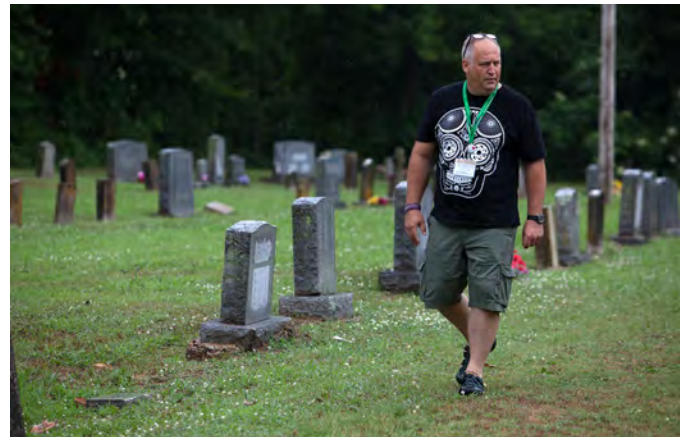
Immigration, Spirituality, and the Blues

CHINESE HERITAGE IN THE DELTA

The diversity of the Delta extends beyond black and white thanks to the region's rich history of immigration. People of many races, creeds, and nations lived and thrived in the Delta. The Delta Chinese were among these peoples.

Opportunity in agriculture, created by a need for labor, and the creation of railroads brought the Chinese into the Delta. Despite the limiting Chinese Exclusion Act, these immigrants developed a unique role in Delta society, often opening grocery stores and restaurants. In the small city of Greenville, nearly 50 Chinese-owned grocery stores once lined the streets.

When the group arrived in Greenville, Raymond Wong boarded the traveling classroom to share his experience as one of the few remaining Chinese Americans in the Delta. The discussion ranged from the social to the personal as Raymond described the complex status of Asian Americans



in a largely biracial culture and the struggle to hold onto a fleeting and unique culture.

After sharing his story, Raymond led the group into Greenville's Chinese Cemetery, which he maintains. The cemetery, still in use today, is both a final resting place and a well-kept cultural landmark. As the group wandered among the gravestones, most of which were covered in Chinese characters, Raymond continued to provide personal insight into the experience.

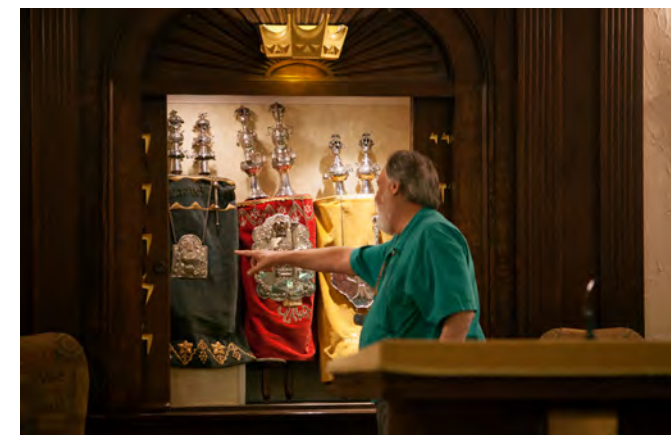


GREENVILLE'S LIVE OAK CEMETERY

A narrow street separates Greenville's Chinese cemetery from its neighbor, Live Oak, the local black cemetery. There, participants were fortunate to hear from Dr. Blake Wintory, Director of the Lakeport Plantation — an Arkansas State University heritage site — who told them about his research on African American soldiers buried in the cemetery who fought for the Union after being emancipated.

After hearing about the African American Union soldiers buried at the site, participants wandered through overgrown grass and crooked headstones to find the most famous grave in the lot: the final resting place of Holt Collier, a renowned bear hunter and sportsman. Collier, born a slave around 1846 on the Plum Ridge Plantation in Mississippi, is known for voluntarily serving in the Confederate army and for leading U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt on bear hunts in the Delta. The "teddy bear" famously gets its name from a hunt in which Roosevelt refused to shoot a bear Collier had trapped and tied down for him.

After time for conversation about and reflection upon the strange history represented in the cemetery, participants boarded the bus again and headed into town.



GREENVILLE SYNAGOGUE

Like the Delta Chinese, the Delta Jews were a minority community with a strong presence in the Delta. Participants learned a great deal about the Delta Jews in Greenville. On the morning bus ride, the group watched "Delta Jews," a documentary that introduced them to the Delta's religious diversity and historically prominent Jewish community. Then, after the visit to the Chinese Cemetery, the group stopped at Hebrew Union Temple in Greenville to learn more.

Temple Vice President Benjy Nelken talked to the group about the history of the Delta Jews and his temple. He also shared his experience as a Jew and religious minority in the Delta. Like the Delta Chinese, Nelken explained, Delta Jews found relative opportunity in the Delta and set down roots here. Many ended up in the Delta as "peddlers," and the community they formed was politically and economically powerful throughout the region.

Nelken talked about how the intersectional identity of the predominantly white, Jewish, and southern group of Delta Jews affected the way they lived, pointing out that many Delta Jews weren't vocal during the Civil Rights Movement for fear of disrupting the Southern "way of life" and provoking antisemitism. Nelken also addressed his congregation's struggle with the massive drop in Delta Jews. After the talk, participants were able to continue learning about the history of the Delta Jews in a museum connected to the temple featuring artifacts that tell the story of Jewish history and heritage in the Delta. Some items included a Torah from the Holocaust, photos of Jewish families in the region, and t-shirts that embrace the Southern Jewish heritage through the phrase, "Shalom y'all".



DR. CHARLES REGAN WILSON: THE RELIGIOUS SOUTH

Back in the classroom after lunch, guest scholar Dr. Charles Wilson, former professor at the University of Mississippi and former Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, helped participants understand how the religious history of the Delta influenced its culture, particularly in the Blues and rock music. Wilson explained how the evangelist dominated culture allowed for religion to transcend church. From the biblical characters infused in the writings of Faulkner to the gospel tinged songs of early Bluesmen, Wilson showed that religion had a far reaching effect on the Delta's culture.

Dr. Wilson displayed his collection of church fans, which was a major highlight of his talk. The fans, jointly used for cooling and for advertising, highlighted the blurred lines between Christ, culture, and commerce in the Delta.

Wilson continued to examine religion's role in segregation, civil rights, entertainment, and politics in the Delta. He drew upon a wide collection of recorded church songs to give participants a sense of the values competing at the intersection of race, religion, and culture seen in the region, allowing participants to better understand the many forces that had a role in building this unique place.



BILL ABEL: HISTORY OF THE BLUES

After dinner, participants returned to find dozens of guitars, some made of driftwood and cigar boxes, lining the front of the classroom. Bill Abel, a local blues musician, then gave them both a concert and a lesson on the history of the blues.

Growing up in the Delta gave Abel a unique perspective on the Delta Blues. He says that he is not a blues scholar but instead "a guy who grew up here in the Delta," learning about the music from local radio and playing the Blues as a teenager. Nevertheless, direct experience is its own kind of scholarship. With stunning musical genius, Abel wowed the group. One participant wrote that "the performance gave me goosebumps," and over a dozen, wanting more, went to watch Abel perform at a local Blues club later in the week.

Over the course of the evening, Abel played selections from a variety of blues musicians, including Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. In addition to entertaining the group, these songs gave Abel an opportunity to discuss the musical qualities of the blues and how the genre evolved over time, as well as to honor the lives of individual bluesmen. While doing so, he paid careful attention to slavery and sharecropping. Despite its beauty, Bill made clear, the genre originated from turmoil and suffering. He also examined how many of the original black blues artists were exploited and how he personally fits into this legacy as a white man playing a traditionally black style. In between songs, Abel carefully considered participants' questions. With song and conversation, Abel carefully wove together the history and feeling of the Blues.





**DAY 3:
THE BLUES**

People and Places that shaped the Music and Lifestyle

DOCKERY FARMS

In the early morning, participants got on the bus and took a quick trip down the road to Dockery Farms. The quintessential Delta plantation, Dockery is well-preserved and well-suited to give visitors an idea of what a busy farm may have looked like. But that's not its only claim to fame. Dockery Farms is considered by many to be the birthplace of the Blues. On the impressive 40 square mile estate, the "Father of the Blues," Charlie Patton, perfected and passed on his music to musicians like Howlin' Wolf, Willy Brown, Tommy Johnson, and Roebuck "Pops" Staples, leaving a critical mark on the Blues.

In the service station of the plantation, Bill Lester, Executive Director of the Dockery Farms Foundation, highlighted Dockery's influence on the Blues and brought to life early Blues legends. He also helped participants understand the troubling and complex history of cotton, and the role of Dockery, known for relatively good treatment of workers, within it. After listening to Lester, participants were able to explore the service station, seed barns, and newly renovated cotton gin of Dockery.

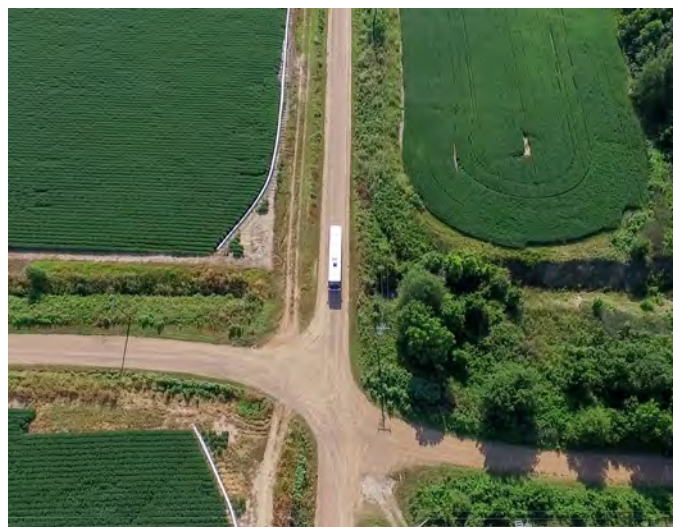


THE CROSSROADS

After exploring the plantation, participants boarded the bus again. It rolled across the highway onto a dirt road surrounded by thick green fields and stopped at a seemingly ordinary crossroads.

But this wasn't any country crossroads. No, not every crossroads is iconic in American music. Legend has it that at this unassuming intersection, an aspiring musician ventured to the crossroads to wait for the devil — or, some say, the African trickster god Legba. At midnight, the devil appeared and offered him a deal: his soul in exchange for unparalleled mastery of the guitar. The musician agreed, and now he, Blues icon Robert Johnson, is counted among the most influential Blues musicians and guitarists of all time.

Fearing a visit from the devil, Lee kept the doors of the bus closed as she told the story of the crossroads.



DR. EDGAR SMITH & MRS. INEZ SMITH

Dr. Edgar Smith and Mrs. Inez Smith rode along on the bus throughout the morning to share their experiences in and knowledge about the Delta. Dr. Smith, born in the Delta, divided his childhood between the classroom and the cotton fields before going on to become a biochemist and serving as the Vice President of Academic Affairs for the University of Massachusetts system.

After the emotional stop at the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden, Mrs. Smith shared a letter she had received from Hamer thanking her for goods she had sent Hamer while the Smiths lived in Boston. Participants were able to better connect with Hamer as they held and read the handwritten letter.

As the mobile classroom passed between sprawling cotton fields, Dr. Smith told stories about picking cotton as a child - the weight of the sack, the boll's prick on the fingers - and highlighted the power of education witnessed in his life.

After passing around a prickly cotton boll to participants, Dr. Smith moved on to his passion, the Blues. A member of the founding committee of the B.B. King Museum, Dr. Smith shared his love for and knowledge of the Delta's most famous art form, often using his life to foster an understanding of the Blues. Later in the day, Dr. Smith shared his own Blues song, which draws attention to the plight of the uninsured.



FANNIE LOU HAMER MEMORIAL GARDEN

The next stop came in Ruleville, Mississippi, the home of famed civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer.

Born and raised as a sharecropper on the nearby Marlow Plantation, Mrs. Hamer only discovered that she had a constitutional right to vote after she became an adult. After attempting to register to vote in 1962 and consequently being evicted from her home by the plantation manager, Mrs. Hamer became an outspoken civil rights activist, leading in both the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as well as in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

On the bus, participants watched Mrs. Hamer's speech to the nation at the 1964 National Democratic Convention in which she urged the Democratic Party to integrate, and Lee filled the group in on the civil rights icon's story.

The group then explored the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden. At the memorial garden, among flowers, trees, and blue skies, the group encountered a larger-than-life bronze statue of Mrs. Hamer and paid their respects at the graves of her and her husband. A sense of purpose and admiration spread through the garden as participants found room to reflect on Mrs. Hamer's legacy. While standing around her statue to take a group picture, one participant began to sing Mrs. Hamer's favorite song, "This Little Light of Mine". Slowly, the whole group joined in.



B.B. KING MUSEUM

The next stop was Indianola, Mississippi, hometown of the King of the Blues. The traveling classroom journeyed to the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center. At the museum, housed in an old cotton gin that King worked in as a young man, participants learned about the life and legacy of the late Bluesman.

The museum's introductory film put B.B.'s music into the context of his background, emphasizing that the Blues are born from lived experiences - struggle and triumph.

The museum uses King's life as a lens for interpreting Delta culture and his artistry as a guide through the history of Blues music, carefully tracking its spread to Beale Street and the rest of the world primarily through the lens of King's rise to worldwide stardom.

After exploring the museum, participants paid their respects to the late Bluesman at his burial site located on the museum grounds.

Back on the bus, Executive Director Malika Polk-Lee came aboard to thank participants for visiting the museum and share its expansion plans with them.

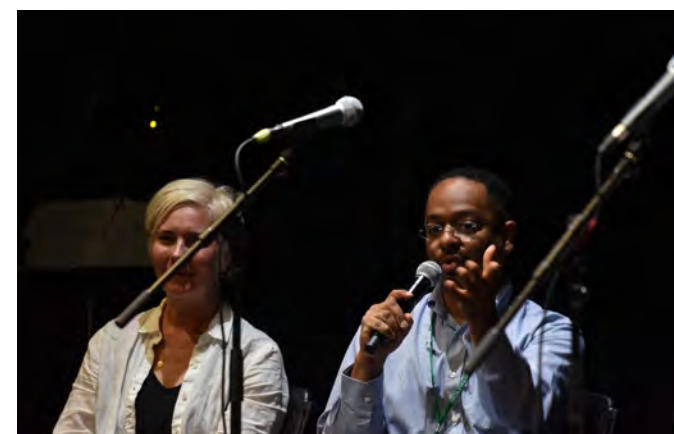
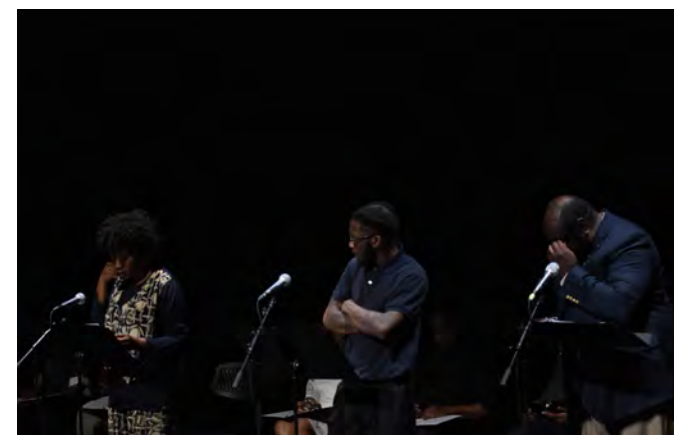
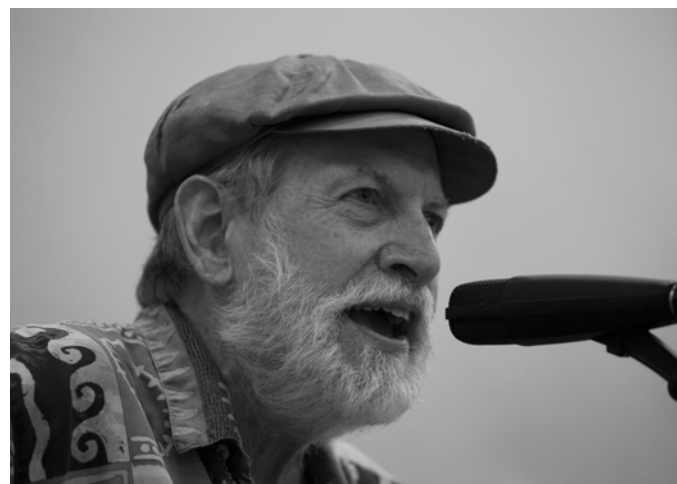


DR. DAVID EVANS: ORIGINS OF THE BLUES

After lunch, participants got to hear from renowned ethnomusicologist Dr. David Evans from the University of Memphis. In his lecture, he highlighted the historical and social contexts in which the Blues flourished and played famous Blues songs to help tie the narrative together.

Evans explained the Blues' role as an expression of individualism in response to the violence and oppression of the Jim Crow South. Through song and speech, he showed the deeply personal focus of Blues lyrics, which often focused on romance and heartbreak, labor and exhaustion, and migration and poverty.

In between questions, he played famous songs by Delta Blues legends such as Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Son House, and more, carefully exhibiting the distinctive traits of artists, time periods, and regions that influenced the evolution of the Blues.



BEAUTIFUL AGITATORS

After dinner, participants headed over to the GRAMMY Museum Mississippi to watch a reading of the play "Beautiful Agitators," which explores the history of Vera Mae Pige's civil rights activism in Clarksdale and her inspiring legacy.

The play, written and performed by Delta locals, highlighted the hurdles African Americans faced to vote in Mississippi, the violence of the Jim Crow South, and the understated role of black women in the Civil Rights Movement.

After the performance, the audience, filled with NEH scholars and Delta locals, sat down with performers to discuss the legacy and status of civil rights in the Delta. The incredible conversation that followed gave the NEH scholars an idea of the beautiful progress and painful realities of race relations and civic engagement in the Delta.

The group was deeply moved by the play, a new addition to the workshop. In evaluations forms to the Mississippi Humanities Council, who sponsored the reading, many participants raved about the performance.

Some teachers made it clear that the reading inspired them to do similar work in their classrooms. One participant wrote that they were "inspired by the intersection of local history records, theater, and local activism," adding that "more work like this is needed." Another added that they plan to "bring this content to my students in California, teach them about the history of Civil Rights and also inspire them to write about members of their local community who fight for civil and human rights."

Others pointed out the importance of telling often untold stories. "The most important thing I learned was to look deeper at local stories and local heroes. These stories can have just as much, if not more impact as national news," one participant noted.

Locals in the audience were able to learn about this hidden history, too. One viewer wrote that they "grew up in Mound Bayou and took dance lessons in Clarksdale and had no idea this was going on there."

Although all were impacted by Beautiful Agitators in their own way, one thing seems clear: everyone gained something.

DAY 4: CIVIL RIGHTS

Mound Bayou & the Enduring Struggle for Freedom

7am	9am	11am	1pm	3pm	5pm	7pm	9pm
Mound Bayou Tour	Po' Monkey's Juke Joint	Charles McLaurin	Lunch	Bus to Sumner	Emmett Till Panel Discussion	Emmett Till Intrepid Center	Robert Johnson Gravesite

MOUND BAYOU TOUR

The morning began with a trip to Mound Bayou. Founded in 1887 by formerly enslaved African Americans and once a thriving community the historic all-black town was remarkable for its lack of racial division and its progressive, utopian ideals. At its peak, Mound Bayou was a bustling, nationally renowned hub of black culture and business.

The first stop of the day came at the Taborian Hospital. The famous hospital offered critical medical services to Mound Bayou and surrounding under-served communities. It operated off of membership dues and donations and had an all black staff.

After taking in the hospital, the group headed across the street to visit the Mississippi Freedom Marker devoted to civil rights activist T.R.M. Howard, who was the hospital's first Chief Surgeon.



PO' MONKEY'S

The bus made one more stop at a sharecropper's shack on the edge of a cotton field. A bit of history rested within the rusted tin walls participants gathered around; they had made it to Merigold's famous "Po' Monkey's Lounge," the last rural juke joint in the country.

Juke joints, originally called "jook" houses after a West African word for "wicked," were havens for sharecroppers throughout the Delta. The juke joints provided a space for sharecroppers to relax and have a good time after a hard work week. Po' Monkey's served sharecroppers for decades before Po' Monkey himself, Mr. Willie Seaberry, tragically passed away in 2016 during that summer's NEH "Most Southern Place on Earth" workshop.

Open or closed, the spirit of Po' Monkey's seeps through the signs adorning the front of the shack, the Christmas lights strung from its roof, and the beer-bottle adorned monument to Seaberry in front of the building. Participants were able to get an idea of what this beautiful, peculiar landmark may have been like in its heyday.



CHARLES MCLAURIN: SNCC & FREEDOM SUMMER



The group returned to the classroom and heard from Civil Rights Movement foot soldier Charles McLaurin. McLaurin served as campaign manager for Fannie Lou Hamer in 1963, then as a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Delegate at the 1964 DNC, and then as a director of the 1964 Freedom Summer Project in Sunflower County. In his many roles, McLaurin has dedicated his life to the Movement. Few people can claim such wide and important experience in the Civil Rights Movement. He now makes his home in Indianola, where he has retired from his role as Assistant Public Works Director for the City of Indianola.



McLaurin spoke to participants about his involvement in the Movement, from boycotts and sit-ins to voters registration drives and picket demonstrations. His incredible stories, including tense encounters with racist police officers and close work with his dear friend Fannie Lou Hamer, resonated with teachers and helped to put a face behind the foot soldiers that go often unnamed in history books. McLaurin discussed the importance of nonviolence while recognizing its limits as a strategy for effective change and spoke about other issues, such as contemporary voting rights, black pride, the need for continued action in civil rights, and how his understanding of people and politics has evolved.



SUMNER COURTHOUSE EMMETT TILL PANEL

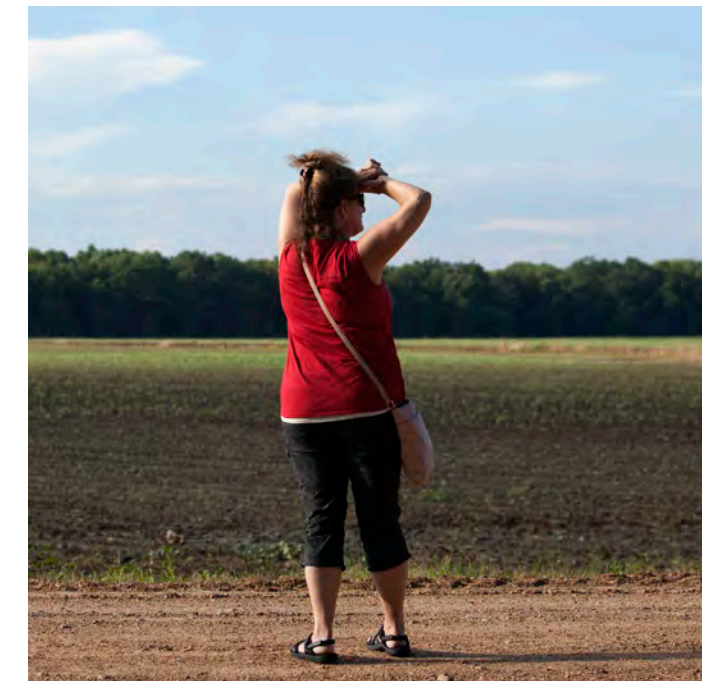
Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old from Chicago, was visiting family in the Mississippi Delta during the summer of 1955 when he, ignorant of race relations in the Jim Crow South, whistled at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant. Soon after, Emmett Till was kidnapped by Carolyn's husband, her brother-in-law, and a suspected six other men. After beating and torturing the boy, the men shot him in the head and dumped his body into the Tallahatchie River. Till's body was found mutilated and a murder trial ensued, Carolyn's husband and brother-in-law were tried by an all-white jury and acquitted on all charges. The Emmett Till trial is widely known as the spark that lit the fuse of the Civil Rights Movement.

At the Sumner County Courthouse, participants sat in the room where the trial occurred while listening to a panel of speakers including Wheeler Parker, Emmett Till's cousin who was with him at Bryant's Grocery and at home the night he was abducted; Alvin Sykes, a leading investigator of civil rights cold case murders; and Jerry Mitchell, a leading investigative journalist on civil rights cold cases. Wheeler told stories about Emmett and the group discussed the facts and legacy of the case before the floor opened to participants to ask questions. After the discussion, participants talked to the panelists individually.



EMMETT TILL MARKER REDEDICATION

After leaving the courthouse, the group made its way to the Tallahatchie River to take in another important part of the Emmett Till story. The group was fortunate to be learning about Emmett Till on this day. Nearly a year ago, vandals defaced the historic marker identifying the site where Emmett Till's body was recovered. The group was able to witness the resilience of the Delta as a new marker was dedicated at the site. Along the river, the group reflected upon Emmett Till's murder and came to understand the legacy it has left behind. At the river site, where a sign riddled with bullet holes was replaced, it became clear that there is so much more to do in the fight against racism.

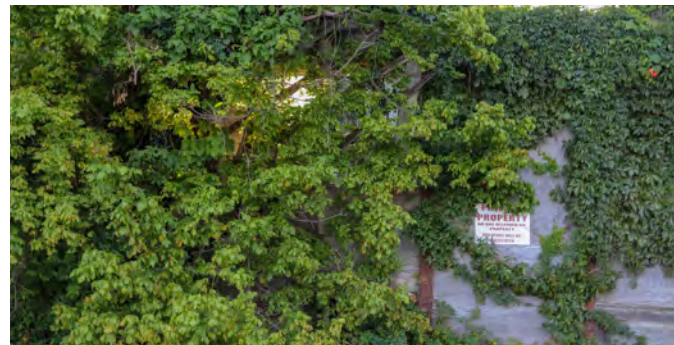


EMMETT TILL INTREPID CENTER

After an emotional discussion at the Sumner County Courthouse, the group headed over to the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center in Glendora to continue learning about the case. The Intrepid Center features a variety of exhibits covering the horrific kidnapping, murder, and trial of Emmett Till and also houses a comprehensive history of the area and other critical events in the Civil Rights Movement that have occurred there.

In the museum, participants followed the Emmett Till story from the start of his trip in Mississippi to reverberations that rippled across the nation in the wake of the murder, even encountering a replica of his funeral.

Participants were somber on the bus ride to Bryant's Grocery, reflecting on the heavy discussions of the past few hours. Some used the opportunity to share on the open mic, while others took time to process the day's events on their own.



BRYANT'S GROCERY

The group continued its study of Emmett Till at the original site of Bryant's Grocery store. Now a mostly decrepit and completely overgrown structure, the store sparked the chain of events that led to the brutal murder of Emmett Till. Participants walked around the store, peeking in through fallen walls and kudzu, and reflected as the sun set on this critical place in history. While Bryant's Grocery has fallen, the story of Emmett Till lives on.

Before boarding the bus, participants enjoyed Koolickles, the Taste of the Day. The strange treat, pickles soaked in Kool-Aid as the name suggests, are a favorite of Delta children and might have been served at Bryant's grocery in the era of Emmett Till. Unsurprisingly, the sweet, slimy, strange snack received mixed reactions from participants. The group got back on the bus refreshed and ready for the last stop of the day.



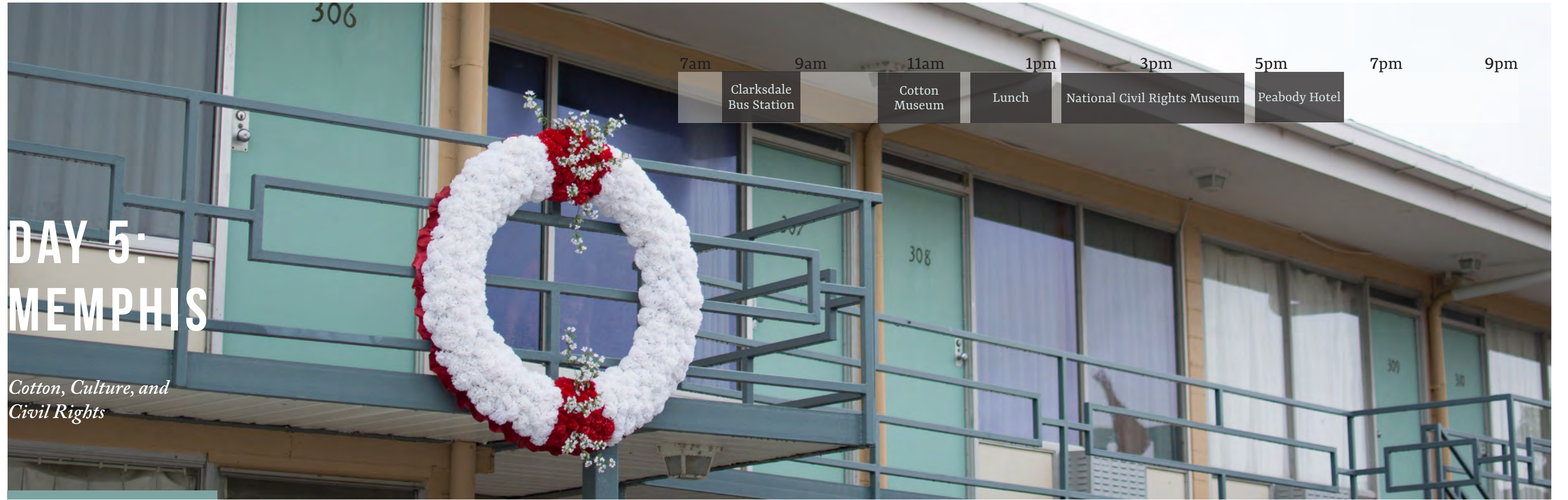
ROBERT JOHNSON'S GRAVESITE

The final stop came at Little Zion Church in Greenwood, Mississippi. There, under the golden rays of the setting sun, the group saw the grave of Blues legend Robert Johnson. Bottles of liquor and other vices lay on top of and around the headstone, forming the perfect memorial to the man famous for wild music and selling his soul to the devil.

The gravesite is actually one of three claiming to be the final resting place of Johnson. However, most academics agree that the Little Zion site is Johnson's true place of rest.

After a few minutes taking in the grave, the group retreated to the bus and headed back to Cleveland.





DAY 5: MEMPHIS

Cotton, Culture, and Civil Rights

CLARKSDALE GREYHOUND STATION

The group made a stop on the way to Memphis to see the Clarksdale Greyhound Station. There, participants found two waiting rooms, each with its own set of bathrooms, and a long hallway between the two. An architectural remnant of Jim Crow, two separate waiting areas - one for "white" and one for "colored" - gave participants an idea of what the segregated Delta looked like.

Mac Crank, Economic Development Coordinator, welcomed the group with donuts. Participants also got to check out the antique ornaments of the well-preserved station: a pinball machine, a phone booth, and a sprawling neon sign on the street corner.



COTTON MUSEUM

After another hour on the road, the mobile classroom arrived in Memphis. Participants got out at the Cotton Museum, located on the historic trading floor of the Memphis Cotton Exchange.

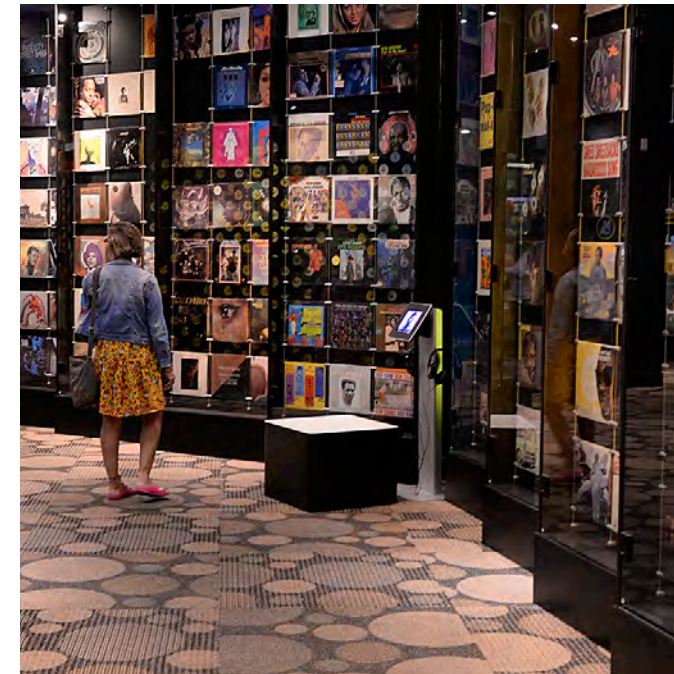
In the Delta, “cotton was king.” From the sharecropping system to debutante balls, cotton, the most essential part of the Delta’s economy, was the cornerstone for every part of society. The history of cotton, one of unimaginable wealth and immeasurable suffering, one that gave us the Blues, but only out of misery, one that clothed the world only to shackle thousands of people, is complex and expansive. At the Cotton Museum, participants grappled with this controversial history.

After an introduction to the importance of the trading floor, participants were able to explore the museum. They learned about the social hierarchies and systems the crop created, saw artifacts from some of the strange customs created by the cotton industry in the Delta, and came to understand this important source of income’s evolving role in responding to the South’s new obstacles.



STAX MUSEUM

Next, the bus stopped at the Stax Museum. At the rebuilt Stax Records label, participants learned about the rise and fall of Stax Records, also known as “Soulville, USA.” In the museum, they got to see artifacts from one of America’s most important records labels, from outrageous costumes and vintage recording equipment to Isaac Hayes’ gold-plated Cadillac. They also learned about Stax’s role as a model for black expression and integration, and the dramatic rise and fall of the label. Race played a critical role in Stax’s success and failure and participants came to better understand the long journey towards progress because of their visit. The group of teachers also learned about Stax’s rebirth — Stax now operates a music school and afterschool programs alongside the museum. On the way back to Cleveland, participants watched a documentary on Stax to reinforce what they had learned about one of the South’s iconic record labels.



NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM

After lunch, where members of the group enjoyed Memphis barbecue at Central BBQ, the group walked over to the National Civil Rights Museum. Outside the museum, which is housed in the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, the group saw the balcony where King was shot. There, in front of the perfectly preserved balcony of room 306, came the first of many reflections motivated by the museum.

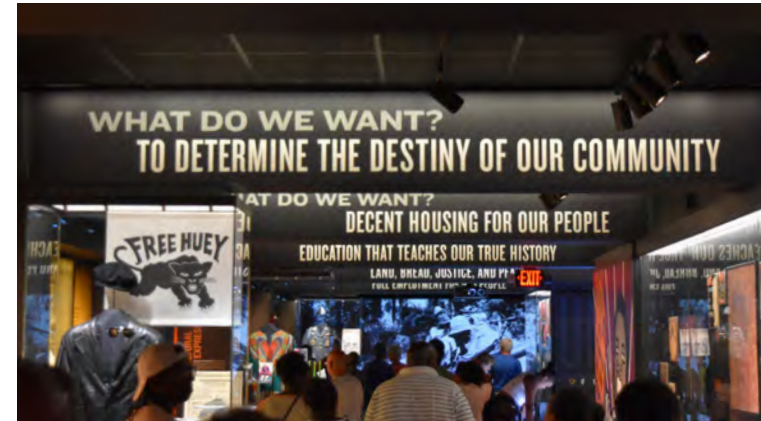
Inside the museum, the group met Raka Nandi, Registrar & Collections Manager at the museum. Nandi sneaked the group into a back room and gave a special behind-the-scenes tour of the museum archives. There, participants got close to important pieces of history and learned about the challenges of curation from representation and accuracy in exhibit creation to the acquisition of Jim Crow era artifacts.

The museum took the group through the history of civil rights in the United States, starting with the Transatlantic Slave Trade and working through Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement to arrive at today. While bringing to life the stories of civil rights titans like Rosa Parks and Dr. King, the museum paid special attention to telling the stories of ordinary people and lesser known foot soldiers in the Movement.

The museum culminates in room 306, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Participants walked through the room, decorated to depict what the room looked like at the moment of King's assassination, and paid their respects to King. Down the hall from the moving exhibit, King's final speech, given in support of the Memphis Sanitation Strike, plays.

"[God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

With pain and love in every heart and tears in some eyes, participants got back on the bus transformed.



PEABODY HOTEL

David Cohn writes that "The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg." In Memphis, the Peabody Hotel is an essential Delta stop. The group went there to round out the day.

Participants found spots along the balcony of the hotel's elegant lobby for a view of its famous tradition: the March of the Peabody Ducks. With pomp and circumstance, the "Duckmaster" led the ceremony, which occurs daily at 11:00 AM and 5:00 PM, and the whole room watched carefully as ducks waddled out of the fountain in the center of the room down a red carpet and into an elevator.

As the Duckmaster told the crowd, the tradition dates back to 1933 when several hunters left their live decoy ducks in the fountain. Guests loved the ducks. The ducks stuck around, eventually gaining their own penthouse and daily ceremony.

The Peabody in many ways represents the extreme wealth that rose out of the Delta. In comparison to other parts of the Delta's story, a duck walk may seem insignificant, but it is important in understanding the powerful people that controlled much of the Delta. With a greater understanding of the Delta's elite, participants boarded the bus once more and headed back to Cleveland.





DAY 6: THE DIASPORA

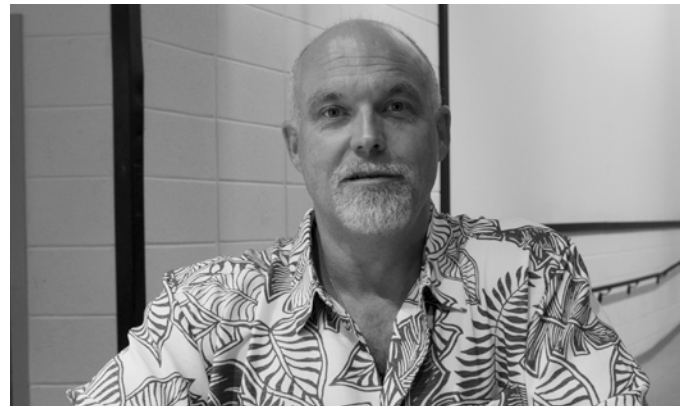
Making Mojo and Memories

DR. JOHN STRAIT: THE DELTA IN DIASPORA

The final lecture of the workshop came from Dr. John Strait, professor of geography at Sam Houston State University. Strait tied much of the week together with a lesson on how the culture of the Delta, particularly the Blues, dispersed throughout the rest of the country and the world.

Strait told the story of the Great Migration, in which some six million African-Americans moved from the South to large cities in the West, Midwest, and North, namely Chicago, taking with them music, memories, and culture to forever influence the social, political, and cultural landscape of the country.

Throughout the lecture, it became clear that the Delta is everywhere. Dr. Strait asked participants to take the Delta with them and to let it impact their lives as it has impacted the country and the world.



POUND CAKE & CHICKEN

The last taste of the day was, as much in the Delta is, fried and buttery. Participants enjoyed pound cake and fried chicken, filling their stomachs to match their full hearts as the workshop ended.



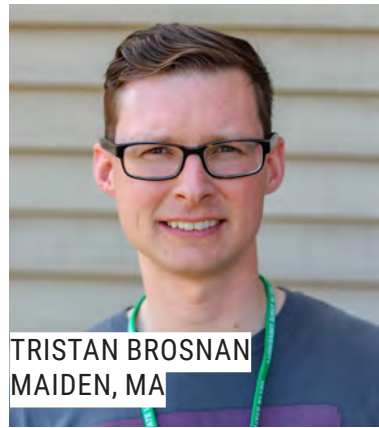
MAKE YOUR OWN MOJO & SAYING GOODBYE

Participants got their “Mojo” working with the final activity of the workshop. Different ‘ingredients’ from the sites visited and things discussed throughout the week, such as water from the Mississippi River, metal bbs for B.B. King, and clippings from a 1960s voter registration form, were laid out on the table. Participants were able to put the ingredients that had significance to them in a piece of cloth and then tie the week together by tying the mojo’s blue yarn, signifying the river and the blues.

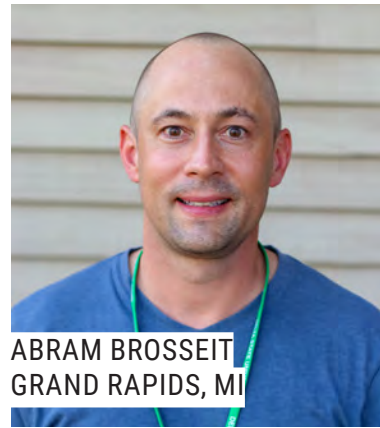
Participants wrote down all of the ingredients inside the mojo on a piece of paper attached to it. Of course, Lee insisted that everyone put a bit of magical “come back oil” in their bag. The tradition of mojo making comes from the folk magic of the Hoodoo spiritual tradition. Teachers were instructed to keep their mojo bags on their desks back home to remind them to tell their students and colleagues about what they learned and experienced in the Delta.



PARTICIPANT YEARBOOK



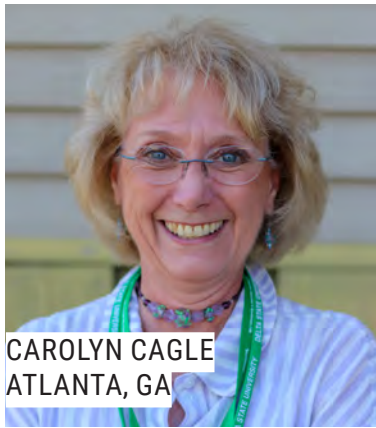
TRISTAN BROSINAN
MAIDEN, MA



ABRAM BROSEIT
GRAND RAPIDS, MI



CHERIE BOWE
GAUTIER, MS



CAROLYN CAGLE
ATLANTA, GA



KENYA DAVIS
REYNOLDSBURG, OH



EMMETT DOUGHERTY
LEWISTON, ID



TONI DRINGMAN
OLATHE, KS



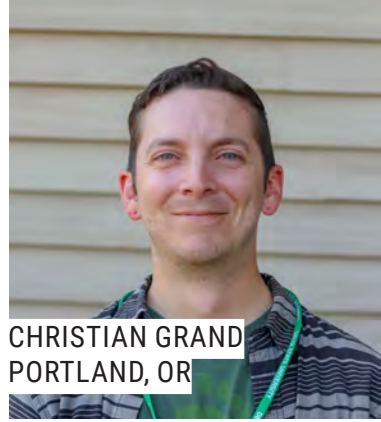
MICHELLE FISACKERLY
VICKSBURG, MS



SHELLEY GOULDER
OAKLAND, CA



SHEILA FOLAN
SACRAMENTO, CA



CHRISTIAN GRAND
PORTLAND, OR



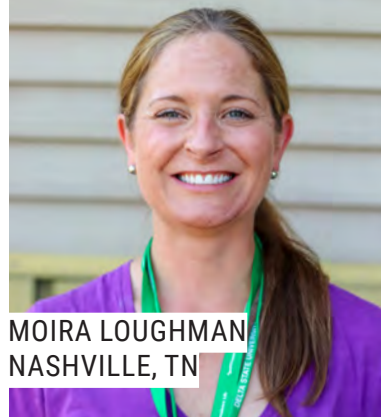
ERIC HITE
JACKSON, MS



ROSEMARY JOHNSON
REDFORD, MI



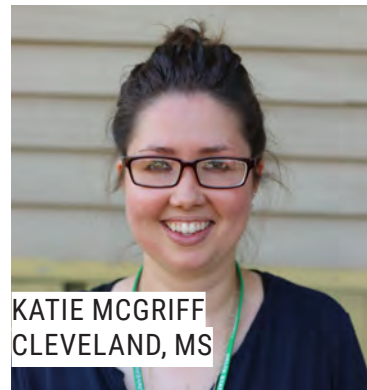
TONY KLEIN
DES MOINES, IA



MOIRA LOUGHMAN
NASHVILLE, TN



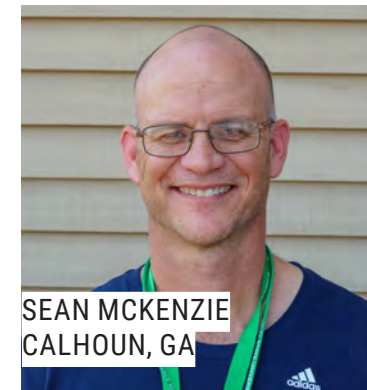
THOMAS MCCHRISTIAN
LINCOLN, NE



KATIE MCGRIFF
CLEVELAND, MS



MARIANNE MCGRIFF
BIRMINGHAM, AL



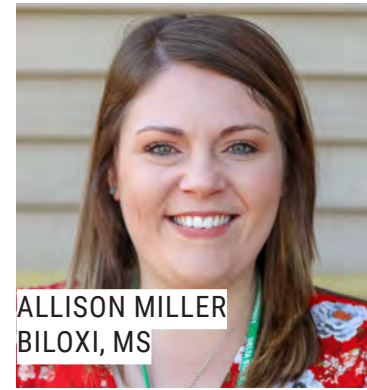
SEAN MCKENZIE
CALHOUN, GA



CAROLYN MARTIN
QUARRYVILLE, PA



BETH MENDENHALL
INDIANAPOLIS, IN



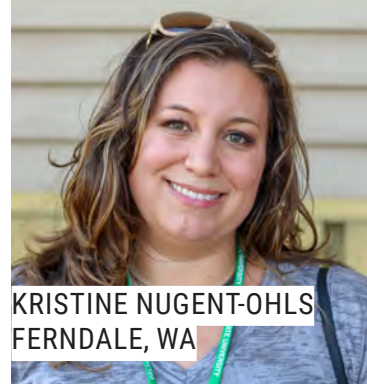
ALLISON MILLER
BILOXI, MS



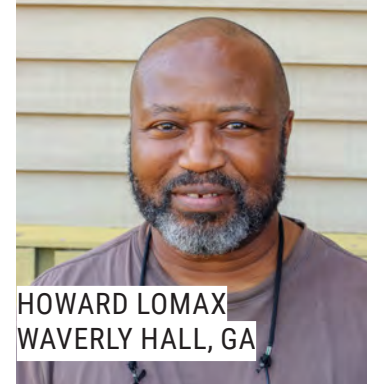
JESSE NEUMAN
HOPEWELL, NJ



KIMBERLY NOFSINGER
MAGNOLIA, OH



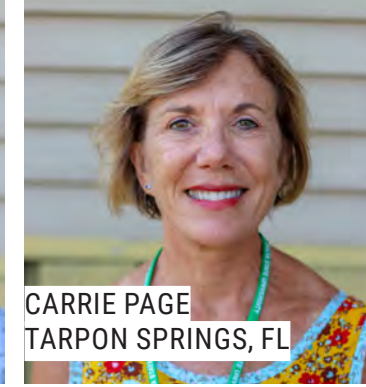
KRISTINE NUGENT-OHLS
FERNDALE, WA



HOWARD LOMAX
WAVERLY HALL, GA



FRANKY ORTEGA
RESEDA, CA



CARRIE PAGE
TARPON SPRINGS, FL



VARLEY PAUL
PHILADELPHIA, PA



WENDY ROGERS
MT. STERLING, KY



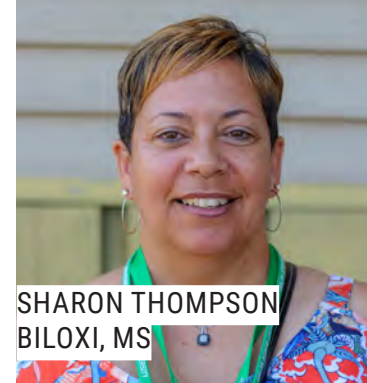
BETSY STEEL
GAITHERSBURG, MD



JES STEINBERG
SHAWNEE, KS



MICHAEL SULLIVAN
BOLINGBROOK, IL



SHARON THOMPSON
BILOXI, MS



SHELBY WESTFAHL
HUTCHINSON, KS



JENNY ZETA
SILT, CO

INSTITUTE EVALUATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Activity	lowest highest					Average Rating
	1	2	3	4	5	
Reception at the Railroad Museum	0	2	2	8	21	4.43
Introduction	0	0	1	9	23	4.67
Discussion Session	0	0	2	7	22	4.65
Movie: "Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton"	0	1	1	3	29	4.76
Discussion led by Reggie Barnes	0	0	3	4	27	4.71
Levee Break Site/ Delta and Pine Land	0	0	2	4	28	4.76
Airport Grocery (Catfish supper)	0	1	2	1	29	4.75
Discussion of the Delta Chinese	0	0	4	8	21	4.51
Discussion of the Delta Jews	0	0	2	10	21	4.57
Greenville's Black graveyard	0	0	2	5	23	4.69
Guest Scholar - Dr. Charles Wilson	0	2	2	11	19	4.36
Bill Abel, History of the Blues	0	0	1	5	29	4.80
Dockery Farms and The Crossroads	0	0	0	1	34	4.97
Fanny Lou Hamer's gravesite	0	0	1	3	31	4.86
B.B. King Museum	0	0	0	4	30	4.88
Guest Scholar - Dr. Edgar Smith	0	0	1	5	27	4.79
Guest Scholar - Dr. David Evans	3	3	4	5	18	3.97
Beautiful Agitators: Civil Rights Play	0	0	1	4	29	4.82
Tour of Mound Bayou	0	1	3	8	22	4.50
Charles McLaurin	0	0	1	3	28	4.84
Panel Discussion of Till Case	0	0	0	2	33	4.94
Emmett Till Intrepid Center	3	3	8	5	15	3.76
Dedication of the Marker	1	0	1	3	30	4.74
Bus Ride to Memphis	0	1	2	6	25	4.62
Stax Museum	0	0	0	1	34	4.97
Cotton Museum	0	2	4	11	18	4.29
Lunch at Central BBQ	0	1	1	5	26	4.70
National Civil Rights Museum	0	0	0	0	35	5.00
Lobby of the Peabody	1	3	8	11	12	3.86
Bus Ride Home (Stax Movie)	0	0	3	9	21	4.55
Guest Scholar - Dr. John B. Strait	0	0	1	3	31	4.86
Comparing the Delta to your Place	0	0	1	3	22	4.81
Mojo Making	0	0	0	2	33	4.94

“Experiences like this are what I live for. As we dove further into the Civil Rights Movement, the more my emotions started to rise. As I walked to the exit of the NCR Museum I noticed a quote by MLK Jr. and instantly began to cry. Everything all came together!”

“The visits were terrific and every one was better than the next. The lectures were wonderful.”

“All of the experiences combined to create a rich and vibrant experience which gave an immersive experience into the life, music, culture, and history of the Delta.”

“I am going to get my colleagues to apply for next year.”

“The first person accounts often times have the most important impact when telling history and stories. They taught me to overcome my misconceived ideas and I hope to pass that onto my students.”

This workshop is invaluable as a teaching tool - the ability to travel to historical places, meet and hear from those who have first-hand accounts and the variety (music, culture, history) really will enhance my teaching. Thank you!!!

“It absolutely had an impact on my world view and how I will approach learning and teaching history (and all my classes). I would recommend it to anyone and everyone.”

“This is the best place based educational experience I have had in recent memory: the focus on the cultural, economic, historical and environmental processes that shape “The Most Southern Place on Earth” helped me better understand how this place works.”

“All of the experiences were enlightening; meeting the people who actually lived through the Movement was very powerful.”

THANKS TO OUR TEAM

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Mike Fagans
Media Team Member



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Lawton Ives
Media Team Member

GUEST SPEAKERS

Bill Abel
Reggie Barnes
Dr. David Evans
Keith Johnson
Charles McLaurin
Jerry Mitchell
Raka Nandi
Benjy Nelken
Rev. Wheeler Parker

Dr. Edgar Smith
Inez Smith
Dr. John Strait
Alvin Sykes
Patrick Weems
Dr. Charles Reagan
Wilson
Dr. Blake Wintory
Raymond Wong

SPONSORS



ABOUT THE DELTA CENTER

The mission of The Delta Center for Culture and Learning is to promote greater understanding of the Mississippi Delta's culture and history and its significance to the world through education, partnerships, and community engagement.

The Delta Center is an interdisciplinary "Center of Excellence" that focuses on the humanities and social sciences as they relate to the Delta. This advances Delta State University's participation in promoting and celebrating the unique heritage of the Delta while also addressing the longstanding social, economic, and cultural challenges that inhibit regional advancement. The Delta Center has fulfilled this role since its inception and continues to do so by:

- Serving as management entity for the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, a cultural heritage and economic development partnership between the people of the Mississippi Delta and the National Park Service;
- Housing the International Delta Blues Project, which comprises the International Conference on the Blues, a Blues Studies program, and a Blues Leadership Incubator promoting economic development and entrepreneurship related to Blues tourism and the creative economy;
- Hosting "The Most Southern Place on Earth: Music, Culture and History of the Mississippi Delta," a Summer Institute for School Teachers funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities which brings K-12 educators to the Delta for a week-long educational and cultural immersion experience; and
- Working throughout the Delta region and nationally with cultural, educational and tourism organizations, local, state and federal agencies, and visiting college classes and groups from around the country and the world, providing information, expertise, and experiential learning and partnership development opportunities.

The Delta Center is located in Ewing Hall, Suite 130, at Delta State University. We welcome visitors regularly and enthusiastically... Come by and see us!

For more information and to see more videos, pictures, and summaries from the "Most Southern Place on Earth" workshop and The Delta Center, check out and like our page on facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/TheDeltaCenter/>.

As a part of this workshop, all participants were required to create lesson plans or other reflection materials based on the workshop course content. These materials have been uploaded at the workshop website page.

For more information, please visit the Most Southern Place on Earth website:
<http://deltacenterdsu.com/mostsouthern/>

Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed on this website do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



Delta Center for Culture & Learning

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