DOG DAYS

By

Steve Tomashefsky

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One summer afternoon in 1903, the young composer W.C. Handy found himself waiting for an overdue train at a railroad station in the town of Tutweiler, Mississippi. While Handy was sitting on the platform, a man started playing the guitar and singing, presumably for tips. The man's technique, as Handy described it in his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, was to run the blade of a knife along the guitar strings instead of pressing them down to the fretboard with his fingers. The result was a sliding sound of whirring notes that, to Handy's trained ear, sounded weird. But apart from the unfamiliar musical technique, Handy's attention was drawn to the singer's lyric, which was the repeated refrain, "Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog."

To Handy, then unknown as a songwriter, those words seemed like nonsense. When the singer took a break, Handy asked him what the words meant. "Perhaps I should have known, but he didn't mind explaining," Handy wrote. "At Moorhead, the eastbound and the westbound met and crossed the north and southbound trains four times a day." The "Southern" was a major railway system with a main line that ran more or less straight west from Atlanta, Georgia to the River at Greenville, Mississippi. The "Dog," Handy explained, was the Yazoo-Delta Railroad, whose initials, "Y.D.," were painted on its rolling stock and caused the locals to nickname it the "Yellow Dog."

That afternoon in Tutweiler was Handy's introduction to the musical form known as the blues. Six years later, in 1909, he published the sheet music for "The Memphis Blues" and in 1914 "The St. Louis Blues," huge successes that, to the public at large, made him "the father of the blues." In between, in 1912, he published "Yellow Dog Blues," which used, word for word, the lyric he had heard at the Tutweiler train station. One wonders how many listeners knew what he was talking about.

The Yellow Dog line ran about 20 miles in the western part of Mississippi known to everyone who lives there as "the Delta." People sometimes refer to the area as the "Mississippi Delta," but the name has nothing to do with the geological delta of the Mississippi River, which is in southeast Louisiana. The Delta generally describes an oval-shaped alluvial plain bounded on the west by the Mississippi River and on the east by a ridge of hills arising along the eastern banks of its tributaries, the Yazoo and Tallahatchie Rivers. One explanation of the name is that, to its early settlers, the region's shape vaguely resembled the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet. Another is that the region's thick deposits of almost impossibly fertile soil, laid down by eons of spring floods as the rivers overflowed their banks, resembled those of the Nile Delta, home of Egypt's cotton-growing industry.

It is impossible to talk about the Delta without quoting its most famous description, given by Delta native David L. Cohn in his 1935 book, *God Shakes Creation*. The Delta, Cohn wrote, "begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg." While that description, measuring a distance of about 225 miles, roughly describes the Delta's northern and southern boundaries (Memphis is a short distance from the Mississippi line), it more accurately describes the Delta's sociology. Built in 1925, the Peabody was for many years the South's grandest hotel, serving the great cotton-growing fortunes at the crossroads of Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Its lobby, crowned by a grand marble fountain, was the meeting place for the planters, factors, and brokers when cotton was king.

I have stayed at the Peabody. Its lobby is still grand. Our room, however, was less grand. The wallpaper was peeling, and the light in the bathroom flickered wildly. Calls to the front desk produced no response. When I checked out the next day, I was handed a customer feedback card promising the reward of a Mont Blanc fountain pen for the best feedback of the

month. Given the passion and detail of my helpful comments, I fully expected to receive the pen by return mail, but it's now been about eight years, so I must assume management determined that another guest's comments were more insightful.

Catfish Row in Vicksburg resembled, in Cohn's day, the fictional Catfish Row depicted in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. "Tumble-down shacks," Cohn says, "lean crazily over the Mississippi River far below. Inside them are dice games and 'Georgia skin'" – a card game – "the music of guitars, the aroma of love, and the soul-satisfying scent of catfish frying to luscious golden-brown in sizzling skillets."

I have also been to Catfish Row in Vicksburg. Or where it was. While I wouldn't say Vicksburg has become prosperous, it certainly has improved since Cohn wrote his book. There is indoor plumbing. On the other hand, there probably is less gambling, and there certainly seems to be less music.

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Consisting of just over 7,000 square miles, the Delta is farm country. Though liberally dotted with small towns and Carnegie libraries, the Delta's rich soil, warm damp climate, and flat geography are ideal for cotton, which requires a long growing season and is thirsty for water and hungry for nutrients in the ground. Once the cotton was harvested, the rivers were ideal for transporting the bales to markets north in Memphis or south in New Orleans.

Recently, Rebecca and I made the 11-hour drive from Chicago to Greenville, a town on the Mississippi River about mid-way between Memphis and Vicksburg. We turned off the main street onto a tree-lined lane and pulled into a driveway behind a car with a bumper sticker reading "My Corgi is smarter than your honor student." The Corgi in question, which answers to

the name of Button, belongs to Leila Clark Wynn, one of the Delta's most prominent and interesting citizens.

Leila is not, strictly speaking, a Delta native. Her father, Edward Clark, was a Texas lawyer whose most famous client was Lyndon Johnson. Clark obtained his undergraduate degree at Tulane University in New Orleans, where he met and later married Anne Metcalfe, whose family owned one of the largest plantations in the Delta. He met Johnson around the time Johnson first ran for Congress, when Clark was Texas' Secretary of State. More politically conservative than Johnson, Clark nevertheless remained one of Johnson's close friends and advisors, and in 1965, Johnson appointed him ambassador to Australia.

Leila grew up in Texas, but she often summered in Greenville, center of the Metcalfe family enterprises. When it was time for her to make her debut, she came out – in the older sense of that phrase – at the Delta Debutante Ball in Greenville. She went north to attend Smith College and then did graduate work in American literature at the University of Texas. She married Doug Wynn, a Greenville attorney whose family also had extensive land holdings and, until a bridge was built in 1940, controlled the lucrative ferry across the Mississippi from Greenville to Lake Village on the Arkansas side. His father, W.T. Wynn, known as "Billy," was the Delta's most powerful lawyer.

After settling in Greenville, Leila led a very busy life. She raised four children while being active in politics, philanthropy, the family businesses (which included banking and timber interests as well as farming), and the arts. Along the way, she assembled an extensive collection of material on William Faulkner, which she has donated to the University of Mississippi Library in Oxford, the north Mississippi town where Faulkner lived. She's been on dozens of boards, both for- and not-for-profit, including the Garden Club of America; the University of Texas

Humanities Research Center; The National Wildflower Research Center; the Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Foundation; the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters; Millsaps College, from which she received an honorary doctorate; several banks; several farming and timber companies; and the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

It was through one of Leila's board memberships, the Foundation for the Mid-South, that we met her. Rebecca had been hired by FMS to consult on increasing the organization's funding base to areas outside the South, including Chicago, where quite a few former Mississippians live. The board came to Chicago for a meeting and had cocktails at our apartment. Rebecca had told Leila that we were interested in the blues and that I was interested in farming and farm equipment. Leila immediately invited us to visit her in Greenville, and she promised to arrange a tour of blues-related locations and her family's farming operation

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I had known about the Delta for many years before meeting Leila Wynn. Probably I first heard of it in 1967, when a song called "Ode to Billy Joe" was a number one hit on the AM radio. The song opens with this couplet:

It was the third of June, another sleepy, dusty Delta day
I was out choppin' cotton and my brother was a-balin' hay

I suppose I initially had no idea what a "Delta day" was, though clearly the reference to "choppin' cotton" – that is, weeding the cotton plants with a hoe – told me it was somewhere in the South. The lyrics, wonderfully quirky and atmospheric, described the suicide of a boy named Billy Joe who jumped from a bridge over the Tallahatchie River somewhere north of Greenwood, Mississippi, which is about 50 miles east of Leila's home in Greenville. The song conveyed both the quotidian trivia of farm life and a sense of foreboding mystery. At one point the singer's mother says at the dinner table:

"That nice young preacher, Brother Taylor, dropped by today
"Said he'd be pleased to have dinner on Sunday, oh, by the way
"He said he saw a girl that looked a lot like you up on Choctaw Ridge
"And she and Billy Joe was throwing somethin' off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

One of the great pop culture questions of 1967 was what were the singer and Billy Joe throwing off the Tallahatchie Bridge shortly before Billy Joe jumped? But the boy's unexplained suicide, played off against the "sleepy, dusty" Delta and the evocative names like "Choctaw Ridge" and "Tallahatchie Bridge," conveyed a sense of mystery and sudden unexpected violence in this land. As Willie Morris, a Delta native who made his fame in New York 45 years ago by becoming the youngest-ever editor of *Harper's* magazine, once wrote, the Delta has "always frightened and titillated the outsider."

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Though cotton was the Delta's most lucrative product, in my world its most important product is the blues. The man singing "Goin' where the Southern Cross the Dog" at the Tutweiler train station was singing the blues long before W.C. Handy became the "Father of the Blues."

No one knows for certain when or where the blues really originated in the form we know it today, or even if it originated in only one place at only one time. But few would deny that the Delta has been the strongest contributor to the blues tradition, including its music, lyrics, legends, characters, and influences. In his 1971 book, *Feel Like Going Home*, Peter Guralnick wrote that "[t]he blues we hear today are almost all Mississippi-derived and -influenced. . . . I think it is enough to say that the blues came out of Mississippi, sniffed around in Memphis, and then settled in Chicago where it is most likely it will peacefully live out the rest of its days." To be sure, blues musicians came to Chicago from all parts of the state and even other parts of the

South, but what we know today as the Chicago blues is the direct descendant of music brought north by Delta musicians during the great migration of the 1940s and 1950s.

There was a lot of blues in Chicago before the Deltans arrived. Big Bill Broonzy, who was from Arkansas, led an entire school of musicians in Chicago who recorded widely during the 1920s and 1930s. Later he became a fixture at the Old Town School of Folk Music and an inspiration to Studs Terkel. But it was not really until Muddy Waters – born McKinley Morganfield near Rolling Fork, Mississippi – settled in Chicago in 1943 that the Chicago blues as we know it started to take shape.

Muddy Waters was a sharecropper on Howard Stovall's plantation near Clarksdale when, in 1941, he was introduced to Alan Lomax, a folklorist who was traveling through the South recording local musicians on behalf of the Library of Congress. Lomax handed Muddy a guitar and was "bowled over" by what he heard. As he wrote, many years later:

> Muddy's style so impressed me that I recorded his two finest blues twice, and later included both of these blues in the first set of records published by the Library of Congress. This compilation aimed to present the finest things we had found in our survey of the whole country, and Muddy's work definitely belonged in this prime category. His first song, given without any prompting from me, began with a murmurous tenderness, the slide guitar echoing the melancholy and sensuous syllables.

Shortly after hearing the field recordings Lomax had made, Muddy Waters decided to try his luck in Chicago.

If one sound most typifies Muddy Waters' contribution when he arrived in Chicago, it is the sliding guitar string sound, created in his case with the broken-off neck of a beer or whisky bottle worn on his pinky. Though not unique to the blues – it may have been Hawaiian guitarists who originated the use of a slide, and some White country musicians also used it early on – the technique was especially suited to the Delta blues style, giving the guitar a more vocal quality in

which the pitch was imprecise or, to be more accurate, microtonal; as is sometimes said, the slide finds the notes between the notes, challenging the standard Western concept of an even-tempered 12-tone scale. Though Black singers throughout the South had used the sliding scale in their singing, the slide guitar technique added it to the instrumental accompaniment.

There is a lineage of Delta blues musicians leading up to Muddy Waters' arrival in Chicago. It can be difficult to trace that lineage to its roots, because there are few written accounts, and those we have – such as W.C. Handy's – pay little attention to the individual artist's names and backgrounds. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the patriarch of the Delta blues was a man named Charlie Patton, born just outside the Delta around 1890. When he was still a child, his family moved to the Dockery plantation in the central Delta, and there Patton spent much of the rest of his life. Between 1929 and 1934, he recorded some 57 titles, mostly for the Paramount label, at studios in Richmond, Virginia; Grafton, Wisconsin; and New York City. The large size of his catalogue indicates the popularity of his music, which was exceptional for its genre and time.

Charlie Patton recorded a wide variety of material, but the core of his repertoire was his songs about Delta life. He sang about encounters with the law:

When the trial is in Belzoni, it ain't no use to scream and cry
Mr. Webb will take you back to Belzoni jail a flying

Let me tell you folks just how he treated me
He put me in the cellar, it was dark as it could be

He sang about being broke:

Ain't gonna tell nobody what '34 have done for me
Christmas has rolled up, I was broke as I could be

They run me from Will Dockery's, drove me out Herman Jett's door[1]
Herman told Papa Charlie, I don't want you hanging round my job no more

[1] Jett was overseer of the Dockery plantation.

He sang about the 1927 Mississippi River flood, by some measures the largest natural disaster this country has known, when the levee broke north of Greenville:

Now the boys around Leland tell me the river is raging high
I'm going to move to Greenville before I say goodbye

The water at Greenville and Leland, it done rose everywhere
I would go down to Rosedale, but they tell me there's water there

Charlie Patton's influence in the Delta was immense. A direct line runs from Patton to Eddie "Son" House, Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters, all of whom played primarily, if not exclusively, in the slide guitar style.

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The Delta is not old farm country. Before the Civil War, it was largely a dense cypress-tupelo swamp and forest populated by Choctaws and other Native Americans. Black bears, panthers, wolves, alligators, and poisonous snakes were plentiful. But the soil's enormous fertility was a magnet to Eastern planters whose cotton lands were playing out. Beginning in the 1840s, they bought up large tracts and began slowly to clear the land and drain the swamps with slave labor, initially in areas close to the River. Even as late as 1890, when Charlie Patton was born, the majority of the Delta was still forest and swamp.

The Dockerys were relative latecomers. In 1895, Will Dockery, who was described in his obituary as having been a bookkeeper of modest means, bought 40 square miles of forested Delta land for $1,000. Gradually, he established an 18,000 acre cotton plantation. His need for a large labor force to clear and farm the land drew people like Charlie Patton's parents from all around the Delta and other parts of Mississippi.

Will Dockery died in 1936, and the plantation was taken over by his son, Joe Rice Dockery. A famous photograph taken in the early 1960s by British writer Paul Oliver shows the plantation seed house emblazoned in large, rough letters reading:

DOCKERY FARMS
EST. 1895 BY
WILL DOCKERY 1865-1936
JOE RICE DOCKERY
OWNER

It all seems a bit showy and indiscreet for the Delta, but Joe Rice Dockery was no roughneck. He was a graduate of Cornell University, following the pattern of many wealthy Deltans who attended Ivy League schools. A noted gourmet, he was a Grand Officer of the exclusive Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, an international organization devoted to the pleasures of Burgundy wine. He loved classical music, and his wife was on the national council of the Metropolitan Opera.

I have seen no evidence that either Will or Joe Rice Dockery had any interest in the blues or appreciation for Charlie Patton's music. Today, however, part of the property has been turned over to the Dockery Farms Foundation, established several years ago by Joe Rice Dockery's grandson – a venture capitalist living in New York – as a shrine to the blues in general and Charlie Patton in particular. The Foundation's web site makes the somewhat extravagant claim that the blues was "born" right there on Dockery Farms and resulted from some sort of creative partnership between Will Dockery and Charlie Patton.

There isn't much evidence that Howard Stovall knew Muddy Waters, either, but *his* grandson, a former member of the Chicago Board of Trade, was a partner with the actor Morgan Freeman in a blues club in Clarksdale and for several years was Executive Director of the Blues Foundation in Memphis.

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At the McCormick Book Inn in Greenville, an independent bookstore that closed recently after 46 years in business, proprietor Hugh McCormick would sell you a small bottle of dirty-looking water said to be drawn from his tap. Drink the water, the label said, and you might become a great writer. Why? Because Greenville claims to be the town that has produced more writers per square inch than anywhere else in America. The secret, says the label, might just be the drinking water.

The back room of McCormick's shop was a shrine to Greenville's literary heritage, with several bookcases of first editions by writers of both regional and national renown. Among those represented on McCormick's shelves were novelist Walker Percy, winner of the 1962 National Book Award for his debut book, *The Moviegoer*; novelist and historian Shelby Foote, probably best known today as the lead narrator of Ken Burns' series *The Civil War*; poet and playwright Angela Jackson, who was born in Greenville but moved with her family to Chicago as a young girl; newspaper editor, historian, and novelist Hodding Carter II; memoirist David L. Cohn; literary agent and memoirist Ben Wasson, whose principal client was William Faulkner; novelist Ellen Douglas, whose 1973 novel, *Apostles of Light*, was nominated for the National Book Award; memoirist and motivational writer Clifton Taulbert; food and cultural affairs essayist Julia Reed; and the writing team of Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays, whose trilogy of books on Southern mores and cuisine is both wickedly funny and relentless in its advocacy of home-made mayonnaise.

Hugh McCormick told me that his favorite Greenville writer was David Cohn, whose 1935 book on the Delta, *God Shakes Creation*, is highly questionable on race relations but beautifully written. According to Cohn, Greenville was "awash with aspirant authors of every

kind. . . . Apparently there is a thesaurus under every bed in the community; a novel simmering with every housewife's soup."

Hovering above all Greenville writers is the town's greatest literary personality, William Alexander Percy. Born in 1885, Will Percy was the son of LeRoy Percy, the Delta's most dominant figure during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Lawyer, businessman, cotton planter, and U.S. senator, LeRoy Percy was wealthy, worldly, and nationally known as a spokesperson for the interests of the Delta's White elite. Though more moderate on racial issues than some, his defining moment was rounding up a large contingent of African-American men at gunpoint during the 1927 flood, forcing them to raise the levee with sandbags and dirt. The effort failed; Greenville and the surrounding communities were devastated. Against that was his successful effort, in 1922, to keep the Ku Klux Klan from organizing in Greenville, because he viewed the Klan as a group of low-class rabble rousers who, he feared, would run off the Black sharecroppers essential to the cotton-farming enterprise.

Will Percy initially followed his father's path. He attended Harvard Law School and came home to enter legal practice with his father. He served with distinction as an Army captain in World War I, earning the *Croix de Guerre*. But he also started writing, publishing four volumes of poetry beginning in 1916. His *Collected Poems* was published by Knopf in 1944, two years after his death.

Will Percy's influence did not really lie in his own writing. His poetry was precious and even pretentious, with little connection to the experiences of real life. The young William Faulkner, in a review of Percy's second book, *In April Once*, nailed it, I think. To him, Percy's poetry contained "poignant ecstasies of lyrical extravagance and a short lived artificial strength achieved at the cost of true strength in beauty." Faulkner's agent, Ben Wasson, once brought

him to meet Will Percy in Greenville, where they were to play tennis on Percy's back-yard court. Percy resented Faulkner for the negative review but, gentleman to the core, he played the gracious host. Unfortunately, Faulkner showed up dead drunk and keeled over after missing Percy's first lob. "I don't believe your friend feels very well, Ben," Percy said to Wasson. "Maybe you'd better take him for a drive."

Will Percy's real influence was as a friend, host, and mentor to many Southern writers. Above all, he offered an example of how to live an aesthetic life among the rough-and-tumble planters and businessmen who dominated the local culture. His associations with the Northern literary establishment and his frequent trips to Europe gave him additional authority among younger writers in the region. Almost 70 years after his death, he still looms large over any account of the Delta. Indeed, just this month a full length biography was published by the University of North Carolina Press.

When his father died in 1929, Will Percy took over management of the family's 3,200-acre plantation, called Trail Lake, where over 600 sharecroppers and tenant farmers lived. In 1941, Will Percy published a memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*, which was a best-seller and is still in print. While I suppose hardly anyone reads Will Percy's poetry any more, his memoir is still widely regarded as the definitive statement of the White Delta experience until the civil rights movement changed things forever.

Will Percy bitterly resented Northern meddlers, especially the editors of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper, who ceaselessly urged Southern Blacks to move north to escape Southern racism, lynchings, and the sharecropper system. The urging worked. Though I have seen no specific data for migration from the Delta, between 1940 and 1970 alone, over five million African Americans moved from the South to cities in the North. Between 1940 and 1960,

Chicago's African American population grew from 278,000 to 813,000, and in that case I believe the overwhelming majority came from Mississippi, and most of those from the Delta. Today there is a Greenwood Club on the South Side, a nice brick building where Chicago people from Greenville meet to talk about what they have in common.

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Rebecca and I moved to Chicago in December 1972, a few months after we were married. Our reasons for starting our new life here were complicated, but there is no doubt that our interest in the blues played a significant part in the decision. I had never really listened to the blues until I went to college. When I got there, I found a thriving group of fans called the Boston Blues Society, who regularly sponsored concerts by blues artists from out of town. The driving force behind the operation was Dick Waterman, a booking agent and manager who had signed up a Who's Who of blues artists, many of whom had not touched a guitar for years until Waterman encouraged them to begin performing again.

Among the artists Waterman managed was Son House, the Delta musician who had been influenced by Charlie Patton and who influenced Muddy Waters. House had given up performing and was living in Rochester, New York when Waterman found him in 1964. He was a fierce performer with deep conviction, and he accompanied himself by slashing at his guitar strings with a short length of metal pipe on his little finger. But by the time I saw him in Cambridge in 1970, his health was not good, and much of the fierceness was gone.

One of the last Boston Blues Society concerts I heard before leaving Cambridge was by a trio of musicians from Chicago. The Harvard radio station was playing a great deal of their new album, and a large crowd showed up. The concert was memorable for its frenetic energy and the strange personality of the band leader, Theodore Roosevelt Taylor, known to most everyone as

Hound Dog. Born in 1917 near Natchez, he grew up in the Delta, near Greenwood, about 55 miles straight east of Greenville.

When I first saw him that evening at Harvard in 1971, Hound Dog was sitting on a chair, constantly pumping his leg up and down as he played a cheap Japanese electric guitar with a metal-pipe slide on his little finger, the effect of which was to produce a highly distorted sound more typically associated with heavy-metal rock than with the blues. He kept up a patter that he evidently believed was very funny, frequently covering his mouth with his hand when he laughed. The patter was hard to understand from my seat in the audience, though I recall him asking the other guitar player several times whether his name was Brewer Phillips or Phillip Brewer, which they both seemed to regard as a hilarious question. The most popular song of the evening was called "Give Me Back My Wig," the refrain of which was:

Give me back my wig
Honey let your head go bald
Really didn't have no business
Honey buying you no wig at all

The lyric's almost Dadaist absurdity, combined with a driving dance rhythm, brought down the house.

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A few years ago a prominent civil rights lawyer came to visit in Chicago to drum up financial support for her organization, based in Mississippi. Born in Jackson, she had gone to college at Oberlin and then law school in Ann Arbor. During the Clinton administration, she served as president of the Legal Services Corporation, the umbrella agency created during the Johnson administration's War on Poverty to fund local legal aid offices in largely poor communities. In 2002, she returned to Mississippi and founded the Mississippi Center for

Justice, a privately funded civil rights law firm that has taken on issues arising from Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, pay-day lending, and mortgage foreclosure abuse. She is listed on the White House web site as a "Champion of Change."

During her visit, I told her we had recently met a woman living in Chicago who grew up in Greenville and who might be a prospective donor. I mentioned that her family had owned a department store in downtown Greenville called Goodman's. "Oh," our visitor said, "the Jew store."

She immediately realized she might have said something offensive and started to explain what she had meant. But we waved her off. Almost every town in the Delta – indeed, many towns in the South – had a dry-goods store run by a Jewish family, and they were uniformly known as "Jew Stores" by both Black and White patrons.

The Southern Jewish community was widely but thinly spread. Greenville, had a fairly large Jewish population as things went and still today has a substantial synagogue, one of the largest in Mississippi. Its first mayor, elected in 1875, was Jewish. As the Delta's largest town, it had at least three Jew Stores, Goodman's, Tenenbaum's, and Stein Mart. That last name may sound familiar. The founder's grandson, Jay Stein, embarked on an expansion campaign beginning in the late 1970s, and Stein Mart now has over 250 stores nationwide. In the process, Jay Stein took the company public and moved its headquarters to Florida.

Jay Stein and Leila Wynn are old friends. On one of our recent trips to Greenville he also happened to be in town, and Leila asked him and his wife over for an after-dinner drink. The Steins arrived with an acquaintance from New York, Andy Lack, who heads Bloomberg Multimedia and before that was chairman of Sony BMG Music and President of NBC. Though he was born and raised in New York, Andy Lack's great-grandfather was Greenville's second

Jewish mayor. He had recently reconnected with his Delta roots, and Jay Stein had invited him down for a visit. On short notice, Lack had managed to convene a meeting of Black and White leaders in town, and over drinks at Leila's he announced he had discovered that the Black people and White people of Greenville didn't talk to each other.

I could see that Leila was steaming, but she maintained her polite exterior. I ventured to say that the problem was not limited to Greenville, the Delta, Mississippi, or the South. But Andy Lack wasn't really listening.

To be sure, Mississippi has a lot of history to overcome. Some of the most brutal events in the modern civil rights movement happened there. Indeed, of the 40 people listed on the Web site of the Southern Poverty Law Center as Civil Rights Martyrs, 18 – almost half – were murdered in Mississippi, including Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. No wonder that, at the close of his "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King memorably said:

> *I have a dream that one day even in the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

When Andy Lack left with the Steins that evening, he gave the distinct impression he was going to do something to solve the Black-White communication problem. So far, I've seen no evidence he's started doing anything, but in the Delta, time still moves slowly.

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When we moved to Chicago permanently in December 1972, my plan was to enroll in the University of Chicago's Comparative Literature program. But because I had deferred starting until the fall of 1973, I needed to get a job for the next eight months.

One afternoon, weary from several interviews with business owners who did not understand the value a liberal arts degree could bring to their operations, I stopped in to the Jazz Record Mart, then located on Grand Avenue just west of State Street. I knew from my reading that the JRM was a place where you could find out where blues musicians were playing at places on the South and West Sides that didn't advertise in the papers. I also knew that the owner, Bob Koester, owned the Delmark Records label and had produced several of my favorite blues albums.

I arrived at the JRM at about four in the afternoon. I asked the fellow behind the register whether Mr. Koester was around. He told me Koester was not in but was expected soon if I wanted to wait. Around 4:30, Bob Koester arrived. He dramatically dumped a pile of records on the counter and asked to see the mail. The store clerk pointed to me and told him that I wanted to talk. "Fine," he said, as though that happened every day. "I'm going out to have breakfast. You're welcome to come along."

So we walked to the diner down the street, and I watched Bob Koester eat breakfast at five in the afternoon. We talked for a while about the blues. He asked me who I was and what I was doing. I said I had just graduated from Harvard and was looking for a job until the fall. "Well," he said, "I just fired my shipping clerk for smoking marijuana in the warehouse. If you want the job, it pays $65 a week."

"I've never done that before," I said.

"That doesn't matter," he replied. You seem to know something about the music. And anyway, I want to be able to tell everyone that I just hired a Harvard graduate to pack my records."

So in January 1973, I started as the shipping clerk at Delmark, which at the time had a catalogue of about 40 albums evenly divided between blues and jazz. I quickly learned that Koester and his wife, Sue, had a regular routine of taking groups of people, often out-of-town visitors who had come to Chicago especially to hear live blues, to clubs on the South and West Sides every Saturday night. Rebecca and I readily fell into that routine.

Within the first few weeks we met another couple who were also regulars, Wes and Peggy Race, who seemed to have a special bond with the Koesters. Perhaps it was because Wes and Peggy, like Bob, had grown up in Wichita, Kansas. Like us, like Bob, and like Sue, they had moved to Chicago to hear the blues. They lived in a small apartment over a meat-packing plant on Halsted Street in Bridgeport. Most Saturday nights, Bob, Sue, Rebecca, and I – and whoever else was coming along – would drive from the North Side down to Bridgeport, pick up Wes and Peggy, and head to one or more of a dozen places on the West Side or South Side to hear the blues.

We soon learned that Wes and Peggy had formed a special relationship with Hound Dog Taylor, his fellow band members Brewer Phillips (that was his real name) and Ted Harvey; their respective wives Fredda, Auria, and Loretta; and Hound Dog's sister, Lucy Wade. The four women had a group they called the House Rockers' Social Club, and Peggy became their first and only White member.

The club's purpose was to raise money for the five women to spend at Christmas. Their main fundraising strategy was to hold dances and parties throughout the year, usually with Hound Dog and the band as the featured attraction. Somewhat surprisingly, since most of the audience was women from other similar social clubs, the shows often included a "shake" dancer

– in other words, a stripper. The price of admission not only got you the band and the striptease, but also a buffet of food the ladies had prepared themselves.

They were all exceptional cooks. The menu rarely varied: pork ribs, fried chicken, chitterlings, collard greens, potato salad, corn bread – staples of the Southern diet. It was all loaded with spices and fat – just what I loved the most.

Hound Dog had a regular gig on Sunday afternoons at a South Side club called Florence's at 55th and Shields. Wes never missed it. At a time when most bars got a dollar cover charge, Florence's was, as Wes liked to say, "free to get into," and they didn't try to make up the difference by jacking up the drink prices. The Sunday afternoon crowd was almost entirely regulars. After all, getting up on a Sunday after a long night on Saturday requires a special commitment. I came to realize that the most committed blues fans were not just interested in the music; they liked being in bars and staying out late. We certainly did. And "late" meant *very* late. Though most bars had to close by 3:00 am on Sunday mornings, a few establishments were permitted to remain open until 5:00 am, and that's when the music ended.

One of the regulars at Florence's was a short fellow whose name, as far as I was able to make out, was Mordiz or Mondez, who always stood next to the bandstand looking serious and taking copious notes. I once asked if I could look at his notebook, and what I saw was a page of undecipherable scribbles that, he told me, were in Korean, though it looked nothing like the writing on menus in Korean restaurants. Nor was it clear where he would have learned Korean anyway. But he must have filled dozens of notebooks with his calligraphy, and if they still survive they probably belong in a museum.

* * *

Several years ago, Leila decided to visit us in Chicago to attend the SOFA art show at Navy Pier. Her friend Gladys Whitney, another Board member of the Foundation for the Mid-South who now lives in Little Rock, decided to join her for the trip. A few days before they arrived, Gladys told us that her two sisters would also be coming to town: Frances Shackelford, known as "Bébé," and their oldest sister, who has the almost impossibly wonderful name Bland Currie. Shackelford was their family name – the Shackelfords were major land owners in the Delta and across the river in Arkansas as well. Bland married Arkansan Johnny Currie, and although Johnny was a fine fellow well worth marrying on the merits, knowing Bland as I do now I can't believe she didn't also consider the value of acquiring a name that would make people to do a double-take every time she was introduced.

We started the evening over drinks at our apartment, and somehow the subject of politics came up. We had just met Bland and Bébé, and of course talking politics is always a bit a bit dicey on the first date. But it turned out we saw things about the same way, which prompted Bland to remark that, on that evening, we had all four of the Delta's liberals in our living room.

Before we left for dinner, Bland said "It turns out Hodding is in town. I've arranged for him to meet us at the restaurant." No one needed to explain who "Hodding" was. Hodding Carter III had followed his father as editor of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville – a newspaper established largely with financial backing from Will Percy, Billy Wynn, and Howard Stovall. He then went to work in the Jimmy Carter State Department, where you may remember him as the government's principal spokesperson during the Iran hostage crisis. At the time we met him for dinner, he was head of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The dinner conversation was rather boisterous, fueled in part by several bottles of wine. Afterward, we decided to seek additional alcohol elsewhere. Though Gladys peeled off to get

some sleep, the rest of us adjourned to the Red Head on Ontario, where our friend Wendy Barr is part owner. After we sat down, she sent over several rounds of free drinks, which helped keep things lively. Sitting next to Hodding Carter, I tried in vain to make some serious conversation, but plainly he was more interested in reminiscing with Bland and Bébé. Then he suddenly turned to me and cupped his hand to my ear. I thought perhaps he was about to share his views on the upcoming election or provide some insight into Jimmy Carter's leadership style. But instead, as if to explain why he was ignoring me, he whispered in a hoarse voice. "When I was living in the Delta," he said, "the Shackelford girls were the hottest thing going."

* * *

Wes and Peggy Race moved back to Wichita in 1974. Peggy never really liked city living anyway. But for my 25th birthday, in 1975, Wes came back from Wichita and went out with us to the 1815 Club, a large place on Roosevelt Road between Ashland and Damen, to hear Howlin' Wolf who, along with Muddy Waters, was one of the two greatest figures of the Chicago Blues.

He was born Chester Burnett in eastern Mississippi, but in his teens he moved to a plantation near Dockery's, where he came under Charlie Patton's spell. Though Patton showed him some elements of his guitar style, Wolf never became much of a guitarist; his primary strength was his singing, which owed much to Patton's deep growl. But Wolf was a much bigger man, and his growl was even more elemental. Wolf moved to Chicago in the early 1950s and started recording for Chess Records, where Muddy Waters had introduced him.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf were the Apollo and Dionysus of the Chicago blues, to borrow Nietzsche's formulation. To be sure, both were more to the Dionysiac side of the scale, but while Muddy Waters was always dignified and, for the

most part, self-controlled, Howlin' Wolf often appeared out of control, a large man stalking the stage, sticking out his tongue, rolling his eyes, and dangling the microphone between his legs in suggestive poses. In his songs, he described himself as "the mighty wolf" and "three hundred pounds of heavenly joy," though that might have been an exaggeration. After hearing him perform at a coffeehouse in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1969, Peter Guralnick wrote a review describing his stage antics but concluding insightfully that "somehow nothing Wolf does is jive . . . . [H]is vulgarity carries with it its own conviction."

Little of the famous Howlin' Wolf energy was in evidence on that night in November 1975 at the 1815 Club. The band carried most of the weight. Wolf sat in a chair and held a guitar but rarely picked at it. Still, even with his energy substantially muted, Howlin' Wolf made you look and listen. Unable to stalk the stage or roll on the floor, he was nevertheless unable to keep still, and he wriggled in his seat as he hoarsely barked the lyrics of his songs, at once powerful and vivid, more like blank verse than song lyrics.

I asked my babe for water
And she gave me gasoline

or

When the mighty wolf comes wagging his tail
He's done stole somebody's daughter
I'm a tail dragger
And I wipe out my tracks

We didn't know at the time that this would be his last public performance. He died of cancer two months later.

* * *

In September 2008, we went down to the Delta to attend the grand opening of the B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, a town of about 12,000 people about 35 miles straight east of Greenville and about eight miles west of Moorhead.

B.B. King, who is certainly the world's best-known blues singer and guitarist, was born Riley King near Indianola in 1925. "B.B." stands for "Blues Boy," a nickname he picked up as a disc jockey in Memphis in the 1940s. His older cousin, Bukka White, was one of Charlie Patton's pupils and played the Delta slide guitar style. B. B. King himself developed a more urbane, big-band sound that had a jazzy tinge. King made his first record in 1949 and had his first blues hit in 1951. He still performs today at age 87; his web sites lists 17 upcoming concert dates in May 2012 alone.

Some years ago, a group of Indianola businessmen got the idea that a B.B. King museum might stimulate tourist traffic and thus the local economy. With King's blessing, they acquired an old cotton gin building and began raising money for the project, which ultimately had a $14 million budget. Support was by no means limited to the African American community. Among the major donors were Jim Barksdale, a Mississippian who made his fortune as CEO of Netscape, and the McPherson and Gresham families, who are in the petroleum distribution business and own a chain of 40 Double Quick gas station/convenience stores throughout the Delta. In addition, there was corporate support from, among others, AT&T, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Anheuser Busch, Entergy, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The state of Mississippi kicked in $1 million as well.

I suspect – though I don't know for sure – that most of those donors are not big fans of B.B. King's music. But people in the Delta have gotten the idea that tourists will come to Mississippi to visit sites associated with the blues. The state has erected historical markers

commemorating nearly 150 locations where blues artists were born, died, or performed, and more are added every year. There is a substantial blues museum in Clarksdale, in the northern Delta, and there are smaller museums in Tunica (inside a casino), Leland, and Greenwood. It is surely a measure of progress that so much activity honoring blues musicians is going on, but in Indianola, at least, the motivation was as much economic as artistic. Studies showed that the museum would draw 25,000 tourists a year, each of whom would spend money in the town's restaurants, stores, motels, and gas stations.

It's hard to build a music museum. Music is, after all, not something you look at. So music museums tend to be filled with curious but trivial artifacts, such as clothes, musical instruments, and album covers. The Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale houses the entire wooden shack where Muddy Waters once lived on the Stovall plantation. Well, not the entire shack. Before it was brought to the museum, a member of the rock band Z.Z. Top removed a board and had it custom made into an electric guitar.

The B.B. King Museum had some artifacts of that sort, but its exhibits also focused on the Delta's history as a whole. I was surprised to see that those exhibits pulled no punches, dealing directly with such potentially explosive subjects as sharecropping, lynchings, and the civil rights movement. It's a beautifully designed and altogether remarkable facility, well worth, as the Michelin Guide says, a detour – though for most people, that's more of a detour than the Michelin people would have had in mind.

On the Friday night before the official opening, in a large tent set up over the parking lot, B.B. King performed with several other blues notables who had come to celebrate with him. While we were listening, a young woman came over and introduced herself as Amy Hawkins, reminding us that we had met a few years before at the Crown Restaurant in Indianola, where she

was a waitress. We had talked then because she is the granddaughter of the late Ethel Wright Mohamed, a remarkable Delta folk-art embroiderer whose work is widely known among collectors. Somehow, Amy Hawkins remembered us and came over to say hello. She also told us that she was no longer working at the Crown and was now at a new restaurant called Nola's. She invited us to stop by if we had the time.

The next day was the official museum opening. Leila decided not to come because of the crowd. On an outdoor stage there were speeches by several local business leaders, the mayor, the lieutenant governor, and U.S. Senator Thad Cochran, who I'm positive could not have named two B.B. King songs but who, like all the others, hailed the new museum as the greatest thing to come to the Delta since DDT.

After the ribbon-cutting, Rebecca and I decided to try Nola's for lunch. When we entered, the large room was completely full. Amy Hawkins came over and said the wait might be half an hour, but she promised to do what she could to fit us in. After a few minutes, she came back and pointed to a four-top table where an elderly couple was sitting. "I talked to Mr. and Mrs. Gresham, and they would love for you to sit with them," Amy said. For so many reasons, I could not have imagined that happening Chicago or anywhere else. Bill Gresham, I knew from the morning's speeches, was the chairman of Double Quick and one of the region's most prominent business leaders. That Amy Hawkins would think it OK to ask the Greshams if we could sit there, and that they would agree to lunch with a couple of Yankees seemed remarkable, especially since they already had their food and, to be polite, would be required to sit and watch us eat long after they had finished. But things are different in the Delta.

We had a pleasant conversation about all the good the museum was going to do for the town. They recommended the pulled pork sandwich, which was excellent. They asked if we knew a certain friend of theirs who lived in Chicago with whom they had worked on the McCain campaign. We didn't, and we decided to stay away from conversation about the upcoming election. I made a point of mentioning that we were staying in Greenville at Leila's house to see how they would react. They gave no clear response. Of course knew her, but I got the clear impression they didn't quite approve of her politics. But the lunch was perfectly charming and pleasant. It ended on a gracious note as Bill Gresham handed me his card and invited us to come see their garden some time.

On our next visit to Greenville, we were talking at Leila's one evening about the Mississippi Center for Justice, which was considering opening an office in the Delta. One of its initiatives was dealing with abusive lending practices, including pay-day loans which, like sharecropping, sound like a good idea on paper but are readily subject to exploitation. Leila said she had heard that the Double Quick stores were in the pay-day loan business. I said that, in my experience, it would be odd for convenience stores to be making pay-day loans. "Well, I hope not," Leila said, "I'd *hate* to think the Greshams were involved in anything shady like that."

* * *

Hound Dog's success was a long time coming. He had moved to Chicago from the Delta in 1942 but didn't start playing music professionally until the late 1950s. He made his first 45-rpm record in 1960, a second in 1961, and a third in 1967. None of them went anywhere. Television footage of him performing in Europe with a Chicago blues package tour in 1967 shows him as surprisingly diffident and subdued, never smiling, seemingly at a loss to know how to connect with the mostly twenty-something European audience.

All that changed in 1971 with the release of his first album, titled simply *Hound Dog Taylor and the House Rockers*, which quickly became the best-selling blues album ever on an independent label. By then he had perfected the raucous personality I had seen at Harvard, which, as much as his music, was responsible for his success.

Through Wes and Peggy, we became friendly enough with the House Rockers that they invited us to Hound Dog and Fredda's apartment for Thanksgiving in 1973. The food was, as always, spectacular, though Hound Dog himself drank far more than he ate. He, Ted, and Phillip (though his name was Brewer Phillips, most people called him "Phillip," which was the reason for Hound Dog's joke) sat with us in the living room, while Lucy, Fredda, Auria, and Loretta sat in in the kitchen, constantly moving things in and out of the oven. I joined them and watched carefully the technique of cooking the ribs. They also explained the complicated process for cooking chitterlings which, if you don't know, are hog intestines.

Lucy, who was the oldest, was clearly in charge, not just of the cooking but of the whole extended family. She was the only one who presumed to tell Hound Dog what to do. Fredda, his wife, was very sweet, but she seemed overwhelmed by Hound Dog's recent success and the trouble her three children were always in. Lucy wasn't bossy; she was just practical. She told us she had picked cotton in the Delta before moving to Chicago in the forties and had no plans ever to go back.

After that meal, I tried to make ribs myself at home, and I realized I had no idea how to make the sauce. I was thinking it needed tomato paste, molasses, maybe some vinegar and Tabasco sauce, but I was sure Lucy's recipe was much more complicated. So I called her and asked what the secret was. "Child," she said, "I start with a bottle of Open Pit. It's pretty good. I just doctor it up a bit. Why do all that work yourself?"

* * *

The finest restaurant in Greenville – and possibly the most famous restaurant in the entire state – is Doe's Eat Place, which has been in continuous operation since the 1940s. The founder, Dominic Signa, known as "Doe," was descended from Italian immigrants. He started out selling tamales from his home in the Black part of town. Tamales, you should understand, are a Delta tradition without any specific connection to Mexican cooks. No one really knows how they became established in the Delta, but Doe Signa's tamales quickly gained a following among both Blacks and Whites – the unusual part being that the Black customers came in the front door, while the Whites bought their tamales from a window in the back.

In the 1950s, Doe started serving steaks, which remain the restaurant's mainstay. In the process, the tamale stand became a sit-down restaurant serving T-bones and Porterhouses along with hand-cut french fries cooked in skillets. The layout didn't change much. You walk in through the room where the salamander broils the steaks, to a central kitchen area where the skillets of french fries cook on dark encrusted stoves, to seating areas that resemble indoor picnic tables more than a restaurant.

T-bone and Porterhouse steaks are not cheap, and Doe's is not popular because it's a good deal. Indeed, Doe's is that great oddity in the restaurant world: a grungy room with an expensive menu in a poor part of town frequented mostly by well-off locals who would not walk the street in front of the building even in the full light of day. If you're unable to find a parking space near the door, someone from the restaurant will walk you to your car to make sure you're safe.

Yet the crème de la crème of Delta society eats there regularly. Leila does, and on one evening when she took us there Billy and Lisa Percy, the current guardians of the Percy family

planting interests, were at the next table. On another night, the author Julia Reed was eating nearby; she made a point of coming over and paying Leila her respects.

It's not as though Doe's started out grand and has run down over the years. A 1957 newspaper article described it as "kind of scary looking" in an area "traditionally inhabited by a more rugged segment of the populace." Even then, it was a "rickety-looking neighborhood store . . . long in need of paint." But "Cadillacs nudge Lincolns and Chryslers each night for parking space," and "[m]ink coats, jug-sized diamonds, tailored suits, and other evidence of worldly success adorn most of the diners."

The food at Doe's is pretty good. The steaks are big and thick, but there's nothing particularly local or idiomatic about a steak – and anyway, how good can a steak really be? Doe's signature cooking technique consists of collecting the melted meat fat in a pan under the grill and drizzling it over the steaks moments before serving them. The famous tamales, I regret to report, are starchy and bland, with not much filling or seasoning. I may be in the minority in thinking that. In 2007, Doe's won a James Beard Foundation award as an "American Classic," and noted food writer Jane Stern has said she wishes her last meal on Earth to be a steak at Doe's with a dozen of their tamales. That doesn't sway me.

In recent years, restaurants aspiring to a high standard of gourmet cuisine have appeared in the Delta, most notably Madidi in Clarksdale, which was part owned by the actor Morgan Freeman, who lives in the Delta part-time. But Madidi recently closed, while Doe's after 70 years remains the favorite eating spot of the Delta's elite. In a way, it's like a private club where, except for the occasional tourist, everybody knows everybody. Most of the people who eat there now were first taken there as children by their parents or grandparents. The staff pays them a lot

of respect. Whether Leila has a reservation or not, there will always be a table for her when she arrives.

* * *

I have long maintained, not entirely in jest, that the best restaurant in Chicago is the Polish sausage stand that used to be at the corner of Halsted and Maxwell Streets and is now a block east on Union Street. After a long night of listening to the blues – or indeed at almost any other time – a Polish sausage from that stand is one of mankind's most perfect foods.

The Maxwell Street market area, which sprawled on either side of Halsted Street just south of Roosevelt Road, no longer exists, the victim of a questionable deal that allowed the University of Illinois to take the land by eminent domain and then sell it to a private developer. The result was a tremendous historical loss, because Maxwell Street was the city's great melting-pot neighborhood. On Sunday mornings, starting at dawn, people of every race and ethnicity would show up to sell or buy an astonishing array of new and used goods, ranging from clothes to furniture to hand tools to hub caps to eight-track tapes. Often on a Saturday night, we would stay out listening to the blues until 5:00 am and then head to Maxwell Street at sunrise to have a Polish, roam through the giant garage sale – and listen to more music.

Maxwell Street had a long tradition of street musicians, mostly blues singers who did not have regular club gigs, but occasionally even those who did. They would run an extension cord into an apartment to power their amplifiers and sing for tips as the shoppers walked by.

Hound Dog Taylor often played there. He told writer Ira Berkow:

> You used to get out on Maxwell Street on a Sunday morning and pick you out a good spot, babe. Dammit, we'd make more money than I ever looked at. Sometimes a hundred dollars, a hundred twenty dollars. . . . We'd get there at about eight in the morning, set up, and then play through till like four in the afternoon. Never eat nothin' 'cept some chicken and the bottle. Was rainin' or cold so many times. But we was always there, man.

Among blues musicians in Chicago, the Maxwell Street area was universally known as "Jew Town." Though I was taken aback when I first heard someone use the name, I quickly realized there was no animus in it. It was simply a description, not really any different from Greek Town or Chinatown. Just as the South had its Jew stores, Chicago had a whole neighborhood where most of the store owners were Jewish, selling the same variety of dry goods sold at Tenenbaum's or the old Stein Mart in Greenville. Hound Dog loved the place. As he told Ira Berkow:

> We were all in Jewtown. I'm tellin' you, Jewtown was jumpin' like a champ, jumpin' like mad on Sunday morning. And I had the biggest crowd there was in Jewtown. All them cats could beat me playin', but I, you know, put on a pretty good show.

By the time we came to Chicago, Hound Dog was no longer playing on Maxwell Street, but the spirit he described was still there. Unfortunately, it was a spirit that Mayor Daley found embarrassing. So the hubcaps and the blues are gone. The Jew stores are gone. The Polish sausage stand has been banished to a side street facing the Dan Ryan embankment. But every so often we go down there and have a Polish with grilled onions on a soft bun slathered with bright yellow mustard. And as I endeavor to keep from dripping the mustard on my shirt, from which it can never be washed out, I think about Hound Dog and all the other blues artists we used to hear on those long, long Saturday nights.

* * *

One Sunday, Leila arranged a brunch party for us at the Greenville Country Club. Her daughter Martha and her son-in-law Matt Weissinger, who has given up farming cotton and now raises corn and soybeans, were there, along with her cousin Harley Metcalfe and his wife Gayden. Bland Currie drove over from her home in Wilmot, Arkansas, a distance of about 50

miles, not really to see us but because Leila had invited her and because Gayden is one of her best friends. Bland and Gayden were debutantes together at the 1967 Delta cotillion, the chairman of which was Joe Rice Dockery. It's hard to imagine that these witty and barb-tongued women went in for that sort of thing, but even today being a debutante in the Delta still means something. Bland is very active in the Audubon society, and I asked her about good bird-watching sites in the area. "Ask Harley," she said. "He knows all the good places." I told Harley I was especially interested in finding a swallow-tailed kite, an elegant hawk-like bird with a long, deeply forked tail. Their preferred habitat is Southern river banks, and for several years I had tried in vain to find one. "I don't know," Harley said, "I've never seen one either. But I'll be happy to take you up the levee this afternoon to see what we can see."

When we got back to Leila's house after the brunch, I told her Harley had invited me out to do some birding. "Steve," she said – she starts off almost every remark by calling out your name – "Steve, I think you're in luck. Harley is about the best bird spotter I know." He had recently retired from a career farming the family land and was spending most of his time fishing and turkey hunting.

At the appointed hour, Harley pulled his truck into Leila's driveway. He told Leila he was going to take me up to Catfish Point, his cabin at a bend in the River, which was the home base for his turkey hunting activities. We drove out to the levee and then up to the dirt road on top. All along the way, Harley lived up to Leila's billing, calling out the names of birds he spotted in the trees well before I even saw them. "Red-shouldered hawk," he said. "Mississippi kite. Butcher bird."

"You mean loggerhead shrike?" I asked.

"Well, we call them butcher birds around here. You know they catch mice and large insects and hang them from thorns."

About seven miles north of town, Harley pointed to an area on the right where there was a break in the treeline a hundred yards wide or so. "Right here is where the levee broke in 1927," he said. "The force of the water coming through was so strong you can still see the effects today." So this was Ground Zero of the great flood, I thought. It was where the Black men rounded up at gunpoint under orders from Will Percy and his father had piled sandbags in vain that Good Friday 80 years before. Many African American families were then forced to camp on top of the levee, because it was the only safe high ground once the once the floodwaters had spread. Though the poor White families were mostly evacuated down-river, the Blacks were not permitted to leave, because LeRoy Percy and his fellow planters feared that once they left they'd never come back.

"Swallow-tailed kites!" Harley called out. Sure enough, two of the magnificent black-and-white birds with deeply forked tails were circling high overhead, unmistakable in their shape and graceful soaring. We watched them ride the air currents out over the River for several minutes until they were too small to make out even with binoculars. "Pretty amazing," Harley said. "I've been coming up here all my life, but it's a first-time bird for both of us."

As we continued toward Catfish Point, Harley began a lyrical description of the wild turkey's cunning ways and how hard it was to lure one out in the open. When we got to his cabin, he showed me a dozen devices for producing turkey calls, some that you blow into and others that require you to run a stylus along a slate with just the right force and speed to produce the desired sound. Harley's collection of turkey calls was like a small orchestra of custom-made instruments, and he played each of them for me to show me their subtle differences.

* * *

One of Charlie Patton's best-known recordings was a two-part song (covering both sides of a 78 rpm record) called "High Water Everywhere," which describes the 1927 flood. Patton sang:

> *Lord, the whole round country, man, is overflowed*
> *I would go to the hilly country, but they got me barred*

When I first heard the song, I assumed Patton meant that the notoriously racist people in the hill country to the east of the Delta had stopped him from coming in. But what he really meant, I'm sure, was that the "moderate" White people of the Delta, under orders from Will and LeRoy Percy and others, wouldn't let him out.

After the floodwaters finally receded, however, African Americans began leaving the Delta in droves, most heading to Northern industrial cities like Chicago and Detroit. It was what LeRoy Percy had most feared. It brought the Delta blues to Chicago.

* * *

Success was, in a way, Hound Dog's downfall. Before the album came out, Hound Dog, Phillip, and Ted usually split their meager earnings equally. But with the album's success and the resulting concert and club tours, Hound Dog became the star and kept the lion's share of the money. Phillip told me on several occasions he didn't think that was fair. He left the band at least once over hard feelings about the money split, but eventually he came back.

In May 1975, he was at Hound Dog's apartment, and they both got quite drunk. Phillip said something that sparked Hound Dog's anger. He pulled out his gun and shot Phillip twice. Probably he didn't really intend to hit him, but given his state of inebriation, his aim was not so good. Phillip wasn't badly wounded, but despite the urgings of his and Hound Dog's friends, he pressed charges.

The case never went to trial. Shortly after the shooting, Hound Dog was diagnosed with lung cancer. He had no health insurance, and eventually he was moved to a large ward at Cook County Hospital. We visited him there, a scene reminiscent of a battle hospital in a war movie. It was a far remove from the King's Daughters Hospital in Greenville where, as Gayden wrote in one of her books, "all the nicer Delta babies are born." The quality of medical care at County was actually known to be quite good, but somehow the large open wards made that difficult to accept. Hound Dog joked that he was going to beat the rap by dying first. One thing you had to like about him was his enormous capacity for not taking things seriously. People say that, toward the end, Phillip came to visit and forgave him for the shooting.

* * *

On one of our early trips to the Delta, we went to find the place in Moorhead where the Southern crossed the Dog. There was almost nothing to see. The east-west track seemed still intact, but the north-south track had several gaps and ended a few yards south of the place where the rails crossed. Nothing marked the spot as having any historical significance. If you didn't know the story, you would pass it in a flash.

And if you didn't know the people – those who live there and those who are from there – the Delta would be a rather unremarkable place – a vast, flat expanse of dirt. David Cohn was fundamentally correct: you don't define the Delta by its geography. It is a way of life – or several ways of life – changing like the Mississippi River's route to the Gulf, slowly for the most part, but occasionally with sudden violence, endlessly fascinating.