

Some women of Mound Bayou, Mississippi.



[re]creating a past

PREFACE

Some Delta Women

I have always felt that the (Yazoo) Mississippi Delta presents a myriad of opportunities for students. The rural, agricultural, culturally rich Delta provides an extraordinary environment for personal and educational development. If a college student or graduate student stays there for six months, there's a good chance that a book is gestating. The Delta has that impact.

I grew up in the 1950s in Ruleville, Mississippi which is in the middle of the Delta and my family's presence in the Delta covers almost its entire history.

The (Yazoo) Mississippi Delta is the vast, flat alluvial plain which is located in the northwest corner of Mississippi. It stretches from Memphis to Vicksburg, Mississippi (about two hundred miles) and varies in width from fifty to seventy miles. The Delta was – for the most part – settled after the American Civil War and its population has always had an African American majority. Its history is that of an agrarian society which has been characterized by small towns and farms. The Delta has been geographically and culturally distinct from the rest of the state of Mississippi. Yet, too often, the Delta has been portrayed as merely an isolated region. The Delta must be viewed in the context of American and world economic, racial and social history.

I have played a role in bringing the Delta to the outside world and bringing the outside world to the Delta from the 1960s to the present. I had plenty of encouragement from Delta writers – both in person and through their work. Craig Claiborne of *Sunflower* and *Indianola*, the former food editor of the *New York Times*, shared some of his Delta background during lunches in the 1960s. Mr. Claiborne was a major factor in the democratization of cuisine in America. I obtained a Yale fellowship for the Pulitzer Prize recipient, Greenville editor, Hodding Carter, Jr. in 1966. On that visit, I witnessed Mr. Carter's presence with students and his command of the Delta's complex background. I have explored the literary and historical worlds of David Cohn, Shelby Foote and William Alexander Percy and presented this legacy to audiences. I remain enthusiastic about the prospect of bringing students to the Delta.

So, when Delta Center Director, Luther Brown, during a visit to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, mentioned the

Yale student Elizabeth Wilkins looks on as Mound Bayou residents remember their childhood through artwork and conversation.



lively group of elderly African American women who visit the St. Gabriel Mercy Mission in Mound Bayou, we immediately saw the possibilities for a student oral history project. This was truly an opportunity for students to experience the Delta in person, not via the media, fiction, or non-fiction.

These women have seen and experienced much of the 20th century in the Delta. They are strong, verbal, energetic and gregarious. They had witnessed and lived through the harshness of both the American and Deltan racial past. They know the good and the bad. And they wanted to tell their stories.

Rabbi James Ponet, the Jewish chaplain at Yale University's Slifka Center, found two students who had a serious interest in the project. The Yale students, Annie Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Wilkins joined with Delta State University students Anna Preus and Lisa Alford to do the project. Annie and Elizabeth are urbanites from Boston and Washington, D.C. so country life and Delta hospitality were new to them. Miles and miles of highway through cotton, soybean and rice fields and catfish farms were a novelty for the Yalies. Anna, the photographer, of the group and Lisa, the art education specialist, are both Delta natives.

Mound Bayou needs no introduction. It was the most famous all black town in

America at the turn of the century. Booker T. Washington, one of the major figures of African American history, captured the importance in his comment,

"Outside of Tuskegee (Alabama), I think that I can safely say there is no community in the world that I am so deeply interested in as I am in Mound Bayou."

The host for the women and the venue for the conversations was the St. Gabriel Mercy Center—a special place run by special people: Sisters Patricia, Donald Mary, Anne, and Kathy. This project connected generations: undergraduates, nuns and elderly women. This is the story of the women who visit the St. Gabriel Mercy Center. It is also the story of undergraduates and their relationship with those women. It is part of the Delta's story.

Gene Dattel

[reflections

Driving from Holly Springs to Tunica, Mississippi, the rolling hills of lush dark green vegetation and thick forest suddenly give way to a dusty, unrelentingly flat expanse domed by as much pale blue sky as you've ever seen. Highway 61, that famous blues highway that runs the length of the Delta, stretches straight ahead, bordered by acres and acres of farm land. Just beyond the levee, the

only hill in sight, is the mighty Mississippi River.

For this Washingtonian, the shock of the landscape change coming into the Mississippi Delta mirrored the culture shock. Rural and southern, even with Delta State University in its midst, Cleveland, Mississippi was not like anything I'd ever experienced. From the food (fried okra, pickled okra, fried pickles), to the entertainment (restaurants close at 9:30, nothings open on Sunday), to the religion (a church on every corner), everything was unfamiliar. My most jarring new experience, however, was my interactions with the people. Getting to work was hard at first because I didn't realize how fluid the line between professional and social life could be. I had to learn how to relate to people in a small town environment where everyone knows everyone and your colleagues are your friends. I also had to get used to the astounding level of hospitality. I didn't know what to do with all the generous offers for dinner, tours, or even parking ticket validation (because, of course, a woman in my office knew the dispatcher). But just as I came to love the unfamiliar seas of dark green soybeans in the field, I became accustomed to the people. Maybe some of my big city notions of privacy and formality had to go, but I gained an appreciation for slowness and a greater understanding of what generosity truly is.

Of course not everything in the Delta is picturesque. As a black student, I was hypersensitive to the change in race relations as I came down south. I knew the local country club didn't accept blacks, and there were fraternity parties where I knew I wouldn't be welcome. But these instances didn't spoil the experience. From my short stay, I learned that race relations in the South aren't as horrific as some northerners think. They are just expressed in different ways in a place where black and white are forced to live 'cheek by jowl,' where race is an articulated and ever-present entity. Much more disturbing are the crippling social problems evident in every town. The mechanization of agriculture and competition from a global market have left this largely black labor force with unemployment and all its trappings. The public school systems, plagued by the problems of children of broken homes, only feed into the climate of economic despair. The cycles of poverty in the Delta are astounding. When people northern and southern asked what on Earth I was doing in Mississippi, their

incredulity was understandable. On the other hand, what other place has greater need of the care and attention of our nation's promising youth?

Working with the elderly in Mound Bayou was an intense introduction to the complexities of Delta life. I felt extremely self-conscious, entering this community that had been hurt so many times by the meddling of outsiders, from whites in neighboring towns to door-to-door salesmen scams. An outsider, and a northerner no less, of any race, has to take time to gain the trust of these elderly folks who have seen it all. I soon discovered, however, that despite this wariness, all I had to do was prove my intentions by showing up every day with a smile and my kindness would be returned tenfold. After a week or two of spending afternoons together, these men and women were not only willing to share their life experiences on tape, they were inquiring after my family, showing me how to eat pig's feet, and inviting me into their homes. They are fun, generous, and inspirational people. After four weeks, I felt as though I had gained not only a unique perspective on Delta history but also twenty new grandparents. My time with them has been the crown jewel in a sparkling two-month experience in the Mississippi Delta.

Elizabeth Wilkins

I have lived all of my twenty-one years in the Delta, without thinking about the history of Delta or its people. I wasn't quite sure what to expect during this project. It never occurred to me that my experience would have such a personal impact on me. My four weeks with the ladies of Mound Bayou was special. I, like Elizabeth, felt as if I had gained twenty new grandmothers. I have always had a special respect for the elderly and love helping any way I can. As I got to know the life stories of these women, I gained a special appreciation for them and for the times in which they lived.

My friends were curious about how I spent my time, and they were incredulous when I told them how much fun that I was having. Each morning I would walk into St. Gabriel's Mercy Mission and was greeted by twenty smiling faces. I am sure that I will continue visiting the ladies and hopefully let them know how much they have meant to me to this past summer.

Anna Preus

re-creating



Annie L. Weeks
flowers at the end of the church benches
collage



Beneva Conway
Sunshine Acting as an Usher at Church
collage



Dorothy Kemp
Flower
acrylic on paper

My role in this project was primarily to teach art lessons to the participants in the senior citizens' Program at St. Gabriels (a.k.a. "The Ladies"). I had been teaching teenagers for three years, with no experience teaching senior citizens and although I have always heard of St. Gabriels, I had never been there and really didn't know what to expect. What I found were some of the liveliest, friendliest people I have ever met, whether participant, volunteer, student or one of the nuns who run St. Gabriels. It turned out that my initial apprehension over what was expected of me was matched by "The Ladies'" apprehension over what was expected of them when it was time for art class. However, we all jumped right in and soon the whole group was making beautiful artwork from memories of their childhoods, churches, and families. There is a particular beauty and joy to the process of creating from memory, especially when the creativity evokes memories that have not been visited in a long time. It was my distinct privilege to have assisted these Ladies in the process of remembering where they once played or worshiped as a child. After each session with this group, one or more of them would begin to sing—always a song of faith, springing from someplace deep inside. These remarkable ladies would be instantly transported to a deeply spiritual place in their hearts and souls. The sights and sounds of their visible and audible faith always moved me. I am so grateful for having been given the opportunity to be a part of this project. Though brief, the experience has made a lasting impression on me and I am somehow better for having been in their company.

Lisa Alford



 Mary Mims illustrates a scene from her past.

"What church do you belong to?" asked Mrs. Norman, an elderly black woman who had always lived in the Mississippi Delta.

Somewhat taken aback by the question, I responded that I was Jewish. I didn't know what to expect.

"Oh, that's wonderful," she responded and then added a warm sincere smile. Despite her friendliness, I felt defensive and uncomfortable. I was in the Mississippi Delta and this was my first trip to the American South. I was raised in the Northeast and had rarely traveled to other regions in the United States. I had never lived in a real world Christian environment. I wondered if I would feel isolated during my three week sojourn.

I spent my days with the elderly people who met at the St. Gabriels Mercy Mission in Mound Bayou. Our days were spent in conversation, doing art projects and taking field trips. I wanted to gain their trust so that I could begin recording their stories. After I left the Delta, I began to realize that I too was adjusting - to the ladies. Although I wanted to be at ease in this all-black, poor but proud, Protestant community, I knew that I felt awkward at times. The ironies of the Delta were also confusing, as these Protestant women were meeting at a Catholic venue which was supervised by white nuns.

Although I was welcomed by Delta folks and their warm hospitality, I looked, spoke and dressed differently. The dramatic Delta landscape - cotton fields, churches, and the language of the people - were novel and powerful. I wanted to feel part of this environment.

I will always remember the gospel songs. The day would begin with the women noisily chatting to each other. Then, a silence would envelop the room as one woman began to sing. Spontaneously, the others joined one-by-one until a beautiful chorus resounded. I was so moved by the melody that I instinctively tried to hum along with the spiritual.

Even the Jews seemed different. They were not the fast-talking, distinctly religious or secular, bagel-and-lox variety that I knew in Boston. The Delta Jews were assimilated with their white neighbors. Delta Jews are no strangers to barbeque pork. I also noted that Delta Jews were all affiliated with a temple and intensely conscious of their Judaism. A former president of the Greenville temple proudly guided us through the archival room and the sanctuary of Hebrew Union Temple. This

congregation, like the other Delta communities, has few remaining Jews. In the Northeast, temple affiliation and attendance at services is a matter of personal choice and not taken for granted. In the Delta, Jews have always belonged to a congregation and attended services in the same way that their Christian neighbors are expected to attend church in these closely-knit communities.

I know that the Delta changed me and I am trying to understand. When I returned home, the commonplace seemed different. As I walked around my neighborhood, I sensed a lack of open space. Front lawns seemed boring. I wanted to drive on route 61 through the vast flat land which is punctuated occasionally by an abandoned grain silo, a church or a small town. I wanted people on the sidewalk to acknowledge me and say "hi" or "good mornin". Instead, I walked to a commercial district, looked at Starbucks, the boutiques, and the Indian fast-food restaurant. My thoughts transported me back to the storefronts of Cleveland, Mississippi with names like the Jewish-owned "Jay's Clothing Store".

My short Delta visit made me want to return.

Annie Rosenzweig

[re]discovering HISTORY

The history of Mound Bayou, Mississippi begins on the Hurricane Plantation in Warren County. Joseph Davis, owner of the plantation and brother of Jefferson Davis, was taken by the ideas of Robert Owen, a contemporary who founded several socialist utopian communities in the United States. Davis educated his own slaves and gave them some amount of independence. Consequently, when the Civil War ended slavery, one of Davis' most trusted slaves, Benjamin Montgomery, had the business savvy to buy and run Hurricane Plantation. The all black plantation flourished for a time, its cotton winning international prizes for quality. However, falling cotton prices and other complicating factors contributed to discontent among the black sharecroppers, and the experiment slowly ground to a halt.

Ben Montgomery's son, Isaiah T., was raised and educated on Davis's Hurricane. In early adulthood, he helped his father run the black-owned plantation. He concluded that the downfall of the plantation

Bernice Carnes
watching the Pilgram boats
near by their church
 collage

Maggie Daniels
 collage

Ora Lee Beal
 collage



[re]creating

lay in the fact that the black farmers did not own their own land. A truly successful black colony must have private land ownership and the sense of pride and responsibility that came with it. When the railroad companies came to the Mississippi Delta, eager to develop the land along its tracks, I.T. Montgomery and co-founder Benjamin T. Green jumped at the chance to own land; they and six hundred brave settlers cleared the dense forest and vegetation at a spot halfway between Memphis and Vicksburg, some miles east of the Mississippi River. In 1887, the town of Mound Bayou was founded.

I.T. Montgomery's dream was one of economic self-sufficiency. The community at Mound Bayou treasured its black-owned bank and black-backed oil mill. Mound Bayou was known for its hospital and opportunities for higher education. The mayors and other elected officials of Mound Bayou were black. The citizens of Mound Bayou voted, although the story goes that the ballot box would always "fall off the truck" before reaching its destination to be counted with the other votes in the state. But this was no huge offense to the original dream; I.T. Montgomery placed the inner workings of the community well before any greater political emancipation of blacks in the South.

The community was unique on a personal level as well. Emphasis was placed on the participation of every member, regardless of class. It was claimed that, while there were rich and poor people to be sure, the poor had as much stake in Mound Bayou as anyone else. This sense of community ownership and trust kept crime rates miniscule, and gave Mound Bayou the reputation as the "town that tore down its jail."

Today, Mound Bayou has a predominantly black population of about 2,000. Fluctuating agriculture prices, dwindling

local prospects and the pull of opportunities elsewhere have taken their toll on the town. Driving down the main street, one can see that this small town once teemed with life. Mound Bayou's impressive history is still present in a variety of ways. Isaiah T. Montgomery's old house still stands, along with the old Bank Building, now undergoing renovations. The spirit of this town is most prominent, however, in the resilience and character of the elders of Mound Bayou, who bear living testimony to the history of this town and the Delta at large.

Sources:

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Interview with Milburn Crowe. Mound Bayou, MS, July, 2003.

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[re]miniscing CHILDHOOD

I played many games with my sisters and brothers. We were a family that my mother kept us at home all the time and we had to learn to play with each other. So we learned to love each other, and we played a lot of games like a-ticket-a-tasket. We even shot marbles. Baseball, basketball, and we played tennis...oh we climbed trees. I guess you would call that Squirrels because we would get after each other and see who could catch the other one. And we would go from tree to tree and if we could we would climb that tree. We had a lot of fun in the forest. – DD

You would go to movies, or go to church, or find yourself some activities of your own. Oh yeah – there were dances, dances, dances! – NN

It was just like a old wooden frame house...old dry wood, you know. And I can remember like at least when I was like 8 or 9 years old, you know, and we...had wood stove, wood heater. And I remember we had to go out across the field and pick up cotton stalks as they'd been cut down and dried for to start a fire with like in the wintertime for the next day. And we also had to shuck corn when it dried. You got to shred it for mama to take and make meal for we have cornbread. And then I can remember like a...old house maybe like three bedrooms. Well, then you didn't have separate like living room, dining room and all that, we just only probably had like three bedrooms and then your kitchen, and then your kitchen was big enough for your table, you know. And then we just had to pump water. We had cows to feed and stuff like that comin' up. And then we had to like, sleep together. The boys didn't have a room and the girls didn't – mama just put us to bed, you know. And so we had, outside we had a chicken yard with a house for the chickens, and we had a big fence and stuff, you know, on the side, that's where we kept the horses and mules, and then a thing for your cows. – DW

I must have been around 13 when my father died. He died in 1945, and that left my mother to raise these children that she has, so as a widow she didn't have it too easy, because my father had lost a lot of money during the 30's when the banks failed.... A lot of money he hid in the bank, he never recovered.... She went into business with her sister here in Mound Bayou and started a little restaurant. We worked as best we could, which wasn't that much, to support our mother.... My father had provided so well for the family. I can remember growing up, I mean, as a youngster, every night he would take all of our shoes and just shine them, and have them lined up in a row for all of his children. The next morning he would get up first and lay the fire in the fireplaces, and in the cooking stove, and all my mother had to do was just strike a match to light these fires.... We didn't have electric lights, and he would clean all of the globes to the lamps, polish them up, so that I guess he pretty much spoiled us.... We didn't have a lot of responsibilities, duties, chores to do. – MC

Usually in those days when there was a large family...the older children helped out so much and we cared for the younger children, so far as dressing and seeing that they eat or even keeping them straight at school and around as they went about. And of course our family was no exception. – GS

I had quite a few friends 'cause we all lived right down on the plantation together so we all played together. We had a nice time playing jumping rope, playing shooting marbles.... We loved to fish, and especially for crawfish. We'd get a piece of meat and tie it on a string and put the string on a stick.... We would end up with buckets of crawfish. – AW

I liked to try to embroider piece quilts, they called me an old lady, but I liked to try to cook and do other such things. My mother could piece some pretty quilts. I couldn't piece them like her, but I tried. – DS

[re]defining FAMILY

I finished college at Tougaloo, and then once I finished college, I said, "Now, let me buy you all a home, because if I get married and start having children I won't be able to do it." Daddy said, "oh well, ain't never had it and won't missed it, you won't have to waste your money that way," but I did it anyways and bought them 20 acres northeast of Canton, and it was sold after they were dead. We sold it, I made sure I sold it to a black man and she still lives there, house is the same as we had left it. I wanted to do it because you know, in those days people would work until they were too old to work and the plantation workers would throw them off of their farm!... I didn't intend that to happen to my parents, so I bought them 20 acres. – NN

My first child, if I had had a doctor, I know I could have saved him, but I just ate and drank and I got so big, and when time for the baby come he came foot forwards.... Well, if I had a doctor he could have turned the baby around and could have saved it.... I lost that one. – AW

During the time...probably the last two years of my husband's life, they were my hard times. Like I had those six children, well maybe in the last year of his lifetime. 'Cause he was a person—he loved to drink and stuff, and I had to really make sure that the kids had this and had that, you know. – DW

My last husband...he was OK, but I had to make sure that things were supposed to be did be did. Because he would work and some how you know he'll give me some of the money, but I have to make sure that I look after myself and my children. I made sure that I did not depend on him. –DW

✚ Celia Toliver holds her collage of the church she attended.



It was easy for me. My wife was a schoolteacher. When she worry with those children all the week, she was so glad to get somebody to take them on Sunday. That would always be my job; to take the children to all the outings, all the programs, all the music lessons, all the typing lessons...to the parties, to the picture shows, sit up out there and fight mosquitoes! – GS

[re]counting EDUCATION

I liked the United States History...the history was telling about the slaves and how they was transferred from the North to the south and how they were sold and everything...that was very concerning to me. – DS

There was a reluctance to adequately fund the public education for blacks. Blacks paid more in taxes for the support of the schools, [and though there were fewer whites than blacks, funding for whites was equal to that provided for the greater number of black students], which meant that the black teacher's salary was probably half of what the white teacher's was...that was an inadequate formula for funding, not equitable. – MC

[Black college students] were few and far between, no. There was not a lot of them. There were a few. But now most of the children that I was in fourth and fifth grade, didn't go to college. They fell by the wayside and so forth. – GS

The whites always had the high schools...they would go to twelfth grade, they could finish high school. But the Negroes only could go to tenth grade. Then in tenth grade, unless you were able to go to [college] or maybe go to some of your people that lived in a large community somewhere, maybe out of state, that ended your schooling, your formal training. Now there were some towns in Mississippi that had high schools for blacks but they were few and far between, some of the larger towns. – GS

I loved all my subjects, but my parents was unable to buy my books. I would take my recess time while the children was being recess playing, I would be in that seat with the books, stealing my lessons. That's how I got the chance to have fourth and fifth grade study at one time, cause I was studying both of them at the same time, so I consider myself to be a well-taught fifth grade scholar. – DS

[re]citing
1927 FLOOD

We were in the Delta when the great flood came...yeah I remember that. That was one of the first things I remember. We lost everything we had.

We went back to Louisiana. It didn't just happen over night, just so suddenly. The levee had been threatening to break for, I'd say, weeks. They said that the levee was full and they had seepage under it and it was expected to crest and expected to burst. And a lot of folks had taken that—had heeded that warning, had moved out to the hills at Yazoo City and got out. But a lot of them hadn't. Some of them didn't have anywhere to go, they just was gonna weather it out. Well we never dreamed that—we were living a mile from the levee, and when the levee burst one morning 'bout four o'clock, that evening I was wading around in our yard with water up to my knees, trying to find the washing board to put it on some racks. Daddy nailed lumber all around the walls, put the chairs and the bedsteads all up on top of that.... That water got up, up in 'round the ceilings of that house. We weathered it. And so he put us on the train, took us back to Louisiana in...May. We didn't get back home 'till July, last of July. And every time he pulled one of those beds like that down it would just come apart, cause I remember him going and getting some little nails and little strips, you know, and nail them 'cross there.

We lost all our furniture.... We were living on the delta side of the town at Yazoo City. And when the flood came, then, wasn't nothing to do, all you had to do just say you had somewhere to go and your fare, anything like that, didn't cost you anything. It wasn't nothing in that section of the country, but muddy water.

All them [crops] that was up was drowned. Them that wasn't up, some of them got the land planted. It was July when some of that land—water got off of some of that land, and if it got off any time before July—see the land was soft and muddy, and people would get out there in the fields and the government would send them some cotton seed, and you just get your bucket of cotton seed, and just go along on top of that row and just drop them down in that mud and step on them. First thing you know you got a pretty stand of cotton. You could harvest a little cotton, lot of folks harvested a little crop that year. The Red Cross came 'cross with a lot of help.

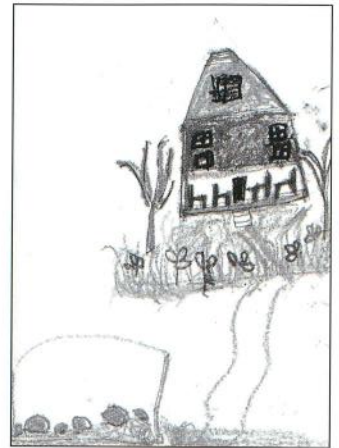
It didn't reach up to Mound Bayou. It come across down south of Mound Bayou. Shaw, over cross to Greenwood, down to Yazoo City, and just flooded that whole country, that end of the Delta. But up in this part of the country, people who lived in Mound Bayou, north of Mound Bayou, east of Mound Bayou, they said they would get in their cars on Sunday, or whatever, and come down and look at the water, you know.

I'm pretty sure some [families] faired worse than we did because—that didn't heed the warning. Just got caught in a sense, you might say. I imagine there were a number of lives lost because all that land under water, and where those people were trapped, some of them were not accounted for. Forgot about it the next day, kept going just like it never happened. You didn't lose too much time...you know it happened, but you kept going. –GS

[re]calling
CHURCH

I wasn't telling no story. I said "Mama, I dreamed I saw Jesus. Mama I saw Jesus," and we were staying beside a gully—there was a gully outside the house—I said, "He was on the cross." I said, "Mama, I seen Jesus".... But I did see Him and sure enough I still know Jesus. – EW

[re]creating



Dora R. Dodds
memory of home
collage



Ella Mae DeFrance
Remembering Home
oil pastel

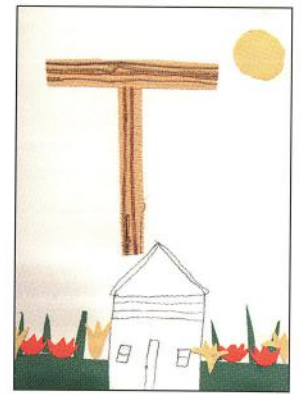
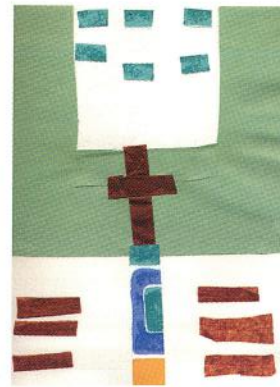


Teresa H. Cain
Flower
acrylic on paper

Alice Lee
dinner on the grounds
 collage

Derotha Weeks
baptismal pool and benches at church
 collage

Mary Boyd
flowers outside the church
 collage



[re]creating

↻ *Beneva Conway, known to all as "Sunshine."*



If you ain't got faith, you don't have no hope. You got to have faith, cause ain't none of us see God, we just reads about it...I believe there's a God somewhere. –AW

My faith to God? I feel like I'm faithful and I believe, I believe in the bible and to God that I am serving a true God, and I believe my work and my trials will not be in vain. – DS

Well [religion] means a lot, because, you know, it learnt me how to be nice to people. It learnt me how to treat people. And it learnt me how to behave myself, you know. And as the time passed by and I got older and understand, and understand about God how he would bless you, and see I could see a lot of things that other people go through with, that I didn't have to go through with. – DW

They were issuing communion and I told Mama, "I want some." I can never forget that—that's my remembrance. And I told her that I would be a child of God then and I never in myself think there's a day when I haven't been ready ever since that night. – EW

I can remember when I was growing up they used to have dinners at the church. And they would have benches all around the trees and it seems as if – there was more people, [and] every one brought a dish. And on those tables they had food food food. Everything you wanted to eat they would bring it. – DD

Have you heard of a creek? That's what we got baptized in. That water was so pretty and clear. And, I didn't see any fish or any thing but it was pretty clear. The preacher and the deacon would take you out in that water and submerge you under that water and it was so pretty and clear. White gowns wouldn't even get dirty. – DD

[re]living RACE RELATIONS

No [the landlord wasn't fair to us]. I'll answer that right away. But, what could I do about it? Nothing. You know, but, like I said, you can look back over your life and see how blessed we are and how God has worked everything out for us.... You work. Everything they gotta get half out of. Ok you go to the field, chop cotton all day long, for three dollars. For three dollars? What is three dollars! And you got five, six babies to take care of, you know? And then we go out and they had these here little buckets...little baskets...that you only get one quarter for filling up one...for make you any money, you gotta pull, fill up a lotta baskets, for only getting twenty-five cent a basket. But after all, by the help of the Lord, we made it. –DW

A lot of them did [own guns], I guess, for both hunting and the rifles and shotguns, they did. In civil rights days, in the '60s, there would be integrated civil rights workers in Mound Bayou, and some outsiders, vendors and others pretty much indicated their resentment for these outside agitators being in Mound Bayou, and pretty much threatened that if the Mound Bayou would put up with this, then they would come in. I remember that my mother said that when there was an incident of groups coming in, she would never realize how many guns there were in Mound Bayou, because people would resent this. – MC

I had good relationships with every white person that I worked with. I had real good relationships. And one lady I took care of her mother and her aunt for ten years, and at least like now they accept me as their family. Every Christmas they gonna make sure I have a present. So I had real good relationships with all the people that I ever worked with. You know everything didn't went like they wanted, everything didn't go like I wanted, but after all, there's not a person that is living that I have worked for that if they need me I wouldn't go back.... And their families were always nice to me too. –DW

I later in life was a volunteer with the boy scouts in Chicago, and I served as a scoutmaster for a short period of time, I served a fundraising chairman in the downtown area district where I worked, I served in different capacities and received some awards and honors as a volunteer in the boy scouting.... I became the Order of the Arrow ... a few honors like that, but when I came back to Mississippi I was considering going back into volunteer scouting, but I could just not accept the segregated system of scouting that they had here. Some of the leaders asked me about becoming a volunteer for scouting, but for some reason I resented that they were segregated units, and so I never did when I came back home in '67. -- MC

[The landowner] was the type of person that when my grand daddy would get through with the crops at the end of the year he'd...give him whatever he wanted him to have, and it wasn't enough for us to live on. My grandmother made ends meet by sewing, doing things like that. She had a lot of chickens, she'd sell eggs.... And my granddaddy raised hogs and beef, cows, you know, and they sold meat, you know. They were the type of people that didn't just depend on the white man. They did something for themselves. – DD

One year my granddaddy made 99 bales of cotton, besides workin' everything else, and that year that white man said...he didn't clear anything, said he was in the hole. And you know what I mean when I say, 'in the hole' is you didn't make nothin' to take you on to the next year.... And I'm gonna just tell you what my granddaddy did. He told us to keep it a secret. And he said we gon' get off this man's place. That was his land, his house and everything. So this house that we moved to...west of Mound Bayou was a government house. I don't know how my granddaddy went about and found it, but he made sure that he got two trucks. Everything we had he put it on that truck, and we left that place at night, everything on those two trucks. And we moved off that place, because he said he wasn't gonna stand to make that many bales of cotton and not clear anything. So that's why we were out there, on our own 80 acres of land. And then when my granddaddy started, you know, making his own crops and everything we were able to clear something. And then we could see that the white man was actually taking, he was taking everything that my granddaddy had made. – DD

I really was considering being a conscientious objector, but then in the end I decided that I would volunteer to go into the service to be eligible for educational benefits. When I went in and tried to take advantage of these things, found that they were not available to me because I was black and I was stationed in the south, that created a lot of resentment in me and I asked that I be moved out of the South. I did not want to fight the south, but I just didn't want to be a part of it, a victim of being there, because the other airmen were allowed to go to the local universities and take classes, but the air force, even though they had a policy of integration, they did not want to disturb the institutions of the south, and so you were denied that opportunity. So I asked to be transferred out of the south, and they said that you couldn't be transferred on those grounds. It was another campaign that I had to wage, and I did finally get transferred, to Labrador. – MC

When I started teaching that was something that was different. The high school over at Ruleville was integrated. And there was a lot of white teachers ended up, they'd be all over on that side eatin' together, and all the blacks over here. So I broke that monotony. I started getting my plate and going and sitting with them.... We as blacks did that. We started mingling with them so they started mingling with them. – DD

The unit that I was in for technical training, one of my best friends was a Chinese guy, and one was a Jewish fellow, and one was a guy from Milwaukee, something like that. And one was a southern boy from Arkansas, whose father was the superintendent of education there. A white guy, and his wife.... They were my best friends, because they would visit and we would go on picnics together...it was kind of ironic, cause he was from Arkansas and his father was part of this Little Rock thing, and the fact that we were best friends. – MC

I can remember coming to Mound Bayou, and as soon I was down at the south end, at the service station.... I could just take a deep breath and be relaxed. Here I am driving, just got my driver's license, didn't know where I was going, a white man in a truck started messing with me, he had run up behind me and bumped me, so I was so scared that I didn't know what to do. But at the same time, I had a '45 lying over in the next seat.... It was my daddy's, he said, "you're going this far, you need some protection," so I had it. – NN

My mother was very light, my dad was brown skinned I guess you can say. My mother's father was really a white person and then her mother was mixed, so I wound up being the lightest one of the 3 sons my mother had.... I do remember getting into a few fights, they would call me funny names.... I managed all right. – LH

[re]collecting EMPLOYMENT

I worked at both schools... I was supervising YMCA girls, I was a custodian, and I worked at the concession stand...it was hard, but I made it.... I learned some of what I learned by listening in on the classroom – I'd be in the hall, but I was taking in a lot of learning...but nobody noticed. – DS

I did not have a very good education, but I had such good understanding, yes I did, 'cause you know like, working at the school [as a custodian] and taking care of the older people...I made like twenty, twenty-two thousand dollars a year, yes ma'am. And I worked for about 30 or 32 years, two jobs...and raised the children. And I always look back and say, I pat myself on the back. For about 32 years I worked two jobs...in the last 8 or 10 years I would say when I made a lot of money, I bought two new cars, and I bought a house, with that little money. And I don't owe nobody nothin' with nothin'. –DW



↑ Hattie Vassel (left) and Josephine Hankins (right) enjoy one of the outings that the group took to Delta museums and galleries.



Dorothy Kemp
dinner on the grounds
collage



Teresa H. Cain
Remembering Home
oil pastel



Lisa Alford
Flower
acrylic on paper

I really enjoyed nursing, and I worked hard when I was nursing, and raising children too was very very very difficult. It wasn't easy, a long way from leaving my children ... I never will forget, my experience down in the hospital in Vicksburg. I was the oldest person in my class, with children, all the others were young and just out of school and all that. But I adapted to it pretty well. I focused on my children, and what I could do if I completed the course. – EA

↪ Teresa Cain wears a family reunion t-shirt and observes the art work her friends have created.



[re]membering AGRICULTURE

It's just been difficult. Extremely difficult. Since there's no work to do. Like farming, is really kinda out for the farmers because...this time of year, people used to go to the fields and chop cotton for a living. But they can't do that anymore. Things have really changed over the years. –EA

After the machinery and after they stopped the color fading with machinery, none of the plantations had no tenants. The tenants had to move and they tore the houses down... Most of the people down there emigrated to Mound Bayou. – DS

Well the cotton sheet, paying a dollar something a day for work, that wasn't that much. 1944, that was nothing. Worked from sunup to sundown choppin' and pickin', pickin' cotton and get up with the sun and, I mean you start sunup and then you had to work till sundown, you know with one hour's rest and [my father] just wanted to do better for himself. And for his children. – EA

I attended an experiment over in Sunflower County where they first brought the first cotton picker, and give a demonstration (probably 1942) on a farm south of Clarksdale. We all, everybody wanted to see that machine that could pick that cotton out that boll. White and blackThe large farmers, plantation owners that owned big plantations, thousands of acres, they were looking at it as being a substitute for labor, and that they could work – in other words they could reduce their labor force ... And so they went down through the fields and he was demonstratin' and we looked at it and we looked at it and we looked. And I noticed, one thing about the [machine] that attracted my attention was, one of those things that was supposedly picking was picking the cotton, doing a pretty fair job, and the other was getting it out the boll, but he was droppin' it on the ground. And I said, I said oh my goodness, I said this thing is gonna be a must now. I said because now, they learnin' how to get it out the boll and within the next year they gon' be puttin' that cotton off that ground in that basket ... You just might as well get ready for it if you stay in the business, because – And so now what do you have now? You have cotton farms now, and you don't see any hands out there doin' nothing. They been displaced all the way around. Those machines are getting it out. – GS

We all of us croppers worked in the field, chopped cotton, picked cotton for a living, and until I was grown it was the same thing, chopping and picking cotton for a living. – AW

[re]discovering CIVIL RIGHTS

Whites were just treated as another customer and all in Mound Bayou.... It was when I went away, for example when I traveled to the school I was attending, Southern Christian institute, I would have occasion to take the buses. It was during those times that I very much resented the segregation and discrimination ... the restaurants...would not serve colored [people]. I would recall that I would go in just to aggravate these orders, to put them through the discomfort of having to say, "We don't serve colored." I remember getting on the buses and would protest in my own special way by taking down that sign that was marked "colored" at the back of the bus, and throwing it on the baggage rack.... I can remember one incident when the bus driver came back and stared at me with bitterness...it was just my way of protesting that. – MC

I think that most of the citizens felt pretty apathetic [toward the Civil Rights Movement]. That they just felt that this was something affecting other blacks in other places, more so than themselves, but it didn't take long for them to realize that they were just as affected as blacks in other places, because of some of these incidents of outsiders coming in. It's just that Mound Bayou's citizens felt a sense of freedom, and they felt like this just didn't apply to them, that it was for the benefit of blacks in other communities. – MC

They integrated Ole Miss. Now our governor had been told that Meredith was coming to Ole Miss. He knew exactly what kinda suit Meredith had on, he knew exactly what hour Meredith he was gonna appear on the campus. Now knowin' that information, was there any reason that two people would lose their lives? He could'a said this is not what I want, but it's what we gonna have to adjust to. You see what I'm talkin' 'bout? Just hadn't thought. You know I went to, that Sunday they integrated Ole Miss I went to a funeral up at West Point. I had a friend who'd lost a brother. I wouldn't go up there now if such a thing was goin' on. But I didn't think nothin' 'bout it. I knew they said Meredith was goin' up there, but I didn't know it was gonna be—every wide place we got to in the road between where I lived and – was an army convoy pulled off on the side of the road, headed toward Ole Miss.... Mississippi could'a been paralyzed in just a minute, matter of seconds.* – GS

*James Meredith was the first African-American to attend the University of Mississippi. This significant event, which was brought about by court order, occurred in September of 1962 and was accompanied by violence which necessitated federal armed intervention on a major scale. James Meredith graduated from the University of Mississippi. He became a conservative Republican and served on the staff of Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. Mr. Meredith's son received a doctorate from the Graduate School of Business at the University of Mississippi in May, 2003.

re|deeming MOUND BAYOU

It seems that everybody was so friendly and at that time Mound Bayou was in the bloom. People had a lot of things here then that they don't have now. They had two hospitals, and they'd even have fairs every year. And they had a big pool up here, and a big Easter egg hunt...something that you'd come to town and enjoy. –DD

The first time I ever sat in a railroad station and saw ['Black'] on that front, you know, door...was in Mound Bayou. I had never seen that before. Where I came from, 'Black' was on the back. 'White' was on the front.... I'd been on trains several times, but I'd never been on a train where I boarded the train and just walked right outta the front door and walked onto the train. I always had to come from behind. That was something new. I never will forget that.... I walked up to Mound Bayou and looked and I said 'Well sir that's odd'. And that thing just stuck with me a long time....Now you see I lived near Merigold, and I went on down to Merigold and I saw 'White' out there on the front, 'Black' on the back, on the end. And as I'm comin' on back home I said 'What is the difference?' I said 'Just looks like to me the one that's in power gonna put the other one behind'. – GS

The adults in the community had a certain amount of...respect for the children, they didn't just treat them as unimportant, and it made you have a sense of importance, even though you were a child, they would allow you to express yourself as a child, but they would not let you get out of your place, disrespect the elders, and so that I had a happy growing up in Mound Bayou. I think that was a good example of where the whole village raised the child, was here in Mound Bayou. – MC

[At Mound Bayou High School] we rode the bus. We as black kids rode the bus. We was able to ride the bus from where we lived. We lived about three miles from Mound Bayou and the bus would come by the door and pick us up. – DD

We voted, but they tell me, I don't know if this is true, that they would throw the votes in the river! I do not know if this is true. – NN

We as black children, we had three miles from our home to the school and white kids had the school bus. They rode the school bus. We as black children had to walk those three miles in the morning and in the afternoon back. And the white kids would just be throwin' paper at us. They'd pass us walkin' home and they would throw those, the paper out at us, that they would chew up and spit out, chew it and spit out and throw it at us. I can remember that very well. They were yelling and screaming at us and we never stopped.... They were doing all the teasing and going on because we were walking. – DD

If a black person was running away, got in trouble, they knew if they ever made it to Mound Bayou they wouldn't be bothered. – NN

It [Mound Bayou] had a sawmill, it had undertakers, it had drugstores...it was once a nice place. That's right, they had the post office, they had the old cellars...they had grocery stores. They had most anything here. – DS

It did happen during the 60s that a young man got in trouble with the highway patrol, he was a son of one of the civil rights leaders in Mound Bayou, and when he made it back to Mound Bayou he was hiding under a house, and they had law enforcement officers swarming the community from outside, and they discovered this boy under the house and shot him to pieces. That was something that disturbed the older citizens of Mound Bayou because it was something that had been resisted through the years, and then in the 60s for something like this to have happened. A lot of the older citizens pretty much kind of lost confidence in some of the leaders of Mound Bayou because they had not prevented this from happening.... – MC



🏠 Ora Lee Beal (left) remembers her church family to Lisa Alford (right).

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This project was funded by Gene Dattel. The Delta Center for Culture and Learning is an interdisciplinary program within Delta State University. Its mission is to promote the broad understanding of the history and culture of the Mississippi Delta and its significance to the rest of the world. Its activities include classes, field trips and tours, oral history projects, historic preservation efforts, and service learning and community outreach programs.