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History of Northern Mississippi

by David Sansing

Any standard historical atlas of the United States will indicate to the most casual observer that there is a political and geographic subdivision designated Mississippi. There are fifty such subdivisions and collectively they constitute the United States. However, Mississippi is not just a state of the union, it is a state of being; it is more than a constituency, it is a condition. To most Mississippians there is a difference between the Mississippi penciled in on a map and that Mississippi charted by a magic marker. Those of you who are not Mississippians cannot understand this. Those of you who are understand what I mean when I say to be a Mississippian is an existential predicament. We have this thing about being Mississippians. And the most liberal, even radical ones I know, harbor a secret devotion to their state, of being. Most of us are fascinated by the fascination that non-Mississippians have with us, and our state. Most of us will attest to the fact that when we attend cocktail parties, conferences, or seminars in other parts of the country that people seem somehow intrigued to find a Mississippian outside of his natural habitat. They are a little envious. Let me illustrate. Willie Morris, one of our more famous expatriates, was scored by a New York friend for wanting to change Mississippi. "Can you imagine?" his friend asked. "There he is with the most messed-up state in the Union, the most fertile ground in America for a writer to write about. . . . The most beautiful land in the whole damned country. The _____damnedest people in the hemisphere, and all of them 'screwed up.' Cruelties right out of the Old Testament. Relationships that would make Freud give up. . . . Emotions run wild. Romanticism gone amuck. Decadence. Decay. Incest. Filth. Complexity. Rank perversion. Charm. Openness. The courage of noble fools. Why if I was a writer I'd use all the influence I had with the politicians and get them to put up big green signs at every point of entry into Mississippi, all along the borders, saying, 'Posted, No Trespassing.'"

While most Mississippians would object to one or more of those rather generalized characterizations, we take a measure of delight at

being the focus of attention, in the limelight, without bothering very much or being bothered by the shadows such illumination may cast. We are not perplexed that we are famous for both the scent of magnolias and the smell of burning crosses. In the next forty-five minutes or so, I will sketch the history of Mississippi in general and north Mississippi in particular. But before I do so, let me make one or two observations.

In my study of Mississippi history I am intrigued by the significance and irony of color. Red, for example. First there were the Redskins, that brotherhood of "noble savages" who hunted in the forests and tilled the land that destiny had determined would be ours. Bearing down hard on the "Trail of Tears" came the march of Southern Civilization. Broadly and generally speaking, there were three columns in that march—the rednecks, the bluebloods, and the blacks. The rednecks were more like camp followers, scurrying on the outskirts of Southern civilization. The bluebloods, that small body of noble men, were the engineers, the architects, and generals. Blacks were the warriors, the builders, the cornerstone of that society. For some reason, which quite frankly I do not understand, that civilization was possessed with a foreboding sense of destiny, a sense of history. Arnold J. Toynbee recognized this, but only after the fact. "There is," he wrote, "a thing called history, but history is something unpleasant that happens to other people. . . . if I had been a small boy in . . . the southern part of the United States, I should not have felt the same; I should have known from my parents that history had happened to my people in my part of the world."

History happened to Mississippi during the cataclysm we call the Civil War. History made museums out of mansions, turned planters into insurance agents. Rednecks, the dormant majority, were aroused by the noise of that war. Rednecks and bluebloods eventually accommodated themselves to history and became redbloods who insist that they are more American than most other Americans.

But what of blacks? History did not happen to them. There was a brief flirtation during Reconstruction when blacks exercised political power commensurate with their numerical strength. But it proved to be illusory. Black is a color of extreme significance in the history of Mississippi and not without its own particular brand of irony. Black was, and in many respects still is, a negative color denoting incapacity, incompetence, immorality. It is associated with

the South's deepest anxieties: black rebellion, black domination, black power.

Notwithstanding the negative aspects of this color, one of Mississippi's major sources of income is the production of black-gold. Mississippi ranks number nine among oil producing states and eighth in allied petroleum products. While I am on gold, or nearly on it, let me also point out that one of the most abundant minerals in Mississippi is pyrite. Several years ago the state legislature considered making pyrite the official state mineral. Had we adopted "fool's gold" as the state mineral, coupling it with the mockingbird which is the state bird, the legislature would have achieved a level of irony the dimensions of which would have boggled the imagination. While on the mockingbird, let me note that its color is grey—a blend of black and white.

But white, by far I think, is Mississippi's favorite color. You have not really lived unless you have participated in that autumnal ritual when Mississippians gaze, ceremoniously, upon their fields "already white unto harvest."

White, more than any other color, is less an adjectival function, a mere part of speech. White is a decree conferring rank and status; a proclamation confirming inheritance and endowment; a bull intoning distinction and difference. White man, white supremacy, and white rule occupy the most conspicuous and illustrious positions on the value totem erected by white Mississippians as a monument to their glorious past.

Regarding our past, still another color forces itself upon our consideration, for most white Mississippians have always viewed their past through rose-colored glasses. Surely, then, it must come as no surprise to you that the present when viewed through those same glasses gives a predictable coloration or tint to those who would reconfigure the past or redirect the future—color the dissenter pink.

One more observation before we proceed with the sketch. Land is a word of primary importance in understanding Mississippi history. It has always had a social and political as well as economic significance. In one of my weaker moments, I contemplated running for public office in Mississippi. When I revealed this dark secret to a friend of mine, he replied, "Look, Dave, before you do that, you've gotta buy you some land first." Let me add quickly, in the interest of

my wife's peace of mind, that I have fully recovered my senses.

Anyone familiar with small, somnolent Mississippi towns has observed our attachment to the land. The lawyer, doctor, jeweler, grocer, merchant rarely funnels his profit back into his business; he siphons it off and puts it into land and enjoys restful sleep as he listens to his trees grow. This ambition is indigenous to an agrarian people. An editorial in the *Vicksburg Sun*, dated April 9, 1860, reveals this force at work in Mississippi.

A large plantation and negroes are the ultima thule of every Southern gentleman's ambition. For this the lawyer pores over his dusty tomes, the merchant measures his tape, the doctor rolls his pills, the editor drives his quill, and the mechanic his plane—all, all who dare aspire at all, look to this as the goal of their ambition. The mind is used, from childhood, to contemplate it, and the first efforts are all lost if the objects in life should be changed. The mind is thus trained from infancy to think of and prepare for the attainment of this end.

Let us now proceed with the sketch of north Mississippi. The term north Mississippi for purposes of this discussion refers generally to the area north of U.S. Highway 82 which extends west to east from Greenville, through Indianola, Greenwood, Winona, Starkville, to Columbus.

U. B. Phillips opened his classic study of *Life and Labor in the Old South* by suggesting, "Let us begin by discussing the weather." Average temperature extremes north of Highway 82 range from a low of 44 in January to a high of 81 in July. The average of 210 days without killing frost coupled with the relatively high degree of fertility in the various soil regions makes the area obviously conducive to agriculture.

From west to east these soil regions include the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, recognized as among the most fertile soil in the world. The Delta is a wedge of land about 200 miles long and 85 miles wide at its greatest extension eastward. Its alluvial deposits reach depths of 35 feet. During the antebellum period, Delta planters did not achieve the prestige and prominence enjoyed by their counterparts in the Old Natchez District. The Delta as a geographic and political entity as we know it today is largely a post Civil War development.

Eastward from the Delta, the land rises suddenly into bluffs or hills which were caused by prehistoric dust storms which swept rich

surface soil from the west across the flat delta region. The loess bluffs, as this region is designated, varies in breadth from five to fifteen miles and extends the length of the state, paralleling the Mississippi River.

The brown loam region, often called the Old Black Belt, is the only other soil type that extends the length of the state. It lies east of the loess bluffs and was at one time comparable to the Delta in fertility. The history of this region serves as a case study of soil abuse, exhaustion, and erosion. In the antebellum era it rivaled the Delta and the river lowlands in south Mississippi in attracting land hungry planters and was the scene of equally large and prosperous plantations. But after a century of abuse the soil was depleted of its fertility and the brown loam belt became an area where the high concentration of farm tenancy was its most striking agricultural characteristic. Lafayette County is in the heart of the brown loam region.

East of the brown loam, soil regions occur with great variety. They include the sand clay hills which begin just north of the central prairie and extend northward through the eastern extreme of Lafayette County and the western extreme of Union County, narrowing rapidly almost to a point on the Tennessee line. Before the Civil War small farmers in these hills made feeble efforts to produce cotton, but the results were usually disastrous. The land was poor, the farms were small, and the families were large. It was said that nothing grows in those hills but trouble.

To the east of the sand hills are the flatwoods, a long narrow strip of greyish soil of low fertility which produces little more than scrub oaks. About one third of Union County lies within this region. The southern extreme of the flatwoods is bounded on the east by the Tombigbee Prairie, a rich area of gently rolling terrain often called the Alabama-Mississippi black belt. This prairie extends into the southeast corner of Union County. The northern extreme of the flatwoods is bounded on the east by the Pontotoc Ridge, a region of rich sandy loam. The sandy hillsides of the Pontotoc Ridge were once the scene of Chickasaw farms; however, this area has also suffered from erosion.

The remaining area in north Mississippi is called the northeast or Tennessee hills, which contain patches of rich bottom land. The rugged terrain, however, precludes large scale agriculture. The residents of the northeast hills were more akin to the mountaineers

of east Tennessee than they were to other Mississippi farmers. This may explain why Union sentiment was stronger in this section than in any other part of Mississippi.

Coursing throughout north Mississippi are the almost numberless creeks and streams that form the state's major river systems. Their names bear eloquent testimony of those who used them first: the Tombigbee, Tilotobee, Tallahatchie, Lusascuna, Yallobusha, and Yockony Patawfa.

These rivers and many other Indian place names bespeak those who were here before the white man came. There were at least sixteen tribes which occupied the territory that later became Mississippi. The major ones include the Biloxi and Pascagoula on the coast, the Natchez in the southwest, the Tunica in the west central portion, the Choctaw in the central section, and the Chickasaw in the northern portion of Mississippi. Let me add, however, that these locations are approximate at best, and that all tribes ranged far into the territory of their neighbors. The most populous tribe was the Choctaws who numbered about 20,000. The Chickasaws and Natchez numbered about 4,500 each.

All three tribes had a common linguistic background. The Choctaws and Chickasaws spoke virtually the same language, which must have been melodic. An early European traveler described it as "very agreeable to the ears, courteous, gentle and musical . . . the women in particular so fine and musical as to represent the singing of birds." None of the Mississippi tribes had a written language.

Tribal folklore included a creation epic, a great migration epic from the "setting sun" to the "land of the great river," and a flood epic which described the use of rafts on which both men and animals escaped the relentless and rising waters.

Tribal life was simple and close to nature. Virtually everything in the Indian universe was expressed in religious terms. The sun was the most important manifestation of diety. It was named the Great Holy Fire Above and was represented by a sacred fire in each household. Diety also expressed itself in both good and evil spirits.

Tribal rites were elaborate both in life and in death. The Choctaws placed their dead on a scaffold where, at the appropriate time, bone pickers removed the flesh, and the remains were then buried amid lamentation and wailing. The Natchez often sacrificed wives and children as part of the burial rite. Chickasaws buried their dead,

beneath the floor of his household in a sitting position facing west to enable the spirit to find its way into eternity.

Mississippi tribes developed a clan system of social organization. Clans were exogamic, that is, members must marry outside the clan; and matrilineal, that is, descent was traced through the female. Additionally, most tribes practiced both polygamy and monogamy.

Essentially, most Mississippi Indians were town or village dwellers with a degree of local autonomy. The tribe was a confederation of towns or villages. Both the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes developed a tribal council in which authority was shared and diffused. The Natchez, however, were more autocratic.

The rule of law followed custom and tradition. In case of homicide, the victim's relatives had the right of vengeance. If the slayer escaped, his brother was deemed responsible under the right of retaliation.

Mississippi Indians were basically agrarian. Their commerce and industry remained primitive. The various tribes did, however, often engage in warfare. Second only to the considerations of territoriality, the chief benefit derived from these intertribal wars was the acquisition of slave labor. Prisoners taken in battle were reduced to bondage. Slaveholders would often sever the ankle nerves or sinews of their bondsmen, a simple technique to prevent escape without impairing the ability to work.

Even if they had known the meaning of the word, most Mississippi Indians would probably not have considered their wilderness pristine. Nor could they have estimated the intoxicant effect the lure of land would work on those strange-looking creatures walking through the woods during that winter of 1540 when Hernando DeSoto camped somewhere along the Pontotoc Ridge.

The white man came, and the Indians were caught in that three-way power struggle for empire among the Spanish, French, and English. Ultimately, the British dominated all the territory east of the Mississippi River. Then the Americans emerged and Mississippi became a political and geographic entity.

In 1798 the Mississippi Territory was established under the same general provisions as the Old Northwest Territory with one important exception. Slavery was permitted in the Mississippi Territory. Slavery had been practiced by the Indians; the French had recognized and regulated the institution in 1724 when Bienville published

his Black Code; the British had allowed it; and the Mississippi economy presumed its continuation. At least by 1806 Mississippi's economic future was sealed. Cotton was rapidly becoming its chief money crop. Slavery was already an established institution. It was not, however, a closed subject; slavery had not yet become the acid test of Southern manhood. Cotton was the crown prince, not yet king.

After almost twenty years as a territory, Mississippi was admitted to statehood in 1817. The invention of the cotton gin, the introduction of a cotton plant suitable for Mississippi's humid climate, and the development of the cotton press combined with the availability of new land to revolutionize Mississippi's economy.

When Mississippi became a state, over two-thirds of its territory was Indian reserve and thus not accessible to white settlement. However, in rather rapid succession this Indian territory was involuntarily ceded to the United States by the Treaty of Doaks Stand in 1820, the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, and the Treaty of Pontotoc in 1832. The availability of over seven and a half million acres generated a land rush of spectacular dimensions. The effect was electrifying. In a speech distinguished by its lack of exaggeration a Mississippi politician proclaimed in 1830, "Already the feet of thousands press upon the borders of this new purchase . . . Kentucky's coming, Tennessee's coming, Alabama's coming, and they're all coming to join the joyous crowd of Mississippians."

Unfortunately, land speculators, who have been described as the shock troops of empire, gobbled up over 75 percent of the new land. Prices skyrocketed from \$1.25 an acre in 1830 to \$40 an acre in 1835. Slave prices experienced a similar trend. By the middle 1830s traders were asking and receiving \$3,200 for a pair of slaves. The land rush was accompanied by a population explosion. Mississippi's population increased about 200 percent in the decade from 1830 to 1840. Significantly, the census returns for 1840 indicated that Mississippi's slave population exceeded its white population. A rather simple notation for such alarming ramifications.

I can hardly overstate the consequences of the Flush Times in Mississippi. During this exciting decade the crown prince became king cotton and all public debate on slavery was closed. Let me trace the progress of that debate. In 1818 both the state supreme court and the chief executive declared slavery to be an evil infesting the

body politic. By 1831 Mississippi's premier orator, Seargent Prentiss, still conceded that "slavery is a great evil . . . *but* a necessary one." The debate had run its course by 1836 and Prentiss was swayed. "The people of the state of Mississippi," he announced, "look upon the institution of domestic slavery . . . not as a curse, but a blessing . . . a legitimate condition of the African race . . . and they hope to transmit this situation to their posterity as the best part of their inheritance. . . . We hold discussion upon this subject as equally impertinent with discussion upon our relations, wives, and children, and will allow no present change, or hope of future alteration in this matter." This was not idle talk. In that same year, 1836, Governor John A. Quitman recommended legislation designed to prevent the dissemination of literature critical of slavery.

The ultimate defense had been agreed upon. Slavery was declared a positive good. The burden of Southern history descended. The power structure would permit no further debate. It would not retreat from that position. In a speech before the United States Senate Mississippi's Robert J. Walker reiterated: "Our peculiar institutions will yield only at the point of the bayonet, and in a struggle for their defense we would be found invincible." Walker's speech is remarkable because it revealed as early as 1836 the ultimate stand Southerners would take in defense of slavery, and it bore eloquent testimony to the South's inaccurate assessment of its military capacity. This mistake, made almost universally in the South, precluded a more realistic appraisal of the drift of events during the next two decades.

As cotton production became almost exclusively the basis of Mississippi's prosperity, the expansion of slavery became increasingly the basic issue in Mississippi politics, the test by which all public men were measured. If the great West were not opened to slave expansion, Mississippians reasoned, a surplus population would result in the devaluation of their capital assets in slaves. In 1860 the assessed valuation of Mississippi's 436,691 slaves was almost 350 million dollars, a figure in excess of the combined valuation of all farm land and equipment.

Furthermore, if no new slave states were carved out of the western territory, the balance of power in national politics would shift to the free states which could and probably would lead to the eventual abolition of the institution of slavery itself.

This was the rationale upon which Mississippi's secession leaders pleaded their cause. One of the most astonishing expressions of that rationale is an editorial which appeared in the October 29, 1860, issue of the *Vicksburg Sun*.

WOULD THE SOUTH BE INJURED BY THE DISSOLUTION
OF THE UNION?

We verily believe that the overthrow of the Union would not only perpetuate slavery where it now exists and establish it more firmly, but would necessarily lead to its widespread extension. The Southern States once constituted as an independent Republic, the acquisition of Mexico, Central America, Cuba, San Domingo, and other West India Islands would follow as a direct and necessary result. It would not be in the power of the North to prevent it, unless by an appeal to arms terminating in the subjugation of the South, and we presume that Abolition fanaticism would hardly venture upon such a Quixotic experiment as that. In possession of the Gulf of Mexico and our institutions established upon what is now the free soil of Mexico and the whole coast would be open to slave emigration, while the Northern and Western states would be completely cut off from our present possessions in that quarter. California would speedily become a slave state. The enormous wealth she is now pouring into the lap of the North would at once be withdrawn and become tributary to Southern prosperity and Southern power. While the Union lasts, it is in the power of the Northern majority to confine slavery to such territory as we already possess. She will exercise that power. Of course no sane man believes that another slave state will ever be admitted into the Union. If they see proper the dominant majority in Congress—and this they would certainly do—can prevent the annexation of Mexico and Cuba, and other territories where slavery now exists and would be likely to go. Dissolve the Union, however, and the case is altered. The South would then be free to carry, without let or hindrance, her institutions far beyond the limits to which they must be confined under our present form of government. In the Union the South cannot expand beyond her present limits; out of it she can extend her institutions over Mexico, Cuba, San Domingo and other West India Islands and California, and thereby become the most powerful Republic that ever the sun shone upon.

Every time I read this editorial, I more fully appreciate James L. Alcorn's assessment of the secession crisis. Alcorn, one of the state's wealthiest and largest landowners in 1860, said that in the hour of crisis, reason was dethroned, passions ruled, and Mississippi was hurled into the embrace of a causeless, cruel and bloody war.

That war, inaugurated in Mississippi with pageantry more befitting

a medieval joust, concluded not only in defeat but amid bitter recriminations and disillusionment. Seventy-eight thousand young Mississippians were sent off, not as soldiers to war, but as knight-crusaders. Almost half of them did not return. Of those who did return, many came back before the war was over.

Mississippians conceded defeat, but only in battle. Their will to resist, weakened in war, survived in peace. To most antebellum Mississippians, the world they lived in was flat; they saw only the danger but none of the adventure in that mysterious and treacherous sea of social change. Their ship of state sailed cautiously and in circles. I do not have the power to measure the magnitude of change in post Civil War Mississippi. I shall simply read a letter that does.

House of Representatives
Jackson, Mississippi
March 26, 1870

To His Excellency Governor James L. Alcorn:

Governor, I was a slave of Col. W. G. Henderson. Boys together as we were, he is the center of the tenderest associations of my life. Arrived at manhood's estate, I was still intimately connected with him. . . . When he was wounded at Upperville, . . . he languished in the valley of Virginia . . . until it was my privilege to take him away, secretly, through the lines to his own people.

My friend and loving master is a candidate for . . . Circuit Judge . . . and a good republican.

Now, Governor, I, by the mysterious providence of God, am a member of the Legislature. . . . and I now place . . . my earnest prayer that you appoint to the Judgeship of the First District the playmate of my boyhood, the companion of my manhood, the generous friend of my whole life—my former master, Col. Henderson.

/s/ Ambrose Henderson

Reconstruction was but an interim, a calamitous experiment, hesitantly adopted—hastily abandoned—by the white majority. Negro suffrage was at last considered so injurious to good government that its elimination was justified by both fraud and violence. The legendary revolution of 1875 which restored a democratic-conservative coalition to political power in Mississippi is without parallel in the history of election abuse. It was, however, in the vocabulary of Mississippi politics an act of redemption committed in

the interest of white supremacy. Mississippi lost the war but won the peace.

As a basis for a permanent structure of peace, Mississippi's re-deemers, or Bourbons, forged a political organization from which there could be no dissent, which could tolerate no division on any issue, a party which, like the king, could do no wrong. The party's cardinal principle was white supremacy, its policy was color line voting. The chief architect of that strategy was L. Q. C. Lamar. "The safety of Mississippi," he declared, "lies in the maintenance of the Democratic organization and its wise direction by conservative leaders."

The conservative leaders referred to by Lamar were more than politicians, they were prophets who envisioned a "New South," an industrial, a commercial, a manufacturing, a vibrant, an energetic South. The energy and interests of those leaders were channeled in such a direction, and not without success.

The value of manufactured products in Mississippi rose more than 100 percent from 1870 to 1890. Railroad construction was Mississippi's most significant industrial enterprise. Mileage increased more than 108 percent from 1880 to 1890. In 1883 Mississippi laid more track than any other state in the country. The number of industrial jobs increased almost 300 percent from 1860 to 1890. But the average industrial wage decreased.

In contrast to industrial development, Mississippi agriculture declined. The total value of farm products rose only fractionally from 1870 to 1890, notwithstanding the fact that 2½ million more acres were under cultivation in 1890 than in 1870. Mississippi farmers were caught in the cycle of declining prices and increasing production. Cotton prices dropped from 15 cents a pound in 1870 to 7.8 cents in 1890. But the crop lien system, under which a farmer mortgaged his crop against credit advances, dictated the increase of cotton production to offset the loss incurred by falling prices.

Such a system inevitably led to sharecropping or tenancy as the farmer became hopelessly indebted to his creditor. From year to year, the tenant farmed with reckless abandon in the hope of a bumper crop which could free him from debt. Under Mississippi's lien law, a tenant could not relocate until he was free and clear of debt. It was not antebellum practices, but the relentless demands of the tenant system that exhausted much of Mississippi's fertility.

Farm tenancy was as fundamentally characteristic of post Civil War agriculture in Mississippi as slavery was to antebellum agriculture. In 1890, 62.27 percent of all Mississippi farmers were tenants or sharecroppers. Mississippi ranked number one nationally in the incidence of farm tenancy. In Lafayette County over 55 percent of the farm families were tenants; in Union County, 50 percent; in the adjacent counties of Marshall and Panola the figures were 70 percent and 74 percent.

The disparity between industry and agriculture during the 1880s and 1890s generated political unrest among the white farmers and laborers who vocalized their discontent through first, the Farmer's Alliance and then, through the Populist Party. They were confronted and confounded, however, by the charges leveled against them by the ruling elite. When the poor whites seriously considered Populism as an alternative to their privation, they threatened the party in power, they jeopardized the principle of white supremacy. Wilbur J. Cash described this confrontation.

When our common white, our Populist . . . had come to this: The eyes of his old captains were ominous and accusing upon him. From hustings and from pulpits thousands of voices proclaimed him traitor and nigger-loving scoundrel; renegade to Southern Womanhood, the Confederate dead, and the God of his Fathers; Champion of the transformation of the white race into a mongrel breed.

The poor whites recoiled; they were reticent, but still restless. An emerging leadership both responded to and exploited that unrest. Their strategy was to disfranchise the black by constitutional provisions such as the poll tax and the literacy test which they enacted in 1890. They would further exclude blacks from political activity by establishing the "lily white primaries" which they initiated in 1902. When blacks no longer posed any threat to white supremacy, the rednecks could then challenge the Bourbons on political and economic issues, which they did in 1903.

James Kimble Vardaman, the White Chief, the spokesman for the redneck farmer, was elected governor in the first popular primary held in Mississippi. He and his successors inaugurated their own brand of Southern progressivism. Among Vardaman's successors, and initially among his political allies, was Theodore Gilmore Bilbo. Both men, Vardaman and Bilbo, assailed corporate interests as the

enemies of reform and secured regulatory legislation to restrain their power. Additionally, they promoted and achieved significant economic reform in the interest of small farmers and laborers.

However, the upturn in Mississippi agriculture resulted largely from the temporary demand impact caused by World War I. And the fundamental changes in buying habits of postwar America activated a downward trend which plunged Mississippi farmers, in common with the rest of the nation, into almost abyssmal depression during the 1920s.

Cotton, still king in Mississippi, suffered humiliating assaults against its prerogative; the lowly boll weevil drastically reduced the yield just prior to and during the early twenties; but the appearance of synthetic fibers stabilized prices. A flood in 1927 and a drought in 1930 only added to the farmer's misery.

Moreover, the plundering of Mississippi's Piney Woods had run its course in the early twenties and the forty thousand workers formerly employed in timber production glutted the labor market. It is not difficult to see why Franklin D. Roosevelt would say, upon taking office in 1933, that the nation's number one economic problem was the South.

As the depression deepened and revenues declined, the state treasury was exhausted. Bilbo called the legislature into special session for the purpose of issuing bonds to meet the state's current obligations. However, not enough legislators showed up to conduct business. Bilbo issued another, more urgent, call. When the legislature did convene and authorized a bond issue, the state could find no purchaser for the bonds. Consequently, Mississippi operated on a deficit of approximately \$12,000,000.

In the gubernatorial election of 1931 a new brand of politician appeared on the Mississippi scene. Martin Conner, a self-styled businessman-politician, promised to operate state government on a businesslike basis. This meant rigid economy and a balanced budget. To achieve such ends, Conner reduced the number of government employees and slashed government salaries and services and implemented a 2 percent sales tax, one of the first in the nation. When Conner left office in 1936, the state treasury showed a cash balance in excess of \$3,000,000. Conner's businessman's approach to state government culminated in the Balance Agriculture with Industry program established in 1936. The BAWI became an official, gov-

ernment policy of attracting industry into Mississippi through tax exemptions and low rental factories paid for by local bond issues.

The modest success of this program coupled with economic recovery commensurate with World War II lifted Mississippi out of the doldrums of poverty, although Mississippi still ranks fiftieth in per capita income.

Economic benefits notwithstanding, postwar conditions disquieted the issue of race in Mississippi politics. From 1931 to 1955 no governor in Mississippi owed his election exclusively to his stand on race. However, as Mississippi Negroes increasingly demanded the full political, social, and economic benefits of citizenship, a corresponding resistance among whites reactivated politicians who were willing and able to parley that resistance into political power and public office.

Much of Mississippi's political leadership during the 1950s and 1960s, like their counterparts in the 1850s and 1860s, exploited the negative instincts so deeply imbedded in all of us, played upon our fears, frustrations, and anxieties. The results were disastrous: assassination by ritual—Emmit Till, Medgar Evers, Michael Schwerner, Vernon Dahmer.

Once again Mississippi politicians were measured not just by competence, but also by eloquence; not only by ability, but also by loyalty; not by direction for the future, but by devotion to the past; not by theories of government, but theories of history. History is not what happened, but what people believe happened. History may be made by the sword; it is written with a pen. None of us really doubts which is the mightier. In 1875 a Mississippi poetess addressed the state convention of the Democratic press association.

What is that word whose sweetness brings
Memories fraught with better things?

.....
Tis sacred; list! I breathe it low
Our cherished South in the "Long Ago"
Our beautiful, beautiful South.

Say ye! Who on the watch-tower stand,
See ye no help for our stricken land—

.....
To you we look in this trying hour
To you, who wield the Press' power

Let each be brave—true to his past—
The pen must win what the sword has lost
For our beautiful, beautiful South.

Let me now read an extract from an article written by Dunbar Rowland who was for many years the Director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. This article appeared in the official publication of the Mississippi Historical Society. It approximates what most Mississippians believe about their past.

... From 1817 to 1861 Mississippi was ... a land of brave men, fair women and eloquent statesmen. ...

Nothing in nature is more beautiful than were the cotton fields of the state during the picking season. ...

As the work proceeds the peculiar melody ... bursts forth, and there is actual joy in the sound. Men and women who sing while they toil are happy. The black toilers were happy in their work. ... The Southern slave was jovous and mirth-loving. ...

... the Mississippi planter was magnificent and great in everything, great in his strength and great in his weakness. ... He looked upon every true woman of his acquaintance as a God-sent ministering angel, and no one was allowed in his presence to even intimate that a woman was not everything that was true, pure and lovely. He was the ablest expounder of a constitutional democracy, and yet he belonged to an aristocracy the most exclusive that America has ever seen. ... He associated labor and slavery together, hence he looked upon physical toil as a degradation and beneath the ... dignity of a gentleman. ... It is impossible to picture in words the wife Mother of a Mississippi plantation home ... the grandest, noblest and best type of woman that ever brought joy and happiness to the world. ... Descended from a long line of distinguished ancestry, she was truly noble, pure and beautiful. ... The most heroic struggle that was ever waged by a liberty loving people [Civil War] was sustained and strengthened by the undying devotion of Southern wives, mothers, and sisters. ... Did she ever falter or despair? When strong men filled heroes' graves she gave with breaking heart and streaming eyes the manly young son. ... Of all the characters of history ... the Southern women should be enshrined in fame's proudest niche. ...

The grand and noble men and women of the "Old South" are rapidly passing away. Their memories, deeds and virtues must be preserved by their sons and daughters. They must be preserved on the living pages of history ... in story, poetry, song, in sculptured marble ... so that they will endure forever and forever.

Can you not, now, understand what Faulkner meant when he wrote, the past is not history, it is not even past. Let me read from Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*.

It's all *now* you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago. For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on the July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against the position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armstead and Wilcox look grave yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't even need a fourteen-year-old boy to think *This time. Maybe this time* with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble.

If you would understand Mississippi, realize that we are haunted by a past that will not die. The past will not die, because it is not past. Remember, that we dreamed of empire, and when those dreams were laid waste on the fields of Antietam and Vicksburg and Gettysburg, we fantasized.

But do not pity us. For like the land we live on, the woods we hunt in, and the streams we sit by, we are not unduly troubled by it all. We have this thing about being Mississippians. We accept, even if we do not understand, the purity of heart to will one thing; the duality of kindness and cruelty attendant to a single act; the plurality of forces at work in one man's nature. We are obsessed with our very being, but not baffled by it. We are, without reason, an incredibly happy people. We are, perhaps without the right, an incurably optimistic people. We have learned to live with questions unanswered, much more so, we have learned not even to ask the questions.

We believe that we will not merely endure, we believe that we will prevail.