

# THE GROVE: STORIES OF CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

by  
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## ABSTRACT

MITCHELL DOWDEN: The Grove: Stories of Cultivating Connections  
(Under the direction of Scott Fiene)

This thesis studies the University of Mississippi's tailgating area known as the Grove. While it explores the logistics and preparation for home game activities, this thesis looks beyond the image and into aspects not so obvious to the weekend visitor: its history, its environmental impact, the economics, and even its reflection of the progress and challenges surrounding race.

This is not intended to be a supreme authority or academic analysis of the Grove, but instead a journalistic piece reflecting the stories and personal anecdotes I encountered.

To gather information, I conducted live interviews with people familiar to the Grove in unique ways and supplemented their stories with information from websites, magazines and newspapers. This project uncovers how the Grove became vital to campus life, why it is still important and how it's influential as a socializer at the university.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Grove is not a monolith.

The 10-acre plot of land in the middle of the University of Mississippi's campus is alive and continuously evolving. It's unique to each of its hundreds of thousands of visitors. The Grove can be breathtaking, confusing, glorious or maybe even dangerous; but it is always, always unforgettable.

The Grove has gone through remarkable changes since its humble beginnings as fenced-in pasture. Today, it is iconic in the world of sports, synonymous with football weekends and the ultimate tailgating experience.

But there's a lot about the Grove that most people don't know, or I didn't at least, so I investigated and tried to answer the following question: What can the Grove tell us about our campus, our state and ourselves?

## Chapter I: An Abbreviated History of the Grove

According to “The Ole Miss Experience,” a textbook required for freshmen taking the First-Year Experience class at the University of Mississippi, before there was the Grove, there was the “inner circle of campus.” Robert Burwell Fulton, chancellor of the university from 1892 to 1906 and a graduate of the university, was responsible for first preserving and growing the 10-acre area of campus in 1889 when the school was building its first library, now Ventress Hall.

Fulton expanded campus eastward toward what was then a train depot, advancing the campus past the “inner circle,” which had previously been at the east end of campus. With this expansion, Fulton added trees and shrubs to the area, adding natural beauty and a lush landscape.

The Grove has been written about by students and faculty alike, but it has gone by a few names. In 1899 the university year book, *Ole Miss*, included an article written by a student who believed spirits of soldiers who died at the University chapel, now the Croft Institute, haunted the building that had been used as a hospital during the Civil War. In the student’s article, the writer refers to “mighty forest trees and vine-clad buildings” and “those dark woods past the Dead House,” which is almost certainly a reference to the Grove.

Later, in 1928, another *Ole Miss* yearbook has a photo referring to “the Glade” but by 1935 it was back to “the Grove.” Plus, a line in the 1996 university annual states, “In 1935, the Grove gets its name.”

But the Grove wouldn’t be the Grove without football. The first football craze at the university was brought by Coach John Vaught in 1947, when he led the Rebels to their first SEC Championship and bowl game win in the same year.

This new excitement about football expressed itself in the only way football fans know: tailgating. By the 1950s, the Grove was beginning to fill with fans and their cars. The cars would eventually be outlawed after a rainy homecoming against Vanderbilt University in 1991 left the Grove looking more like a mud pit than a grove of grass and trees.

However, it’s important to note that it wasn’t until the 1980s, after a stadium expansion, were more than a handful of home games played in Oxford; most games were played in Jackson, Mississippi, or Memphis, Tennessee.

After the vehicles were expelled, the Grove was free to exponentially expand into the football mecca it has become today. The Grove goes beyond football too, with student activities such as Frisbee games between classes to community wide events such as spring concerts and the Summer Sunset Series of films shown in the Grove.



## 10 Must Knows for Tailgating

1. The campus, the Grove and the Circle will open at 7:30 p.m. on Friday and close three hours after the end of the game or at midnight (whichever is first). Please note, all tailgating areas will be completely cleared (including all people and personal items) at 6:30 p.m. on Friday until the 7:30 p.m. opening.
2. With the exception of approved University-sponsored tents, all spaces are first come, first served.
3. Tents that are 12-by-20 or smaller are permitted. Tents that require stakes are not allowed. If a tent is determined to be an unacceptable size or is housing unacceptable activities, the owner or vendor will be asked to immediately reduce the size of the tent or the tent will be removed.
4. Know and obey regulations concerning alcohol use. Drinking is illegal for anyone under the age of 21. Individuals and tent groups that do not follow alcohol regulations are subject to removal, arrest or both,
5. Portable generators with a decibel rating of 60db or less are permitted for tailgate use.
6. No solicitation is permitted, including commercial or political advertisement or handouts.
7. Open flames, propane tanks and propane bottles are strictly prohibited.
8. Amplified sound is prohibited.
9. Do not leave valuables unattended. The university is not responsible for unattended tents and items.

10. Help keep The Grove and The Circle beautiful by placing all recyclables in designated recycling receptacles and other trash in trash receptacles.

In addition to the above, other rules regarding tailgating at Ole Miss are below.

- No cords or cables of any type will be allowed to run across streets or sidewalks.
- No cords or cables of any type will be allowed to be run or pass through open windows or through doors of campus buildings. Unauthorized entry into any campus building for the purpose of plugging in extension cords will not be tolerated.
- Electrical circuits are not to be overloaded by plugging in multiple extension cords by using splitters or power strips. Circuits that are tripped will not be reset.
- Unauthorized tampering with the University's electrical distribution equipment, including circuit breaker panels, junction boxes or disconnects will not be tolerated.

*From olemissfb.com.*

## Chapter II: What is the Grove?

### **CURTIS WILKIE**

*You can go home again.*

Curtis Wilkie is a tall, slow-talking man. From Greenwood, Mississippi, his beard is scraggly and meets his shirt collar as they compete for visibility. He's what you would expect a retired John Grisham character to look like: a well-dressed academic who would look just as much in place in Oxford, Mississippi, as he would in Milan, Italy.

The walls of his corner office in the Meek School of Journalism and New Media are piled high with books, stacks of old magazines and posters. There's even a signed 1970 campaign poster of a failed attempt for the sheriff of Aspen, Colorado, from his friend, Hunter S. Thompson. A well-used coffee pot and an old can of Billy Beer are hidden among the organized chaos.

A self-proclaimed liberal Democrat, Wilkie covered the 1972 presidential campaign with his pal, Hunter S. Thompson. But before that, he graduated from the University of Mississippi with a degree in journalism in 1963 and worked as a reporter and staff editor for the *Clarksdale Press Register* and later as a legislative aide on Capitol Hill. He settled down in 1975 at the *Boston Globe*, where he worked until retirement in 2000.

Of all the people interviewed, Wilkie was at the University of Mississippi the earliest—more than 70 years ago, when he lived on campus as a child while his mother

got her master's degree. "I've been wandering around this campus since right after World War II," he said.

To him, the Grove was always a pretty piece of property, even when he enrolled at the university in the late 1950s.

However, once he left Mississippi in 1969, Wilkie didn't make it back to the Grove until the fall of 1993, when a close friend of his, James P. "Butch" Cothren, and his wife, Pat, invited him to visit them for a game.

Wilkie wrote in his book, *Dixie*, that at the time of his visit he was living in Boston and writing for the *Globe* as a national reporter. When Butch and Pat asked him to visit, he couldn't turn it down. Wilkie missed SEC football after living in Washington and New England for so long; the allure of Southern Saturdays spent watching football hadn't lost its appeal.

The Cothrens brought Wilkie to the Grove, which by then had transformed from a pasture into a true tailgating machine. "It absolutely blew me away," Wilkie said. "I ran into people I hadn't seen in 30 years."

Upon returning to Boston, he couldn't shake the experience; he knew he had to go back. He made his case to Matt Storin, editor of the *Globe*. "I conned the editor of the *Globe* to let me live and work out of New Orleans," Wilkie said. "Since I was a national reporter and traveled so much, they allowed it to happen."

He promised to move back to Boston in the spring when the weather got warmer, but he never went back. The *Globe* never asked him to return, instead, they formalized a Southern bureau in New Orleans, where Wilkie worked and lived for the next seven years. The move was sparked by one weekend in the Grove.

The Grove, and all that comes with it: the memories, the people, the attitude. It's like an electromagnet, supercharged and always on, pulling people back to it. Recalling his visit in 1993, Wilkie described the Grove as almost like a picnic, informal and less packed, not "cheek to jowl" as it is today. Living in New Orleans made it easier to attend more games, so in the fall he began to travel to games more regularly. Most of his contemporaries with whom he spent time with in the Grove had children at the university and their children would set up the group's area in the Grove.

As the Grove continued to grow, Wilkie's original group morphed into a different group of tailgaters that still sets up every home game.

Like a lot of other groups in the Grove, Wilkie and his group named their tent for identification purposes. They named their tent 1810, after the numbers of Archie and Eli Manning. "Oddly enough, the Mannings (Archie and Olivia) were part of that group at one time," he said.

A perk of Groving with the Mannings was the special guests who would occasionally stop by if they had a bye week in the NFL.

Wilkie said, "I can remember Eli coming by the Grove after games. I remember one year after they were both out of school and playing pro ball, Ole Miss played the University of Tennessee and both had off weekends. Eli and Peyton both came to the Grove. It was something of a madhouse. The university finally had to put security at our tents just to keep them from being mobbed in the Grove."

But it's not just Super Bowl champions who visit the Grove. Wilkie's children threw his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party in the Grove in 2000. Howell Raines, the editor of the *New York Times* at the time, was there and Tom Brokaw, who still visits the Grove, was also there.

Another favorite visitor of Wilkie was Sen. John McCain of Arizona. McCain visited the Grove for the 2005 Louisiana State University football game with Sen. Trent Lott. As a political reporter, Wilkie covered McCain and knew he had some leverage to get McCain to visit his tent.

The night before the game, Wilkie had dinner with McCain and a small group of people at the chancellor's house. He knew McCain was going to be in the Grove the next day so he asked the senator to visit his tent. He added, "There were a bunch of Republicans at our tent and I knew I could score some points with them. And damned if he didn't, he came and spent about half an hour with our group."

Sen. Thad Cochran, who was a friend from college to a lot of members in the group, and Gov. Haley Barbour could be seen at Wilkie's tent too.

Like most Grovers, Wilkie and his group now pay vendors to set up their tent for the group. Wilkie and his group show up on Saturday morning and everything at their spot: tent, chairs, tables. All they do is bring the food, drink and conversation.

One of the biggest influences on the Grove is the football team. The team's performance on the field has a direct effect on how people treat the Grove. Wilkie said, "Obviously, people are a lot happier when we win. When we beat Alabama in 2015, instead of heading home after the game they were all partying in the Grove for quite awhile after that game. Or, for example, when we lose to Mississippi State, people are out of there."

He added, "People are generally philosophical about it. We've been through bad times and good in football. They have fun in the Grove regardless of how it turns out."

Wilkie was also here in 1962 when James Meredith enrolled as the first African-American student at the university. The University of Mississippi has been in the spotlight for race-related issues multiple times since the violent integration. Most recently, there's been a battle about whether the Mississippi state flag should be flown on the school grounds because the Confederate battle flag is part of the state flag design. While the Associated Student Body voted to take it down, a lot of people felt it was a betrayal to the state.

But, while the school is still caught up in these deeply embedded problems, Wilkie suggested there is still progress. "Sociologically, we've progressed light years," he said. "Although we still aren't where we should be, we're slowly getting there."

That progress includes the Grove. "I would like to see more of a black presence in the Grove," Wilkie said, "but I think that's getting better every year. There's still some black students who, understandably, don't feel comfortable in the Grove, especially if those people with the flags are walking around."

All the full-time members of Wilkie's Grove group are white, but there's a conscious effort to see that their guests are integrated. "There's a friend of mine who's a doctor at UMMC who is an Ole Miss graduate and black," he said. "Whenever he's here for a game, him and his brother come by. They are very welcome, but I wish I'd see more of it."

Some of his group provide scholarships to black students at the university and always invite them, ensuring the students know they have a place they are welcomed.

However, not every tent is as open as Wilkie's. "There are parts of the Grove that aren't as welcoming as they should be. But that's part of the greater Ole Miss problem, from my generation on," he said.

To those who feel the Grove is laced with a certain unapproachability, Wilkie responded with empathy. "If you don't like something because there's too many assholes in Mississippi, it'd get pretty hard to move around," he said. "That's not going to keep me from the Grove. I'm going to have a good time but you can be sure I'm going to bring some black friends, too."

Wilkie is sure the Grove could be used to help heal racial divides on campus, but not enough people see it that way. While people aren't typically going out of their way to mistreat or exclude minorities, not enough use it as an intentional time to include those who might look different than them.

Only within the 21<sup>st</sup> century have many African-Americans felt comfortable enough to venture into the Grove as the perception of Ole Miss as a bastion of the Old South began to fade.

As for the future of the Grove, Wilkie hopes it will continue as it is. He said, "I hope the university doesn't start to use it as a money-making device. It would begin to lose a lot of its character."

"There may have been a fight or two in the Grove over the years," he said, "but it's generally a hospitable place. Visitors from other schools come and hang out, and no one is going to harass them. Not even LSU fans."



**DR. ED MEEK**  
*The social network.*

Dr. Ed Meek isn't a tall or imposing man. But what he lacks in height is more than made up for in his magnetism. His laughter can be heard from just about anywhere in the offices of HottyToddy.com, the online publication he started. Dr. Meek is 76 years old but has the energy of someone 30 years his junior and is as talkative and excited as anyone.

He arrived as a student in Oxford in 1958 with just a couple of hundred dollars to his name. After graduating with a degree in journalism, he worked for the university and soon after, at the age of 24, became the youngest department head at Ole Miss as the director of public relations. Dr. Meek retired from the university in 1998 after 36 years of service as an associate professor of journalism and an assistant vice chancellor.

Dr. Meek worked under four chancellors and each time a new one came to town, he would humbly offer his resignation, although they all declined to take him up on the offer.

One chancellor that he recalled having a particularly unique impact on the Grove was Gerald Turner. Turner, now the president of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, was chancellor of the University of Mississippi from 1984 to 1995.

Dr. Meek recalled some alumni were worried about Turner's strong religious and conservative convictions. His preacher-like presence loomed over the Ole Miss partying culture.

One day, Turner called Dr. Meek into his office and told him to stop the drinking in the Grove. “I went home and told my wife to pack the bags, there was no way that was going to happen,” he said.

As Dr. Meek wrestled with the idea, a few weeks later he was called back to Turner’s office and was asked about the status of the drinking in the Grove. Dr. Meek asked Turner if he wanted him to be a yes man or to tell the truth. Turner replied he wanted the truth, so Dr. Meek responded, “Chancellor, you mess with the Grove and you’ll be out by the end of the month.”

Turner dropped the project.

Later, Turner called Dr. Meek back in and tasked him with a new project: getting the liquor bottles under the tables in the Grove. Dr. Meek knew he could work with this idea.

He organized a group that started at the Student Union at the west side of the Grove and worked toward the Alumni House on the east side.

Dr. Meek recalled, “Of course, I knew just about everyone in the Grove. When I started asking everyone to put the bottles under their tables, they all wanted one last drink with me before they moved them. By the time I got to the other side of the Grove, I couldn’t stand up! But we got the bottles under the table.”

Before the Grove was covered in tents each home game, people used to come to campus, park their cars, open the tailgate and maybe set up a card table with some food. Simple and humble, the beginnings of the Grove weren’t as lavish as today’s tailgating; it was more of a picnic atmosphere.

Dr. Meek acknowledged the Grove is an exceptional place, but went further, suggesting it’s a sacred ground on campus and has been since before he got to Oxford in

1958. But when people began to realize the cars in the Grove were causing compaction of the soil and killing the trees, there was still a lot of opposition to removing the cars.

It was a big political controversy. Alumni loved parking their cars in the Grove, and they didn't want to give that up. It took the school prohibiting cars in the Grove in 1991 to finally keep them out, which helped save the Grove.

John Weathersby, a leader in the student government at the university and a former student of Dr. Meek's, also had his part in saving the Grove. With the help of Ole Miss students, Weathersby raised \$25,000 to irrigate the Grove, which was one of the first steps at seriously protecting and preserving the Grove. Weathersby and his team used the fundraiser and irrigation to convince people to get the cars out of the Grove. Today, there's a monument in the Grove commemorating Weathersby and other students who worked to raise money.

While the Grove may have had humble beginnings, it wasn't long after the cars left that it began to change. Without the cars, there was an abundance of room, and the Grove exploded in size. The over-the-top, extravagant tailgating that the Grove is known for today began to form in the years following.

Dr. Meek felt the Grove is important to families too. "Generations of families keep coming back to the Grove," he said. "I know families with three generations at their tents. Most families have Thanksgiving and Christmas once a year, but we get that same community about seven times a year in the Grove."

The Grove gives a magical, festive power to the people there. Win or lose, each home football game is a reason to celebrate. Grovers do not skimp on celebrations, which had

been a point of contention to many chancellors at the university, until Robert Khayat was named chancellor in 1995.

Dr. Meek remembered Khayat brought a very different mindset about the university's party reputation, which previous chancellors didn't appreciate.

*Playboy* magazine used to release a list of top party schools, a list the University of Mississippi often found itself on. Each year the *Playboy* list mentioned the university, Dr. Meek, as the head of public relations, would get calls telling him to get them off the list. "They would get fired up and tell me to get the university out of the list," he said. "But of course, what the heck could I do about it? It was true!"

Dr. Meek knew Khayat was going to call him when the list was published again, but to his surprise, Khayat took a different tone. He wanted to know what made students at the University of Mississippi different from students at New York University or the University of Virginia or the University of Texas at Austin.

The answer: social skills.

"We did some research and found the socialization of Ole Miss students is an important asset in business. They can talk with anybody," said Dr. Meek. "So we said we can be the party school and turn out people who can walk, chew gum and socialize. If that's the way the business world is, then let's do it!"

The Grove starts the socialization process at the university; it's a place where students can develop social skills needed later in life.

"All of that begins in the Grove. It gives birth to careers. If you don't think business goes out and drinks, then you haven't been out there, these are realities of the real world," Dr. Meek said.

This comparison to the Grove as a birthplace of careers only becomes truer when it's noted that the commencement for graduating seniors also takes place in the Grove. A sea of white chairs stand out against the young grass of the Grove in the spring. Seniors get ready to go off into the world in a Grove very different than that on game days; it's quiet and calm, as if the Grove itself is listening in on the speaker.

“The Grove experience is part of the crucible that builds who students are. It's part of what builds ‘the Ole Miss network.’ Let me tell you,” Dr. Meek added, “the network and the Ole Miss spirit are real.”

**BILL ROSE**  
*Balm for the soul.*

South Beach, Miami. Images of late nights at clubs, beautiful women and beaches come to mind. Which is why it's such a surprise that Bill Rose, now an adjunct professor teaching a depth report magazine class and taking students on reporting trips across Mississippi, lived there for so long.

Rose arrived in Miami in 1975, working for the *Miami Herald* as a journalist, national editor and eventually editor of *Tropic*, the *Herald's* Sunday magazine. Rose is from Shelby, Mississippi, a small Delta town between Clarksdale and Cleveland, and was a student at the University of Mississippi from 1965 to 1969. Rose received a scholarship to the law school at the university upon graduation, but dropped out a few weeks into the first semester to start working for the *Delta Democrat Times* in Greenville, Mississippi.

Rose began romantically musing about the Grove began as a student. He found the Grove a wonderful place for people to relax and enjoy the warmth of the sun. "What I remember of the Grove was it was this wonderful, ideal place that you could go to and let the campus breathe," he recalled.

In the late 1960s, there were few, if any, lights in the Grove; it was so dark some students were scared to walk through it at night. However, other students would go into the Grove at night with dates to find some alone time.

Rose used to drive up to Oxford with another family to tailgate in the Grove, back when cars were still allowed. "We'd go in an old station wagon and pull down the gate of the car and put the food on the tailgate. Sometimes they had a card table, sometimes they didn't, and we would eat on paper plates," he said. "It was a pale imitation of what it is

today. There were no chandeliers, no tents, no lavish setups. It was pretty basic, but there was this certain great charm.”

After leaving Oxford for Greenville in 1969, Rose didn’t visit the Grove for a football game again until November 2003, when the university was playing LSU and Eli Manning was the quarterback; he was blown away.

“I was stunned, I couldn’t believe it. I had seen photos, but they can’t possibly do it justice. When I got out there, I realized it’s not just tents all over the Grove, it was a sea, an ocean, of tents,” he said. “They literally cover the Grove. You could barely move.”

Rose thought the Grove was phenomenal. The extravagant food and decorations that people had worked for hours on won him over. He especially liked what he found to be comical lengths to which people were going to conceal their booze.

It wasn’t just the physical attributes of the Grove that had changed. Along with the tents, people brought a different attitude to the Grove. “It’s a big yard party,” Rose said. “People were there to celebrate the university, to party, to have fun. Some just come to explicitly get drunk, and you could tell because they could barely move and the game hadn’t even started.”

The Grove has a mysterious power to stir emotion in its visitors, and Rose isn’t immune to that. When he thought about what the Grove means to him and why it’s special, he said, “It was chaos. It was organized. You just felt your spirits rise when you first came upon the scene, you couldn’t be unhappy at it. It’s the only time I can be with that many people and *still* be that relaxed. We are all there for two things: Ole Miss and to have some fun.”

A complaint often hurled at the Grove is that it's sometimes *too* rowdy or *too* unruly. Frequently these complaints are directed toward those in Greek life who have too much fun. Pledges of fraternities are abundant, running around in navy blazers and ties, probably looking for a drink for someone or taking a snooze in a folding chair. But Rose shrugged it off and took a "loosen your collar" view against the over-boisterous activity.

He recalled one memory when Coach Hugh Freeze had recently taken helm of the football team. He was sitting close to one of the fraternity tents and noticed some of the older fraternity members had required a pledge to memorize and recite Freeze's pregame speech to the players. He said, "The pledge was saying it in Hugh Freeze's accent and it was fabulous. He had to do it three or four times, but he was really into it. The alumni walking around would stop and look around because they thought they'd heard Hugh Freeze's voice, and here's this young pledge just rattling on and on."

Rose explained why he thinks the Grove is important. He emphasized what people have repeated throughout other interviews: the seemingly medicinal qualities of the Grove and how it fills people with delight.

He suggested when people think of the Grove they remember their university experiences. "It can't be separated from the Ole Miss ethos. Students remember going to the Grove and the joy of the green grass and the trees and realize that it's something that no other campus has." He said, "You can feel like you're apart from everything. It's a safe haven, a relaxation, a sleeping pill, a relief valve.

The Grove brings its visitors a sense of freedom. "For a moment, you can forget the pressures of the classroom and whatever chaos you find yourself in and feel your blood



pressure drop. You can feel the temperature drop as you walk into the shade of the Grove.” Rose added, “It’s balm for the soul. And above that, it’s a great place to party.”

Rose addressed that although the university saddled itself with Confederate imagery, the administration throughout the years has been smart enough not to develop or build on the Grove, they’ve kept it a unique green space, something other schools look upon with great envy.

“Can you imagine the budget pressure the university has been under or how many covetous glances have been thrown at the Grove? How many buildings they could have put out there? No, they’ve kept it natural and kept it the Grove,” he said.

He continued and noted higher education needs more spaces like the Grove. Places that aren’t all sterile sidewalks and buildings. Students need places to get away to relax and learn. “The Grove is part of the overall mystic,” he said. “It took a lot of courage and vision to hold onto the Grove. It’s an icon, a symbol of Ole Miss.”

There’s a complex relationship with the city of Oxford and the university. Not everyone in Oxford is completely wooed by the school, mostly turned off by the students. For some it’s the activities on the Square, for others it’s the traffic or the noisy and messy neighbors. Not everyone feels this way; there are plenty of alumni in town plus faculty and staff who spend most of their time working with or for the university.

It’s clear to Rose that the city of Oxford is proud to host a university, even if it annoys some residents, but mostly because they can’t control the school. “I think the Grove is one of those things that endears the university to Oxford,” he said, “even the grumps and the grouches that get mad at the crowds that interrupt their lives.”

That's not to say every professor likes the Grove, just like not every student or alumni enjoys the bustling crowds and constant noise, but Rose thinks the bizarre and unique are what make the Grove worth each visit.

“There are passionate feelings for those who love it and those who don't. The Grove on a home game is such an extraordinary event, and such a people-intensive event, it can suck the life out of the rest of the place, and some people don't like that.” He added, “There are professors that feel it's beneath the campus and beneath them. I would just suggest, loosen up, loosen your collar, and walk into the Grove and start talking to people.”

Rose added he's concerned about the damage over the years, even with the university landscaping department's work to preserve it. But he also spoke on the Grove's ultimate mystique, adding, “It's a soul magnet. It just draws people, much like Central Park in New York, just on a much smaller scale. I hope that we can hold on to it.”

### Chapter III: Tending the Grove

The Grove is one of the university's most valuable assets. From recruiting players and students to impressing publications and parents alike and to the emotional connection to alumni, the Grove must be protected.

The first effort to preserve the Grove began in 1983 when a group of students became concerned about the damage done by vehicles parked there for tailgating. Three years later, another group of students raised money to irrigate the Grove. Since then, the university's landscaping department has been charged with both pampering, protecting and preserving the Grove. On game day, when thousands of football fans descend on the Grove, the University Police Department and the city of Oxford get involved, too.

**JEFF McMANUS**  
*Cultivating greatness.*

A frequent concern to those who love the Grove is that game day and other social activities—the weight of thousands of people walking around, spilling drinks and littering—are killing the Grove. The man in charge of making sure that doesn't happen is Jeff McManus.

The “about” section on his personal website says, “Jeff McManus grows things.” And that's exactly what he does. Here at the University of Mississippi, he's taken on more than the typical landscape job; he feels his role goes beyond planting flowers in the spring and mowing. A graduate of Auburn University, McManus serves as the director of Landscape Services and has been at Ole Miss since 2000. Hearing him talk is like listening to a mix of a horticulturist and a motivational speaker.

And while he acknowledges that all the reveling isn't great for the landscaping, his crew helps the Grove out, and no one is killing it. Compaction, which is pressure on roots that stops the motion of the little hairs on roots that wiggle to take in nutrients from the soil, is the Grove's biggest enemy.

“Compaction is negative toward plant materials in all aspects,” he explained. “Whether we're tailgating in the Grove or a herd of cows is walking around. Under the soil, all the tree roots are in the top 12 to 18 inches. Compaction kills the little hairs, then the roots die and it works its way up. This can take years because of the way trees store energy, but if landscaping didn't combat compaction, we would see more damage.”

Landscape services employees do a lot of the preparation and preventive work to the Grove in the spring. In the fall their Grove work consists mostly of cutting the grass until it's all dead.

But the week after the last game is over, the Grove reset begins. The first step: aerify the Grove. Aerifying is the process of poking and slicing the dirt. The goal is to break up the soil to combat any compaction that could have happened throughout the season. After they aerify, the next step is to spread grass seed around the Grove. Later they fertilize and will reseed any areas that need it. McManus explained the optimum temperature to get the grass to grow is 60 to 70 degrees, just in time for graduation.

Landscape Services is made up of 33 people who serve the full 1,000 acres of the university's campus. To inspire his team members, McManus takes them to other campuses. One nearby campus, which he wouldn't name, had grass clippings left out from mowing earlier in the week. He asked his team for a reaction, and everyone agreed that it looked sloppy. Giving his team context like this, showing them why the details they put into their work matters, is important to McManus. He said students decide if they're going to the school in the first 10 minutes of a visit, and the *way* a school's campus looks is a huge factor in that decision. Tiny details like picking up grass clippings elevate the University of Mississippi campus above others.

McManus puts a lot of effort to ensure his workers to feel the importance of their job. Their work directly ties into the image of the university because they truly create the lush landscape of the campus. Whether it's making sure the Grove is ready for a game weekend or planting flowers in front of the Lyceum, McManus wants the landscaping

team to feel like as if it's a part of the bigger picture, not just tending to individual settings.

He calls it "cultivating greatness." Just like the plants on campus, which require intentional care and attention to thrive, he wants his team, and everyone else, to fulfill their highest potential.

To help with that, he even brings in the Ole Miss head football coach, Hugh Freeze, to talk to the landscaping team about why they're work is important to athletics. "Sure, recruits don't care that much about the landscaping, but the player's moms and dads' first comments are always about how beautiful the campus is, and that matters," he said. "That really inspires everyone and helps them understand how important their work is."

The ability to tie everything his team does to the students and athletes makes the staff feel like they're a part of each student's success. Landscaping helps recruit students to the university and McManus wants them to know that.

The Grove is planted with two types of grass: fescue and Bermuda 419. Both do well in the Grove area and hold up in the Mississippi climate. Most of the 187 trees in the Grove are willow and water oaks, but there are plenty of other species, too. There's a one-in, one-out policy for the trees, so that when one tree dies, another is planted.

Flowers are planted based on the seasons and rotate accordingly.

The Grove is paid for by a different fund than the rest of landscaping. The Grove Society helps fund the Grove landscaping. The Grove Society has two levels of membership.

- A Founder level membership costs \$1,500 a year. Its the perks include a parking spot at all the home football games, an inscribed brick on the Walk of

Champions and a window decal, although there is a waiting list. It's so popular that there's a waiting list.

- A regular Grove Society membership costs an annual donation of \$100 and comes with a window decal.

Plus, anyone can purchase an inscribed brick for the Walk of Champions for \$250.

It takes about 1,200 of labor hours a year costing the university \$27,000 to keep the Grove in prime condition. All the materials, including seed, fertilizer, pine straw, fencing and the 500 or so beloved red and blue 35-gallon trashcans, cost an additional \$77,000 a year. McManus mentioned that these trashcans sometimes wander off around town, and when landscaping workers spot one on a front porch, they pick them back up.

There have recently been attempts by a lot of schools, like Oklahoma State University with its "Range," to copy the Grove. McManus is flattered. He's aware he didn't start the Grove and he won't be here with it forever, and chalks up what he's able to work with now to good planning.

It was in the early stages of the university that the Grove and the Circle, which is an adjacent, circle-shaped area full of trees and a popular tailgating spot, were designed and built. The circle represents never-ending learning and to the left of Lyceum, the university's first building, there is a meditation garden, all of which was inspired by Greek culture.

Although the sons of Fred Olmstead, a world-renowned landscape architect, worked on some plans for the university, McManus isn't sure how much influence they had on the final plan that was built.

However, he suggests William Nicholas had a lot of influence on the campus. Nicholas was an architect who designed the state Capitol buildings in North Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi. Nicholas also designed the Lyceum, which was completed in 1848.

“We’re still reaping a lot of benefits of good planning and by not making a lot of potential mistakes,” McManus said. “There’s a master plan from 1948 that showed a torn down Ventress Hall being replaced by a dorm. It’s a good thing we haven’t messed it up.”

Ventress Hall, now one of the most iconic buildings on campus, is also listed in the United States National Register of Historic Places.

If there’s one way to sum up the Grove, it’s that it hasn’t been messed up yet. The hard decisions made by university administration throughout the decades to help preserve the Grove, even as the university struggles to find room to grow, have not been fruitless. Hopefully, there will always be those 10 open acres.



## **CAPTAIN PEGGIE JANE MAHAN**

*Keeping it safe.*

Capt. Peggie Jane Mahan, from Pontotoc County, Mississippi, graduated from the University of Mississippi in 2002. She was hired by the University Police Department in 2003 and has been a captain for six years.

Capt. Mahan and UPD are part of a committee made up the landscaping department, facilities management, athletics and other stakeholders involved with game days. This committee comes up with the rules and policies for tailgating. Most of the UPD preparation for game days includes meetings between UPD and athletics concerning parking and the Grove detail, what they call the Friday night tent setup. She said, “We put out signs, we check parking lots, it’s a long list.”

Capt. Mahan added, “We want everyone to have a great game day experience. We want to make sure everyone stays safe while they’re here.

Capt. Mahan is charged with overseeing the Grove on game days. She assigns officers to the east and west sides of the Grove and a few in the Circle too. There are usually about 12 to 18 university police officers in the Grove, depending on the game and the size of the crowd. In total, there will be about 30 UPD officers and 60 to 80 temporary police officers on campus for a game day.

Temporary officers report from the towns and counties surrounding Oxford. They are certified and sworn personnel.

The No. 1 thing police officers are looking out for is behavior. They keep eyes out for suspicious people or packages, but in the Grove, they focus on behavior.

When officers see a group of tailgaters with behavior that needs to be tamed, they will go address them and give a warning. But if officers continue to receive complaints they can shut tents down and make groups leave.

“All the game day policies we enforce are there to protect the property and protect lives. But mostly, it’s a lot of walking. We get here early and we may be on our feet 14 to 17 hours depending on when the game starts,” she said. “It’s continuous walking and looking.”

Most of the complaints UPD receives are due to people’s behavior, which could be about anyone in the Grove. Sometimes it’s students, sometimes it’s young alumni and sometimes just a group of fans.

Capt. Mahan and UPD focus on how to make the Grove a safer experience for everyone. The implementation of lanes in the Grove, like miniature streets cutting through and across the Grove, helped people navigate. The lanes also make it easier to move around by providing more dedicated walking spaces and forcing people to spread out, making it less crowded.

“The Grove is a great thing,” she added. “People come from all over. We’ll have people from New York and other countries because they’ve heard about the Grove and our tailgating traditions.”

Alcohol is a fixture in the Grove. Not everyone drinks, some people drink too much, but it’s presence is expected. From beer to liquor or even champagne, almost every tent is serving something.

The university adopted the local alcohol laws. In Lafayette County, beer is illegal and hard liquor is legal. In the city of Oxford, beer is legal and hard liquor is illegal. The

Grove is in the county, so beer is illegal. However, other parts of campus, like the baseball stadium, are in the city.

To ensure safety, Capt. Mahan emphasized “eyes on and hands on” and a lot of planning. Officers keep a constant look at what’s going on around them, plus UPD gets intelligence briefings and takes what’s going on at the university and surrounding areas into consideration.

“After working throughout the years, you learn what games typically cause the most trouble,” she said. “Any of the larger SEC games are worse. I’m not saying they’re the worst but LSU and Georgia seem to bring a little rowdier fan base.”

It’s not always behavior that causes problems; sometimes it’s just the size of the crowd, regardless of how they’re acting. When Texas played in Oxford in 2012, it was such a large crowd, UPD was struggling keep it under control.

“We want to have a relationship with the community that comes and tailgates,” she added.

But it’s not all work at the Grove. After years of overseeing the Grove, Capt. Mahan has developed relationships with a lot of people in the Grove. She said, “People come by the UPD tent and tell us if we’re hungry come eat at their tent.”

## **MAYOR PAT PATTERSON**

*It's not all fun and game.*

The University of Mississippi system has grown at an unprecedented pace for the past decade, with enrollment up by 40.5 percent in the last 10 years. In 2016, the main campus in Oxford had 20,453 students. The United States Census Bureau estimated population of Oxford for 2015 is 22,314 people, up from 13,673 in 2000. The rapid growth is partly due to natural population growth but also to an annexation in 2007.

The man in charge of the city under this era of growth has been Pat Patterson. Part of a six-generation Oxford family, Patterson has been in Oxford his whole life. He started his public service for Oxford as a member of the tourism council in the 1980s. He then served two terms on the city board, first running in 2001 and again in 2005. Patterson was elected mayor in 2005 and won re-election in 2013. When this term is over, he plans to retire.

Patterson's earliest memory of the university as a student was the 1960 LSU game. The away students arrived in Oxford by train near the football stadium. With few home games and a smaller student population, the Grove wasn't the same destination it is today, so he didn't go other than the occasional visit.

Patterson cites former Chancellor Gerald Turner as the catalyst of the university's growth, encouraging people to come to more football games in Oxford by building the first suites in the football stadium. Ole Miss typically only played homecoming and one or two more games in Oxford, the rest were in Jackson, Mississippi or Memphis, Tennessee. Both Jackson and Memphis were less remote than Oxford was in the 1960s.

“People wanted to come stay in their boxes for the games,” explained Patterson. “The university, happily accommodating, made temporary parking lots and added temporary lights for the first night game.”

To Patterson, the Grove is endearing because of the city, which is the least populated host in the Southeastern Conference, and the university. “It’s safe and it’s small,” he said. “People go to Baton Rouge, or Knoxville or even Gainesville and they’re going to walk three miles from wherever to get to the stadium. Here in Oxford, you’re right there. The character of the trees and the fact that it’s right here on campus really make it special.”

But the Grove isn’t the highlight of Patterson’s game weekends. He also owns University Sporting Goods on the Oxford Square. Home football games mark their busiest days, so he chooses to work and help the store on game days.

The Grove, as people know it now, only started forming in the 1990s, but for Patterson, it’s always meant more and more work.

Not only do the people pouring into his store mean more work for him as a businessman, but thousands of extra people coming to Oxford also add to his workload as mayor. On game day weekends, the population of Oxford skyrockets from 20,000 to 85,000. The city infrastructure is pushed to its limit.

Patterson said, “We try and use the same roads and eat in the same restaurants and flush down the same sewer. You can just imagine. It’s a dramatic effect, but it was similar when Ole Miss played two games a year here. Even when we had 25,000 people in the stadium, Oxford only had 5,000 residents. But now we’re playing seven games here instead of two.”

To prepare for the incoming crowds, the city and university set up a committee to coordinate smoother game weekends for visitors and residents. They have game day meetings with the athletic department the Wednesday before games. They set up transportation together, share parking at the Oxford High School, a local park and Northwest Community College and set up a shuttle system to help get people around.

The city takes a hands-off approach to the Grove on game day, letting the university take control while municipal leaders focus on activities on the Oxford Square and around town.

“The city lets the university enforce drinking in the Grove. If they want to turn a blind eye to it, that’s outside of us,” said Patterson. “How we handle it inside the city on game days, and most other days: if you have a drink in a cup and you aren’t raising hell and you aren’t pushing your girlfriend or piddling in the bushes and trying to steal something, we will generally leave you alone.

Game days also mean more arrests in Oxford, with anywhere from 60 to 120 arrests. Patterson said the LSU weekend tents tend to lead to the most arrests. “But we could arrest 500 if we wanted to,” he said. “So if you aren’t making a fool of yourself we’re going to leave you alone. If you get arrested in Oxford, Mississippi, on a game day, you deserve it.”

The city’s growth may be a plus for now, but what about the future? “I have no idea,” he said. “To sustain growth, we need to grow smart—Be able to provide services to stay ahead of your water, sewage, road, fire and police needs.”

Patterson is more certain about the Grove. “It’s as much of a part of the university as the Lyceum. I have no doubt the Grove will be here in 20 years.”

## Chapter IV: The Athletic Experience

### **ROSS BJORK AND MICHAEL THOMPSON**

*Linking athletics and academics.*

It's clear the majority of Ole Miss fans love the Grove, but what does the athletic department think of the Grove? Ross Bjork, vice chancellor for Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Mississippi, suggests that it's more than a social phenomenon.

“As far as the fan experience side of things, it's the identity of the program,” he said “I think it's the front door. It's one of a kind, it's a bucket list experience. You'll never see anything like it.”

Bjork framed the Grove as a gateway that leads to the football game itself. There is major significance to the program and to the football team.

Part of that, he said, comes from the team's pre-game Walk of Champions through the Grove. Two hours before kickoff, the team will drive up to the Grove on the team buses and file out and walk under the Walk of Champions arch and along the bricked path, across the Grove.

“A lot of teams have a mini player walk; they walk down the street or from their buses to the locker room, but not many do it like this. Right in the middle of families and tailgating and tents,” he said. “It's an icon of who we are as a university, as football program, even a city.”

According to the website Bjork and Thompson helped develop, olemissfb.com, the Walk of Champions started in the 1980s. Coach Billy Brewer wanted the team to get a taste of the atmosphere before the games, so he started walking the team through the Grove; the fans loved it.

The Walk of Champions arch was built in the fall of 1998 near the student union on the east side of the Grove. It was donated to the university by the 1962 football team, the only Ole Miss football team to have a perfect season.

Bjork knows why the tradition of walking the team through the Grove continues. It has to do with the players. “I think you can see it on their faces,” he said. “All you have to do is see them there. You’ll see tears; it’s powerful. I think it’s probably different if they’re a freshman and different on their last time through. There’s a range of emotions depending on player’s situation on the team.

“Even on hot days, when the walk can be exhausting, the inspirational side is uplifting,” Bjork said. “I think it adds to the emotional confidence and boosts the team.”

Michael Thompson, a Memphis native who graduated from the university in 2001, began working for the athletic department in 2010 and serves as the Senior Associate Athletic Director for Communications and Marketing. He agreed with Bjork.

“What I love about it is the reverse, from the fans’ perspective,” Thompson said. “If you sit in the Grove for four or five hours, it’s easy to forget there’s a football game later. But when the team walks through, the whole fan mindset in the Grove changes. Everyone remembers they’re there for another purpose. The whole mood changes.”

“I think the one thing that’s totally unique about the Grove is the proximity to the stadium and its proximity in the center of campus,” added Thompson. “We have a



collegiate atmosphere with all these academic buildings around and then a football game. It ties the college part of college football together.”

Bjork and the Athletic Department decided the Grove needed more organization and communication around it, so they worked on improving the game day experience in the Grove.

Bjork and Thompson helped come up with the lanes in the Grove and the street signs that identify them. They also developed the vendor registration program, creating a system for the vendors that set up 55 to 65 percent of the tents in the Grove on Friday nights. They established a formalization of the rules and communicated them through the website. Their goal was to organize the Grove and take it from being too organic.

With an improving football team, the university has faced a new experience in hosting sport shows like ESPN College GameDay and SEC Nation, both of which broadcast from the Grove in 2014 and have been of major importance to the athletic program.

“We set the template for how to operate these shows,” Bjork said. “We’re going to have SEC Nation in here every year and hopefully College GameDay again.”

Going into the future, Thompson is focused on continuing to improve the Grove by making it easier for people to communicate, figure out where they are and ease the congestion.

The Grove is empty of tents until 7:30 p.m. on Friday nights. Right at 7:30 p.m., swarms of people with buggies and arms full of tents, chairs and tables fill the Grove to claim their spot for the next day.

The vendor program was created to help alleviate the traffic pressures at 7:30 p.m. by allowing vendors to pay a fee to enter the Grove before 7:30 p.m. with their equipment.

Thompson grew up regularly came to the Grove. “My earliest Grove experience was in a car.” He added, “Removing the vehicles was the greatest decision ever made. It’s funny, at the time people couldn’t believe they were doing it.”

Bjork, who is from Dodge City, Kansas, and graduated from Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas, made his first visit to the Grove was in 2012, the year he was hired. “I had no idea what to expect,” he said, “I had only seen pictures and that’s all I had to go off. But until you see it firsthand, and feel it, and see the team walk through and get the energy, there’s no way you can prepare for it.”

For Bjork’s first game as athletic director, the football team played the University of Central Arkansas, a smaller team that didn’t draw a huge crowd to the Grove. But two weeks later, the University of Texas football team came and the university had to open the stadium early to alleviate some of the crowd pressure.

“That first game allowed me to realize this place is cool, this place is unique. We have great potential here,” he said. “We can bottle this and use it to our advantage.”

Because of the proximity of the Grove, there’s a deep connection between the physical space of athletics and the Grove. Bjork explained the inspiration to build the new basketball stadium, the Pavilion, so close to campus was the Grove.

Bjork and Thompson are aware that minorities don’t always feels welcomed in the Grove and they’re working to overcome that by setting a good example for people to follow. The diversity of the football team, both racially and demographically, they say, is a strong representation of the entire university.

“I think that’s a great symbolic part of making everyone feel welcome,” Bjork said. “You get to touch and feel the team, which means you get to touch and feel the university through the team. I think that’s a starting point.

“Are we all the way there yet? No. But I think our role is making sure that the image is right on the front end and using good examples along the way. It doesn’t matter where you’re from, you’re welcome here. I think our responsibility is to enhance that feeling as much as possible.”

Having a shaded area full of drinks, food and friends just a short walk from the stadium is tough competition for the Athletic Department. When the team is playing well, the stadium is filled early and stays that way the entire game. But when the heat, humidity and a subpar performance from the team mix, people wander back into the Grove.

But even in 2016, when the team finished 5-7, Bjork said, “We set a record for season long attendance. We got a bigger stadium, we sold out of season tickets, we sold out of student tickets.”

Thompson also realizes the impact of a subpar season. The Grove draws people to Oxford, but not necessarily into the stadium. He said, “People don’t always use their tickets. They’re coming to Oxford and they’re coming to the Grove, but they may just watch the game on television in the Grove.”

## Chapter V: Grove Business

### **ISAAC JENKINS** *'Twas the night before...*

The Grove hasn't just spurred inspiration in thousands of fans and hundreds of football players over the years, it's also developed its own cottage industry, with a full team of economic players.

Most of the tents in the Grove, typically E-Z UP tents, along with the chairs and tables aren't set up by the people under them on Saturdays. That job is left up to vendors including Isaac Jenkins, who runs a company called The Circle Boss.

Jenkins, who graduated from the University of Arkansas, moved to Oxford to become a director of the campus student ministry group, Cru, in the fall of 1995. Before that, the closest he'd been to the Grove was an Ole Miss football game in Jackson, Mississippi when he was still in college.

The idea to set up tents for other people came from one of Jenkins' ministry donors about five years into his time in Oxford. As a minister, he raises support for most of his salary, so someone suggested he set up a tent for their family and they would pay him. Jenkins charged \$75 to set up a tent and would get paid \$125, so donors could write off a \$75 donation. This spread to other donors and eventually regular paying customers.

These vendors, of which there were 37 for the 2016 football season, set up a lot of tents; about 60 percent of Grove tents are placed by vendors. Jenkins' company sets up

95 tents, sometimes fewer depending on the weekend. But he claimed some companies set up 250 to 300 tents in a single weekend.

Jenkins estimated the vendors set up at least 2,000 tents and more than 4,000 tents are in the Grove at any given game. Most of the tents are in the Grove and the Circle, but they're starting to spread to other areas as the most popular areas of campus continue to squeeze.

The university has continued to develop and implement new policies for the Grove, especially in recent years, and vendors have been affected more than anyone. Jenkins said, "The university has said they will never change for spots, which is a myth. Instead they charge a fee for the number of tents vendors set up. I pay \$2,800 to have two headquarters tents.

"If you drive around the Grove on a Friday around 5 o'clock, you're going to see tents spread around and those are the headquarters tents and they represent the tent companies. At 6 o'clock, we can come and put all the tents we're going to set up under our headquarters tents."

When 7:30 p.m. comes and everyone else can run into the Grove, vendors already have their equipment under the headquarters tents and get a head start on setting up.

The Circle Boss has eight or nine guys working any given game weekend. Jenkins said it takes about two hours to set up on Friday nights and another three hours to break down after the games are over.

The headquarters tents, which were introduced two years ago, give vendors the valuable advantage of getting coveted spots for their clients. For another \$150, vendors

can get a vendor pass that allows them to drive on campus on Saturdays, which typically is strictly prohibited, to bring drinks or food to clients.

He also pointed out the nomenclature of the Grove, “It’s interesting how we don’t even call it tailgating. We call it Groving. There’s an expectation of Groving, and it’s an understood concept. Another understood is that there’s going to be enough food for everyone and leftovers.”

Having a vendor set up a tent isn’t cheap and the cost can add up quickly. On top of paying for the tent (\$159.00 for a 10’ by 10’ E-Z Up tent), customers face additional fees for any extra service. Jenkins charges \$150 to set up a tent, one table and 10 to 12 chairs and charges proportionally for more equipment. But if customers want a tent on the Walk of Champions, Jenkins said the price can double to \$300 for one tent, a table and chairs.

Customers provide their own equipment, and Jenkins and his employees will set it up for them, often storing equipment in the off season, too.

Jenkins said he likes the vendor system, instead of the free for all it was up until two years ago. People would lay down blankets in the Grove and “save” spots all day starting at 8 o’clock in the morning, which made it difficult for vendors to ensure that paying customers got the spot they were expecting.

Vendors also have numbered vests while setting up tents. Each employee wears a vest with a number corresponding with their company, which increases accountability and safety for all the vendors.

A tip from Isaac to out-of-towners or newcomers: If you want to set up in the Grove and you don’t want to make anybody upset, wait about 10 minutes after the 7:30 p.m.

buzzer goes off. Then go set a tent up right in front of the Student Union, which he suggested as the best spot for newcomers.

“Don’t come in and set up right where someone who has been Groving for 18 years usually is,” he said. “It’s not fair to anybody involved and there’s a chance you’re going to make a lot of people mad. The companies need that spot. That’s what people are paying for and why we need to hire so many workers.”

## Chapter VI: Race Relations

The Grove can be a dark place. Minorities, especially African-Americans, continue to feel the weight of the not-so-distant Confederate imagery the university has wrapped itself in, including a statue of a soldier and the ever-lingering battle flag. Although the university has been shedding the icons and symbols of bygone eras for decades, it's doing it slowly. With every step forward, it encounters stiff opposition from those who see these symbols of the past as part of a beloved and rich tradition.

How is it that grown African-Americans, some who wouldn't even venture into the Grove until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are still not completely comfortable in the Grove?

It seems the Grove has churned the university's, and perhaps even Mississippi's, deep, systemic problems into one place. Where time has passed slower; where racism has been accepted as tradition; where nostalgia has been consumed alongside whiskey and fried chicken. On the outside is a hospitable celebration full of friends, family and even strangers, but a closer look reveals begrudgingly set aside icons of a dark past, a largely aloof attitude toward African-Americans and a continued resistance against progress.

Year after year, week after week, each fall at the University of Mississippi, alumni, fans and students gear up beside the football team and prepare for battle. Many feel the presence of progress as an unwelcomed intruder, stripping the school of its character. Their relics of the past, beloved like an old, familiar friend, will be fought for.



**DR. CHARLES ROSS**  
*Getting rid of Dixie.*

The band played *Dixie* with pleasure and gusto, the Confederate battle flag was proudly flown, the Grove was exclusively white, besides the people waiting on tents, and Colonel Reb was still the school mascot.

Dr. Charles Ross, an African-American, arrived in this Oxford in the fall of 1995. After receiving his undergraduate degree in history at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Dr. Ross went on to receive his masters and Ph.D. from Ohio State University, his hometown university. He is now the director of African-American Studies and a history professor at the University of Mississippi.

He wasn't sure what to expect when he got to Oxford, but he was keenly aware of Mississippi and the university's reputation, especially concerning African-Americans. He had spent time passing through Mississippi but hadn't been to Oxford or the university campus.

"I knew it was a place that was steeped in this historic vortex of the past. It had a reputation and a legacy and an identity of being one of the more resistive schools in the country when it came to racial integration," he said. "I was on alert in terms of coming here and not knowing what was going to happen."

As a new professor, he spent most of his first weeks as any new professor would: settling in, acclimating as a new faculty member, finding his classes and getting adjusted to his schedule. Along with that, he remembered in the fall of 1995, the university found itself in a string on controversies it continues to fight today. The head football coach,

Tommy Tuberville, publicly said that the flying of the Confederate battle flag was hurting recruiting.

In the 1990s, continuing traditions that began decades before, students and other fans would bring legions of Rebel flags into the stadium to wave in support of their team. But as other schools began to use the Rebel flag against Ole Miss, Tuberville found it increasingly difficult to recruit black athletes. This stance put the administration in a box, but Chancellor Robert Khayat backed Tuberville and began to implement a controversial policy that banned flag sticks in the stadium, and that action gained international coverage.

It was this climate that Dr. Ross found himself immersed. A young, black professor from Ohio at a school struggling to remove Rebel flags from its football fans on the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dr. Ross found his African-American students pleading him to visit the Grove. As an alumnus of Ohio State University, a football powerhouse, he understood tailgating, so he preferred to spend his weekends resting at home.

After weeks of adamant pressure from his African-American students to visit the Grove, he was finally convinced and he was surprised by what he found.

“It was one of a few instances that really drove home that I was in Mississippi,” he said. “The Confederate regalia was overwhelming, whether it was flags or people wearing clothing with the flag on it or Colonel Reb. It was everywhere. There were no black people tailgating, instead they were cooking and waiting on white tailgaters.”

He returned to his students with empathy, troubled by his first visit to the Grove. He understood why his students wanted him to go to the Grove to get a picture of the

university. He said, “That was how they knew I would get the full understanding of what I meant to be at the University of Mississippi as an African-American.”

African-American students, who continued to feel disregarded, fought back in their own way. They had considerable objection to Colonel Reb, who was officially banned in 2003. To some he was, and still is, an esteemed Southern gentleman, but to black students, he represented the plantation master image.

“Amid the stick issue, along with other images the university was associated with, black students began informally, and in a derogatory way, calling Colonel Reb ‘Massa,’” said Dr. Ross. “But more importantly, the way they said it was that they had to accept this because this is a school in which, in a lot of ways, they were here but they didn’t have a voice.”

But Dr. Ross is hopeful. There has been significant positive change and it hasn’t gone unnoticed. Largely, he’s noticed less Confederate regalia. The Confederate flag was once embraced by almost everyone; it was flown, worn as a pin or incorporated into clothing.

Now the university is at a point where more African-Americans feel relatively comfortable in the Grove, either having a spot or moving around. He added, “Of course, there’s vestiges of individuals who have setups that are more traditional, or racially insensitive ‘flavor’ but beyond that, it’s nowhere near what it was in 1995.”

The removal of offensive symbols remains an uphill battle. The 2015 decision by the Associated Student Body not to fly the Mississippi state flag on campus has reignited the flag controversy. Mississippi is the only remaining state in the Union whose state flag design still incorporates the Rebel flag; many students and faculty felt it was inappropriate to fly a state flag on campus. Protests against the flag and counter-protests

in support of the flag by people associated with the KKK were held on campus before the divisive vote. By the fall of 2016, it was normal to see protesters marching Rebel flags and the Mississippi state flag through the Grove on game days.

Dr. Ross believes the university has issues around traditions of icons and images. To him, there shouldn't be any icons or images associated with the institution that have any negative racial connotations; as a public institution, it's the university's responsibility.

He also understands that for a lot of people, alumni and students included, there's an idea that some things are less flammable than others, so it's best to move slowly away from some icons first.

For example, in the fall of 2016, *Dixie* was no longer played by the band. "When I first got here, if you talked about getting rid of *Dixie*, you were a communist," said Dr. Ross. "But now, we decided to stop playing it ourselves, and that says something about the progress we're making."

While the university is making progress, it's slow, and the reason is complex. Dr. Ross believes because so many of the Confederate images have been connected to the university for so long, it makes it difficult to allow people to move into a different paradigm where these icons aren't socially acceptable.

The university, to many people, represents more than a public institution for education. It also functions as one of the last holdouts of the Old South.

Dr. Ross suggested the people holding out for the Old South want to use the university to function as a sort of last battle of the Civil War, as a holdout of pure Southern history of an all-white culture, steeped with Dixie and the Confederate flag. This is what makes it difficult to move forward.

“When we do make changes toward progress, those who don’t want that ‘Southern way of life’ to fall by the wayside,” he said. “They feel a Holy Grail of responsibility, because if this institution changes, then any other kind of institution or component of Southern society is fair game. They don’t want us to shed our old identity.”

Dr. Ross added context to the issues facing the university. He made an example from a recent trip to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, a campus he finds similar to the University of Mississippi.

He said, “Alabama has a fundamentally different kind of socialization. The whole aspect of symbols and images and their connections to athletics are relatively minor. Because they’re about *winning*. Winning is so important to them, and they’ve had so much success, no one cares they have an elephant mascot and no one cares where they tailgate.

At the University of Alabama, the game is what matters, not the Grove, not the mascot and not playing *Dixie*. Alabama has been able to let go of their icons because the concept of winning became more important.

“Part of the passion we’ve had around the unwillingness and the inflexibility to move away from certain images is because people are very fearful if you take those things away and we don’t win, what do we have left?” he said. “People fall back on these images. There’s no way anyone at the University of Alabama would walk around with a shirt that says, ‘We may not win every game, but we’ve never lost a party?’”

The first few years Dr. Ross was in Oxford, the Grove was more important than the football game. People didn’t care about the game because they had given up on the idea

of a successful football team. The team hadn't been good in decades and there wasn't a lot to be proud of.

As a result, people became more and more entrenched in the identity of the Confederate icons.

This is the ultimate crux of the Grove. Why the Grove is what it is today, how and why it became important. When the team wasn't doing well, the passion for the Grove grew alongside a dependence of the fans to rely on something else: falling back on symbols of the Old South.

This is why people like Dr. Ross, namely African-Americans, especially those with a longer history at the university and have seen it develop over the past several decades, still don't feel completely comfortable in the Grove. They avoid certain areas and always mindful of where they are.

"I tend not to venture into areas where I could be uncomfortable," he said. "I have some friends that may tailgate in the Grove a few times a year, and I'll go to their tent. But even that leaves room for concern. With all the people going by that have been drinking a lot, they look at you and you never know if they'll say something disrespectful."

The reality of the uncertainty comes unexpectedly and inconveniently. In the fall of 2016, some friends of Dr. Ross visited for the game with Georgia Southern, which their son attended. The friends, a middle class African-American family from Atlanta, had never been to the Grove, so Dr. Ross and his wife brought them along to host them and guide them around the tailgating mecca. They parked and as they walked toward the Grove, they ran into one of the groups walking around with the Confederate flags.

He said, “Our friends looked at us like, ‘Damn, what is this?’

“They hadn’t been on campus for a minute, and their first impression is these people walking around with the flags. They looked at flags, and they knew our school’s situation, but we had to explain why people were protesting about the Confederate flag.”

Dr. Ross argued it’s hard to validate any change and convince people of it because of how often the school is cast in a negative light.

Race relations on campus are often a struggle for African-Americans because it’s an issue of power; power that’s in the hands of white alumni and students. And the message to black students has been they must accept the way things are.

“You must accept walking past a Confederate statue, you must accept that the university continues to refer to itself as Ole Miss, you must accept that the university continues to be the Rebels and you must accept that as an African-American football player, you walk through the Grove playing *Dixie* and go put a helmet on that says Ole Miss,” he said. “It all means they don’t have any say-so over change in the dynamics of this reality.”

Although Dr. Ross is hopeful that the Grove and the larger Ole Miss culture will continue to become more empathetic toward African-Americans and other minorities, there’s still a lot to be wished for.

“We would have to figure out a way to get African-Americans to become passionate about being involved in the institution,” said Dr. Ross. “I don’t see that happening because the imagery makes it physiologically difficult to be connected to the university in a meaningful way.

“We still have baggage that probably makes it difficult for African-Americans to connect. Until we begin to do away with these things, then we won’t see significant numbers of African-Americans in the Grove. So how would we make progress if there’s no change in the fundamental infrastructure of the place that people socialize?”



**DR. DONALD COLE**

*Progress.*

“I’ve learned that social change is very difficult to achieve. It takes a lot of time. It equates to changing people’s minds and sometimes their hearts,” said Dr. Donald Cole. “That’s not an overnight thing. Sometimes it takes a more persuasive argument, or sometimes it takes marching. There are some people bent on never changing.”

Dr. Cole is assistant provost, assistant to the chancellor Concerning Minority Affairs and associate professor of Mathematics at the University of Mississippi. He began his career at the university as a freshman in 1968. He was expelled in 1970 for civil rights protests but returned in 1977 to begin his doctoral studies. Upon completing his doctorate, he left for another job but returned for good in 1993, when he joined the faculty and administration.

Now, Dr. Cole goes to most home football games and always spends time in the Grove. But it wasn’t until the early 2000s that he would even step in the Grove on a game day, much less freely wander the area looking for friends. It was only after years at the school and meeting so many people did he begin to walk through the Grove with any confidence.

His initial experiences with the Grove are not comparable with any current experiences he’s had, but he still doesn’t feel completely at ease moving around the Grove. “There’s a little sense of consciousness in the back of my mind of where I am,” he said. “It’s not like I’m walking into church. There’s always a limited amount of mindfulness about where I am and observing my surroundings and,” he added with a laugh, “which way to run.”

When Dr. Cole first came to the university he said the Grove was not a place for him and it wasn't a place he would have gone. Although he feels more welcome now, it was one of the things he was protesting in the 1960s, along with the Rebel flags and Colonel Reb.

Dr. Cole believes racial and social progress are an educational process, but he said he too has been one of the people educated over time. After talking with people who believed the Grove could possibly be a good social experience, he decided to give it a try. "Initially I wouldn't go in the Grove, I'd go *by* the Grove and talk to people on the peripherals. As time passed, I would find myself two feet in the Grove," he said. "Over time, I progressed and now I regularly visit people in their spots in the Grove."

It wasn't until 2000 that he found himself deeper in the Grove, when he finally felt comfortable enough to walk around alone looking for friends or family. "But I'm far from a student now," he said. "I'm less fearful than a student and I can imagine that some students, even today, might have some apprehensions about the Grove, and maybe have more than I would have as a person associated with the university."

This is a contributing factor to why there are so few African-Americans in the Grove. The Grove isn't just people who attend and work at university, a group typically more welcoming of different people. It's also full of older alumni and fans who didn't go to school at the university. While they might not intentionally make the Grove hostile, they generally don't make a conscious effort to make the Grove a more hospitable place.

"However, there are a number of people who do want to make it more welcoming, and that's making it a place where more people of color feel comfortable," he said. "And I'm sure there are a limited number of people who still don't appreciate my presence, but

that number is dwindling and the number of people that want to make it a friendlier place are able to express that with more freedom, and that's what's defining the continuing change in the Grove.”

He is confident that change will continue. Although it's a slow pace, progress in the Grove has and will continue to happen naturally, but he said there needs to be a stronger emphasis around raising awareness to the people coming in to enjoy the Grove and the game *and* help make the Grove more enjoyable for others.

“I suspect many individuals are unaware that people of color might be uncomfortable in that crowd, a crowd that at one time had been very hostile,” said Dr. Cole. “All these people of color here now have heard about the hostility from their parents and grandparents and they've been warned to watch out for it.

One of the problems with raising awareness is how difficult it is to reach individuals to whom the university has no direct path to, and it's not easy or comfortable to fix that. Dr. Cole remembered an administrator that asked him to walk around the Grove with her. He trusted her, but even so, he was uncomfortable. He said, “I understood the statement she wanted to make. So I overcame that uncomfortableness to help make that statement.”

It's people and similar defiant acts that Dr. Cole thinks are necessary to get the message across to those who don't spend time on campus or understand how the school has shifted in the past decades.

Dr. Cole is committed to respecting the rights of the people carrying the Mississippi state flag and the Rebel flag though the Grove on game days. He suggested that people close to them need to speak up and make them feel uncomfortable. “I could approach

these same individuals with the same language, but without the influence, and it won't cut across," he said.

"Raising that consciousness of individuals and confronting them is going to be the thing that helps the most. For a while, rightly or wrongly, the university was perceived as a place that would welcome this type of behavior, and students of that nature would gravitate here. So when they find out Mississippi isn't like that, their behavior and attitude will change."

To continue to protect against perceptions racist and discriminatory behavior is welcome, Dr. Cole said, "It's incumbent upon the university to create venues for conversations and dialogue to take place."

Beyond the university creating venues, students must engage themselves; these venues, like Black History Month, don't lend themselves to good dialogue if all the students engaging in it are of one race. Students need to be bold enough to take advantage of these conversations.

Finally, he added, "I would like for it to not be possible for a student to enter the university and not have a faculty member of a different ethnic group before they graduate. I'd like for it to be impossible for a student to enter the university and exit without having a conversation about race and exposing themselves to other races. I'm not sure if it's possible now or not, but I'd like for it to be possible."

## CONCLUSION

The Grove is the cultural fabric of the university, the thread that weaves through generations of students and ties them all together. Its allure is strong enough to bring people from all over the world to gather with thousands of strangers. The Grove brings people back to Oxford, it can start a career or even serve as a much-needed relief on a stressful day.

The Grove serves as one of the most valuable assets for recruiting students and athletes to the university. The university continues to invest in the Grove, both financially and by protecting the grounds and the people there on game days.

The Grove also serves as a physical link to athletics and the rest of the university, as people walk through the Grove into the football stadium, but also as the football team walks along the Walk of Champions, allowing the fans and visitors to reach out and connect with the players as they go by.

The Grove has progressed, logistically but also socially. It has continued to become a safer place for all people. As the Confederate icons and symbols are slowly removed, minorities have felt increasingly welcomed in the Grove.

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