



“The Mississippi Delta” by Lewis W. Jones

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This manuscript, a noncirculating original, was found stashed in the back of a file cabinet drawer in the Alan Lomax Archives at Hunter College in New York. The manuscript of 119 typescript pages had a soft powder-blue cover identifying it as a product of, and the property of, the Social Sciences Institute at Fisk University. It has since been returned.

The manuscript is titled “The Mississippi Delta” and the author is given as Lewis W. Jones, though the authorship claim is misleading. The manuscript is actually the culmination of the Coahoma study, the draft unifying the sociological and the musicological perspectives. It is John Work’s long text with an introduction by Lewis Jones. Only the first thirty-two pages are by Jones; the remaining eighty-seven are a verbatim copy of Work’s manuscript. (There are drafts in Work’s hand on microfilm at Fisk confirming his authorship.) It is not clear who assigned sole authorship to Jones. “The Mississippi Delta” did not include Work’s transcriptions or indexes. This document may be what was sent to the Library of Congress in July 1943—and lost, and found, and lost again. Confusion would have resulted from searching for John Work’s manuscript when it had Lewis Jones’s name on it. It may have been picked up by Lomax on his 1948 return to Fisk. In 2001, Robert Gordon rediscovered it in the Alan Lomax Archives while researching his biography of Muddy Waters.

As was discussed in the previously cited July 30, 1943 letter from John Work to Fisk president Thomas Jones, Work focused on musicology, Jones on sociology. Lewis Jones intended to draft a much longer introduction. His outline of his projected work is included as Appendix 4, “Memorandum to Charles S. Johnson from Lewis W. Jones; Folk Culture Study in Coahoma County, Mississippi; August 20, 1942.” His intention was to document three periods of social life in the Delta. Working from the premise that, “the river and the levees are responsible for the economic life of the delta,” Jones designated each generation by its mode of transportation: The River (roughly 1860–1890), The Railroad (1890–1920), and The Highway (1920–1940). Jones was unable to complete his proposed treatment due to service in the armed forces, and the manuscript sent to the Library of Congress contained a survey of the three generations and fuller analysis of only the River generation. His writing is vivid with detail about river and levee camp life, clearing the jungle, and other aspects—secular and religious—of a vanished time, gleaned from

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the memories of those remaining few whom he terms “The Pioneers.” “I been all over here in boats,” says one subject early in Jones’s text. “I can go now and show you places that have cotton and corn on them now where I used to fish.”

The South is often mythologized, and many visitors go there to confirm their assumptions. But Jones was bred in the South—as were Work and Adams—and he is quick to disabuse a reader who may have more exotic expectations. Early in the work, Jones writes about the landscape “which usually disappoints the traveler who had had some vague romantic vision.” Jones is positioning himself against the kinds of romanticized notions associated with visitors like Lomax, and he begins his essay with hard, fast, and concrete details—a geographical tour. Proceeding through ever-smaller divisions of territory, he takes us from the vast region to “an average working community”—Coahoma County. His specific descriptions of work and play enhance the cultural portrait he creates, especially for readers coming decades after the passing of this way of life. Jones’s presentation of the River generation indicates how strong his portraits of the succeeding generations would have been.



The Mississippi Delta

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I

The Delta

Though its Chamber of Commerce advertises Clarksdale, Mississippi, as “the Heart of the Delta,” the Negro citizens of Clarksdale regard the town as one half of a world categorically divided into “The Delta” and “The Hills.” This distinction, for the Negroes, requires no elaboration: “In the Hills” is a matter of fact response to the frequently posed question “Where do you come from?” Clarksdale Negroes, when referring to “The Delta,” have in mind the area between Memphis and Vicksburg along the Mississippi. Outsiders—those who recognize other deltas—distinguish this one as the Yazoo–Mississippi Delta, a region whose boundary wall is one of hills rising from one hundred to three hundred feet above the flood plain of the Yazoo River. The area covered by the Delta is approximately 8,000 square miles of level, low-lying land, taking in eleven entire counties* and a portion of eight others.† The whole is encompassed by the Mississippi River on the west and a run of hills on the east. The effect is that of a vast oval about one hundred and eighty miles long and roughly seventy-five miles wide. This oval is almost exclusively agricultural, yielding one of the richest cotton crops in the United States.

In its natural state the oval was subject to the overflows of the Mississippi. The alluvial deposits of the river gave the soil a reputation for fabulous richness. In 1840 the

*Tunica, Coahoma, Quitman, Bolivar, Sunflower, Washington, Humphreys, Leflore, Sharkey, Issaquena, and Tallahatchie.

†DeSoto, Tate, Panola, Grenada, Carroll, Holmes, Yazoo, and Warren.

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Delta produced 39,000 bales of cotton, and by 1850 it was producing a total of 42,000 bales annually. After small levees had been built, production increased to 136,000 bales in 1860. The population in the region made proportionate growth: in 1860 there were only 6,606 people in Coahoma County; in 1940 the single urban center of the county, Clarksdale, had a population of 12,168. In 1940 there were four other incorporated centers in the county: Friars Point, with a population of 940, Jonestown with 706 inhabitants, Lula with 503, and Lyon with 339. Coahoma County's population in 1940 was nearly 50,000.

The smaller incorporated places are in many instances no more than plantation headquarters. There are, for example, Farrell, Sherard, Rena Lara, Hillhouse, Bobo, Coahoma, Cloverhill, Hopson, and Matteson plantations. Small as they are, these centers are of great importance to the Negroes who live on and near them; they are the sources of food, clothing, and recreation. As social centers these plantations are also the scenes of numerous dramatic incidents, the incidents of the normal working community of the average working man.

An average working community is Coahoma County; the working man in Coahoma County is the farmer; the average farmer, like thousands of his peers, lives in a house close to the cotton fields. These simple folk do most of the work and most of the living; the patterns of their lives are remarkably alike. Indeed, their names and their jobs are their most distinctive possessions—"Jim Smith be my name, what might be your'n? I'm making a crop with Mr. Higgins." Work for all is the code; the women and children chop cotton in the spring, pick it in the fall. Young men drive tractors covering acres that formerly took many men and mules. During the week all are busy traveling between cotton rows with a sack, a hoe, a plow, or a tractor.

On Saturday the people who live and work in the cotton fields fill the streets of the "New World" in Clarksdale, or they mill in and out of the stores in Jonestown, Friars Point, and Lula, or they crowd the commissaries at Hopson, Stovall, Sherard, or one of the other plantations. At night, on Saturday, there may be dancing at Mrs. Baugh's, or Stovall's, or at New Africa. Every Sunday there is a church meeting within walking distance of the houses. There is the Green Grove Church, Mt. Ararat, New Hope, and a score of others in the area. On week days the commissaries, the stores, and the churches are empty and the sidewalks are bare, but there is heavy traffic on Saturday and Sunday—people are walking, or riding in wagons, or driving automobiles of various makes and models. These, then, are the ordinary people, the folk, working and living in the Delta.

The oldest generation of the Delta folk is composed of those who have lived past their seventieth and eightieth birthdays. There are not many and they don't do much work, but they do a lot of living in their memories. They are the people who cleared and settled the Delta. Phineas MacClain, who lives on Sherard's plantation, is a typical example. He doesn't work much now but he does not appreciate the changes that have come—changes requiring so little work from a man "making a crop." "They" are doing

things to him that he can't understand when they "break your land, plant your crop, and plow it and don't turn it over to you 'til it's ready to chop, while you set around doing nothing." When settlement time comes, after his wife and grandchildren have picked the cotton, he finds the costs of cultivation charged against him in the accounting. This seems to him unusual and unnecessary. He feels that if anybody knows about the cultivation of cotton planted in this land, he is the person. He knows all about cotton and all about the land in which it grows.

I been right here since '79. Life then and now like no life at all. There's been changes in the system of living, changes in everything. One thing different now from then—I been all over here in boats. I can go now and show you places that have cotton and corn on them now where I used to fish.

Phineas MacClain thinks the old days were happier than the present ones. He doesn't think much of the levees or of the drainage system; the overflows that came regularly when he was young were, to him, beneficent. He remembers everything that has happened to the land and to the people for a period of sixty years. He remembers the early planters who set out to develop the swampy forests into cotton plantations: the Lombardys, Mr. Sherard, Mr. O'Neil and others of their generation. MacClain worked on the levee under Old Man Dabney, the engineer, and the contractors who built different sections of the levees. His associates were Negroes who built the country and made reputations for themselves by buying land or perhaps by cutting somebody's throat! Some of his contemporaries can join him in recounting stories of Coahoma County when it was on the frontier. Others, as one of the oldest generation expressed it, "don't have their real mind no more." They recall, now and then, that they played "ring games" in the moonlight, singing and cutting capers, but they have forgotten the words or the tunes they sang. They went to the dances but can't remember, as Phineas does, the figures and popular dance tunes. Some of them gambled, but they have forgotten the game-talk and the gamblers' songs. Theirs at that time was a creative world. They cleared the forest, built levees, traveled on the waters of the Mississippi in skiffs, made bumper crops of cotton, danced, gambled, loved and killed with what seems to have been tremendous zest.

The next generation came when the country had been opened up. They are people, now between the ages of fifty and seventy, who found the frontier pushed back, the river dwindling in importance, and the era of the railroad beginning. A levee system, protecting the lands of the country from overflows, had by that time been completed. The railroad lines were crossing the county and cotton growing was in boom. When Mrs. Frank Reed came to this section of the Delta, Phineas MacClain's generation had put the Sherard plantation into cultivation. Mrs. Reed and her husband were tenants on that plantation until they were able to buy a place for themselves. She and her son are perhaps the most successful among the few Negro farm owners in the vicinity of Sherard. Their

lands were purchased from the railroad company when they were selling land which had been given to them by the Government as a subsidy to encourage construction. Mrs. Reed describes the first time she came to the spot where she now lives. It was a cane brake covered with what she claims was "the biggest cane you ever saw," protected from the flood waters by a levee "no bigger than the railroad dump." She and her husband built a one-room house with a "stick and dirt" chimney and set up housekeeping with "two children and a box of meat."

People belonging to this second generation are now old, but they are still strong and vigorous. Having come with the first orderly regimes established after the frontier, they still represent order. They frown alike on the violence of the pioneer life they found and the disorderly life of the present. Mrs. Reed, referring to one of the pioneer heroes, remarked, "I just couldn't stand him. He was the kinda man didn't have no respect for nobody—for himself and nobody else. He was a devil." The present, in contrast to the orderly past which she helped to develop, seems confused and disorderly to her as well as to her contemporaries. Their world reached its flowering around the first World War and suffered a collapse later which has never been quite understood.

In the active lives of the second generation the church became the dominant institution of the community. In the church buildings, most of which were built by this generation, the congregations uniformly sang the long "Dr. Watts" hymns, enjoyed (prior to their exclusion, as Negroes, from politics) political rallies, and supported vigorously the numerous lodges which grew out of the church organization. These people helped bring order into the life of the area and witnessed this same order disappear into the chaos of the present. All, therefore, that is still established and considered normal in the Delta is indebted to this generation.

The third generation is composed of young adults between the ages of thirty and fifty who came to maturity in confusion. Their memories of an orderly world are those of their childhood and youth. Cotton growing for them has not departed from the "old way," nor has the church become weakened in its expression of the true faith by the introduction of "a form and a fashion." Theirs has been a rapidly changing world. They have no pleasant memories of the isolation and stabilization before motor transportation arrived; they have enjoyed the freedom of movement the "good road" brought as they rattled about in the second-hand cars their cotton money bought. Sixty cent cotton, six cent cotton, "parity checks," and tractors have been among the many surprises in their economic life. Electric lights in the church and electricity to make their nickels bring music out of "Seeburgs" and radios are their pride. For them there is no stable past against which to measure the present day; there is only a succession of changes in their way of working and living from war to war.

Youths and children try to get a grip on life in the midst of a disintegrating past and a fascinating present. For them the new has as much place as the old. As they acquire the culture, they receive the traditions from the past and the technology and the organization of the present and even absorb the conflicts between the two. They pick

cotton, play their games, follow their parents through a routine of living, and go to school. They sing the songs currently popular on the radio and the juke boxes and learn others as they hear them sung by older people at home and in the fields. Theirs is the task of discovering a pattern of living which conforms with their opportunities as well as with the varied inheritance from their elders.

These are the people of the Delta. Their lives are intimately related to cotton and cotton growing. Cotton guides the use of the seasons and the day for them, as it has done for others through sixty years. The winter and the early spring are respectively the wet season and the idle period. Then comes the period for the plowman, with his mules or tractors, to prepare the land and plant seed. As soon as the cotton plants stand a few inches above the soil, the struggle to “keep ahead of the grass” begins. Women and children swing their hoes from dawn until dusk, destroying weeds and grass which thrive among the young plants. Midsummer has come before hoe and plow can be laid aside. The plant is then mature and no further cultivation is required. There is a period of waiting while the bolls develop and burst open, presenting the fruit to the harvesters. This season of waiting is called the “lay-by” and is given over to festive occasions and group activities in the area. The revivals, lodge meetings, conventions, and associations are held during the lay-by. When the harvest is ready, from dusk to dawn all available black hands hurry among the cotton leaves and fill the long white sacks. Haste is essential to gather the harvest before damaging rains fall or the chill winds bring winter and another idle season. The order which cotton imposes has known modification with changing skills and practices over a period of sixty years. With all the shifts and changes “The Delta” remains basically “The Delta”—different from all others, despite technological and community changes.



II

The River and the Levee

Travelers going south from Memphis observe what seems to be a hill west of the highway or railroad. Passing from view only to reappear closely for several hundred yards, the “hill” then curves away until it is dimly outlined in the distance for a few miles before it disappears. This hill is the levee, a grass-covered, gentle slope which usually disappoints the traveler who had had some vague romantic vision of the Mississippi levees. Each time the levee curves near the roadway, the traveler scrutinizes it more closely, deciding that it is going to appear as a low hill for the extent of the trip. The more curious, anxious to see beyond the levee, and thinking perhaps that the river washes its further side, can find a road leading to the levee summit. They may drive along the roadway found there and the chances are that even though they reach the top of the levee they will not see the river. Between the levee and the river are small fields,