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PREFACE: DISCOVERING MOUND BAYOU

The town is unique. It is all-Negro—and it is all happy.
—Hartwell and Weld in “Mississippi’s Miracle Town”¹

REVELATION

It is hard to imagine that it has been nearly twenty years since I first came across, quite by accident, mind you, the town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi. I remember so vividly the moment I first took it all in: the images, the intrigue, the implausibility of it all.

The initial reference was at hand for all to see, right there in that *alternative* Mississippi middle school history textbook, though I suspect that because of the controversy surrounding the source back then, scant few people had even seen the commentary that Drs. Loewen and Sallis scrawled in the section regarding the 1890 Mississippi Constitutional Convention that read:

Then, with full knowledge of what he was doing, Montgomery voted for the voting restrictions which would keep blacks out of Mississippi politics for the next 70 years.²

The Montgomery in question here was Isaiah Thornton Montgomery, the ambitious son of Benjamin Thornton Montgomery, also an ex-slave who in 1866 would inherit the third largest cotton concern in all of Mississippi while his former master sat in what seemed then to have been a state of near-permanent exile. But long before I came to discover all that, what I knew consisted exclusively of this ill-fated vote preceded by an impassioned

¹ Hartwell, Dickson and Weld, Carol. “Mississippi’s Miracle Town.” *Coronet*. Vol. 35, No. 5. September 1951:125.

² Loewen, James W. and Sallis, W. Charles, Eds. *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*. New York: Pantheon, 1974:186-187.

plea before fellow landowners that in the end brought to bear the final and most official denial of voting rights for the black population of the state that would too leave a fairly hefty number of landless whites disfranchised. As a matter that seemed as improbable as it would seem implausible, I simply had to find out more for myself.

Of course Montgomery's imprudence, as the authors couched it throughout that passage, was never such a cut and dried matter. What happened on that day in 1890 was in hindsight as predictable as it was unfortunate. Montgomery, a black man swimming in a sea of powerful white forces, had little choice. Vote "no" and then refuse to address the assembly that day, and he might as well return immediately to his beloved new home and start packing, as that would have surely doomed the project. By voting "yes" and giving the speech, however, this committed (*Booker T.*) *Washingtonian* might one day find himself excoriated in the history books, but at least his dream of fashioning a black respite in the white-powered Mississippi backwoods would have its fighting chance. This was what it was all about for I.T. Montgomery, at least then, though for me, this was merely the first few baby steps in what has come to be quite an extensive albeit rewarding journey.

To be sure, there have been many wonderful pieces written from various corners both within and without the academy—some emanate from the town, even—that offer a wealth of multi-faceted accounts of the story of Mound Bayou since its initial founding in 1887. Typically, they all contain elements of nigh on the same story: Montgomery, an opportunist extraordinaire from rural Warren County, Mississippi sought to revive his family's withering assets through schemes that took him as far as Kansas and as near as Bolivar County, where through some quite mutually beneficial dealings with the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railroad Company, he would ultimately procure the land that would eventually become Mound Bayou, the once-hallowed *Jewel of the Delta*, the region's first wholly African-American town.³ These narratives would tell stories of the town's celebrated beginnings, of its familial genesis, of its communal atmosphere, its unparalleled relationships with neighboring municipalities, and, yes, even some of the more shameful and certainly unseemly aspects of its history as well. They also tell of

³ See, among others, Hamilton, Kenneth Marvin. *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991:43-45.

schools and hospitals, of great men and women who would reaffirm its purpose and potential and whose stories would too filter out of its diminutive confines and into the mainstream of local, regional, and even statewide renown. Charlie Patton, for instance, the first truly important blues artist from that first generation of known players and the music's most celebrated link to its nascent past, had a home there. Patton was without question a towering figure, a man of immense talent and largesse both decades before that caricature of the defiant if not rambunctious musician would establish itself as the paeon for musical excess.⁴ Still, as integral as Patton's legacy may be, he is not the point of Mound Bayou but rather a symbol of its one-time status as gemstone and as haven and as, to borrow from one of the region's more prolific historians, Janet Sharp Hermann, the beneficiary of a long-ago fashioned dream.⁵

And it is that dream—precisely the evolution of that dream—that serves as the driving force behind this particular study, namely that while this dream may have been realized by a younger generation of Montgomerys near the end of the nineteenth century, the dream itself was really quite older than all of them. And it is that dream, that glimmer of possibility that cascades blithely toward both the past and into the present that links Mound Bayou to a much more fascinating history that transcends its pre-founding at Davis Bend, both before and after emancipation, and through some of its more interesting and even some of its more problematic nature. Yes indeed, it is this prehistory of the Mound Bayou settlement that drives this particular bus—drove it all the way through the mid-Delta on what is today Old Highway 61⁶—past Clarksdale, past Bobo and Alligator, and on into Bolivar County through Duncan, Hushpuckena, Shelby, and Winstonville, and right through the front door of Milburn Crowe's legendary haunt, The Crowe's Nest.

THE VIEW FROM THE CROWE'S NEST

Milburn J. Crowe, the late owner/operator of The Crowe's Nest, was my friend. Mr. Crowe, or Milburn, as he insisted I call him from the start, was a learned man,

⁴ Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982:48-89.

⁵ See Hermann, Janet Sharp. *The Pursuit of a Dream*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

⁶ Actually, it would be the second version of Highway 61, since re-dubbed 161, and replaced by a transnational superhighway destined to someday gain entry into the Eisenhower Interstate System.

pensive and quite passionate, who above all else loved Mound Bayou, its people, and most of all, perhaps, its history. Accordingly, he would be regarded throughout his lifetime as the town's unofficial historian, though near the end of his life, he would have the opportunity to serve his beloved hometown faithfully in a more official capacity as the town's comptroller.



Milburn J. Crowe's Crowe's Nest, 1993 (Author's Photograph)

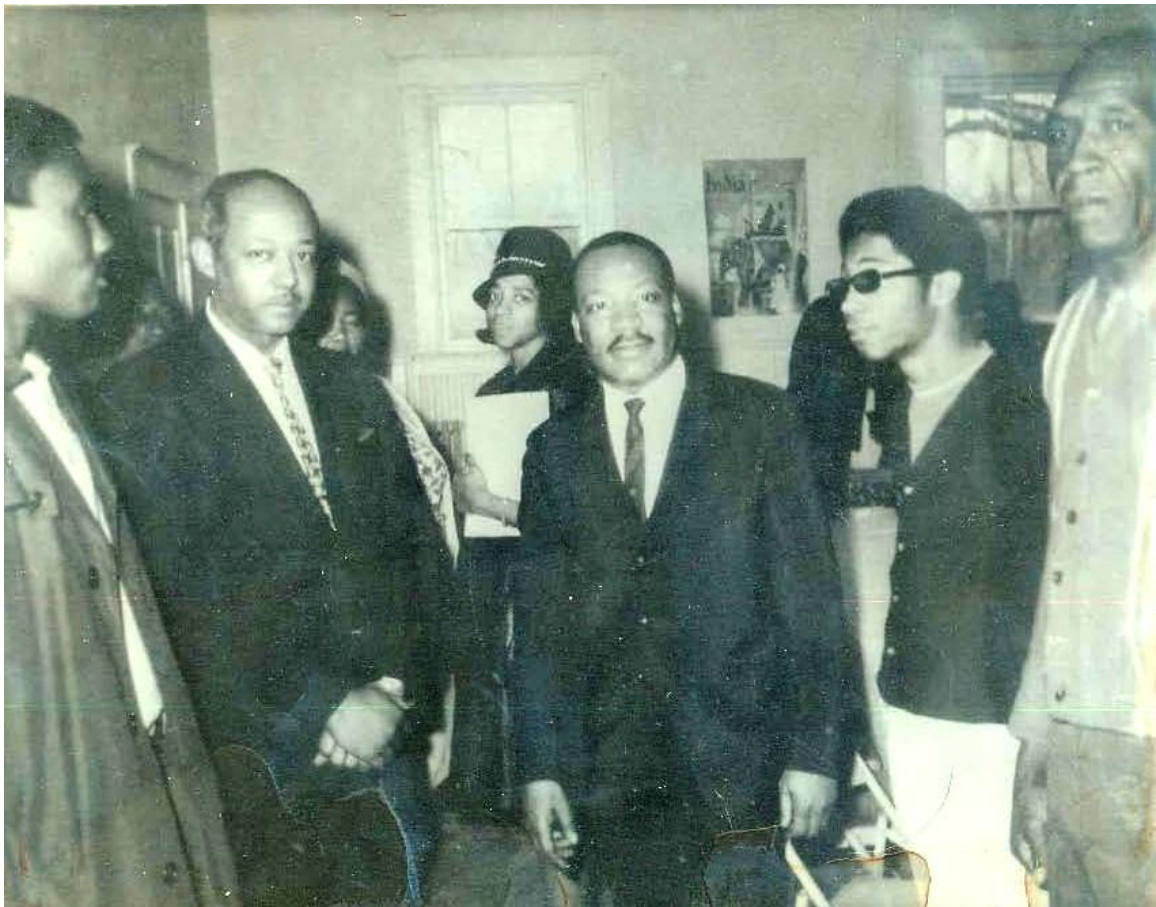
When I first met him, Milburn was also quite troubled by an unfortunate series of political events that had thrown Mound Bayou (he always seemed to pronounce it softly as "Mound Bayah") into a marked degree of political paralysis, a topic of present concern that would make up the bulk of our discussions throughout our time together once he had sufficiently—at least in his mind—brought me up to speed on the past. Indeed, from the outset, he remained visibly delighted to have met yet another visitor to his world, even

one as clueless though as inquisitive as I, and primarily because he so loved to home-school eager initiates.

Nevertheless, the complexity of the events he would describe was captivating and sometimes shocking, and it seemed that every time we would sit and chat, he would find even more innovative means with which to recount details of Mound Bayou's often perplexing past that would offer even newer insights into its present, but it was always that first afternoon that continued to resonate. Over cups of instant coffee, shared between shifts at the counter of his combination restaurant, bar, bus stop, pharmacy, post office, dry goods store, and occasional *juke-joint*, Milburn explained to me in great detail the implications of Loewen and Sallis' depiction of Montgomery and the historical hit that Montgomery took partly as a result of what happened at the 1890 convention. He allowed that regardless of hindsight, those disfranchisement measures were going to pass with or without Montgomery. Thus, by agreeing to serve as the face of planter potency, Montgomery all-but-secured the preliminary success of Mound Bayou if only because Montgomery, as his father had taught him, was willing to exchange a little security for his fledgling community in exchange for his support of a disfranchisement project he clearly could have never stopped under the best of circumstances, which the late 19th century clearly were not. In this regard, Milburn portrayed the ever-ambitious Montgomery as a man desperately trying to take a little something away from what must have been to him a most vile but inevitable enterprise. Regardless, as Milburn would continue, once Montgomery struck his deal, his partners, the townspeople, and he were all at least moderately free to proceed with their town-building initiatives, and they, thus, turned their attention back to the loathsome yet necessary work of trying to make headway into the unforgiving Delta bottomlands.

Milburn always seemed to take great pride in lining out precisely these types of stories regarding those earliest days at Mound Bayou, which marked quite an exciting phase in our exchanges, but it was also during this stage of my journey that I would come across many of those abovementioned works, including the first of two remarkable pieces by Janet Sharp Hermann. Dr. Hermann's chapter on Mound Bayou near the close of her acclaimed *Pursuit of a Dream* was at the time the first extensive contemporary scholarship that sought to explore Mound Bayou's origins through its ties to Davis Bend,

located some twenty miles south of Vicksburg in Warren County, Mississippi, which offered up even newer roads with which to travel. Among the many matters that she would broach throughout was her contention that lying at the root of Davis Bend, and, thus, by extension Mound Bayou, was the remnants of an ideological pairing that linked Davis Bend's architect and family patriarch Joseph E. Davis to the celebrated British philanthropist Robert Owen. In this and her later biography of Davis,⁷ Hermann maintained that the extraordinary ideological framework upon which Davis Bend was built was based in large part on Owen's experimental communities in first New Lanark, Scotland and later in New Harmony, Indiana, which in turn marked a completely different phase in my investigations.



Milburn J. Crowe with Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis Taken by Richard A. Crowe, Circa 1967 (Courtesy Sylvia Crowe Scott)

⁷ Hermann, Janet Sharp. *Joseph E. Davis: Pioneer Patriot*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

EXISTENTIAL NONSENSE

Caught in effect unaware by Hermann's startling assertions, and especially coming on the heels of my growing fascination with all things Mound Bayou, I again proceeded to dig more deeply. Remarkably, as it turned out, Dr. Hermann's assumptions seemed spot on. Davis Bend, though palpably different from Owen's dual ventures, especially when one considers the slavery issue, seemed, nonetheless, to operate on many of the same principles. Specifically, while Owen sought to reinvent nineteenth century life by expanding the experiential base of his labor force through education and similar such culturally-driven programs, Davis' primary interest lay solely in broadening the skill-set of his largely agrarian slave workforce. There was indeed a light there in the middle, and while on the one hand it seemed unlikely that a so-deemed utopia could be cast from the breastplate of a Mississippi plantation community, I came to see in Hermann's base argument what she and apparently many of her sources all seemed to conclude. In this regard, and many of her sources would present this idea similarly, by selectively implementing strict, if not literal, elements of Owen-derived principles, Davis, who unlike Owen was never out to change the world nor even attempt to reform it, for that matter, had stumbled upon a most remarkable system for making Davis Bend, already a juggernaut in Mississippi's cotton economy, that much more profitable. What continued to trouble me, however, was that every time Dr. Hermann came close to drawing a straight line that connected the two men, her source material, while too intimating the very same conclusions, was also never able to add any substantive links that could unequivocally put these two men or even their associates in the same place.

Milburn Crowe was certainly aware of Dr. Hermann's work, which he regarded as interesting yet somewhat troubling. He remembered her, and fondly at that, from those days a decade prior when she spent time in Mound Bayou collecting data and generally soaking up the scenery, but he was also concerned that she could so easily lump together what he maintained were the dissimilar worlds of Owenite New Lanark and Mound Bayou. What troubled him particularly was the part about Owen and his supposed relationship to Davis and, by association, the Montgomerys. In fact, he often referred to

it as “existential nonsense,” which I found quite harsh, but then again, the political situation in Mound Bayou had grown even more turbulent, escalating from accusations of voter fraud to assault and even attempted murder. Obviously, Milburn was in no mood for such academic musings, though in the end, he would be the first to admit his misjudgment when it turned out that for all of Dr. Hermann’s supposed “nonsense,” it would come to pass that she, as well as her sources, had been right all along.

BREAKTHROUGH

In spite of all the political turmoil, much of which Milburn Crowe and his comrades graciously agreed to discuss with me in a series of intriguing interviews conducted in his living room in 1993, it had become even more apparent that while I was enamored with the contemporary Mound Bayou storyline, I was even more awestruck by the Owen-Davis link that presaged Mound Bayou’s founding. More importantly, I simply had to find out once and for all whether Dr. Hermann’s assertions could actually be substantiated beyond a line of supposition that was beginning to look more apocryphal than edifying. I continued to visit the Delta for a few more years, but I was also busy making arrangements to take a more earnest look into the Owenite side of the equation, which included a trip north.

My first stop was at the archive at the University of Illinois library, which houses Owen’s American papers. A few days pouring over the contents of this collection, while interesting, to be sure, was also a rather fruitless exercise in terms of what I had hoped to specifically accomplish.

My next stop was always to have been New Harmony, Indiana. I had assumed all along that since I would be so close anyway, I would venture over to the site of Owen’s American undertaking just over the southern Illinois-Indiana border as part of my general tour of the area. Frustrated by my lack of success in Illinois, I harbored no expectation for anything tangible, but I felt that merely seeing the place and perhaps even having an opportunity to ask a few open-ended questions would at least offer me a physical context upon which I could hang my hat.

By then regarded as something of a charming bedroom community and tourist destination, New Harmony was indeed quite lovely. After a brief drive through to get my bearings, I headed over to the town's one-time centerpiece, The Workingmen's Institute, which remained a public library-like facility. It was here where I met a most remarkable woman, Josephine Elliott, a longtime archivist at the facility who I soon learned was also collecting material for a book that she had been crafting for some time.

After exchanging pleasantries, I warily explained what I was doing there, noticing all the while that look of incredulity to which I was growing more and more accustomed. Despite her obvious doubt, however, she invited me to supper that evening, claiming that while she knew nothing of this "Davis person" in regard to New Harmony, Donald Pitzer, at the time Professor of History and Director of the Center for Communal Studies at the University of Southern Indiana, who was to join us, might.

Indeed, I remember the evening as being quite pleasant. Mrs. Elliott and Dr. Pitzer, while both skeptical of my descriptions of this Owen-Davis link, were both gracious if not attentive hosts. Knowing so little of each other's worlds certainly made our discussions quite challenging at first, but by the end of the evening, I overheard a still unconvinced Dr. Pitzer asking Mrs. Elliott to "have a look," which is how the final twist in this tale comes about.

As it would happen, Mrs. Elliott's book project involved the laborious task of compiling the correspondence between William Maclure, the driving force behind New Harmony's education program, its version of the jewel metaphor, and his protégé/paramour Marie D. Fretageot, a French woman with sub-par English skills who typically assumed the leadership role at New Harmony when Maclure was on the road speaking and fund-raising, two of his more crucial challenges. Now a massive volume,⁸ the book was still far from completion then, which makes what happened next all the more remarkable.

That next morning, while I sipped coffee and contemplated heading back to Mississippi empty-handed, I was startled to find Mrs. Elliott slipping through the doorway of the local café with a sheet of paper in her hand. She was also smiling!

⁸ Elliott, Josephine Mirabella, Ed. *Partnership for Prosperity: The Correspondence of William Maclure and Madame Marie D. Fretageot, 1820-1833*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1994.

Apparently, during one of Maclure's Mexican tours in the summer of 1826, Madame Fretageot dispatched a letter to him that noted amidst the many more pressing matters of the day that she had recently welcomed a "Mr [sic] Davis"⁹ of Natchez, Mississippi to New Harmony for what she claims to have been a rather thorough investigation of the town's educational facilities. Additionally, she noted that this individual was planning to return sometime later with children and other members of his plantation community for a much more hands-on inspection of what Davis contended was his abiding interest in what Maclure and his legions were doing there with the New Harmony workforce, and particularly in terms of education. She would also note in that same letter that Owen himself had spoken at the Fourth of July celebration, which meant that Owen and Davis were indeed in New Harmony together at some point during Davis' stay, which to be sure had become the holy grail of my search.¹⁰

To suggest that we were all astonished is to completely fail to appreciate the sum total of the moment. Until then, this *Davis* person was for them merely another in a fairly long line of indeterminate figures from New Harmony's past, but now he had a context. For me, however, this marked nothing short of an epiphany. For years I had searched for some shard of evidence, some element that could prove beyond a doubt that this alliance was indeed genuine as opposed to implied, and there it stood before me on what had been twenty-four hours prior a nondescript 8½" x 11" sheet of paper. Nevertheless, it was my smoking gun—the tangible confirmation that what appeared from a distance to have been the case, though never properly documented, was indeed the situation.

Energized, I immediately called the ever-skeptical Milburn Crowe, who was amused by my discovery. Next I rung up the history department at UCLA in order to inform a rather indifferent Dr. Hermann, who received the news in a way that only makes sense in hindsight: that someone of whom she had never before heard had found the physical evidence of something that she seemingly long ago dismissed as a foregone conclusion—so much so that she had long since moved on to greener pursuits. Nevertheless, finally freed from the supposition while at the same time utterly invigorated by this extraordinary turn of events, I began to piece it all together, making

⁹ Ibid; 382. See Appendix for an excerpted portion of the letter.

¹⁰ Ibid; 382.

my first public presentation of the Owen-Davis-Montgomery lineage at Dr. Pitzer's urging at the annual Communal Studies Association conference in New Harmony in 1993.

A MOMENT TO REMINISCE

Looking back on these fortuitous if not circuitous twists, I continue to find that the most rewarding aspect of this entire episode, perhaps ironically, was and is that I was able to prove everyone right, which is not something that occurs every day in my line of work. Still, and to be quite clear on this, it was always what I had hoped would happen. Knowing that the connections are there and can be substantiated makes this whole experience all the more fascinating not to mention meaningful.

All these years hence, Mr. Crowe, Mrs. Elliott, and several other key pieces of this puzzle have left us, but at the same time their legacy lives on in this work. Their patience, their kindness, and their understanding is not lost on me these many years hence. They listened when others stopped, they looked when others turned away, and they rolled up their sleeves when others thought it folly. More importantly, they shared with me those guiding principles that continue to inform my still evolving body of work—that the pursuit of fact must triumph over probability and that verity must always trump illusion. At the end of the day, these are the essentials that made this journey so worthwhile. And as such, it is my hope that the reader finds some spark of this delightful crossing lurking within.