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Forrest Ansel Prichard

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FIGHTING THE BLUES WITH BLUES: HOW INDIANOLA, MISSISSIPPI USED
DELTA BLUES TOURISM TO DEVELOP A NEW IDENTITY

By

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DELTA BLUES TOURISM TO DEVELOP A NEW IDENTITY

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In Indianola, Mississippi the past and present remain inextricably linked. Unresolved racial issues proved this point in 1986 as tension exploded within Indianola's public education and economic sectors. Lingering segregation and socioeconomic inequalities brought outside scrutiny to Indianola's white elites. To counter this negative image, Indianola leaders turned to Delta Blues tourism. Supported by state and federal agencies, they expanded the blues industry over the next two decades. They promised its institutions would alleviate the problems which caused the 1986 crisis: the economy, education, and racial inequality. Officials structured Indianola's blues market around native B.B. King. They incorporated King's rags-to-riches life into the creation of Indianola's own success story. Using sociological analyses, anthropological studies, and an array of primary sources, this thesis reveals how the endeavor largely failed. Indianola society still struggles with its past. Racial inequalities continue, and this study urges for other ideas and reforms.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“You can listen to blues, play the blues, have the blues and even use the blues to help create change,” the publisher of the 2009 *Blues Festival Guide* claimed. “The blues and the spirit of the blues continue to address challenges. As you see...there are more than a few socially aware groups and individuals who use the blues as a vehicle to drive change and to bring social awareness to causes.”¹ Many entities have used the Delta blues tourism industry to forge a new, progressive identity in Indianola, Mississippi. By the 1980s Indianola’s racial problems still hindered the area. A history of slavery, disfranchisement, sharecropping, resistance to civil rights, segregation, and enduring paternalism continued to infect communities throughout the Delta. Economics, education, and community segregation contributed, and still contribute, to Indianola’s social stagnation. By the mid-1980s, much of the country as well as other parts of Mississippi lashed out against the Delta’s lack of progress. Looking for answers, community leaders turned to an art form ironically born of the same oppressions which still inhibit the region’s growth today. They looked to Delta Blues.

From the 1980s forward, Delta blues tourism evolved from a sporadic industry into an organized blues network. Many players are responsible for its transition. White community leaders played the largest role. Government-sponsored development programs also represented an important aspect in the movement. Black community leaders later filled key positions within the industry. A renewed interest in the music

worldwide made the industry's expansion possible. Primarily an economic endeavor at first, blues tourism became something much more. To show the world a changing Delta, blues tourism became a medium through which community leaders could "solve" the region's problems. A poor economy, below-average education, and racial legacies all represented the industry's targets. In a 1997 collection of essays, *Tourism and Culture*, anthropologist Stanly E. Hyland observed that "the U. S. South in general, and the Lower Mississippi Delta region in particular, is currently in an intense struggle to redefine its image and redirect its future."² Blues tourism did not represent the only way in which Delta leaders attempted to "redefine its image." It was a major player that could use more attention, however. While blues tourism became a Delta-wide industry, this thesis is Indianola, Mississippi's story within the movement.

Indianola Today

Indianola is the seat of Sunflower County, which lies in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. Today, Indianola retains a population of about 12,000. Roughly seventy-five percent of its population is black. Most of the remaining twenty-five percent is white, with the exception of a small Asian and Hispanic demographic (although the Hispanic population is on a steady rise). Though exceptions exist, Indianola is sharply divided into black and white communities. A railroad track runs east and west through Indianola. Most blacks live south of the tracks; most whites live to the north.

Two major schools accommodate Indianola's black and white students. Gentry High School, located in southern Indianola, has an almost all-black attendance. Indianola Academy, a K-12 private school positioned in the northern-most part of the community, maintains an almost all-white student body. Various elementary and middle schools take

on Indianola's younger black students. Lockard Elementary, formerly a first through eighth-grade institution, previously represented Indianola's only fully-integrated school. With school district lines redrawn earlier this decade, Lockard Elementary's capacity was reduced to first and second grades only. In the process, blacks became the majority of the school's students.

Poverty is rampant, and it largely falls along racial lines. Over thirty percent of Indianola's population lives in poverty, but over forty percent of those under the age of eighteen live in squalor. Most of the community's wealth rests in the north; unemployment rates, poor housing, and civil neglect are much higher in the town's southern sectors. The present-day story of Indianola is not unlike Melissa Fay Greene's description of 1970's McIntosh County, Georgia in her work *Praying for Sheetrock*. Indianola whites are a minority yet retain most of the community's wealth. Black workers venture from South Indianola across the railroad tracks to tend yards, housekeep, and work in convenient stores, fast food chains, or Wal-Mart. When their work is done, they head south again across the tracks back to their community. Indianola does not bear all the qualities of 1970's McIntosh County. Indianola blacks do participate in the town's professional world. They have a powerful presence within Indianola's political realm. Businesses are open to all races. There remains a lingering stigma which smacks of Greene's description of McIntosh County's racial dynamic, however.

Chapters and Sources

This thesis is a somewhat contemporary topic. Indianola blues tourism did not take shape until the 1980s. There is so much history behind it, however. Historical memory plays a key role here. As the authors within *The Civil Rights Movement in*

American Memory argue, the country's racial past is often treated by many mediums as a bump in America's history. Many see the obstacle of the Civil Rights Movement as a struggle overcome, and the horrors of an oppressive past should find their places within the history books. Writers within *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* understand the flaws inherent within this mentality. History is never separated from the present. Whether from a contingent, anachronistic, teleological, or post-modern perspective, history provides a diagnosis for contemporary dilemmas.³ Local, state, and federal officials have presented countless initiatives, blues tourism included, in order to cure the Delta's continuing decline. They all miss the mark in some fashion. The issue, this thesis will argue, is that they misdiagnosed the problems' real causes. Understanding the birth of Indianola's blues industry and its evolving agenda over two decades provides a glimpse into how the region's history still inhibits present progress. This thesis is presented in three chapters, spanning Sunflower County's entire history.

Chapter one begins with Sunflower County's founding in 1844. It provides a sweeping survey of Sunflower County and Indianola through the peak of the area's Civil Rights Movement. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first segment paints a historical picture of Sunflower County from slavery to Reconstruction. The second piece describes the birth of Mississippi Delta Blues around the turn of the century. An understanding of the music's emergence from a racially oppressed society helps illuminate the irony of the current movement's use of Blues as a tool against continuing racial and social discord. The final section delves into the classical period the area's Civil Rights Movement (CRM). The term classical period of the CRM is borrowed from J. Todd Moyer's *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements*

in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986. It refers to the CRM during the 1950s-1970s.

Most of chapter one depends on secondary sources. Many historians have already dissected Sunflower County and the Delta's history. James C. Cobb's *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, J. Todd Moye's *Let the People Decide*, Clyde Woods's *Development Arrested*, Chris Meyers Asch's *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* and Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* have all canvassed the region's history in one way or the other. They provide an intimate understanding of the Delta's racial and cultural history, how global economics shaped its progression, and how subsequent socioeconomic hegemony based on race still influences the region today. Marie Hemphill's *Fevers, Floods, and Faith: A History of Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1844-1976* was tapped for some of the work's factual data. Because Hemphill tends to ignore the extent of racial dynamics within the county's history, however, her work was used for little else. Asch's *The Senator and the Sharecropper* was probably referenced more than any other work. His analysis of Senator Eastland and Hamer's polarized social experiences in Sunflower County evoke a social environment which Asch and this thesis argue still exist today.

Chapter two discusses the pinnacle of Indianola's identity crisis. The term "identity crisis" refers to the point at which contemporary white elites began a campaign to counter outside criticism of the Delta region. Chapter two is also divided into three sections. The first details Indianola's attempt to industrialize. Indianola is the seat of Sunflower County, and most of the area's industrialization occurred within this community. This segment is essentially a case study of James Cobb's *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984*. The exploitation of docile, black labor reflected the

bulk of local boosters' attempts to attract new industry. Planter hegemony remained intact as new industries trickled into Indianola throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The failure to provide adequate or increased job training eventually stagnated Indianola's growth into anything but labor-oriented industry. Social scientists tried to achieve progress within the industrial sectors via educational and vocational reform but failed to dislodge the region's landed gentry. Without the ability to grow, industry declined by the 1980s with the exception of Indianola's catfish business.

Chapter two's second and third sections discuss the actual identity crisis, which occurred within Indianola's catfish industry and public schools during the same year. Indianola's catfish enterprise revealed that racial hierarchies were still firmly in place by the 1980s, and the national media blasted the Delta for this fact. Blacks still represented the bulk of the lower-end positions responsible for only routine labor. Whites represented the upper-management and reaped most of the profits. The tension which arose when black workers attempted, eventually successfully in 1986, to unionize reached national headlines. When the industry's black workforce demanded better conditions via a general strike in 1990, media and civil rights leaders across the country jumped on board. Crisis also struck within Indianola's public education sector.

By 1986, Indianola's public school board still retained an all white membership. Almost all white students attended the town's private academy, however. The superintendent of education position opened in 1986, and the most qualified candidate, Robert Merritt, happened to be black. He was denied the job, and Indianola's black population revolted. Black parents pulled their children out of school and boycotted white owned businesses across Indianola. A Bi-Racial Committee was established so black and white community leaders could attain a backchannel of communication. The

superintendent crisis was eventually resolved, and Merritt received the gig. Chapter two shows how problems of racial hegemony survived the CRM and still influenced Indianola society by the 1980s. The media, civil rights leaders, and even other parts of Mississippi criticized the Delta for its lack of advancement. In an attempt to forge a new image of progress, community leaders began fighting their blues with the Blues.

Chapter two relies on an array of sources. Tommy Rogers's 1976 study entitled *The Distribution of Poverty Throughout Mississippi* provides an excellent account of the region's industrial situation. He also compiled research from a number of economists and social scientists of that era (for instance Marshall Colberg, James O'Toole, Thomas Naylor, and Arthur Ford). Their suggestions in regard to how the Delta's socioeconomic dilemmas could be addressed never took shape. Indianola and the Delta's racial legacies prevented many reforms from taking place. Local and national periodicals provided insight into the catfish industry crises in 1986 and 1990. Indianola's local newspaper, *The Enterprise Tocsin*, closely followed Indianola's 1986 superintendent crisis. J. Todd Moye's *Let the People Decide* provides a detailed analysis of both incidents, and this work was consulted many times within these sections. Moye's book ends with the superintendent crisis, however. There is no real sense of closure. Chapter three picks up where Moye stopped. The crises which ended Moye's book, this thesis suggests, are where Indianola's search for a new identity began.

Chapter three is all blues. From a loosely organized industry, community leaders turned blues tourism into an organized network. An economic endeavor on the surface, the promotion of the blues became synonymous with the promotion of a new, progressive identity. As chapter three explains, blues tourism became a way in which local, state, and federal entities addressed the region's Big Three inhibitors: economics, race, and

education. In Indianola the industry revolved around its native son B. B. King. His life, a perfect rags to riches story, became the new story of Indianola.

Blues tourism in Indianola began with the B. B. King Homecoming Festival in the late 1980s. A resurging interest in the blues worldwide made its expansion possible. Throughout the 1990s Indianola's blues industry grew as did its message. Through the Homecoming Festival, Indianola's revitalization project, the creation of the Mississippi Delta Blues Society of Indianola, the town's relationship with the Mississippi Blues Commission, and the B. B. King Museum, Indianola leaders tried to create a new, more positive image.

Chapter three uses sources from all over the country. Periodicals described the blues industry of the late 1980s and early 1990s as hard to navigate. Soon after, newsletters, magazines, guides, and maps solely dedicated to blues tourism exploded upon the Delta scene. By 2000 umbrella organizations began emerging in order to network the Delta's increasing number of Blues Societies. Federally sponsored development programs such as the *Mississippi Delta: Beyond 2000* initiative insisted that places like Indianola continue expanding their cultural heritage programs. The state government created the Mississippi Blues Commission dedicated to the promotion of this new industry. Immense revenues were poured into blues tourism: both monetary and social. When plans for a multi-million dollar B. B. King Museum were approved, Indianola leaders promised that the structure would serve as a catalyst for social change. Sources from around the country and world followed the museum's progress.

Chapter three uses a lot of internet sources. While discussing the Blues Societies, Blues Commission, and B. B. King Museum, hard primary sources are used when possible. Much of this research does not yet exist in hard copy, however. Many of the

interviews, speeches, and finance information crucial to this chapter could only be found on the internet.

Chapter three brings the entire thesis together. It reveals a struggle to forge a new, progressive identity, even when that image may be misleading in several ways. It shows a region that is still largely grasped by its past. It depicts a community out of answers. It explains how many believe the Blues to be Indianola's last hope for success, and why that mentality is untrue.

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CHAPTER II

THE ROOTS OF THE INDIANOLA PROBLEM

The Mississippi Delta Blues tourism industry has become a search for a new Delta identity, an identity largely characterized by historical atonement. The manner of this “let bygones be bygones” process has caused much of Delta society to distance itself from the reality that the past and present are still very much connected. Contemporary Delta society remains substantially unequal; power still largely resides with a white minority. Until the dynamics between the past and present are adequately understood, the Delta will continue on a path towards social degeneration. The break with the reality that the Delta’s past and present remained deeply infused began with the reemergence of federal “social and fiscal conservatism” during the 1970s and 1980s.¹

At this juncture, such forces as the Civil Rights Movement were declared largely successful when in actuality they were only beginning to have effects in places like the Delta. Governmental funding and involvement in the Delta, which were more socially supportive during the late 1960s and early 1970s, thus segued to emphases on “self-help initiatives.” The Civil Rights Movement in the Delta was as much an awakening and explosion of black consciousness as it was a fight for civil rights, and the fall back into federal conservatism helped limit the movement after it had given blacks political independence. When Delta society continued to stagnate in the wake of a collapsing industrial economy, poor education, and continued segregation, subsequent federal relief programs were consequently thwarted due to poor planning, poor management, and the

faulty distributions of federal dollars. Faced with a scarred history, failed reform, and continued social woe, the mentality asserting “Well at least look how far we’ve come since pre-Civil Rights” began to take hold. The projection of Blues cultural heritage throughout the Delta, executed in an organized movement largely undertaken by affluent Delta whites, represented the culmination of such a mentality. The history of blues music, its emergence among Delta blacks, commercialization, and eventual popularity among whites, provided a perfect conduit through which to create such a universal Delta identity.²

This was no conspiracy in which affluent Delta whites wished to exploit that which originally belonged to Delta blacks for personal profit. It is just not that simple. Many of those involved, white and black, have given this movement their all, pouring a lot of effort into something many believed could truly help this suffering region. Furthermore, the push to greatly expand Delta Blues cultural tourism was encouraged by many entities: local, state, national, and global. In many ways it began with an economic agenda in mind, but over time it transformed into an effort to portray the Delta as a region no longer “saddled by its past.” But the Delta, especially places like Indianola where Blues tourism has vastly expanded, *is* still very much “saddled by its past.”

The history of Indianola’s welcome signs, located east-west on Highway 82 and north-south on Highway 49, reveal the community’s changing identities. Coming into town in the 1980s, the driver was presented with the traditional “Welcome to Indianola” slogan, but if the pictures in the upper left and right corners were “read” along with the text, they told the story of Indianola’s changing image. The upper left corner depicted a picture of a cotton boll, representing the area’s previous one crop economy. The upper right corner displayed a picture of a traditional factory, reflecting a hopeful new era of

Indianola society: industrialization. In the 1990s Indianola's welcome sign would have appeared much the same with one exception. In the lower center a picture of B. B. King had been added, representing a new found appreciation of Indianola's cultural heritage. After the year 2000, however, with the negative reminder of the region's one crop history and the failure of industrial expansion, the old signs had been removed. In their places arose welcome signs focusing on one theme: B. B. King and the Delta blues. "Welcome to Indianola: Home of Blues Legend B. B. King," the sign now boasted. The most recent welcome billboard, sponsored by the new B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, is committed to the region's new image of progress. Its only words read, "Experience a Delta Awakening." Indianolians had found their new icon and with it their new identity.³

The search for identity often requires a glance into the past. That search is in many ways enveloped by historical memory, or it may be characterized by the manipulation of that memory. More simply, people often choose what aspects of their past can best suit their desired identity in the present. The pursuit of identity is thus subjective because memory is subjective. In some cases if a community seeks out a historical identity, the skewed historical memory associated with it may be relatively harmless, especially if the community's population is cohesive. In Delta communities, places like Indianola, where populations tend to remain segregated and legacies from an oppressive past still socially hinder the region, finding a cohesive identity becomes much more complicated, however.

The Delta is heralded as the home of the blues. Delta Blues heritage is meant to represent a legacy belonging to all Deltans, black and white. This appears ironic since original Delta Blues music first belonged to Delta blacks and was born out of many of the

social ills that still scar Delta society today. How then did Delta Blues become the cultural heritage of all Deltans? Who were the players involved in this movement? How has this movement affected the historical interpretation of Delta Blues history? How does this movement affect Delta society? These are all important questions. To answer them, a journey must first be taken to the beginning of Sunflower County history. Understanding this history will provide a road map directing the course of Sunflower County, Indianola, and Delta Blues. Sunflower County's history is characterized by oppression, black labor exploitation, segregation, the ability of Delta whites to maintain economic supremacy in the wake of civil rights, and how the reemergence of government conservatism allowed many of these elements to survive into the present. Almost every relief program and institution created in Sunflower County since has in some way been affected by the guise of this conservatism, and that includes the movement to preserve Delta Blues.⁴

This story begins in 1844, the year Sunflower became an official county. There was certainly history here before 1844, Native Americans lived in the region long before Europeans and Africans arrived. The history relevant to this thesis, however, begins when white settlers brought their slaves into the area and began cutting a plantation society out of the dense forests which then blanketed Sunflower County. This plantation culture, characterized by slavery and later by the continued application of white supremacy, molded Delta society in many ways, and it continues to shape the region today. The attempts to maintain rigid racial hierarchies never fully broke Delta blacks for whom they were meant to dominate, however. As slaves and as freedmen, they resisted in many ways, and their creation of Blues music was no exception.⁵

Many view Sunflower County and the entire Mississippi Delta as the epitome of the Old South, one of the last bastions of antebellum culture. Ironically Sunflower County, the primary focus of this study, did not become an official county until 1844. Sunflower County, along with the majority of the Mississippi Delta, remained largely unsettled and undeveloped throughout the Civil War. By the conflict's end in 1865, over ninety percent of Sunflower County remained undeveloped. Only twenty percent was agriculturally viable three decades later. The prospect of cotton's potential wealth motivated more settlers to brave its harsh environment, however.⁶

By 1850 Sunflower County's population had risen to roughly 1,100 persons. Of those, 754 were slaves, which represented about sixty-eight percent of the total population. Ten years later in 1860, the national census indicated that the county's population had soared to over 5,000, seventy-eight percent of whom remained in bondage. As slaves gained an increasing majority of the area's population, fears of an insurrection began to occupy white minds as they had in most Southern regions where slaves held the majority. Southern whites' fears in the Mississippi Delta became realized at the Civil War's culmination, courtesy of Reconstruction.⁷

Reconstruction established unprecedented Delta black civil liberties that, once they were eventually reversed by white Delta planters, would never resurface until the post-Civil Rights era. Reconstruction was an interesting period in Sunflower County simply because there was not much to "reconstruct." So much of the county was undeveloped by the war's end that Union forces had little incentive to destroy it during the conflict. Sunflower County was thus a kind of "blank slate" which offered its black majority "an unparalleled chance to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." While much of Sunflower County's post-Reconstruction history was dictated by black

out-migrations, during Reconstruction black residents stayed and “black immigrants came to the area in droves.” The presence of an occupying Union army made their “pursuit of happiness” a possibility.⁸

During the decade or so following the war’s end, it was a great “time to be young, Mississippian, and black.” Before Mississippi could reenter the Union, it was first required to establish a new state constitution. In addition, Mississippi had to ratify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments and apply the Bill of Rights to the state government. Not only were blacks now formally recognized as United States citizens, but they also enjoyed voter protection courtesy of the Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibits voter discrimination on the basis of race. Mississippi Delta blacks took advantage of their new political rights as well as their sheer numbers. So long as the federal government remained directly involved in the region via Reconstruction, Delta blacks were able to control their newly acquired socioeconomic lives.⁹

Mississippi in general saw a surge in black political participation. Black men were elected as lieutenant governor. The 1870s saw the rise of one black United States congressman and two black United States senators from Mississippi. In the Delta, blacks built schools, other public facilities, and established their own communities. Politically in Sunflower County, they elected a black superintendent of education, sheriff, and county supervisor. Blacks fulfilled their civic duties by serving on juries. They exercised their civil rights, rights that “would not be repeated for more than a century.” They improved themselves economically as well.¹⁰

Delta blacks used their numbers to their economic advantage. Knowing that white Delta farmers depended on their labor, blacks bargained for better and more lucrative farming contracts. Delta blacks became landowners themselves. They bought

land and used improved economic status to negotiate for land acquisitions in the Delta's "undeveloped backwoods." By the late nineteenth century, about two-thirds of the Delta's landowners were black. The times during the late nineteenth century were comparably good for native and newly arrived Delta blacks. Reconstruction had given them unprecedented social opportunities. White Delta farmers and citizenry had a much different perspective during this period, however.¹¹

During the postwar years, when many blacks witnessed opportunity in the Delta, whites perceived tragedy. Reconstruction would, for over a century, leave a generational bad taste in many Delta whites' mouths (some still refer to Reconstruction as a dark period and remember the Civil Rights Movement as being an unfortunate Second Reconstruction). Delta whites believed that the social order which defined their existence had been stripped away from them. They therefore had one goal in mind from the onset of Reconstruction: the restoration of white supremacy.¹²

Delta whites fought to restore what they perceived as the natural order of white supremacy. They acted to "overthrow biracial Reconstruction governments," and they often did so violently. Joining terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, Delta whites violently intimidated potential black voters, tried to rig and undermine elections, and attempted to sabotage blacks economically. By 1875 the violence was widespread. Blacks were not altogether derailed, and they continued exercising their newly acquired rights into the 1880s. The Election of 1876, which trumpeted the end of Reconstruction, signaled the beginning of the end for black freedom in the Mississippi Delta, however.¹³

With the federal government further removed from Mississippi politics, the region's whites found the answer to their dismantled racial hierarchy. The Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890, insisted upon by the state's white leaders, redefined

voter requirements. The rewritten constitution implemented a grandfather clause, poll tax, and literacy test. On paper, its new policies were indiscriminate, but they were created to exclusively inhibit black political power. It worked. Once the new constitution was ratified, it “made black voting a thing of the past.” Disfranchisement removed most of the Delta’s black population from the political realm. With the political and power pendulum swinging back toward Delta whites in the midst of a booming global cotton economy, blacks that remained in the region became increasingly pressured into another form of slavery: sharecropping.¹⁴

The pendulum swing back towards white supremacy could not have come at a better time for white Sunflower County planters and at a worse time for black families who remained in the area. The world was experiencing a technological and population boom by the end of the nineteenth century. The global cotton market exploded. By the turn of the century, cotton represented the highest United States export commodity in terms of revenues. The United States was exporting nine times as much cotton by 1900 than it had in 1865, and it was producing three times as much cotton as the entire world combined. The introduction of the railroad to Sunflower County and a substantial expansion in agriculturally viable lands by the 1880s made it one of the region’s most prominent cotton hubs. In other words, Sunflower County was becoming “the most productive cotton-growing area in the most productive cotton-growing state in the most productive cotton-growing country in the world.” Sunflower County white land owners flourished as a result.¹⁵

By the 1880s Sunflower County’s population more than doubled. The engine that drove the Delta cotton expansion and the success of wealthy white planters was black labor; it hindered on docile black labor. The global cotton economy gave wealthy white

planters the incentive they needed to reinstate total white supremacy. Black farmers began sharing less and less of the new influx of capital as sharecropping began trapping more and more of their families. Poor white farmers and most remaining black farmers were eventually priced out of the market by the 1890s. Blacks were forced out of society economically and politically. By the turn of the century, Delta whites had nearly reinstated total control of the region socially. Cotton and the global cotton economy did not create the desire to manufacture a rigid racial hierarchy, but it justified an aggressive pursuit of the preexisting Southern white notion of white supremacy. That supremacy was once again reached. The “plantation mentality” was once again implanted into the psyches of Delta blacks via sharecropping and political marginalization. The Delta’s white populace would do and did everything to keep that hierarchy firmly in place.¹⁶

Violence became a popular medium through which Delta whites kept their reestablished white supremacy intact. Lynchings doubled during the first decade of the twentieth century. Violent white-on-black crimes sometimes took place on the premises of black churches. The church had long been considered a place of black autonomy, and Delta whites purposefully gathered lynch-mobs on their grounds in order to send a clear message: no black institution was safe from white intimidation. During the early twentieth century, violent and socially oppressive stories in Sunflower County often gained national attention.¹⁷

In an attempt to test the limits of white control in Sunflower County, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed black resident Minnie Cox as Postmistress of Indianola. Surprisingly, she served as Postmistress without many problems for over a decade, and she and her husband even resided on the white side of Indianola. Things had changed by 1903, however. James K. Vardaman, running for governor on a primarily anti-black

platform, began targeting Cox's position. "We are not going to let niggers hold office in Mississippi!" Vardaman exclaimed to an Indianola crowd. Vardaman won the gubernatorial campaign easily. Cox, under increasing pressure from Indianola whites, eventually resigned her post despite Roosevelt's insistence that she stay. Sunflower County, a place of opportunity for blacks during the post-Civil War years, was quickly becoming a place of total social marginalization. On the actual plantations, black workers experienced the power of white supremacy that made life little better than the slavery which had gripped them only decades prior.¹⁸

On the plantations, planters "relied on rigid boundaries" to ensure white feelings of "safety and supremacy." Though lynching would significantly decrease in the ensuing decades, the possibility always remained. "No Negro is safe," Hortense Powdermaker observed in the 1930s, "and every Negro knows it." The trick for Delta planters was to keep their black labor in enough debt so they could never leave, and they also had to keep them fearful enough so that blacks would never attempt to challenge the often "fictitious" debt and social inhibitions which kept them there. This strategy remained imperative to Sunflower County planters, who could not survive without a constant supply of docile black labor to do their bidding. Delta whites were always ironically conscious of blacks' importance. Everything that made Delta economics possible was accomplished by the "Negro's daily toil." Economics aside, blacks also gave planters political strength.¹⁹

Delta planters could flex statewide political muscle because of their large black populations. Blacks were registered citizens, but they were not registered voters. This Delta black majority, which would much later become the political majority, could not challenge white political strength at this time. The poll tax, literacy test, and sheer violence kept them politically and socially at bay. White Delta representation in the State

legislature was bolstered as a result. Aware of their unchanging social conditions, Delta blacks began leaving the State entirely.²⁰

From 1910-1920, black workers left Mississippi in droves, including many from the Delta region, to seek economic opportunity in the North (for example by 1920 the number of Chicago blacks with Mississippi roots increased five fold). In places such as Sunflower County, however, out-migrant blacks were always replaced by in-migrants. Floods and boll weevils had wiped out entire crops all over the country, and subsequent federal disaster relief funds fell into the hands of planter elites. But for Sunflower County such disasters paid off in the long run because cotton prices soared and neighboring competition, experiencing far more damages, lessened as a result. Black workers could therefore make comparably more money in Sunflower County at this time, performing tasks they were already used to. Between 1910 and 1920 Sunflower County continued to exponentially grow, acquiring over 45,000 residents, seventy-five percent of who were black. The racial hierarchy was still firmly in place. By 1919 War World I had ended, however, and many returning Mississippi black veterans were eager to pursue the freedom they had just supposedly defended in Europe.²¹

Black veterans returned from the European theater during World War I only to find themselves still fighting a much older conflict in the United States. Reflecting upon the irony that they fought for America overseas and still struggled for freedom at home caused many black leaders to act. This held especially true for blacks returning to the Mississippi Delta.

Radical black newspapers and organizations such as the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) reflected during the postwar years as a “seeming revolution in black consciousness.” Throughout the North black militancy and white

violence became rampant, spreading to Washington, Chicago, and many other northern cities. Over a hundred people were killed. In the South, lynchings skyrocketed once more in 1919 reaching a recorded tally of eighty-nine. Planters in Sunflower County became apprehensive when black workers, led by black veterans, formed the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America. Massive white violence and a socially subdued black labor force kept any significant change in Sunflower County from materializing, however. By 1924 many Sunflower County white fears of a second Reconstruction had subsided and “throughout the 1920s...black families in Sunflower County tended the crops much as previous generations had.” Sunflower County continued to grow.²²

The Delta’s one crop economy hindered on the availability of a large black labor force, especially in Sunflower County. By 1930 Sunflower County’s population exceeded 66,000 people, making it one of “the most densely populated areas in the entire South.” Despite the inequalities, white planters almost always had access to large contingents of black workers. Black laborers were not required the entire year, however, and remained idle for many months. Even though many blacks spent this idleness receiving their educations, those educations were insufficient, and planters made sure it stayed that way. Forcibly learning and skilled deprived for generations, a fact which would later haunt the entire Delta when industry was introduced to the region, planters made sure that scores of Delta blacks remained dedicated to the art of planting, chopping, and harvesting cotton. Delta blacks were kept perpetually uneducated, poor, and, most of all, dependent on the paternalistic planter. To a large degree, the “plantation mentality” had been firmly entrenched into the psyche of Delta blacks. A changing global economy

and the coming of another world conflict transformed the role of the Sunflower County sharecropper, however.²³

The stock market crash of 1929, the New Deal, and World War II greatly altered the lives of wealthy Delta planters and Delta black laborers. Before the crash, Delta planters had already felt the pinch of international competition within the cotton growing realm. Countries such as India, China, Brazil, and Egypt were producing more, cheaper (though less quality) cotton by the end of the 1920s. Other American states had also begun growing cotton. The Delta was gradually losing its dominance over the world cotton market. It was not the crash itself which spelled disaster for American cotton exports, however.

The ensuing economic relief legislation represented what really took its toll on the market. The Hawley-Smoot Tariff, established to relieve economic problems by raising tariffs on all United States imports, simply backfired. Rather than pay the tariffs, foreign markets simply closed their doors to American commodities. Proving catastrophic to the American cotton industry, by 1934 the United States no longer dominated the global cotton economy. By 1939 America produced only forty percent of the world's cotton, as opposed to sixty percent between 1910 and 1920. Roosevelt's New Deal sought to alleviate this predicament, but it only continued to hamper Delta black laborers.²⁴

New Deal programs, aimed to relieve the economic distress of the common American worker, did little to help Delta black laborers. White Delta planters made the maintenance of the social status quo their primary goals, and they did everything within their power to make sure that any New Deal programs satisfied their interests. The Delta Chamber of Commerce, later the Delta Council (which still exists today), was established in 1935 as a planters' lobbying organization. Wealthy white planters and the Delta

Council worked with one another to ensure not only their continued prosperity, but also the continuation of Delta white supremacy. The sharecroppers had no one to speak for them in Washington.²⁵

The Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933) was part of the New Deal package that tried to answer the now problematic American cotton economy. In order to raise cotton prices, the federal government ordered that cotton growers substantially reduce their crop acreage. In exchange the government would pay the planters for their losses, money which was also to be passed down to the laborers who actually planted, chopped, and harvested the cotton. The money rarely trickled down, however, but rather stayed in the hands of planters. To make matters worse for Delta sharecroppers, less acreage meant that planters required fewer laborers. With the ability to now rely on “low-wage day laborers”, planters simply evicted Delta sharecroppers. “Even William Alexander Percy,” claims Chris Asch, “...complained to the AAA that the program underestimated ‘the amount of dishonesty practiced by landlords in this section.’” Other programs also primarily served the wealthy, white Delta planter.²⁶

The Commodity Credit Corporation (the “other CCC”) was also created in 1933. Used to stabilize cotton prices and increase cotton revenues, the CCC gave planters access to large loans, using their crops as collateral. The CCC “paid above-market prices,” and planters began keeping more of their cotton out of the market so to secure larger loans. Six years after their creation, the AAA and CCC had brought over three million dollars into the hands of Sunflower County planters for their acreage reductions. While white Delta landowners continued to flourish under New Deal policies, Delta blacks continued to suffer. The beginning of the end for sharecropping emerged during the 1930s because of Depression relief programs.²⁷

Programs such as the AAA looked good on paper because they seemed to serve the interests of the workers. In the Delta, however, it spelled only doom for the average sharecropper. The AAA insisted that Delta planters share the economic relief funding with their laborers. Knowing that they did not have to share the funding with wage laborers, however, Delta landowners simply switched. Times were rarely good for sharecroppers, but they were especially tough during the 1930s. Within this decade, the number of Delta sharecroppers had dropped almost ten percent. The total acreage “farmed by sharecroppers dropped by more than twenty percent, while the acreage farmed by wage hands increased significantly.” Planters that now used wage labor did not have to worry about their living conditions, as they had with sharecroppers. Many sharecroppers were therefore forced to become wage laborers, earning less for themselves while earning more for the planters for whom they toiled. Initial New Deal policies failed to alleviate much of the poor throughout the United States, who were now organizing into unions and leftwing programs influenced by the American Communist Party (which would later play an immense role in the lives of Delta planters and laborers).²⁸

In response to increasing pressure, Roosevelt began the Second New Deal which transitioned his relief policies from “recovery to reform.” In 1935 the Wagner Act assured the right of unions to bargain collectively. The National Labor Relations Board was created in order to legally enforce the legislation. The Fair Labor Standards Act created a national minimum wage. These moves, coupled with the formation of the Works Progress Administration and Social Security, gained Roosevelt immense support among the laboring classes and angered white Delta planters who once again felt as if their social dominance was being threatened by a “meddling” government. Blaming

much of the New Deal on Communist inspired conspiracies, Sunflower County planters such as James O. Eastland would stop at nothing to keep this “red menace” from altering the rigid racial hierarchies which enriched him and other planters. That would have to wait, however. By the end of the 1930s, the coming of another world conflict furthered the changes taking place in Sunflower County and the entire Delta.²⁹

World War II preoccupied the minds of white Sunflower County planters for two reasons. First the war in Europe could potentially affect their global cotton interests abroad. Secondly, and far closer to home, World War II sucked the one thing landowners needed to compete in the world cotton market in the first place: labor. The United States draft and the need for wartime industrial workers drained much needed labor from Sunflower County fields. By 1943 Sunflower County lost over 4,000 laborers, representing almost twelve percent of its total workforce. Sunflower County was twenty five percent short the labor required for harvesting the year’s crop by 1944. Worried about the current dilemma, the Delta Council lamented that “the area no longer has any surplus, nor any great reservoir, of workers.” The Delta Council and Sunflower County planters were not disheartened, however, because they retained lucrative connections in Washington. With the aid of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, landowners were still able to fill their fields with cheap labor. In addition, Indianola and Drew established POW camps in order to replace any further labor shortages. Despite the threats of World War II, Delta planters continued to operate a successful cotton economy, and they continued to socially dominate their communities. Even after World War II’s end, Sunflower County planters pursued new ways to keep their sense of social control intact.³⁰

The end of World War II left much of Europe in shambles. To make matters worse, Communist Soviet Union was making a bid for much of the conflict's leftovers. What did this mean for the Sunflower County cotton planter? A free and capitalist Europe, which wealthy Delta landowners heavily supported with a profound sense of irony, was considered crucial to the continued success of the Delta cotton economy. A successful European reconstruction was therefore imperative. During the immediate postwar years, however, the war-ravaged European cotton demand dwindled for obvious economic reasons. Delta planters such as Sunflower County native and United States Senator James Eastland had the answer.

Because Sunflower County planters now produced an immense surplus due to decreased demand, Senator Eastland addressed the issue in two ways. First the surplus would be given to struggling European countries "free of charge." Secondly the United States government would subsidize American farmers for this surplus. This in turn "would allow American cotton farmers to compete with foreign growers who enjoyed lower labor costs. Federal intervention would stimulate demand for U.S. cotton at a time when global demand was slack." Though Delta planters often smirked at the prospect of government interventions, this time it heavily played into their interests. Senator Eastland's and other's plans took hold.³¹

Senator Eastland's ideas would later combine with other policies regarding European reconstruction in the form of the Marshall Plan. Facing tough congressional resistance, Truman's officials required the support of southern Democrats if the Marshall Plan was going to pass. Eastland and other southern Democrats, very much aware of their newly acquired political leverage, bargained with the Truman administration for the right to run their cotton kingdoms as they saw fit: the maintenance of rigid racial

hierarchies included. To better understand the role of Delta landowners regarding European reconstruction, the first public appearance of the Marshall Plan did not occur in Washington. It first appeared at the Delta Council's annual meeting in Cleveland, Mississippi in May 1947, about a ten minute drive from Sunflower County. Influential white Delta planters often viewed national and global occurrences as opportunities to make continued bids for control of their own domestic agendas. Those agendas had been on the cusp of dramatic change since the 1930s, however, because black populations had begun steadily decreasing in places such as Sunflower County.³²

If steady black out-migrations represented the norm for two decades by 1950, a serious question arose for wealthy Delta landowners. How could they maintain their positions in the global cotton market if their labor supply was consistently decreasing? They found their answer in mechanization. Sharecropping was already on the decline. The increased desire for wage labor and a changing global economy "helped pave the way for the fully mechanized cotton plantations that would make most farm laborers...economically obsolete."³³

In 1946 the Delta Council asserted that "no agricultural area of the nation is undergoing such a revolution as the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta." Having to incessantly worry about the availability of a large, docile black labor force, especially since that mass was consistently leaving the area, began to frustrate many white Sunflower County farmers. In addition, this method of harvesting cotton was falling further and further short of other cotton producing countries, which had access to more and even cheaper labor. The increased worldwide demand for manmade synthetics such as rayon only continued to hamper the Delta cotton economy. By the 1950s "it had become clear to many observers that this way of life no longer was economically feasible."³⁴

By 1948 companies such as International Harvester had developed mechanized cotton pickers which could be mass produced and sold at reasonable prices to farmers. Fourteen percent of the Delta's cotton was harvested by mechanical pickers by 1952. Improvements in "weed-killing chemicals" during the 1950s also gave planters the incentive to "mechanize their entire cotton operation, from planting through harvesting." World War II and the Second Great Migration reduced Sunflower County's black population by more than twelve percent during the 1940s. Mechanization only fueled Delta out-migrations even further. Forcefully pushed from primarily the only economic opportunity available to them and still socially marginalized, many Delta blacks simply left the area entirely in increasing numbers. During the 1950s, after the introduction of substantial mechanization, the county's black population decreased by almost an additional nineteen percent. During the 1950s the "number of sharecroppers dropped so dramatically...that in 1960 the U. S. Census Bureau stopped including 'sharecropping' as an occupational category." To reduce labor costs and again effectively compete with the global cotton market, Delta planters gradually introduced agrarian mechanization onto their farms. This introduction displaced thousands of black workers in Sunflower County. Many headed to northern cities for economic opportunity, but many stayed behind; this was their home. Many whites subsequently became apprehensive because of one question: What of the remaining, now unemployed black laborers?³⁵

In 1947 Delta planter David Cohn claimed there was "an enormous tragedy in the making." Cohn continued, arguing that "Five million people will be removed from the land within the next few years. They must go somewhere. But where? They must do something. But what?" Several ideas were suggested. The vast majority of now idle Delta black workers were low-skilled. Business leaders and "moderate [Delta]

politicians” therefore suggested an influx of low-skill requiring industry into the region. A report assessing the region’s potential economic resources reported to the Delta Council in 1949 that the Delta retained “a reservoir of workers with potential productivity in the number of persons displaced, or likely soon to be displaced, from agriculture.” Other reports suggested improving black educational institutions. Citing that improved black education would be economically advantageous, influential entities such as the Delta Council became interested. “The education of the Negro is of vital concern if he is to be other than an economic liability,” the Delta Council asserted in 1950, “and it is even more important as we enter an era of mechanized agricultural and industrial development.” The region’s population trends over the past two decades would carry the Delta Council in another direction, however.³⁶

Because much of the black population had been represented by consistent out-migrations since the 1930s and especially since the increase of agrarian mechanization, entities such as the Delta Council simply did not see the point of seriously investing in black education or industry. If Delta blacks were constantly on the move out of the region, they thought, there would not be enough blacks left in the future to matter. Why dedicate educational resources to Delta blacks when “rural areas with a heavy concentration of Negroes at the present time may have few Negroes ten years from now?” This consideration to industrially and educationally address Delta blacks during the 1950s, unlike a later attempt undertaken during the 1960s and 1970s, was a paternalistic deliberation. It was an attempt to address a potential “Negro problem.” The mentality behind the proposal was less a genuine concern for the wellbeing of Delta blacks, but more an inherently racial fear of what they might do if left idle. Since the institution of slavery, white paranoia often suggested that if blacks were not controlled

and constantly given work and responsibility, then their idleness could cause “potential social disruption.” That notion continued to thrive in the mid-twentieth century Delta.³⁷

This era of oppression represents the world from which the Blues emerged. It was a region characterized by perpetual struggle. Delta blacks did not just take the oppressions; they certainly retained a sense of agency and autonomy in several ways. They exercised their rights to simply leave. Churches and religion also provided mediums through which Delta blacks maintained their autonomy. It provided one of many escapes during slavery, and the church continued to do the same afterwards. It represented a world that Delta blacks largely controlled themselves. Here they could often come together and express their social woes. The church also “provide[d] an avenue for administrative and executive abilities which [had] little or no other outlet,” especially for black women since they often “[ran] the affairs of the church.” According to John Dollard, this institution “provide[d] a splendid opportunity for the social and political training of Negroes,” which would later offer the Civil Rights Movement important local players such as Fannie Lou Hamer. The church “preserved” the hope and “self-respect of many Negroes who would have been entirely beaten by life, and possibly completely submerged.” It should be noted, however, that the church, while important, could at times paradoxically inhibit black resistance to white supremacy.³⁸

Hortense Powdermaker observed in the 1930s that “in both its secular and its religious character [the church] serves as an antidote, a palliative, an escape. By helping the Negro to endure the status quo, this institution has been a conservative force, tending to relieve and counteract the discontents that make for rebellion.” In another attempt to maintain the social status quo, white landowners allowed the churches to exist but made sure they remained “dependent on white goodwill.” So long as black churches never

fueled the fire of social discontent, “whites were happy to give churches funding and relative freedom to run their services.” As one observer noted of Delta black churches, “The Negro church could enjoy this freedom so long as it offered no threat to the white man’s dominance in both economic and social relations. And, on the whole, the Negro’s church was not a threat to the white domination and aided the Negro to become accommodated to an inferior status.” Future civil rights activists such as Aaron Henry and Fannie Lou Hamer challenged black preachers who they “believed held [their] people back” in this way. While churches played immense roles in the creation and maintenance of Delta black autonomy, another form of expression emerged which traced its roots to the institution of slavery and beyond: Delta Blues.³⁹

The Birth of Blues

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact birth of the Blues. Many researchers and historians have traced its roots to the Mississippi Delta and other parts of the South some time around the turn of the century. The Delta, particularly Sunflower County researches note, gave birth to a particular style of blues which set it apart from all others, however. The timing of its emergence makes sense because, as discussed earlier, it was by this point in history that Delta blacks had been almost completely dislodged from the social opportunities they had enjoyed during and shortly after Reconstruction. If there was a time for Delta blacks to have the blues, the beginning of the twentieth century certainly represented one of those times. What did Delta Blues mean at the time of its emergence? What did it mean to those who performed this new music as well as to those who received it?⁴⁰

Original blues music had many influences ranging from the very old to the contemporary. It “was both a continuation of deep and tenacious African traditions and a creative response to a brutal, desperate situation.” Slaves brought their African heritages to America. Over generations as slaves of different ancestral African tribes interacted, they managed to preserve and develop their cultural heritage. Even after such traditions as drumming had been outlawed among African-American slaves for fear that it could signal insurrections, they still maintained a sense of agency through cultural preservation. Their music was often polyrhythmic, complicated, carried underlying meaning, and undoubtedly influenced later Delta blacks as they attained “freedom” but in many ways remained in bondage. Slave songs and spirituals, often resembling simple musical rhythm accompanying the strains of routine labor, actually carried with them hidden codes or languages that only fellow slaves could understand. Blues, influenced also by certain white American music, evolved from the jump-ups, field hollers, and church music that accompanied the desperation of slavery and later sharecropping institutions. The same language of discontent present during slavery, an underlying criticism of its contemporary social conditions, existed within original Delta blues. The blues represented another chapter in which many blacks expressed their dissatisfaction through music.⁴¹

Freed Delta blacks, much like within the institution of slavery, had to express themselves through mediums which seemingly did not challenge the social order. Original blues music gave many the necessary outlet to do so. It offered an escape, a way to comment upon the world around them when outright expression could result in harmful or fatal reprisals. Many early ramblers, bluesmen constantly on the move, developed their talents in Sunflower County (particularly on the Dockery Plantation).

For early bluesmen such as Henry Sloan, Son House, Charlie Patton, Howlin' Wolf, Thomas Johnson, Robert Johnson, and Houston Stackhouse, blues offered an escape in a literal sense. They expressed themselves not only through music, but their constant "on the move" lifestyles freed them from the social restraints found in institutions such as sharecropping. They were certainly kept aware of their "place" within the Delta's rigid racial hierarchy, but at the very least they refused to become docile. Not only did they ramble, but their lifestyles represented anything but that which society deemed "appropriate". Alcohol, womanizing, and danger accompanied many of the early blues ramblers; Thomas and Robert Johnson even claimed to have sold their souls to the Devil. They became the "antithesis of what Delta whites wanted their black workers to be." Because of the deviant lifestyles associated with many bluesmen, many Delta blacks also frowned upon the blues and referred to it as the "Devil's music." The blues, however, meant as much to those who heard it as it did to those who played it.⁴²

The music often provided a sense of awareness or consciousness that allowed many blacks to remember the nature of their contemporary social conditions. Koko Taylor, blues legend and original performer of Willie Dixon's *Wang Dang Doodle*, asserted that the music was a "reminder of hard times, depression, slavery, and just being black." Blues were interactive. The music did not center solely on the performer, but it also incorporated an audience that certainly related to what he or she was playing and singing.⁴³

For other future stars, hearing the blues offered an escape in the sense that it could ease the pain often associated with a life dominated by Delta sharecropping. B. B. King, while listening to the blues as a young Indianola sharecropper, recalled that "it's like when you have a toothache and somebody can give you something to stop the toothache.

That's the way the music was, it was that soothing to me." "Philadelphia" Jerry Ricks maintained that Delta blues represented a "cry from black culture." Blues gave some Delta blacks an opportunity to break away from the Delta norm completely by giving them opportunities to move from place to place and avoid becoming rooted anywhere. For others, it provided temporary relief from the often rigorous day-to-day. But blues music was more than just an escape; it was a way of questioning a Delta society where "authentic thoughts and actions [were] routinely and violently condemned."⁴⁴

The emergence of Delta blues represented a "hearth of African American consciousness." Throughout the history of slave owner-slave interactions in America, there have been two perpetual movements taking place, always opposing one another. The attempts to assert plantation dominance over black slaves represented one, and the struggle of slaves to maintain their autonomy in terms of culture and social consciousness represented the other. Since the arrival of the first African slaves, they "[had] daily constructed their vision of a non-oppressive society through a variety of cultural practices...By doing so they [had] created an intellectual and social space in which they could discuss, plan, and organize this new world." This plantation dynamic continued after the Civil War.⁴⁵

After Reconstruction planter elites once again tried to reassert their dominance over Delta blacks. The blues emerged "after the overthrow of Reconstruction." Once again violently thrust into social marginalization, Delta blacks needed an "alternative form of communication, analysis, [and] observation..." Blues provided the medium for such communication and analysis and thus represented a very similar struggle for Delta blacks to maintain social consciousness in the post-bellum years, much as they had when slavery still existed. If original blues represented the resiliency and creativeness of black

consciousness in response to an oppressive society, what of the notion that most early Delta blues seemed to concern itself with love?⁴⁶

From a lyrical perspective, blues music “typically focused on male-female relationships...with both pleasure and pain.”⁴⁷ Once again this style represented a cultural legacy carried over from Africa “where social harmony [was] often considered synonymous with or dependent on harmony in the home.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, so much emphasis was often placed upon “love” because for Delta blacks who were violently forced from short lived socioeconomic independence during the early twentieth century, significant others might be all they had. Some also argue that the listening world has paid too much attention to blues love songs when a library of other themes appears within the music. In *Development Arrested* Clyde Woods, quoting Richard Wright, observed:

Since the best-known blues have love as the main theme, people have a false idea, an incomplete one, of their true range and role in the life of Black people. There also exists blues which indict the social system and they have been judged not commercial enough because of this satirical bent...Common, everyday life, the background of our national life, is to be seen through the blues.⁴⁹

Blues lyrics pertaining to love lost or gained carried with them underlying meanings that comment on the surrounding social environment. In addition most blues lyrics not associated with love did the same. Their true meanings almost always had to remain hidden in a Delta society dictated by rigid racial hierarchies. Blues did not remain in the Delta, however, but eventually spread throughout the entire country. During that journey

blues continued to evolve as more people added to the music and as its audience diversified.

The social inequalities which permeated throughout the Delta and the consequent black out-migrations coincided with the spread of the blues. In Sunflower County the nearby Illinois Central provided the best mode of transportation for those wishing to escape the Delta's harsh realities. This option was hardly available to all Delta blacks, and the move was never easy. The prospects of a more successful life in other, Northern cities (particularly Chicago) convinced many Delta blacks, however, and they left places like Sunflower County in droves. The First and Second Great Migrations carried unprecedented numbers of Delta blacks out of the region to Illinois, Kansas, Memphis, and St. Louis. The blues traveled with many of them.⁵⁰

During the 1920s and 1930s record companies began tapping into the marketing potential of Delta blues, but their target audiences remained overwhelmingly black. As blues began penetrating northern urban centers, however, its style began to dramatically change. Blues became "electrified" by World War II's end because in places like Chicago, performers were "encouraged ...to develop a more relevant and sophisticated music calculated to appeal to the tastes of an increasingly urbanized black population." This new "rhythm and blues" began overpowering the "traditional country blues" in terms of popularity. This, coupled with changing musical preferences among white Americans, signaled the rise of a new blues listening audience.⁵¹

Blues remained popular almost exclusively among blacks before the 1950s, but that started to change as blues began to influence other musical styles. Blues and country music may appear as stark opposites, but as time progressed the two styles heavily influenced one another, especially the former on the latter. As Cobb explains in *The*

Most Southern Place on Earth, this came as no surprise since not only did country performers often “[grow] up within earshot of both the blues and black gospel music,” but country music careers often began in the same recording studios as those of rhythm and blues artists. Both genres, emerging from a “sense of alienation that flourished on both sides,” would infuse to create a well known “hybrid”: rock and roll.⁵²

Rock and roll took young American whites by storm, though they likely never understood the extent to which blues had influenced this new music. The blues continued to largely go unnoticed among American whites, however, until the 1963 rock and roll “British invasion.” British rock stars were far more familiar with and accepting of early Delta blues than their American counterparts, and they were quick to acknowledge the influence these bluesmen had given them. As British groups like the Rolling Stones began praising and recording early blues players such as Muddy Waters, Delta blues “gained considerably greater recognition among American whites than they might otherwise have achieved.” Rock and roll during the 1950s and 1960s helped spread the blues to other parts of the United States as the country was experiencing one of the most important periods in its history: the Civil Rights Movement. While the blues spread to the rest of the country during the Civil Rights Movement, civil rights had yet to penetrate Sunflower County’s borders.⁵³

The Classical Period of the Sunflower County Civil Rights Movement

With local terrorist and economic coercion and powerful allies in Washington, Sunflower County’s seemingly impenetrable wall of white resistance kept the Civil Rights Movement at bay before and throughout the 1950s. The NAACP had managed to successfully register just over 100 black voters in the county by the mid-1950s, but they

never bothered voting in elections that would bear no fruit and could possibly ruin their lives. Aside from white resistance, the NAACP had difficulty in places like Sunflower County because the organization often targeted the black middle class. Not only was Sunflower County's black middle class tiny, but the Civil Rights Movement that would later grip this area was in many ways a "poor peoples' movement." The NAACP proved to be an excellent force in terms of pressuring federal recognition of civil rights, but the organization experienced trouble enforcing it in places like Sunflower County. With the *Brown* decision and other future civil rights mandates approaching, Sunflower County whites continued to resist.⁵⁴

When an endeavor undertaken by Sunflower County whites to improve black schools failed to curtail the maintenance of "separate but equal," they sought other options. Sunflower County whites, along with many areas throughout the South, were ready for *Brown* before it even passed. Fearing government sponsored desegregation was a forgone conclusion, state and county grand strategies were formulated, instructing what to do when such legislation occurred. When the *Brown Decision* (and later *Brown II*) emerged on May 17, 1954, it was heralded as a momentous victory for NAACP "legal and sociological arguments" before the Supreme Court, but it actually caused an enormous setback for civil rights for over a decade.⁵⁵

Southern white reactions varied throughout the South. In Sunflower County resistance was extreme. Fearing "mongrelization" of the races, Sunflower County whites became part of a widespread Southern movement known as massive resistance. In July 1954 a group of white elites (businessmen, planters, and politicians) met in an Indianola home and, under the leadership of Robert Patterson, founded the Citizens' Council. Those in the organization dedicated themselves to the continued "separation of the

racism.” Setting themselves apart from terrorist organizations such as the KKK (although many members had dual membership), the Citizens’ Council promoted nonviolence and instead implemented economic coercion as their primary weapon. Memberships penetrated all levels of Delta society and became heavily involved in state politics as powerful legislators began joining the movement. It spread throughout the South, absorbing many thousands (an official number is not known) into its ranks. Resistance continued to grow in Sunflower County and the state as the 1950s progressed.⁵⁶

Two years after *Brown*, state lawmakers created the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission in 1956. Lasting for almost twenty years, the SSC began as a public relations campaign hoping to convince the non-South of the equality and benefits of segregation. With taxpayer funding adding up to about \$250,000 the first two years, the SSC soon became much more. The SSC became the state’s premier Communist hunter, and it did everything it could to label everything and everyone associated with the Civil Rights Movement as Communist subversives. The preservation of segregation remained a primary goal. Massive resistance in Sunflower County, the Delta, and the state during the 1950s “rose in direct correlation to the quickening pace of a global movement against white supremacy.” As time progressed the government became less patient with the staunch resistance of white Southerners to civil rights because it was taking a toll on the “American effort to win allies in the Cold War,” especially with other non-white nations. During the 1950s, however, the Civil Rights Movement in Sunflower County had minimal achievement. With massive resistance largely successful by 1960, the resolve of the black movement for civil rights only intensified, however.⁵⁷

In 1962 William Chapel became the first Sunflower County church to welcome members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The Civil Rights

Movement had now really arrived to Sunflower County, and it was here that one of the movement's most well known activists first appeared: Fannie Lou Hamer. Since Reconstruction any attempt to usher in civil rights to Sunflower County blacks ran the risk of economic or physical harm. By 1960 only five percent of Mississippi's black populous could vote. In Sunflower County only 161 blacks were registered during this time, about three percent of the entire black population. Civil rights activists had their work cut out for them, and they joined forces to accomplish it. The 1961 Freedom Rides under the guidance of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) penetrated Mississippi's borders. Once SNCC established itself in the state it allied with CORE, the NAACP, the National Urban League, and SCLC to create the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). Together they set out to bring civil rights to Sunflower County blacks.⁵⁸

Socially and economically restricted for over half a century, Delta blacks did not have the resources to challenge their deeply rooted "injustices." SNCC and other organizations in the area heavily relied on outside philanthropy, which Hamer frequently secured by hosting fundraiser drives in the North. Washington was becoming more civil rights friendly as the 1960s progressed, but officials concerned with the Cold War wished to avoid any bad publicity associated with racial violence in the South and elsewhere. The potential for a negative international image of said violence caused many in the Kennedy administration to "privately fume at the Freedom Riders" and other civil rights organizations. This, coupled with Sunflower County's Washington allies' (i.e. Senator Eastland) attempts to quell federal intervention, made activists jobs that much harder. The war for civil rights in Sunflower County was fought across the entire country as both sides fought for national support and for that of Washington. Legally and financially, the

Civil Rights Movement was in many ways on its own during its first phase in Sunflower County.⁵⁹

After a year or so, black voter registration in Sunflower County was not achieving the progress that activists had hoped. To show the rest of the country that it was not apathy but rather intimidation that kept Delta blacks out of the polls, county organizers held Freedom Votes. These mock elections attracted tens of thousands of potential black voters who were threatened out of the actual elections. This strategy, along with the 1964 Freedom Summer coordinated by COFO, pressured Washington to investigate the ability of Delta blacks to register. Increased tensions and wider publicity forced Washington to encourage greater sensitivity to the Civil Rights Movement, which materialized in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Blacks were still being kept out of Mississippi polls, however.⁶⁰

When significant registration of black voters failed to occur, organizations under COFO decided to take an alternative course. Creating the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as a way to “channel black political energy into an alternative party,” Hamer and other delegates traveled to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. There they hoped to “challenge the composition and legality of [Mississippi’s] all-white Democratic party.” The reality of national politics took the hopeful MFDP delegates by surprise, however. President Johnson refused to recognize the MFDP for fear of losing white Southern support, and others backed away so to preserve “the image of unity at the convention.” In a compromise only two MFDP members, Aaron Henry and Ed King, would be seated. The others were allowed to stay, but only as “guests”. The realities of politics sent the majority of the MFDP back to Mississippi disillusioned with the government and also with one another. Young and old,

radical and moderate, and other conflicting mentalities caused dissent within the Civil Rights Movement by 1965. The endeavor carried on, however, and after a series of federal programs aimed at poverty relief had passed (part of Johnson's Great Society), Congress approved the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁶¹

Since the coming of the Civil Rights Movement to Sunflower County, black and white activists had suffered economic intimidation, threats, beatings, and some lost their lives. Delta whites resisted the movement in every way imaginable in order to preserve what they perceived as the natural order of white supremacy. Less than two years after the Voting Rights Act, the number of registered black Mississippi voters skyrocketed from seven to sixty percent. Massive resistance, perhaps most formidable in Mississippi, began to falter. Even in Sunflower County, by the end of the 1960s whites running for office had to take the black vote into consideration. Even after these successes, however, the situation for Sunflower County blacks remained dire. Segregation still thrived and Sunflower County blacks still suffered economically.⁶²

In 1968 the Supreme Court mandated that integration happen immediately. Sunflower County, like many other places at this time, was characterized by white flight. Almost overnight whites were pulled out of public schools and moved to private institutions or "segregation academies" as they were often called. Indianola Academy was one such school. By 1970 eighty-five percent of Sunflower County's public schools were black. By 1972 and especially 1974, federal courts began to back away from liberal desegregationist perspectives. A happy Senator Eastland asserted that "the pendulum [was] swinging back towards conservatism." At this juncture the Supreme Court began to withdraw from desegregation and "prohibited busing across school district lines." This reemergence of federal conservatism lessened the pressure for Sunflower County whites

to achieve anything more than token integration, and it also continued to hinder Sunflower County blacks economically, despite their political achievements.⁶³

Though more and more blacks were achieving political autonomy in the region, that ascendance was not translating into economic independence. White Delta planters and other whites still used their economic superiority to negate much of the political leverage blacks had acquired. Continued agrarian mechanization in the Delta (ninety-five percent by 1966) coupled with further crop acreage deductions under the 1965 farm bill hindered black workers. This process made white landowners richer but continued to economically hamper Delta black workers, who were only trained in the agricultural sector, and just when they were achieving political equality. Hamer and others tried to counteract these economic conditions with the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. They did manage to influence a 1966 bill guaranteeing minimum wage to agrarian workers, but in response many planters simply replaced the “workers with machines.”⁶⁴

By 1967 the only laborers required throughout the Delta were mainly men who could operate the machinery, which represented “about 25,000 jobs in the Delta with hundreds of thousands of low-skilled black workers.” Looking to the government was not really an option because the Vietnam War once again shifted federal attention away from problems in Sunflower County elsewhere overseas. The government did create the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), but it still insisted that wealthy planters play an important role in regional development. The funding it provided thus flowed into the wrong hands, and Delta black workers were not receiving the monies they needed. There arose a movement to elect blacks as Sunflower County supervisors with the hopes of “[redirecting] federal money.” The endeavor failed, however, because with the acquiring of “some rights,” local blacks began to distance themselves from the movement. An

economic base for Sunflower County blacks still did not exist. By the late 1960s Sunflower County blacks achieved political power, but that was undermined to a large degree because “economically...blacks seemed to be moving backwards.” Many of the aspects of Jim Crow had been overcome but continued mechanization “made most black labor expendable.” By 1970 Sunflower County’s black population numbered less than 25,000, and about seventy percent of it lived in a state of poverty.⁶⁵

The reemergence of federal conservatism, continued white economic dominance, and a surviving plantation mentality intertwined to guarantee that places like Sunflower County remained “saddled by [their] pasts.” While many declared the Civil Rights Movement in Sunflower County a success by this time, continued segregation and black economic hardships revealed that the situation had become “a Second Redemption...to follow the Second Reconstruction.” There were successes, but there were also strides backward. “Thanks to the movement,” Chris Asch explains, “blacks had both the will and the chance to work for themselves, but due to the limited schooling, constricted worldview, and abysmal skill level produced by a century of segregation, they often could not take advantage of the opportunity.” By the mid-1970s not everyone saw the situation of Sunflower County (particularly Indianola) as hopeless, however. On the contrary many, with the droves of now unemployed Delta blacks in mind, were hopeful that the region’s current socioeconomic distress would be relieved by a new addition to Sunflower County society: industrialization.⁶⁶

The history of Sunflower County through the 1970s reveals the survival of a centuries old plantation mentality. Local blacks achieved more rights, but their positions within Delta society remained restricted. White hegemony still lingered. These realities spilled into the 1970s and 1980s as white Indianola leaders tried to industrialize their

community as well as maintain control over majority-black public schools. Unchanging power dynamics based on race still influenced the area's economic and education sectors. Chapter two will discuss why industrialization failed and how racial tension within Indianola's public school realm exploded by the mid-1980s. Sunflower County's history and resulting social failings during the 1980s would take Indianola to the brink of an identity crisis. In search of a new, progressive image, community leaders subsequently turned their sights towards Delta Blues tourism.

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CHAPTER III
THE IDENTITY CRISIS: HOW UNSHAKEABLE HISTORICAL LEGACIES
TURNED INDIANOLA TO BLUES TOURISM

Though the Civil Rights Movement was far from over in Indianola and Sunflower County by the 1970s, the region was falling further behind the rest of the country in terms of progress. The next two decades produced similar results as racial problems still inhibited Indianola economics and education. Attempts to industrialize Indianola society eventually stagnated. Local industry boosters, usually white elites, did not represent the interests of the majority: namely poor blacks. Social scientists tried to encourage social reform for Delta blacks, hoping they would become better suited to an industrial economy. Those intending to maintain rigid racial hierarchies often ignored their suggestions, however.

Racial tension exploded by the mid-1980s. Indianola blacks became frustrated by a lack of involvement within their own school system. They rose against a majority white school board's decision to appoint a white education superintendent in 1986 (especially when the black candidate was more qualified). Racial crisis also threatened Indianola when black workers decided to unionize the catfish industry, Delta Pride, that same year. When the tensions supposedly calmed and progress seemed eminent, Delta Pride workers again struck against the company's white upper management in 1990. When worker demands were still not being met, employees went on strike, civil rights activists join their cause, and blacks throughout the South boycotted the company. By

the end of the 1980s, Indianola and much of the Delta faced an identity crisis. The state and federal government, the media, and even other Mississippians blasted the Delta for its social shortcomings. Indianola leaders, with the help of outside entities, came to the conclusion that their community required a new image. They found such a new identity in a piece of black cultural heritage: Delta blues.

Indianola Industrialization

The Civil Rights Movement in Sunflower County was unique when compared to the movement on a national scale. It in many ways represented what J. Todd Moyer calls a “poor people’s movement,” with economic equality being one of its primary goals.¹ James B. Jennings asserted that “political mobilization is a requisite condition for improving significantly the quality of social and economic life in the Black community.”² Black political autonomy in Sunflower County did not segue into economic equality by the 1980s, however. As James Cobb pointed out, “it was by no means clear whether blacks were actually capturing political control or whites were simply surrendering it,” therefore relinquishing “responsibility for the leadership of an economically depressed Delta.”³ While the Civil Rights Movement was successful in a number of realms by the end of the 1970s, its actual achievements and lasting effects were exaggerated.

By the end of the 1970s there existed a fine line between the simply poor and the covertly oppressed in Sunflower County. Before, oppression of Delta blacks was clearly defined and easily recognizable. Jim Crow, disfranchisement, and other discriminations were in the open. The Civil Rights Movement and federal pressure brought many of these institutions down. Delta blacks’ political participation increased after 1970, but in the economic arena they remained underrepresented and continued to suffer (even in

Delta counties with the most black officeholders). Over forty-six percent of all Sunflower Countians lived in poverty in 1970, the bulk of them being black.⁴ Massive government spending and aid coupled with out-migration helped reduce poverty to thirty percent by the end of the decade. A retreat back into “social and fiscal conservatism” by the 1980s, failing industry, and continued segregation increased poverty rates once again, however.⁵ Black political power alone could not challenge their economic problems. Before this social deterioration, however, community leaders looked to industry as an answer to the region’s economic hardships.

Industry has been a Southern concern since the Industrial Revolution crossed the Atlantic, but after World War II, efforts to industrialize the South expanded. Direct access to an industrial economy has been the worry of every demographic: the rich, poor, black, and white. During the second half of the twentieth century, desires for industrialization varied. Some wanted to attract industry because of apprehensions induced by an idle black workforce. Others strived to use Northern investment capital to create their own profitable, labor exploitative factories in the South. Social scientists encouraged industrialization, arguing that a subsequently expanded middle class would alleviate social problems dictated by planter hegemonies. Wealthy planters, in turn, successfully fought to make sure that any industrial expansion did not interfere with their social dominance. All of these dynamics played crucial roles in the attempts to industrialize Delta communities like Indianola. The history of industrial expansion in Indianola was not progressive. Conservative forces maintained social status quos in the wake of this new economy, even after the Civil Rights Movement had been declared a regional success. Industrialization’s ultimate failure revealed that Indianola’s problems were more than just economical. They also remained racial, cultural, and historical.⁶

Believing that the construction of a smokestack economy would give the South the dynamic economy so often envied in the North, prospects of industrialization spread throughout the South. Although there were many exceptions, it became clear by World War II that industrialization was not northernizing the South. On the contrary, Southern industrialization was adaptable to racially and hegemonic charged societies.⁷

As Cobb argues in *Industrialization and Southern Society*, smokestacks were seen as the cure for “underdeveloped, ‘backward’ regions like the South.” To prove their points, industry boosters pointed to a vibrant, industrially diverse North.⁸ Throughout the history of Southern industrialization, however, expansion usually occurred within the context of maintaining planter hegemony and rigid racial hierarchies. Advocates of industrialization catered to the “special interests of affluent landholders and gave their assurances that industrial development would not undermine the sharecropping system by siphoning away surplus labor.”⁹ Even after the fall of sharecropping, wealthy landowners made sure that subsequent industrialization would not remove the landed aristocracy from power. Upsetting the belief that industrialization would naturally dislodge the social status quo, Southern industrial expansion actually perpetuated rigid caste systems.

The “marriage of northern capital and southern labor”¹⁰ was meant to benefit parties north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line. In regions like the Delta, however, the parties involved were relatively small and did not represent the bulk of the population: namely displaced black laborers. Because industrial development in the Delta relied on the exploitation of cheap, unskilled labor, plantation ideology dictated its industrial growth and a prophesied “social and political transformation” never occurred. A “rapidly expanding middle class” never emerged, and if the industry succeeded, Northern investors and Southern factory owners became its only real beneficiaries.¹¹

Most of the efforts to industrialize Sunflower County occurred in Indianola. By the 1960s and 1970s about three quarters of Sunflower County's population was black, and agrarian mechanization had displaced the vast majority by this time.¹² Many blacks remained uneducated and socially marginalized at this juncture. Any attempts to increase their economic status via industrialization were not undertaken by the black majority but by upper class Indianola whites. They retained the capital and marketing skills necessary to attract industry (mostly from the North) into Indianola. Their strategies guaranteed that industrial expansion would not only eventually stagnate, but would also fail to socially alleviate the black population for whom the industry was meant to employ.

By the mid-1970s labor exploitative industry existed in Indianola for over two decades. With the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, however, social scientists were still confident that further industrial expansion would instigate needed social change. In a 1975 general study entitled *The Distribution of Poverty Throughout Mississippi*, their plans diagramed how industrial expansion should occur, certain that it would alleviate social crises in places like Indianola. By the 1980s, their studies proved to be at best unaware of the retreat back into conservatism taking place nationally, however. Coupled with resistance to change locally, the national reemergence of "social and fiscal conservatism" allowed Sunflower County public education and vocational training systems to rank among the worst in the country. It also contributed to the end of an organized Civil Rights Movement in Indianola. These factors allowed labor exploitative industrialization to continue in the same manner as it had since the 1950s. When the catfish industry was introduced to Indianola by 1981, its exploitation of cheap, black labor made it clear that racial inequalities still hindered Indianola society.¹³

Understanding the nature of industrialization in Indianola will explain why it failed as both an economic and social endeavor. The economic and social crisis climaxed in the 1980s within the public education and catfish industry sectors. The same social forces which caused industrial expansion to stagnate would also hinder subsequent federal economic development programs in the Delta. In the wake of consequent economic, social, and racial problems, Indianolians looked to another kind of industry for social answers: a cultural industry. Analyzing Indianola's attempts to industrialize will help explain why the community eventually looked to Delta Blues tourism for social assistance as well as a new identity.

Promising Northern investors access to cheap, non-unionized labor and enormous tax break incentives, Southern boosters attracted industry requiring unskilled labor. Even after World War II, when the American economy soared, textiles, mills, clothing factories, processing plants, and distribution centers represented many such Southern industries. They exploited poor whites as much as they exploited poor blacks.¹⁴ In Sunflower County, where almost three quarters of the population was black, the ratio differed. Displaced by agrarian mechanization, the majority of the county's citizens living in poverty (over fifty percent by 1960) were also black.¹⁵ They bore the brunt of exploiting industries, which picked up speed by the 1960s.¹⁶ As agrarian employment plummeted throughout Sunflower County, many of its residents either left or flocked to the county's seat: Indianola.

Unemployed Sunflower County residents came to Indianola because it retained the most aggressive industry boosters in the county. Under the auspices of the local Planning Board, city officials and businessmen combed the East Coast and Midwest. To get the attention of Northern industrialists, they explained how Indianola best suited their

interests with what they called “The Indianola Story.” The profile retained all of the attractive elements that industry boosters used throughout the South, and it was heralded by the Mississippi Agricultural and Industrial Board as “being exceptionally well-planned.”¹⁷ Its promise of a large labor pool, low wages, low taxes, lack of unions, and cooperative local and state governments helped guarantee Northern industrialists that Indianola was the perfect place in which to locate.¹⁸

Indianola blacks, who represented the bulk of the industry’s workforce, were denied access to negotiations. Industrialization requiring unskilled labor began in a time when Indianola blacks had no say in social matters whatsoever. Economically and politically marginalized, Indianola blacks had to face the reality that initial industrialization allowed little to no room for upward social mobility. While many viewed this as a “better than nothing” scenario, this was not a temporary reality. It set the industrialization tone for decades. Boosters’ sales pitches worked well, however, and several Northern industries opened branches in Indianola by the early 1950s.

The Ludlow Sales and Manufacturing Company of Boston was the first to set its sights on Indianola, and it arrived in 1953. To make the move more attractive, the cost of locating and erecting the necessary factory building was placed on Indianola’s citizenry who, through a bond issue, raised almost 1.3 million dollars. Northern managers were also brought in to make sure labor was accessible and adequate. Since the Ludlow Company was a low-skill textiles factory, labor displaced from agriculture was readily available and the 350 needed workers were easily found.¹⁹ The Indianola Industrial Committee again succeeded by 1956 and Hayes-Sammons of Texas relocated to the community. Initially producing insecticides, the company was bought out by American Cyanamid in 1964. The industry again changed hands in 1968 when a local stock

company bought and renamed it Delta Western. Primarily a liquid cattle feed manufacturer, Delta Western employed about 150 low-wage workers.²⁰ The company has managed to survive to this day by piggybacking the arrival of the catfish industry. It now produces both cattle and catfish feed. Industrial expansion also took place within already existing small businesses.

The Lewis Grocer Company came to Indianola in 1934 as a small grocery and food distribution chain. Operating as a branch facility with two other Mississippi Lewis Grocery plants, the company was consolidated into a single distributive warehouse in Indianola by 1957. Expanding its reach across state borders, the Indianola plant was enlarged to a 100,000 square feet facility which employed hundreds. The Super-Valu Company, a firm out of Hopkins, Minnesota and then the world's largest food distributor, bought out the company by 1965. The next year fire destroyed the plant's infrastructure. Rather than relocate, Super-Valu took advantage of Indianola's lucrative tax-break incentives and available low-wage labor. The company quickly built another facility about 500,000 square feet in size: making it the largest facility in the state and one of the South's largest. More low-skill labor was needed and found as a result of the expansion. By the mid-1970s Super-Valu employed almost 600 people, the majority uneducated, unskilled, and black.²¹

Perhaps the biggest moneymaker arrived in 1960 when the Modern Tool and Die Company of Cleveland, Ohio set up shop in Indianola. Modern Tool and Die was the largest manufacturer of lawnmowers in the world, and its location in Indianola was deemed such a victory that the day of its opening was declared a holiday. To signal the triumph, on opening day Governor Ross Barnett and Miss America Mary Ann Mobley were among the celebration's featured speakers. The Indianola branch acquired the title

Modern Line Products. It was an actual manufacturing industry, however. Its survival required something not readily available in Indianola: skilled labor. To meet worker requirements, many local blacks were given the lower end, lower skill requiring jobs while the more skilled positions were at first given to qualifying whites. As Modern Line Products continued to expand (which it did four times by the mid-1970s), it employed almost 700 persons. Many workers were “imported” from outside the region due to a lack of local skills.²²

On paper it appeared as though Indianola industry was booming. In just over a decade, several major industries from across the country had opened branches in the community, bringing with them jobs and potential prosperity. Sunflower County’s population continued to decrease in general, but Indianola proved to be the county’s exception. By 1970 no municipality in North Mississippi of the same population group was growing as fast as Indianola. It was the third fastest growing town in the entire state.²³ Additionally, because its industry employed workers from Indianola as well as throughout Sunflower County, chronic poverty fell by over sixteen percent by the end of the decade (from 46.2% in 1970 to 30% in 1980).²⁴

Despite the growth of industry, Indianola blacks were still sharing a minimal proportion of the community’s overall wealth. Chronic poverty still subsisted, and blacks still represented the bulk of those living in squalor. Indianola affluent whites still dictated public education policies, and they hardly adapted to the needs of Indianola’s skill deprived workforce. Industrial expansion helped reduce the level of chronic unemployment, but because it primarily targeted low-wage labor, Indianola blacks could not use these new economic opportunities to thrust themselves socially upward. Agriculture was still a prominent factor in Delta society, and wealthy landowners were

able to maintain rigid racial hierarchies which had existed for decades. These factors, coupled with the difficult transition from an agricultural to an industrial work environment, continued to socially depress Indianola's black workforce. The failure to address their educational, economic, and social statuses allowed the plantation mentality to survive. It helped eventually bring industrial expansion to a halt.

Budding Indianola industrialists accommodated the area's landed aristocracy, and this new era of industrialization adapted to the social status quo well. By the mid-1970s change had taken place, and was continuing to take place throughout the country via the Civil Rights Movement, however. Confident that such a movement would dislodge the Delta's landed gentry, social scientists throughout the country became interested in places like Indianola. Conducting studies and bringing together scholarship from several academic fields, they wanted to encourage a break with the social norms of the past. Believing that the political victories of the movement throughout the Delta was proof of a changing social dynamic, they maintained that industrialization was still the key for the area's social problems. The difference now, they believed, was that future industrial expansion would now be on everyone's terms: black, white, poor, and rich. They were right in some cases, but wrong where it mattered.²⁵

Social Scientists and the Hope for a New Delta

“Though many of our current problems...have emerged from our past history, our past has not saddled us with many of the infirmities characteristic of older industrialized areas,” social researcher Tommy W. Rogers asserted in 1976. “There is still time to consider the warnings expressed by the Twelve Southerners in *I'll Take My Stand* of a society always winning ‘Pyrrhic victories at points of no strategic significance’ with

those aspects of the life environment which allows man's existence to be most fully integrated and harmonious.”²⁶ Tommy Rogers wrote these words on the last page of a 1976 analysis of Mississippi's socioeconomic conditions. Entitled *The Distribution of Poverty Throughout Mississippi*, Rogers and others focused much of their research on the Delta. Rogers ended the report with hopeful prose. Contingently, he and other social scientists optimistically viewed the Delta as an industrial region still in its infancy. Its people could avoid the mistakes of Northern industrial cities, they argued. Industrial hubs do not have to be overcrowded, polluted centers. “The course of our industrial development is in the future,” Rogers stated. Within that course, social researchers hoped to utilize the full potential of economic development. Through their findings, the Delta and Mississippi people in general could not only improve their economic lot, but they could also create a society “which allows man's existence to be most fully integrated and harmonious.”²⁷

Agrarian mechanization and an already existing oppressive social environment caused large numbers of blacks to leave Mississippi. The bulk of this displacement took place in the Mississippi Delta, in places like Indianola. With much of its economic and social infrastructures in shambles, the Delta's future since the 1950s appeared bleak. Many social dilemmas exist in Indianola and throughout the Delta today, but were these present conditions inevitable, even in hindsight? In the mid-1970s a large contingent of social scientists, educationists, and economists, observing places such as Indianola, would have responded with a resounding “No”. Realizing that social woes and race were historically interrelated throughout the Delta, they believed that the successes of the Civil Rights Movement coupled with economic development would alleviate these social shortfalls.

By the mid-1970s many were hopeful for improved Delta economic development and poverty reduction. Government officials, social scientists, and economists conducted Mississippi studies in order to emphasize this point. Reducing the level of chronic poverty in places like Indianola and bolstering the strength of its middle class represented the study's primary goal, and they believed the time was right to begin accomplishing the task. "The promise of Mississippi is great," remarked an Office of Human Resources official in 1975, "for it is yet a relatively unspoiled, unindustrialized, nonurbanized State with the prospect of its future development before it."²⁸ The reference to "promise" meant future social progress, and "future development" meant that that progress would occur via economic diversification. While the potential for economic improvement existed, primarily via industrial development, these reformers also understood that developers had to face certain realities.

They observed that chronic poverty blanketed the Delta. While pools of idle labor resided throughout the region, they represented uneducated and unskilled labor. Their observations were nothing new, however. Such analyses had been put forth by apprehensive, racial whites and aspiring industrialists for decades.²⁹ The difference lay in social scientists' ideas for sustained economic growth. Incorporating a poverty ridden black population rather than merely using them for labor marked the clear difference between the ideas of social scientists and those who actually implemented local development. Their road to social success consisted of a multi-faceted strategy which combined an influx of low grade industry practical for the available labor, followed by an overhaul of the area's existing public education and vocational infrastructures.

Officials and scholars insisted that education, considered a prerequisite for those desiring a "vertical migration" into higher income brackets, must undergo reform within

areas such as Indianola.³⁰ Social scientists' suggestions contradicted Indianola's power structure. Indianola leaders held socioeconomic sway. Social reformers could speculate and research all they wanted, but local white leaders retained power. The latter would win out, and development continued in much the same way. Industrial expansion and social progress thus eventually stagnated. Industry failed to spark social progress because of the naivety that it can be a socioeconomic cure-all, a belief which can trace its roots to the social science's Regionalist school of thought (created during the 1930s).³¹ Institutional changes were meant to directly improve the region's economic infrastructure. This would, in theory, naturally solve its social deficiencies. Social scientists nevertheless applied their theories throughout Mississippi.

Simply bringing high-skilled industry into communities such as Indianola, many argued, would not work for obvious reasons. The amount of required labor existed, the required skills did not. As Tommy Rogers argued, "While attraction of high wage industry is often cited as the curative for the economic ills of a depressed area...this is a dangerous fallacy which neglects the important concept of comparative advantage. Areas with large surpluses of ordinary labor require the types of industry that employ much ordinary labor at rates of pay which will be well below that of industries where skill requirements are high."³² Economist Marshall R. Colberg reiterated that "truly labor intensive rather than human capital intensive industry is needed by many communities."³³ These observations were dated since communities like Indianola had incorporated low-wage, labor intensive industries since the early 1950s.

They continued, arguing that an influx of higher grade industry not practical to the already existing, low-skilled labor force would require that these industries bring in qualified laborers from other areas. Based on economic theory related to such a scenario,

James O'Toole argued in 1975 that even if the "United States were to create millions of new jobs through massive spending...because of the substitution effect there would be many people who would need, but would not be receiving, the social, psychological and economic benefits that come from a good steady job."³⁴ While on paper the community's per capita income may increase due to an influx of high wage jobs, the apparent improvement is misleading. While in-migrant workers enjoy the benefits of the new, high wage industry, the number of those still unemployed and living in poverty actually never changes. If a community has 100 unskilled laborers living unemployed and impoverished, and a newly established industry needs 100 skilled laborers for high wage positions, that industry must hire 100 skilled workers from outside the community. Once the new workers arrive and begin receiving payment, statistics would eventually reveal that poverty is decreasing and per capita incomes are increasing. In actuality, however, chronic poverty remains the same without increased capital being transferred to the "low income population of the area."³⁵

This is exactly what happened in Indianola and communities throughout the Delta. In Indianola, Modern Line Products, Incorporated had to import employees outside of the region for its higher skilled positions. This is why observers of the region in the mid-1970s stressed that "labor intensive industry" should be incorporated first, with high skilled industry coming later as the area's population acquired the necessary skills via reformed education and vocational programs.³⁶ Indianola had already been industrializing its poor, unskilled workforce for almost two decades, however. Furthermore, the realities of Delta society would not allow drastic social change. White community leaders were not interested in educational reform because they did not share

the desires for social change and progress stressed by social scientists. Observers continued to stress industrial expansion requiring low-skill labor.

Represented by poverty and poor education, social scientists such as Tommy Rogers argued that the Delta's "industrial expansion must be of a nature which allows for maximum employment of local area labor rather than recruitment of outside technicians and laborers."³⁷ The influx of low-grade industry was to be only temporary, however. Their strategy also called for a simultaneous overhaul of the region's educational infrastructure. Reforming the area's public education system combined with an influx of low-grade industry would in theory attract higher grade industry. Overtime, the populace would become better educated and have attained higher and more salable skills. As James Cobb revealed, social researchers implemented such a strategy throughout the South with often disappointing results because industrialists were not looking for a future liberalized economy. They only desired continued access to cheap labor.³⁸ The proposal to change the Delta's education institutions offered many options, with particular attention being directed to the impoverished.

Observers suggested that long term economic development in the mid-1970s Delta should begin with educational reform. The educational status quo at this time was one of the poorest in the country. The endeavor's plans called for a multi-pronged "rethinking" of the region's educational institutions. The reforms incorporated ideas for deschooling, vocational training, alternative training, and a higher education voucher system. The ideas reduced the amount of formal education required in order to obtain a more salable job. "The poor and disequalized as well as the society at large," argued Rogers in 1976, "would seem to benefit from a critical rethinking of the actual skills and learning required for adequate job performance."³⁹ Researchers studying the area in the

mid-1970s argued that education did not represent “an indicator of skills in specified tasks,” but was rather acting as “an access barrier to the disadvantaged.” Civil rights organizations and poverty lawyers understood this well, and they attempted to “eliminate discriminatory tests for hiring which [were] irrelevant to the jobs performed” in response to those barriers.⁴⁰

When an individual was performing his or her job well, pressure to increase their qualifications still existed. Deschooling advocates asserted that irrelevant formal education requirements were used to merely increase a particular vocation’s attractiveness. Specifically to Indianola, however, irrelevant education standards were used to “screen out” race.⁴¹ Racial discrimination in the workplace not only hurt the blacks to whom it was targeting, but it sabotaged the community. “Resultant low incomes for blacks,” argued Naylor and Clotfelter in 1975, “means reduced buying power, and reduced buying power means fewer jobs and lower wages for all the people...not just blacks.”⁴² If Indianola leaders wanted to expand its economic capacity, social observers argued, they had to eliminate discriminatory barriers. In addition to deschooling, Indianola and communities throughout the Delta were also urged to transfer their resources to increased vocational training. If these educational strategies worked, communities then had to keep the newly educated population from leaving.

Those able to attain a better and more salable education, at least the kind required to incorporate an industrial economy, often left the area. This delivered a double-blow to communities like Indianola. Political scientist Arthur Ford claimed,

If education is to play a role in regional development, then the area that incurs the costs of the education must receive some return from the education provided within its borders.

When the industrial infrastructure of a region is such that increased educational levels are not utilized within the borders and the area is one of net out-migration of the more educated, then the consequences of the education will be perverse for the region in question in that it incurs the cost of education but incurs no significant return except in the expenditures to support providers.⁴³

Coupled with discriminatory reasons, Indianola's population (black and white) declined because good jobs were no longer readily available in agriculture and significant industrial development had not yet occurred. A lack of economic opportunity, along with the depressive social atmosphere often associated with the whole Delta, did little to keep blacks and whites from leaving. Out migrations of Indianola's black and white middle classes has been a problem since the early twentieth century. The strategy in the mid-1970s thus hinged on encouraging this demographic to remain in places like Indianola. Doing so required educational reform so that a larger percentage of the population would become better suited to incorporate future industrial expansion. Terms such as reform, economic redistribution, a liberalized economy, and social change, however, placed a bad taste into the mouths of white leaders dedicated to the maintenance of racial hierarchies.

Many plans were put forward in attempt to address social problems throughout Mississippi. They were in many ways academic suggestions that proved inapplicable to the realities of a racially polarized Delta society, however. The social commentators were not completely naïve in their observations. There was adequate reason to believe that by the 1970s the time was ripe for social progress. Industry *did* start outweighing agriculture as Mississippi's biggest source of revenue by the 1970s.⁴⁴ More importantly,

many produced these social ideas on the heels of what was perceived as a successful Civil Rights Movement. Contingently, it would have been hard not to believe that the Delta's socioeconomic pendulum was perhaps beginning to swing back towards the black population for the first time since Reconstruction.

Rogers suggested that political and educational reform stood a good chance by 1975 because the region's black populace was beginning to enjoy political autonomy. This acquisition of political power could potentially give this demographic the necessary clout to initiate such reforms. Rogers and others underestimated the continued racial struggle despite the rising sense of black political autonomy, however. Additionally, one of the common misconceptions was that political independence meant economic autonomy. This was not the case in Indianola. In *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, Cobb acknowledges that Delta blacks attained political sway by the 70s and especially 80s. But were the region's whites just giving it up, as Cobb suggests?⁴⁵ White leaders definitely had to consider the black vote by the 1970s, but the area's overall wealth was still firmly in their control: especially landowners.

Significant reform in the area's educational and social infrastructures was never attainable in prior decades because Indianola's black majority remained too socially marginalized. However, black voter registration and the fall of agriculture as the state's leading source of revenue loosened planter elites' political choke hold on the Mississippi legislature. This convinced many that the local political pendulum was swinging towards the black population.⁴⁶ The Office of Human Resources noted in 1975:

Differences in racial practices and attitudes in Mississippi today and only a decade ago are notable and distinct...Not the least of this change is seen in the political realm, where

the necessary racial stridency for political success in the past has been muted in response to new political and economic considerations. Though blacks have long been a suppressed majority in Mississippi...by the mid-1970s Mississippi's success in adjustment to new ways was reflected in the fact that the State's blacks had more freedom from local controls and enjoyed more economic prosperity than ever before.⁴⁷

The rise of the region's black political autonomy was considered a step towards social change. It was hoped that a more evenly distributed political power base would incorporate both black and white populations thus initiating gradual socio-political assimilation between the races. Potential for socio-economic change in places such as Indianola seemed high by 1976. That potential was never realized, however. These changes never took hold in communities like Indianola. They actually fell very short. By the 1980s it became clear why: the problems of race and power distribution were still strong.

Racial problems were underestimated by social scientists observing the region's industrial and educational potential during the 1970s. Industrial development continued as the 1980s approached, but it still reflected a decades old social mentality. Whites controlled the managing interests of local industry, and blacks represented the general workforce. A solid black political base never translated into a solid economic foundation. Whites still controlled the majority of the public school board though blacks represented almost all of the public schools' enrollments. While Indianola's past may have not completely "saddled" its black and white populations, it influenced how they

conducted future social policy. In 1986 these issues climaxed in the public education and industrial sectors. Indianola's race relations exploded.

The Changing of the Guard: Indianola's Search for a New Superintendent of Education, 1986

Though segregation had been overturned since 1954, Indianola schools remained racially divided by the mid-1980s. When an organized Civil Rights Movement entered the area by the 1960s, local blacks were attacking the school system outright. In 1969 the Supreme Court ruled in *Alexander v. Holmes County, Mississippi, Board of Education* that "every school district ...[had] to terminate dual school systems at once and to operate now and henceforth only unitary schools." By January 1970 U. S. District Court Judge W. C. Keady demanded that Indianola's school board integrate its public schools no later than February 1. When the decision was handed down, Indianola whites were ready.⁴⁸

When minimal integration was agreed to by 1965, local white churches took on students while white leaders decided how to solve their problem. Plans for a private academy began in 1967 under the auspices of the Citizens Council. Officially opening in 1969, Indianola Academy received over 900 applications within one week. The institution also offered scholarships to poor whites, making sure racial divisions permeated all social classes. On paper Indianola had desegregated by the 1970s, but in reality the community was still divided.⁴⁹

By the 1980s the picture of Indianola's school system appeared much the same. Black students went to the town's various middle schools and Gentry High, and whites went to Indianola Academy (with the exception of Lockard Elementary which was the only integrated school in the area). Blacks remained in public schools, whites in the

private academy. But Indianola whites still controlled the community's public schools. In 1985 longtime Indianola superintendent of education D. B. Floyd retired from his position, however.⁵⁰ Deciding who would now lead Indianola's majority black schools turned into controversy.

The selection process began in January 1986, and Indianola's black citizenry supported Robert Merritt, the position's only black applicant. The issue fell to the Indianola public school board. Four of the five board members were white in a majority black community. The general public elected only one board member. The city's aldermen appointed the other four (who up to this point in Indianola were all white).⁵¹ Of all who applied for the job, Merritt was the most qualified. Indianola blacks thought his appointment was a certainty.

Merritt held a Bachelors in elementary education, a Ph.D. in education administration and supervision, ten years experience as a teacher in Indianola's public schools, and sixteen years experience as a school principle. The board shocked Indianola's black population, however, when it voted to require that applicants have "five years administrative experience in the city schools' central office."⁵² Merritt did not meet the requirement and was consequently denied the job. Increasing the tension, the board discreetly met with, interviewed, and hired a white candidate at board president Odell Godwin's plantation home. Word leaked that the board did not even meet with Merritt, and the town's black population exploded. Under pressure, the board started the selection process over.

By March 1986 the superintendent issue was months old. At this time, the Indianola school district held an election for the only publicly appointed seat on the school board. White board President Odell Godwin currently occupied the seat. Wanting

better representation in public education matters, local blacks took action. Calling themselves the Concerned Citizens, a group of black community leaders organized support for Merritt. Concerned Citizens, believing Godwin represented Merritt's primary obstacle, endorsed black deputy director of the Delta Housing Development Corporation David Johnson for the available seat.⁵³

Organizing voting drives, their efforts easily elected Johnson to the board seat. The five member school board now had two black members: David Johnson and Walter Gregory. Gregory was also subsequently appointed board president.⁵⁴ Jackson's election to the school board was considered a victory, but this crisis revealed two things thus far. First, it became clear that Indianola's racial problems were anything but solved by the mid-1980s. As Concerned Citizens spokesman Willie Spurlock argued, "[Merritt's appointment would] trample or at least cool the flames of a steadily brewing and potentially explosive crisis which would affect not only the school system, but also the business community, and all races, religions, creeds, and colors in Indianola."⁵⁵ Second, local blacks faced this struggle on their own, without the outside assistance they garnered in the past. The controversy gained attention elsewhere as the state chapter of the NAACP joined the ranks of Merritt supporters, but it otherwise remained a local struggle with local involvement.⁵⁶ By the end of March 1986, the search for a new superintendent continued as the race came down to just two men: black candidate Robert Merritt and white candidate W. A. Grissom.

Despite the demands of the black majority and the victories regarding the school board, word spread that Grissom would win the position. Concerned Citizens threatened to implement a citywide economic boycott if the board failed to choose Merritt. In the

wake of black and moderate white demands, the board officially voted (three white votes to two black votes) in favor of Grissom. Indianola blacks quickly reacted.⁵⁷

Concerned Citizens held a meeting the night of the decision. It attracted some 700 citizens. Spurlock exclaimed, “We have tried to maintain peace. The superintendent issue has led us to war.”⁵⁸ The next day picket groups marched in front of businesses throughout Indianola. They targeted the white owned chains on Highway 82, and the white owned merchant stores in downtown Indianola. In the public schools so many students did not show up for class (over 2,500 or about ninety percent) that the school board closed them for a week. The board declared a holiday, but they were actually trying to save funding based on class attendance.⁵⁹ The boycotts devastated Indianola businesses.

While individually Indianola blacks represented only a fraction of the town’s overall wealth, together they became a formidable economic bloc. They constituted the bulk of the buying power for Indianola small businesses. When black customers vanished along with fearful white customers, Indianola businesses lost anywhere from thirty to over sixty percent of their sales.⁶⁰ Around 500 protestors descended upon downtown Indianola during the first week. In the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., they walked arm-in-arm, singing “We Shall Overcome.” Addressing the crowd, Concerned Citizens spokesman Spurlock claimed:

We are here this afternoon to say to Indianola, Sunflower County, the state of Mississippi and the nation that we’re not here to protest against our white sisters and brothers...It is a matter of where a decision was made with which we do not agree...We know this is hard...It is a lot of stress. It

has caused races to become polarized. But we must conduct ourselves just as we have up to this point, with decency and integrity...The only thing we are asking is that we are given a chance. We are not asking to take over...It is time we get a slice of the pie. We are not asking for the whole pie.⁶¹

Concerned Citizens and all Indianola blacks demanded an equal share in Indianola's decision-making process. After a week, parents sent their children back to the public schools, but the economic boycotts remained active as the superintendent crisis continued.

By April 1986 a resolution to the crisis had still not been reached. The board again refused to back down from their decision, and again parents withdrew their students from the public schools. In a letter to Indianola's *Enterprise-Tocsin* the same month, the black community spoke out again, "For many years the black community has sat idly by while the leaders of the white community have made important decisions that dictated our lives and our children's lives. That day no longer exists when our community will allow others to direct our children's lives."⁶² In light of such public pressure, the town's board of alderman asked for Grissom's resignation. Grissom refused. The school board subsequently shut down all Indianola public schools. This decision indefinitely cut off hundreds of employees from work and pay, until the boycotts ended.⁶³

Since the boycotts began and the public schools closed, racial tensions peaked. The notion that Indianola blacks and whites did not live in presupposed peace and harmony was becoming a rude awakening. Communication between the two communities became crucial. To create such a channel the Indianola Chamber of

Commerce convened a Bi-racial Committee. Indianola's black and white leaders met under the committee to negotiate the crisis. They were given the chance to speak freely during this dilemma.⁶⁴

To avoid clashes, each side carefully chose committee representatives. Concerned Citizens had heavy representation in the committee and clung to their support for Merritt. Throughout the crisis, the Bi-Racial Committee was the one entity through which Indianola blacks and whites could get a sense of one another. As negotiations continued, white business leaders had had enough and demanded that city officials make a decision. Their concerns were also discussed within the Bi-racial Committee since they too had heavy representation there. Grissom did not budge. He still refused resignation as well as a \$90,000 contractual buyout. The black community refused to budge as well. The boycott stretched into weeks as negotiations ensued. The wealthy white minority began to waver, and they subsequently curried favor to black demands.⁶⁵

Now under increased pressure from both sides, Grissom was convinced to accept the \$90,000 buyout (much of the funds coming from Indianola's "big three" industries: Supervalu, Modern Line, and Delta Pride). They next day, the board voted unanimously in favor of Merritt and appointed him as Indianola's superintendent of education.⁶⁶ The crisis had come to an end, and Indianola briefly returned to normal, though much had changed.

The superintendent crisis was a racial conflict in which the black community emerged victorious. It was a victory, but it also revealed continuing problems. Race was still an explosive issue. Furthermore, Indianola blacks were only successful through a well organized movement in which both lower and middleclass blacks remained united. It is easy to see how they stayed so connected. Public education involved all of their

children and thus all of their interests. Could such a united front be counted on when only lower-class blacks' interests were at stake? Secondly, had Indianola's white business leaders and industrialists really seen the wrong that had been done to the black community when they intervened, or were they just trying to restore their own business interests? These questions were answered in 1986 also, nearly two months after the superintendent crisis.

Continued Social Distress: The Catfish Industry and the Continued Exploitation of Black Labor, 1986-1990

Not two months following the superintendent crisis, Indianola faced another dilemma within its catfish industry. The 1980s witnessed the birth of an additional Indianola enterprise: the catfish industry. Because the raising and processing of catfish fell within the agricultural sector, many hoped this new agri-industry would flourish in this historically agrarian area. The catfish industry indeed flourished. With the national and international demand for farm-raised catfish increasing, more landowners converted fields into catfish ponds. Within several years the industry in Sunflower County was worth tens of millions of dollars and employed over 1,000 people. Like cotton harvests and Indianola industries before it, however, the catfish industry also relied on the exploitation of cheap, primarily black labor.⁶⁷

In 1981 several Delta catfish farmers united as a cooperative known as Delta Pride. With catfish demands on the rise, the industry exploded. Its annual revenues grew thirty percent every year since its beginning. Indianola boasted the largest catfish processing plant in the world. By 1985 the Sunflower County catfish harvest valued at an estimated \$44 million; cotton that same year grossed almost \$48 million.⁶⁸ Because of

increased demand and the expectation of future growth, the catfish industry relied on labor: cheap labor that could be pressed to process catfish faster and faster. By 1986 the industry employed over 1,000 people. The majority of the low-end employees were black, and they worked under terrible conditions.

Here is how catfish processing worked. The “cleaning line” of the facility represented the majority of the workforce, over 900 employees. Over 850 of these workers were black. Under strict quotas, the facility could churn out 600,000 pounds of processed catfish per day. Repetitive processing lines were key to the plant’s success. The “cleaning line” was divided into two components: the “kill line” and the “cutting line.” In the former the “header” was required to cut off fifteen catfish heads per minute; in the latter the “filleter” had to cut 800 pounds in a single shift. The plant smelled terrible, stayed cold, and employees found themselves standing among the unwanted portions of the catfish. Employees were kept under constant watch by supervisors who walked amongst them and peered from catwalks above. They also carried stopwatches to make sure workers achieved their respective quotas. Injuries were frequent, and the pay was low.⁶⁹

Wages for those on the processing lines were \$3.85 an hour: the 1986 minimum wage was \$3.10. In 1990 *New York Times* reporter Peter Kilborn calculated that after the consideration of overtime and company benefits, the average worker made about \$4.05 an hour. Their yearly wages totaled about \$8,400, an income well below the poverty line. Many if not most of these workers had families to support.⁷⁰ With their financial situations and working conditions worsening, the facility’s black workforce decided to do something feared by many Delta industry owners. They decided to unionize.

The workers' attempts to seek unionization were met with stiff resistance. This was true for many Delta industries in which black workforces attempted to unionize. Many employees from Delta Pride's predominantly black workforce were often fired or threatened with cuts into their benefits when they made such intentions known. In May 1986 the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCWU) consequently filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, and the struggle for unionization was well on its way.⁷¹

The push for unionization was a risky endeavor for many reasons. Company leaders attacked pro-union workers. Lower class blacks making a bid for unionization did not have the support of middle class blacks they retained during the superintendent crisis. Black middle-class organizations such as the Concerned Citizens did not dedicate themselves to the endeavor. On the contrary, they urged Delta Pride workers to withdraw their union bids. Concerned Citizens spokesman Willie Spurlock, who later took a management position with Delta Pride, encouraged the company to "address worker concerns" thus foregoing their need for unionization.⁷² Another Concerned Citizens spokesman Carver Randle asserted that "where management does everything it should to keep its employees as happy as possible, you don't need a union."⁷³ They, along with moderate whites, pointed to examples of other industrial workforces which sought unionization in the past.

Workers at other Delta catfish plants attempted unionization before, only to have the facilities close. In 1981 a seven week strike led to the closing of the Welfed plant in Isola, Mississippi (just twelve miles south of Indianola). Tunica's Pride of the Pond closed its doors when its workers unionized (though it eventually reopened). Sunflower County's Ludlow Industries recently shut down within weeks of its workers' push for

unionization. Despite the risks, employees concluded that their working conditions were worth the endeavor. In October 1986 they voted 489-349 for unionization, and the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1529 was born.⁷⁴

Union organizers knew this was a racial issue as much as it was economic. The two had actually gone hand-in-hand since the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s and 70s. Cleve McDowell, Drew, Mississippi native and NAACP field representative, brought the organization behind the unionizers and made it a civil rights issue.⁷⁵ Workers asserted that their workplace environment was “hell.” One worker exclaimed, “They hire you, cripple you, and fire you...It’s like being back on the plantation.”⁷⁶ The *New York Times* observed that “management philosophies [were] akin to those of the plantation era.”⁷⁷ It was a civil rights issue after all. Like the succession of inequalities which dictated the course of Sunflower County history before the 1980s, the superintendent and catfish industry crises made the realities of lingering social inequalities clear. The Delta Pride black employees’ struggles did not end with their ascension into unionization, however.

By 1990 the UFCWU Local 1529 protested Delta Pride once more on the grounds that the company needed to address poor wages and dangerous working conditions. The company was just fined almost \$33,000 the previous year by the Occupational Health and Safety Administration for worker safety negligence. By 1990 working conditions were still an issue, and Delta Pride’s black employees again decided that if changes were going to occur, they had to take action themselves. In the face of a reluctance to change on behalf of company managers, a general employee strike ensued.⁷⁸

Because the movement could not carry substantial support from the area’s black middleclass, union leaders reached out for national support. Based on the racial dynamics inherent in Delta Pride’s employee makeup, civil rights leaders around the

country again supported the majority black workforce. Jesse Jackson claimed Delta Pride was “turning the plant into a plantation.” Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) leader Reverend Joseph Lowery also supported the strike. Reverend Lowery asserted that “90% of the workers in the catfish industry are black and 90% of the money in the industry goes to whites.”⁷⁹ As in the arguments of local blacks during the superintendent crisis, they demanded a share in the overall wealth. Indianola blacks were still being used as a source of cheap labor, much as they had been within the cotton realm and the initial arrival of industry during the 1950s.

In addition to the strike, local blacks boycotted Delta Pride products. The SCLC called for the same boycott of Delta Pride throughout the South. Delta Pride company leaders understood that their largest consumers were black southerners, and they tried everything to show that these “labor issues were not civil rights issues.” The strike effort ended in success, but it was in many ways a failure. After thirteen weeks, the strike ended with the acceptance of a “new contract with modest concessions from Delta Pride.”⁸⁰ The fragility of lower-middle class black cooperation weakened the effort. Also, poor laborers can go without pay for only so long. After all, the vote for unionization did not win by a vast majority. Workers were forced to accept a lackluster deal. Had Delta Pride not been able to find position replacements so quickly during the strike, concessions may have been larger. They managed to find more workers during the strike than they had before, however.⁸¹ The Delta was on the cusp of a social crisis, and the events of the 1980s proved that not only was the Civil Rights Movement in Sunflower County still wanting, but that it also had a long way to go.

By the end of decade, the Delta was in a dilemma. Many of the same problems that sparked the emergence of Blues around 1900 were still hindering the region by the

end of the 1980s. Though Jim Crow had faded as a solid institution, social inequalities based on race were still evident. Events such as Indianola's superintendent and catfish industry crises made it clear that, in the words of Indianola Reverend Michael Freeman, "We live in two separate communities—black and white." Willie Spurlock also commented, "We still have racial problems. There have been no great racial strides [since Indianola's founding]."⁸² Events like these were not limited to Indianola and Sunflower County. Problems in education and economics were rampant throughout the Delta. Public schools fell further below the national averages. In the wake of union disputes, poor work ethics, perpetual lack of skills, national recession, and the damaging publicity stemming from racial problems, Delta industries fled the region (either locating elsewhere in the U. S. or moving abroad). By the end of the 1980s, after a steady decrease in chronic poverty since 1970, Sunflower County poverty rates skyrocketed. They reached as high as fifty percent by 1990.⁸³

Due to the racial divisions still existing within many if not most Delta communities, many began viewing these social problems as a crisis of identity. The lack of a sense of community cohesion between Delta blacks and whites was seen as a primary source of the region's socioeconomic downfall. Many local, state, and national entities therefore decided to act. In 1988 they came together in the form of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission (LMDDC). Though the LMDDC set forth a number of goals to accomplish across a region far exceeding the boundaries of the Mississippi Delta, it made the addressing of such a crisis one of its primary goals. In a study entitled *Interstate Cooperation, Regionalism, and Economic Development in the Delta*, the LMDDC asserted:

The first step toward the development of any meaningful cooperative venture among the Delta states must be the psychological unification of its residents into a recognizable, cohesive region with their own identity...This will require that both governments and citizens identify themselves with the Delta as their cultural and economic home. Attitudes toward regional participation must be reshaped so that the Delta region takes on a psychological aspect of importance nearly equal to attitudes about state loyalty, giving people a sense of 'connectedness' with other Delta residents.⁸⁴

In this sense, the LMDDC sought to encourage the formation of a united Delta populace, black and white. In a segregated region in which blacks still struggled for racial equality, this was asking a lot. LMDDC officials stressed that the most effective way to accomplish this task included the creation of some kind of identity with which all Deltans, black and white, could relate. Delta blacks and whites, though always an influence upon one another, had formed their own unique cultures ever since they coexisted, however. What then, could be an all encompassing Delta identity? Many found their answer in a cultural resource called Delta Blues.

Conclusion

Both government officials and town leaders stressed the need for a source capable of binding the black and white communities. Efforts to industrialize Indianola failed to promote community growth and harmony. It actually sustained the area's historically

paternalistic society. Black workers' bid for unionization in Indianola's catfish plants brought race relations to a head in 1986 and again in 1990 when blacks across the South boycotted Delta Pride because managers did not meet contract demands. The 1986 superintendent crisis also illuminated the reality that Indianola's race relations were far from harmonious and progressive.

This was the pinnacle of Indianola's identity crisis. The events of the late 1980s and early 1990s got the attention of local leaders, officials from every government level, and especially the national media. Some community leaders clung to hope, however. After Merritt's appointment to superintendent, black spokesman Willie Spurlock guaranteed that a permanent Bi-Racial Committee could preemptively resolve future conflict. "In a concerted effort we can cause our community to become unified," Spurlock said, "and bring about the cohesiveness that is needed in a progressive city."⁸⁵ The enthusiasm faded away, however.

By 1990 Indianola was clearly not progressive. Media and government agencies still blasted the whole Delta for its shortcomings. On national television, the country watched as Jesse Jackson branded the region as "America's Ethiopia."⁸⁶ Indianola's Bi-Racial Committee eventually fell into obscurity. The town's blacks and whites fell back into their own separate communities. Indianola's institutions continued to suffer. The source to progress and racial harmony would have to be found elsewhere. The country demanded that the Delta change, and Delta leaders were now willing to create such a progressive picture. The LMDDC called for such a new identity as it stressed the need for a "cohesive region" with "regional participation" so that all Deltans "identify" with "their cultural and economic home." Over the next two decades, the Delta's budding blues industry evolved into the epitome of this new image.

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CHAPTER IV

FIGHTING THE BLUES WITH BLUES

“You can listen to blues, play the blues, have the blues and even use the blues to help create change,” the publisher of the 2009 *Blues Festival Guide* claimed. “The blues and the spirit of the blues continue to address challenges. As you see...there are more than a few socially aware groups and individuals who use the blues as a vehicle to drive change and to bring social awareness to causes.”¹ Within the last two decades, Indianola, Mississippi has used its Blues tourism industry in an attempt to forge a new identity. Many external entities influenced this movement. This new identity is meant to show a community leaving behind past mistakes and instead moving towards a progressive future. In 1997 anthropologist Erve Chambers observed that “tourism can be considered not only as an activity, but also as an orientation to the modern world.”² Anthropologist Stanly E. Hyland added that “Towards this end, the U. S. South in general, and the Lower Mississippi Delta region in particular, is currently in an intense struggle to redefine its image and redirect its future.”³ Promoting a regional image or identity can blur the connections between past and present. New identities are often reactionary. They frequently stem from a desire to disassociate contemporary problems with historical legacies. Local whites once boasted Indianola as the home of the Citizens’ Council. Thirty-five years later Indianola became the proud home of Blues legend B. B. King. A lot changed within this time period, but how much? And why did Indianola and much of the Delta look to Blues for a new identity?

Indianola and Sunflower County's history up to the 1980s is a microcosmic glance into Delta history in general. Slavery, sharecropping, exploitative industry, the struggle for civil liberties, and contemporary social woes thrust the Delta into an identity crisis. Much of the country continued to criticize the region for its backwardness and social stagnation. Even other parts of Mississippi began blaming the Delta for holding the state back. "I love my home state of Mississippi. I think it is terribly misunderstood and dogged upon by many people who have never been there," one native exclaimed on a *Mississippi Pride!* website. "But trust me," he continued, "stay out of the Delta!"⁴ With the help of local, state, and federal entities, Delta citizenry (primarily whites at first) ironically looked to its African American roots as a means to fight back. Pouring immense resources into an already existing but loosely organized industry, Indianola and the Delta turned to blues tourism. To foster a more positive image of the region, Indianola and the Delta utilized a resurging interest in the blues worldwide. Through the B. B. Homecoming Festival, Indianola's revitalization project, the creation of the Mississippi Delta Blues Society of Indianola, the town's connection to the new Mississippi Blues Commission, and plans for a B. B. King Museum, Indianola leaders attempted to forge a new, progressive identity.

The Blues Explosion

If the internet is any indicator of how the Mississippi Delta prioritizes social needs, then search engines produce some interesting findings. Googling "Delta poverty" results in 67,000 hits. Google "Delta education" and about 380,000 sites appear. Run a search for "Delta Blues tourism" and Google reports over 430,000 hits.⁵ The blues

industry has not only become a priority, but it has also become the Delta's answer to social inhibitors.

Blues festivals dot all of North America. From Canada to Texas and Massachusetts to California, demand for the blues continues to rise.⁶ The true blues enthusiast knows, however, that getting a real taste of the music means embarking on a Delta pilgrimage. The Delta still evokes a sense of mysticism within many first-time travelers. The region, with its flatness, agriculture, racial dynamics, and poverty, reinforces the myth of a land somehow removed from the rest of the world, a place still stuck in the past.⁷ They also come because this is where blues began.

Many Deltans know this too. They have taken great strides to remind the world of its birthright. When the music's popularity resurged by 1990, the Delta claimed only a handful of festivals. Today, there are over fifty with more emerging every year.⁸ Published maps, guides, and books take tourists from around the world to must see blues hotspots.⁹ The Delta boasts countless blues attractions, so much so that after 2000 the state government created the Mississippi Blues Commission. Its initial act was the proposal of a Mississippi Blues Trail: a series of historic markers meant to guide tourists along famous blues sites. As will be discussed in more detail, the Commission helped turn a once sporadic Delta industry into an organized blues network. Why did the blues become so popular by the 1990s?

Since its beginning, the music's popularity has fluctuated. Initially spreading throughout the country's black populations, by the 1960s blues reached white demographics with the help of British rock bands like the Rolling Stones. Captivated by the music, younger, mainly Northern whites traveled southbound to find records from previous decades. They also searched for the music's actual artists with some success.

The next “blues boom” came in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁰ Several factors led to this resurgence. The double-CD box set release of Robert Johnson’s complete compilation went through the roof. It remains the only country-blues release to have sold over one million copies. Shortly after, Robert Mugge’s film *Deep Blues* revealed that the blues was still alive and well in Mississippi.¹¹ People from all over flocked to see the music for themselves.

When fans actually came to the Delta, however, they found the blues circuit difficult to navigate. Performances and sites were hard to find. Researching a John Lee Hooker biography in the early 1990s, writer Charles Murray noticed that the Delta lacked a doorway into the blues world. Visiting Clarksdale, Mississippi Murray observed, “as I discovered...there was little or no official acknowledgement of the only reason why anyone would want to visit Clarksdale: the town’s towering blues legacy.” Murray added that “tourists unaware of local guides versed in blues lore would find little more than a tiny, isolated southern town. There was no access point.”¹² Murray, among others throughout the Delta, began noticing the potential for an improved and profitable industry. “Slowly, everything in the south happens slowly,” he continued, “things are changing...they have realized that there’s more to their pop-cultural heritage than the Elvis industry.”¹³ The market for a new economy, a new identity had arrived. The King Biscuit Blues Festival for instance, begun in 1986, had an initial attendance of about 15,000 people. By 1994 the same festival had attracted over 80,000.¹⁴ The industry just needed reigning and reorganizing. “Blues music might have conquered the world, but it was born of poverty in the sharecropper shacks of the Mississippi Delta. And the Delta stayed poor,” asserted the *Guardian*, “Now the area is learning to profit from its heritage.”¹⁵ This is Indianola’s story within that industry.

Since 1989, Indianola's blues tourism industry developed many goals. The first and most obvious was economic. Tourism is, after all, an economic institution in its base form. Blues attract tourists. They pay to attend festivals, sponsors pay to advertise, vendors pay to sell merchandise, and hopefully tourists will patronize local businesses during their stay. Those behind the industry set their sights much higher than economic stimulation, however. For many, Delta blues tourism reflects regional progress on a different level: namely race. Most simply, blues preservation shows an appreciation for black culture. Developers argue the industry represents a step away from a racist past and instead a stride towards racial reconciliation. With the arrival of the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, many added that blues preservation would also improve local education. Chronic poverty, defacto segregation, and poor education are all legacies that Delta society inherited from an oppressive past. Economics, race, and education constitute the "Big Three" social inhibitors within the Delta, and the blues industry aims to improve all three. To address these problems and to change the negative image much of the country cast upon the region, Deltans are fighting the blues with blues.

Any Delta tourist who stumbles into Indianola may quench his or her blues thirst in a number of ways. They may attend blues festivals, enjoy an evening at one of several blues cafes and bars, or stay in a blues hotel. In Indianola anyone can see, eat, drink, and sleep the blues. A tourist's ability to *experience* the blues was recently added to that list. With the opening of the B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, Indianola blues became interactive. Is this all merely an economic scheme? Is the industry seeking to tap into a renewed fondness of the genre worldwide? Or are Deltans also using blues tourism to promote a positive Delta identity in the wake of enduring social problems and

outside criticisms? Do different players within the industry have different agendas? The answer is all of the above.

B. B. King: the Foundation of Indianola Blues Tourism

Almost every Delta town participating in the blues industry has its own claim to fame. B. B. King became Indianola's selling point, and his life story made him a valuable asset for the community. A sharecropper during his early years, King shared a life with many Delta blacks. Earning seventy-five cents a day chopping cotton and thirty-five cents per hundred pounds picking it, he experienced a life other sharecroppers described as monotonous and backbreaking. King recalls those years in a positive tone, however. "But don't get me wrong, that was a lot of money in those days," King remembers, "I loved my work and I loved my life."¹⁶ When agrarian mechanization swept the Delta, King was among the few who retained employment as a tractor operator. Deciding to pursue a music career, B. B. King moved to Memphis in 1948. His life forever changed, and his career inadvertently altered Indianola's history decades later.

B. B. King has won multiple Grammys, toured worldwide, was dubbed international ambassador of the blues, and Rolling Stones magazine named King the third best guitar player in history. King guest-starred in such films as *Amazon Women on the Moon*, *Spies Like Us*, and the television show *Sanford and Son*. He appeared in commercials alongside McDonald's Big Macs and Burger King's Whoppers. Diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, however, King abandoned fast food and became a spokesperson for One Touch Blood Glucose Monitoring Systems.¹⁷

In 2002 then Mississippi Governor Ronnie Musgrove proclaimed that Mississippians should celebrate May 31st as B. B. King Day. The Mississippi State

House and Senate officially ratified B. B. King Day in 2005, but moved the date to the middle of black history month: February 15. The legislature decreed that “No matter where he appears in the world, B. B. King is a proud ambassador of his home state, and Mississippi is even prouder of this native son.”¹⁸ His popularity continued to spread. On the eve of King’s performance in Erie, Pennsylvania, Mayor Joseph E. Sumot proclaimed March 14 as its own B. B. King Day. Portland, Maine Mayor Edward Suslovic issued the same declaration for his city less than a week later.¹⁹

Before reaching stardom, however, America’s race question influenced King’s career early on. Like most blues musicians before the 1960s, King toured along the Chitlin’ Circuit: a national route which guided black performers through “negro-friendly” locations.²⁰ As a budding musician, King asserted that “We don’t play for white people.... I’m not saying we won’t play for whites, because I don’t know what the future holds. Records are funny. You aim them for the colored market, then suddenly the white folks like them, then wham, you’ve got whites at your dances.”²¹ His audience changed as the country transformed. King played his first integrated concert in 1968 at San Francisco’s Fillmore West. His listeners became whiter ever since. In a more recent interview, he claimed “I’m trying to get people to see that we are our brother’s keeper. Red, white, black, brown or yellow, rich or poor, we all have the blues.”²² Racial progression proceeded much slower in Indianola, however. Facing racial crises, community leaders began to notice King’s increasing popularity by the 1980s. In 1988 his performance of the hit “When Love Comes to Town” with political band U2 thrust King into the mainstream. Indianola hosted its first official B. B. King Homecoming in 1989, the year marking Indianola’s 100th birthday. The festival headlined the centennial celebration.

B. B. King's life is a perfect rags to riches story. King's experience is a lesson of uplift and progress from a lowly sharecropper to a world renowned musician, one loved by blacks and whites everywhere. Indianola has used his life to not only address its own fiscal predicament, but to also create a new identity characterized by its own success story. This rags to riches tale is not only monetary, however, but social. "By preserving and sharing the lifetime accomplishments and values of King," remarks Oxford, Mississippi writer Darlene Copp, "it is the [B. B. King] museum's mission to enrich and empower the lives of young people and to unite and heal all people through music, art and education."²³ Through blues tourism, Indianola leaders hoped to show a transition from a community once grappled by a racist past to an Indianola now pursuing a progressive future.

The B. B. King Homecoming Festival

The 1989 Homecoming Festival was not B. B. King's first concert in Indianola. He had actually held yearly performances in Indianola since 1968. Local citizenry had recognized Indianola blues heritage, particularly from a grassroots level, before it became a tourist commodity. Childhood friends and associates as well as local fans persuaded B. B. King to return and perform annually. B. B. King and his band, several locals remember, played in a field atop an old flatbed trailer. The audience consisted of a relatively small, mostly local crowd. They remember being right up front, handing mosquito repellent to King and his ensemble as they played in the summer heat. King dedicated his annual concerts to the remembrance of Medgar Evers and the fact that he gave his life for civil rights (and especially since his murderer was still free). The band's tradition, one that continues to this day, was playing the outdoor event then moving to

Club Ebony: Indianola's historic black club. Here King performed for an almost all black audience.²⁴ King's homecoming changed as blues tourism expanded, however.

Demand for the blues exploded by the end of the 1980s. King's humble, low-key performance no longer sufficed, therefore. King had become an international icon. Selling out stadiums abroad and again climbing R&B charts in America, his life and success made him a valuable commodity for Indianola. The community transformed as a result.

The Indianola Chamber of Commerce relocated B. B. King's annual concert from an isolated field to an open park closer to the town's center. Cutting the performance's connection to the remembrance of Medgar Egan's murder, since his killer was finally convicted anyway, planners dubbed the event the B. B. King Homecoming Festival in 1989. They moved the festival near Indianola's railroad tracks, which historically represented the community's racial dividing line. Finding evidence explaining why officials chose this particular site is difficult, but it was possibly an effort to ease racial tension.

As aforementioned, the 1989 Homecoming Festival represented the climax of Indianola's centennial commemoration. This was also a period of tense race relations. The superintendent crisis, Delta Pride's unionization, and Concerned Citizens' was no doubt still occupying people's minds. The black workers' movement to strike and boycott Delta Pride was just around the corner. The centennial planning committee thus had its own racial problems. Like the Bi-Racial Committee a few years before, the centennial committee consisted of black and white members. The original location for Indianola's 100th anniversary festival was Legion Field. Formerly a World War II POW camp, Legion Field is now a football stadium positioned within the center of the white

community. Though a public facility, only Indianola Academy's white football and track teams have ever been allowed to use it (which is still true today). An all black junior high school stands adjacent to Legion Field, but its football team had to use Gentry High School's facilities on the other side of town. Black members of the planning committee protested to the location's choice. Trying to justify using Legion Field, white members pointed to the fact that King's festival was held near the black side of town.²⁵

The new site would hopefully as a kind of connector between blacks living south of the tracks and whites to the north. Before the first homecoming concert, B. B. King told local reporters, "It's something I've wanted to do for a long time...I hope all the children, black and white, can come out and boogie down."²⁶ The audience, previously a small contingent of mostly local residents, now consisted of thousands from around the Delta, the country, and the world.²⁷ "It helps heal some hurt," King remarked about the Homecoming. "It helps to see thousands of little black and white kids playing together, to see the big crowds so happy to hear blues that feels good to everyone."²⁸ The festival transformed.

King and his troupe now performed upon a giant erected stage. Hundreds of lights lined its rafters and flanks to liven up the performance. An expensive and lengthy fireworks show brought the evening to a close. After 1989 the B. B. Homecoming Festival became more publicized and commercialized. As the crowd increased over its first few years, the Indianola Chamber of Commerce began charging an attendance fee (though King insisted children still get in free). The stage stood at the south end of the park; the gate rested to the north. Vendors now blanketed the park's perimeter. People had access to food, souvenirs, and dozens at a time scurried to the *Bud Light* tents. Advertisements blanketed not only the festival, but the entire town. *Coca-Cola*,

Budweiser, and *McDonald's* signs were everywhere (before one year's performance, B. B. even filmed a *McDonald's* commercial in a tent located within the park). Coming into town at least a week before festival time, tourists witnessed a corporate sponsored blues fever. Largely born out of an oppressive social environment, Delta blues was now ironically being tapped for its potential as a tourist commodity as well as a new face for Indianola. Mississippi Delta blues music, once brought to its listeners via the back-roads, store porches, and juke joints of a socially unequal region, was now being, as one advertisement put it, "brought to you in part by *Bartles and James* wine coolers."²⁹

The actual festival crowd can be divided into two general categories: the listeners and the socialites. About half of the audience brings its lawn chairs or blankets and gathers in front of the stage as the festival's listeners. King always reserves the section immediately in front of the platform for kids. The listener portion of the crowd consists of both blacks and whites. Though not segregated they typically form small, separated groups within this area. The socialites represent the rest, roughly half of the event's audience. Mainly consisting of white locals, this demographic remains on the north end of the park. Constantly moving, but never venturing far from the beer vendors, the socialites seem to attend the event primarily for the social occasion rather than for the blues.

Throughout the 1990s, the concert proceeded in much the same way. King came on stage after sundown, played a token concert of rarely more than three or four songs, then invited the children on stage for a "dance off." After the public performance, King and his band relocated to Club Ebony on the "black" side of town. Here King played his real concert. By the 1990s access into Club Ebony on festival night became more and more expensive. Costing about fifty dollars during the decade, it presently costs almost

one hundred dollars to get in during festival night. The bar crowd also became whiter and whiter. To fit more ticket buyers, tables and chairs began filling the entire bar, eventually overtaking the dance floor. Photos of King performing Club Ebony during the 1980s show a majority black audience. Today it is almost entirely white.³⁰

For most of the 1990s, Indianola blues tourism primarily rested upon the Homecoming Festival. Aside from the annual concert, however, Indianola officials also decided to give the town a bluesy look year round. Welcome signs previously depicting Indianola as an up and coming industrial community, were removed. In their place rose welcome signs boasting Indianola as the “Home of Blues Legend B. B. King.” Behind the text rested an enormous picture of the legend himself. In a downtown revitalization project, Indianola officials refurbished the street corner King played on as a younger man. An artist was hired out of Jackson, Mississippi to paint a gigantic mural of King in the downtown’s central area. A Holiday Inn located on Highway 82, which runs east and west through Indianola, changed its name to the Blues Traveler Inn.³¹ All of these measures were meant to immerse Indianola within blues culture. They intended to enhance its economy as well as its image towards visiting outsiders. It was not working, however.

The revenues attained from this industry thus far had little to no effect on Indianola’s annual budget. The evidence suggests that the industry since 1989 had not improved Indianola’s economy much during the following decade. It failed to boost the local economy because it failed to provide a substantial source of sustainable economic growth. Poverty rates decreased during the 1990s, but that was more likely attributable to America’s recovery from recession nationwide.³² So long as the Indianola blues industry hindered on the B. B. King Homecoming Festival every June, an influx of tourists

occurred only one weekend out of the year. Additionally, writer Clyde Woods observed that “this institutionalization process” failed to gather “systematic input from African Americans and with little concern for their historic and current development agendas.” He claimed events like the Homecoming Festival “give blues the blues” because they failed to incorporate local blacks, who not only represented the local majority but whose cultural heritage the festival meant to represent.³³

Blues tourism was not benefiting the surrounding population in terms of jobs or capital distribution. Chronic poverty subsisted by 2000. Indianola’s blacks and whites still lived in two separate communities. Indianola’s education programs continued to rank among the lowest in the country. The industry did not attract a substantial influx of new residents because the region remained too depressed in terms of economic opportunity. It did not attract other industry because of Indianola’s past industrial track record due to a skill deprived workforce. Though noticing the appeal of its new blues industry, media around the country continued to criticize the Delta’s social shortcomings.³⁴ Approaching the year 2000, however, its blues industry further evolved under the influence of outside entities.

Blues tourism around the Delta continued to thrive and expand by the year 2000. New festivals popped up almost every year. New blues museums either arrived or their plans were in the making. More tourists from around the world flocked to the Delta. In a region still suffering from a poor economy, de facto segregation, deprived education, and an overall bad reputation, state and federal bodies still saw potential in this new industry.

In the Year 2000: Revisiting the LMDDC

Another conglomerate of government organizations came together in 2000 as the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). Faced with ensuing economic, racial, and educational problems, the DRA developed a multi-pronged strategy to meet them. Spearheaded by then President Bill Clinton, the DRA molded its plan after a similar government intervention in the Appalachian region. Like the LMDDC, DRA officials still recognized blues tourism as one of many channels through which to accomplish social progress. In 2000 they met to discuss the successes and failures of the previous decade.

In 1989 Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton submitted the Interim Report of the LMDDC to President George Bush. Clinton admitted that Delta citizens “are the least prepared to participate in and to contribute to the nation’s effort to succeed in the world economy.”³⁵ Governor Clinton submitted the LMDDC’s final report in 1990. Bearing the title *The Delta Initiatives: Realizing the Dream—Fulfilling the Potential*, the report suggested a “10 year regional economic development plan.”³⁶ Clinton, now as president, revisited the issue in 2000. Entitled *The Mississippi Delta: Beyond 2000*, all levels of government met to discuss the region's successes and remaining challenges a decade after the LMDDC study.

Like the LMDDC, the 2000 economic development coalition addressed a wide range of issues: economics, health care, education, race, and regional identity. “Historically,” the report acknowledged, “the melancholy legacy of racial discrimination has posed one of the most formidable barriers to the Delta’s progress.”³⁷ Blacks represent the majority within the Delta counties of Mississippi. Over fifty percent of rural Delta blacks still lived in poverty by 2000.³⁸ Authors of the 2000 initiative realized that despite progresses, “the measures of prosperity and opportunity are depressing for

this large section of the Delta's people."³⁹ Citing Martin Luther King, Jr., Clinton emphasized that this new economic commission would further "ameliorate race divisions...Mississippi and other areas of the region have advanced beyond the racial oppression of those troubled times, yet the Delta still faces a long journey before it reaches King's vision of racial justice."⁴⁰ To continue turning the region in the right direction, Clinton and others proposed the creation of a permanent Delta organization: the Delta Regional Authority. The DRA set its sights on a number of goals, and the promotion of cultural tourism became a major agenda. The 2000 Delta commission influenced the creation of a Delta blues network. In Indianola, this blues industry became the epitome of the community's claim to social progress.

Though blues tourism had expanded since 1990, it required additional organizing. The *Mississippi Delta: Beyond 2000* campaign followed the recommendations of the LMDDC study. The LMDDC set the stage for the industry's development. Researchers presented the *Mississippi Delta Region Heritage Study* to Congress in 1998 "as an initial analysis of the Delta's cultural, natural, and recreational resources."⁴¹ Assessing the region's cultural worth, the commission wanted to expand the regional tourist industry with the help of all government levels. The *Heritage Study* became the "foundation from which the federal, state, local and private partners [could] make decisions regarding promotion of cultural preservation and tourism in the Delta in the next century."⁴² The *Beyond 2000* initiative suggested the creation of a "regional tourism-marketing plan" which would combine local and state agencies.⁴³

Linking chambers of commerce, local tourism bureaus, and state agencies, blues tourism would become an organized, networked industry. Aside from the potential economic benefits, government officials also stipulated that the industry could continue

improving the region's identity. "This would not only be an efficient means of promoting the region's tourist assets," observed Deputy Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy Albert C. Eisenberg, "but it would also enhance the region's profile in this country and abroad."⁴⁴ After the culmination of the *Beyond 2000* study, the Delta blues tourism industry again transformed.

Delta blues tourism became an organized network after 2000. The transformation of the industry fell into the hands of already existing nonprofit organizations and new government agencies. The Blues Foundation operated out of Memphis, Tennessee since 1980. Founded as a charity association, the Blues Foundation boasted that it remained "the world's foremost organization dedicated to Blues music, culture, history, and education. Through its signature events and network of professionals...it is the center of the Blues world."⁴⁵ With about 1,500 members around the globe, the Blues Foundation became an "umbrella organization" to some one hundred fifty Blues societies after 2000.⁴⁶ Many of these Blues Societies sprouted throughout the Delta. The Mississippi Delta Blues Society of Indianola was founded in 2003.

In November, 2003 a group of self-proclaimed Indianola Blues enthusiasts created the Blues Society of Indianola.⁴⁷ Mostly upper class whites, original founders included members of the McPherson, Gresham, and Webb families. These families, which share a long history in Indianola, have remained firmly connected either through marriage or business interests. They are heavily invested in the whole Delta region. The Greshams, for instance, operate Gresham Petroleum. The company manages the majority of the Delta's gasoline imports. The Gresham family also owns and operates a chain of Double Quick gas stations. With four stores in Indianola alone, the Double Quick's "We Keep You Movin'" slogan dots almost every Mississippi Delta county.⁴⁸ During the

superintendent crisis of 1986, Double Quick franchises were prime targets because of the families' past connections to the Citizens' Council.⁴⁹ These families have thus pushed the expansion of Indianola's blues industry from the start. They all have reputation and financial stakes in the future successes and failures of Delta society. All three families represent some of Indianola's most influential community leaders. The Homecoming Festival, Indianola's downtown revitalization project, plans for a B. B. King Museum, and the new Blues Society were all heavily influenced and managed by this family coalition. The Blues Society of Indianola, overseen by Janet McPherson Webb, set a number of goals.⁵⁰

Located in an area thriving with cultural heritage, a rich blues history, and blues artists, the Indianola Society claimed it had "found much meaning. Nurturing this art form and honoring the stories along with the storytellers has been very important to the members of this organization."⁵¹ The Blues Society of Indianola (BSI), a nonprofit organization, took its place within the network of similar institutions. The BSI asserted that Delta blues music was an "indigenous American cultural expression."⁵² Blues is an art form with which all Deltans and Americans can and should relate to, the BSI observes. It is the BSI's goal to "preserve, cultivate, nurture, and promote" this old but rediscovered piece of Delta heritage.⁵³

The BSI set out to promote local artists and attract visitors with blues events aimed at the "public benefit and enjoyment."⁵⁴ Members of the Society pushed the reorganized industry hard, attempting to "increase awareness of and appreciation for the blues through collaborative educational efforts."⁵⁵ Indianola blues tourism was now part of a much larger Delta network. The BSI created a "forum for exchange of blues news and events within a network of blues enthusiasts...[and] innovative blues-related

partnerships.”⁵⁶ Indianola elites, joining others around the Delta, were using the blues to promote a new regional identity based on a better economy, better education, and cultural preservation. The state government joined their ranks.

Promoting a better image of Mississippi statewide, in 2004 the Mississippi Blues Commission asserted that “The Blues and Mississippi are synonymous to music lovers. We invite you to experience the land and the people who gave birth to modern American music—Mississippi, the birthplace of the Blues.”⁵⁷ Proceedings for the development of a Mississippi Blues Commission began in 2003. The Mississippi Blues Commission (MBC) is comprised of eighteen Commissioners. Each is chosen based on varying “geographical/political regions supporting Blues initiatives throughout the state.”⁵⁸ The MBC gives the Governor power to appoint its chair, and Bill McPherson of Indianola was selected as the Commission’s first and current Chairman.⁵⁹

The MBC also created the Mississippi Blues Foundation. Represented by a board of directors appointed among the state’s community leaders, the Foundation is the Commission’s support group. Their purpose “is to spearhead efforts to identify and secure sources of financial and programmatic support for the work of the Mississippi Blues Commission.”⁶⁰ Janet McPherson Webb represents Indianola on the Foundation’s board of directors.⁶¹ In collaboration with the Mississippi Blues Foundation, the State Legislature gave the MBC a number of charges.

Decreeing that the “Commission will develop a plan to promote authentic Mississippi Blues music and Blues culture for purposes of economic development,” the State Senate officially ratified the MBC in 2004 via Senate Bill 2082.⁶² Within its mission statement, the MBC engineered a plan to “inventory the state’s Blues assets” for

the formation of a Mississippi Blues Trail (MBT).⁶³ With the MBT, the Commission's goal is to "foster an appreciation of the Blues and the culture that created it."⁶⁴

The MBT represented the Commission's initial project. In a three phase funding initiative, the MBT will place over one hundred twenty historical Blues markers throughout the state. Phase one secured monies from the National Endowment for the Arts. The second and third phases received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, AT&T, the Mississippi Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, the Mississippi Development Authority, and local communities.⁶⁵ Funding flows from every conceivable source, including the Commission's campaign to sell MBT license plates.⁶⁶

In addition to the MBT, the State Legislature also gave the Commission the task of "creating and implementing a marketing plan which shall be designed to attract tourists, conferences, music performances, filmmakers, and others for the purpose of economic development of all geographic areas of the state."⁶⁷ To ensure the Commission's future success, the State House and Senate are considering the creation of a "permanent Mississippi Office of the Blues as an agency of state government."⁶⁸ The state's push for a new identity took the form of a legal government branch. It is no coincidence that the Commission concentrated its primary interests where the state hurt the most: the Mississippi Delta. This is the region, reiterating Anthropologist Stanly Hyland, which is fighting the hardest "to redefine its image and redirect its future."⁶⁹ In Indianola this struggle was ever present. Community leaders therefore decided to take its blues industry to yet another level. In addition to the creation of a Blues Society and their involvement with the new MBC, Indianola's elite upped the ante. Talks of a B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center began after 2000.

The B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center

Indianola's pursuit of a new, progressive identity peaked with the development of a museum honoring B. B. King. Around 2000, Indianola community leaders began the structure's initial planning. As previously suggested, the rags to riches story of B. B. King's life represented the blueprint for this new image. A museum news bulletin stated that "The B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center is all about the Mississippi Blues – a grand celebration of our rich cultural heritage. B. B. King's life story is a lesson of pursuing a dream, and making it happen, in one of America's most impoverished places, the Mississippi Delta. He had little but the dream in his heart and a destiny that would take him around the world."⁷⁰ Another post observed that "B. B.'s story is the American dream: Born among the poorest of the poor in a sharecropper's shack...B. B. grew into not only the best known bluesman of his time but became a business empire of his own."⁷¹ The museum's board of directors said "the life of B. B. King provides the backdrop...to share the rich cultural heritage of the Mississippi Delta...[The Museum] celebrates Delta blues music heritage and the local culture...and enriches the lives of Delta youth and all who visit the museum campus."⁷² The list goes on. B. B. King's life is Indianola's blues industry as well as its source for progress.

Exchanging ideas for the museum, elites from both the black and white communities formed a biracial planning committee. White community leader Bill McPherson and black attorney Carver Randall represented two major players. If they were going to see the museum through, they quickly realized they needed more of one thing: money.⁷³ They found investments everywhere.

Initially believing the museum would cost about ten million dollars, estimates quickly rose after 2003. In the end the B. B. King Museum cost nearly twenty million

dollars to construct.⁷⁴ In collaboration with local, state, and federal authorities, museum planners received appropriations from every imaginable source. A 2.5 million dollar challenge grant represented the bulk of the initial funding. Lead gifts from Indianola accumulated to 1.5 million dollars in donations.⁷⁵ Bill McPherson, the museum's president, claimed that additional finances were provided by "all levels of government."⁷⁶ That support included a two percent raise on all Indianola bar and restaurant taxes, which was implemented by the Indianola City Council as well as other Delta communities. The tax increase raised an undisclosed amount but it is believed to be in the several millions.⁷⁷

The Delta Regional Authority contributed 256,000 dollars. The Economic Development Administration donated one million dollars. In 2007 AT&T allocated 500,000 dollars to the museum's cause.⁷⁸ At the Hollywood Café in Robinsonville, Mississippi, B. B. King and Governor Haley Barbour accepted a 500,000 dollar check from AT&T Mississippi President Mayo Flynt. "AT&T believes in the vision of the B. B. Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, and we're proud to be a supporter," claimed Flynt. "This museum will honor the life work of B. B. King, celebrate and preserve the Delta blues, impact the lives of young people, attract visitors to Mississippi, and promote a better quality of life for all."⁷⁹ B. B. King himself said, "It thrills me so to know that my home state is behind this museum. I am honored and humbled that AT&T has chosen to show their support for this cause. I am so grateful to them."⁸⁰ Governor Barbour remarked that "Mississippi is the birthplace of America's music and it all started with blues in the Delta. AT&T's significant gift will have a sizable impact on the museum, the Delta region, and help preserve Mississippi's unique and world-renowned cultural heritage."⁸¹ Not to be forgotten, the museum's educational hub was aptly named the AT&T Learning Center.⁸² Many public and private donors invested millions into the

expansion of Indianola blues tourism. Representing more than just economic stimulation, the idea of blues tourism was becoming more synonymous with social progress.

Many local leaders argued that this new museum would create necessary social change. As stated before, blues became the medium through which many Deltans addressed the region's primary inhibitors. Museum President Bill McPherson revealed the importance that Indianola placed upon the blues industry. In an interview he asserted that "this new museum will serve not only to honor B. B. King, but also as a catalyst for racial reconciliation, educational opportunity, and economic development through cultural heritage tourism."⁸³ Attorney and Museum Board of Directors member Carver Randall observed, "This museum will be an asset that will reflect positively on all the good things going on in Mississippi today. I know that it has already had a positive effect on Indianola by bringing the community together."⁸⁴ The rhetoric suggests a conscious awareness of Indianola's continuing social dilemmas, lingering predicaments linked to an oppressive and discriminatory past. Problems regarding race, education, and economics became the primary targets of the Indianola cultural tourism industry. More than an attempt to address fiscal difficulties, Delta blues had been called upon to show the world a changing Indianola: a community leaving behind a past which ironically created blues in the first place, nearly a century ago.

An old cotton gin located near downtown Indianola was chosen as the museum site. Visiting the location before construction started, B. B. King recalled that he had worked in the gin as a young man. That confirmed the location's importance.⁸⁵ The museum's board of directors spared no expense on the structure's quality, and only the most qualified were chosen to run it. C. Sade Turnipseed became the B. B. King Museum's Director of Education and Community Outreach. A native of California,

Turnipseed is the founder of the Young Publisher's Global Network, an award winning producer, and representative to the Pan African Film Festival. She holds multiple degrees in communication, business management, and marketing. Heavily involved with the African American community, she has dedicated much of her work to the art of developing cultural literacy and understanding. She even once pushed for the creation of integrated charter schools in the Delta.⁸⁶

In an article published in multiple periodicals, Turnipseed affirmed that "Steeped deep in the sweat-soaked, tear-drenched soils of the of the Mississippi Delta cotton fields are the moans, groans, field hollers and sounds that came to be blues music."⁸⁷ Promoting the museum, she emphasized the influence King's life could have on Indianola. "B. B. King's life is a continuous and winding route of musical successes," Turnipseed wrote. "The entire museum is designed to be a Delta immersion experience. Using B. B. King's life as the framework, thousands of artifacts, old photos and film footage help tell not only the wonderful story of B. B. King, but of this treasured form of music and the rich culture of the place he calls home."⁸⁸ The museum opened in September, 2008. Celebrities such as John Mayer presided over the event's entertainment. The museum is impressive.

The B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center is comprised of "20,000 square-feet of exhibitions and educational programs designed to preserve the legacy of B. B. King, explore the rich cultural legacy of the Mississippi Delta, and promote pride, hope, and understanding."⁸⁹ The technology and quality of its exhibits have been compared to the Smithsonian. It has also been called "the most elaborate museum in the U. S. about a single living musician."⁹⁰ In a two to three hour tour, the visitor experiences countless interactive exhibits which explore the Delta's history.

The B. B. King Museum takes visitors through the sights and sounds of the Mississippi Delta from the 1930s onward. Next the exhibits send them on a journey through B. B. King's life. More than just a story of King, the museum also tells the story of America's transformation. Tourists bear witness to King's gradual rise from a poor sharecropper to eventual stardom. Artifacts, photos, videos, and recordings simultaneously illuminate the great changes America underwent during the 50s, 60s, and 70s. The museum shows a country in transition, and how its transformation influenced King's becoming an international icon. Changing economics, reforms in the music industry, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, and an overall evolving America are presented here via the best technology museums have to offer.

The tour comes to a close in a small theater. The film is a series of interviews. Some of the world's greatest celebrities discuss how B. B. influenced their careers, how his life represents the epitome of success against all the odds. That is the story Indianola leaders desire for their community.

In many respects, the B. B. King Museum draws an image of success. It acknowledges a difficult history, a racist past, and how the country overcame such obstacles in the name of a progressive future. King's life story fits perfectly upon that backdrop. Indianola leaders, black and white, want the same story for their community. Every motivation behind the museum's creation was propelled by a need to show the world such a new identity. Edward Ayers suggests that "The South plays a key role in the nation's self-image: the role of evil tendencies overcome, of mistakes atoned for, of progress yet to be made."⁹¹ Indianola has immersed itself within such an image through its blues industry.

There have no doubt been progresses in the Delta over the decades. Blues tourism and the B. B. King Museum do have many positives. The music's history and heritage should be preserved. It does provide some services to the community. It keeps the music alive and well. Blues tourism brings some revenue into Delta communities. Many behind the museum's operation have greatly dedicated themselves to its success. There is still so much more to accomplish, however.

The Delta must not underestimate its current condition. Things are bad. Chronic poverty is rampant. Schools remain largely segregated. Whole towns continue to wither away. The Delta people should celebrate their successes, but they should also be humbled by contemporary problems. Nor should they forget how connected these problems remain to that history many are trying to leave in the past. The authors within *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* fretted that people often shut the door which connects past and present. Civil rights memorials, monuments, or museums accept the reality of past oppression, but they are often quick to distance it from contemporary troubles.⁹²

The Delta suffers from its historical legacies. Bill Luckett, co-owner of a Clarksdale Delta blues club with actor Morgan Freeman, claimed that blues tourism is "far from a boom...[Our] ventures have yet to break even. For the local economy to turn the corner, deep seated cultural problems have to improve. We are going to have to...overcome something for this to become a viable economy in this area. We still have...segregated schools here, and unless Clarksdale pulls the races together...Clarksdale is going to continue to suffer."⁹³ Clarksdale's story is much the same as Indianola's. Much of its history remains unresolved, and this fact influences present conditions. In *The Senator and the Sharecropper*, Chris Meyers Asch denotes the

subsistence of the socially inhibiting “plantation mentality,” even after all the progress the Delta has accomplished.⁹⁴ When beginning the B. B. King Museum tour, the first stop is a fifteen minute or so video. The film is a compilation of interviews. The interviewees, black and white, speak of Indianola as a place rich in culture and a community that is one of the “most racially progressive” in the country. The doorway connecting past and present closed a little further.⁹⁵

Also, to achieve true progress, the entire Delta populace must be mobilized. When developing any community or region, relying too heavily on its “leaders” carries risks. In Indianola those obstacles are very apparent. The Delta was born into a paternalistic society, and that legacy influences the region still. As Indianola elites began fostering new identities, preaching progress via blues for instance, others became apprehensive. Clyde Woods wrote that Delta blacks have always been pitted against the “plantation bloc” in some form or another.⁹⁶ In his work *Development Arrested*, Woods asserts that the blues began as a resistance mechanism to such a bloc. Today, he warns that cultural preservation must occur within the demographic it represents. The notion of “white supremacy tourism,” Woods writes, is just another way in which the community’s white elites control the tide of community progress.⁹⁷ This progress will thus take place as it always had, within the context of patronage. Historian Edward Ayers once observed that “culture is a great resource;” Clyde Woods would agree, but insists that it be represented by the *right* culture.⁹⁸

In 2000 writers from the *Journal of the Community Development Society* conducted a more data driven analysis. Researching community leaders and ordinary citizens in two Delta towns, four social scientists demonstrated the risks of a primarily elite-driven community development campaign. They argue that in a region often

dictated by “an elite patronage approach to economic development and social opportunities,” the community’s diverse needs are not met.⁹⁹ In a place like Indianola, which may be “punctuated by social inequality, attitudes of patronage from a powerful class of community decision-makers may circumvent the individual needs of less powerful groups.”¹⁰⁰ The researchers suggested that a region’s elite retain a natural desire to lead local development. Promoting this economic growth may become self-serving, the authors warned. Local elites have the power to promote “it as a generic community development strategy.”¹⁰¹

With the power to steer the course of development in a town with diverse needs, Indianola’s push for progress could become “a reflection of one group’s hegemony and not symbolic of the incorporation of different groups into the community development process.”¹⁰² Indianola’s white elite dominated the blues industry from the start. They still do. Its leaders supervise the homecoming festival, oversee the local blues society, were heavily involved in the museum’s planning and subsequent operations, and help lead the Mississippi Blues Commission. The B. B. King Museum does have voices from the black community. Class divisions greatly divide Indianola’s black population, however. The late 1980’s catfish industry crises revealed this. Indianola’s poor blacks, who represent one of the town’s largest groups, must be given adequate involvement. If the whole community gives way to what the social researchers called the “monolithic growth machine,” the Delta’s historically patronage-based society will come full circle.¹⁰³

The Museum’s One Year Anniversary

B. B. King’s eighty-third birthday was also his museum’s one year anniversary, and museum directors marked the occasion with a huge celebration. “The thrill is gone at

many attractions across the country as recession-mired tourists stay home,” said Associated Press writer Shelia Byrd, “but in Indianola, a favorite son is packing ‘em in at the B. B. King Museum.”¹⁰⁴ Museum officials were ecstatic about the previous year’s stats. Visitor numbers surpassed initial expectations as 30,000 tourists from over twenty countries and every state in the Union made their way to the museum during its first year.¹⁰⁵ Having recently visited the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum, Kelly and Thomas DeVogt of Australia remarked, “This is equally emotional. The way B. B. King’s life is presented gives incredible context to it all.” Tom Teepen of Atlanta “was especially impressed with the civil rights history which is included in [the] storyline of B. B. King’s 83-years of life.” Chris Cunningham of New Orleans claimed, “It’s just about the best blues museum I’ve ever seen. It’s informative and emotional, and I had a very interesting and educational time being here.”¹⁰⁶ Similar comments were presented by natives of California, Alaska, Hawaii, Illinois, New York, the Netherlands, and England. Word of the museum had certainly spread around the globe.

Directors were also enthusiastic about the positive effects the industry was having on Indianola itself. “I have to tell you that even though it bears my name,” King said, “the museum is as much about the history and culture of the Mississippi Delta as it is about me. People from all over the world are fascinated by this area I’ve called home. My only regret is that we didn’t have anything like this when I was growing up here.”¹⁰⁷ The anniversary event unveiled the museum’s educational branch: the AT&T Learning Center. The Center promises to provide “educational and cultural programming along with character development training...through mentoring programs.”¹⁰⁸ In a town and county with almost half of the population living in poverty, however, community leaders observed that “success is measured in tax collections.”¹⁰⁹ Indianola Mayor Arthur

Marble said that hotel and meal taxes were up about seventeen percent from the previous year. General sales taxes, according to the state Tax Commission, were up about twelve percent. The museum's annual budget, about 820,000 dollars, was met with the help of admission fees, membership dues, and donations.¹¹⁰

Concluding the museum's anniversary report, the USA Today observed that over two thousand Europeans visited the museum during its first year. Mayor Marble announced that he established a relationship with Notodden, Norway Mayor Lise Wilk. The two began proceedings to create a sister-city partnership. Notodden holds its own annual blues festival. A Norwegian delegation visited King's latest Indianola homecoming concert. "She brought some economic development individuals from over there," Marble claimed, "along with a guy who built a throne for the King of the Blues."¹¹¹

Indianola's blues industry is successful in many respects. Visitors from around the world are leaving with a better impression of the community. The town's revenues have increased. Is this enough, however? Will the museum become the catalyst that Indianola leaders claim it to be? Can "success" in the Delta really be "measured in tax collections"? Is Indianola, Mississippi similar to Notodden, Norway? Are Norwegian economic developers fluent in the source of the Delta's problems? Do Deltans understand it themselves?

Build a thousand B. B. King Museums, casinos, or Toyota manufacturing plants in the Delta, and at the end of it all its citizens will still ponder what they are doing wrong. The Delta does not suffer from an economic, educational, or health care crisis. The Delta is arrested by a crisis in conscience. Poverty still ravishes the Delta. But does a lack of opportunity create poverty, or does poverty create a lack of opportunity? In the

Delta it seems to be the latter. Poverty is not only economic, however. It perpetuates itself in many ways. Others have called it a lingering plantation mentality or perhaps political conservatism. The latest Indianola welcome sign invites visitors to the B. B. King Museum so that they may “Experience a Delta Awakening.” That awakening will only occur when all of the Delta’s diverse people become conscious of their true situation and voice their diverse needs. While the catalyst for such an occurrence has yet to be seen, hope should not vanish.

Conclusion: Is the Delta’s Problem also America’s Problem at Large?

In a 1990 Canon commercial, Andre Agassi stylishly looks into the camera, slowly lowers his shades and utters the infamous phrase, “Image, is everything.”¹¹² While the Canon Corporation doubtfully sparked the Delta’s strive for a new image, this slogan certainly fits within the region’s campaign for a new face. Much of the Delta’s history is characterized by social woe. Slavery, sharecropping, exploitative industry, resistance to civil rights, and subsequent socioeconomic tension in a period when the rest of the country reveled in its progress, thrust places like Indianola into a crisis. Unable to shake the legacies of an unwanted past, many Indianola citizens looked to blues as a source for a new regional identity.

New identities do not solve old problems, however. This not only applies to the Delta, but remains true everywhere. In the wake of America’s most recent economic crisis, several corporations were blasted for their shortages and governmental bailout needs. Insurance mogul American International Group, Incorporated (AIG) recorded unprecedented losses requiring an eighty-five billion dollar bailout in September, 2008. American taxpayers, with their total tax burden approaching 185 billion dollars, became

the real victims. Worsening its reputation further, AIG used much of the bailout funds for executive bonuses. The negative consequences of unfettered capitalism were taking their toll. Appearing before a United States House of Representatives subcommittee, then AIG Chief Executive Ed Liddy explained, “I think the AIG name is so thoroughly wounded and disgraced that we’re probably going to have to change it.” Other companies followed a similar strategy.¹¹³

But what’s in a name? Changing a name, or face, or identity does not get to the core of the problem. AIG may change its name, but so long as its policies stay the same, its customers and later the American public in general will only face further disappointment. The promotion, preservation, and celebration of blues heritage may improve the reputation (and the economy a little) of Indianola and the Delta, but its people will continue to suffer if attention is not also given elsewhere. Mississippi has the unfortunate tendency to place its eggs into only a few baskets, whether they are agriculture, casinos, or tourism. In reality many of these “fixes” are simply add-ons. A weak and suffering infrastructure cannot be repaired by only attaching other parts. It must be fixed from within. Reform is key.

The Homecoming Festival, Club Ebony, and the new B. B. King Museum are all fun and exciting. They do a good job preserving the blues and its history, they bring some revenue into the area, and many people behind them do care about the town they are trying to improve. But at the end of the day they are still just festivals and museums. They can only accomplish so much, and the fact that many citizens view the museum as Indianola’s last hope is unfortunate. Other, more practical opportunities still exist.

Indianola needs more success stories like the Sunflower County Freedom Project (SCFP). In 1998 Chris Myers Asch and Shawn Raymond, former Sunflower County

Teach for America participants, decided to give black children a better shot at a future. In collaboration with local families and former teachers, the SCFP held its first summer school in 1999. Eventually locating its headquarters in a decaying strip of Sunflower, Mississippi's downtown area, the SCFP changed people's lives.¹¹⁴

The SCFP takes its inspiration from the 1964 Freedom Summer. The program accepts children from middle school upwards. Families pay an annual fee of three hundred dollars, and the SCFP relies on a 200,000 dollar budget to pay for the rest (much of which comes in the form of outside donations). Initially a summer program, the SCFP became a year-round experience. Students in the curriculum, called Freedom Fellows, are exposed to strengthening of the body and mind.¹¹⁵

They experience intense mental and physical exercises. Aside from sheer academics, they are taught martial arts, take media production classes, writing classes, public speaking, intern with other nonprofit organizations outside of the Delta, and take field trips to such places as Orlando, Washington, or Mexico. They are given a rich sense of the world outside of the Delta, but they are also schooled "by looking deeply at Mississippi history and culture."¹¹⁶ A key player in Mississippi's civil rights movement and member of the SCFP board of advisors, Charles McLaurin observed that "We're rooted in the past but preparing people to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow."¹¹⁷ The SCFP works.

Since its inception, as far as high school graduates and college acceptances go, the SCFP has had a one hundred percent success rate. Graduates left to pursue degrees in Mississippi universities, Louisiana State University, and the University of North Carolina. Currently enrolled students plan to attend Harvard and the University of South Carolina.¹¹⁸ The SCFP is relatively small, for now. With a current enrollment of just

over forty students, the class grows every year. “We’re not just fulfilling our mission,” states Executive Director Greg McCoy. “Now we’re starting to establish a tradition. This is something that works, this is something that will produce results, and it’s something that will allow students to go to college.”¹¹⁹

Through the B. B. King Museum’s AT&T Learning Center, community leaders may genuinely be trying to help Indianola’s “at risk youth,” but the SCFP helps those same children actually become leaders themselves. Every day after their regular school hours (and even on Saturdays), the SCFP’s Freedom Fellows are completely immersed within a transforming experience. With an annual budget of 200,000 dollars, the SCFP accomplishes more in one year than a museum with a budget not only four times greater but that also cost nearly twenty million dollars just to build. Real Delta change and progress must come from within, and all of its people must accomplish the task together. This is not a new idea; many have stressed it for decades. “I am deeply concerned ...about the black community and the white community,” newly appointed Superintendent Robert Merritt said in 1986. “We must become more than aggregates of population. We must become a human community...forces helping each other.”¹²⁰ With more ideas like the Freedom Project which permeate all races on a larger scale, that progress could become a reality.

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