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Once proud princes: planters and plantation culture in Louisiana's northeast Delta, from the First World War through the Great Depression

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ONCE PROUD PRINCES:
PLANTERS AND PLANTATION CULTURE IN LOUISIANA'S NORTHEAST DELTA,
FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR THROUGH THE GREAT DEPRESSION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of History

by

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B.A., University of Mississippi, 1997
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2000
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For my daughter,
Madeleine Ann

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PREFACE

This study emerged from an earlier paper on the northeast Louisiana Delta that I completed my first year of graduate school. That work, a bit presumptive in retrospect, looked at the impact of agricultural modernization and desegregation in the region during the decades after the Second World War. Although I set this project aside for some time afterwards, the Delta still proved to be an intriguing subject of conversation, with both my father-in-law, a native of West Carroll Parish, and family friends who lived on Lake Bruin near St. Joseph. Eventually, I returned to the Delta and its rich, complex history for a dissertation topic, picking up the tale at an earlier time in the wake of the First World War, as the old plantation order gave way to the modern era.

I am not the first person to find the Delta alluring. Writers and scholars always have been drawn to the intense emotions and bitter experiences of plantation life, although much of this prolific outpouring has focused on the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, with relatively little written on the older cotton region down river in Louisiana. This is not to say that the Louisiana Delta has been shunned; indeed, due to its close ties to Natchez, the region has its own literary and scholarly traditions. In the 1930s, WPA writers and sentimental novelists like Stark Young chronicled the history of the city and its environs in romantic prose. Later that decade, sociologists appeared in the Delta to record life on the changing plantations, just as Allison Davis and Burleigh Gardner, with a research team, began work on Deep South, their seminal study of Natchez society. Other

examinations, such as Ron Davis' Good and Faithful Labor and Michael Wayne's The Reshaping of Plantation Society, incorporated research from the Delta into larger studies on the Natchez district, and Jack Davis, in Race Against Time, brought Davis and Gardner's work up to date. But, largely, the Louisiana Delta has remained only a sidelight to the real story of Natchez itself, and rarely has this story come past the nineteenth century.

When I began work on this dissertation, I wanted to chronicle the collapse an older plantation society and, from its shambles, the emergence of the modern Delta. I envisioned a comprehensive study of the period from 1900 to 1940 but soon narrowed my range down to what I considered the crucial decades of the 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, I also focused very tightly upon Tensas Parish as a research model. Located about midway between Vicksburg and Natchez, on the Louisiana side of the Mississippi River, Tensas Parish, as well or better than any of the other riverfront parishes, epitomized the rural Delta culture that I wanted to examine. In addition, the source material for Tensas appeared to be more abundant and accessible, including an excellent run of the local newspaper, which became the backbone of my work, and a number of fine manuscript collections. These, along with WPA monographs, sociological studies, regional and parish histories, and personal memoirs, allowed me to create a convincing picture of Tensas Parish, and by extension, the rest of the Delta, during the inter-war years.

The primary characters in this study were members of the white planter elite, many of whom had roots reaching back deep into the antebellum period. Because these people dominated the political and economic affairs of Tensas Parish and the Delta, their reactions to the events and movements of the 1920s and 1930s proved the easiest to trace

and their story provided the best cohesive narrative. I do not feel that I have ignored, however, the mass of the Delta's inhabitants, the black tenants and sharecroppers who made up 70 to 80 percent of the population, or the hill country whites that moved into the area in the 1920s and 1930s. Rather, I have chosen to relate these groups to the planters' world instead of placing the planters within theirs. A number of recent works chronicle explicitly the struggle of African-Americans in the Louisiana Delta, including Greta De Jong's A Different Day and John Henry Scott's gripping memoir, Witness to the Truth, adding to a strong general literature on Delta regions that also includes Nan Woodruff's American Congo and Jeannie Whayne's A New Plantation South. Sadly, no substantial analysis exists on the lives of the white migrants who made a stand in the Delta and shaped its economic and social direction afterwards. This dissertation, then, will add to the understanding of all these diverse cultures that occupied the same physical space and time but often on very different planes.

I divided the study into four parts that follow a rough chronology from the First World War through the Depression, although at times earlier thematic material necessitated introduction at a later point to provide better continuity. Overall, I think it still reads well. Due to the geographical complexity of the Delta, I have included a number of maps that illustrate major natural or man-made features such as rivers, bayous, towns, and roadways. To complement the narrative, at the end of the work I also have attached a biographical dictionary that offers background on key figures as well as a compilation of relevant statistical information gleaned from a variety of sources. It is hoped that these items will prove beneficial in navigating an essentially local story.

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ABSTRACT

The Delta country of northeast Louisiana is a richly productive alluvial region stretching south from the Arkansas line to the confluence of the Red and Mississippi Rivers below Natchez. As the source of great cotton fortunes made during antebellum times, it reflected the Old South ideal and, for several decades after the end of the Civil War, remained firmly grounded in this old plantation culture. The economic depression of the 1890s and the coming of the boll weevil in the early 1900s, however, signaled a gradual decline that turned into full-blown dissolution in the years following the First World War. Old families, both black and white, were swept aside or moved away, new people arrived, lands changed hands, and revolutions in organization and authority eroded the bonds of people connected by the intensity of shared experience through time.

This dissertation examines the challenges to traditional Delta life during the 1920s and 1930s, as the old plantation order collapsed amidst the pressures of the modern era. In particular, this study focuses on the transformation of the planter class from a collection of independent producers to an organized interest group, as its members grappled with financial uncertainty, the collapse of their social hegemony, and the loss of political power. Ongoing problems with the cotton economy forced dramatic changes in the plantation routine and a virtual revolution in race, gender, and class relations further disrupted the integrity of the old order. The rise of Huey Long to prominence decreased the influence of planters in state and national politics and the expansion of the Federal government into agriculture

and flood control policy during the ensuing years, although ultimately beneficial, proved disturbing for a group accustomed to radical independence. By the end of the 1930s, however, local planters had adjusted to the new conditions, paving the way for rapid development after the Second World War and moving the Delta ever further from its roots in the antebellum era.

INTRODUCTION

When the First World War erupted in far off Europe during the late summer of 1914, the isolated Delta country of northeast Louisiana hardly seemed disturbed by the uproar. In many ways, though, the beginning of the war marked the divide between old and new in American history, a tipping point of sorts in the Modernist revolution that came to overtake even small Mississippi River towns like Vidalia, St. Joseph, Tallulah, and Lake Providence. Some of the hallmarks of Modernism have been noted in the extensive literature on the subject: increased societal organization, greater reliance upon technology, stronger belief in science and rationalism, growth in state power over groups and individuals, and the questioning of established patterns of behavior and conduct. This transformative movement came upon a very conservative, very Victorian Delta with amazing rapidity and forced often subtle, often very stark realizations and accommodations. For the white planters, their families, and the doctors, lawyers, merchants, and country editors who composed the Delta elite, the era of the war and the decades afterwards proved to be both exciting and disturbing as changes in culture and society drastically altered their world.¹

¹ The classic work on American involvement in the First World War, and its effects at home, is David M. Kennedy, Over Here: The First World War and American Society, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. Emerging out of the wreckage of war, cultural Modernism exploded into the 1920s. It has developed a wide and varied literature, particularly in the field of literary and artistic criticism, but good overall summaries of the Modernist ethos in the United States can be found in Lynn Dumenil, The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s, New York: Hill and Wang, 1995, and Stanley Coben, Rebellion Against Victorianism: The Impetus for Cultural Change in 1920s America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. An older work that provides a

The realities of the plantation complex had forged a conservative white society in the Delta long before the Civil War yet the maudlin pining over this lost "golden age," combined with the sobering prospect of a recently freed and numerically overwhelming black population, served to consolidate an even more reactionary and extreme form of Victorianism in the region following the defeat of the South in 1865. The Victorian emphasis on manly power and discipline, of course, blended perfectly with the white southern planter's own sense of self, a brooding consciousness focused on preserving honor and independence of action but also on regulating social order and stability through appropriate behavior. Indeed, the "planter ideal" of a strong, dispassionate white man, in total control of himself and his surroundings, dominated in the Delta.

Refined and dignified social constructs highlighted his status: the aristocratic church, heavily Episcopal although sometimes Catholic or Presbyterian but never radically evangelical; an exclusive business and political order tied to Natchez, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans; and an elaborate set of personal obligations expressed at camp hunts, card games, and in day to day interactions on the plantation and in Delta towns. Social and economic relations with inferiors reinforced his authority. From black tenants, the planter demanded respect and deference but often offered in return a certain kindly or familial regard, especially so in the Delta where connections ran through generations and across the slavery-Emancipation divide. White women

first-hand account of Modernism in its varied forms is Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s, New York: Harper & Row, 1931. The defining study on the movement in the American South is Daniel J. Singal, The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982. The great Southern writers of the 1920s and 1930s, especially, have attracted considerable attention from scholars.

confined their activities to the home or local charities, leaving him unchallenged in politics and business. Lower class whites he simply ignored. Delta planters, then, lived in a highly stratified world, where remnants of the old antebellum hierarchy lingered as the twentieth century rapidly approached. Tensas Parish, the major focus of this study, exhibited a particularly strong attachment to this old plantation culture. A sociologist working in the area in the 1930s called it "one of the last old-time aristocratic parishes in this state," and a Memphis lawyer who had grown up there in the early 1900s fondly recalled many years later that it had "more of the old aristocratic families than any other community" he knew.²

By 1900, though, this traditional world already seemed to be passing away, beset by post-Civil War financial crises and social changes it could not control. The arrival of the boll weevil only a few years before the First World War exacerbated conditions, bankrupting many white landowners and driving black laborers from the land in search of sustenance elsewhere. Though some planters tried to adjust to new realities, most others straggled along, encumbered with debt and unable, or unwilling, to abandon the deteriorating cotton culture with which they identified. The war, however, seemed to provide a quick remedy for these problems in the form of high cotton prices, serving to hold back the steady decline at least temporarily. But the strains of war also pushed the region in new directions that would permanently alter the plantation system. As part of the all out

² Harold Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers in the Mississippi River Delta, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, 1941, 250, and Marion S. Kaufman to Thomas M. Wade, Jr., 1 December 1955, Box 2, f. 11, Thomas M. Wade Collection, M-156, Department of Special Collections, Manuscripts and Archives, Prescott Memorial Library, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana.

mobilization effort directed by the national government, the Delta organized itself more than ever before with parish committees on production, labor, and defense. The planting class, naturally, took a leading role in such efforts and came to realize, in some fashion, the benefits of such large-scale coordination. In the years after the war, they increasingly turned to voluntary associations and government assistance to combat a wide range of pressing agricultural problems, such as slumping cotton prices, uncontrolled production, and an inadequate infrastructure. The war, then, served to stimulate the organization process among men most well known for their stubborn sense of personal independence.

The war brought about as well a sea change in planters' relationships to their social inferiors in the Delta. Black tenants and sharecroppers, who had held on during the lean years of the boll weevil, now were taken away in droves by the draft. Although most would return, the exposure to a world outside the Delta did not have had a calming affect upon a long-oppressed population. Many black families, in fact, used the opportunities presented by the war to leave the area altogether, seeking better work and living conditions in the urban areas of the North. Compromised by the shortage of labor, white planters realized their utter dependence on a stable and subdued labor force, while at the same time the black community realized its own latent economic power. The Jim Crow system, of course, did not fall apart in the 1920s and 1930s but the changing nature of racial relations, and the weakness of the plantation establishment in the face of this challenge, set the path for a troubled future about which unsettled planters already seemed wary.

Shifting behavior patterns among white women and youth in the post-war years also struck at the old-line social order. The passage

of the suffrage amendment introduced females in the Delta to the political process, gradually undermining male dominance in that area, while new technologies like moving pictures and automobiles offered to youths a wide range of new influences and activities outside the realm of community supervision. With the specter of sexual promiscuity and drunkenness hanging darkly over the region, as it did elsewhere in the country during the "Roaring Twenties," the Victorian conception of moral order seemed to be rapidly in decline. For planters, such social disarray in the white community had far-ranging consequences as it further subverted the elaborate constructs that had separated black and white, civilization and savagery, in the Delta.

The old order also came under intense pressure from poor, hill country whites that surged into the region after the war. These "new" whites came in search of opportunity and many signed on as tenants as a temporary step towards purchasing their own small farms from broken up plantations and recently cleared timberland. They clashed with their landlords almost immediately over economic issues, with cultural differences between the groups adding to the tension. The relaxed racial attitudes of Delta whites, which permitted an easy familiarity and close social contact between the races, for instance, contrasted with the more virulent attitudes possessed by the hill country people. Likewise, ranged against the old-line planters, who generally maintained an easy-going tolerance of Jews and Catholics and showed more interest in having a good time than anything, were these grim evangelicals of the backcountry who looked scornfully upon common Delta indulgences such as drinking, dancing, and miscegenation. Shaped by their own fears and beliefs, many of the Delta blacks shared with their white landlords a common distrust and disdain for these newcomers. Class and racial conflict, then, became a hallmark of the turbulent

years in the 1920s and 1930s, as planters sought to hold onto power in the face of strident competition.

The greatest challenge to the planter class, though, came with the emergence of the poor whites' champion, Huey Long. Long represented all that was crass and vulgar and distasteful about the modern world: he attacked tradition, carried himself in a loose and inappropriate manner, insulted his opponents, and besmirched his own honor through various and sundry escapades. Above all, he smashed Louisiana's old and venerable political coalition, in which the planting classes, the great sugar and cotton growers, conspired with the New Orleans machine to control the state. For years, the Delta had maintained a powerful voice in state politics and its interests were capably represented even at the national level. Long's astounding string of political victories, though, forced the planters into deep concessions and, eventually, for sheer survival, they came into the Longite camp, from which point they became disgruntled but complicit allies.

Practical reasoning lay behind the accommodation to Longism. Dominating the state's political machinery, the Longites controlled access to the benefits of modern society like roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals. They also stood in the way of a practical relationship with the Federal government, which, during the New Deal of the 1930s, had exerted its power over important agricultural and flood control policies. To influence the favorable development of both of these, the planter class had to accept the modern formulation of politics, of state power over that of individuals, a shift that reduced them in stature and independence, but garnered them continued influence and wealth.

The 1920s and 1930s, then, proved to be an exciting and troubling time for Delta planters. New possibilities expanded their horizons but systemic changes in the social order increasingly separated them from their cherished past, leading to conflicting sentiments over their status and identity. As the world opened up, their own importance and sense of self declined; they found themselves defined as a pliant interest group rather than a forceful set of individuals, being acted upon more and more, rather than doing the acting themselves. In this way, the modern era came to the Louisiana Delta. Of course, the planters gained from the new order. They still held onto political and social power in many instances and continue to do so today. But after the 1930s, they no longer identified as strongly with their forefathers, those heroes of the Confederacy and Reconstruction, those proud princes of an earlier time.

PART ONE
THE PLANTATION WORLD IN FLUX

CHAPTER ONE
WAR AND ITS COSTS

On the eve of the First World War, the Delta already had entered a period of tremendous societal upheaval and transformation. The persistent agricultural depression that followed the Panic of 1893 had shaken the old plantation culture of the region and the arrival of the boll weevil during the first decade of the 1900s delivered another crippling blow. Old families, both black and white, declined or moved away, new people appeared, and land changed hands, eroding bonds forged by both time and place. Yet, the old Delta remained intact in many regards, even if only as a gaunt shadow of its former self. White planters, many of them rooted deep in the antebellum history of the riverfront district, still held sway over political and economic affairs, and a black majority, likewise rooted in slavery times, still toiled in cotton fields, day after day, and year after year. The World War, however, proved to be a turning point, forging a wide range of pressing social and economic issues already at work into a cohesive challenge to the old order itself; only after the even more tumultuous years that followed would some look back with veiled nostalgia on this earlier time as the last hurrah of a dying age.

Having persisted through the Civil War and Reconstruction, albeit in altered form, the old plantation society increasingly began to break down in the 1880s and 1890s as a younger generation, raised outside of the antebellum tradition, matured with new sensibilities. The romantic sentiments of the master and servant relationship seemed to hold little value in a world driven more and more by intensive capital investment and resource exploitation. Outside forces contributed to the decline.

The extended economic downturn after 1893 wreaked havoc on planting families, forcing widespread bankruptcy as the price of cotton fell from over eleven cents a pound in 1889 to about six cents in 1894, and under five in 1898. Besotted with unpaid bills and mortgages, many planters gave up, selling their property and moving off in search of opportunity elsewhere. The King family of Iona plantation in Madison Parish, for instance, chose not to rebuild after a fire burned down the old home, and instead packed up for Arkansas, where they engaged in the fruit orchard business. A daughter-in-law reminisced later that, no matter the other circumstances, the move came at a transitory time as, "The neighborhood had changed," and, "Old friends had moved away." The classic society, then, seemed to be coming apart at the seams under the strains of a new era.¹

Middle and upper class whites were not the only ones to feel pressed or unsettled by the turmoil of the 1890s. Black tenants and their families, too, felt helpless amidst worsening social and economic conditions. Tightened access to credit and wages that fell to their lowest level in decades exposed the hypocrisy of the post-war labor system, fueling an increased dissatisfaction with the plantation regime as the starvation line inched ever closer. Abandoned by their supposedly benevolent patrons, and throttled by Jim Crow, blacks in the

¹ On the effects of the 1890s depression in the Delta, see Robert L. Moncrief, "The Economic Development of the Tallulah Territory," M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1937, found in the electronic resource, Madison Parish, Louisiana, Historical and Genealogical Data, at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/index.htm>, no page number. A nice evocation of old plantation life in the Louisiana Delta from the 1870s until the 1890s is Edith Follett King, "The Kings of Iona," 1951, reprint, Tallulah, LA: Madison Parish Historical Society, 1998; quote from 34. Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940, New York: Pantheon Books, 1998, explores the theme of generational change, particularly its effects on racial views, in great detail.

Delta began to look towards safety, refuge, and freedom outside the region.²

The boll weevil infestation only a few years later exacerbated the tensions of the 1890s into a full-blown crisis situation. Coming out of Texas, boll weevils first appeared in the riverfront parishes about 1907 and within two years had devastated completely the cotton-based economy of the region. Production in Madison Parish dropped sixty percent between 1907 and 1908, and in neighboring Tensas Parish, ginned cotton declined from 36,185 bales in 1906 to 11,177 bales in 1909. During the early 1910s, Tensas, one of the greatest cotton parishes in the entire state, produced totals hovering only about the 7000-bale range, with all the consequent misfortunes for planters who relied upon big crops to pay off debts and secure additional credit for the next season. Moreover, during this time, black laborers and their families, unable to acquire food or supplies from struggling furnishing merchants, began their great exodus out of the Delta, and the South. Railroads that had penetrated the Delta interior only in the years

² On the conditions of African-Americans in the Delta during the 1890s depression, see Moncrief, "Economic Development of the Tallulah Territory," n.p. On the general nature of labor and social relations after the Civil War in the Natchez district, see Ronald L. F. Davis, Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982, and Michael Wayne, The Reshaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District, 1860-80, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983. I tend to favor Davis' interpretation of a compromised position for both blacks and whites, with remnants of antebellum paternalism surviving amidst the cash nexus. For a further discussion of the lingering effects of antebellum influences in the area, also see Allison Davis and Burleigh B. and Mary R. Gardner, Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941, 403-409. A very keen conceptualization of planter/tenant relations in another plantation region at about the same time can be found in Peggy G. Hargis, "For the Love of Place: Paternalism and Patronage in the Georgia Lowcountry, 1865-1898," Journal of Southern History, v. 70, no. 4 (November 2004). Her argument for a system of patronage, rather than true paternalism, in post-war social relations is very compelling, and is supported by my research.

after 1900 now carried away the plantation labor force in droves. The movement came with a swiftness that startled everyone. Tensas Parish lost over a tenth of its total population, about 2000 people, between 1900 and 1910, most after 1907, and would lose another 5000 during the war decade of the 1910s. Looking back a few years later, Josiah Scott, editor of the Tensas Gazette, bemoaned the fact, "That plantations which formerly had a population of hundreds of Negro tenants and laborers are now practically uninhabited, the people having gone, as farmers, to the Yazoo Delta and Arkansas, and as laborers to the railroads, saw mills and to the cities." This virtual depopulation of the countryside, more than anything, underscored the near total collapse of the old plantation order.³

For Delta planters, the economic disaster of the boll weevil brought a discernable shift in temperament and attitude. Although these men still lived and breathed cotton and could not break its hold over them, some began to look at creative solutions to their problems. A few brave souls turned away from cotton entirely, bringing in experts from south Louisiana to oversee a switch to rice cropping. In 1909, East Carroll Parish, for instance, had 9000 acres planted in rice, while Tensas Parish planted upwards of 5000 acres throughout the war years. This fad soon played itself out, though, as the physical

³ For production numbers, see Moncrief, "Economic Development of the Tallulah Territory," n.p., and "Cotton Production and Ginnings for Specified Years, Tensas Parish, Louisiana," USDA Administrator to Congressman Otto E. Passman, June 1962, Box 1, f. 4, Wade Collection. Ginned cotton did not represent exactly the total parish production, as some neighboring areas on the borders of Tensas came across the parish line for this service. The difference, give or take, appeared to be about 1500 bales, by comparison of various sources. Scott's quote from Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 15 June 1917. Population figures are drawn from an electronic resource, the Historical Census Browser, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, University of Virginia Library, found at: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>. See, Figure 1, Appendix C.

demands of the crop did not suit the soil or water conditions in the Delta, not to mention the people themselves.⁴

More serious interest, though, was given to agricultural diversification. Progressive farming advocates, of course, had hammered away on the diversification topic for decades. G.W. Alford, writing about Southern farm issues on the eve of the First World War, questioned why the \$148 average income on Southern farms compared so pitifully to the \$611 average in Iowa and why Southerners spent "more money for pork" than for education or religion. To remedy these deficiencies, he argued for a balanced plan that included the planting of forage and feed crops as well as the raising of hogs and cattle. He also encouraged soil improvement through the turning under of vetch, peas, and other nitrogen rich cover crops. "Poor soil," he reminded farmers, "means a poor people, and a poor people means bad roads, uncomfortable homes, poorly equipped farms, very little education, the credit system, and all that retards civilization."⁵

A handful of local planters embraced these concepts, finally having had their fill of the constant ups and downs of cotton planting. Omar Richie, at L'Argent along the Tensas-Concordia line, urged his fellow planters to halve their cotton production, calling it "uncertain at best, and the most expensive crop to raise that I ever saw." He wanted them, instead, to plant oats, peas, corn, and cotton in

⁴ On rice cultivation, see Moncrief, "Economic Development of the Tallulah Territory," n.p., and "Narrative Report of Work of the County Agent, G.L. Burleson, Tensas Parish, 1939," in Box 42, f. 615, v. 390, Agricultural Extension Service Records, RG #A3000.1, Louisiana State University Archives, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA. According to Burleson, Tensas Parish had no more than about 5000 acres in rice during the 1910s, and did not grow any after 1923.

⁵ Examples of Alford's writing can be found in a series of articles printed under the title "Diversification on Southern Farms," in the *Tensas Gazette*, 2, 9, and 16 January 1914. Vetch is a member of the pea family, very closely related to clover.

rotation, thereby building the fertility of the soil, providing forage and feed for work stock, and increasing the overall value of cotton by enforced scarcity. He also encouraged planters to really devote themselves to raising cattle and breeding their own mules, rather than paying exorbitant prices every year for work animals brought in from Kentucky and Missouri. This comprehensive plan, he assured them, would make a planter "feel like a real man again, and bring prosperity to this unfortunate country."⁶

The failure of the plantation economy during the boll weevil years did indeed take a terrible toll on the self-esteem of planters, as Richie seemed to indicate. As elsewhere in the South, these men put a high price on their ability to raise cotton, equating large crops with success and virility, failure with weakness and dishonor. Despite the apparent collapse of cotton, then, few of them could give up on it entirely. This addiction to cotton culture cut across class and racial lines. "All Southerners, white an' black, are the same way," related one black tenant farmer in the Natchez area, expressing his deep sense of frustration and fatalism. "The South has been ruined by cotton, but they won't change!" Indeed, there seemed to be no cure.⁷

In the early 1910s, though, a savior, of sorts, appeared on the scene in the form of the Federal government. The U.S. Department of Agriculture had organized only a few years earlier its cooperative extension, or county agent, program, with the purpose of supplying farming districts with trained technicians who would encourage sound,

⁶ "Letter from a Progressive Planter," Tensas Gazette, 26 June 1914.

⁷ For a concise description of cotton culture in the Natchez district, see Davis, Deep South, 266-280, with quote from 275. This is a valuable study overall but is marred at times by the use of dialect in recording the comments of African-American sources, among other troubling aspects of the age in which it was written. However, the main ideas appear to hold true, and are supported by my research.

scientific practices. A few of these experts, with knowledge of the best and latest techniques and methods, arrived in the Louisiana Delta beginning around 1913 to help local farmers combat the boll weevil, the main impediment to successful cotton planting. The USDA also established at Tallulah, in the heart of the Delta, a laboratory and experiment station to test poisons and methods for the control of the weevil and other pests.⁸

The parish agents had a difficult time establishing themselves in a district that prized personal independence and distrusted governmental authority. Delta planters and their tenants took great pride in their knowledge of cotton, and felt that no one knew it as well as themselves. They especially doubted the abilities of an outsider employed by the Federal government. Yet, as few in number and grossly under funded as they were, the parish agents did manage some converts through the success of their demonstration work. Those planters whom they brought into the fold defended the extension effort vigorously. In early 1914, for instance, a cotton planter from the Red River valley expounded on the value of the agent system at a meeting of interested individuals in Tallulah. Describing the "dark" post-weevil conditions, he recalled that, "The banks withheld money and the exodus of labor began," leaving many "disposed to quit raising cotton." The arrival of the USDA agents in the area, "preaching the doctrine of burning the stalks and picking up the punctured squares," however, led

⁸ On the establishment of the cooperative extension program in Louisiana as a response to the boll weevil, see Frederick W. Williamson, Yesterday and Today in Louisiana Agriculture: How Twenty-five Years of Extension Service Changed the Pattern of Farming and Rural Life, New Orleans: Louisiana State University Division of Agricultural Extension, 1940, 77-116. On the experiment station established at Tallulah by the USDA's Bureau of Entomology, see Madison Parish Historical Society, "The 'Bug' Station, or U.S. Department of Agriculture Experimental Station at Tallulah, Louisiana, 1913-1971," Tallulah, LA: Madison Parish Historical Society, n.d.

to a complete turn around, and he soon expected his parish to be producing as much cotton as ever before. T.B. Gilbert of Wisner, in Franklin Parish on the edge of the Delta, likewise came to the defense of the extension service. Reacting strongly against an agent of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad who had advocated certain non-approved methods, Gilbert curtly suggested that the man had "not planted cotton in recent years, if at all" since he had the "temerity to set his views against the Department of Agriculture and the practical experience of men who are successfully coping with the weevil and making fair crops." In a very limited way, by the time of the First World War the agents appeared to have made some progress in familiarizing planters in the Delta with the concepts of agricultural reform and organization, developments that would mature over the next decade and a half.⁹

The outbreak of the war in 1914, however, served to delay this modernizing process, as the demand for cotton allowed planters to put in large crops and still make record profits without having to bother with the issue of diversification. The boll weevil, of course, due to its dramatic negative impact on production, actually had achieved the positive effect of driving cotton prices up and, the disruption of world markets in late 1914 and early 1915 proved only temporary. By early spring 1917, with the prospect of the United States entering the conflict, the Natchez cotton broker Theodore Wensel predicted even higher prices in the near future, as the world appeared to be in a "cotton famine." With short crops the previous two years, the 1917-18 season would finally see demand exceed supply, he proclaimed. But, he warned against planting cotton solely; he wanted planters to diversify

⁹ Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 13 February 1914, and Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 9 January 1914.

with corn, hay, and other crops. A large acreage planted in cotton, even without a large harvest, he argued would have "a sentimental effect on the market," with the end result that planters would "get less for their cotton and pay more for their corn, hay and meat." If cotton planters did not go crazy, Wensel assured them they could safely expect prices upwards of twenty or twenty-five cents per pound, and could have corn, peas, peanuts, velvet beans, hay crops, and livestock as well.¹⁰

S.W. Vance, working as the extension agent for Tensas and Madison Parishes, also sensed an opportunity for local planters to take positive actions towards reform in the midst of the expected boom. Indeed, Vance called any "attempt to grow cotton except in conjunction with the production of grain, hay and livestock . . . uneconomical, bad business and . . . bound to result in disaster." Yet, he realized that with, "Cotton being the sole basis of credit in the south," and wartime demand driving prices to unprecedented heights, it would be "difficult to carry out a sane diversification" plan in the area under his charge. At best, he expected to develop a set of planters and tenants willing to conduct small demonstrations while establishing himself as a valuable resource with real services to offer. He faced a hard task; the Delta, a region composed of large plantations where even he declared "every . . . place is a community to itself," inherently shunned organizational efforts. Lack of communication and individual self-interest continually impeded his attempts to institute any sort of

¹⁰ On the temporary impact of the war, see James L. McCorkle, Jr., "Louisiana and the Cotton Crisis, 1914," Louisiana History, v. 18 (Summer 1977). For Wensel's analysis, see "Keeping the Price of Cotton Up," Tensas Gazette, 2 March 1917. Wensel noted that Louisiana's cotton production had declined roughly seventy-five percent since the arrival of the boll weevil, from 1.1 million bales in 1904-05 to 273,000 in 1916-17.

systematic farming plan although he did have planters "in each ward that I call on or write to and I get all of the help and contribution that could be expected" He corresponded heavily with these men about such topics as buying fertilizers and insect poisons or selling farm products, so that, in a very informal way, he coordinated when some sent their corn, oats, barley, rye, and wheat to market. Likewise, Vance convinced thirty-six planters and small farmers to cooperate in demonstration work, thereby putting about 900 acres under intense cultivation. He had some success, too, in pushing alfalfa as a hay crop and also in planting and turning under pea vines to improve soil fertility. The local lending institutions, the banks and private furnishing merchants, supported these efforts as much as feasible and even began to seek his advice, often asking him for his "opinion of the men" with regards to making farm loans.¹¹

Yet, high cotton prices drove the Delta during the war years and, although Vance and others could claim small achievements, interest in farm reform paled next to the clamor to plant a big crop. Production totals soared. Ginned cotton in Tensas Parish alone increased from under 8000 bales in 1916, to over 15,000 in 1917, and over 18,000 in 1918. In fact, the war sparked a genuine boom in land sales as investors from outside the Delta sought to cash in on the huge market upswing. The Tensas Gazette reported that land sales in the parish for the first part of 1918 surpassed "all previous records" and that the prices obtained had "exceeded the brightest hopes of the most enthusiastic optimist of bygone days." Heavily capitalized land and

¹¹ "Cotton Growing Alone Unprofitable," Tensas Gazette, 1 February 1917, and "Narrative Report, S.W. Vance, Tensas and Madison Parishes, 1918," in Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. On diversification efforts during the war years, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 119. Williamson admitted it was a tough sale during times of high cotton prices.

timber concerns, holding large tracts acquired during the down times of the previous decades, began to part with these properties, serving as middlemen and procurers for clients unfamiliar with the region. The Delta Land Company, based out of Memphis, figured prominently in this action, speculating heavily in plantations across the lower Mississippi River Valley, from Memphis to Natchez. In the war era, they had an agent set up directly in St. Joseph to buy, sell, lease, or trade prime lands. Members of the local establishment, too, looked to turn a dollar off the land rush. The company of Wade, Clarke, and Ratcliff, steered by local men bearing old names and long credentials in the community, sold a number of sizeable plantations, such as Clara Nook and Hubbard Place, each over a thousand acres, during this time.¹²

Most of the new investors came from commercial backgrounds, with capital or credit enough to get a Louisiana plantation up and running. The editor of the Gazette, in fact, called them an "enterprising, intelligent class" of immigrants, and seemed pleased to have fresh blood in the parish. W.M. Goodbar, who purchased the Villa Clara and Minnehaha plantations through the Delta Land Company in August 1918, had made his money as a shoe manufacturer in Memphis; Judge E.R.E. Kimbrough, who arrived from Illinois, had a large portfolio of banking and commercial interests. C.C. Brooks, a well-educated Georgian, had sold land in Oklahoma and then worked as a cotton broker in Shreveport before coming to Tensas Parish, where he purchased the Botany Bay

¹² On cotton production in Tensas Parish, see "Cotton Production and Ginnings for Specified Years, Tensas Parish, Louisiana," USDA Administrator to Congressman Otto E. Passman, June 1962, Box 1, f. 4, Wade Collection. Scott's quote from, Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 15 March 1918. On activities of the Delta Land Company in Tensas Parish and area, see Sales Notices, Tensas Gazette, 19 and 25 April, and 26 July 1918. On the Wade, Clarke, and Ratcliff operation, see Sales Notices, Tensas Gazette, 23 and 30 August 1918; 20 September 1918; and 22 November 1918. For biographical information on these men, see Appendix A.

plantation and speculated in other properties. L.H. Cook came from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, backed by his brother, a banker in that city. Sometimes, these men proved to be of exceptional quality and their willingness to take on extra work secured them a quick rise to leadership roles. Although he resided in the parish only a few years, Kimbrough proved capable and active enough to chair the parish Council of Defense during the World War before moving back to his home state. Brooks won a seat in the state Senate in the 1920s and ably represented his fellow planters for a number of years before being swept aside in the 1930s.¹³

Outsiders, though, were not the only ones to prosper, as nearly everyone benefited from the surging economy. Parish agent S.W. Vance reported in 1918 that in his district, planters and farmers had purchased twenty-one tractors, eight trucks, forty gasoline engines, and 500 plows during the year. "Most all farmers," he remarked, "have autos and 40 have put in light and water works." Automobiles especially seemed in vogue; local agencies had their "biggest trouble" in "getting cars from the factories, for the demand exceeds the supply." They became such an ingrained part of life during the war years, in fact, that the Tensas Parish Police Jury took the unprecedented step in July 1918 of ordaining a one-dollar tax on every

¹³ Scott quote from Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 30 August 1918. On Goodbar's purchase, see Sales Notice, Tensas Gazette, 9 August 1918. On Kimbrough, see "Parish Council of Defense Organized," Tensas Gazette, 28 September 1917 and "Tensas Loses Two Good Citizens," Tensas Gazette, 30 May 1919. Kimbrough left the parish in 1919 to return to Illinois but sent his farm manager on to Alabama, where he had invested in other farming operations. On Cook, see "L.H. Cook Selected a Master Farmer," Tensas Gazette, 12 December 1930. For information on Brooks, see Appendix A.

vehicle and all able bodied men, age fifteen to fifty-five, to be put towards improving the rutted dirt paths that passed for roads.¹⁴

In addition to new cars and equipment, local planters also managed to put a large amount of money aside. Vance reported that ninety percent of his demonstrators had increased their bank deposits or opened accounts for the first time and that everyone in the parish had started to pay down their accumulated debt. Indeed, the local banks enjoyed a record year in 1918. The Bank of Newellton, usually forced to borrow money from larger institutions at the start of planting season, found itself able to finance local farming operations on its own account that spring. The Bank of St. Joseph likewise enjoyed the flush times. Louis Buckner, the cashier, reported clearing amounts "double those of previous years" in January and, by March, its total assets had topped the half million dollar mark, more than three and a half times that of July 1916.¹⁵

Even black tenants and small landowners profited. Planters and furnishing merchants extended generous credit lines and paid off cotton at high prices, while wages reached levels unseen before in the Delta. Buckner at the Bank of St. Joseph remarked, in fact, that these men had "more money than they ever dreamed of." Many, of course, put their

¹⁴ "Narrative Report, S.W. Vance, Tensas and South Madison Parishes, 1918," in Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. For a similar account, see "Narrative Report, T.I. Watson, East Carroll Parish, 1918," in Box 15, f. 136, v. 136, Extension Service Records. On the automobile quotes, see Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 2 November 1917, and "Police Jury Proceedings," Tensas Gazette, 5 July 1918.

¹⁵ "Narrative Report, S.W. Vance, Tensas and South Madison Parishes, 1918," in Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. On banking prosperity, see Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 22 March 1918; Bank Statements, Tensas Gazette, 21 July 1916 and 29 March 1918; "Bank Tells of Great Prosperity for the Year," Natchez Democrat, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 18 January 1918; and Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 15 March 1918.

money into automobiles and other consumer goods but a large number invested in land, attempting to put in a guarantee for the future. A few agents specialized in breaking up larger plantations into more manageable farmsteads, which they then offered to black farmers on decent terms. Edgar Whittemore, based out of St. Joseph, was very active in this trade. In late 1917, he offered for sale a 200-acre tract west of Waterproof and was willing to subdivide the parcel so that two families might have a "fine front on the much traveled Texas Road." In September 1918, he began advertising to black tenants the subdivision of the Orchard Grove plantation in Concordia Parish into hundred acre tracts that could be had on easy credit. Such opportunities attracted men looking to improve themselves and provide for their families.¹⁶

Other opportunities existed as well for blacks and non-elite whites in the Delta during the war years. The large timber companies that had bought up tremendous chunks of forested backcountry property during the early 1900s and 1910s at last began to tap into this vast reserve, providing constant employment and high wages. In 1917, over 450,000 acres, half of the total land area stretching across East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes, held stands of hardwood timber. Within twenty years, though, less than a third of this amount remained. Timberland in Tensas Parish alone exceeded 253,000 acres in 1905 and still covered 181,000 acres in 1917. But, by 1939, forests in the parish totaled only about 47,000 acres, a reduction of over eighty

¹⁶ "Bank Tells of Great Prosperity for the Year," Natchez Democrat, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 18 January 1918. On the more equal treatment of black tenants during the war years, due to labor shortages, see Davis, Deep South, 373. On Whittemore's activities, see "200 Acre Plantation For Sale," Tensas Gazette, 16 November 1917; "Land Buying Chance for Colored People," Tensas Gazette, 6 September 1918; and Public Notice, Tensas Gazette, 7 June 1919. Whittemore continued this line of work through the 1920s.

percent in just a few decades. The sawmills, humming along at full steam, stimulated real economic growth, at least for a while, and lured men in from the surrounding countryside, fueling the emergence of new commercial centers at Newellton, Ferriday, and elsewhere to supply their needs.¹⁷

The World War, then, seemed to be a godsend to the Delta, bringing prosperity to all races and classes. And, for the most part, the people of the Delta, black and white, got behind the war effort. Patriotic rallies held across the Delta shortly after the declaration of war demonstrated the general buy-in from the public. The rally at Waterproof, for instance, culminated in the raising of a large American flag over the town. A processional of school children, led by two young girls dressed in red and white striped skirts and blue waists, accompanied the flag to the its destination, where everyone sang the "Star Spangled Banner" and the Reverend George Fox, of the Methodist Church, delivered a prayerful sermon. After the little ceremony, the women of the parish, led by Carrie Moore Davidson and Clara Whitney, two of the most prominent female figures in Tensas society, retired to the Knights of Pythias Hall to organize a local Red Cross chapter.¹⁸

A few months later, once the Federal government had established its major outline for community involvement, parish leaders organized a

¹⁷ On the timber industry, see Philip E. Jones, John E. Mason, and Joseph T. Elvove, "New Settlement Problems in the Northeastern Louisiana Delta," Baton Rouge: Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1940, 3-4; Mary Alice Fontenot and Edith Ziegler, The Tensas Story, Newellton, LA: private printing, 1987, 225; and Moncrief, "Economic Development of the Tallulah Territory," n.p. S.W. Vance reported the opening of four new sawmills in Tensas Parish alone during 1918; see "Narrative Report, S.W. Vance, Tensas and South Madison Parishes, 1918," in Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records.

¹⁸ "Patriotic Meeting Proceeding," and "Patriotic Meeting at Waterproof," Tensas Gazette, 27 April 1917.

local Council of Defense, with a variety of subcommittees that handled issues such as food production and distribution, finance, and price control. Although chaired by a newcomer, well-known planters such as Sheriff John Hughes, William Davidson, Joseph Curry [Sr.], Benjamin Young, Carneal Goldman [Jr.], and Harrison Miller occupied key positions and, their wives and sisters handled the relief and welfare committees that oversaw sanitation, nutrition, and health. In addition, a few select members of the African-American community, men like George Woods, Armstead Mitchell, and John Cammack, were invited to help in securing the cooperation of their people in the war effort. In large part, this organization emerged from the top-down pressure of the government to encourage total mobilization, a sophisticated program that included skillful use of propaganda and centralized control over production and distribution. The local Council, although very loose in its operation, proved reasonably effective in achieving these national goals, springing into action whenever needed "to raise any money for bonds or war work or [the] Red Cross or to make a call for . . . increased food production" It was, at any rate, "the only plan we could get results from in this territory," the parish agent wrote, reminding his administrators of the fierce independence of local planters.¹⁹

White society in the Delta aggressively supported the war and, following a tried and true pattern, sent its best and brightest off to the fight. Among these were young men like Joseph Davidson, son of the St. Joseph planter and businessman William Davidson. "Jody," as he was

¹⁹ "Parish Council of Defense Organized," Tensas Gazette, 28 September 1917, and "Child Welfare Committees for Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 29 March 1918. Quotes from "Narrative Report, S.W. Vance, Tensas and South Madison Parishes, 1918," in Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. On the Extension Service as a part of the nation's war effort, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 117-128.

known, grew up in the genteel refinement of a wealthy household with deep roots in Tensas Parish. Educated at Culver Military Academy in Indiana, the University of Michigan, and the law school at George Washington University, when America entered the war, he was serving as the assistant secretary in Washington, D.C., for that paramount of Delta society, U.S. Senator Joseph Ransdell of East Carroll Parish. He had a sterling future before him. Other heirs to the plantation tradition who went on to serve in the officer corps during the war were Joseph Curry [Jr.], son of another St. Joseph landmark and a graduate of the Culver school and the University of Virginia; David Amacker, son of planter and state Senator Robert Amacker from Lake Providence and a graduate of Princeton; and the Sevier cousins of Tallulah, Andrew and Henry, whose plantation family dominated political office holding in Madison Parish for almost eighty years.²⁰

Black society in the Delta also, perhaps surprisingly, greeted the World War with considerable enthusiasm, looking on it as an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and basic worthiness as citizens. The small middle-class, especially, had high hopes. John Henry Jones of St. Joseph, a well-off merchant, advised young black men to join the military, scolding those who claimed that African-Americans had nothing for which to fight. "Why not fight to perpetuate our freedom," he asked with indignation. Rekindling proud memories of black military service during the Civil War, he reminded them that, "Our grandfathers fought for our freedom, now let the young men of today fight if this country needs them." Certainly, the exhortations of

²⁰ On Joseph M. Davidson, see "Account of the Death of Lt. Jos. Davidson," Tensas Gazette, 13 December 1918; "Dedication of Fountain and Flag Staff," Tensas Gazette, 26 March 1926; and "Unveiling Ceremony at 'Jody' Davidson High School," Tensas Gazette, 2 April 1926. Davidson was killed in action shortly before the Armistice. On Curry, Amacker, and the Seviars, see Appendix A.

Jones and other respected black leaders played well to a white audience. Widespread support, however, no doubt existed in the black community as a whole. Alfred Scott, the principal at the Crimea plantation school in the countryside, for instance, purchased Liberty Bonds and donated money to the Red Cross and YMCA drives, hoping that he would serve as an example to others. Many did indeed follow suit; the quota limits for war contributions set by the local Council of Defense were always met with resounding success, thanks to the strenuous efforts of involved black leaders. Even more significant, from the standpoint of military service, the black community contributed the vast majority of the over 1500 volunteers and draftees that Tensas Parish supplied to the armed forces. Members of black middle-class families, like Stacey Pollard and his brothers-in-law Arthur, Fred, and George Shaifer, figured prominently among those who enlisted. They expected their service to earn them a new level of respect when they returned.²¹

The appearance of harmony and unanimity of purpose in the Delta of the war years, though, belied a society seething with anxiety and fear. Part of this stemmed from the stress of the war itself. Having witnessed the grand slaughter in Europe since 1914, Americans quite naturally worried over American involvement and its costs. The Federal government's propaganda assault, too, put many on edge. Throughout the spring of 1918, a steady stream of visitors, carefully chosen to ramp

²¹ "Sensible Advice to the Colored Race," Tensas Gazette, 18 May 1917, and "Patriotic Work Among the Colored Race," Tensas Gazette, 22 February 1918. John Henry Scott, Witness to the Truth: My Struggle for Human Rights in Louisiana, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003, 65-67, gives a good account of black enthusiasm for the World War in East Carroll Parish. On black soldiers in the service, see "Soldiers Leave for Camp Pike," Tensas Gazette, 5 April 1918, and the roster of local black servicemen printed in the Tensas Gazette, 2 August 1918. On total numbers, see "Tensas Man Power in the World War," Tensas Gazette, 21 April 1933.

up support, brought the viciousness of the war home to the people of Tensas Parish. Edward Byrne, a British subject who made stops at all the major Delta towns on his tour, recited the horrors of trench warfare, filling the audiences with "horror and with hatred" of the "despised, degraded, barbarous Hun." He proved such a rousing orator that many people doubled their subscriptions to the third Liberty loan then in the process of being filled. A "war train" came through about the same time, carrying wreckage from the battlefields of Europe as well as recent photographs showing the death and destruction along the Western Front. A week later, a young Belgian nurse came through St. Joseph with her tale of woe, offering a softer but still emphatic pitch to the local crowd.²²

The visits had the hoped for impact. For "Liberty Day" on 26 April, all three towns in Tensas Parish held parades and rallies with a common theme- "the prosecution of the war to the bitter end, without quarter to the country's enemies, 'Death to the Hun' being the slogan of the day." An assortment of speakers expounded on this theme at a final conclusive ceremony at the courthouse in St. Joseph, where they described the "unspeakable cruelties" of the Germans; such heated talk led to additional subscriptions to the war bonds drive, with over \$22,000 pledged in less than half an hour. That Sunday, the Presbyterian minister in St. Joseph closed the weekend activities with "one of the greatest excoriations of the Kaiser possibly ever heard here," providing a Godly sanctification for America's own violence lust.²³

²² For coverage of these three events, see "Sergeant Byrne's Visit to Tensas," Untitled Article, and "Miss Van Gastel," in the Tensas Gazette, 26 April 1918.

²³ "Liberty Day in Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 3 May 1918, and "Most Patriotic Sermon," Tensas Gazette, 3 May 1918.

In an ominous turn, the new technology of moving films, which had come to the Delta around 1913, found itself utilized to tap into these inflamed passions. Footage of the war in France periodically appeared in the local movie houses as part of news reels and, in May 1918, Curry Macpherson, a junior member of the Curry family who managed the Electric Theatre in St. Joseph, scheduled the film "The Kaiser, The Beast of Berlin," probably a less than subtle portrayal of the hated enemy. The film ran in late June, only a few weeks after the still powerful "Birth of a Nation" aroused different, though equally intense, feelings at a theatre in Natchez.²⁴

Indeed, enthusiasm for the war sometimes took unsettling paths as paranoia took hold. Those judged to be disloyal met with swift action on the part of others willing to enforce conformity. Early on, the Newellton merchant Leon Kullman, a German Jew who had arrived in the United States in 1891, found himself harassed by "some malicious slanderer" because previous to American entry into the war he had expressed his support for Germany, where his mother and two sisters lived. He was so disturbed by the "warnings as to my conduct and expressions" that he took out a notice in the Gazette to establish his position of support for the United States once it entered the fray. By 1918, the hysteria had grown. In May of that year, two white men found themselves locked up in St. Joseph for their unwise remarks on the war. J.A. Williams, formerly employed on the Mississippi River by the Federal government, ended up jailed for his remark that, "Wilson had no business getting this country in the war." The fact that Williams hailed from New York no doubt played into the reaction of local authorities. Joe Uncherbacher's German nativity contributed even more

²⁴ See Film Announcements, Tensas Gazette, 31 May 1918.

to his incarceration, although perhaps his more serious offense involved encouraging black laborers to evade the draft by telling them they could earn more money at home than in the Army at a dollar a day. Darker incidents, obviously, also occurred, although often not recorded in full for public consumption. The Natchez paper reporting on the two men in custody carefully related to its readers that no other "cases of disloyalty" had been observed in Tensas and, in a validation of the parish's honor, recalled the fact that not too much earlier the local citizens had tarred and feathered a well-known planter for his anti-war comments.²⁵

The Delta certainly had a reputation for sudden and violent mob action. Five Italians were lynched at Tallulah in 1899 after repeated conflicts with their Anglo neighbors and, in St. Joseph, probably during the 1880s or 1890s, the leading men of the town—William Davidson, Benjamin Young, Joseph and Frank Curry, and a few others—broke into the jail and lynched another white man over a personal dispute. Surely, such treatment awaited a stranger who arrived in late May 1918 and acted both "indifferently and impertinently" when queried about his business by Sheriff John Hughes and a select "committee." Ordered to leave town, he wisely caught the morning train.²⁶

²⁵ "A Card from Mr. Kullman," Tensas Gazette, 20 April 1917. "Jailed for Disloyalty," Natchez Democrat, n.d., reprint in Tensas Gazette, 17 May 1918.

²⁶ On the Tallulah lynching, see Edward Haas, "Guns, Goats, and Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899," North Louisiana Historical Association Journal, v. 13, no. 2 and 3 (Winter and Spring 1982). A long series of violent confrontations between the Sicilians and their neighbors and business rivals preceded the lynching. On the lynching in St. Joseph, see Transcript of William A. Register Interview, 28 April 1956, Box 1, f. 1, Wade Collection. The lynched man, named Emerson, owned a store in St. Joseph. In a dispute of some sort, either business or personal, he had physically beaten the wealthy and powerful merchant planter Joseph Moore, an older man. He was arrested and jailed. That same night, the family relations and friends of Moore rendered Emerson from his cell and hung him from a nearby tree. Those

The war, then, established an undercurrent of stress and strain that permeated daily life. It also created, or exacerbated, social tensions that further destabilized the plantation world. The continued outflow of black laborers and their families proved the most disturbing. White planters had seen various migrations of black laborers on and off since the Civil War, but never in such numbers, nor with such effect. This emigration threatened the very prosperity the war had brought since, as the editor of the Gazette observed, "the great mass were the young Negro men, who being more adventurous, less attached to the land and of a roving disposition were naturally the first to leave under the stress of hard times." Drawn by high wages, these black laborers deserted the plantation by the score, taking up jobs at saw mills and factories where they could put real money in their pockets. The draft, too, pulled many young black men away. The first number drawn for Tensas Parish in the draft lottery, for instance, belonged to Jonas Brown, a black tenant farmer on the Mound Place plantation, a telling sign of things to come.²⁷

As early as the fall of 1917, Delta society had begun to feel the pinch. In an effort to retain as many hands as possible, planters

involved were William Davidson, Benjamin F. Young, Richard Whitney, Joseph and Frank Curry, and Reeve and Floyd Lewis. On the last incident, see "Strangers Must Make Their Identity Known," Tensas Gazette, 31 May 1918.

²⁷ Scott quote from, "Registration in Tensas," Tensas Gazette, 15 June 1917; on the draft, see Editorial Notice, Tensas Gazette, 27 July 1917. On the black out-migration from the Delta during the war years, see Greta De Jong, A Different Day: American-American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 64-67. On similar conditions in the Delta regions of Mississippi and Arkansas, see James C. Cobb, The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, 112-124, and Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 40-42.

offered good wages for cotton picking and other such day labor and also added special incentives to their tenant contracts. Wages for other work likewise shot up as demand increased for the limited supply. Blacks exploited these opportunities, picking and choosing among their options, but also continued to leave the district at an alarming rate, both willingly in search of jobs elsewhere and by force of law through the draft. The situation reached crisis level by the summer and fall of 1918. The Levee Board complained that each draft reduced an "already small force in the levee camps," causing a serious deterioration of the maintenance schedule. Local hotels closed their dining rooms because they were unable to find black "help." Private families suffered through an even more difficult time, with many white women forced to take on everyday tasks that normally would have been delegated to poorly paid black cooks or maids.²⁸

Planters, though, endured the worst effects of the exodus. S.W. Vance, pleased with the best cotton crop grown in five years in Tensas Parish, lamented the fact that "owing to labor shortage and the flu [the Spanish Influenza]," local planters had been unable to haul in the "big crop" and he doubted that they would "gather it at all." T.I. Watson, the parish agent for East Carroll, reported a similar situation, claiming that as of December 1918, planters in that parish had harvested only sixty percent of the cotton crop and that perhaps only forty or fifty percent of that total had been ginned. The situation proved so extreme that Governor Ruffin Pleasant, petitioned by local leaders, issued an extraordinary executive order mandating a

²⁸ On higher wages for farm work, see Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 28 September 1917. On the concerns of the Levee Board, see Proceedings of the Fifth District Levee Board, "Tensas Gazette, 19 July 1918. One example of the shortage of black cooks and servers is found in Public Announcement, Tensas Gazette, 31 May 1918.

five-day workweek for all persons, age sixteen to fifty-five, both male and female. The Council of Defense in Tensas Parish made known its intentions to enforce this measure, especially among the black population.²⁹

Resort to such legal endeavors indicated the extreme situation for Delta planters during the war years. For, as much as it brought exciting possibilities, it brought troubling realities as well. In many ways, it spurred the Delta to greater organization, conditioning planters to begin the process of thinking in terms of a group, rather than as individuals. This process, however, was by no means complete and, indeed, in some regards seemed to stumble as high cotton prices led many back into old habits. The prosperity of the war, too, led many planters to overlook or downplay as temporary aberrations the social disruptions that continued to erode the social power of the old order. This heady confidence, though, would soon give way to a haunting feeling of disarray throughout the 1920s.

²⁹ On the problems with plantation labor, see "Narrative Report, S.W. Vance, Tensas and South Madison Parishes, 1918," in Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records, and "Narrative Report, T.I. Watson, East Carroll Parish, 1918," in Box 15, f. 136, v. 136, Extension Service Records. On the anti-vagrancy law, see Public Notice, Tensas Gazette, 4 October 1918.

CHAPTER TWO
THE STRUGGLE FOR ORGANIZATION

For cotton planters in the Louisiana Delta, the dizzying optimism of the big market war years, when prices reached upwards towards a half-dollar a pound, dissipated amidst the grinding agricultural depression and uncertainty of the 1920s. Crashing land values, after heavy speculation in 1917 and 1918, combined with poor yields and high costs of operation to produce a stunning array of mortgage defaults, tax sales, and bank closings, all of which underscored the precarious economic situation in old plantation country. Those planters who survived the tumultuous ride of the post-war period gradually turned towards cooperative action and agricultural reform as the keys for bringing stability to their notoriously volatile industry.

For a year or so after the war, however, the boom mentality carried forward, masking the underlying problems of a bubble economy. The movement of plantation properties that had characterized the war era continued through 1919 as interested outside parties made their way into the region. Both Joseph Harper and Dr. Kirk McMillan, venerable old members of Texas' aristocratic society, disposed of portions of their holdings in June of that year, with Harper selling off about 600 acres of his China Grove place to an investor from the Mississippi Delta for \$18,000 and McMillan parting with 900 acres from The Burn. Even as late as August 1920, in the midst of a swirling recession, Randal Hunter, son of the long-time Waterproof cotton broker and furnishing merchant Napoleon Hunter, reported "some few plantations

still changing hands," although he commented as well on the significant fall off from preceding months.¹

Buyers, in fact, prowled about through most of 1920 and 1921, looking for good bargains, but increasingly these inquiries represented the activities of large land and timber corporations that had the capital to withstand a rough economic downturn while taking advantage of the misfortune of others. The Delta Land Company, for example, sent their Memphis agent and two Illinois investors to look over the Osceola plantation in January 1921, at the very nadir of the post-war depression. For most private individuals, though, the fever for plantation property had cooled, as heavy speculation in inflated properties simply could not continue with cotton prices bottomed out. John Lindsay, who had managed Mound Place plantation and then became an agent for the Alluvial Land Association, also based out of Memphis, basically admitted as much to landowners trying to recoup their paper profits. He warned that it was "useless to hold lands at [the] top prices obtaining last year," since those prices were "considerably above true value." Lindsay, of course, sought to drum up his own speculation business among planters desperately clinging to prime lands, waiting for a rebound in prices, but his comments identified, in a succinct way, a dire problem facing Delta planters as the cotton market spiraled downward.²

Most Delta planters had overextended themselves in the rush to cash in on the swelling market of the war years, borrowing heavily from

¹ Sale Notices, Tensas Gazette, 20 and 27 June 1919; Randal N. Hunter to Emily Scott, 16 August 1920, in Box 1, f. 7, Emily T. Scott Papers, Mss. 386, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

² Untitled Notice, Tensas Gazette, 14 January 1921; Lindsay Business Notice, Tensas Gazette, 13 May 1921.

banks, finance companies, and private sources to purchase overvalued properties and plant them in cotton. Faced with continued labor shortages, inflated supply costs, low cotton prices, and poor yields in 1919 and 1920, these men now strained to keep up with the high mortgage payments. Stirring unpleasant memories from the fallout after the Panic of 1893, Josiah Scott, of the Gazette, wailed that with cotton declining from forty to ten cents a pound, planters were "struggling under difficulties such as they have not experienced in twenty five years." Many, he noted, had been forced to put liens on their lands and homes simply to "obtain funds with which to maintain their organization and raise crops for another year." Many more lost everything.³

James Marlow, for instance, a Missouri native and former levee contractor who had settled down as a planter in Tensas Parish before the war, defaulted on his mortgage, losing most of his work stock and farm equipment, including nineteen mules and horses, three tractors, five wagons, plows, discs, harrows, seed drills, and mowing machines. Formerly among the progressive farming crowd advocating agricultural reform, he left the parish after this embarrassment, realizing that in the Delta, economic failure reflected a loss of personal honor and status. Other newcomers suffered similar indignities. G.W. Lindsay lost twenty-four mules and horses, twenty cattle, a steam tractor, plows, discs, cultivators, and other equipment. C.L. Cole gave up at

³ On the problems facing Delta planters in 1920, see "Narrative Report, T.I. Watson, Madison Parish, 1920," in Box 26, f. 242, v. 242, Extension Service Records. Watson noted that he expected cotton production in his parish to average only about a quarter bale per acre, an abysmal figure. Tensas' production dipped from over 18,000 bales in 1918 to only a little over 7000 bales for each year, 1919 and 1920. This information from "Cotton Production and Ginnings for Specified Years, Tensas Parish, Louisiana," USDA Correspondent to Congressman Otto Passman, June 1962, Box 1, f. 4, Wade Collection. Scott quote from Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 28 January 1921.

sale twenty-nine mules, three horses, six cattle, a Ford automobile, sawmill equipment, plows, harrows, cultivators, cotton bales and cottonseed. W.M. Goodbar lost his plantations, Villa Clara and Minnehaha, totaling over 1200 acres, which he had purchased only a few years before. Other properties, such as Pecan Grove (1709 acres) and Elmwood (1333 acres), likewise went to the sheriff for sale to the highest bidder.⁴

Other planters fared just as poorly, unable to make even their minor tax obligations. For the state tax sale in August 1921, some sixty properties, many of them large plantations, were advertised as subject to sale due to nonpayment. Josiah Scott marveled that this was "certainly the largest list we have had in some years," with the total assessed valuation in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Delinquent landowners redeemed most of these properties, but twenty-one, a full third, went under the auctioneer's gavel. Included among these were W.W. Burnside's 700 acre Hollywood plantation, worth over \$19,000, and C.C. Brooks' 530 acre Gladstone and Woodstock plantations, worth over \$12,000. Burnside and Brooks played crucial roles in the parish's later political and economic life but even they proved susceptible to the vagaries of fortune. Other large holdings that went at the auction block for pennies on the dollar included the 1940-acre Dunbar spread, owned by the Natchez financiers Beltzhoover & Learned; H.L. Cockerham's 1295-acre Osceola No. 2; the 1630-acre Kenilworth plantation of investors Payne & Hamilton; and D.V. Edwards' 1320-acre Monticello.⁵

⁴ For specific citations and examples on foreclosures, see Assorted Writs and Notices, Tensas Gazette, 18 February, 29 April, 6 May, and 21 October 1921. For biographical information on Marlow, see Marlow Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 26 August 1921.

⁵ "State Tax Sale," Tensas Gazette, 8 July and 26 August 1921.

The round of foreclosures precipitated by the rapid descent of cotton prices had a debilitating effect on the parish's economic life. Planters who had borrowed heavily and at usurious rates from banks and other sources to fund their operations now proved unable to pay up or secure other loans. Without their money in circulation, passed down as cash or credit to their sharecroppers and tenants, consumer purchases in town stores and plantation commissaries declined. Sawmill laborers and timber men helped take up the slack to a degree, as the great lumber companies cleared the backcountry of its wide hardwood stands, paying high wages. Randal Hunter, of the Waterproof merchant clan, in fact, called them a "God send to us for business would certainly be bad" otherwise. Sawmills running at full capacity, however, hardly helped planters pay off their debts, which ultimately proved devastating for local financial institutions. Unable to pay their own creditors, two of the three parish banks went under in 1921. The Bank of Newellton closed its doors in spring of that year and the Bank of Waterproof folded in the fall. The Waterproof bank already had suffered through one closure in 1920 as a result of a disastrous embezzlement affair involving W.D. Brigham, the cashier, who made improper use of his bank position to loan himself money during the downturn. His deed discovered and owing some \$75,000, he was forced to sell all his accumulated property, \$50,000 worth, and suffered through the humiliation of being branded a thief by local society. Brigham's wife defended him as an honest man who only made a foolish mistake, but, as Hunter opined, "others cannot see it that way."⁶

⁶ On the bank closings, see *Untitled Notices, Tensas Gazette*, 1 April and 21 October 1921. On Randal Hunter quotes, and Brigham affair, see Randal N. Hunter to Emily Scott, 16 August 1920, Box 1, f. 7, Scott Papers, LSU.

The hemorrhaging would continue well past 1921 as the post-war depression marked out winners and losers. The Somerset Plantation Company lost everything to back taxes in September 1922, including Somerset, Via Mede, Backland, and Wildwood plantations. These properties totaled almost 14,000 acres with an assessed value of over \$254,000, but the Mortgage & Securities Company of New Orleans paid out less than \$7700 for the rights to them all. Later that fall, the Clara Nook (1216 acres) and Osceola (1295 acres) plantations also went to sale to cover unpaid mortgages. Lawsuits and sheriff's sales would dog worried planters deep into the 1920s, with one estimate placing approximately seventy-five percent of all Tensas farmland under "heavy mortgage" during this period.⁷

Not all planters suffered alike, though. More established individuals, with connections to capital or deep social ties in the community, managed to weather the storm of the early 1920s and even took advantage of the depressed conditions to expand their holdings and influence at the expense of their less well-off neighbors. James Allen, a wealthy entrepreneur originally from Missouri who had made his fortune in land speculation before settling down in Tensas as a planter, added Bellevue and its 590 acres in January 1921 to his already substantial holdings that included three other plantations. Later, in early 1922, following the collapse of the Bank of Newellton,

⁷ On tax sales, see "State Tax Sale," Tensas Gazette, 25 August and 15 September 1922, and "Tax Notice," Tensas Gazette, 29 September 1922. On seizures and sales, see Assorted Writs and Notices, Tensas Gazette, 25 August and 10 November 1922. For the estimate on parish indebtedness, see "What is the Matter with Tensas Parish?," Tensas Gazette, 17 November 1922.

he would organize the Citizens Bank of Newellton, capitalized at \$25,000, with himself and his son as majority shareholders.⁸

Another man who profited was Thomas Wade [Jr.], the ubiquitous attorney at large who owned shares in Allen's bank and nearly every other incorporated business in Tensas Parish. Wade had strong family ties in the river district, as well as financial ties to Natchez, and he used these to his benefit. In a late August 1922 tax sale, he acquired almost 1500 acres for less than \$650, further rounding out his portfolio, and in 1926, he established the Tensas Investment Company, with his father and the Natchez banker M.R. Beltzhoover as key associates. Capitalized at \$15,000, the company mainly sought to speculate in local plantation property.⁹

Among the other planters and investors who withstood the bust period of the early 1920s, many sought to maximize their earnings and protect their assets through increased agricultural organization along the corporate model. The agricultural corporation itself was a fairly new concept to the Louisiana Delta which, unlike other parts of the New South, such as the Mississippi Delta a decade or two earlier, did not begin the process of incorporation until the early years of the twentieth century. Plantation owners in the heart of the old antebellum Natchez district had a natural disinclination against such organization, having staked their social reputations on the success or failure of their properties over a long period of time. Giving up such a personal association proved difficult for many old-line planters,

⁸ On the sale of Bellevue, see Untitled Notice, Tensas Gazette, 14 January 1921. For biographical information on Allen, see Appendix A. On the bank incorporation, see "Act of Incorporation of Citizens Bank of Newellton, Louisiana," Tensas Gazette, 17 February 1922.

⁹ On Wade's investments, see "Tax Notice," Tensas Gazette, 8 September 1922, and "Act of Incorporation of Tensas Investment Company," Tensas Gazette, 31 December 1926.

although some of the more astute members of this class did indeed lead the initial movement. The Panola Company, one of the earliest and certainly the most successful agricultural concern in Tensas Parish and perhaps the entire Delta, had as its founders, for example, two of the leading lights of the old establishment, William Davidson and Benjamin Young of St. Joseph.

Other progressive-minded planters, both members of local society and well-off newcomers, sought to emulate the continued fiscal achievements of this large operation. Sidney Shaw, with his partner in Greeneville, Mississippi, utilized the down times to streamline their activities by organizing the Winter Quarters Plantation corporation in December 1921. With a stock capitalized at \$75,000, this new agribusiness sprawled across some 4000 acres and included fifty-nine mules and horses, fifteen wagons, two tractors, numerous plows, cultivators, and assorted other farm equipment and plantation stores. Others followed suit, with the incorporation of the Burn Planting Company in January 1923 and the Crimea Planting Company in March of that year. The Crimea business, capitalized at \$40,000, had two Mississippi businessmen as its chief shareholders, but included as well a number of prominent Tensas people such as Young and Wade.¹⁰

Increasingly, then, Tensas planters looked towards organization as the key to retaining their position and place. Paying close attention to the futures market and the worldwide cotton "situation," they realized the declining status of Delta cotton as ranged against competition from Egypt, India, and other areas, and desperately sought measures to reverse this trend. For, despite the effects of the boll

¹⁰ "Act of Incorporation of Winter Quarters Plantation," Tensas Gazette, 20 January 1922; "Act of Incorporation of the Burn Planting Company," Tensas Gazette, 16 March 1923; and "Act of Incorporation of the Crimea Planting Company," Tensas Gazette, 23 March 1923.

weevil, American cotton planters continued to flood a depressed market with their product, so much so that the Cotton Growers' Association of America warned in January 1921 that two bales of cotton existed for every one that could be spun. The only logical solution appeared to be a reduction in crop size to temporarily stabilize cotton prices and then force a gradual increase. Strong powers within the cotton economy already had begun to agitate on this issue. The Louisiana Bankers' Association, in accordance with the Memphis Cotton Convention's plan, called on state farmers to voluntarily reduce their production by fifty percent, or at least cut their acreage by a third, and asked bankers and merchants to fairly distribute the restricted credit offerings in an even handed manner to "give every farmer a chance." In New Orleans, many of the large cotton factors, such as John Parker, Putnam & Norman, Lehman Stern & Co., and others, together handling over a million bales a year, endorsed the concept of acreage reduction, but, as with other such grand plans, implementation on the ground, at the local level, proved to be the most challenging problem.¹¹

Bound by the cyclical and dilapidated nature of cotton culture, many planters, and certainly their tenants, found it difficult to accept the idea of change or even conceive of how it might be achieved without major upheavals in the system as it existed. Some planters, though, influenced by government agricultural agents and progressive farming journals, and chastened by the devastation of the boll weevil and the ongoing difficulties of the post-war era, began to alter their views on cotton cultivation and farming in general. Judge Hugh Tullis, a prominent attorney and member of an old established family in the

¹¹ "The Over-Production," Tensas Gazette, 28 January 1921, and "Cotton Plan," Tensas Gazette, 7 January 1921. For more on cotton issues, see "The World's Cotton Situation," Manufacturers' Record, n.d., reprint Tensas Gazette, 18 May 1923.

lower Delta, whose brother sat as dean of the Louisiana State University Law School in Baton Rouge, put the situation in stark terms. Only those "fit to survive and prosper," he argued, could make their way in this new environment since the day had long come and gone "when cotton could be produced profitably except by one who brings to the task intelligence, thrift and energy." Before the boll weevil "a cotton crop practically made itself" and required "little scientific knowledge of farming. There were no problems of drainage, fertilization, crop rotation, [or] insect damage to confront the happy dweller of our virgin lands." In the altered world of the early 1920s, though, only the smart farmer could overcome the drastic conditions he faced, through "draining the land and increasing its productivity by fertilization; by producing food for the man and beast who produce the cotton; [and] by intelligent co-operative effort in getting the value of cotton in the market." For Tullis, and many of the educated and progressive planters in the Delta, it simply became an issue of Darwin's immutable law: "He who is fittest to succeed in the race for prosperity, will attain the victory; the dullard and sluggard will fall and perish by the wayside."¹²

Others took an equally adamant, if slightly more optimistic, stance. In a letter to the editor of the Gazette, Mayor Martin Jacoby of Newellton, a wealthy Jewish merchant and landowner, flatly declared that "cotton at present prices can not be profitably grown," and recommended instead a diversification program that included alfalfa, oats, corn, wheat, rye, or barley. He also encouraged the planting of truck gardens full of tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, and beans to market in the North and East and, suggested that an organizational meeting "of

¹² "Survival of the Fittest," Tensas Gazette, 3 November 1922.

all the planters" be held to develop a sustainable parish-wide program. "If we are successful," he contended, "the depression now upon us will be forgotten." James Allen also pressed the issue of organization with his fellow planters. "We can do a great many more things to better our condition by organization and by unity of effort than we can do by acting singly or individually. Without organization," he prophesied, "we can accomplish very little."¹³

Despite some discussion on this issue, Tensas planters did not make the plunge towards increased communication and cooperation until late in 1922, when they established a local chapter of the American Farm Bureau Federation. During the early 1920s, the Farm Bureau had emerged as a leading voice on American farm policy and agricultural reform, making a furious grassroots effort to unite farmers from across the nation and thereby bring some order to a chaotic situation. For planters in Tensas Parish and the rest of the Delta, the Bureau's track record seemed appealing. That fall, the Bureau, through its Cotton Growers' Cooperative Association, had put some two and a half million bales under contract in their bid to cut out the middleman and get the best value for both growers and consumers. In Louisiana alone, the Association had already pledged some 35,000 bales and looked to increase that number upwards to 75,000, fully one quarter of Louisiana's total production, by early 1923. At a meeting in St. Joseph to encourage support for the plan, the visiting Farm Bureau agent spelled out plainly the situation for the planters in attendance: "If the present method and conditions in marketing the cotton crop are not improved," he warned, "the Southern states will pass into a state

¹³ "We Must Diversify," Tensas Gazette, 1 July 1921, and "What Can Be Done to Improve the Labor Situation in Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 19 January 1923.

of bankruptcy in the very near future." The Farm Bureau's program, he concluded, offered the best hope for saving the cotton economy.¹⁴

His doom and gloom comments had the desired effect and soon Bureau organizers found their way back to Tensas. At a courthouse meeting in December 1922, the leading men of the parish, including William Davidson, Benjamin Young, Sheriff John Hughes, state Representative D.F. Ashford, James Allen, Frank and Joseph Curry, German Baker, Carneal Goldman [Jr.], and Napoleon Hunter, among others, heard a bevy of speakers elaborate on the topics of improved marketing strategies, scientific agriculture, and the benefits of community organization. H.F. Kapp of the statewide Farm Bureau association described the broad program for cooperative efforts in purchasing and marketing the cotton crop, as laid out by Bureau directors, who, as farmers themselves, understood the needs and demands of cotton culture. Kapp also urged the planters to hire a permanent county agent to assist in their organization efforts and provide technical expertise on farming issues, as the promotion of agricultural reform and progressive practices, next to more efficient marketing, occupied the most important place on the Bureau agenda. Dr. W.R. Jenkins, director of the state Extension Service out of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, seconded this latter recommendation, arguing that the Farm Bureau and the parish agents worked "hand in hand" in resolving the complex problems facing farmers. The crowd of enthused planters, sold on the ideas set forth by the Bureau, hurriedly elected state Senator George Clinton as a temporary chairman of their parish committee and then set out to enlist their friends and neighbors, with some forty-three planters signed up as members by early January 1923. After

¹⁴ "Tensas Cotton Drive Starts," Tensas Gazette, 10 November 1922.

permanent elections in February, the very active James Allen took over as president.¹⁵

The Farm Bureau continued its intensive organization efforts throughout the year. In July 1923, with the help of the state Extension Service, the Bureau kicked off a campaign, highlighted by a three-day speaking tour led by the president of the American Cotton Growers' Exchange, to lure more farmers into the Louisiana Cotton Growers' Association. With some 5000 Louisiana cotton farmers already pledged and some 150,000 across the nation, representing about a third of the total American production, the Bureau looked to add more. United States Senator Joseph Ransdell, owner of a large plantation in East Carroll Parish, joined in the campaign, pledging his cotton for five years to the Cotton Association. In a speech at Oak Grove, in West Carroll Parish, he personally endorsed the Farm Bureau's plans and called his decision "a cold-blooded business proposition" since the organization, controlled by cotton growers, enabled him and his neighbors to "get a better price than any commission man in the country." The support of Ransdell, a classic figure in the Delta, lent an air of respectability to the program and its modest success in raising cotton prices, at least temporarily, secured the Farm Bureau as an important player in Louisiana's agricultural districts.¹⁶

In conjunction with attempts to regulate cotton production, the more progressive planters in the Delta also looked towards the issue of

¹⁵ "Tensas Parish Farm Bureau Organized," Tensas Gazette, 15 December 1922; "News of Tensas Farm Bureau," Tensas Gazette, 19 January 1923; and "Farm Bureau Elects Officers," Tensas Gazette, 2 March 1923. On the effect of the post-war depression, with farmers interested in cooperative marketing and improved farming methods, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 129-30.

¹⁶ "Another Drive," Tensas Gazette, 13 July 1923, and "Senator Ransdell Knows," Tensas Gazette, 5 October 1923.

agricultural reform. The Northeast Louisiana Farm Demonstration Association, founded in early 1923, attempted to establish through the Extension Service a model, or demonstration, farm in Madison Parish that would aid the entire district through its experimental work with different crops and cultivation methods. Although ultimately fruitless, as the seed money requested from the cash-strapped surrounding river parishes never materialized, the effort aroused considerable interest. In a mass meeting in March 1924 held at the courthouse in Tallulah, Delta planters heard talks from a number of agricultural specialists and professionals that demonstrated the importance of such work. Dr. Perkins, the new director of the Extension Service in Louisiana, advised the adoption of "a well-balanced farm program," including crop rotation and the use of fertilizers, as well as the planting of animal feed and foodstuffs and the raising of livestock. Regarding cotton, he advanced "superior" methods of soil preparation and cultivation, lobbied for the introduction of better quality seed, and advocated the heavy use of fertilizers and calcium arsenate to combat the boll weevil. George Maloney from the Delta Entomological Laboratory near Tallulah spoke for an hour on the various poisons and application methods that he and his staff had tested. Clifton Hester, the manager of the Abston, Crump, & Wynne properties in East Carroll who would later become the extension agent and sheriff for Madison Parish, provided an analysis of his progressive farming practices over the past year, detailing the handsome returns he had achieved through the use of nitrate of soda, a fertilizer, and calcium arsenate, a common weevil poison.¹⁷

¹⁷ "Proceedings of the Northeast Louisiana Farm Demonstration Association," Tensas Gazette, 16 February 1923. "Residents from Eight Parishes Were Present at the Meeting," Tensas Gazette, 21 March 1924.

The local agents, who up until the early 1920s had only had sporadic success in their organization efforts, utilized this meeting and the apparent interest in agricultural reform to discuss their own programs and reach out to the leading planters in their districts. Indeed, the parish agents employed every resource possible to get their message across: newspapers, word of mouth, on-site demonstrations, and even moving pictures. In April 1924, for instance, the local theatres in Newellton, Waterproof, and Ferriday ran several promotional films put out by the Chilean Nitrate Company, a lead producer of nitrate of soda fertilizer. One film illustrated the battle between tradition and modernity in a morality play of sorts, with the character of the grizzled old planter refusing to try new agricultural methods or techniques because he had "grown cotton all his life" and knew what could "be done with it." The spirit of the new, his female ward, however, believed in technology and science, and secretly oversaw the application of fertilizer and the use of improved methods on a portion of the cotton crop. The dramatic results gained from these practices, of course, impressed the planter to such a degree that he forgave the willfulness of his female charge and endorsed fully her plans for the future. The other film, more educational and less dramatic than the previous offering, showed the progressive practices of modern cotton cultivation, tracing the process from improved seed selection through the application of fertilizer and the use of machinery to increase per acre yields.¹⁸

¹⁸ For examples, see "The Use of Nitrate of Soda," Tensas Gazette, 27 April 1923, and "Real Facts Regarding Nitrate of Soda," Tensas Gazette, 18 May 1923. Also, the Annual Narrative Reports of the parish agents detail their promotional work. For the film reference, "'White Magic'-Agricultural Films Exhibited in Tensas Recently," Tensas Gazette, 2 May 1924.

The parish extension agents pressed this reform agenda strongly throughout the mid-1920s. Walter Daniel, agent for Tensas Parish, secured demonstrators for the use of fertilizers like nitrate and Cyanimid and experimented with different cotton seeds, especially the various Delfos strains which gave a better yield and withstood the rain and cold more effectively since much of the picking in the Delta did not finish until after Christmas. He also pushed for soil improvement through crop rotation and the planting of legumes and clovers that could be plowed under for their nutrients. A few of the larger plantation interests already had begun to move in this direction. For the 1925 season, the Panola Company planted 510 acres on one of its plantations in Delfos cotton, which by January of the next year had yielded 675 bales. The management expected to gin over 700 bales total before the end, with some sections producing right at two bales an acre, a remarkable feat even in the very fertile Delta. In addition to the use of improved seed, the company had followed new cultivation practices, including the heavy use of fertilizers and aerial sprays of poison to combat insects.¹⁹

The use of airplanes to fight the boll weevil and other pests, in fact, emerged out of the Entomology Laboratory outside Tallulah, which had been hard at work for over a decade. Under the direction of Dr. Bert Coad, the "bug station," as it was popularly known, experimented heavily with different poisons before settling on calcium arsenate, a powerful concoction that worked very well against the boll weevil but could be fatal to work animals and humans in large doses. Having

¹⁹ "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1926," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. On the need to be more efficient in cotton production due to low prices, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 130-31. On the Panola Company, see Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 1 January 1926.

failed to achieve satisfactory results with mule-drawn and hand-held spray applicators, Coad and his assistant, C.E. Woolman, looked for a better delivery method. By the beginning of the 1922 planting season, they had secured several government surplus DeHaviland airplanes and rigged them to carry a heavy load of pesticide, using air pressure to push the poison out of its hopper. The planes were flown by dare-devil pilots, most of them World War veterans, who reveled in feats of skill such as running the landing wheels on the tops of terrified tenants' roofs, or careening through downtown Vicksburg. Based out of Scott Field, Louisiana's first municipal airport, built on the old Shirley plantation with a \$100,000 in government funds, the dusting operation expanded rapidly and by 1925 had 60,000 acres under contract, at seven dollars an acre. The Southern Dusting Company, organized in 1925 and 1926, and backed by leading Delta planters, including, among others, R.H. Whitney, William Davidson, and Benjamin Young from Tensas Parish, sought to cash in on this new service, although the company eventually folded a few years later due to excessive fatalities. Coad's lead assistant, C.E. Woolman, however, would organize Delta Airlines, a combined dusting, passenger, and freight service out of the wreckage, and build this entity into a major national corporation.²⁰

The movement towards agricultural reform, both in organization and practices, had made some headway by 1926, with Delta planters clearly a much more educated and cohesive group than before. Walter Daniel, the agent in Tensas, remarked on the "well-organized" Farm

²⁰ On the development of crop-dusting in the Delta, see Timothy Harper, "Crop-Dusters," Delta Airlines' Sky Magazine, March 2004, and John Earl Martin, "A History of Ag Aviation in Madison Parish," both located at Madison Parish Historical and Genealogical Data (electronic resource); also see, Madison Parish Historical Society, "The Bug Station." On the dusting company, see "Act of Incorporation of the Southern Dusting Company," Tensas Gazette, 5 March 1926.

Bureau club with sixty-four active members and seemed to be pleased with the overall course of his work. Yet, he also freely admitted that a strong individualist strain remained. It was "very hard" to get the planters to work together as a group, he explained, since each one thought that "a person does not know what they need unless he has been to see the place first hand." This shortsighted attitude would continue to hinder Daniel's activities and those of the other parish agents as well. The gradual rise in cotton prices, too, exacerbated the agents' plight, for as much as planters talked about diversification, they still wanted to plant cotton. "Our southern friends say that they want to get away from cotton," speculated a newcomer to the region, "But I don't know. It seems as if cotton is in their blood. Cotton is one thing they feel sure about." And, even if a planter wanted to move away from cotton, he found himself under intense pressure from his financiers. This same newcomer related an educational tale:

There is a banker not far from here who is strong for crop diversification. He advocates diversification at the Rotary Club meetings and everywhere. Not long ago, however, one of the colonists [at the Mound Colony in Madison Parish] ran short of cash and, knowing the banker's attitude, went to him for a loan. The banker greeted him cordially and the farmer revealed his mission. The banker then asked the farmer how many acres he had planted. The farmer replied, 'Twenty acres in corn, ten acres in soybeans, two acres in potatoes,' and then stopped because of the disappointed expression on the banker's face. The banker said, 'That is very interesting, but when I asked you how many acres you had planted I meant how many acres of cotton.'

The intense hold of cotton culture over the Delta, then, remained strong despite all efforts to displace it.²¹

²¹ "Narrative Report, Walter Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1926," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. "Agriculture in Madison Parish," Madison Parish Historical and Genealogical Data (electronic resource), abstracted from the "Centennial Issue" of the Madison Journal, 14 August 1975.

Disregarding all advice, cotton planters indulged themselves by planting a record crop in 1926. The inability to control production frustrated reform advocates, who simply could not get planters and farmers on the same page with regards to acreage reduction. One of the primary leaders for a sane cotton policy, state Senator Norris Williamson, a planter in East Carroll Parish and president of the Farm Bureau's Cotton Growers' Cooperative Association, lobbied his fellow planters and local merchants to exercise restraint during this bumper crop year. Writing William Davidson in March, he appealed to the respected businessman's common sense: "cotton farmers are facing disaster," he explained, "if they persist in their present inclination to plant another record breaking acreage." Williamson contended that a smaller crop would yield ten cents or more per pound than the massive one being planted, and would give "a nice profit instead of a tremendous loss to the individual farmer and financial disaster to the whole South." Williamson, of course, recognized the tremendous influence that Davidson held in Tensas Parish, as a planter and particularly as a banker, through which position he exercised considerable control over agricultural loans. If the cotton policy advocates could secure the support of a majority of bankers and lending merchants, they designed that they might succeed in reducing acreage through limited loans or stipulations on the type and amount of certain crops, cotton especially, that could be grown by planters.²²

Once again, though, the cycle of cotton culture undermined efforts to control acreage and production, leading to plunging prices and a crisis mentality among planters, merchants, and bankers. By October of 1926, the situation appeared so acute that Senator Joseph

²² "Reduced Acreage Necessary," Tensas Gazette, 12 February 1926.

Ransdell, ever the ally of his fellow cotton planters, bulled in with his own plan to remedy the problem, arguing for the withdrawal of up to four million bales off the market, to be warehoused until prices rose. Using local, state, and Federal credit, the planters would receive seventy-five percent of the price of their stored cotton up front, financed at low interest rates, and would agree to limit their acreage for 1927 to two-thirds of that planted in 1926. Like other advocates, Ransdell focused his efforts primarily upon the region's bankers, who had a stranglehold on credit for farming operations. The leading planters in Tensas Parish generally supported Ransdell's plans and in early November met to discuss the issue. With a majority in favor, they voted to endorse the withdrawal of four million bales from the market and to reduce cotton acreage by twenty-five percent for 1927. With Benjamin Young as chairman, the planters then organized an executive committee and voted in ward leaders to secure pledges from every cotton grower in the parish. Davidson's Bank of St. Joseph offered loans of eight cents on short cotton and ten cents on staple cotton for warehoused and insured bales, at a rate of six percent, until prices improved.²³

The Farm Bureau, particularly the Cotton Growers Cooperative Association, remained active during this time of concern as well and worked hand in hand with the large planter interests to bring bales off the market. Since 1922, the Association in Louisiana had handled over 107,000 bales of cotton worth twelve million dollars and, with its own graders, warehousemen, and insurers, the organization continued to provide low cost services and secure the best prices on the world

²³ "Senator Ransdell's Plan of Market Control," Tensas Gazette, 15 October 1926; "Cotton Reduction," Tensas Gazette, 5 November 1926; and "Local Bank to Aid Farmers to Hold Cotton," Tensas Gazette, 12 November 1926.

markets. Heavy production usually correlated with a steep drop-off in value, such as in 1920 when the thirteen million bale cotton crop drove prices down from thirty-seven cents in January to thirteen cents in December. Three large crops in succession, thirteen million bales in 1924, sixteen million in 1925, and eighteen million in 1926, should have driven prices down to five cents, but the Association claimed that its work had kept the price from breaking only from seventeen to twelve cents. With over 300,000 farmers organized in thirteen states, and control over a million and a half bales that they planned to hold off the market until prices improved, the nation-wide Association was poised to make a positive impact. Unorganized growers, however, threatened all of the good work that could be done, and left themselves "at the mercy of the speculators and gamblers." But, the Association figured:

If fifty percent of the cotton men would join together there would be no more cotton panics, no more cotton prices below cost of production. The cotton farmer could rely on a reasonable price and the whole south would see such an era of prosperity as it never before witnessed.

The bright future promised by the Farm Bureau depended, though, on a widespread cooperative effort among cotton producers, a dubious proposition among a disparate and localized population that, at its core, still distrusted organization and centralized control.²⁴

Smaller planters and farmers, for instance, proved reluctant to sign off on any grand schemes that would limit their number one money

²⁴ "Louisiana Farm Bureau Cotton Growers Co-Operative Association," *Tensas Gazette*, 26 November 1926. Tensas Parish ginned 14,566 bales in 1924, 26,666 bales in 1925, and 20,310 bales in 1926. Actual production appears to have been about 1600 bales less than this per annum total, as sections of neighboring parishes ginned portions of their crop in Tensas. Nonetheless, this is a substantial increase over ginned totals from the years 1919-1923 that averaged 7520 bales. This information from "Cotton Production and Ginnings for Specified Years, Tensas Parish, Louisiana," USDA Correspondent to Congressman Otto Passman, June 1962, Box 1, f. 4, Wade Collection.

crop and the larger planters themselves no doubt had misgivings about losing their cherished independence of action. Ranged against this instinctive opposition, the Cotton Growers' Cooperative Association also faced the challenge of stamping out rumors about its own viability and trustworthiness. The Association financed its regulatory activities with loans from the Federal government, following the general trend towards "associationalism" promoted by Herbert Hoover and others during the 1920s. This reliance on Federal funds, although productive, carried a negative perception with many farmers and planters who became jittery with any mention of "big government." In the midst of the critical campaign of late 1926, Norris Williamson had to fight off nagging suggestions that the Association could not guarantee anything and, in fact, might have to sell its warehoused cotton at low prices to pay off these called-in loans. He protested that the Association had a full eighteen months to meet its obligations to the government, giving it plenty of time to hold the cotton crop over until prices rose. Yet, his arguments often fell flat with many cotton producers, as the chains of localism continued to restrain full participation. Although the work of the Farm Bureau did seem to hold prices in check, 1926 nonetheless proved a disastrous year with most planters only clearing eleven or twelve cents a pound on a crop that cost fifteen cents to produce.²⁵

Efforts at reform, although having made great strides during the early and mid-1920s, continued to suffer then from incomplete organization, localism, and fears of government intrusion. Too, although having witnessed a near catastrophic economic downturn in the

²⁵ "Louisiana Farm Bureau Cotton Growers Co-Operative Association," Tensas Gazette, 3 December 1926, and "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1927," Box 42, F. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records.

early 1920s, planters seemed to gleefully disregard any lessons they had learned when cotton prices rose. An even more strenuous effort, or more dire circumstances, appeared necessary to complete the transformation. And, while this ongoing and painful process moved ahead in fits and starts, planters struggled with other, more intimate challenges to their sense of self and identity as a group.

PART TWO
THE NEW ERA IN COTTON COUNTRY

CHAPTER THREE
SOCIETY DISARRAYED

Amidst the economic turmoil of the early and mid-1920s, white planters in the Delta faced perhaps an even greater crisis as they witnessed the apparent disintegration of the prevailing social order. The First World War had unleashed a veritable cultural revolution in race, gender, and class relations that threatened to upend plantation society entirely and, in the end, did transform it, though not in ways that planters sometimes imagined or feared. Yet, their struggle to control or adjust to these rapid changes occupied much of their time as they continuously sought to maintain their place and status in the modern era.

The most striking challenge to the old order came in the area of race relations, as the emigration of African-American tenant farmers and their families that had haunted Delta planters throughout the war years continued unabated, further undermining their position and authority with those laborers that remained. Mobile and with a newfound sense of economic independence, blacks streamed from the Delta in large numbers, seeking refuge from the harshness of Jim Crow and better lives for themselves in Northern cities. This dramatic movement perplexed white plantation owners who had become accustomed to an abundant and mostly pliable labor force, a situation that reinforced ideas about black shiftlessness, lack of ambition, and overall satisfaction with the plantation system. With few choices in occupation or living arrangements, black laborers, in fact, had been captive to the plantation, and subject to its continual degradation,

feeding these stereotypes in a cyclical fashion. Yet, when access to Northern industrial centers appeared through cheap rail fares and abundant employment, they instinctively grasped at the chance to improve their condition, leaving behind an angry, confused white society that often simply could not comprehend their eagerness to leave.¹

Planters, of course, had struggled through various black emigrations from the Delta before, first during the Civil War and then at the end of the Reconstruction era as African-Americans fled the oppressive atmosphere of a "redeemed" Louisiana. Several decades later, when the boll weevil arrived, bankrupt landlords who could no longer afford to extend credit to their labor force drove many more off the plantation. But the onset of the First World War, with its high demand for labor in war industries, spurred a movement of a magnitude never before witnessed and, this migration continued after the end of the war, as word passed back down South of the opportunities that existed in the North. By 1920, the black population in Tensas Parish had declined by over a third from its 1910 total, and over forty percent from its 1900 peak. These kinds of losses proved a rude shock to plantation society.²

¹ Some good general works on the Great Migration are Nicholas Lemann, The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America, New York: Knopf, 1991, and Milton C. Sernett, Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997. On the migration from Louisiana, see DeJong, A Different Day, 65-76; and Scott, Witness to the Truth, 68-70.

² On emigration after the Reconstruction era, see Nell Irvin Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977. In her discussion of political oppression encountered by blacks, she deals explicitly with Tensas Parish and the "troubles" of 1878. For population figures, see Figure 1, Appendix C.

At first, attempting to brace their racial conceptualization of blacks, whites sought to downplay the out-migration, often dismissing it as a misguided fool's errand, poorly conceived and bound for failure. One article in the local paper reminded its white readers that migrations such as the one under way had "generally ended with the Negro getting back to his 'home folks,' sooner or later," since the black laborer supposedly liked "high wages and short hours" but disdained "the kind of work he has to do in the North to get them." Such stereotypes retained their full force throughout the period, and bolstered white self-esteem at the expense of the black "character." A separate author scoffed at the so-called "employment" opportunities for black men in urban environments: a clothes presser in alliance "with some white man's cook," a street vendor serving up "hamburgers, hot catfish and beef sausage, and sometimes sweet spirits of fermenti on the side," or a barber "with a pool-room and craps table" at the back of the store. When he did return to the countryside, which the same author thought inevitable, the black man usually proceeded to "eat up anywhere from \$5 to \$300 worth of grub while he is waiting for the ground to get in shape to plow," and, when that time arrived, he was usually "seized with wanderlust" and disappeared.³

Reports of black helplessness in Northern cities played particularly well with the local white audience and served the added purpose of a deterrent to any blacks still in the moving frame of mind. One article reprinted in the Gazette, for instance, recounted the tale of Gee McLain, a black man recently returned to Mississippi from East St. Louis, "fully disillusioned and glad to be back in God's country."

³ "Unduly Alarmed Over the Negroes Leaving the South," Manufacturers' Record, n.d., reprint, Texas Gazette, 2 February 1923. "The Colored Brother, or the Creator's Masterpiece," Memphis Commercial Appeal, n.d., reprint, Texas Gazette, 12 February 1926.

McLain described massive unemployment, homelessness, and starvation among black migrants in that city, with one incident in particular striking him as a pathetic summation of their plight. Having secured a rare commodity, a loaf of bread, McLain took pity on a woman and child, both also recently up from Mississippi, and offered it to them. "The way they devoured it," he remembered, "reminded him of ravenous wolves suffering from the extreme pangs of hunger." The white interviewer of McLain who penned the piece added his own commentary at the end and, in a plain warning to black readers, noted that the conditions described were "not calculated to encourage migration up there" to St. Louis or that other great mecca for black migrants, Chicago.⁴

Such tales involving local blacks further reinforced white notions about the migration but with an added sense of realism. In August 1924, for example, Solomon Johnson, who had left "his comfortable home and lifelong friends" to seek "the Elysian fields of the city on the lakes," wrote plaintively to David F. Miller, his former "boss man" on Richland Plantation west of Waterproof, asking for train fare back to Louisiana from the Windy City. He promised to "come just as soon as I can hear from you," and begged for a job bringing in the fall cotton crop so that he could pay back this debt and "come home once more in life." Johnson's misfortune and his subsequent desire to get back into the good graces of his former patron, seemed an appropriate commentary on the ultimate success of the migration. The editor of the Gazette, expecting other such reports in the near future, jibed that, like Johnson, "One by one the weary wanderers will return."⁵

⁴ "Returns from the North to Remain," Lexington (MS) Advertiser, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 6 July 1923.

⁵ "Got Enough of Chicago," Tensas Gazette, 8 August 1924.

Despite this outward self-assurance, whites feared the implications of the black out-migration and their clumsy attacks belied this deep-seated insecurity over the changing racial order. Although sometimes casting the movement as a humorous morality play to be watched and enjoyed, white attacks often took ferocious form and exposed the base racism at the heart of the Jim Crow South. One grisly account, originally published in the Detroit News but specially selected for re-printing due to its emotional impact, played upon the deep psychological fears of many blacks who would be separated from their families and communities if they went North. The grotesque caricature allegedly recounted the fate of blacks who had left the South to pursue their "exotic, absurd, barbaric" dreams of "high hats and royal king shoes, of diamonds as big as hawberries, of ice cream and fried chicken every day, of 'yalla silk dresses' and gen-wine gol' watches," only to be struck down by bitter cold and disease in a far away land. The white man who had located the article and forwarded it for publication made sure to emphasize to the editor that fear was the "best method we can use to impress on the Negroes that going north is not all as it should be." He particularly noted the warning in the article for all black migrants to carry nametags with the addresses of relatives back home so that their bodies, once they died, would "not be carried to the hospital to be cut up for experimental purposes." The suggestion of such a gruesome fate, he felt, would have a good effect for planters trying to keep their labor from leaving.⁶

Whites, too, resorted to a softer approach at times, seeking to exploit class and color divisions within the black community by using members of the black upper and middle classes, with their own agenda,

⁶ "Labor Situation," Tensas Gazette, 8 June 1923.

to reach out to plantation tenants and their families. In a reprinted speech, Dr. R. S. Stout of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church resorted to cheap logic and spurious appeals to racial harmony in his attack on emigration. Although he conceded that blacks had not always been treated fairly in the South, he echoed the old pro-slavery "school of civilization" argument in claiming that black culture "came from the white man, and ninety per cent of it came from the Southern white man." Indeed, he felt that blacks, rather than seeking out better opportunities elsewhere, were morally obligated stay on the farm and repay the patience and charity of whites, who had, after all, raised them up from a heathen people, with "no name, no religion, no civilization, [and] no wealth" to the "highest civilized negroes in the world."⁷

Although not as craven as Stout, F.D. Rollins, the principal at a black school in the far reaches of Tensas Parish, nonetheless supported the stay-at-home movement, if in a different way. Following the path of Booker T. Washington, whom he called "an unusually able college man, with a national reputation," Rollins emphasized the benefits of healthy country living over life in the crowded city, still "reeking with contagion." With a thorough grounding in agricultural principles, so the argument went, young black men could earn a "comfortable and independent living" on the farm, with plenty of fresh air and outdoor work. Rollins cited the successful example set by those graduates of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, under George Washington Carver's guidance. Eschewing emigration into far-off, morally unhealthy urban areas, Rollins wanted to develop and uplift the black race on its home ground, working within the limits of Jim Crow, not challenging it

⁷ "Let the Unrest Stop," Christian Advocate, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 6 July 1923.

outright. Such talk must have provided succor to whites but its finer points no doubt failed to impress those who actually suffered under the plantation system.⁸

White planters, too, realized the limitations of these arguments. They were countered heavily, and effectively, at any rate, by many of the black newspapers coming out of the North, like the Chicago Defender and Pittsburgh Courier, which contained accounts of African-American success outside the Deep South. Whites attempted to curb circulation of these black papers and magazines, to no avail, and continued to press the people they considered to be the real culprits or instigators of out-migration, labor agents working for Northern industries. Paranoia against these individuals, accused of misleading a supposedly docile and gullible black population, ramped up into rage. Jeff Snyder, the longtime district attorney for the region, felt the situation so acute in the late spring of 1923 that he issued a circular to local papers, planters, and businessmen rehashing the World War One era statute aimed at curtailing the activities of labor agents in Louisiana. Snyder reminded his supporters that many "unauthorized and pestiferous persons are operating in this section of the State, endeavoring to persuade labor away from where they are rightfully employed," and urged the prompt notification of authorities about any suspicious activity so that "arrest and vigorous prosecution" could be attained.⁹

⁸ "The Privilege of Living in the Country," Tensas Gazette, 13 January 1928.

⁹ On the circulation of Northern papers, see John Henry Scott, Witness to the Truth, 64-65. "Law as relates to Labor Agents," Tensas Gazette, 8 June 1923. The demands of the legislation, which called for a \$500 license and a \$5000 bond to the state Labor Commissioner, backed by a certificate of good character from a District Judge, would have been almost impossible to meet in plantation country, even if money was not

The continued oppression of the plantation system itself, however, proved more important than Northern papers or labor agents in driving black emigration. Some whites assessed this trend correctly, if only within their limited frame of vision. One writer identified the migration as primarily the movement of the "younger and loafing set" who were leaving out of "distrust, fear, and a demand for civic rights" rather than for economic reasons. To a degree, he was right, as many younger men and women, raised within the bounds of Jim Crow segregation, did want a better life for themselves. Many had seen military service during the World War only to return to the status quo of Delta society. Their dissatisfaction was evident to all, even this author, who took a somewhat progressive stance by advocating interracial meetings that would, "let the Negro explain what he has hid in his breast." He also felt that whites could do a better job of developing a black leadership that could "preach the gospel of 'back to the farm'," which would help secure "better results" in turning the tide and keeping blacks at home.¹⁰

James Allen, the wealthy planter and banker, who, as an outsider could put some perspective on such issues, concluded that the labor situation was "growing worse from year to year" and that the "exodus of colored labor to the cities in the South and also to the industrial centers in the North is going to continue and . . . be more rapid in the future than it has been in the past" White planters, of course, always complained about the amount and quality of labor they had at their disposal but the early 1920s saw serious disruptions in

an obstacle. Punishment for disregarding the statute included a stiff fine and/or jail time.

¹⁰ "Williamson Writes on Negro Migration," Vicksburg Evening Post, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 3 August 1923.

the labor supply that worried many. Allen, writing from his Sunnyside Plantation in early 1923, estimated that Tensas Parish had "not more than one-half of the amount of labor necessary to cultivate the lands properly" and that even this labor pool was "very inferior and inefficient." Calling black labor "a losing proposition to the landlord" because a tenant farmer could not "make enough cotton, corn and other farm products to pay the expense of feeding and clothing his family," he also complained of apparent ingratitude on the part of black laborers. "If we try to compel him to work more and save more," Allen remarked, "he becomes dissatisfied and moves from your plantation to where he can have more leisure and do more as he pleases." Despite these supposedly gross deficiencies, he still "preferred negro labor to any other kind of labor to raise cotton" and therefore argued strenuously for attempts to retain the remaining black workforce in the parish. This could be accomplished, he contended, by "giving them better houses, in which to live, giving them longer terms of school for their children and also giving them better school houses in which their children can be educated and helping them all we can by fair and just treatment to make good." Without these small guarantees and life improvements, plantation owners might have to resort to bringing in white labor, a thought abhorrent to most.¹¹

Others in Tensas Parish attempted to foster this spirit of cooperation and interracial goodwill, having failed to generally stem the flow by other means. In August 1923, whites in St. Joseph helped organize a parish-wide meeting of the black fraternal orders, under the guidance of John Henry Jones, the middle-class black merchant, for the purpose of discussing the labor unrest in the parish. With food,

¹¹ "What Can Be Done to Improve the Labor Situation in Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 19 January 1923.

drinks, a baseball game in the afternoon, and the music of the Bud Scott dance band out of Natchez that evening, the event drew a good crowd. The main point of the meeting, though, was to develop means to effect a "pacification" of the black population on the issue of migration North, where, the editor of the Gazette sighed, "in so many cases disappointment awaited them and the rigors of winter and heat of summer have taken [a] toll in human life." That the migration came to be discussed so openly in a region well known for its silence on racial conflict indicated the desperate position of the planters themselves.¹²

The African-Americans who remained in the parish throughout the war era and after benefited from this situation, with whites willing to compromise on a whole range of issues. Black tenants, with considerable leverage, generally secured better terms and treatment, or moved off to the next plantation, as Allen noted. Although by no means a golden age, the opportunity did exist at this time to actually clear substantial amounts and move up the economic ladder by purchasing a mule or equipment, or even a small farm. A number of tenants at the Montrose plantation in Madison Parish, as an example, cleared well above the fifty or hundred dollar average cited by at least one source as the annual profit norm in the Natchez district; many made as much as two or three hundred dollars after their accounts had been settled. Almost all seemed to have access to large credit lines, and tenants personally owned over a third of the total mules on the plantation. Only a few made the leap to ownership, of course, but most enjoyed greater access to luxury and consumer goods for themselves and their families.¹³

¹² "Fraternity Meeting Friday," Tensas Gazette, 3 August 1923.

¹³ On planter concessions, see Davis, Deep South, 373, and Scott, Witness to the Truth, 68-70. Davis, Deep South, 366-369, discusses

Blacks also enjoyed opportunities off the plantation, often working in town for cash wages. White townspeople felt the labor shortage of the early 1920s acutely, with a decreased supply of domestic help to cook, clean, garden, paint, carpenter, and do other odd jobs and, they consequently paid top dollar for that help they could get. The manager of Lyndale plantation, on the outskirts of St. Joseph, became so incensed with these folks luring his black workers away with the promise of easier work and higher wages that he took out a notice in the local paper, advising potential white employers to "call No. 19 and ascertain from me whether I will have these negroes at work on the plantation at the time they are wanted to do work in town." In a sour mood, he remarked that he did not object to his laborers picking up "an occasional dollar on the outside" but reminded whites in town that "their time belongs first to the plantation on which they live."¹⁴

To a degree, then, blacks found themselves in the unusual position of being able to pick and choose the work they wanted, if they wanted any at all. Many worked until they had their fill and then relaxed with their friends and family, to the chagrin of local whites. The authorities sometimes sought to close down this black leisure time by utilizing the war era anti-vagrancy statute, which would force local blacks to work, or, rather, work more strenuously. The Board of Aldermen in St. Joseph, for instance, authorized Mayor William Davidson in July 1919 to employ a special marshal if necessary to enforce the

overall income of black tenants in a year. On the Montrose information, see Tenant Accounts, v. 11, Ledger, 1925-26, and Plantation Inventory, 1 January 1924, in v. 3, Cashbook, 1924, George W. Montgomery Papers, Mss. 1091, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

¹⁴ "Notice to the Public," Tensas Gazette, 25 March 1921.

law against a large number of "idle" black men and women in the town. This resort to police power, though, did not sit well with the black community and appears to have been abandoned shortly thereafter.¹⁵

The white community eventually turned, as Allen had suggested, to the issue of uplift and improvement in an effort to keep black laborers mildly contented in the Delta. This effort, though, proved very limited. A few planters probably sought to offer better access to doctors and health services and permitted black tenants to grow gardens and keep milk cows, thereby improving nutrition. White townspeople generally encouraged the small black middle class-the teachers, ministers, merchants, and landowners-and treated them with as much courtesy as Jim Crow segregation allowed. But, largely, whites in the Delta wanted blacks to help themselves and, for once, tacitly agreed not to stand in their way.¹⁶

The organizing tradition among African-Americans in plantation country had a long history, of course, and throughout the 1920s blacks continued to rely on their churches, fraternal lodges, and social clubs for support. In early 1921, for instance, black families on Oneonta plantation organized the Home Mission Society to care for the sick and dying, pay for funeral expenses, and conduct charitable work. The True Vine No. 1 Homestead Lodge was organized and incorporated in October 1926 out of the Choctaw Chapel on Pecano plantation and, much like the Home Mission Society, its general range of activities included care for the sick, burial obligations, and relief. During hard times, these organizations offered more help than could generally be expected from

¹⁵ "Proceedings Board of Aldermen," Tensas Gazette, 4 July 1919.

¹⁶ For a discussion of similar plantation improvements in the Mississippi Delta, see Lawrence J. Nelson, "Welfare Capitalism on a Mississippi Plantation in the Great Depression," Journal of Southern History, v. 50, no. 2 (May 1984).

whites, outside of a few donations made by well-off planters in a paternalistic gesture. After a line of vicious tornadoes swept through the parish in the early spring of 1927, for example, black leaders raised money to relieve the suffering of the affected tenants. Small, individual offerings totaled only about fifty dollars, but the various black clubs, such as such as the Climax Lodge, Knights of Pythias, Hollywood Society, and Odd Fellows Lodge donated fifty dollars each.¹⁷

Blacks in the Delta realized that they were, for the most part, on their own, but appreciated the opportunity to conduct their affairs unimpeded by the establishment. As was usually the case in other black communities across the South, they focused their efforts on educational improvement. The middle class leadership, men like George Woods, Paris Dixon, John Cammack, and Armstead Mitchell, offered their support but a black woman, Mary Sykes, emerged as the outspoken voice of this movement. Sykes came from a church family, her father being the Reverend S.L. Sykes. His position had afforded a relatively comfortable life for himself and his family and his daughter benefited from increased social and educational opportunities. Using these to her advantage, she eventually rose to become the "right hand" of the parish school superintendent, handling all of the issues involving black education. She pursued her passion vigorously, often wrapping her criticism of the Jim Crow system in patriotic appeals, kindly sentiments, or moral chastisements. For instance, in a public invitation to a fundraising activity at the Delta Bridge school in July 1924, she warmly praised the sponsoring group, the Woman's Relief Corps, an auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic, calling them "a

¹⁷ "Act of Incorporation of Home Mission Society," Tensas Gazette, 4 February 1921, and "Act of Incorporation of True Vine No. 1 Homestead Lodge," Tensas Gazette, 8 October 1926. On storm relief, see Untitled Notice, "Tensas Gazette," 4 March 1927.

band of race-loving, patriotic women, striving with utmost sincerity to uplift fallen humanity, assist in educating the race and making loyal citizens." She carefully thanked the parish School Board for extending the black school term from four to six months and likewise thanked the many whites that had donated money to build a new black high school. Yet, she did not shy away from confrontation. She warned those in the community, white and black, who had not given to the current drive to be ready with a handout in the near future because, "we are coming again." She even offered a critical rebuke of whites that disapproved of her efforts, contending that they "could only realize by changing their skin, what the progressive, law-abiding colored man or woman has to face and efface." For Mary Sykes, educational reform and uplift in the black community provided an outlet in her active struggle for personal and political rights in the Jim Crow South.¹⁸

Her incessant demands for additional resources and more funds proved an effective strategy in the midst of the black out-migration and echoed the arguments of progressive planters concerned about the labor shortage. She realized the rare opportunity that lay in the hands of the black community and, with other middle-class leaders, pressed for concessions at every chance. One of their key ambitions centered on the establishment of an industrial and agricultural training school at St. Joseph, which would encourage racial improvement along the lines espoused by Booker T. Washington and George Washington

¹⁸ For background on two of these men, George Woods and Parish Dixon, see Woods Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 18 and 25 May 1923, and Dixon Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 7 April 1933. Woods had arrived in the parish from Port Gibson, Mississippi, in 1875, and became a prosperous landowner and merchant. He spearheaded the Liberty Bond drives among the black community during the First World War. Dixon was a well-off farmer and member of the black Masonic Lodge. For background on Mary Sykes, see Sykes Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 17 February 1928. Quotes from "Celebration at Delta Bridge School," Tensas Gazette, 11 July 1924.

Carver. Unwilling to fund such a school out of their own pockets, the planters reluctantly decided to pursue "national funds" to bring the school plan to fruition and, indeed, the money did end up arriving through the Julius Rosenwald fund, a Northern philanthropic institution that provided money for hundreds of black schools across the South in the age of Jim Crow. The black community was ecstatic and feverishly sought to raise a matching amount. Whites seemed interested in the project as well. Bolton Smith, an absentee landowner from Memphis, wrote Mary Sykes that, "having some Rosenwald schools in the parish will have a great influence in making the labor contented," and, as a show of support he offered an initial fifty dollars towards the fundraising efforts, and more if necessary. Smith encouraged Sykes and the other black leaders to acquire a plot of twenty or forty acres for the school "where a system of rotation suitable to one tenant on a plantation can be worked out, and the pupils can see it before their eyes." At least, he wrote, the school should have room for a large garden since he felt that "nothing will make the beginning of a good farmer better than to learn how soil should be prepared for gardening."¹⁹

The state Rosenwald agent, J.S. Jones, visited the parish in September 1925 to inspect the black schools and assess the opportunity for the development of these educational facilities "along proper and sane lines." With Mary Sykes leading the way and various black church leaders in tow, including the Reverend Sykes, Jones toured the parish, providing positive words for the black community and urging whites to assist in their uplift. "You should not forget," he reminded his white

¹⁹ "Proceedings Tensas Parish School Board," Tensas Gazette, 5 June 1925, and "The Rosenwald School for St. Joseph," Tensas Gazette, 18 September 1925.

listeners, "that the physical resources of this very fertile parish cannot be properly developed without honest, industrious, capable and trained labor." He expected whites, in fact, to "furnish the directive influence" while black tenants furnished the physical power. But, he warned, "If this power is not properly trained and housed and made comfortable, the net results will fall far below your expectations." The parish School Board already had made some accommodations in the early 1920s, increasing the number of black schools in the countryside, extending the school term, and securing certified teachers. In addition, the parish helped support small Rosenwald schools at Newellton and Delta Bridge and employed Mary Sykes to oversee black education. The Board members promised to help as well with the larger St. Joseph school, which would see double duty, serving in the summer months as a teacher training institute. They offered to move and refurbish the old white high school, only recently replaced by a new brick building, and to "be as liberal as their funds will assist." And, although the vast amount of the funds for the new school came from the black community itself, the school board did follow through with its limited commitment to aid black education.²⁰

Indeed, by the end of the decade, black education had advanced significantly through community activism and with at least a modicum of white support. It still remained woefully inadequate, among the worst in the state in fact, but showed signs of progress. During the 1928-29 school term, the parish operated thirty-three black schools, up from a meager fifteen in 1920-21, and had two large agricultural schools at

²⁰ "Visits Tensas-J.S. Jones, State Rosenwald and Jeanes Agent, on Tour of Inspection," Tensas Gazette, 25 September 1925; "Fine Rosenwald School in Prospect," Tensas Gazette, 2 October 1925; "Collections for the Rosenwald School," Tensas Gazette, 20 November 1925; and "Colored Teacher Training School at St. Joseph," Tensas Gazette, 30 April 1926.

St. Joseph and Delta Bridge. The property value of the buildings associated with black education had increased from \$1500 to over \$33,000 in the same span. Enrollment included "practically every colored child in the parish" and local teachers and volunteers conducted adult illiteracy courses at every school. The School Board employed forty-four licensed educators, with the teacher-training institute producing excellent results. Its program had earned a Class A ranking from the state Department of Education, allowing its graduates, all employed with the Board, to be exempt from examination for five years. Although the main goal of this expanded educational effort remained to teach black children "courtesy and politeness and above all 'How to Work' intelligently," they were being taught by black teachers who were more educated and motivated than ever before.²¹

Throughout the 1920s, African-Americans in the Delta utilized the changed environment of the post-war world to carve out new opportunities and new destinies for themselves. White planters faced this development with a sense of concern and general unease. Raised to expect black subservience or, at least, dependence, they viewed the activism of blacks in economic and social affairs as an alarming development, but felt powerless to control it. And, indeed, blacks in the Delta had set themselves on the long road to civil rights, although many years of struggle and oppression lay ahead. Sensing the altered racial environment signaled by the rapidity with which African-Americans took control over their own lives, Delta planters, frustrated and feeling betrayed, struggled to adjust their racial beliefs to a new reality that few seemed ready to accept.

²¹ Untitled Column, Tensas Gazette, 29 July 1927, and "Facts About Tensas Colored Schools (1928-29) Session," Tensas Gazette, 8 March 1929.

Amidst this ongoing challenge to the racial order, white planters in the Delta faced further social unrest as the pent-up frustrations and tensions of the war years erupted into a full-scale assault on Victorianism. This affront to the old order seemed to appear suddenly out of the war's wake, bringing with it a disturbing set of new social mores that undermined planter power and control. The Victorian ethos, as noted earlier, extolled the virtues of masculinity and personal independence, so cherished in Delta culture, while relegating women, children, blacks, and lower class whites to a lesser status, where they were subjects rather than active participants in society. The modern temper of the 1920s questioned the basic parameters of this social construct. Although planters dealt with the changes with their usual verve, they felt confused as to their ultimate meaning.

One of the most disturbing challenges to the old Victorian order came with the changing gender roles of the post-war era, as the acquisition of voting rights with the Nineteenth Amendment proved to be a key indicator of the new role for women in society. The struggle for suffrage had a long history dating back, in organized form, at least to the abolition movement of the mid-nineteenth century. As society seemed to spiral more and more out of control in the latter years of that century, women emerged as social leaders, especially in urban areas, and attempted to exert their moral vision through political participation. The rural South, based in the Victorian culture of masculinity, largely rejected the issue, in part out of basic principle but also due to fears of tampering with an electoral system that had taken years to "adjust" after the Reconstruction era. Yet, by the 1910s, the pressure had grown to such a degree that even in the most conservative sections of the South, middle and upper class white women sought the franchise in order to give voice to their thoughts and

opinions. Men of the old order at times took a virulent stance against this movement, although very often realizing their own ineffectiveness to control it. That powerful commentator on Tensas society, Josiah Scott, for instance, felt that the birth of a girl to a local Italian family on election night in January 1916 heralded the imminent passage of the suffrage amendment; he did not revel in this premonition. "We have had the misfortune of boll weevil, politics, and high water," he moaned, "but perhaps the worst is yet to come- woman suffrage." His condescension sparked outrage among the younger women in the community and, as Scott remarked, they did not hesitate "to say what they thought of us." Scott, however, remained unapologetic and indeed attached a blistering response to the "rose bud set" in his next edition. Recycling the classic Victorian vision, he sallied that the American woman should "not be marred or her hallowed influence blighted by the coarser duties of citizenship." Further, he felt it was the duty of "American chivalry to . . . preserve her unsullied from the allied influences of politics, and protect her from the weighty responsibilities of the sordid affairs of life that will crush her ideals and lower her standards." At any rate, Scott sneered, "political gossip would cause her to neglect the home, forget to mend our clothes and burn the biscuits." The country editor's crusty, old-fashioned image, if not already firmly in place, became a set reality after the airing of these views.²²

Not surprisingly, he maintained his vocal opposition to female voting rights long after suffrage had been attained, fighting a bitter

²² For an excellent articulation of the states' rights opposition to female suffrage, see "Wiping Out the States," New York World, 7 June 1918, reprint, Tensas Gazette, 28 June 1918. Quotes from Untitled Notice, Tensas Gazette, 4 February 1916, and "An Apology!," Tensas Gazette, 11 February 1916.

rear guard action with the war already over. During one special election shortly after ratification, he reminded female property voters to vote in person, as proxies would no longer be accepted. "Before the world war, with its train of ills," he ruminated, "feminine property owners could vote in tax elections without previous necessity of registering and paying [the] poll tax" Their demand "for the privilege of wearing the breeches and enjoying what the Lord never intended for them to have - the right to voice in governmental affairs," however, had cost them this little "premium," just as any man. He continued to periodically unleash these contemptuous feelings throughout the decade. Espousing a hard-line Victorian conception of gender relations, in which women dominated at home, and men in the world at large, he simply could not endorse women taking an active role either in the political or, apparently, the social life of the community, state, or nation. "Wifehood and motherhood should be woman's objective and ambition," he wrote, and "politics and the affairs of the nation should be man's work, in which woman should not meddle." Again, placing women upon the domestic pedestal, he lauded the wife and mother as "too noble and high in her ideals to drag her skirt in the putrid mire of politics," and questioned whether women should even become involved in social issues, as that might distract them from their duties with the family.²³

Scott, of course, spoke for an older generation, raised within the world of Victorian etiquette and behavior and disturbed by the course of modern life. Yet, the old ways had not passed entirely from the scene during the 1920s, as the honor killing of the planter Henry May in September 1924 illustrates. May met his end on a long, dusty

²³ "St. Joseph's Bond Election Next Tuesday," Tensas Gazette, 27 April 1923, and Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 28 January 1927.

stretch of highway known as the Texas Road, which led west from Waterproof towards Highland; his assailant was a neighbor, Harrison "Buddie" Miller, member of an old antebellum family in the parish. The source of the dispute centered on May's alleged attention to Miller's wife, a barely contained secret that portended a violent ending in the rigidly honor bound Delta. Miller had suspected the affair for over a year, and on several occasions had quarreled with his wife and threatened to leave her. The last straw came when he overheard her in a telephone conversation with May, promising to come to town. The phone line out to the big house at Highland ran through the plantation store, so that a person could pick up at either point to listen. Miller had been at the store and picked up the phone to overhear the suspicious talk, which sent him into a rage. Returning home, he rummaged through his wife's goods, retrieving an unsigned but incriminating love letter from one of her handbags. He then set out with a pistol, determined, as he told Elliott Coleman, whom he met on the road, "to drive May from the parish." Finding him stopped in his car alongside the Texas Road and talking with one of his black tenants about the cotton crop, Miller approached May, threw the letter at him, and then stepped back, firing four rounds into his chest, and another into his leg. May crumpled back against the seat, dead. Coleman, who had begged to help Miller "adjust" the matter, and thereby avoid violence, came up about a minute later, having lost time in turning around. He checked for a pulse, but found none, and then searched May for a weapon, likewise finding nothing. Miller, having accomplished his goal, asked Coleman to accompany him to St. Joseph, so that Coleman could bring the car back to Miller's home once he had turned himself into the sheriff. Before making their way to the courthouse, Miller

asked to stop by the law offices of Dale, Young & Dale to secure his defense.²⁴

The court hearings for Miller attracted a capacity crowd, as people poured in to hear the details of this deadly encounter between members of Tensas' upper class. May, the son of Reverend H.W. May, the Methodist pastor at Tallulah, but formerly posted at Waterproof, had been connected to the prominent Hunter family of that town through his wife, Julia, daughter of the old patriarch Napoleon Bonaparte Hunter. Miller's family, of course, was old-stock, well known and well heeled, and his defense team included some of the most prominent men in the area, former Judges Hugh Tullis and John Dale, both in private practice. His defense, from the beginning, rested on the appeal to honor, and although the presiding judge ruled in a preliminary hearing that the "unwritten law" did not apply in this case, clearly, Miller and his attorneys meant to press the issue. In fact, after carefully weighing the evidence, the grand jury, composed of leading planters and merchants like state Representative Daniel F. Ashford, Richard Whitney, and German Baker, refused to indict Miller, thereby endorsing the conception of manly action so important to the Victorian order.

Such incidents ratified an older behavioral pattern still prevalent in the Delta, but one increasingly on the wane. Miller killed May because he felt he must in order to maintain his status among his peers, those men who subsequently refused to bring charges. The white youth, the new generation, embraced, by contrast, the culture of the "jazz age" with its emphasis on personal fulfillment over community sanction. In large part, they were influenced by culture

²⁴ On the murder and court hearings, see "Wednesday's Tragedy," Tensas Gazette, 12 September 1924; "Preliminary Trial for Harrison C. Miller," Tensas Gazette, 26 September 1924; and "H.C. Miller is Freed," Tensas Gazette, 17 October 1924.

filtering in from urban areas. The movie houses in many of the small river towns, like the Blackman Theatre in St. Joseph, played the most recent runs of Hollywood productions, and the advent of the radio allowed access to happenings in St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. Periodically, the jazz bands from the pleasure steamers that plied the Ohio and Upper Mississippi Rivers swept through the area featuring the latest sounds from the hottest musicians. In December 1925, for instance, the steamer "Capitol," working the winter season out of New Orleans, arrived in Natchez for a one-night stand featuring the Peacock Charleston Band, which included "colored musicians from all parts of the United States" such as "cornet wizard" Dewey Jackson, "the originator of the wah wah" effect, and other "musical stars." Through these mediums, the outside world with its fads and fashions poured into the Delta.²⁵

Personal connections also played a role in bringing the new culture into the countryside. Lucille Watson, the young mistress of Cross Keys plantation, for instance, maintained a steady correspondence with her friends and family in New Orleans and Natchez, keeping abreast of the latest trends. Her brother Philip attended Tulane University in the early and mid-1920s, and Lucille's cousin Belle filled her in on all the gossip. In the early fall of 1924, she talked about gaining weight and dieting, and then remarked on the rebellious stance of many of the local girls who had cut their hair in the fashionable "bob"

²⁵ Almost every edition of the Tensas Gazette, from the mid-1910s on, features advertisements for movies playing at the local theatres. On the jazz cruise, see "Peacock Charleston Ban Coming to Natchez," Tensas Gazette, 20 November 1925. Also see the assorted announcements for other cruises in the Tensas Gazette, 30 April 1926 and 9 September 1927. William Howland Kenney, Jazz on the River, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, discusses the cultural importance of these pleasure cruises in disseminating the "jazz" sound across the heartland of the nation.

style. "I wish you could see the hair cuts at school," she wrote Lucille. "There are so many that have their hair cut short all over except for one little lock over each ear. I think they look a perfect sight myself." Belle even considered how she might use the new style to her advantage, thinking that she might get "an explosion from mama, by telling her that I am going to get my hair cut like that."²⁶

Lucille's friend Ethleen, in Natchez, also offered views on the outside world, beyond the plantation. In one letter she described a visit to Havana, Cuba, where she drank champagne, attended the cabarets, and gambled at the casino, losing seventeen dollars on roulette. Her whirlwind tour took her on to Panama, where she attended a dance at Colon and flirted with a young American army lieutenant from Nebraska, and then to Nicaragua where her good times continued. Later, she described a somewhat less exotic time on the dating circuit in Natchez. On one Sunday, she had attended a matinee showing of the movie "A Lady Surrenders" with her beau Charlie, before going back to see it again that night with another young man, Syd Farr. Later that week, she had dates with Felix Rives, up from New Orleans, on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and then went out again with poor old Charlie on that Saturday. She prided herself as being a "modern" woman. In such brief, nonchalant conversations, then, the cultural mores of the city made their way into Tensas Parish and the Delta.²⁷

The widespread availability of the automobile also aided the escape of Delta youth from the strictures of the highly ordered,

²⁶ Cousin Belle to Lucille Watson, 27 September 1924, in Box 5, f. 1, Cross Keys Plantation Records, Mss. 918, Manuscripts Department, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

²⁷ Ethleen to Lucille Watson, 29 July 1929, Box 5, f. 5, Cross Keys Records, and Ethleen to Lucille Watson, December 1930, Box 5, f. 6, Cross Keys Records.

carefully monitored interactions at old-fashioned picnics, fish fries, and other social visits. Indeed, the Delta penchant for continual entertainment in an effort to relieve the boredom of plantation life became even more pronounced with the advent of the automobile and the slow improvement of major roadways, first with gravel and later with asphalt or concrete pavement. The advances of the new age, though, came with a cost. Drinking and driving took a heavy toll among the Delta youth, with long stretches of poorly maintained roads lying between themselves and a good time, and plenty of liquor to attend the journey. In July 1924, one young sport ploughed his new Lincoln into a bridge support, severely injuring himself and killing his friend. The two had been out to a dance given at the country club on Lake Bruin, and were returning to Natchez when the accident happened. The editor of the Gazette lamented the accident, but used it as a moral lesson in his crusade to divorce "gasoline and white lightning."²⁸

The weekend dances that these young men had attended emerged as the focal point for youth culture in the Delta, with black dance bands brought over from Natchez, like the one led by the ever-popular Bud Scott, to play the latest music. These dances, easily accessible by youngsters from up and down the Delta and from neighboring districts in Mississippi, were big affairs and outside the supervision of older adults. To the older audience, the dance steps themselves, though wildly popular with the youth, appeared suggestive and immoral, provoking one country editor to remark that the "Charleston" was "nothing but the old plantation break-down that was the rage among the darkies when slavery prevailed." If the youth would "just rattle the bones as they jig," he claimed, "the old times will surely have staged

²⁸ "Deplorable Tragedy," Tensas Gazette, 11 July 1924. Also, see "Dances and Whiskey," Tensas Gazette, 1 August 1924.

a come back." The other activities, free flowing booze and intimate encounters inside, and outside, the dance hall, incited outrage. In April 1925, aghast at these loose morals, a Tensas Parish grand jury, led by foreman Elliott Coleman, recommended that the local government enact legislation to clean up the dances, which attracted men and women "of not the best character from abroad" and featured moonshine whiskey and "other conditions" that they could "only hint at." Although the youth of Tensas Parish participated actively and willingly in such dances, it seemed beyond thought for the elders that their own children might be anything less than moral, upright, and God-fearing Christians. They remembered earlier times, when, "An intoxicated youth was a crying scandal and an intoxicated female would certainly have caused harakiri or apoplexy among the penates."²⁹

District Judge Felix Ransdell, with jurisdiction over most of the Delta, attempted to restrain the immorality through stiff fines and punishments. In the late summer of 1925, he had a glowing commendation for the East Carroll Parish sheriff, who had broken up a dance in Lake Providence given by the "social set," in which many were drinking or drunk. In passing down his praise, he advocated the arrest of all future offenders as well, promising to enact harsh justice in his courtroom, since he felt that young men "so void of that sense of self-respect, regard for women, and a desire to observe the laws of the

²⁹ Dances were extremely popular, and almost a weekly event in the summer months. On the popularity of the Natchez band leader Bud Scott, see Dance Announcement, Tensas Gazette, 27 June 1919; Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 17 April 1925; Scott Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 25 November and 16 December 1938. The "plantation break-down" quote is from Untitled Editorial, Mansfield Enterprise, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 19 March 1926. On the report of the grand jury, see "District Court," Tensas Gazette, 24 April 1925. The last quote comes from William Alexander Percy, Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941, 1994 re-print, Louisiana State University Press, 129.

country" as to be drunk in public ought to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. A man willing to give whiskey to a woman, he sternly reminded the local youth, only did so for "immoral purposes" and should be viewed as a "social leper." The editor of the Port Gibson Reveille applauded Ransdell's stand, and likewise encouraged the arrest and incarceration of drunkards, as "a night spent in jail is a night long to be remembered" by such dishonorable miscreants.³⁰

Despite such strident words, the youth revolution continued, with young women and men demonstrating an increased independence from the old manners as the 1920s wore on. Such widespread social improprieties struck at the very heart of Victorian morality. William Percy, who chronicled the decline of the old order around Greenville, Mississippi, bemoaned the "disintegration of the moral cohesion of the South" as he watched the desolate nature of modern life: youth "fretting and fuming . . . over what they should do," standards "in flux," and hospitals full with the flotsam of the disconnected society: "the neurotics, the mental cripples, [and] the moral anemics." Scott of the Gazette observed a similar sense of ethical turpitude among the Tensas Parish youth, who "file rapidly out of the House of God" only to "step on the gas" and leave any lesson of rectitude and right living behind. This degradation of polite society not only imperiled the souls of the white youth but, perhaps more important in the Delta, also loosened white control over the majority black population. "Today white women drink in public places, become drunk in public places," Percy lamented, "and public places are filled with scandalized and grossly human Negro waiters. Cars at night park on the sides of roads, and Negroes, like

³⁰ "The Last Dance," Lake Providence Banner-Democrat, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 4 September 1925, and "A Determined Judge," Port Gibson (MS) Reveille, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 18 September 1925.

everyone else, deduce what the couple inside is doing." For Percy and others of the old school, the moral failure of the white elite signaled a general societal decline that could be witnessed in the uncontrolled behavior of blacks and even lower class whites.³¹

Social disorder, indeed, appeared to permeate Delta society in the 1920s. The easy days, as late as April 1919, when the Gazette could report no business at all in the District Court and boast that Tensas Parish had not held a jury trial in two years, dissipated amidst an explosion of criminal activity. In large part, this stemmed from the unintended effects of Prohibition, which encouraged widespread lawbreaking in the distillation and consumption of alcohol. Whites and blacks living on the margins of Delta society eagerly turned to the manufacture of illicit liquor as a way to make a quick dollar, setting up their operations in the secluded backwoods and swamplands of the riverfront parishes and peddling their product in large markets like Vicksburg and Natchez, or further down river in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The bitter isolation of the areas along the Mississippi River, many only accessible by boat, provided near perfect security for moonshiners practicing their craft, and jurisdiction issues, especially in the case of certain cut-off islands, further confounded law enforcement by the few officers available for the task.³²

Conflicts between these desperate men and polite society increased dramatically. In April 1921, for instance, a dissipated and bitter ex-levee worker named J.A. Smith shot and killed the aged Deputy Sheriff of Tensas Parish, Howard Clark, before being gunned down himself. Smith, a white man working with the government fleet below

³¹ Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 74, 308. Scott quote from Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 4 December 1925.

³² Court Notice, Tensas Gazette, 2 May 1919.

St. Joseph, had been dismissed for drunkenness several weeks earlier and retreated to a small, nearby "shanty-boat," from which he sold bootleg whiskey back to the black work gangs. A white clerk with the fleet confronted him about his activities and, after taking a potshot at the man, Smith fled back to his refuge. A short time later, Deputy Sheriff Clark and one of the junior deputies, Albert Bondurant, Jr., came down from St. Joseph to arrest him. When they climbed aboard his boat and ducked down into the sleeping cabin, Smith met them with his shotgun and poured buckshot into Clark's chest. Bondurant opened fire with his automatic pistol, killing Smith instantly. The incident produced an immediate uproar in the local community, as Clark, seventy-one at the time of his death, was well liked by all. He was, in fact, part of the old crowd in the parish, having grown up across the Mississippi River in the old plantation district at Rodney, almost directly opposite St. Joseph, before coming to Tensas Parish in 1880. His sudden death at the hands of a violent and erratic "river rat" highlighted the dangers of the new era.³³

And, indeed, lawlessness seemed at times to reign. Conditions in the backcountry appeared particularly harsh. Conservative citizens in the town of Delhi, in Richland Parish, feeling overwhelmed, posted a warning in July 1922 to "moonshiners, blind tigers, [and] pistol packers" that their behavior would not be tolerated, invoking the specter of mob action if necessary. Ferriday, down in Concordia Parish, had an equally tough reputation, especially since it served as a center for railroad and sawmill operations. In Tensas Parish, too, in the early 1920s, disorder and lawbreaking seemed to take hold, disturbing the relative peace and harmony that had formerly held sway.

³³ "Dy. Shff. N.H. Clark Killed," Tensas Gazette, 22 April 1921.

In its November 1922 report, a grand jury returned indictments for murder, manslaughter, and embezzlement, and reported on rampant moonshining activities in the parish, which they felt had reached "serious proportions." Discoveries like the badly charred body of a young woman deep in the swamp along the Tensas River only reinforced the general sense of social collapse. In this case, the woman's body had been laid over logs, covered with gasoline and set on fire.³⁴

Raids by law enforcement officials and heavy sentences from the judiciary only served to temporarily depress the crime wave in the Delta. In April 1925, for instance, Federal revenue agents and two Mississippi sheriffs busted up several illegal stills in the netherworld along the Mississippi River, actually crossing into Louisiana territory on two of the raids. Longtime District judge Felix Ransdell promised moonshiners that they could expect to receive no mercy from him, and carried through with his threat. Yet, throughout the Prohibition era, bootleggers continued to use the Delta as a base for their operations regardless of the personal risks to themselves. The profits to be made proved a great lure.³⁵

This social disorder during the postwar years fueled the emergence of the new Ku Klux Klan as a powerful force in Louisiana life, if only briefly. Voicing the frustrations of lower and middle class whites, both displaced and disturbed by the course of America in the 1920s, this "second" Klan had a varied agenda. As an outgrowth of

³⁴ "Delhi For Law and Order," Richland Beacon-News, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 14 July 1922. On Ferriday, see coverage of a gunfight there in "Killed at Ferriday, Sunday," Tensas Gazette, 30 October 1925. "Grand Jury Report," Tensas Gazette, 24 November 1922. "A Gruesome Find," Tensas Gazette, 16 October 1925.

³⁵ "Officers Capture Three Big Stills," Fayette, MS, Chronicle, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 24 April 1925. "District Court," Tensas Gazette, 24 April 1925, and "Court Convictions," Tensas Gazette, 30 October 1925.

the "100% Americanism" that had led to the misguided patriotism, and sometimes vigilantism, of the First World War era, the Klan espoused a veritable moral crusade against perceived radicalism and "foreign" influence in the country, especially targeting immigrants, Catholics, and Jews as people outside the Anglo-American mainstream, and therefore of questionable loyalty. At the same time, the Klan vigorously supported an aggressive and reactionary Protestantism that sought to reverse the spiritual isolation and corruption of modern society, witnessed in the collapse of community standards, the rise of corporatism, and the excess of the "Jazz Age."³⁶

In Louisiana, the Klan flourished in the conservative, Anglo-Protestant heartland of the hill country north, with the largest organizations in urban centers like Shreveport, Monroe, and Alexandria, but with smaller groups flung out across the rural districts as well. Although disavowing a political thrust, other than maintaining a strict adherence to the rather vague notion of "Americanism," the Klan did articulate a certain dissatisfaction with the status quo, and its activities often appeared driven by the class struggle between working class whites and the planter and corporation dominated power structure. At times, such long held political and social grievances boiled over into Klan-backed violence.

The worst of these incidents occurred in Morehouse Parish, on the western fringes of the Delta, where poorer farm and town whites objected to the supposed loose morals and insolent manners of local planters around the small hamlet of Mer Rouge. Located in an isolated

³⁶ On the "second" Klan, especially its origins, social composition, beliefs, and goals, see Nancy MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, a very detailed study of the organization and its activities in Athens, Georgia.

plantation district, Mer Rouge tolerated the eccentricities of the planter lifestyle more readily than the hard-scrabble parish seat of Bastrop, and, according to at least one knowledgeable source, "was where all the planter's sons kept their colored girlfriends." Enraged by such open and shameless "race-mixing," among its other nefarious sins, local Klan leaders, raised in a strongly evangelical and violently racist environment, determined to clean out the town and reform the wicked ways of their fellow whites, eventually kidnapping, torturing, and murdering two of the most well-known "offenders" in late August 1922. The greatest "offense" of the two men killed, however, most likely was nothing more than their stated opposition to the Klan itself. Their willingness to call out the Klan leaders by name, to challenge the will of this shadow organization, led directly to their deaths.³⁷

In the Delta parishes along the Mississippi River front, the Klan, for the most part, found little sympathy. Despite considerable racial violence during the Reconstruction period, and ongoing economic and political oppression, this district had a long history of relatively fluid and easy race relations, with few lynchings or clear cases of brutal mistreatment. This is not to say that a pervasive pattern of abuse, especially on the plantations, did not exist, only that the flagrant, horribly violent incidents that marked the other parts of the Jim Crow South occurred rarely. African-Americans, after all, composed upwards of eighty percent or more of the population in

³⁷ On the Louisiana Klan in the early 1920s, see William Ivy Hair, The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991, 128-36, and T. Harry Williams, Huey Long, New York: Knopf, 1969, 191-92, 208-11. On Mer Rouge, the local Klan, and the murders, see C.S. Lecky's "Morehouse Parish," 42-53, in Folder 3 (Morehouse Parish), Drawer 8, WPA Papers, Louisiana Collection, Louisiana State Library. The quote comes from Lehman Williamson, conversations with author, various dates.

the region, mostly as plantation tenants, but also including a small middle class of merchants, schoolteachers, farm owners, and preachers. Racial agitation, then, simply did not make for good business or friendly social relations, and, as a general rule, most planters attempted to keep on good terms with their black workers and the local leaders in the black community. John Henry Scott, in East Carroll Parish, attributed this somewhat relaxed racial atmosphere to the fact that many whites and blacks, due to miscegenation, were actually related to one another. He claimed, in fact, that it was not uncommon for the large planters often to have two families, one white and the other black.³⁸

In other ways, too, the planters had very close ties to their "people," their black clients within the patronage system. "Aunt" Louisa Banks, who passed away in early 1917 at the age of eighty-two, had been brought as a slave from Georgia to New Orleans, where she was purchased by Robert Snyder, Sr., of St. Joseph and brought upriver to Tensas Parish. She had served as wet-nurse for "all the children of that family," including Lieutenant Governor Bob Snyder and his brother, District Attorney Jeff Snyder. Jake Smith, who passed away in early 1922, had been a retainer with the Clinton family and a well-known black "character" in St. Joseph. The editor of the Gazette labeled him as "one of the fast disappearing ante-bellum negroes of which unhappily so few are now left to connect the past with the present." Smith had been born a slave on the Mt. Ararat Plantation and, although playing the role of the "good ducky" with effect, he nonetheless led an

³⁸ John Henry Scott, Witness to the Truth, 35. For an analysis of the "relaxed" racial attitudes of East Carroll Parish in this period, see Philip J. Johnson, "The Limits of Interracial Compromise: Louisiana, 1941," Journal of Southern History, v. 69, no. 2 (May 2003). Further observations on the closeness of blacks and whites in the district can be found in Davis, Deep South, 39, 91-93, and 403-09.

independent life and probably exercised some influence in the local black community. His involvement with the state Republican Party, masked by non-threatening humor, too, might have belied a deeper political interest in the civil rights of blacks, which he could not otherwise express in the ultra-conservative Delta. Smith and his benefactors, though, also no doubt shared a close bond, forged over many years of constant interaction. The Gazette's report that during Judge Clinton's final illness Smith "was as faithful as a watch-dog, sleeping on the floor at his bedside and nursing him as tenderly as a child," although dripping with condescension, still rings true as an account of the type of strong personal ties that developed in isolated plantation districts between blacks and whites.³⁹

The Delta, likewise, with its small white population, almost always proved accepting of new, quality people, regardless of their ethnic background or religion. German Jews, Italians, and others had carved out successful livelihoods for themselves, with only a minimal amount of disagreement with native whites. There had been a multiple lynching of several Italians at Tallulah in the 1890s, in the white heat after the murder in New Orleans of the city police chief and, during the war years xenophobia raised its ugly head. For the most part, though, these sorts of incidents were rare and many immigrants achieved great success. Martin Jacoby, a Jewish merchant and planter, amassed one of the largest fortunes in the entire Delta and served for many years as the mayor of Newellton. The Elgutter and Kullman

³⁹ On Banks, see "An Old Servant Gone Home," Tensas Gazette, 16 February 1917. On Smith, see Smith Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 27 January 1922, and Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 18 November 1921.

families likewise emerged as upstanding figures in local society, becoming merchants and landowners.⁴⁰

The Delta also proved to be a haven in North Louisiana for Catholics and the more aristocratic Protestant sects. Among the most prominent Catholics in North Louisiana were the Ransdells, the brothers Joseph and Felix, who served, respectively, as U.S. Senator and state District Judge, and hailed from Lake Providence in East Carroll Parish. Strung out in the river towns were others as well, including many prominent landowners and local powerbrokers, such as the acknowledged planter spokesman for Tensas Parish, Benjamin Young of St. Joseph. More common were the Episcopalians, an elite group that included the leading families of the district, who dominated the political and social scene. Overall, as Will Percy across the Mississippi River observed, Delta society was "pretty cozy and neighborly, and nobody cared what to hell was the other fellow's route to heaven."⁴¹

The Klan, then, found little support in the Delta for its anti-black, anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic vitriol. However, among some of the new farmers arriving in the backcountry, and among town whites outside the prevailing power structure, the Klan articulated a certain political discontent and moral disdain with the Delta establishment. Amidst the social disorder of the early 1920s, even members of the prevailing power structure sometimes bought into the Klan's message for moral renovation. Josiah Scott, in response to attacks on the group by Governor John Parker and others, himself pondered how "a society or an order that declares itself as supporting good and opposing bad . . .

⁴⁰ For a good example of Jewish life in the Delta, see the discussion on the Pasternacks, Jewish merchants at Ferriday, in Elaine Dundy, Ferriday, Louisiana, New York: Donald I. Fine, 1991, 91-108.

⁴¹ Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 231.

[could] be regarded as a factor for ill in the body politic of our state?" But, such innocent support would prove fleeting as the Klan's real message became apparent.⁴²

The Klan first appeared publicly in Tensas Parish in late October 1922. At a mid-week evening church service in Newellton, a dozen local Klansmen, dressed in their full regalia, burst through the front doors of the sanctuary and marched solemnly up to the pastor, presenting him with a fifty dollar donation to further his work. After making a brief statement that affirmed their belief in the advancement of Christian principles, they just as quickly disappeared. A Klan resolution sent to the local paper in conjunction with this surprise visit further explained their opposition to Bolshevism, Socialism, Liberalism, and other such "revolutionary" movements, and declared their unqualified support for American democracy and Christianity. Several weeks later, another group of robed Klansmen visited the same pastor during a sermon at St. Joseph, entering silently, depositing another collection of money, and leaving again. The staged aspects of these performances, along with the proclamation, obviously demonstrated a certain effort to advertise their cause. Neither the Klan nor the pastor had strong connections to the local establishment, and it is probable, indeed likely, that they worked together to establish credibility for each other in the community. This, in fact, was a common Klan tactic, used to make a dramatic impact and secure support in new areas. At an early stage of development and without any gross violations of the law yet laid to its name, the Klan's activities seemed relatively harmless, if somewhat juvenile in their production.⁴³

⁴² "K.K.K. Visits St. Joseph Church," Tensas Gazette, 24 November 1922.

⁴³ "Ku Klux Klan Presents Rev. Cudd with \$50.00," Tensas Gazette, 27 October 1922; "To All Citizens of the United States, Tensas Gazette, 27

At the statewide level, though, progressive Governor John Parker had mobilized to fight the Klan's political influence, working to suppress its organization through the resurrection of the old Reconstruction era anti-Klan laws. Its association with the killings in Mer Rouge emerged shortly thereafter, and locally the dark side of the movement revealed itself as well. After Louis Blackman, the proprietor of the St. Joseph movie theatre, fired one of his employees for being associated with the Klan, the local chapter posted a statement of purpose that served as a veiled warning. Labeling Blackman as "a Jew," the group defined itself as a fraternity of "native born white male citizens of protestant faith" who were devoted to stamping out disloyalty, especially among the "foreign born," whom they felt had been less than patriotic during the First World War. The warning to other Jews, and even Catholics, in the community could not have been more apparent.⁴⁴

The Klan continued its organizational efforts throughout the spring of 1923, especially among the middle and lower class whites of the parish. In a welcome to the evangelical preacher J.M. Alford, the local group again proclaimed their belief in American democracy and Christian brotherhood but downplayed the racism, bigotry, and violence increasingly associated with the movement. "The Invisible Empire," the public notice read, "is founded on sterling character and immutable principles, based upon a sacred sentiment, and cemented by noble purposes." The group did, however, make clear that they had a clear Christian vision, of which Jews could not be a part, and with a jab at Catholics, avowed that they held no allegiance to a foreign power,

October 1922; and "K.K.K. Visits St. Joseph Church," Tensas Gazette, 24 November 1922.

⁴⁴ "Public Notice," Tensas Gazette, 13 April 1923.

"either political or religious." Making a promise to offer "no threats and no apologies," the Klan wished to let their actions speak for themselves.⁴⁵

Confronted with considerable skepticism in the aftermath of the Morehouse murders, though, they continued to propagandize their cause in the Delta. The Reverend William McDougall, a noted Klan lecturer, delivered an address at the courthouse in St. Joseph in late May. A large crowd of about a thousand people showed up for the speech, including some two hundred folks from Franklin Parish, in the backcountry, brought in by special train, and many others from the surrounding parishes and Natchez. Following brief talks by several local preachers, including a Winnsboro evangelist, and the ever popular District Attorney, Jeff Snyder of Tallulah, who never missed a chance to address a crowd, McDougall rose to the stage to defend the Klan's basic principles of Christianity and "Americanism," which aroused considerable support from the audience. He was followed by Newton Dalton, of the Klan-backed "Sgt. Dalton's Weekly" newspaper, printed in Winnfield, who further articulated themes of patriotism, while disavowing any Klan involvement in the Morehouse troubles. No doubt attracted by the sensationalism of the Klan and its activities, many in the crowd probably only came in to enjoy a good show, but others, like the large contingent from Franklin Parish, arrived in a show of support. Other than Snyder, who had a keen political eye, it is likely that few of the Delta planters, and none of the Jewish merchants in the area, bothered to make an appearance.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Open Letter from the Ku Klux Klan of Tensas Parish to the Evangelist, Rev. J.M. Alford," Tensas Gazette, 27 April 1923.

⁴⁶ "Dr. McDougall's Address," Tensas Gazette, 1 June 1923.

They were joined, however, by an assortment of other men, even from the backcountry, in opposing the Klan's secret and violent ways. W.A. Jacques, who owned property far out on the Tensas River, directed his criticisms against the organization's "secret machinations and methods," which he felt were a veritable "invitation to reckless and unthinking members to do unlawful deeds." Despite the realization that he might "suffer in my business or my person" for this belief, he still felt compelled to speak out. And, by late 1923, amid continuing revelations regarding the Mer Rouge killings and other atrocities, such stands against mob rule had managed to turn back the tide of support for the Klan to so great an extent that as a political force, its decline was assured. Locally, the Klan certainly was on its way out. In the run-up to the 1923-24 elections, Oliver Watson, a candidate for clerk of court, felt obliged to reject wholly and publicly his Klan membership, arguing that in a parish as orderly as Tensas, such an organization simply was not needed, and in fact, had "had the effect of dividing our people and disrupting the harmonious relations always heretofore existing amongst us" Needless to say, he did not win election. At the state level, the assault on the Klan continued under the administration of new Governor Henry Fuqua, and by mid-1924, the issue had run its course. This did not mean, however, that the cultural challenge to the plantation establishment, which the Klan came to represent in some ways, had abated. Indeed, the misdirected social and political discontent that the Klan fomented, once stripped of its religious and patriotic veneer, would soon enough find a champion in a young politician named Huey Long.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ See W.A. Jacques reasoning for opposition in, "Dangers of the Ku Klux Klan, Tensas Gazette, 26 May 1922. "For Clerk of Court, Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 2 November 1923. For a similar view of the

Throughout the 1920s, the plantation establishment of northeast Louisiana struggled with the cultural challenges of the modern era. The emigration of blacks from the area in search of better opportunities elsewhere and the shifting moral compasses of their own youth, who appeared eager to jettison the traditional values of the old plantation for the excitement of dance halls and unchaperoned rides in the countryside, undermined the traditional conceptions of masculine planter power. As the post-war era wore on, planters would face other tests of their authority and resolve that proved equally unsettling.

Klan's demise in Greenville, Mississippi, see Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 231-241.

CHAPTER FOUR
STRANGERS IN THE LAND

The First World War had set in motion racial unrest and youthful rebellion, but it proved disruptive in other ways as well. Beginning in the early 1920s, and continuing with an increased volume after the 1927 Flood, white farmers from the hill country parishes of Louisiana, and similar parts of Mississippi and Arkansas, began to drift into the Delta in search of land and opportunity, bringing with them a radically different vernacular culture that presented new challenges to traditional, aristocratic Delta society. Planters along the riverfront reacted with disdain when faced with this influx of lower class whites and sought to establish their authority in the usual ways. But, the unwillingness of these people to react in the customary manners of the old plantation continually pressed the limits of planter tolerance, leading to class conflict and social disorder that further underscored the sense of decline and change in the post-war decades.

The Delta, of course, had always harbored a number of small farmers, both white and black, but most of these tended to cluster in the backcountry districts, those low, swampy areas far away from the riverfront that offered a sanctuary of sorts for the human wreckage of the plantation system. The Black River settlement of lower Concordia Parish, for instance, included a large percentage of older, broken down black tenant farmers, driven off the plantations by age, illness, and lack of productivity. In fact, black males sixty-five or older outnumbered similarly aged whites by a ratio of four to one, and this in an area where black and white populations were actually balanced. The community also included many younger, unsuccessful white farmers

who had washed into the region in search of farming opportunities, either as tenants or small owners. About half of these white families, and ten percent of blacks, owned small farmsteads; the balance continued to work on shares for absentee landlords, who expected little but took quite a lot. No matter what their economic circumstance, though, most supplemented their meager returns from farming with hunting, fishing, and trapping in the swamps and bayous, allowing them to edge out a living. It was, however, a hard life, even if it did offer some independence from the normal plantation regimen. According to on sociologist who observed the settlement, the living conditions failed to meet "the barest standard of comfort or health" and reflected "a struggle for mere existence." In fact, if possible, the backland farmers had even fewer conveniences than plantation tenants, who lived relatively close to towns and therefore had access to a wider variety of goods and services. Their homes were mostly rough wood board structures, with hand cut shingles, mud chimneys, and newspaper and magazine pages pasted over the walls to provide cheap insulation from the cold. Wood shutters covered any window openings. Half of the families owned no milk cow, and about forty percent had neither a horse nor a mule. Even worse, a substantial number of whites, and the majority of blacks, did not have access to a clean water supply, relying for the most part on unsanitary cisterns or nearby ponds and bayous. And, increasingly throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the surging timber industry, and accompanying paper mills far upriver in Monroe, left the backcountry area a wasted and polluted habitat, denying its residents of the bare subsistence provided by wild game and fish.¹

¹ T. Lynn Smith and S. Earl Grigsby, "The Situation and Prospects of the Population in the Black River Settlement," Agricultural Extension Bulletin No. 319, Baton Rouge: LSU Agricultural Experiment Station, July 1940, 3-31; quote from 28. Over half the white population was

Yet, as the vast forests disappeared, and new land opened up, these districts attracted more and more settlers, for beneath the once dense growth existed a rich and fertile soil capable of tremendous production. Generally, this "buckshot" clay soil proved less cultivable than the loess deposits closer to the river, which had been in play for almost a century by the 1920s and 1930s with only little evidence of wearing out. It was, however, far more productive than the hard, clay, upland soils of the hill country and, for small, white farmers used to making a hard scrabble living on that, the lure of "bottom-land" proved irresistible. The big timber interests, anxious to turn a second profit off the land once it was cleared of all the cypress, oak, and hickory, encouraged these hopes with attractive offers. Dr. C.W. Melton, who, as a timberman, owned almost 23,000 acres in Tensas Parish, proposed to finance small farmers on forty-eight acre tracts over the span of ten years, with principal and interest paid in annual installments composed of cotton bales: one the first year, two the second, and on up to five bales for years six through ten, after which the farmer would receive a clear title. Most of the other timber companies offered variants on these conditions, which, although tempting to landless and cash poor men, nonetheless proved a hard bargain. The settlers usually had to build their own houses and barns, running up high interest credit lines for materials, and going further into debt with local furnishing merchants for food and supplies. Few ended up making all their payments and often the improved property went back to the original company, to be sold for a higher price at a later date. Still, the chance to clear a tract of

under twenty at the time of the surveys, indicating a much more youthful composition.

land and, through hard work, have title to it after only a few years seemed to be a good deal for men down on their luck.²

Although many failed, enough succeeded to give an appearance of viability. J.C. Vines arrived with his family in Tensas Parish from Mississippi and, already stocked with tools and seed, borrowed enough money to purchase a mule, cow, hogs, and poultry. He concentrated on self-sufficiency and grew enough corn, cane, and vegetables to feed his family and livestock, and enough cotton to pay off his eighty-acre farm after only three years. Others experienced similar success. Up in East Carroll Parish, for instance, Jeff Marsh rose from tenant farmer and renter to large landowner, while Henry and Jim McPherson established themselves on a hundred acre tract that eventually expanded to include over 800 acres. Men like Bill Poe and Ed McDonald, although a step above white tenants and the "new ground" farmers, also served as fine examples of what could be accomplished through toil and thrift. Both arrived in Tensas Parish from outside the Delta, purchased plantation property in the post-war era, and eventually became leading farmers and businessmen. Poe best exemplifies this rags-to-riches story. Arriving almost penniless from Arkansas in 1915, he hired on as a plantation manager in the Newellton area and worked his way up the economic ladder. By the 1930s, he owned several thousand acres and a large herd of cattle, and even carried some political weight in the parish as a very vocal member of the School Board. Such models of

² On Melton's plans, see "Tensas Parish and Her Future," Tensas Gazette, 23 November 1928, a continuation of a report by Frederick Williamson, originally published in the Shreveport Journal, n.d. (1928), serialized in Tensas Gazette, 9, 23, and 30 November 1928. For a discussion of the various terms and conditions associated with these "new ground" farmers, see Jones, "New Settlement Problems," 23-31, and Troy Mullins and B.M. Gile, "Economic and Physical Factors Affecting New-Ground Farmers in Madison Parish, Louisiana," Baton Rouge: Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station, July 1940, 13-14.

success, then, proved a powerful incentive for even the poorest to come into the Delta.³

Underlying this movement was a quest for security, for a share of the "good life," that blurry dream that draped over the landscape of 1920s America. As men returned home from military service during the First World War, they looked to stake out a place of their own; many chose to leave behind the worrisome debts and worn out lands of the hill country for the tall cotton of the Delta. The easy mobility of the automobile age facilitated this migration. Packed into lumbering haul-alls, which would make so striking an impression on Depression era writers and photographers documenting the westward travels of Dust Bowl farmers, the young white families set out, carrying with them their worldly goods: a Bible, a radio, their hunting dogs, and the other flotsam and jetsam of the Southern migrant.⁴

This migration, at first a trickle, began in earnest in the years following the close of the First World War and, initially, most of it went into the backland areas of the Delta, which had not been developed as thoroughly as the wide plantation districts along the riverfront proper and remained almost an afterthought to the courthouse rings that

³ On Vines, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 256-258. A number of modern-day farming families in East Carroll Parish had their start in the 1920s and 1930s. See Georgia Payne Durham Pinkston, A Place to Remember: East Carroll Parish, LA., 1832-1976, Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1977, 68-71, 333-34. On Poe, see Appendix A; on McDonald, see Fontenot and Ziegler, Tensas Story, 198-99. McDonald later went on to head the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries under Earl Long in the 1950s.

⁴ For a very thorough description of these migrants into the Delta, particularly their material and cultural baggage, see Homer L. Hitt, "Recent Migration Into and Within the Upper Mississippi Delta of Louisiana," Agricultural Extension Bulletin No. 364, Baton Rouge: LSU Agricultural Experiment Station, June 1943. Both Hitt and Harold Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers in the Mississippi River Delta, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA, April 1941, use Tensas Parish as a model for their larger arguments about the migration of hill country whites into Delta regions.

dominated parish politics. Increasingly, though, with a rise in numbers, the inhabitants of the backcountry became more vocal in their criticism of the plantation establishment and its failures to provide basic services, especially in the area of transportation. Wiley Cavin, out in the Dickard community west of St. Joseph, for instance, bitterly complained in June 1922 about the failure of parish authorities to replace a number of vital bayou crossings that had been torn up during the high water from earlier in the spring. Without these rudimentary bridges, the people in his neighborhood had been forced to swing far to the south, all the way to Waterproof, to get their necessary supplies. The round trip, much longer than the previous journey to St. Joseph, put additional strains on an already isolated area. "Fortunately," Cavin smirked, "we have not needed a doctor." W.A. Jacques, who had bought property out near New Light, west of Newellton, was likewise discouraged by the failure of the parish government to help the backcountry. In a biting letter from February 1924, he lambasted the "gods of the Police Jury" for refusing to put funds toward the completion of the St. Joseph-New Light road, which had been promised over two years earlier. Declaring that the New Light people probably sooner would "eat green cheese fresh from the moon" than receive "some attention or possibly a respectful hearing" from the parish leaders, Jacques illustrated pointedly the backcountry disillusionment with the status quo. Almost two years later, Jacques still was taking shots at the Police Jury, this time up in arms about their plans to span the Tensas River farther away from the New Light community than originally intended. To Jacques and others, the apparent shift in plans for the bridge seemed to serve only the interests of the large timber companies reaching deep into the wilderness. Angry that his people had paid their taxes just as everyone else, but yet had no relief, Jacques

threatened an economic boycott of St. Joseph itself, warning that Winnsboro in Franklin Parish was "larger in population, with more and larger stocks of goods." In another open letter he criticized the treatment of the "orphanage children" of the backcountry, who suffered through terrible conditions in getting to market while the main portion of the parish population were "surrounded by every comfort of life, even to good roads" Put on and abused, Jacques resented his district's treatment by the "wealthier parts of the parish." This lack of access to major trading centers due to poor road and bridge conditions continued to be a major source of irritation throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, a vivid example of riverfront contempt and apathy.⁵

Yet, the parish elite soon found themselves faced with an even greater annoyance than the backcountry's incessant demands for roads and bridges. The slight movement of hill country whites into the Delta that had started shortly after the First World War began to mount into a full-scale migration by 1924, with large numbers of poor farmers filling the void on the plantation left by the exodus of black labor. This influx of new people put tremendous pressure upon the resources of Tensas Parish. By that fall, school enrollment at St. Joseph had doubled and many of the students, living out on the surrounding plantations, were either unable to bring their own lunch or make their way back to their homes for a noon meal. Such malnutrition resulted in deficiencies in performance so great that a number of teachers actually

⁵ For Cavin's complaint, see "Pecano Bridge," Tensas Gazette, 10 June 1922. Jacques' remarks come from, "Vigorous Protest," Tensas Gazette, 22 February 1924; "Tensas Police Jury Versus New Light," Tensas Gazette, 27 November 1925; and "Mr. Jacques and the Good Roads-Bridge Question," Tensas Gazette, 1 January 1926. For further commentary, also see "Mr. Jacques and the Good Roads-Bridge Question," Tensas Gazette, 29 January 1926, and "Mr. Jacques and the Good Roads-Bridge Question," Tensas Gazette, 19 February 1926.

sought to equip a small soup kitchen for the purpose of providing sustenance to these malnourished tenant children. The School Board sat quietly by, citing a lack of funds, while the teachers scrounged about for a charitable handout. The Men's Prayer Meeting, a collection of middle-class merchants and businessmen at St. Joseph, ended up donating enough money to run the kitchen for a few months, but such private relief efforts could not carry the load for long.⁶

By early 1925, the crisis had become acute, with new white children crowding all the parish schools. Tensas, of course, did not have the best facilities to begin with; indeed, less than two years earlier, the state Rural School Inspector, L.M. Favrot, had issued a scathing report on the parish's educational infrastructure. Since then, ashamed that out of all the parish seats in the state, only New Roads in Pointe Coupee and St. Joseph in Tensas lacked modern high schools (a sad comment on the value of education in the deep plantation districts), local taxpayers had passed a minor tax increase, over a lawsuit, to provide for such a building. Yet, even this major improvement for the parish proved inadequate in the face of new developments.⁷

The dreary issue of extra taxation, then, once more reared its head. Despite the parish consistently ranking near the bottom in terms

⁶ "Men's Prayer Meeting," Tensas Gazette, 19 December 1924.

⁷ "Tells of Visit to Tensas Schools," Tensas Gazette, 2 March 1923. On the saga of the new high school at St. Joseph, see "Proceedings Tensas Parish School Boards, 4 April 1923," Tensas Gazette, 6 April 1923, and "New High School Building for St. Joseph," Tensas Gazette, 4 May 1923. On the lawsuit, by several local landowners, see "The St. Joseph School Building Law Suit," Tensas Gazette, 15 February 1924, and "Some Facts Pertaining to the St. Joseph High School," Tensas Gazette, 15 February 1924. Also see "Plaintiff's Reply," Tensas Gazette, 4 April 1924, in which Freemont Goodwine and L.H. Cook presented their side of the story, especially with regards to the depressed condition of the economy and why they couldn't support any additional taxation.

of taxpayer support for education, the School Board hesitated "a long time" before submitting a slight tax hike to the voting public. Josiah Scott of the Gazette took a noble point of view in offering his support for the tax and even attempted to shame its opponents into action. It was a plain fact, he quipped, that Tensas Parish had one of the lowest school tax rates in the state, with more than forty other parishes taxing themselves "considerably more," and some even tripling this number. Of course, Scott remarked, no one took pleasure in supporting a group that added "heavily to the school enrollment" but only made a "minimum contribution" in return, but he nonetheless felt it a necessary duty of the more established whites in the parish to help in whatever way possible. It was, after all, in his mind, a matter of racial solidarity. Others in the parish obviously held similar feelings, as the additional tax of two mills on the dollar for assessed valuations passed overwhelmingly. However, the largest planters, those who could most afford the increase, continued to balk at such measures, with the average vote against the tax representing over \$13,000 in assessed property compared to the average yes vote, representing only some \$7700. Clearly, then, a certain element in society refused to budge on their general views about class and the natural order of society.⁸

This conflict over proper spatial relations within society boiled over into other cultural areas as well. Perhaps one of the most noticeable came in the arena of hunting and its associated privileges. Planters in the Delta, of course, had perfected the art of the hunt, a

⁸ Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 9 January 1925; "The School Tax Election," Tensas Gazette, 17 April 1925; "The School Tax Election," Tensas Gazette, 24 April 1925; and "Proceedings Tensas Parish School Board, 22 April 1925," Tensas Gazette, 24 April 1925. On planters' reluctance to fund education "for the children of other people," see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 146.

highly ritualized encounter between social equals that validated a man's status and place. Increasingly from the early 1920s on, though, planters found their traditional sport and pastime under pressure from the "new" people in the region, who often held very different views on the proprietary rights over wild game in the deep woods of the Delta. In large part, lower class whites depended on hunting to put meat on their table, either literally, to bolster poor diets, or figuratively, as contract hunters. A daughter of a migrant family in Tensas recalled, in fact, that, "Had it not been for the abundant wild game . . . many people would have starved to death." The newcomers likewise held vigorously to their belief in the open range, especially in the far backlands and swamps, and disregarded basic ideas about conservation, placing intense stress on local wildlife populations. In September 1921, for instance, a state Department of Conservation agent reported the discovery of several deer slaughtered and partially butchered, out of season, along the banks of the Tensas River, evidently the work of "lawless" white men since only the choice cuts had been taken; black hunters, by contrast, would not have left the carcasses with so much meat. Tensas Parish found itself "literally over-run" by such outlaw hunters in the early 1920s, causing real fears that the deer population would be exterminated.⁹

Alarmed by this unrestricted hunting which threatened their one, true sport, over fifty members of the plantation elite, including such leading figures as Harrison and D.F. Miller, Richard Whitney, Elliot Coleman, Henry May, Frank Curry, Will Watson, E.F. Newell, George

⁹ See, "\$25.00 Reward," Tensas Gazette, 9 September 1921, and Untitled Notice, Tensas Gazette, 18 November 1921. "Starved to death," from Fontenot and Ziegler, The Tensas Story, 205. Regarding the slaughtered deer, it is likely that only the best cuts, meaning the ones that comprised a part of the white food culture, were taken, although this was not specified exactly.

Clarke, and German Baker, drafted in the fall of 1921 a public resolution pledging themselves to the support of conservation laws and the prosecution of all violations in order to protect wild game from "ruthless and senseless destruction" by the "lawless pot hunters and fishermen of this and adjoining parishes." They also began to take other formal measures as well to close off access to the woods, swamps, and fields of the Delta over which they and their black tenants had once ranged contentedly. As individuals, they began to systematically post their properties against unauthorized trespass, using a legal device to defend their land and its game populations against poor white hunters. Few trespass notices appeared in the local paper during previous years for the simple fact that they were not needed; planters and select black tenants did not generally clash over such issues. In the early 1920s, though, multiple notices became commonplace and, indeed, would come to consume large portions of the local paper. In December and January of 1924-25, for instance, at least twenty-two separate plantation properties, held by eleven different owners, were posted publicly against trespass. In December 1928, owners or operators listed thirty-four properties, and the numbers only grew in following years.¹⁰

Planters also began the formation of exclusive hunting clubs that negotiated huge leases from absentee landowners, chiefly the large timber companies, and thereby further deprived poor whites of the opportunity to hunt freely over land widely considered as part of the open range. Frederick Williamson, a veteran Shreveport newspaperman,

¹⁰ "Pledge to Protect Game," Tensas Gazette, 14 October 1921. On the emergence of "posted" properties, see a sampling of trespass notices found in the Tensas Gazette, 30 September, 21 October, 16 December 1921; 14 April 1922; 12 and 26 December 1924; 2 and 9 January 1925; 8 October 1926; 7 December 1928; and 7 November 1930. Even more extensive listings can be found in later years.

chronicled a visit late in 1928 to one of these clubs deep in the Tensas wilderness. His host was none other than Benjamin Young, the well-known St. Joseph planter and lawyer, who also served as president of the club. Williamson beamed about Young, whom he claimed epitomized "that fine old sense of charming hospitality which is integrally a characteristic of the old families of Louisiana," but the membership included other such high class individuals as Harrison Miller of Highland plantation, "the champion deer-slayer of several seasons," and his brother Balfour Miller, a businessman in Natchez; German Baker, a merchant and landowner at St. Joseph; Sheriff John Hughes; and fellow planters Dick Lynch and Pless Woodford. These men had secured a special hunting lease from the Fisher Brothers Lumber Company, which owned 80,000 acres in the backcountry; as a token of the corporation's esteem for their continued assistance in local affairs, it even supplied the men with an electric "speeder" which carried them over a trunk line from St. Joseph eighteen miles into the woods. From that point, the camp itself still required a two-mile trek by horse. While there, however, Williamson and the other guests-businessmen W.E. Day of New Haven, Connecticut, and Wilbert Geisenberger of Natchez, J.W. Bateman of the state Department of Education, and the rising young St. Joseph attorney Philip Watson-enjoyed a splendid time. The days started off with huge breakfasts of broiled venison, grits, omelets, bacon, hot biscuits, and black coffee, all prepared by black cooks, the only females allowed. Then came the hunt itself. A few crack shots were posted on stationary stands, while mounted riders, led by a black guide, circled around deep into the woods, deploying dogs and black "drivers" on foot to push any deer caught in the vise back towards the gunmen. At least one or two deer were usually taken in this way. Evenings were spent relaxing by a warm fire, drinking, talking, and

listening to the radio as it carried an orchestral performance from New York, or an opera in Chicago.¹¹

Such clubs served a useful social function, facilitating both business and politics while providing planters with a venue for showcasing their masculine virtues. But, they also proved to be a convenient method of control over the deep woods, with the lease itself being part of a web of legal entanglements designed to limit the impact of newcomers on wild game. Indeed, planters utilized their influence over local governments, and, to a degree, over the state as well, to build a powerful conservation machine, complete with stringent enforcement codes. The Tensas Parish Police Jury, which planters controlled, secured several closed seasons during the mid-1920s due to concerns about over-hunting, and also passed ordinances against out of season kills, as well as against camp hunts. The latter ordinance was designed to limit the ability of non-property owners to hunt for more than a day at a time on land that they did not own or lease. This allowed large planters to have parties that extended over several days, while tenants or renters found themselves confined to single day excursions.¹²

To back up such rules and regulations, planters increasingly turned to conservation agents, game wardens, and the court system to catch and punish white offenders. During the 1927 Flood, for instance,

¹¹ "Pursuing the Elusive Wild Deer, Classic Sport of Tensas Parish," Shreveport Journal, 31 January 1929, reprint, Tensas Gazette, 8 February 1929. For other examples of such social hunts, see coverage in the Tensas Gazette, 7 January 1921, and 6 January and 29 December 1933.

¹² On the various ordinances, see "Police Jury Proceedings," Tensas Gazette, 11 and 18 April 1924; 4 December 1925; 8 October 1926; 7 October 1927; 29 August and 12 September 1930. Madison Parish instituted a three-year ban in the fall of 1931. See, "Closed Season for Big Game," Monroe Morning World, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 14 August 1931.

local planters, by voluntary subscription, employed Avery Hollis, a local white woodsman, to serve as an extra warden on the Perkins estate, near Somerset in the upper part of Tensas Parish, where over 200 deer and innumerable other creatures had sought refuge on its thousands of dry acres. Under the supervision of parish Conservation agent, Elliot Coleman, Hollis maintained his watch for a month until the murky waters subsided and the temporary menagerie gaited away. For the Singer Preserve, donated by the sewing machine company and covering over 81,000 acres in the Tensas Basin, the state commissioned two permanent game wardens to maintain a continuous patrol. But, this could be a thankless job, especially as resentment mounted against strict enforcement. E.L. Collins, for instance, resigned his commission as parish game warden in July 1930 due to the "considerable unfavorable comment" and "unfriendliness" he received from various citizens while in the performance of his duties. Such sentiments increased during the Long administration, when, as a part of his attempt to curry favor with the masses, he permitted widespread violations of hunting restrictions. Yet, the planters, for the most part, did manage to control this aspect of their world and successfully manipulated the political and legal system in the early and mid-1920s to set boundaries that defended their interests. As the 1920s wore on, though, they faced a much graver cultural challenge from the new wave of white migrants pouring into their region.¹³

¹³ On the resort to police power to curtail illegal hunting by poor whites, see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 190-91. For other local evidence, see the summaries of Sixth District Court sessions in the Tensas Gazette, 30 April 1926; 28 October 1927; 1 November 1929; 2 May and 31 October 1930; 6 November 1931; 28 October 1932; 24 July and 23 October 1936. On the Somerset preserve, see Untitled Notice, Tensas Gazette, 17 June 1927. "The Singer Wild Life Refuge," Tensas Gazette, 3 December 1926. Collins resignation is found in "To the Citizens of Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 25 July 1930. On conservation during

Following the 1927 Flood, these people appeared rapidly out of the hill country, seeking to find opportunities for themselves in the post-catastrophe plantation economy. Walter Daniel, the extension agent for Tensas Parish, described the movement as a "regular invasion," but grimaced at the migrants' arrival since few came with mule teams or farm implements; like a wandering gypsy, this new breed of farmer appeared only "with what he [had] on his back." And, such migrants swamped the old society of the Delta. In Tensas, the white population more than doubled in the decade of the 1920s, rising from about 1800 in 1920 to 4300 in 1930. Daniel reported that local towns, once filled with crowds of black tenants on trade Saturdays now "had an almost equal mixture of these white people and the Negroes" H.F. Cassell, the agent in Madison Parish, reported similar circumstances, remarking in 1932 that hill country whites had swollen the total population there by 2000 souls since 1930. The suddenness of the movement stunned Delta planters. Faced with chronic labor shortages, though, they had little choice but to adjust to the demands of working this new white labor. The management of Raritan plantation, for instance, which had formerly employed some twenty black families, made the switch very early on to an all white work force. Many other plantations followed suit.¹⁴

Walter Daniel encouraged planters to make the best of the situation. "We [now] have more labor than we have had for a number of years . . .," he reminded them, with "thousands of acres of cleared

the Long administration, see "Conservation Breaks Down in Louisiana," Richland Beacon-News, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 1 August 1930.

¹⁴ "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1929," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. On the population shift in Tensas Parish, see Appendix C, Figure 1. For the Madison figure, see "Narrative Report, H.F. Cassell, Madison Parish, 1932," Box 26, f. 243, v. 243, Extension Service Records.

land that are ready and willing to be cultivated." These idle lands "must pay taxes the same as the good acres" and the new whites offered "a chance to realize a return . . . from some of the land we are just half cultivating." Daniel realized, however, that working white tenants in an old plantation district had inherent problems. In an attempt develop a viable farm plan that would help smooth out the rough spots, he put out a questionnaire that asked planters to list both the "good points" and "defects" of employing white labor, giving them an opportunity to share their experiences with others. But, he was careful to assure the planters that while "some of these tenants we want and wish to keep," the others, who might not be the "kind we want," could be "eliminated." Despite Daniel's confidence, many felt that they were striking a devil's bargain.¹⁵

The employment of white laborers on the plantations of the Delta indeed proved a troublesome affair for the big landowners. Many of the white migrants arrived in poor shape- financially, physically, and mentally- but rapidly took up the life they had known elsewhere: cropping cotton. Most of them, of course, were familiar with tenant farming, and a number had owned their own small farms previously, but, in many sundry ways, they proved "unfit" for the plantation routine. Planters and plantation managers were used to supervising their black labor very closely, unless they trusted the tenant exceptionally well or, more likely, he had secured better arrangements because he owned his own equipment or work stock. The "boss man" directed when and how much cotton and corn to plant, and inspected the work on daily rounds made on horseback or, with increasing frequency, by car. He left very little room for independent action. The new whites in the Delta,

¹⁵ "To Planters of Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 3 January 1930.

however, came from a background of relaxed or non-existent supervision in their native sections, and objected strenuously to being treated "black" by the planters. As whites, they felt strongly that they deserved the respect that came with independent farming operations, no matter what their economic status or agricultural capability. The planters, for the most part, seemed disposed towards allowing some control; the bond of whiteness at least deserved this much regard, if only grudgingly. But they still found their loss of control disturbing, and often were subject to manipulation and exploitation by the tenants themselves.¹⁶

Planters had usually made a sizeable portion of their income from the "advance" or "furnishing" business, in which they extended credit, with high rates of interest, to their black tenants for the purchase of goods at plantation stores. Often, these tenants never even saw cash money pass through their hands, except perhaps at the yearly settlement, and only then if they cleared enough cotton to pay off their accumulated debts for that year, and previous ones. Tenants who produced, and who remained in the good graces of the planter, received larger credit lines; those who proved unsatisfactory, for whatever arbitrary reason, were let go and blacklisted in the area. Economic coercion, with control over the very basics of survival, therefore, proved to be the most important tool at a planter's disposal. One Natchez District planter remembered, for instance, that his father had taught him to handle black laborers "through their stomachs," and that

¹⁶ On the origins of these migrants, and their physical and mental condition, see Hitt, "Recent Migration," 5-49, and Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 18-39. On the nature of the plantation routine, see Davis, Deep South, 324-42. On planters' willingness to allow more independence in dealing with white tenants, see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 280-83.

in his own dealings with plantation blacks, he had found that, "If they won't act right, I can cut off their rations, and they quiet down."¹⁷

The continual labor shortage of the 1910s and 1920s, however, provided tenants with more leverage than usual in this exchange, and the white migrants who arrived during this period exploited this weakness, and their race, to the hilt. Quite simply, they refused to play by the rules that had governed white planter-black tenant relations, insisting on extended lines of credit and access to the account books. One planter in the area grumbled that white tenants were "always wanting silk stockings for their wives, and print-dresses, and things like that, and if you tell them you can't advance anymore, they will probably just pick up and move out on you." Another planter based his opposition to white tenants on the simple fact that, "you can't hold them down the way you can a Negro."¹⁸

Often times, disagreements erupted over the operation of the tenant's farm, or over prices offered for cotton or other crops. Planters, it must be remembered, were accustomed to labor intimidation, and, in this regard, the old habit died hard. Although often offering fair prices for cotton to their tenants and croppers, allowing the laborers to make a profit of a few hundred dollars in a good year, planters still controlled the process and no doubt shaved off a cent here or there in negotiating prices for lint and seed, using such determinants as fiber length, quality, and condition. They also controlled access to the gins, which cost a fee to use (usually a percentage of the cotton baled matched against the account), and, most important, extended credit at high interest rates for crop production

¹⁷ Davis, Deep South, 356.

¹⁸ Davis, Deep South, 349, 469.

and rations the year round. Descriptions abound of ways in which plantation owners and managers manipulated the system to their benefit.¹⁹

White hands on the plantation refused to be intimidated when it came to protecting their rights. They insisted on fair prices, and being more or less educated and literate, were able to keep up with trends and developments that might help their cause. Likewise, they were not above malingering or refusing to work when they felt cheated or disrespected, long a common and effective tool used by black plantation laborers, but they often pressed the bounds of this traditional relationship by showing outright defiance to the owners and managers. This sometimes occurred with black tenants as well, and there are accounts of black men or women killing a white man over some plantation dispute, usually only in extreme life or death situations; in such cases, other white planters often simply shrugged off the incident as just desserts. There was a balance, of course, but white tenants often pushed their anger and resentment to the fore. In many cases, they simply abandoned the farm, their mobility a key ally, and moved on down the road, leaving behind unpaid debts. Other times, their resentment took more violent turns.²⁰

Arson proved to be a favorite method of retaliation against real or perceived slights, with barn or gin burnings in a district signaling a distinct form of class warfare in motion. Tensas Parish witnessed such activities on a widespread basis in the late 1920s and 1930s. In October 1929, the very heart of ginning season, Carneal and Harry

¹⁹ On exploitation and intimidation by planters, see Davis, Deep South, 293-99, 369-73, and 392-400.

²⁰ On incidents of black retaliation against white owners or managers, see Davis, Deep South, 397, and Scott, Witness to the Truth, 36-41.

Goldman's Burn plantation gin, containing approximately seven hundred cotton bales, went up in flames, the handiwork of a suspected arsonist. The total loss amounted to well over \$100,000 and, even though the brothers carried a substantial amount of insurance, it was a devastating blow. In mid-August 1930, another gin at Waterproof went up in flames. This one belonged to Michael Kullman, member of a leading Jewish merchant family in the parish, and was a total loss. Kullman believed it to be arson, and Josiah Scott listed a number of other questionable fires in the area, starting with the Goldman gin the previous fall, and followed by the store of another Jewish merchant, Herman Goldberg, and the homes of merchant Charles Testa and planter R.C. Lancaster. Scott reminded his readers that the punishment for such work would be the "nearest tree and the highest limb."²¹

Despite such bravado, the firebug struck fear into the hearts of planters. In visiting a sickly white family out on Avondale plantation near St. Joseph in November 1933, Lucille Watson, working as a relief agent, reported the landowner as being "very anxious to get rid" of them, "as they keep the plantation in an uproar nearly all the time." She had obviously seen such tenants before, since she remarked that, "This type of people nearly always instill an instin[c]t of fear into their employers, due to their treacherous and revengeful natures. They will not fight in the open, but will burn your house down when your back is turned." In fact, the Police Jury, later that November, became so alarmed at the "serious condition" that existed in the parish due to the "great number of fires, supposed and in some cases proved to of incendiary origin," that they requested money to be set aside for more thorough investigations of these cases. Such increased vigilance only

²¹ "Burn Plantation Gin Destroyed by Fire," Tensas Gazette, 18 October 1929, and "Another Fire at Waterproof," Tensas Gazette, 15 August 1930.

had a limited affect, however, as fires continued to break out sporadically for the next several years. Elliott Coleman's barn at Live Oak plantation, containing over \$3000 in hay, corn, and other feed crops, along with assorted farming implements, fell victim in October 1935. A few months later, one of the barns at the Panola plantation went up in flames, destroying a crop of corn, oats, and soybeans. In August 1937, W.W. Burnside lost a brand new cotton warehouse at his Newellton Elevator Company yard. Inside were eighty-five bales of cotton, part of the season's first picking.²² Such incidents of lawlessness and violence increasingly forced the planter establishment to utilize the police and courts to regulate the new whites in the parish, who seemed to threaten disorder at every turn. Accustomed to controlling the predominantly black population through a complex web of patronage and oppression, Delta whites found themselves perplexed by the newcomers, who responded to neither, and in fact demanded fair and equal treatment despite their "low" status. The Delta elite, unable to force compliance through the informal means that had governed plantation life and made every planter a judge and jury, turned then to the police power as conflict intensified. The October 1929 District Court session, for instance, featured a full docket of cases and was

²² Matthews Family Relief Report, 6 November 1933, Box 5, f. 11, Cross Keys Plantation Records. Greta DeJong, A Different Day, 59, cites this as an example of African-American resistance to the plantation regime, but, in fact, this was a white family, as evidenced by Watson's careful insertion of the titles "Mr." and "Mrs." into her report, and her studied refusal to use their first names, both signs of respect that no plantation mistress would have mistakenly used in referring to black tenants. Arson tended to be more of a "white" crime at any rate; see William Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning" for a fictionalized account. On the Police Jury's recommendation, see "Minutes of the Tensas Parish Police Jury, 24 November 1933," Tensas Gazette, 1 December 1933. "Live Oak Barn Destroyed by Fire," Tensas Gazette, 25 October 1935; "Panola Barn Burns," Tensas Gazette, 7 February 1936; and "Fire Destroys New Cotton Warehouse for Newellton Elevator Co.," Tensas Gazette, 20 August 1937.

"one of the busiest terms" that had been seen in years. Josiah Scott, for one, was unsettled by the number of "strange faces seen in the audience," remembering a time when "court offered an opportunity for friends from distant parts of the parish to meet and exchange greetings and pleasantries." Back then, Scott recalled, "every one knew each other and each others' family and family history," but the influx of new people, "strangers at the gate" and "people who knew not Joseph" he called them, had so altered the social makeup of the parish that he despaired for the future. "It is iron in our soul," he swore, "to have Tensas Parish, Louisiana, confounded with Jones county of some far east section." The list of convictions, typical of the time, included no less than nine liquor law violations, five game law violations, and a host of assaults and lesser offenses. Five men were sent down to Angola, the state penitentiary, one for rape and another for murder. The District Court in October 1930 also proved exceptionally busy with over thirty convictions, mostly for possession of whiskey and other misdemeanors. As Scott noted, these included "quite a few white people, something unknown in Tensas" in the old days. Indeed, Scott was so appalled by the new whites and their behavior that he pondered "whether this can really be the Tensas of glorious tradition."²³

²³ Planters had usually handled personally any minor infractions among their black tenants, without resort to the court system. On their willingness to treat blacks differently from whites, see Davis, Deep South, 46-47, and Scott, Witness to the Truth, 21. On their willingness to prosecute poor whites, especially on liquor and game law violations, see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 190-91. In a 1922 Fourth of July speech to the black population, B.F. Young remarked on their orderliness, citing the fact that, "For a period of three years there was not a single jury case before the Courts of Tensas Parish, and not infrequently the jail at St. Joseph has been empty except for the confinement of some unfortunate whom the asylum could not accommodate for the time being." From an Untitled Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 14 July 1922. On these two court examples, see "Court," Tensas Gazette, 1 November 1929, and "District Court," Tensas Gazette, 24 October 1930.

At times, this poorly concealed antagonism between the planter establishment and the newcomers erupted into violence. In early September 1931, Elliott Coleman, the deputy sheriff and parish prohibition agent, killed a white tenant on the Franklin plantation near Newellton while attempting to take the man's brother into custody on a public drunk charge. The Miller brothers, Roscoe and Marshall, were suspected of running an illegal still and indeed had been drinking when Coleman, a local constable, and the white informant Avery Hollis arrived. Roscoe Miller surrendered immediately but his brother, Marshall, grabbed a shotgun and attempted to kill Hollis, who hid behind an innocent bystander. In the confusion, Coleman, armed with a rifle, opened fire, with his second shot taking effect. In this affair, the local court cleared the well-established planter of any wrongdoing. Although Coleman's actions appeared justified, Marshall Miller's death nonetheless seemed a particularly harsh punishment for so simple a violation of the law. Many of the new people no doubt remembered back to this incident when Coleman was involved in yet another killing less than two years later. This time, however, it was his junior deputy, Blanton Evans, who had been on the scene at the Miller shooting, that pulled the trigger. While at Newellton, Coleman and Evans had arrested two white men from an adjoining backcountry parish on liquor charges. As the officers were transporting the men to the parish jail, though, the two detainees attempted to overpower Evans, who pulled his pistol and fired, killing one and severely wounding the other. A grieving female relative later swore out charges against Evans, but these were subsequently thrown out. The sense of outrage and injustice, however misplaced, reflected real concerns about

the select enforcement of the law against lower class whites by the official arm of planter power.²⁴

In many ways, the simmering resentment that existed between old and new whites in the Delta reflected the huge cultural gulf that separated them. Plantation whites generally classed these new migrants as simply an extrapolation of the river people whom they already knew, the itinerant fishers, trappers, and moonshiners who lived most of the year alongside the riverbank on floating barges and houseboats. The planter and author Will Percy, from across the Mississippi River near Greenville, castigated these people as "illiterate, suspicious, intensely clannish, [and] blond" with "twists of speech and grammatical forms current in Queen Anne's day or earlier." They lived an "uncouth, unclean, lawless, [but] vaguely alluring" existence outside the mainstream, gypsy-like in their seasonal movements and lack of social constraints. The social gap between such people and the polite society of the Delta proved difficult to bridge.²⁵

Indeed, planters like Percy often saw the newcomers as both "intellectually and spiritually" inferior to the plantation blacks that they knew so well and had lived with for generations. They were, he sneered, "the sort of people that lynch Negroes, that mistake hoodlumism for wit, and cunning for intelligence, that attend revivals and fight and fornicate in the bushes afterward." Planters did in fact feel much closer to their black "people," having developed close personal ties to select African-American families over the years. Percy, for instance, recalled his "café-au-lait" nurse maid, Nain, who

²⁴ "Tragedy Occurs on Franklin Plantation," Tensas Gazette, 11 September 1931. "Dry Agent Slays One Prisoner and Wounds Another," Tensas Gazette, 3 March 1933, and "Manslaughter Charge Lodged Against Evans," Tensas Gazette, 10 March 1933.

²⁵ Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 16-17.

was "sweet-smelling, of the right temperature, and dozy," and provided "the comfort of the womb." A planter's daughter in Tensas Parish likewise recollected her close relationship with the black families associated with her household; she and her sisters would teach nursery rhymes to the cook's little girls and on Saturdays would have them sit on the steps outside the kitchen "while we plaited their hair and primped them up for church on Sunday."²⁶

The old planters of the Delta also moved about in a different cultural arena from the new whites moving in from the hill country. They were educated, having attended college in many cases downriver at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, or, more likely, at Tulane in New Orleans. On occasion, they earned degrees from more prestigious institutions along the Atlantic seaboard, like Princeton or the University of Virginia. They had extensive private libraries and maintained subscriptions to national papers and magazines, keeping abreast of the latest economic and social trends. Further, the planters traveled extensively, to Memphis, New Orleans, New York, and even to Europe; they felt comfortable in the company of other leading economic and political figures in the state and nation.²⁷

In comparison, the hill country migrants arrived with little education or worldly experience, clinging rather to their "cracker" culture of country music, moonshine whiskey, and evangelical religion. One family group, in particular, personified this "backwoods" culture that arose in the midst of the old plantation society. Drifting out of

²⁶ On the views of new whites, see Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 19-21, 149. For the remembrance of his nursemaid, 26-27. For the Tensas quote, see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 247. For additional discussion of these sometimes intimate relationships, see Davis, Deep South, 403-409.

²⁷ On the social world of planters in Tensas Parish, see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 189-224.

the Delta backcountry, the Swaggarts, Gilleys, and Lewises started to filter into the Ferriday district of upper Concordia Parish in the mid-1920s. Towns like Ferriday, and Newellton in Tensas Parish, attracted many such migrant families eager to search out new opportunities for themselves. Laid out by the Texas & Pacific and Iron Mountain Railroads in the fall of 1903 as the regional center for their maintenance and repair operations, Ferriday quite literally represented a supplanting of the Old South by the New, as it occupied the former lands of the Helena plantation. In addition to the railroad shops and yards, though, Ferriday also emerged as a center for the local lumber industry, with a cooperage, hoop mill, and numerous sawmills, and as a key service center for the plantations and small farms of the surrounding area, with a mechanical compress, warehouses, and other businesses associated with the cotton economy. By 1930, the town had swelled to about 2500 people, and had a well-deserved reputation as a wild and raucous place, with free flowing whiskey, prostitution, and almost nightly brawls. The Swaggarts, Gilleys, and Lewises, like other migrant families in this environment, alternated between farming, working in the woods or mills, and running bootleg liquor. And, like others, they endured their share of hardships.²⁸

Although beaten down by life, they eventually found sustenance in an Assembly of God church that had been founded by a young teenage visionary, Leona Sumrall, in 1936. The children of these families, including three male cousins, grew up surrounded by the emotionally charged gospel preaching of this charismatic sect, and absorbed the

²⁸ On these families, see Ann Rowe Seaman, Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist, New York: Continuum, 1999, 33-115. On Ferriday's origins, see Elaine Dundy, Ferriday, Louisiana, New York: Donald I. Fine, 1991, 57-64, and Robert D. Calhoun, "History of Concordia Parish," Louisiana Historical Quarterly, v. 16, no. 3 (July 1933), 476-78.

country music traditions of their forebears as well as the blues sound of Delta blacks. One, Jerry Lee Lewis, emerged as a national sensation in the mid-1950s, pounding out pulsating rhythms on the piano, and infusing his singing with the mad fervor of a religious fanatic. Tied into the Sun Studio empire out of Memphis that harnessed blues, country, and gospel singing, those raw sounds of the Southern dispossessed, Lewis ran with the likes of Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley and, although wildly successful, he lived a life haunted by his harsh Delta childhood. Another, Mickey Gilley, went on to celebrity as a country and western star, putting up over thirty Top 40 hits, and operating the world-famous honky-tonk that bore his name in Houston. Their cousin, Jimmy Swaggart, whose father, Son Swaggart, found religion and became a preacher, started out singing gospel music, and even cut a few records for Sun Studio before taking on preaching himself, reaching millions across the nation, first with his radio broadcasts, and then more famously, with his incredibly powerful, though ultimately flawed, television based evangelicalism.²⁹

This radical culture set Delta migrants apart from plantation whites and their living conditions only served to reinforce the social divide. In her travels to St. Joseph area plantations, Lucille Watson, the plantation mistress and relief fieldworker, had a chance to observe a few of the worst circumstances in which these newcomers found themselves. On one plantation, she found the Crossgrove family, living in a four room tenant house that the wife had fixed up as best she could with heavy, cheap blue wallpaper and cut out magazine images. The husband had been sick in bed with chills and fever for ten days when Watson visited in late October 1933, and they were "so deeply in

²⁹ Dundy, Ferriday, 11-20, 109-168.

debt" to German Baker, the furnishing merchant, that they could not secure any more credit for medical treatment. Watson issued them some basic supplies such as flour, corn meal, meat, lard, potatoes, sugar, and coffee, along with a jar of Vicks salve. The Daves family out on Mound Place plantation was in similar straits. The parents were "depressed and miserable" and all the children "looked more or less sick and puny." Mrs. Daves, like Mrs. Crossgrove, had been forced into the fields to help bring in the cotton crop, about which she was clearly embarrassed. In addition, she had some physical ailments that she believed to be cancer since "all of her people died with cancer" and she did not see how she could escape their fate. The youngest child, Edwin, had been given over to a childless couple to raise since he could not be cared for properly; of all the children, he appeared the most healthy and vigorous. The Matthews, the barn burning type, lived in a two room shack built like a barn, where one could see the tin roof tacked to the rafters. Only one of three windows had a wooden shutter, with the other two covered with cloth; across the walls, pages from newspapers and catalogues pasted over huge cracks and kept the "wind and the rain from blowing into the house as much." Mr. Gladney, out on Mt. Ararat plantation, lived in a house that looked like it might "tumble down" at any minute, with so much space in the roof that Watson could "see almost as much daylight as if you were out of doors." Needless to say, amongst such compelling poverty, access to basic services and utilities, such as clean water, sanitary privies, and electricity, was severely limited.³⁰

³⁰ Crossgrove Family Relief Report, 24 October 1933; Daves Family Relief Report, 27 October 1933; Matthews Family Relief Report, 6 November 1933; and Gladney Relief Report, n.d., Box 5, f. 11, Cross Keys Plantation Records. Also, see Hitt, "Recent Migration," 5-49, and Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 18-39, 79-143.

To Delta planters, these types of conditions signified an inferior status, a willingness to accept the basest level of existence, and upset the social atmosphere of the plantation. John Henry Scott, the black farmer and reverend from East Carroll Parish, speculated that planters only reluctantly embraced such people because they feared that, "if we [African-Americans] saw white folks without money, power, and authority, we might begin to question what they were always trying to teach us about the 'natural order' of things-that white men were born to control and black men ordained by God to serve." As a consequence, local planters attempted to maintain a certain level of formality with their white tenants, offering them the respect due to a white person, while yet adhering to a rigid class boundary. One planter's daughter in Tensas Parish, for instance, recalled that her father absolutely forbade the family from sitting at the dining room table in the presence of the plantation foreman or any of the white tenants, as that would have connoted some form of familiarity, which he deemed unacceptable. She never attended the parties or birthdays of her lower class white schoolmates, nor invited them to hers, and although forced to treat them "with utmost courtesy" as a sign of basic respect, she nonetheless learned to reject "at any time the possibility of closer social relationships" with these "coarse, vulgar, intemperate" people. Such an awkward social position proved hard to maintain.³¹

The extreme difficulty of this stance revealed itself with the school crisis of 1929-1930, which compounded the problems from earlier in the decade. With the arrival of the hill country migrants, white enrollment in parish schools had jumped from 462 in 1923-24 to 703 for

³¹ Scott, Witness to the Truth, 35, and Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 247.

1924-25, and then up to 983 for 1929-1930. This surge in attendance overwhelmed the meager resources of the School Board. Although it had constructed new high schools in its principal towns during the decade, Josiah Scott worried that "even if we had desks to accommodate all the children demanding admission . . . we could not find floor space." Newellton appeared as the most hard-pressed, with St. Joseph and Waterproof only slightly less affected. Scott estimated that the schools needed a hundred percent increase in teachers, equipment, and facilities to handle the new students. Since, as Scott sniffed, the new migrants, poor and landless, could not contribute any revenue because of the "abolition of the tobacco tax," the burden of support fell inevitably onto the planters themselves. As much as it grieved him, Scott felt that the new people could not "be turned away," lest "Bolshevism and Socialism . . . reign in our land." Christian civilization demanded that the old guard "share our blessings with them." In a desperate appeal to the "land-owning class," then, Scott argued that "if only in self-protection we must educate these new people."³²

James Allen, ever the progressive citizen, likewise pushed his fellow planters to support the school tax. "We cannot secure desirable immigrants," he railed, "unless we provide their children with school facilities and also have good roads. No man . . . will move into a community where he cannot educate his children, and no good business man will move into a parish where the roads are impassable more than half of the year, where he cannot get his farm products to market and his children to school or church" With the expressed

³² "Public School Situation in Tensas," Tensas Gazette, 13 December 1929. "The Public School Problem," Tensas Gazette, 15 November 1929. For similar sentiments, also see Scott's editorial, "Next Friday's Mass Meeting," Tensas Gazette, 22 November 1929.

willingness of the Federal government to take on the flood control issue after the 1927 debacle, Allen expected an influx into the Delta of "good farmers, who are now farming the poor, thin Alabama, Georgia, and Arkansas lands." With the "best colored labor" rapidly leaving the Delta and the "oldest and best darkies . . . fast dying off," he felt that planters ought to accept the inevitable and accommodate those white farmers filling the void. This meant providing them with the basic necessities of life: access to markets, schools, and healthcare.³³

The planter establishment groaned under its predicament, sensing that Scott and Allen, in fact, had hit the nail on the head. At a mass meeting, Benjamin Young framed the issue, pointing out the inadequacy of the school system. As an example, he cited the fact that in Newellton, fifty-two children had been left behind on the plantations even after two separate busloads had carried eighty others off to school. Young brought along the State Superintendent of Education, T.H. Harris, to do the dirty work of suggesting options. As the people of the parish taxed themselves less than the state average, and a great deal less than many parishes, Harris could only see two solutions: raise additional money or cut the school term. Ultimately, the leaders of the parish submitted to the inevitable and passed a resolution in support of a three-mill increase. The voters reluctantly gave their approval, but facilities and staffing nonetheless remained a very real problem throughout the decade. At the beginning of the fall term in September 1930, the third grade class at Newellton, for instance, had sixty-six students with only one teacher, and at St. Joseph, a single

³³ "Mr. J.P. Allen, Big Tax Payer, Strong Supporter of School Tax," Tensas Gazette, 21 February 1930.

schoolmarm likewise occupied fifty-five first graders. The issue did not get much better in the following years.³⁴

Despite such minor concessions on the part of the planters, the new whites still felt their outsider status keenly and almost from the start began to build their own community organizations outside the traditional power structure. Crawford Rose, up in East Carroll, reported the movement of 150 white families into the southwest corner of the parish at Monticello, where they formed a community club of 300 members that lobbied for churches, schools, gravel roads, and access to extension work. Most of these people, Rose grimly admired, were making a "desperate struggle" on "raw country just being cleared of second growth hardwood." Down in Tensas, local leaders such as Bill Poe at Newellton, who had brought in a number of migrants from his old home ground around Scott and Yell Counties in west-central Arkansas, began to organize church services and a minor relief effort to help the new people get firmly established. And, throughout the 1930s, they continued to put down roots in the area. Like the settlers at Monticello, the small farmers in Tensas Parish used community forums to discuss major issues. In the early years of the decade, the parish Home Demonstration agent worked extensively with these people in developing a viable "live-at-home" program that stressed the importance of gardens, poultry, hogs, and milk cows. Later, leaders in the various migrant communities took matters into their own hands. In early 1937, J.C. Vines and a few other men from the Newellton area organized meetings with the parish agent, the superintendent of the Agricultural Experiment Station at St. Joseph, and the sheriff to

³⁴ "Minutes of Mass Meeting Held in St. Joseph, Louisiana, Friday, Nov. 29, 1929," *Tensas Gazette*, 6 December 1929. "Opening of the Public Schools of Tensas Parish," *Tensas Gazette*, 12 September 1930.

discuss major farm and social issues. These talks drew upwards of seventy-five to eighty people anxious to discuss problems and solutions. Across the parish, other community leaders followed suit in setting up similar meetings.³⁵

One of the strongest organizing tools, though, proved to be the evangelical church. In August 1935, Baptist missionary A.C. Holt organized two churches in the parish, one at Newellton and another out in the countryside. To celebrate, he held a baptism at New Light on the Tensas River that attracted over 300 whites and a number of local blacks. A few years later, the Baptists successfully organized another congregation at St. Joseph. As one Baptist commentator put it, "Everywhere one goes in Tensas parish today he finds new people and more often than otherwise, Baptists, who have located on a tract of this fertile land. These new people are strangers in a strange land, and unless we find them and enlist them they will soon be lost to us." The Baptist Church, along with other evangelical groups, then put a great emphasis on making inroads into the Delta, and made great strides through the 1930s and 1940s in building an alternative support system for the new settlers in the region, outside of the old plantation society.³⁶

³⁵ "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll Parish, 1930," Box 15, f. 136, v. 136, Extension Service Records, and "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll Parish, 1931," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records. "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1929," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. Poe was heavily involved with the Union Church in Newellton. "Farm Meeting at Bethany Church," Tensas Gazette, 5 March 1937.

³⁶ "Two Baptist Churches Are Organized in Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 30 August 1935, and "Dedication of Baptist Church," Tensas Gazette, 28 January 1938. On the growth of the Baptist churches in Tensas, see "Church at Newellton Three Years Old, Has Unusual Record," Tensas Gazette, 22 April 1938, and "Tensas Parish and Baptist Missions," Tensas Gazette, 29 April 1938 (quote). On church efforts in other parts of the Delta, see Pinkston, A Place to Remember, 83-105.

Delta planters faced the development of this new culture within their midst with serious reservations. Although desperate for labor, the new whites did not fit into the plantation system well and, in fact, undermined its basic tenets, along with the power of the planters themselves. Such people, by their very existence in the Delta, signaled the melting away of the old order, of the changing nature of the district in the modern era. Indeed, as John Henry Scott observed, "Even upper-crust whites regretted they had turned over all this good land to the poorer whites because after they moved in they began to exert some political power." But, planters also confronted in the years of the late 1920s and 1930s other, more desperate problems that threatened their economic livelihood and demanded their full attention, even in the midst of this social revolution.³⁷

³⁷ Scott, Witness to the Truth, 92.

PART THREE
THE PLANTER CLASS IN CRISIS

CHAPTER FIVE
FLOOD AND DEPRESSION

As the 1920s came to a close, the plantation society of Northeast Louisiana faced a dual crisis with the Flood of 1927 and the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. Planters turned increasingly towards organization and government aid in their efforts to deal with both of these events, first for relief in the aftermath of the Flood, and then for assistance in maintaining the plantation establishment itself as the Depression set in. Faced with total collapse, planters adapted themselves to the demands of the times, laying aside much of their old behavior in search of sustenance.

The flooding of the Mississippi River always had been a source of concern for the Delta and it continued to be a major hazard into the 1920s. Old timers remembered back to the great flood of 1882, and of more recent memory were the floods in 1912, 1913, 1916 and 1922. The flood in the spring of 1922 proved particularly devastating. Deltans black and white watched nervously as the waters reached perilous levels that spring. The 1916 break had come when the gauges at Vicksburg showed a high stage of almost fifty-four feet; by the last days of April 1922, the water level had risen almost a foot above that mark. Local officials massed every resource in men, materials, and money to shore up the levees that strained under their burden but the people of the parish calmly made preparations for the worst, building scaffolding to hold their household goods above the waters and shipping livestock to high ground in Mississippi. Those who could not move their animals

often sold them at bargain prices to traders who flocked into the area looking to make a profit off the distress of others.¹

The levee line finally burst at Weecama plantation, about four miles north of Ferriday, on the 26th of April, pouring through "with a roar of artillery" and sweeping away everything in its path. Most of Concordia went under, with Ferriday taking approximately two feet, and water seeping up into the lower sections of Tensas Parish as well, where work continued feverishly in an attempt to keep any breaks from along that front. The release of tension at Weecama, however, seemed to abate the River's wrath, and although a major disaster, the flood did not assume the general proportions expected, being confined mainly to the backcountry lowlands between the Mississippi and Red Rivers. Still, almost half of Concordia Parish's population found themselves in need of relief assistance, completely overwhelming local and state efforts. H.B. Conner, a state legislator from Concordia and member of the state Flood Relief Commission, complained bitterly about the lack of funds and resources at his disposal and bemoaned bureaucratic mishandling of the emergency. One ruling that especially disturbed him declined assistance to all but those few hundred that had made their way into the refugee camps set up at Natchez and Harrisonburg. Likewise, he was astonished that more than a week after the break, he had received only \$750 in relief funds to deal with the needs of some 6000 people. When Federal officials made a quick boat tour of the devastated region, Conner reminded them of his parish's great enthusiasm during the war bond and Red Cross drives a few years earlier, hoping to shame the government into action. Eventually, once the Red Cross and National Guard arrived on the scene, over 310,000

¹ On the 1922 high water and overflow, see coverage in the Tensas Gazette, 21 April-26 May 1922.

rations were given out to 10,000 people in Concordia Parish alone, with some families receiving support for upwards of six weeks.²

Despite the tough luck of its sister parish, the people in Tensas felt both relief and optimism that their levees had held. Edgar Whittemore, a land speculator operating out of St. Joseph, concluded that bad engineering, not the levees only concept itself, had been at fault, as it was the one spot along the line not standardized and built to grade that failed, and nowhere else. That several points in Tensas Parish threatened failure as well, Whittemore chose to discount. Rather, he argued that the odd weather conditions that put more water than ever before into the Mississippi River in 1922 were an aberration, "something that is not likely to occur again in a generation." His bravado so soon after the flood, however, belied deep concerns by outside investors in the security of their holdings in the Delta, which he clearly sought to assuage with his bold assertions.³

A number of Delta leaders, however, endorsed Whittemore's reasoned discourse, and sought to downplay any negativity associated with the recent crisis. In a thanksgiving service held at Tallulah to celebrate the deliverance of the Upper Delta from flood, a resolution passed by the leading citizens of East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes gave full support to the levees only policy of the Mississippi River Commission and roundly rejected calls by other interested parties for outlets, spillways, dams, and tributary improvements to help in future floods. Castigating these calls as "wholly visionary and impracticable," the leading lights of the non-flooded Delta parishes continued with their adherence to the limited, and less costly, levee

² "Flow of Current at Crevasse Slows Down," Tensas Gazette, 5 May 1922, and "Final Report is Given by Bullis," Tensas Gazette, 23 June 1922.

³ "The True Levee Situation, " Tensas Gazette, 26 May 1922.

system already in place. Without a doubt, they feared both the cost to themselves in taxation and the grasp of the Federal government in such a wide-ranging proposal. Unfortunately, they left themselves open to bitter criticism by their neighbors to the south. A mass meeting of citizens held at Jonesville, in Catahoula Parish, which, like Concordia, took on a great deal of water during the flood, derided the self-congratulatory Tallulah resolution, noting that, indeed, "by the heroic work of the citizens of north Louisiana," the flood safely had been passed on down river to a sister parish, resulting in "one of the most destructive floods that the Mississippi Valley has ever known." The "great success" of the levees, the Jonesville people cried, had led to "thousands of homes swept away, thousands of mules, horses, and cattle lost, years of toil and honest effort lost in a few days," and a sense of desolation so profound that, without relief, many would abandon the area entirely. Such a "success" they prayed never to encounter again. These bitter feelings and the subsequent inability of Delta leaders to rally around a common solution in the wake of the 1922 flood had severe consequences for the entire region only a few years later.⁴

In the early spring of 1927, Deltans once again watched as the Mississippi River swelled at a record rate. There had been heavy snows in the North and Midwest the previous winter and the combination of thaws and abnormally wet weather drove a dramatic increase. The high water began to worry the citizens of Tensas Parish by mid-March, with concerns that the river stage might reach or surpass the heights attained during the 1922 flood that had swamped large parts of Concordia, Catahoula, and Avoyelles Parishes. Armed guards began their

⁴ "Levees vs. Outlets," Tensas Gazette, 30 June 1922.

patrols of the levees and work commenced on strengthening weak spots in the line. For Tensas citizens, their greatest worry came from the upriver levees in Madison and East Carroll Parishes that had not yet been built to the new standard grade. The Fifth District Levee Board, comprising the four river parishes, had okayed a five mill tax increase, in conjunction with Federal funds, to pay for these improvements, but the work had moved at a slow pace; local citizens in Tensas realized, of course, that "the chain is no stronger than its weakest link," and that a break in the lines above them would bring the waters of the Mississippi River coursing over the entire lower Delta, much as they had done to Concordia alone back in 1922. By mid-April, it had become apparent that the River indeed would surpass those levels. In fact, within two weeks, the levee lines in Arkansas and Mississippi gave way and, on 3 May, the Cabin Teele levee in Madison Parish failed, followed the next day by the Winter Quarters levee near Newellton. Floodwaters rushed across Tensas Parish and the Delta.⁵

The flood wreaked death and destruction across a wide swath of the lower Mississippi Valley in one of the worst natural disasters in the nation's history. Tens of thousands were driven from their homes and their entire livelihoods washed away. Many were fortunate to have their lives. The people in Tensas Parish, though, seemed to take the flood in stride for, although thoroughly soaked, they appeared to suffer less than others. Many sections of the parish, especially along the natural levee of the riverfront, remained above water or took only a little. Newellton, on a slight ridge, fared best of all with only

⁵ "The River," Tensas Gazette, 25 March 1927; "The River," Tensas Gazette, 15 April 1927; and "The Overflow," Tensas Gazette, 6 May 1927. A thorough summary of the Gazette's coverage of the Flood is John Bush, "The 1927 Flood in Tensas Parish as seen by the Tensas Gazette," North Louisiana Historical Association Journal, v. 11, no. 2 (Spring 1980).

three businesses and the white schoolhouse getting wet. St. Joseph witnessed a little more of a rise, with a number of homes and businesses taking water in the downtown, although by no means a widespread occurrence. Waterproof, on the other hand, carried two and a half feet of water along its front street, but still, a quite a few buildings, on piers, remained dry. The hardest hit areas in the towns, of course, were the African-American neighborhoods, which tended to be located in lower, less desirable spots on the outskirts. Most of these flooded badly, as did the backcountry, to the west, away from the Mississippi River. Except for a few natural ridges, where plantation homes sat, these districts saw very high water levels, anywhere from a few feet upwards towards fifteen or more in sloughs and other low-lying sections. The water in the town of Ferriday, in upper Concordia Parish, for instance, reached a depth of fourteen feet, with many buildings flooded up to the second story. Despite the optimism of some, such as Tensas Gazette editor Josiah Scott, who felt that the flood had not been "as disastrous as every one at first feared," the waters nonetheless drove most blacks and a number of whites off the plantations and in search of refuge and caused something like a million dollars worth of damage in Tensas Parish alone. The only bright spot seemed to be that northeast Louisiana had had not suffered as badly as the Mississippi Delta, upriver of Vicksburg, "where the water crept upon them like a thief in the night, and drowned many people and nearly all livestock in the country affected."⁶

⁶ "The Overflow," Tensas Gazette, 20 May 1927. For an effective description of events during and after the 1927 Flood, see "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1927," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records, and "Narrative Report, H.F. Cassell, Madison Parish, 1927," Box 26, f. 242, v. 242, Extension Service Records. On the estimate of damage in Tensas Parish, see "Estimate of Losses in Tensas Parish, Louisiana, as the Result of the Mississippi River Flood in the Spring, 1927," Tensas Gazette, 19 August 1927. Richard P.

The relief effort, too, appeared well organized, at least compared with the showing in the aftermath of the 1922 flood. The Federal government and Red Cross arrived almost immediately to perform rescue operations, set up refugee camps, distribute food and supplies, and otherwise help in recovery. In fact, this assistance, so ready and generous, carried the devastated plantation economy through the summer and on into the fall. From the time of the levee break in May through mid-August, the Red Cross expended \$205,000 for relief in Tensas Parish, including food rations for families, feed for work animals, railroad cars full of cotton and vegetable seed, mules, clothing, and other miscellaneous goods. In neighboring Madison Parish, where water remained on some plantations south and east of Tallulah until late July, relief aid cared for over 1800 families on 125 plantations, along with thousands of cattle and work stock.⁷

Initially, some optimists predicted a quick resumption of everyday life. The editor of the Gazette even convinced himself very early on that the overflow might have been a blessing in disguise. The rich deposit of silt left by the receding waters, he boasted, would soon "return Tensas to the thirty thousand bale class, from which she

Sevier, Madison Parish, Images of America Series, Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003, has some excellent images of the flooding in and around Tallulah. The Planter' Museum, in the old Farrar House of downtown St. Joseph, still holds a number of photographic images for Tensas Parish. For a more thorough assessment of the Flood from a broad view, see Pete Daniel, Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, and John M. Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

⁷ On relief work in Tensas Parish, see "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1927," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records; Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 5 August 1927; and "Red Cross Completes Work in Tensas," Tensas Gazette, 12 August 1927. For similar work in Madison Parish, see "Narrative Report, H.F. Cassell, Madison Parish, 1927," Box 26, f. 242, v. 242, Extension Service Records.

retired after the coming of the boll weevil." Likewise, the massive destruction, he argued, would force the Federal government to finally take total charge of the flood control issue, bringing physical and monetary relief to the people on both sides of the Mississippi River.⁸

His self-assurance, however, soon faltered, as the water, which seemed to fall rapidly at first, suddenly stalled out, leaving large portions of the parish still covered, and with little prospect of getting even a late cotton crop into the ground. Some planters, anxious to get any return at all, made plans to plant well into June, hoping that a warm fall might prolong the growing season. Scott, however, surmised that the late start would probably lead to the "discomfiture of the farmer and his later financial embarrassment." Indeed, with low cotton prices from the previous year, many planters already had extended themselves over the precipice with loans and mortgages.⁹

The weather did not cooperate. Heavy, late spring rains coaxed the Mississippi River to rise again in late June, pushing a substantial, though not disastrous, amount of floodwater back through the levee breaks at Cabin Teele and Winter Quarters. Across Tensas Parish, recently emerged land, much of it feverishly planted in cotton, went back under, awash for a second time. The new rise depressed the Tensas population even more as it reinforced the already bleak estimates of cotton production.¹⁰

⁸ "Be of Good Cheer," Tensas Gazette, 27 May 1927.

⁹ "Water Fall Too Slow for Cotton Planting," Tensas Gazette, 3 June 1927. Also, see "The After-Flood Story," Tensas Gazette, 10 June 1927.

¹⁰ On the second rise of the Mississippi River, see "Outlook Not the Best," Tensas Gazette, 24 June 1927; "The Water," Tensas Gazette, 1 July 1927; "The Outlook," Tensas Gazette, 8 July 1927. On cotton production, see "Prospect of Cotton Crop for Tensas," Tensas Gazette, 1 July 1927; "The Cotton Crop of Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 15 July

Despite such conditions, Delta planters adjusted to the myriad challenges associated with the Flood, and often managed to turn them to their advantage. Relief assistance, for instance, proved a real boon. Not only did it ease the economic burden on planters, whose credit was already stretched thin, but it also provided them with another tool for labor coercion. In Tensas, William Davidson, the well-connected Mayor of St. Joseph, directed the overall effort, working closely with the parish agent, Walter Daniels, and other leading men in the area. Plantation owners and managers reported their needs to the district representatives-Davidson for the St. Joseph area, Carneal Goldman around Waterproof, and W.W. Burnside in Newellton-who then coordinated the distribution into the countryside of goods and supplies. Individual planters, speaking for their tenants, used this arrangement to keep their favored families well supplied with food and other necessary items while denying these to more "troublesome" laborers. This manipulation of relief came naturally to Delta planters who had mastered economic exploitation in all its forms.¹¹

They even utilized the outpouring of national sentiment following the Flood to assist in their uplift plans for the black community. By that fall, a variety of public and private interests outside the Delta,

1927; and "The Crops," Tensas Gazette, 22 July 1927. The editor estimated perhaps a fifty percent reduction in acreage. For 1926, about 38,000 acres produced 20,613 bales. The estimate for 1927 was for perhaps 15,000 or 20,000 acres. In actuality, the ginned total for the parish was 8425 bales; see, "Cotton Production and Ginnings for Specified Years, Tensas Parish, Louisiana," USDA Administrator to Congressman Otto E. Passman, June 1962, Box 1, f. 4, Wade Collection.

¹¹ On the work of the Extension Agents during and after the Flood, especially in facilitating relief, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 160-172. On the parish organization, see "Red Cross Aid to Farmers," Tensas Gazette, 27 May 1927. The relief committee in Madison Parish had a similar composition, including planters, bankers, and the parish agent; see, "Narrative Report, H.F. Cassell, Madison Parish, 1927," Box 26, f. 242, v. 242, Extension Service Records.

including the Federal government, the Red Cross, and the Rockefeller Foundation, had put together funds to organize a health unit for Tensas Parish, one of many set up in the affected areas of the lower Mississippi River valley. Consisting of a doctor and nurse team, its work focused on the prevention and treatment of a wide range of diseases prevalent in the parish, such as malaria, typhoid, and tuberculosis. The financial backers placed a strong emphasis on reaching the large black population in the district, especially the children of tenant farmers, to help correct health deficiencies early on before they became more serious problems down the road.¹²

Although the health unit met a real need, it also served the interests of the plantation establishment. Its director, Dr. N.P. Liles, did not hide the fact that he felt his work to be an essential tool in the preservation of the black labor force. He cited, for instance, the evidence in a recent USDA study of a single Louisiana cotton plantation. The study estimated that malaria had debilitated black tenants on this plantation to such a degree that it took seventy-four sickly families to do the work of sixty healthy ones. These conditions caused a net loss in the range of \$6500 per year for the owner. Liles, therefore, encouraged planters to be pro-active in their treatment of disease and "to throw all of the available protection around the laborer," so as to ensure his health and continued production.¹³

Senator Joseph Ransdell vigorously endorsed this program. Precautions against malaria, such as hanging doors and screened windows on tenants' cabins, he argued, were a "good financial investment,

¹² "Tensas Again to the Front," Tensas Gazette, 16 September 1927.

¹³ "It Will Pay You to Read This," Tensas Gazette, 27 April 1928.

returning a good interest on every dollar" since they kept the tenant and his family healthy and working. The "tenant of to-day is not the tenant of ten or fifteen years ago," he lectured his fellow planters; they needed to be supplied with gardens, milk cows, and other incentives to maintain a certain level of satisfaction with the plantation system. "We need tenants-we must have them," he declared, "and anything to increase their comforts and efficiency and insure their health is worth trying." A.H. Jackson, the black principal of the agricultural and industrial training school in St. Joseph, put the issue in even more stark terms. The "value of a dead person is zero," he warned, "but the value of a sick person is minus zero." Caring for the sick, he implied, drew workers away from more productive activities on the plantation. It was best, he suggested, to offer preventative healthcare rather than pay an ever-increasing price for lingering illness.¹⁴

Planters in the parish seemed to get the idea. Indeed, late in 1928, the local government secured, through the State Board of Health, the services of a black nurse, Mrs. D.M. Lange, to assist the health unit. She was tasked with working in the schools and communities spread out across the land and dealt extensively with children, screening for health problems and delivering vaccinations against diphtheria and small pox. She also helped midwives in standardizing and sanitizing their craft, especially through the use of silver nitrate in newborns' eyes to prevent blindness. Her efforts, under the guidance of Dr. Liles, provided another success that planters could claim as their own.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Tensas Parish Health Unit Notes," *Tensas Gazette*, 10 August 1928, and "Malaria Education," *Tensas Gazette*, 9 November 1928.

¹⁵ "Malaria Education," *Tensas Gazette*, 9 November 1928.

Following in the same vein of paternalistic uplift, parish leaders also appropriated money for a black home demonstration agent in July 1928, a position that would be filled intermittently in the years to come. The first agent, Lubertha Dyer, preached the "live-at-home" message of self-sufficiency, utilizing the well-organized churches and clubs already in existence to demonstrate new methods in gardening, clothing manufacture, furniture repair, and proper sanitation. She also discussed dietary issues and nutrition at these meetings, and later coordinated the local community's agricultural exhibit at the annual Delta Fair. Such slight improvements in home life and healthcare after the Flood, mostly paid for by sources outside the parish, helped bolster the planters' own image as dutiful providers, watching over the interests and welfare of their charges. They did have a meaningful impact, of course, and the black community, by all accounts received the efforts with open arms. Yet, for the planters themselves, such assistance served a key function in their economy by maintaining a viable and satisfied labor force that could not be achieved by other means.¹⁶

In the post-Flood era, planters also looked for other ways to brace their economic and social position against further turmoil. Many turned to the Extension Service agents and their message of change. Amidst the general malaise following the overflow, these men had moved into action, outlining a recovery farming plan that emphasized reduced acreage in cotton and expanded plantings of hay and forage crops, sweet potatoes, corn, cowpeas, and sorghum, all of which could be grown easily and would benefit the plantation system by raising the price of cotton and providing foodstuffs for tenants and work stock. Many of

¹⁶ "Status of County Extension Organization," *Tensas Gazette*, 7 December 1928.

the larger planters in the region, having experimented with diversification on and off throughout the early 1920s, at last seemed to buy into these ideas and embraced the idea of government assistance in transforming their region. The parish agents, as the point men for the USDA, therefore began to take on a more pronounced role within their communities, becoming sources of technological advice and keys to state and Federal funding.¹⁷

One of the key accomplishments for the agents and local planters in the aftermath of the Flood was the establishment of an agricultural experiment station at St. Joseph. Realizing the impact of such institutions in other districts, especially the Stoneville research complex near Greenville, Mississippi, the leading figures in Tensas Parish's political and economic establishment determined to secure one of their own. In the legislative session of 1928, C.C. Brooks, the respected businessman and planter, shepherded through the state Senate a bill authorizing a Delta station and appropriating an annual funding of \$10,000. D.F. Ashford pressed the bill to passage in the House. With this supporting legislation in hand, Tensas' leaders then sought out the financial assistance of their neighbors in the other Delta parishes to get the project off the ground. Most of these planters needed little persuasion, as they had experienced the same ups and downs in the cotton market, but envy and jealousy, particularly strong in such a highly individualized region, could have derailed the whole effort. Parish leaders in Tensas, then, needed to sell the station as

¹⁷ "Flooded Farms May Grow Good Crops This Season," Tensas Gazette, 27 May 1927, and "Farm Situation in Flood Area Outlined by Department of Agriculture Representative," Tensas Gazette, 27 May 1927.

a Delta-wide opportunity, and therefore pushed forward with an aggressive marketing campaign.¹⁸

In August 1928, delegations went out to proselytize their fellow planters and merchants. The party visiting the East Carroll Parish Police Jury, for instance, included such prominent members of Tensas society as Frank Curry, president of the Police Jury; Mayor William Davidson of St. Joseph, president of the town bank and the Panola Company; corporate attorney Thomas Wade; Mayor W.W. Burnside of Newellton, president of the Tensas State Bank; Joseph T. Curry of the Chamber of Commerce; and planter Sidney Shaw. The Tensas people also organized a publicity junket to the Stoneville experiment station in Mississippi, to demonstrate the usefulness and value of agricultural research. Some seventy-five Delta planters, drawn from eight parishes, made the trip, which included visits to the well-managed Delta and Pine Land properties, demonstrations of mechanical farming, and round-robin discussions with W.E. Ayres, director of the Stoneville center. At that time, the Stoneville station had been in operation for twenty-four years, and had an annual appropriation of \$25,000. Its operations included work with ground cover crops, soybeans, and improved strains of cotton and covered approximately 260 acres, with another 300 acres not yet brought into cultivation. Along with the bevy of interested Delta planters, a number of Louisiana officials came along as well, including the president of Louisiana State University, the state commissioner of agriculture, the director of state extension work, and the dean of LSU's agricultural school. Among the Tensas crowd were such leading lights as Josiah Scott, editor of the Gazette, D.F.

¹⁸ "Tensas Should Be Proud of Her Representatives," Natchez Democrat, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 13 July 1928.

Miller, R.L. Wimberly, Bert Berry, W.W. Burnside, C.V. Ratcliff, Howard Netterville, and Harrison Miller.¹⁹

The inspection of the facilities at Stoneville clearly played to the favor of the large planters anxious to make the Delta experiment station a reality. Nonetheless, Tensas Parish hosted in late September a huge picnic on the town green in St. Joseph, understanding that the best way to attract and sell any proposition to the scattered planters across the district was through entertainment, not business or informational meetings. The picnic just so happened to coincide with a general meeting of the Police Juries from the interested parishes in the Delta region, with the chief topic of discussion being financial assistance to build and equip the physical plant of the station. Tensas had already secured a 160-acre plot of ground through donations, over a third of the acreage coming from the Panola Company and Weatherly & Anderson, two of the larger planting corporations in the parish. What the parish needed more than anything was cash to begin construction; the elaborate preparations of the picnic evidently succeeded in achieving this main goal. Concordia, Madison, East Carroll, Franklin, and Ouachita parishes donated \$4500 each; Catahoula offered \$3750; Richland and Morehouse, \$3000 per parish; and Caldwell and West Carroll, \$1500 a piece.²⁰

¹⁹ "A Branch Experimental Station for Northeast Louisiana," Lake Providence Banner-Democrat, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 31 August 1928; "75 Farmers from Louisiana Visit Delta's Station," Greenville (MS) Daily Times, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 31 August 1928.

²⁰ "Big Picnic at St. Joseph Next Wednesday," Tensas Gazette, 21 September 1928. For the list of donations and discussion of the project, see "Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 30 November 1928, a continuation of a report by Frederick Williamson, originally published in the Shreveport Journal, n.d. (1928), serialized in Tensas Gazette, 9, 23, and 30 November 1928.

Searching out the best candidate for station director, the planters settled on the district extension agent for Northeast Louisiana, C.B. Haddon. Haddon had all the requisite qualifications and experience. Originally from Mississippi, he earned his degree from Mississippi A&M (later Mississippi State University) in 1908, then taught in agricultural high schools in his home state and Alabama, before taking a position at Clemson University in South Carolina to work in their agricultural program. After a brief stint, he left Clemson to teach animal husbandry back at A&M, but went on to take advanced courses in entomology at the University of Florida, only later returning to Mississippi to work for the state on major pest control projects. Lured from this post, he then took over the management of a 9000-acre plantation in East Carroll Parish, and in 1924 accepted a supervisory position over the county agent program in the fifteen-parish region of Northeast Louisiana. Haddon, by all accounts, was more than qualified for the position, having had both the scientific training and the plantation management experience that meant so much in the new, post-war Delta.²¹

The parish agents usually came, like Haddon, with some professional training and experience. G.H. Stewart, who took over the East Carroll post in 1927, had earned a degree from Auburn University, then spent a year at the University of Wisconsin, before moving back to Alabama where he served as an extension agent and then as superintendent of the state prison farm. He then took the agent position in Marlboro County, South Carolina, another big cotton producing district, for three and a half years, before coming to the Delta. Clifton Hester, who served as East Carroll's agent in the early

²¹ "Extension Agent Appointed to Tensas Experiment Farm," Tensas Gazette, 1 February 1929.

1920s and then in the same capacity for Madison Parish in the late 1930s, arrived with a similar background. Born in hill-country Union Parish, he earned a degree from Louisiana State University and then worked with an experiment station at Calhoun, Louisiana, before taking up the agent's job in East Carroll. After only a few years, he took over management of the massive Abston, Crump, & Wynne property at Transylvania, the largest cotton plantation in the state, which he operated with great success for over a decade. He took over as agent in Madison Parish in 1935, and then rode his popularity into the office of sheriff in 1944.²²

With the establishment of the Experiment Station at St. Joseph and the increasing visibility of the parish agents, Delta planters seemed to take a giant step towards more rationalized farming in the post-Flood period. Among the leaders in the transition were many newcomers to the region, men who managed their plantations as business investments, not as cultural relicts of an older age. E.L. Collins, who came to Tensas Parish from Mississippi during the years of the First World War, was a major proponent of progressive farming practices and led by example. Before the 1926-27 season, he had purchased a forty-five acre tract for his own, personal agricultural demonstration work, planting forty in cotton to be cultivated by regular practices but reserving an acre and a half for newer, more intensive cultivation. After factoring all the costs of production, such as labor, fertilizer, and ginning fees, and even selling his cotton in a down year where he only got thirteen cents a pound, Collins cleared over eighty-three dollars per acre on his experimental plot, while the rest of the tract,

²² "G.H. Stewart Selected as County Agent for East Carroll," *Tensas Gazette*, 4 March 1927, and Clifton E. Hester Biography, *Madison Parish Historical and Genealogical Data* (electronic resource).

worked in the standard way, yielded only forty dollars an acre. Needless to say, Collins put his experiment to use on a more widespread basis in the following years.²³

Bill Poe was another newcomer who had pulled himself up into the class of leading planters. Arriving from Arkansas shortly before the war, Poe managed plantations in the Newellton area before purchasing one of his own. He utilized sound farming principles and methods to boost his production. In late summer 1929, for instance, he had three hundred acres in heavily fertilized, weevil free cotton, from which he expected to yield a bale or two per acre. The remainder of his plantation acreage he had devoted to corn, soybeans, peas, clover, and alfalfa. L.H. Cook, farming the Mayflower plantation, maintained such a diverse and successful regimen that he was selected a Master Farmer by the Extension Service in 1930. Originally from Mississippi, he arrived in the Delta in 1918, and began a progressive farming program, cultivating his cotton acreage intensely but also growing large amounts of corn and soybeans and planting some acreage in Austrian winter peas that he plowed under to help improve the condition of the soil. He also got into the cattle business and planted extensive vegetable gardens and fruit orchards to further diversify his interests.²⁴

These men, and many others, avidly embraced the newer methods, tools, and technologies that had appeared on the scene by the late 1920s, transforming bit by bit the old plantation routine. By 1929, for instance, nearly all planters had become accustomed to the use of arsenic poison in treating boll weevils and other pests. Many utilized

²³ "Telling the World About Louisiana," Tensas Gazette, 1 April 1927.

²⁴ On Poe, see "Crop Prospects in Tensas Parish Most Encouraging," Tensas Gazette, 26 July 1929, and biographical information in Appendix A. "L.H. Cook of Tensas Elected Master Farmer," Tensas Gazette, 12 December 1930.

aerial sprays, although this was expensive. More common were the simple mule-drawn row dusters, operated by small gasoline engines, which carried enough poison for twenty rows before needing to be refilled. The use of poison became so widespread and accepted, in fact, that one planter proclaimed he "wanted to have three or four tons of calcium arsenate on the plantation from the first, even if it was a year its use was not necessary," since he saw it as "cheap insurance." Fertilizer, too, enjoyed an increased use on the plantation, having proven its use even in the rich Delta soil. G.H. Stewart reported that planters in East Carroll Parish had used over a hundred tons of fertilizer during the 1928 season, compared to only ten the year before. Walter Daniel, down in Tensas, stated that "practically every planter" in his area had contracted for a supply of nitrate of soda by late 1928, an amount "considerably more . . . than has ever been ordered before." Indeed, during 1929, planters in Tensas Parish purchased 1400 tons of commercial nitrogen fertilizer, while their neighbors to the north, in East Carroll, placed orders for another 500 tons.²⁵

Soil improvement efforts began to see dividends as well by 1929, with some of the more progressive farmers growing nitrogen-rich crops to turn under into the ground, providing nutrients for a later cotton rotation. J.H. Netterville, managing the Panola properties, used oats followed by Dutch clover and lespedeza to increase fertility on about

²⁵ On the use of arsenic poison, see "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1928," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records, and "Crop Prospects in Tensas Parish Most Encouraging," Tensas Gazette, 26 July 1929. On fertilizer use, see "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1928," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records; "Narrative Report, G.H. Stewart, East Carroll Parish, 1928," Box 15, f. 136, v. 136, Extension Service Records; and "Narrative Report, G.H. Stewart, East Carroll Parish, 1929," Box 15, f. 136, v. 136, Extension Service Records.

500 acres he intended to plant in cotton. Soybeans, utilized both as a conditioner and a hay crop, also saw increased acreage, and were often planted with corn to secure a double harvest on the same ground. Little known in the area before 1927, parish agents brought in railroad cars full of soybean seed after the Flood as part of their diversification program. Planters in the region, anxious to secure cheap forage and improve their yields, began to plant it on a regular basis; Tensas Parish alone had 5000 acres planted to the crop in 1929.²⁶

Delta planters also looked to boost the quality of their cotton production through the use of improved seed. The Experiment Station at St. Joseph proved especially useful in testing and promoting new strains. The parish agents worked closely with Haddon, the station director, in demonstrating lines such as Delfos, Dixie Triumph, and Missdell Nos. 1 and 2, which had more resistance to rain and cold weather. Together, they distributed several tons of the top-grade seed to planters in the region, hoping that increased and better quality yields on smaller acreage would encourage diversification. Daniel reported that for the 1929 crop in Tensas Parish, which exceeded 22,000 bales, the best grades of cotton, grown from improved seed, brought sixteen to twenty cents a pound, a significant price increase over the normal production.²⁷

Improved machinery and tools enabled planters to consider much of this new farm program, with the new men in the parish, less attached to the culture of the old plantation, generally showing the greatest interest. Tractors, multi-row cultivators, and other equipment being

²⁶ "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1929," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. Lespedeza is another member of the pea family, closely related to clover.

²⁷ Ibid. On the role of the Experiment Station in Tensas Parish, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 224-225.

developed in the 1910s and 1920s allowed these men to do more with less. Tib Mitchiner in East Carroll made 680 bales on 700 acres during the 1928 season using these technologies; in 1929, J.A. Parker on Yelverton plantation near St. Joseph cultivated fifty-five acres of cotton by himself with a Farm-All tractor, calling it the "easiest crop he ever made." Parker claimed, in fact, to be able to work his land three to six times faster with tractors and cultivators than with mules, and planned to purchase another machine and break in 400 acres for 1930. Another new man in the region, "an experienced hand with tractor farming" that arrived from the Mississippi Delta, had another 400 acres he had worked with tractors, four-row cultivators, and a few experienced wage laborers, with very satisfactory results.²⁸

In his annual report for 1929, Walter Daniel envisioned "a new day" for the Delta, since he felt that the only issue "holding her back at the present time is the lack of labor to handle the lands." Advanced equipment, fertilizers, and pesticides, he argued, would help overcome this limitation and allow local planters to "compete with western Texas and Oklahoma and parts of Mississippi" which were already using the latest tools and techniques. Daniel was confident about the region's prospects: the "Delta soil lends itself very readily to the use of machinery," he boasted, with large, level fields, "300 acres or more being the minimum on most plantations," and labor so scarce that "the planter wants as much money return from the labor used as is possible to get." Daniel, too, felt encouraged by the attitude of the planters, as they appeared "quick to grasp the use of a tool that will

²⁸ "Narrative Report, G.H. Stewart, East Carroll Parish, 1928," Box 15, f. 136, v. 136, Extension Service Records. "Crop Prospects in Tensas Parish Most Encouraging," Tensas Gazette, 26 July 1929, and "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1929," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records.

improve the conditions on the farm"; Daniel himself had helped them secure 150 cultivators and fifty-three tractors over the previous year, when only a couple of years earlier, few existed at all in the parish.²⁹

Indeed, the future had already arrived in terms of the technology that would ultimately transform the cotton plantation. By early 1928, farmers in northwest Texas, with the assistance of USDA agents, had begun work with mechanical cotton pickers, and, although wholly experimental, their efforts sparked an increased interest in the potential applications for other areas. Within two years, engineers had brought the new machines to the Mississippi Delta. At the Stoneville Experiment Station in October 1930, hundreds of planters and businessmen, including many from across the River in Louisiana, witnessed an extensive five-day test run of these pickers, watching in awe as the they rolled easily down the rows, outstripping by far the capable black hands that had been brought out to offer a comparison. W.E. Ayres of the Stoneville station declared that the pickers would, "in a few years revolutionize the cotton-growing business." Louisiana planters got their own demonstration, too, when the Rust Brothers brought their mechanical cotton picker to the Olivedell plantation near Lake Providence in November 1932. All the planters in attendance generally concurred that the demonstration had satisfied their questions regarding the feasibility of mechanized cotton harvesting. They now only waited for the fine-tuning of the machines, and the money to put them into the fields.³⁰

²⁹ "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1929," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records.

³⁰ "Mechanical Cotton Harvesters Now Doing Satisfactory Work," Tensas Gazette, 9 March 1928; "Veteran Cotton Pickers Awed as Iron Giant Shows 'Em How," Memphis Commercial Appeal, n.d., reprint Tensas Gazette, 24 October 1930; and Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 11 November 1932.

As their farming operations became more sophisticated, so too did their overall social and economic organization. Parish leaders in Tensas formed a Chamber of Commerce in February 1928 under the guidance of the local agent, Walter Daniel, with the stated aims of encouraging better farming practices and advertising the parish to potential investors. At the first meeting, the assembly elected Dr. W.D. Noble president, C.C. Brooks, vice-president, and Joseph Curry [Jr.], secretary. Among the directors were a mix of men like B.F. Young, L.H. Cook, Louis Hunter, E.D. Coleman, and Sheriff John Hughes. By April, over 120 citizens from across the parish had joined the group, which pledged to promote positive changes in the parish and took over sponsorship of such programs as the 4-H clubs and the Delta Fair. As an auxiliary of sorts, the society ladies organized their own group, the Cosmopolitan Club, which started out as a social club but then took on issues involving uplift and reform, such as town clean up and beautification efforts. These two organizations joined sister groups in the other Delta parishes in August 1928 to form the Delta Club Federation. Its first major issue, of course, involved the acquisition of the Experiment Station for St. Joseph. Later, it pursued other reforms in agriculture, sought improvements in Delta schools and libraries, encouraged road-building efforts, and weighed in on a whole host of other civic issues.³¹

³¹ "Parish Chamber of Commerce Organized," Tensas Gazette, 17 February 1928. "Minutes of a Call Meeting of the Tensas Parish Chamber of Commerce," Tensas Gazette, 13 April 1928; "Narrative Report, W.R. Daniel, Tensas Parish, 1928," Box 42, f. 614, v. 389, Extension Service Records. On the organization of the Cosmopolitan Club, see the notice in the Tensas Gazette, 30 March 1928, and "Cosmopolitan Club," Tensas Gazette, 27 July 1928. The younger ladies formed a reading club initially, but picked up social issues as a matter of course. In July, they were hearing about Lyle Saxon's novel Cane River, reading poems, and playing music. On the Delta Federation, see "LA Delta Club Federation," Tensas Gazette, 24 August 1928; "Fall Meeting Delta

The move towards increased organization came at a propitious time for Delta planters who, beginning in 1929 and 1930, witnessed the catastrophic decline of cotton prices due to the effects of the Great Depression. American cotton, of course, had struggled along through the 1920s, with increased competition from foreign sources and decreased consumption eroding its place in the world market. The Depression, as it set in, forced the already wobbly cotton economy into full-blown crisis. Total exports for the seven month period ending in February 1930 came to right about 5.3 million bales, compared to the 6.2 million bales exported during a similar period only a year earlier, and the 7.7 million bales from the same span in 1926-27. At home, American mills began a slow-down that further exacerbated market conditions. The Federal government, unaware of the depth of the problem, initially proved very reluctant to assist in righting the situation, choosing rather to let the cotton industry find its own way out. Powerful forces in New York and New Orleans, then, once again agitated for a reduction in acreage, appealing to the independent farmer and planter to put less of their land in cotton and more in hay and forage crops. Although farmers had instituted a voluntary cutback of sorts after the record year of 1926, when prices dropped to ten or twelve cents a pound, these bankers and brokers complained that cotton growers did not make diversification a permanent part of their farming plan, but rather gradually increased their acreage for 1928 and 1929 back to elevated levels. The remedy for the current crisis, it was suggested, lay in a similar plan for lessening production, although

Federation," Tensas Gazette, 23 November 1928; and "Delta Federation Development Plan is Comprehensive," Tensas Gazette, 30 November 1928.

this time, it would have to be put into place forcefully, rather than by any of the previous lackadaisical methods.³²

A bevy of agricultural reformers chimed in with their own plans. W.K. Henderson, owner of the KWKH radio station out of Shreveport and a key backer of Huey Long, offered his three-step plan to relieve the cotton crisis: continued organization through the American Cotton Co-operative Association, regulation of production, and increased consumption. His first order of business was to secure the support of the banking industry in the South, which would have to offer advances to hold the cotton crop off the market, since farmers could not "produce cotton at ten cents." Another reform advocate argued quite simply that control of production was the only issue that mattered, since it was "the only kind of farm relief that ever can be made effective and lasting." He contended that such a measure would force planters to put the rest of their land in hay and forage crops or pasture, and might, in fact, "bring back to us the good old ante-bellum days with plenty of hog and hominy and a smoke-house on every farm and plantation."³³

Huey Long himself, Governor and Senator-Elect by 1931, even pressed forward with his own idea - a total moratorium on cotton planting for 1932, what he called his "cotton-holiday" plan. Long gained some traction on the issue, and even browbeat the state legislature into passing supportive legislation, but could not translate his popularity into concerted action among the cotton

³² "An Urgent Appeal to Cotton Planters for Acreage Reduction," Tensas Gazette, 14 February 1930, and "What Price Cotton?," Wall Street Journal, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 28 March 1930.

³³ "W.K. Henderson of Shreveport Broadcasting Station KWKH Outlines Plan to Relieve Tense Cotton Situation," Tensas Gazette, 12 September 1930, and "The Cotton Situation," Tensas Gazette, 14 November 1930.

producing states of the South. At any rate, he did not fully explain how planters and tenants, based on the cotton credit system, would subsist for the year without collateral. He garnered little support in the Delta parishes, which tended to shy away from reductions in any form but did offer a half-hearted embrace of more reserved plans, like that approved at a conference in Jackson, Mississippi, in November 1931, which would have reduced cotton acreage by fifty percent for the next year, a more reasonable goal.³⁴

At the local level, the Extension Service took a very active role in educating planters about the cotton situation and implementing, or at least offering, such a reform program. The district agent for Northeast Louisiana, C.W. Davis, scheduled "cotton outlook" meetings across the region to explain the issues associated with the cotton crisis: over-production, increased competition, and decreased consumption. Realizing his audience, he was careful to note, however, that his talks were "not part of an acreage reduction campaign disguised under another name," but rather an educational initiative designed to give planters a full view of cotton futures and, perhaps, encourage them to adjust their thinking on cotton planting and diversification. A large part of the problem, he explained, lay in foreign competition. Great Britain, for instance, had increased its consumption of Egyptian cotton from twenty-one percent of its total to thirty percent in the early 1920s, and continued to adjust this rate according to price and quality. In the Far East, Japan, the most industrialized nation in the region, likewise had decreased its imports

³⁴ For the particulars of Huey Long's plans to aid the cotton industry, see Robert E. Snyder, "Huey Long and the Cotton Holiday Plan of 1931," Louisiana History, v. 18, no. 1 (Spring 1977); Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 213-217; and Williams, Huey Long, 530-33. "Cotton Delegates Adopt Texas Plan," Tensas Gazette, 27 November 1931.

of American cotton while tapping into the vast Indian market. These trends would continue even after the Depression, he argued, and to compete, American cotton growers would have to produce a better quality crop at a cheaper price. Through the use of science and technology - better seed, advanced equipment and machinery, fertilizers, and pesticides - he felt that it was possible to produce more and better cotton on less land, while utilizing the remaining acreage for corn, hay, and other forage crops.³⁵

Cotton planters in the Delta, though, proved unable to adjust that easily. The old, broken credit system allowed for very little deviation from the cotton regimen and, despite perhaps a willingness to try something different, few had the economic independence to indulge such an effort. Indeed, planters in Tensas Parish alone put over 46,000 acres in cotton for both 1930 and 1931, desperately trying to produce as much as possible, even with prices bottomed out, with which to pay off their loans and secure new ones for the next year. In addition to this dismal set of circumstances, planters also struggled with Mother Nature in the first full year of the Depression. Across the South and Southwest in the spring and summer of 1930, a very serious drought prevailed; it damaged all the feed and staple crops and portended an inferior grade yield from the cotton that would further dampen prices on the market. This development, in tandem with the general depression, deepened the sense of crisis among the planters of the Delta, particularly since it demonstrated their inability to

³⁵ "Series of Cotton Outlook Meetings to be Held," Tensas Gazette, 23 January 1931, and "The Cotton Outlook Meetings," Tensas Gazette, 6 February 1931.

control the larger economic forces that they manipulated so effectively at the micro-level.³⁶

Yet, the leading men in the Delta continued to look at organization as part of a more systematic solution to their economic woes. In East Carroll Parish, a group of the biggest planters, representing sixty percent of the cultivated acreage, formed in August 1930 a luncheon club for the purpose of discussing major farm issues. C.A. Rose, the parish agent, considered this a major accomplishment, since the profound isolation of plantation life contributed to an individualism, as he put it, "so pronounced that it is hard to get him [the planter] to think in terms of a group." The informal social setting of the club meetings, Rose further observed, "aroused" the interest of local planters more than formal talks and allowed them to reach agreements on day rates for wage hands, ginning fees, and drought relief issues. About the same time as the initial East Carroll meeting, state Senator C.C. Brooks organized a meeting of planters in Tensas Parish to discuss similar topics. Although only a score of the leading planters turned out, it marked the continued coalescence of the planters in the parish as a viable interest group.³⁷

And, as such, they turned once again to the Federal government for assistance in meeting the crisis in plantation country. In late August 1930, a Delta-wide meeting of planters formally petitioned the

³⁶ On the cotton acreage figures, see Figure 6, Appendix C. For coverage on the 1930 drought, see "Drought Broken Tuesday," Tensas Gazette, 4 July 1930, and "The Drought," Tensas Gazette, 1 August 1930.

³⁷ "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll, 1930," Box 15, Folder 136, v. 136, Extension Service Records; "Planters Club Organized in East Carroll," Tensas Gazette, 24 October 1930; and "Cotton Planters Establish Rates on Cotton Picking and Farm Labor," Tensas Gazette, 8 August 1930. The small group in Tensas voted to limit wage labor to no more than a dollar a day and to pay cotton pickers no more than sixty cents per hundred pounds.

Red Cross for aid because of the almost complete failure of feed crops, disappointing cotton prospects, and their inability to employ farm laborers in the winter months, which would have cut into an already slim or non-existent profit margin. A standing committee on relief, consisting of leading planters and the parish agents, appealed to allies in Washington, D.C., to exert the necessary pressure. Senator Joseph Ransdell, coming to the aid of his fellow planters, pleaded that many farmers would be "in actual want as soon as the small crops are harvested and turned over to their creditors," and that local banks and furnishing merchants would likewise face disaster "if cotton is sold at present prices." In addition to basic emergency relief, then, he urged the Federal Farm Board to institute a ten-cent per pound minimum price advance to farmers, which would allow them to hold their crops until prices rose. Although he failed to achieve this last measure, his efforts were not completely in vain, as the Red Cross did eventually offer food rations and other supplies to the beleaguered tenant population of the Delta.³⁸

Even with this added support, though, Delta planters found themselves in a difficult position. Josiah Scott, who often waxed optimistic about crops and prices, could not conceal his gloom this time, crying that, "Distress and suffering will mark the wreckage which the drouth and low prices have made," and even suggesting that, "if ever there has been a time in recent years that the real benefits of

³⁸ "LA Delta Parishes Not to Ask for Aid," Tensas Gazette, 29 August 1930, and "Senator Ransdell Urges Farm Relief," Tensas Gazette, 29 August 1930. On the drought and general failure of relief in the drought period, see Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, As Rare as Rain: Federal Relief in the Great Southern Drought of 1930-31, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985. The Fisher Lumber Company, a subsidy of General Motors that owned thousands of acres of timber and plantation land in the area, refused this aid, choosing rather to carry their tenants at the established Red Cross rates; see, "A Most Liberal Company," Tensas Gazette, 13 February 1931.

diversified or balanced farming have been forcibly brought out into the open, it is this year." For planters, merchants, and bankers, he only saw "uncertainty and discouragement" in the future. Unfortunately, Scott's evaluation of affairs proved correct and by 1931, the effects of the Depression appeared everywhere. Many taxpayers proved unable to meet their obligations, resulting in a series of defaults similar to those seen during the post-war depression. Parish leaders even went so far to ask for a reduction in the state assessment on agricultural lands, which, in Tensas at least, they claimed to be overvalued by at least twenty-five percent. Although ultimately denied by the state Tax Commission, it demonstrated a desperate state of mind. James Allen, usually an even-tempered, if at times critical, observer of the Delta's economic situation, even joined in the refrain, objecting to a taxation level that seemed particularly oppressive with cotton resting at six cents. He claimed to have paid his taxes in 1929 with only fifty bales, but that his most recent accounting with the government cost him two hundred. The assessed land values, he argued, simply did not represent the true cash worth of property in the midst of the Depression, but rather the inflated values from years earlier. Allen, a wealthy man able to shoulder such burdens, worried most for his fellow planters and farmers, half of whose properties were under mortgage. How these men would pay off their loans, carry insurance, and make the necessary repairs with such ruinous tax rates, he did not know. The only solution, he offered, seemed to be a radical slashing of the parish budget in order to lower local taxes, since it appeared that no relief would be forthcoming from the state.³⁹

³⁹ "The Story that 1930 Tells," Tensas Gazette, 2 January 1931. "State Tax Sale on Immovable Property," Tensas Gazette, 4 September 1931. "Reduction in Assessment on Agricultural Lands Denied," Tensas Gazette,

And, in fact, the School Board, where much of the local tax money ended up, did indeed cut its expenditures for the 1932-33 session by about twenty-five percent, reducing salaries, leaving positions unfilled, and shortening the terms at the black schools. Yet, parish leaders still continued to press for reduction of their tax burden. In May 1932, the parish Board of Equalizers, including large planters Richard Whitney and Martin Jacoby, again objected to inaccurate assessments and claimed that the Depression had inflicted such hardships that not more than ten percent of property owners had paid up their taxes for the year. They recommended a twenty-five percent reduction else "there will be a collapse of farming operations and a majority of the lands . . . will necessarily go to the State for taxes." Later, a committee of concerned property owners, chaired by Benjamin F. Young, recommended even further retrenchment in government services, the assumption by the state of local road bonds, and the replacement of property taxes with regressive income and sales taxes. In some instances, then, the planters even sought to turn the bitter Depression to their favor by excising all of their societal obligations and dumping these onto the poor of the state, who could least afford to handle them.⁴⁰

But, for the planters, bankruptcy did appear as a very real fate throughout 1931 and 1932. Brothers Guy and Earl Hunter, with their aged father Napoleon, had well over 600 acres on the unpaid list for the October 1932 tax sale, and Eliza Hunter likewise had not met her

5 June 1931. "To the Taxpayers of Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 26 February 1932.

⁴⁰ "School Board Plans \$25,000 Reduction in Operating Cost, About 25 per cent," Tensas Gazette, 29 April 1932. "Meeting of Tensas Parish Board of Equalizers," Tensas Gazette, 6 May 1932; "Minutes of Taxpayers' Mass Meeting," Tensas Gazette, 27 May 1932; and "Taxpayers' Meeting," Tensas Gazette, 3 June 1932.

obligations for a number of cheap rental houses. J.A. Tudor still owed on his 1100-acre Holly Grove plantation near Newellton, as did R.L. Wimberley on his 600-acre Johnson Bend property. As the Depression wore on, even more prominent members of Tensas society found it difficult to keep the dreaded sheriff's sale at bay. Appearing on the November 1933 tax sale list were men like James Allen, Joseph T. Curry, C.V. Ratcliff, Thomas Wade [Jr.], and S.T. Yourtee. Most of these men redeemed their properties, but the embarrassment of being published no doubt disturbed them greatly, although perhaps not as much as would have the loss of their land.⁴¹

In short, by late 1932, the plantation world of Louisiana's northeast Delta was in deep trouble. Local planters had struggled through flood and depression, and had attempted to make adjustments to both crises. In the end, though, alone, they appeared unable to force the changes necessary to continue forward. They found themselves increasingly looking to the Federal government for assistance in providing basic subsistence for their labor as well as in propping up their own economic livelihoods. The full weight of this helplessness forced a fundamental reevaluation of the psyche grounded in a masculine independence of action. In many ways, then, the transformation of the planter had reached a critical phase.

⁴¹ "State Tax Sale on Immovable Property," Tensas Gazette, 28 October 1932, and "State Tax Sale on Immovable Property," Tensas Gazette, 10 November 1933.

CHAPTER SIX
THE NEW DEAL IN THE DELTA

By 1932, the Depression had taken a heavy toll on Delta planters, stretching their financial resources to the limit. Faced with utter ruin, they desperately looked to the Federal government for assistance in propping up the cotton economy through direct relief to their tenants, whom they could no longer afford to feed, and in subsidization of their own planting efforts. Ultimately, the Federal government succeeded where the voluntary efforts of the 1920s had failed, allowing planters to diversify and improve their farming interests while relieving them of the burden of support for a large and inefficient labor force. The New Deal, then, served to cleave a modern Delta from an archaic past.

Prior to any systematic relief effort, though, planters in the Delta had utilized Home Demonstration agents to help reduce the economic burden they faced in supporting their tenants in the midst of the Depression. As part of the overall Extension Service program, Home Demonstration sought to make tenants and small farmers self-sufficient through home food production and storage. This plan, of course, had clashed with planters' desires to make tenants as dependent as possible on the plantation commissary, where goods could be overpriced and accounts manipulated. Consequently, local parish governments did not fund any Home agents until after the 1927 Flood, when credit began to dry up. At this time, and certainly by the first years of the Depression, many planters simply could no longer afford to grant the generous tabs that tenants expected and which they often simply rolled over onto the next year's account. It is possible, too, as the planter

James Allen claimed, that tenants had become accustomed to the credit system as well, and put all their efforts into the real moneymaker, the cotton crop, rather than towards raising gardens or livestock.¹

Whatever the case before, by 1930 and 1931, planters had begun to press a "live-at-home" program on their tenants in an effort to reduce operating expenses. At an August 1931 meeting of black farmers, Tensas Parish school superintendent V.C. Rives cited the "economic depression" that "may go on for an indefinite length of time" as the reason for this new development. Explanations elsewhere appeared more blunt. In early 1932, the Extension Service agents in East Carroll Parish sponsored a series of community meetings held at local black churches for the purpose of describing in detail the need for self-sufficiency. At these talks, the white parish Extension agent, assisted by both the white and black Home agents, laid the situation out clearly, telling the assembled crowds that "visiting friends and negro 'good times' are over because the 'boss man' was broke, and if the negro didn't see about raising and storing his food he would starve." Although disdainful of such lectures, many blacks nonetheless appreciated this opportunity to become more self-reliant while diversifying their farm activities and improving their nutrition. The black Health Unit nurse in East Carroll, for instance, felt that the talks had "awakened [the tenants] to the fact that from now on they are directly dependent on themselves and the white man is finished as far as furnishing food is concerned." And, clearly, this newfound independence improved the self-esteem of black farmers across the board. Jersushia Griffin, the black Home agent in East Carroll Parish, reported in 1934 that they

¹ Allen claimed to have encouraged his tenants to plant gardens for years but with no success. See "The Crisis," Tensas Gazette, 6 March 1931.

were "stepping high and looking the whole community in the face with a smile and [that this] surely cannot be estimated in dollars and cents." The planters saw results as well, with one claiming that the Home agent work was "worth money to me" since his tenants now had "gardens, home canned and dried vegetables to last the year round" and that they were no longer "asking for food."²

The Home Demonstration agents likewise proved helpful to the planters in dealing with the new white population in the Delta. The canning, curing, and preserving work of the agents enabled these people to maintain a certain level of economic independence from their white landlords, and put them further down the track towards acquiring, or maintaining, their own small farms. In 1930, for instance, Myrtle Dessens in East Carroll, oversaw the canning of only 5422 quarts of fruits and vegetables, but by 1931, this number had risen to almost 19,000, and in 1932, up to almost 28,000. Thousands of quarts of other items, such as meats, jellies, preserves, fruit juices, pickles, and relishes, were also put away during this period. In some cases, when the "woody section" or backcountry whites appeared with venison, their only source of meat since they lacked beef cattle, she helped them can this so that they were able to "take care of their year's supply." The Home agents also took over relief efforts at times. Dessens operated the high school soup kitchen in Lake Providence after other funds had run out, taking donations of cash, canned goods, fresh milk and eggs,

² On planters pressing their tenants to plant gardens, also see Davis, Deep South, 385. For Rives' quote, see "Colored Farmers Improvement Association at Delta Bridge Rosenwald School," Tensas Gazette, 7 August 1931. On the East Carroll meetings and discussion, see "Narrative Report of Home Demonstration Work, Myrtle Dessens, East Carroll Parish, 1932," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records, and "Narrative Report of Work with Negroes, Jerushia Griffin, East and West Carroll Parishes, 1932," Box 63, f. 1048, v. 497. For "stepping high," see "Narrative Report, Jerushia Griffin, East and West Carroll Parishes, 1934," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records.

meat from the butcher, and old bread from the baker in stitching together a program that made sure that malnourished tenant children had enough to eat.³

Even with such assistance from spirited individual agents, though, Delta society found itself unable to cope with the size and scope of the Depression; along with the rest of the United States, it had reached its breaking point by mid-1932, when President Herbert Hoover instituted his first major relief measures. Riley Wilson, campaigning that summer for re-election to the House of Representatives from northeast Louisiana, touted his record of support for these bills aimed at alleviating the suffering of the nation: \$300 million in emergency relief money, \$200 million for crop production loans, and \$125 million to the Federal Land Banks to provide low interest loans to farmers, thereby helping to prevent massive foreclosures. These early efforts at organized relief, especially emergency funds for work relief, began to filter down to the states through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In late July, Governor Oscar K. Allen constituted his Unemployment Relief Committee to serve as a central authority, with six district offices providing oversight for local city and parish agencies; the Delta fell under the Monroe district office. From there, the district supervisors certified individual parish needs, and whether or not all local sources had been tapped fully. Next, relief caseworkers in the field compiled a list of potential recipients and allocated work relief to the most needy. Work relief included from one

³ "Narrative Report, Myrtle Dessens, East Carroll Parish, 1931"; "Narrative Report, Myrtle Dessens, East Carroll Parish, 1932"; and "Narrative Report, Myrtle Dessens, East Carroll Parish, 1933," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records. Individual planters also oversaw Home Demonstration work, such as Sidney Shaw at Winter Quarters plantation in Tensas Parish. See "Winter Quarters Plantation Favors Live At Home Program," Tensas Gazette, 30 October 1931.

to four days of public work on roads, bridges, and other parish and municipal improvements, at two and a half dollars a day. The state received some two million dollars for the latter half of 1932, and by late in the year, at least a quarter million people were beneficiaries of this Federal largesse.⁴

By early November, Tensas Parish had its relief organization up and running. Although overseen by a paid administrator from outside the parish, the local elite dominated its activities. The men on the placement committee, which controlled access to relief jobs, included Benjamin Young, Philip Watson, Elliott Coleman, and German Baker. The wives and daughters of the plantation establishment, drawing paid salaries, occupied most of the clerical positions; such women even occupied the majority of the field worker slots, which required tromping about through the parish by car and horse to interview poor tenants. This setup, very natural in its evolution, nonetheless gave Delta planters a considerable amount of power over the relief process, which they used to their benefit. As winter approached, many saw an opportunity to offload their tenants onto the relief rolls. The numbers applying, and receiving, relief, then, swelled. By mid-November, the parish office at St. Joseph had taken in 540 applications and had certified over 300 of these for actual support. By the end of the month, the agency had almost 450 laborers at work on public roads, levees, sewers, and drainage projects; this number jumped to over 1400 by early December and by Christmas time, to 2200. The other Delta

⁴ "Statement from Congressman Wilson About His Labors in Congress," Tensas Gazette, 29 July 1932. "Relief Measures for the Unemployed," Tensas Gazette, 12 August 1932; "Unemployment Relief Work Now Functioning Practically Throughout State," Tensas Gazette, 4 November 1932; "Unemployment Relief Work Goes Steadily On," Tensas Gazette, 11 November 1932; and "Unemployment Relief," Tensas Gazette, 2 December 1932.

parishes witnessed a similar bulging of relief cases, each with well over 1000 by the end of the year. By the state's estimates, which figured that each case represented approximately four and a half persons, this meant that perhaps as many as 24,000 people across the Delta, upwards of nine thousand in Tensas Parish alone, benefited from relief expenditures on food and supplies.⁵

Relief had both positive and negative aspects for planters in the Delta. Many, of course, utilized it to lessen their economic burden in the fall and winter, a time when they normally would have had to "carry" their tenants over until spring. Not only did the tenants run up big tabs at the plantation stores in the down period but, the planters themselves had to borrow money at high interest to keep their stores afloat. This had become a dicey proposition in the Depression years with the restricted access to credit that most experienced. Planters profited from the relief arrangement, then, as they were able to keep their laborers around for spring plowing without having to furnish them for the four or five months after the previous fall's harvest. As a bonus, many used their tenants to work on private projects about the plantation, a highly illegal action since relief work was intended for public benefit, or at least for the benefit of the impoverished person. The director of relief operations in Tensas Parish, R.L. McRaney, in fact, found it necessary to issue a circular detailing to what ends relief work could be used. Such tasks as whitewashing cabins, mending fences, putting in gardens, improving

⁵ "Bureau for Unemployment Relief Work," Tensas Gazette, 11 November 1932; "Bureau of Unemployment Busy," Tensas Gazette, 18 November 1932; Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 18 November 1932; Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 25 November 1932; "Rules and Work of the Unemployment Relief," Tensas Gazette, 9 December 1932; "Work Given 90,108 By Relief Group, Report Reveals," Tensas Gazette, 23 December 1932; and Untitled Notice, Tensas Gazette, 30 December 1932.

water and sanitation, and clearing fence lines and ditches, were acceptable under relief regulations, as long as such work was directed towards the "improvement and preparation of the particular parcel or tract of land assigned to the client." Other work on the plantation, however, was strictly prohibited. McRaney maintained that:

IT IS NOT THE POLICY OF THIS ORGANIZATION NOR WILL IT BE ALLOWED, TO GIVE RELIEF TO CLIENT TO WORK FOR PLANTATION OWNER OR LANDLORD, AND, UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES AR THE CLIENTS OF THE E.R.A. TO BE USED FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROPERTY WHERE HE IS NOT PERSONALLY BENEFITTED.

To draw such a bold and unmistakable line, he clearly had come across multiple instances of planter abuse of the system.⁶

Planters manipulated relief in other ways as well. Their control of the levers of power gave them a renewed authority over African-Americans on the plantation after a general waning throughout the 1920s, allowing them to reward or punish tenants by either bestowing or withholding relief during the critical winter months. Those with good records, who had worked hard and given no trouble to their landlords, obtained a goodly allotment; those who had caused problems received nothing. Lucille Watson's caseload from 1933 gives a good indication of this pattern. The Johnson family at St. Joseph, for instance, had a long history in the community, with both the husband and wife classed as "the white mans negroe." They had both been house servants, and were considered "very loyal to their employers," but had fallen on hard times. The husband had only made a small crop and remained in debt to the black merchant John Henry Jones; the wife worked as a laundress for

⁶ "Memorandum to All Plantation Owners and Managers, Tensas Parish, LA," n.d., Box 5, f. 10, Cross Keys Plantation Records. On the abuse of relief, and other New Deal, measures by planters, see DeJong, A Different Day, 92-97, and Woodruff, American Congo, 155-59. Pete Daniel, Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985, 65-90, gives a very good overview of relief in Southern cotton districts as well.

a white family, and her daughter, formerly a teacher out in the countryside, found it "impossible to make her salary stretch that far." These were good candidates for relief. Likewise, the Robinsons, down on the China Grove plantation belonging to Joseph Harper, seemed a worthwhile investment. Jamey, the husband, had lived in the neighborhood his whole life; his wife came from further up in the Delta but had a mature son who wanted to help them make a crop the next season. Jamey himself had made three bales that fall, but only broke even during the settlement. With his landlord "so poor" that he could not carry them through the winter, and with only a few hogs, some chickens, three or four sacks of corn, a few of sweet potatoes, and some canned peaches and berries, the Robinsons appeared in desperate straits. Watson consequently offered six days of work, worth almost eleven dollars, and threw in some emergency supplies as well, including flour, meal, sugar, lard, soda, meat, soap, grits, and tobacco. A man and woman living on the Wilsonia plantation, south of St. Joseph, however, reflected the latter situation. After consulting with some neighboring white managers, Watson decided not to offer them any relief aid at all. One of the managers remarked that they "were trifling and did not want to work," but also noted that part of the problem stemmed from their landlord, who, being from Texas, did not "know how to handle this type of labor." Presumably, he was critical of the lenient furnishing agreement that the tenant had abused, which set a bad precedent for the area. Another local white, who had worked the tenant in an earlier season, remembered that he had been "so no count and trifling" that he had to "make him leave the place." Such informal discussions and implicit understandings between relief workers and

local planters ultimately shaped the course of relief in plantation country.⁷

Race, too, played a powerful role. In almost all cases, poor whites received some form of relief from parish organizations; to deny it would have potentially precipitated a violent encounter that planters simply did not want to risk. The Daves family, out on Mound Place, as an example, received a doctor's visit and medicine as direct relief, while the father was certified for ten days of public work, an eighteen dollar gift that exceeded the plantation furnishing rate of fourteen dollars for the same period of time. The Crossgroves, another white family near St. Joseph, received twelve days of work relief, along with emergency issues of food and supplies. Such offerings, either in work opportunities or provisions, reinforced the color line as much as possible. Whites, of course, generally demanded more in terms of material goods, simply because they could; as much as it galled them, planters acquiesced since impoverished and starving white men tended to undermine conceptions about white superiority. African-Americans, on the other hand, found themselves deliberately frozen out, given less because it fit in with white views of black poverty. In distributing food and supplies across Tensas Parish, relief workers adhered more or less strictly to these basic guidelines. White men over age eighteen, for instance, received at least a dollar and a quarter worth of food as part of their weekly ration; black men, in comparison, could be furnished with as little as ninety-eight cents. These numbers held true, in proportion, for all ages and sexes. Especially striking, though, were the figures for children under age

⁷ Johnson Family Relief Report, 2 November 1933; Robinson Family Relief Report, 14 and 21 November 1933; and Wilsonia Plantation Family Relief Report, 13 July 1933, Box 5, f. 11, Cross Keys Plantation Records.

two, the most important age in terms of successful later development. White toddlers and infants were supplied at no less than a dollar and twenty-nine cents a week, while black babies received no more than ninety-two cents. The difference in food variety, too, appeared shocking. White families generally had access to a wide array of food choices, including such items as butter, root vegetables, oranges, and sugar, while blacks often were limited to cornmeal, salt pork, and molasses. These distinctions, imposed by the plantation hierarchy, served to bolster the faltering planter hegemony of the 1930s.⁸

Yet, relief efforts, in some ways, cut into this authority more deeply than ever before. Planters always feared the "demoralizing" effects of government handouts on their labor force and attempted to limit access at key points in the cotton cycle, when they needed every available hand. Even paying only a dollar and a half, though, a full dollar less than originally prescribed, relief work appeared as the easy choice over backbreaking field labor that paid only sixty cents or a dollar. Often, black and white laborers both attempted to maintain their listing on the relief rolls. A sociologist working in lower Concordia Parish discovered that local parish leaders discontinued a popular road project there because "the farmers refused to plant their crops" while this opportunity existed. Benjamin Young, in Tensas Parish, found it necessary to issue public circulars asking for the

⁸ Smith, "Black River Settlement," 34-35, provides some interesting information about the nature of white relief. In the section of Concordia Parish he studied, fifty-five percent of white families had been on continuous relief since 1932, compared to only seventeen percent of black families. Ninety-five percent of whites had been on relief at some point, but this was only true for eighty-two percent of blacks. Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 83-85, discusses relief in Tensas Parish. Daves Family Relief Report and Crossgrove Family Relief Report, Box 5, f. 11, Cross Keys Plantation Records. On the rationing figures, see Figures 12a and 12b, Appendix C. For more on the plantation diet, see Davis, Deep South, 382-83.

names of men whom he believed could be gainfully employed, so that their files could be "immediately closed" and any future relief work "denied." Such efforts to control relief, then, indicated that its effects were not all positive for planters.⁹

This appeared especially to be the case in the mid-1930s when the Federal government instituted reform programs aimed at helping small farmers acquire their own property. Beginning in 1935, the Resettlement Administration (RA) began to scour state relief rolls for a massive undertaking that would move likely candidates onto government purchased farms, where they then would receive financial and technical assistance in the hopes that, once on their feet, they could buy the land for their own. The RA purchased the Abston, Crump, and Wynne property in East Carroll Parish in late 1936 for just such a project. Sprawling across seven separate plantations and 9000 acres, the property had been a consistent moneymaker for its owners. Unfortunately, the 200 or so black tenant families who farmed the land, and had lived there since slavery times, now found themselves homeless, evicted to make room for poor whites moving in. The resulting uproar made the national press, where many African-American papers blamed racist landowners and incompetent government bureaucrats. Locally, it led to the organization of the first chapter of the NAACP in the parish. In response to the criticism, the government set up smaller projects to accommodate the displaced black farmers, but the flourishing cultural life that had existed previously did not survive the disruption.¹⁰

⁹ Smith, "Black River Settlement," 35. Public Notices, Tensas Gazette, 30 December 1932 and 10 March 1933. Also see, "Relief Withdrawn from Farm Hands," Tensas Gazette, 16 February 1933.

¹⁰ Untitled Article, Tensas Gazette, 1 November 1935. "RA Pays \$290,000.00 for 9,000 Acres of Fertile Land in Louisiana," Tensas

In addition to such large projects, though, the Federal government also provided assistance to many smaller farmers on an individual basis through the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which eventually subsumed the RA. The FSA, for instance, advanced over \$7000 to thirty-seven small, mostly white farmers in Tensas Parish during 1937 for a variety of purchases that helped stabilize their economic situation. The net assets of these farmers had increased gradually to over \$200 by then, and the size of such loans decreased in proportion as farmers secured their own mules and implements, which allowed a modicum of independence and self-sufficiency. Most of these FSA families provided themselves with gardens, poultry, milk, beef or pork in plentiful amounts, while also growing enough feed for their farm animals. Although many of these small farmers only experienced slight success, a number eventually moved their way up into the ranks of the large landowners, from which position they exerted both economic and political influence in the following decades. The Federal government, through such relief efforts, then, emerged at times as a powerful broker between the plantation establishment and the dispossessed.¹¹

To a considerable extent, though, planters reaped the benefits of Federal assistance. This aid came not only through public welfare, but with agricultural reform as well. The Depression, of course, had wrecked the plantation economy; unable to control production, cotton

Gazette, 1 January 1937. The only in-depth study of these projects is Donald Holley, Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975, which deals explicitly with several of the Louisiana experiments. For more on the Transylvania project in East Carroll Parish, see Scott, Witness to the Truth, 81-93, and Pinkston, A Place to Remember, 8-10.

¹¹ "Good Record for County's FSA Farmers," Tensas Gazette, 14 January 1938. "35 Farmers in Parish to Farm with FSA Loans," Tensas Gazette, 29 April 1938. Also see "FSA Supervisor Explains How Bankhead-Jones Program Will Be Carried Out in the Parish," Tensas Gazette, 29 July 1938.

planters had harvested the largest crop on record in 1932, driving prices to rock bottom. They needed help to recover. The comprehensive farm adjustment acts in the spring of 1933 provided this basic assistance. In the area of production control, legislation provided for acreage reduction through government rental payments, to be initially funded by \$100 million in emergency allocations and then by a processing tax on the handling of cotton by ginners and warehousemen. With regards to the financing of the cotton crop, it allowed for a basic restructuring of the credit system along national lines, to ensure the availability of low interest loans and cheap mortgages for farmers.¹²

In Washington, D.C., the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) oversaw the implementation of these new programs. Locally, for production goals, however, the bulk of the work fell upon the parish agents and the planters themselves, who anxiously embraced government assistance. Due to the Depression, Tensas Parish had not been able to fund an agent for several years, but with the new legislation came G.L. Burleson, a trained agricultural technician, to help organize the effort. His first job was to secure support for the planned plow-up of excess cotton, which had been mandated by the government. The plow-up, of course, would guarantee a reduced crop size, an absolute necessity since the market had carried over thirteen million bales from the previous season. Burleson did not have a hard sale among the desperate planters of Tensas Parish. They had put in huge cotton acreages

¹² "Benefits of the Farm Adjustment Act," Tensas Gazette, 19 May 1933. On the role of New Deal agricultural policies in Louisiana, see Rudolph Carroll Hammack, "The New Deal and Louisiana Agriculture," Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1973. On the overall impact of Federal farm policies on cotton culture, see Daniel, Breaking the Land, 155-183, and William C. Holley, Ellen Winston, and T.J. Woofter, Jr., The Plantation South, 1934-1937, 1940, reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971.

throughout the Depression, with over 45,000 acres in 1929, 1930, and 1931, and over 33,000 in 1932 and 1933; production had swelled to almost 28,000 bales in 1931, but then lowered, with the price of cotton, to about 19,000 for 1932. Still, their economic prospects did not look bright. Burleson met with the leading planters to assess the situation, putting together a parish steering committee composed of Benjamin Young, W.W. Burnside, and L.T. Collins, and setting up local committees to ensure buy-in from planters and farmers across the parish. These committees included the usual cast of characters: Frank Curry, German Baker, Carneal Goldman [Jr.], Elliott Coleman, Harrison Miller, and Howard Netterville, among others. Their main obstacle appeared to be breaking through the chains of localism that made many wary of government power; some planters and farmers, for instance, feared that a Federal takeover may force them to quit growing cotton entirely, a horrid thought. But, as Burleson explained, his task was not to replace the "money crop" system, but to bring sanity to it by enforcing control measures and diversification. With the cooperation of the big planters, who circulated widely in their home districts, Burleson succeeded in signing up 650 separate individuals to the special "rent" contracts that governed the plow-up. These men agreed to destroy over 9600 acres of an estimated 34,000 acres planted in cotton that year in return for a government subsidy check. By December, cotton farmers in Tensas Parish had received almost \$114,000 through this program, with the Fifth District as a whole taking in over \$1.9 million. Across the state, over 450,000 acres of cotton went under the plow, with farmers receiving a hefty five million dollars from the government coffers.¹³

¹³ "Narrative Report, G.L. Burleson, Tensas Parish, 1933," Box 42, f. 615, v. 390, Extension Service Records. On the initial organization,

In 1934 and 1935, production control fell under the Bankhead Act, which limited the national output to only ten and a half million bales. To accommodate this requirement, Burleson secured contracts representing 14,800 acres, thereby reducing the cotton planting in the parish to only about 25,400 acres. The farmers and planters of the Tensas Parish embraced the revised production program because they had seen the actual, positive results of government control. Cotton prices had slumped badly in the early 1930s, from about nine cents a pound in 1930, to five cents in 1931 but, due to reduced production, they shot up rapidly to about thirteen cents in 1934. The price per bale went from a low of twenty-five dollars in 1931 to sixty-two dollars in 1934. And, although the average planter had reduced his cotton acreage in 1934 by some thirty-seven percent, he saw his average income increase almost forty-six percent above those of the previous three years. In addition, government parity payments ensured that farmers received a bare minimum for their cotton even if the market remained depressed and prices low. The adjustment prices, fortunately, reflected the peak cotton years of 1913 and 1914, when the boll weevil had restricted harvest levels and driven up cotton's overall value. The first parity payments in the parish, for example, totaled \$42,000, and rent payments added another \$134,000, a big payoff indeed. Such trends continued as the government attempted to stabilize the cotton economy. By the end of May 1936, the AAA had distributed over \$460,000 in rental and

see "Cotton Planters Meet at Court House," Tensas Gazette, 23 June 1933. For cotton production figures, see Figures 6 and 8, Appendix C. On the overall emergency plow-up campaign in Louisiana, see Hammack, "New Deal and Louisiana Agriculture," 24-54. On the role of the extension agent as parish agricultural "manager" in the 1933 plow-up and with the Bankhead Act of 1934, see Williamson, Yesterday and Today, 193-94. B.F. Young of Tensas Parish not only chaired his parish committee but also served on the three-member state Cotton Control Committee. Monetary figures from "Tensas Cotton Farmers Receive Funds," Tensas Gazette, 30 March 1934.

benefit payments to Tensas Parish, part of Louisiana's thirty million dollar total. Later, after the reorganization of the AAA, the benefits would increase; for 1937, Tensas Parish farmers participating in the Agricultural Conservation Program received approximately \$300,000.¹⁴

Delta planters also benefited from the other major New Deal agricultural reform which re-structured farm credit and debt. Through low-interest, long-term government loans acquired through the national Farm Credit Administration (FCA), planters paid off much of their high interest debt, thereby allowing them to keep their property out of foreclosure and reorganize their farming operations along more profitable lines. Under the old credit system, many planters had taken loans from local banks and furnishing merchants at anywhere from five to eight percent, and even up to ten percent and above in some cases, on mortgages and production loans. With the new legislation in place, they now had access to money at four and a half percent, and sometimes much less, depending on the term length. This proved an incredibly popular measure. Crawford Rose, the extension agent for East Carroll, for example, was very pleased to see the program administered by actual farmers rather than by those "who knew only one criterion to [abide] by in deciding whether to grant the loan or not, and that was 'How many acres of cotton are you going to plant?'" In 1933, planters in Rose's

¹⁴ "Narrative Report, G.L. Burlison, Tensas Parish, 1934," Box 15, f. 615, v. 390, Extension Service Records. For examples of increased income, see Figure 7, Appendix C. On the Bankhead Act, see "Voluntary Cotton Acreage Reduction for 1934 Summarized," Tensas Gazette, 14 December 1934, and "Bankhead Act in Tensas Reviewed and Summarized," Tensas Gazette, 4 January 1935. "AAA Gave Tensas \$460,310.17," Tensas Gazette, 31 July 1936. "Tensas Farmers Receive Checks," Tensas Gazette, 26 August 1938, and "AAA Checks," Tensas Gazette, 9 December 1938.

parish secured 385 of these low-interest loans, worth over \$220,000, from Memphis and Jackson branch offices of the FCA.¹⁵

By 1934, though, the Federal Intermediate Credit Bank of New Orleans, one of twelve major regional banks under the FCA, had emerged as the major lender in the lower Mississippi River Valley. Financed by public investment in its notes, the Intermediate Bank loaned money to smaller district cooperatives, which in turn loaned money to local credit associations. At the local level, production loans provided money for the planting, harvesting, and marketing of crops, as well as the raising of livestock and virtually any other farm improvement that could be justified. The association officers, usually planters themselves, issued the loans based on the character and production history of the potential borrower, a boon to well-connected planters; collateral mostly included moveable property rather than real estate.¹⁶

The Rayville Production Credit Association, established in early 1934, serviced the Delta area. Steven Voelker, a planter and banker from East Carroll Parish, headed the organization and eventually moved its headquarters from the backcountry to the seat of planter power at Tallulah. It subsequently re-emerged as the Tallulah Production Credit Association and proved to be a strong force in the Delta's economic life. In 1934 alone, this corporation loaned \$550,000 to 732 farmers in the ten-parish area of northeast Louisiana. By 1938, its loans

¹⁵ "Help for Farmers," Tensas Gazette, 30 June 1933; "Government Lending Money to Farmers," Tensas Gazette, 14 July 1933; "Land Bank to Aid Farmers," Tensas Gazette, 11 August 1933; and "Farmers Active," Tensas Gazette, 18 August 1933. On local loans, see "Loans Refinance Farmers' Debts in Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 15 June 1934, and "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll, 1933," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records.

¹⁶ "Remarks of J.M. Magruder, President of the Federal Intermediate Credit Bank of New Orleans," Tensas Gazette, 2 March 1934.

totaled over \$1.5 million. The cheap loans, according to Voelker, allowed farmers to "make the most of their opportunities."¹⁷

The overall effect of both the production and credit reforms, indeed, gave planters expanded avenues for moneymaking in the 1930s. Many utilized their "rented" land for new crops. In Tensas Parish, acreage devoted to corn increased fifty percent and yields doubled from 1929 to 1934. Acreage in hay crops likewise crept up from just under 2400 acres to over 9000. Oat production saw a similar surge, as the parish harvested only 50,000 bushels in 1929 but brought in 75,000 in 1934, and 210,000 in 1939. Many planters likewise put great effort into expanding their livestock operations. The number of cattle in the parish increased from 4600 in 1930 to 11,000 in 1935, and up to 23,000 in 1939. In 1938, for instance the Panola Company grazed 550 head of cattle, C.V. Ratcliff some 300, Bill Poe and the Delta Oil Company about 250 each, and George Bland, L.H. Cook, and W.W. Burnside all about 175.¹⁸

Planters also experimented with new methods and techniques to increase the fertility of their land and thereby increase cotton yields on the improved ground. By 1938, parish planters had upwards of 24,00 acres in soybeans, over 31,000 in summer legumes, and over 14,000 in winter legumes like vetch and Austrian winter peas. Indeed, over half of the parish's total cropland acreage was planted in legumes of some kind that year. Such efforts had big impacts. In 1935, the Panola

¹⁷ "Better System of Credit for Farmers," Tensas Gazette, 2 March 1934; "Farm Borrowers Payment Record Good," Tensas Gazette, 14 December 1934; "Five Year Term Completed," Tensas Gazette, 6 January 1939.

¹⁸ For the crop figures, see "Narrative Report, G.L. Burleson, Tensas Parish, 1934," Box 15, f. 615, v. 390, Extension Service Records, as well as Figures 4 and 5, Appendix C. Also, see "Narrative Report, G.L. Burleson, Tensas Parish, 1939," Box 14, f. 615, v. 390, Extension Service Records, and "All Livestock Except Mules Increase in Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 4 October 1935.

Company decided to plant their 1400 cotton acres after a crop of vetch and soybeans since similarly cultivated soil in 1934 had yielded a bale per acre. Clifton Hester, in East Carroll, saw his cotton yield increase from 1300 to 2900 pounds per acre after planting winter peas and vetch.¹⁹

The director of the Experiment Station at St. Joseph, C.B. Haddon, continued to tout the benefits of fertilizer, cover crops, and improved cottonseed in all his demonstration work. Investments in cover crops, he stated, might yield twenty-five or thirty dollars for every dollar and a half put in. In fact, Haddon was quick to note that, "The expansion of the acreage planted to legumes in Tensas Parish and the increase in yield per acre of cotton following such crops is perhaps our best means of telling the story." Haddon and others clearly noticed the upward trend in cotton yields, and were anxious to take credit for the success that planters experienced. Planters, for instance, only got about 251 pounds per acre for the years 1928 to 1932, but with the introduction of improved strains of cotton, such as the Delfos, Stoneville, and Delta and Pine Land lines, and the heavy use of fertilizers and cover crops, the overall yield shot up to 390 pounds per acre for the years 1934 to 1938.²⁰

¹⁹ "Narrative Report, G.L. Burleson, Tensas Parish, 1934," Box 15, f. 615, v. 390, Extension Service Records. "Tensas Parish, With Its Fertile Soil, Is Farmer's Paradise," Tensas Gazette, 22 April 1938, and "Farm Notes by G.L. Burleson," Tensas Gazette, 27 January 1939. "Narrative Report, East Carroll, 1931, C.A. Rose, Box 15, F. 137A, v. 137, East Carroll, 1931-1936.

²⁰ "Supt. C.B. Haddon Broadcasts Over WQBC, Vicksburg," Tensas Gazette, 3 January 1936; "Narrative Report, G.L. Burleson, Tensas Parish, 1936," Box 14, f. 615, v. 390, Extension Service Records; "Tensas Parish, With Its Fertile Soil, Is Farmer's Paradise," Tensas Gazette, 22 April 1938; "Farm Notes by G.L. Burleson," Tensas Gazette, 27 January 1939; and "They Are Building," Tensas Gazette, 1 December 1939.

This move towards agricultural rationalization can be seen in a few choice examples. In 1937, the Panola Company managed by J.H. Netterville, but with a Board composed of Benjamin Young, Curry McPherson, and Joseph Curry [Jr.], had a large herd of Angus and Hereford cattle on 1200 acres of pasture. In addition, that season they planted 1500 acres in cotton, 1000 in corn, and 1000 in oats. The operation was almost entirely self-sufficient. Their neighbor in Tensas Parish, L.H. Cook, who had taken an early lead in this "silent revolution," also had a diversified farm plan. In 1939 he ran a herd of 250 cattle over several hundred plantation acres, while devoting about 250 acres of the rest to cotton. He also put in 250 acres of grains and feeds, 200 of corn, 100 of grasses and clover, and 50 of lespedeza and alfalfa hay. J. Martian Hamley, in East Carroll Parish, also adjusted the old routine on his Island plantation. Once given over exclusively to cotton, he now only had 560 acres in the staple, while he had 150 acres in corn and cowpeas, 35 in soybeans for hogs, 100 in cowpeas for hay, and 20 in sweet potatoes. He had also built himself a new smokehouse and potato cellar, and, with almost as much cotton as usual, he also had hay and feed for stock, enriched soil, and meat and potatoes for winter.²¹

Planters also put their extra money into other improvements. Crawford Rose reported that after visiting the Stoneville station and seeing the advances in ginning technology there, several planters in East Carroll Parish installed cotton dryers in their gins. Robert

²¹ "Debts, Mortgages Unknown on Huge Panola Farm Units," The Progress, 18 June 1937, and "St. Joseph Grower Finds that Cattle Raising Advances," The Progress, 3 March 1939, Tensas Parish Vertical File, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll, 1932," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records.

Amacker, a successful planter, argued that the improved grade secured from these dryers would push the price of such processed cotton up five cents a pound. By picking season in 1938, most of the gins in Tensas Parish also had undergone major renovations, most being equipped with the latest, most modern equipment.²²

The interest in new technology extended out into the fields as well. Throughout the 1930s, planters showed an increased interest in mechanization, particularly in the cotton pickers that were being perfected at the time. By the fall of 1936, for instance, the Rust brothers, John and Mack, working out of Memphis, had a handful of pickers that they were ready to deploy into the Mississippi Delta for further experimentation, causing serious concern about the fate of labor in cotton country. They ran one of these through a series of tests at Stoneville in late August, completing in an hour as much picking as could be done by eight or ten hands in twelve hours. W.E. Ayers, director of the station, estimated the machine would reduce picking costs by two-thirds and would totally overturn the labor situation in the South. By the next year, the brothers were experimenting with machines twice the size of these pickers, and outfitted with electric lights to do night work. Although still a slight way off, planters could see the future before them.²³

The mechanization process, of course, spelled the end of the old plantation. But, the AAA itself had led the way in changing the basic

²² "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll Parish, 1931," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records, and "Local Gins Improved and Repaired," Tensas Gazette, 26 August 1938.

²³ "Eight Mechanical Cotton Pickers Ready for Action," Jonesville Booster, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 21 August 1936; "Mechanical Cotton Picker Demonstrated at Stoneville, Mississippi," Tensas Gazette, 4 September 1936; and "Mechanical Cotton Picker Claimed Greatly Improved," Tensas Gazette, 3 September 1937.

organization of labor relations. G.L. Burleson, in Tensas Parish, oversaw the gradual transformation of the tenant system during the New Deal years as owners re-imposed management control over large chunks of their property, relegating former tenants to cropper or wage labor status. In his parish, tenant numbers decreased from 717 to 666 between 1933 and 1935 while cropper numbers rose from 1207 to 1424. Wage hand numbers likewise went up, from 457 to 521. These men did not have much support from the establishment, which saw them increasingly as inefficient and atavistic. Crawford Rose, for one, objected stridently to any government loans or payments to tenants, since such help smacked of "class discrimination in its worst form" and "disrupted and disorganized" the plantation regime by giving tenants too much control over production and reducing the "wholesome influence and knowledge of the planter." With little recourse, tenants slowly drifted into lower levels, until the Second World War led many away.²⁴

Through the aid of New Deal programs, then, cotton planters in the Delta enjoyed a renewed measure of prosperity in the mid-1930s. Agent Clifton Hester noted that his constituents in Madison Parish had the largest oat crop ever, and the highest cotton yield per acre since the boll weevil and happily reported that the planters had also hauled in good corn and hay crops. He worried, though, that such success might "make them feel their old time independence and perhaps less eager to participate in a program designed to curtail the acreage of our money crop - cotton." Indeed, as Crawford Rose had noted only a few years earlier, "planters [still] think and talk in terms of cotton

²⁴ "Narrative Report, G.L. Burleson, Tensas Parish, 1935," Box 14, f. 615, v. 390, Extension Service Records. On the AAA's impact on tenants in Tensas Parish, see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 258-60. "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll Parish, 1932," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records.

year in and year out." And, indeed, they would have one last go at cotton before they would finally resolve themselves to the new order.²⁵

As part of his attempt to ease the country off of the New Deal, in 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt removed some of the government props that had controlled production to see if the economy could stand on its own. These measures resulted in an orgy of over-planting by farmers anxious to cash in on high cotton prices, leading to one of the largest cotton crops in history. Madison Parish alone harvested over 34,000 bales, more than 9500 than had been brought in the previous year. As before, though, with the large crop came a disastrous fall in prices that resulted in a minor recession. In its first annual report, the Tensas Parish Department of Public Welfare recounted this transition from a year "of plenty," when, "Planters made money without exception," to one when "share-croppers are being given meal from the corn and meat from the hogs raised on plantations." The stress put a heavy burden on everyone, especially the tenants and wage hands, who often appealed to the state as a last resort. The recently organized welfare offices, funded in large part with Federal money, distributed to these people massive amounts of supplies, including thousands of pounds of canned beef, oatmeal, grapefruit and grapefruit juice, dried milk, potatoes, prunes, apples, rice, and grits. The public relief program, though, represented a formalization of the emergency relief efforts of the early 1930s, and set a dark precedent for later decades

²⁵ "Narrative Report, C.E. Hester, Madison Parish, 1936," Box 26, f. 243, v. 243, Extension Service Records. "Narrative Report, C.A. Rose, East Carroll Parish, 1931," Box 15, f. 137A, v. 137, Extension Service Records.

when a trapped and impoverished population came to look to the government as its lifeline of support.²⁶

For the planters, though, having been chastened by their greed, the 1937 overproduction perhaps served a useful purpose. Looking back, Clifton Hester remarked that it would probably "leave farmers in a serious financial situation," but would also "cause them to more seriously consider a better balanced farm program, which should include livestock, sufficient feed and conserving crops." Indeed, the 1937 debacle did put planters back on the right track and afterwards they would follow more closely the dictates of the USDA. But, Hester somewhat undervalued the transition that had already taken place by that time. The Federal government had rescued planters from the brink of disaster in 1933, setting up programs that, little by little, reduced their authority over their own affairs. This, then, proved the greatest shift, and took the longest to effect, as Delta planters held tightly to their sense of independence. Clearly, though, their individualist ethos had failed in the modern world; only their status as a new interest group, subservient to the larger broker state, gave them a continued lease on power and influence.²⁷

²⁶ Tensas Parish Department of Public Welfare, "Annual Report, 1937." Madison Parish Department of Public Welfare, "Annual Report, 1937," Madison Parish Vertical File, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. On planter concerns about the overproduction, see "Cotton Planters Meeting in Tallulah," Tensas Gazette, 17 September 1937.

²⁷ "Narrative Report, C.E. Hester, Madison Parish, 1937," Box 26, f. 244, v. 244, Extension Service Records.

PART FOUR
DEFEAT AND TRIUMPH IN THE NEW ORDER

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE CHALLENGE OF LONGISM

Amidst the assorted challenges to the old plantation order with which planters struggled in the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps nothing struck more at the very essence of their self-confidence and sense of self than the emergence of the political virtuoso Huey Long, who embodied all the tensions and anxieties of Louisiana society that they had sought to suppress. Long, in fact, revolutionized politics in the state, bringing a modern conception of power and its uses to an archaic social structure; Delta planters, accustomed to ruling almost without question after the Reconstruction era, had no answer to his brash style, and, in fact, faced political irrelevancy under his administration. Yet, though badly beaten, they persevered. Facing both an internal rebellion from the hill country whites and an unfriendly state government, they eventually succeeded in utilizing old methods to win favor with Long's successors. But, in the new order that emerged, they came more as supplicants than full partners. With their glory days past, they adjusted as best they could to the new environment.

The planters of northeast Louisiana in earlier times, though, had always had a powerful voice in state politics. As one of the richest regions of Louisiana in the antebellum era, they joined with their fellow planters in the other big cotton and sugar districts, and with the commercial establishment in New Orleans, to successfully manipulate the levers of power, keeping taxes and social obligations, such as schools and healthcare, low or non-existent. Following the travails of the Civil War and Reconstruction, these men once again emerged as the

main arbiters of the political scene in the state. In fact, their crushing of black political initiatives at the end of the Reconstruction period became something of a founding myth for their own claim to authority. Across the state, the Democratic Party, with its military arm, the assorted White Leagues and white militias, had put down violently claims by African-Americans to the political process, and had openly challenged white Republican officeholders. Incidents such as those that occurred at Colfax, Coushatta, and even in New Orleans at Liberty Place, forged Louisiana's national reputation as a ferocious and ungovernable land.¹

The Delta enjoyed some of this notoriety as well. In 1878, the riverfront parishes still harbored a viable Republican Party, composed largely of African-American farmers but including a few white leaders as well. When these white men, well aware of the Democratic ascendancy in the state, agreed to be a part of the Conservative "compromise" ticket in the 1878 fall elections, the black masses in Tensas Parish rebelled, and led by one of their own, Alfred Fairfax, attempted to nominate an all-black slate that would have carried a fair election. The planters did not intend to allow such an election, though, and called upon their neighbors in Catahoula Parish to "visit" Fairfax and settle the dispute. After an exchange of shots that resulted in the death of the Civil War veteran and militia leader, Captain William

¹ On the wealth and power of the Delta in antebellum times, see Joe Gray Taylor, "Slavery in Four Northeastern Parishes of Louisiana," M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 1948. For an analysis of the influence of big planters Louisiana, both before and after the Civil War, see Roger W. Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939. On the emergence of the Bourbon regime, see Shugg, as well as William Ivy Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969. On the importance of incidents like Liberty Place in the white conceptualization of Reconstruction, see Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 7-11.

Peck, from the Sicily Island area, Fairfax fled for his life, never to return. The issue was not concluded there, however. Determined to run roughshod over any further resistance, about fifty local men from the St. Joseph area, led by a number of ex-Confederate soldiers and including many of the white plantation youth, broke up a later black political gathering near Waterproof, engaging in a small skirmish that became known as the "Bass Lane Affair." With their leaders scattered, and heavily armed whites patrolling the land, African-American political aspirations in the parish were finished. Several of the white participants in this series of events, though, faced Federal charges afterwards, and found themselves hauled to New Orleans to stand trial for electoral fraud. When the trial opened, however, the prosecution discovered a courtroom filled with stern-faced White Leaguers, the leader of whom, James Houston, declared sternly that, "if the Tensas delegation . . . is convicted the streets of New Orleans will run red with blood." The judge in the case wisely chose to indefinitely postpone the hearing, allowing the accused, such outstanding members of Tensas society as William Davidson, Joseph Curry, Carneal Goldman [Sr.], and Charles Cordill, to resume their lives unmolested. "Little wonder," Josiah Scott of the Gazette mused, that "the political leaders of Tensas have always had a warm spot in their hearts for those men of New Orleans who saved them from prison stripes."²

² For a good account of these events, from the perspective of the white community, see "Reminiscences of the 15th of October," Tensas Gazette, 8 October 1937. In her book Exodusters, Nell Irwin Painter devotes a whole chapter to this saga, offering testimony from African-American participants that further rounds out the story. Also, see Fontenot and Ziegler, Tensas Story, 139-45. On the aborted trial in New Orleans, see "An Echo from the Past!," Tensas Gazette, 29 October 1937. On the Reconstruction turmoil in Jefferson County, Mississippi, with which Tensas Parish was intimately connected, see "Memories of Effie Harrison Snyder," Tensas Gazette, 1 October 1937, and "History

Indeed, Tensas Parish, and the rest of the Delta, remained firm allies with the New Orleans political machine, consistently delivering overwhelming, fraudulent vote tallies for the conservative, Bourbon politicians who dominated state politics and protected the interests of the City as well as the plantation countryside. This relationship proved so close that Tensas Parish became known as New Orleans' "Eighteenth Ward," reflecting the fact that its leading politico, Charles Cordill, who served as state Senator from 1884 to 1912, only kept a room in St. Joseph while residing almost year-round in the metropolis. Cordill dominated in parish and state politics, and in truth, epitomized the masculine, planter ideal that defined Delta society. In the Senate, he enjoyed "a position of influence, respect and power, unsurpassed," as chairman of the Committee on Lands and Levees for twenty-eight years. He also served as president of the Police Jury for a quarter century and was a long-serving member of the Fifth District Levee Board, where he exercised "almost dictatorial power." In his public, as well as private life, he defended his opinions with an "aggressiveness almost to the point of rashness," always "beating down or placating opposition, encouraging the faint-hearted, smoothing away or trampling down obstacles and pursuing his object . . . with all his physical and mental force." Such qualities of character made a man in Louisiana, and assured him a place of honor among other gentlemen.³

Following in Cordill's footsteps as the voice of the Delta was Jeff Snyder of Tallulah, the longtime District Attorney for the riverfront parishes. Originally from St. Joseph, the son of a planter,

Recalled," Port Gibson (MS) Reveille, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 1 September 1939.

³ For biographical information, see Appendix A.

Snyder did not have the benefit of a wide-ranging education since most of his family's limited, post-Civil War resources went towards the eldest son, Robert. Bob Snyder, indeed, emerged as a powerful force, working the backroom politics of the state Democratic Party and even serving as Lieutenant Governor under the ultra-Bourbon Murphy Foster in the 1890s. Meanwhile, his younger brother, lounged about as a store clerk and itinerant lawyer and, through the help of patronage, took a Customs House posting in New Orleans, where he finished his law degree. Returning to Tallulah, though, Jeff Snyder suddenly emerged into his own. He served a stint in the state House of Representatives, and went as a delegate to the 1898 Constitutional Convention, which succeeded in codifying voting "reforms" that disfranchised almost all African-Americans in the state and a large proportion of poor whites as well. In 1904, he won election as District Attorney, a post he would not relinquish until 1945. Using this position, and his engaging, amicable personality (he was, by all accounts a wonderful storyteller and entertainer), Snyder, known as the "Judge," cultivated political relationships across the Delta and the state, becoming a major player in the ruling coalition that united country planters with the Choctaws, or Old Regulars, who ran New Orleans. The strategy sessions that he held at his camp on Lake Bruin became must-attend events for aspiring politicians. They featured, of course, a great deal of old fashioned politicking and deal making, but also included a heavy dose of more pleasurable activities, such as hunting, fishing, and drinking.⁴

In September 1925, Snyder hosted one such meeting for former Governor J.Y. Sanders, who had thrown his hat into the ring for the U.S. Senate race against incumbent Edwin Broussard. Attendees at the

⁴ For biographical information, see Appendix A.

meeting included Sanders himself; Mayor Martin Behrman of New Orleans, the head of the Old Regulars; and the political elite of Tensas Parish: Mayor William Davidson of St. Joseph; prominent lawyer Benjamin F. Young; state Senator George Clinton; state Representative Daniel F. Ashford; Sheriff John Hughes; Police Jury president Frank Curry; and planter Elliott Coleman. When the ultra-conservative Sanders began to run into trouble amid bitter accusations of corporate cronyism in his campaign, much of it fomented by the fiery Huey Long, the loyal Tensas crowd rallied to his cause, taking out an editorial in the local paper outlining their belief in his honesty and upright character. Their cause, however, proved lost, as Long's support of Broussard proved to be the difference in the election.⁵

Surprisingly, when the 1927-28 gubernatorial elections rolled around, Jeff Snyder, that bastion of Delta conservatism, cast his support to Long, the rough and rude upstart from Winn Parish. Ever the opportunist, and skilled in the political arts, Snyder recognized the surging Long tide in the state and wanted to be on the winning side, from where he could still maintain a certain level of influence. His friends and allies, though, were horrified. They had largely put their money on Congressman Riley Wilson, another self-made man from the hill country whose conservative politics and friendly demeanor towards the Delta earned him glowing praise. Snyder's endorsement proved

⁵ "Sanders to be Candidate for Broussard Senate Seat," Tensas Gazette, 11 September 1925. "To the Voters of Tensas," Tensas Gazette, 10 September 1926. On the 1925-26 Senate race, see Williams, Huey Long, 235-40, and Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 142-43. One of the charges lodged against Sanders cited his involvement with the New Orleans-Lake Pontchartrain bridge issue. The firm that was awarded the contract, and which Sanders represented, included as a partner Eli Tullis Watson, a powerful New Orleans investment broker who had been born in Tensas Parish, the scion of two outstanding plantation families. On the Watson-Williams bridge issue, see Williams, Huey Long, 227-33. On Watson himself, see Appendix A.

especially disturbing as it came on the heels of a blunt declaration by Long of his enduring opposition to the New Orleans Ring and former Governor J.Y. Sanders of Baton Rouge, two key players in the old ruling order. The editor of the Tensas Gazette remarked on this strange turn, noting that Snyder had "practically his whole life-time been hand in glove with the New Orleans Ring" and that Sanders had not had a "more loyal supporter or closer personal friend" than the congenial District Attorney. He could not understand how this "friend of the old guard for half a century" had "turned to other gods" and now worshipped at a "another shrine." Sanders, for his part, wrote Snyder that the 1927 Flood had not only devastated the Delta parishes but had also "affected your mind."⁶

Despite such opposition from within his own faction, Snyder continued to press for Long, even attempting to bring the candidate to his camp on Lake Bruin for an informal political pow-wow. A number of the leading men in the area showed up, perhaps to get a feel for the man, but Long himself never arrived, on guard against being associated publicly with a group that he had so often chastised. But, Snyder was not the only member of the old guard to go over to Long. Judge Felix Ransdell of Lake Providence also committed this "unpardonable sin," perhaps remembering the support Long had given to his brother, U.S. Senator Joseph Ransdell, in his last campaign, and also hoping that if Long won, such support would be available again in 1930. Judge Ransdell's brother-in-law, Frederick H. Schneider, president of the

⁶ On the 1927-28 elections, see Williams, Huey Long, 244-79, and Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 151-60. "Ye Gods, Can It Be?," Tensas Gazette, 29 July 1927. On the Delta elite recognizing Snyder's political opportunism, see "We Bury the Hatchet, Judge," Tensas Gazette, 3 February 1928. For more of Josiah Scott's amazement at Snyder's apostasy, see "Yesterday and To-Day," Tensas Gazette, 23 September 1927.

Fifth District Levee Board, however, rejected such political games, and placed himself firmly behind Wilson, bringing the rest of the Board with him.⁷

Delta planters supported Wilson mostly because of his status quo politics and conservative fiscal outlook. Wilson himself pledged to consolidate the administration of the state and to put it on a "business-like" footing with the elimination of unnecessary boards and agencies and a complete avoidance of any obligations "that would add new burdens upon the tax payers." In comparison, Long promised the moon, demanding better roads and free textbooks for the state's schoolchildren, among other things. These improvements, though worthy, would have to be paid for by increased taxation, his detractors warned. The textbooks alone, for example, would cost \$2.5 million, an amount that would force an extra mill and a half onto all property assessments. In addition to these questionable economic policies, Delta planters objected to Long's style and behavior. Often characterized as a drunk, draft-dodger, liar, and hypocrite, he seemed to represent everything crass and distasteful about the modern politician. His constant agitation of poor whites and endless personal attacks on members of the old order further lowered their opinion of him. Interested in maintaining the proper level of decorum and keeping the lid on Louisiana's roiling class problems, the plantation establishment wanted the "sound, safe, conservative statesman" over the demagogue.⁸

⁷ "Consoling Though Sad," Tensas Gazette, 2 September 1927. On Ransdell, see "Politics Make Strange Bed-Fellows," Tensas Gazette, 2 September 1927, and "Wilson's Speaking Tour A Triumphant March," 14 October 1927. For more on Long's support of Ransdell in his 1924 re-election bid, see Williams, Huey Long, 219-22, and Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 139-41.

⁸ "Rally Behind Wilson," Tensas Gazette, 26 August 1927, and "Economy and Taxation," Tensas Gazette, 16 September 1927. "Huey Promise

State Senator Norris Williamson, the well-connected businessman and planter from East Carroll Parish, pressed these views home in a speaking tour with Wilson that swept through the Delta. At stops in Lake Providence, Tallulah, Newellton, St. Joseph, Waterproof, and Ferriday, Williamson discussed his moral obligation to speak out against Long. Although admittedly lukewarm to Long from the start, Williamson said that he had given him a fair chance to present his case. What Williamson discovered, though, was a man lacking in honor and self-respect. Williamson had witnessed this personally, he explained, at a recent Long rally in Lake Providence. There, introduced by Judge Felix Ransdell, and with Senator Joseph Ransdell and District Attorney Jeff Snyder seated on-stage, Long had launched into a harangue that castigated their closest friends and political allies and the old establishment itself, of which these men were a part. Williamson was embarrassed for his elders, who, unable to defend themselves against Long's tirade, sat sullenly through the excoriation. They were his friends, Williamson cried, members of the same "political school" with a similar outlook on society. Reminiscing on earlier, less troubled days, he recalled how when he had first arrived in Louisiana, he had been informed that the Ransdells were "constant office holders" and that Jeff Snyder had the "same inclinations," with all of them belonging to the same "Louisiana Political Machine or Fraternity" that allowed them continued re-election. Williamson, through hard work and demonstrations of his honorable character, had become part of this same group, and he resented deeply what he

Long!," Tensas Gazette, 2 September 1927. For more on Wilson's fiscal outlook, see "Free of Pledges Wilson Says in Speech at Rally," Tensas Gazette, 16 September 1927. On questions about Long's behavior, see "Drew Says Long Attempts to be State Dictator"; "Long is Double Facer, Williams Says in Speech"; and "Huey is Allied with Gambling and Vice Charge," Tensas Gazette, 16 September 1927.

considered personal attacks by Long. Moreover, these verbal assaults had come, he insinuated, from a man with deep ties to the gambling and liquor interests of New Orleans, a draft dodger and coward who had defended a known anti-war advocate. Williamson, quite simply, was astonished at Long's willingness to denigrate rigidly honor bound men like the Ransdells and Snyder, while he himself floundered about in moral turpitude. Appealing to the women in the crowds, he asked whether or not any mother "wants to help elect a man as Governor of her state that she can not point to with pride as an example for her son to follow." Riley Wilson, by contrast to the despicable Long, was a man "clean at home and in private as well as public life."⁹

The moral issue, indeed, proved important in pushing society women in the Delta against Long. Sensing an opportunity to link their still new voting rights to an ethical crusade, they turned out more than in any previous campaign or election. The cream of Texas' womanhood, the wives and daughters of planters and merchants, for instance, telegraphed their support for Wilson to a rally held in New Orleans in early January 1928, stating that they favored the "election of men of proven ability, of unquestioned honor and integrity, of private and political morality, men of sobriety and civic righteousness." In their view, Huey Long did not meet these high standards.¹⁰

The political debate over Long continued throughout the fall and winter, with tensions running high. Josiah Scott, though, lightened

⁹ "Address of State Senator N.C. Williamson," Texas Gazette, 28 October 1927.

¹⁰ On Texas women's support of Wilson, see "The Wilson Rally," Texas Gazette, 6 January 1928. Also see, "Speech of Mrs. P.B. Meyer of Shreveport, La. Delivered at New Orleans on Jan. 3, 1928," Texas Gazette, 6 January 1928.

the situation a little, and had a few laughs at the expense of Snyder when the would-be governor failed to show up for a late December rally at Newellton. It was disappointing that the visit was scrapped, he wrote, because "a circus is always interesting and a clown always funny." Yet, Scott realized the stakes involved and wished it to "rain like the devil in the hill-billy parishes and precincts" on primary day in January, since Long's election would be a true "crime." His hopes, and those of Delta society, were crushed, though, when that day arrived. Long piled up an impressive victory, taking over forty-three percent of the vote, while his two competitors, Wilson, and incumbent O.H. Simpson, not widely considered a viable candidate, split the rest. Long added insult to injury by even stealing away Wilson's own Fifth District in northeast Louisiana, carrying most of the backcountry parishes, while only a few others, like East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas, went the Congressman's way. Tensas, following its tradition, went overwhelmingly for Wilson, 377 to a combined 139 for Long and Simpson. Many Wilson supporters held out hope that he would challenge Long in the run-off but, clearly, Long's base was strong and motivated, and Wilson's demoralized. He threw in the towel. Although many in the Delta were discouraged by the "choice of the masses," especially since they had opposed Long "bitterly and fought him to the last ditch," most resigned themselves to the situation, hoping that "he may make a better governor than we expect." They reserved the right, however, to "criticize and oppose" any policies they deemed inappropriate, and would shortly have plenty of opportunities to do so.¹¹

¹¹ "Long a Long Time Showing Up," Tensas Gazette, 30 December 1927. On the statewide vote, see Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 159-60. For local results, see "The Vote in Tensas Parish," (table), Tensas Gazette, 20 January 1928. "A Pledge to the Governor-Elect," Tensas Gazette, 27 January 1928.

After Long's victory, Delta leaders attempted to patch up their internal feud. Scott of the Gazette offered to "smoke the pipe of peace" and "bury the hatchet" with his old friend, Judge Snyder, as long as he promised not to "mix clothes with the Long people" again, since, as Scott politely put it, Snyder had been "schooled better and knows that birds of a different plumage are by nature unrelated and unassociated, that oil and water will not mix." After the election, as well, Senator Williamson, with the other members of the Delta delegation, continued to fight Long from the state legislature. Attempting to gain election as president protem of the Senate, Williamson, for one, found himself accused of attempting to organize an anti-administration bloc. Denying any real knowledge of Long's program to begin with, he only equivocated that, "I may agree with him and I may disagree with him, as I have with every Governor under whom I have served as Senator since I have served in that body." And, although he dismissed such talk of outright obstructionism, he did state that if Long pursued a reckless course of retribution against his political enemies, those people would "have to form their own group." Despite such niceties, though, it was clear with whom Williamson would side, and Long soon forced the revelation.¹²

Although he only pushed through modest measures in the 1928 legislature, Long still drew the ire of the conservative establishment. The following spring, leaders in the state House of Representatives, including Mason Spencer, the Tallulah planter and attorney, secured impeachment charges, which failed miserably and, in the end, only intensified Long's drive to break the old order. By late 1929 and early 1930, he began to take his cause to the people of the state,

¹² "We Bury the Hatchet, Judge," Tensas Gazette, 3 February 1928. "Letter From Senator Williamson," Tensas Gazette, 13 April 1928.

focusing on his plans for the future and the defeat of the political opposition. In late April 1930, he arrived in the Delta. Leading the way was a propaganda team with a portable sound truck and maps and placards that highlighted his plans for concrete highways and farm to market roads, which appealed greatly to the isolated farmers in the backcountry. Although not entirely pleased with Long's appearance, even Josiah Scott admitted that he was the first governor "in the memory of the present generation" to make his way into northeast Louisiana. Local officials and their wives, then, turned out dutifully to hear his talk, even decorating the Tensas Parish courthouse in St. Joseph with flags and banners and setting out some nice bouquets; they were gracious hosts, as custom demanded. About three hundred people, including many blacks, showed up for his speech; among the whites, a large contingent of tenants drawn from the Island community at Lake Bruin had come to thank the Governor for building them a gravel road into St. Joseph. The night before, in Vidalia, Long had drawn some three thousand people, most of those no doubt making their way from the rough and tumble areas around Ferriday and Clayton. Realizing the somewhat unfriendly environs of St. Joseph, though, Long apparently toned down his rhetoric and mostly discussed his accomplishments: free schoolbooks and adult literacy classes; highways and bridges; and increased support for the disabled, blind, deaf, and insane. Yet, the night before, in front of a more sympathetic audience, he had laid into his political enemies, "the old gang" who had been in power for years, and detailed his plans to clean them out of office.¹³

¹³ "Governor Long's Visit to St. Joseph," Tensas Gazette, 2 May 1930. For an excellent description of Long's visit to Tallulah, in summer 1932, see Bruce Tyner, "The Story of the Tyner Family Immigration from Minnesota to Madison Parish in 1930," Tallulah, LA: Madison Parish Historical Society, n.d. On the views of African-Americans towards Long, see Scott, Witness to the Truth, 74-78.

Such talk still aroused one of the leading anti-Longs in the Delta, state Senator Norris Williamson. Although discouraged by the impeachment debacle, he still maintained a defiant position and had joined other opposition leaders in the Constitutional League, which sought to expose the graft and corruption of the administration through its brutal use of patronage and the spoils system. Trailing Long on his tour through the Delta, Williamson delivered his own addresses at the major towns. At St. Joseph, the crowd that arrived had a distinctly different composition from the one that came to hear Long; it was mostly drawn from the planter establishment, people "who had nothing especially to thank the administration for, and for whom no special gravel roads have been built." Williamson's speech, then, appealed to them, and mainly revolved around alleged misappropriations of state revenues by Long and his cronies, what he called an "orgy of spending" and a government of "pillage and plunder." He also lashed into Long personally, citing a number of the now defunct impeachment charges from the previous year as evidence of Long's "disgraceful and repulsive" character. Conjuring a powerful memory, Williamson wondered aloud if "the days of the scalawags and carpetbaggers was much worst than at the present time," a damning comment indeed in the deep plantation country of the Delta where thoughts of "Negro rule" still brought chills.¹⁴

The resurrection of the rhetorical tool of Reconstruction, though, indicated the desperate political condition of conservative Delta politicians as Long asserted his dominance. Even the wizened old political boss, Jeff Snyder, who had sought to control or influence

¹⁴ "Senator Williamson to Answer Gov. Long at St. Joseph Tuesday Night," Texas Gazette, 2 May 1930, and "Senator Williamson's Address, Texas Gazette, 9 May 1930. On the Constitutional League, see Williams, Huey Long, 421-24, and Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 189-190.

Long at the outset, had given up on this dream by the spring of 1930. Before Senator Williamson's speech in Tallulah, Snyder addressed the crowd and made a public apology for his earlier support for Long, asking that he be granted an opportunity to "do all in my power to make amends for that course." The apology came at a late date; indeed, in July, the old order faced the most serious challenge to its hegemony in state politics when Long announced himself as a candidate to succeed that venerable defender of Delta interests, Joseph Ransdell, in the United States Senate. Ransdell came from an old plantation family in the Alexandria area, but had settled near Lake Providence after finishing school back east, opening a law practice and purchasing several plantation properties. He quickly emerged as a leading political figure, serving locally as the District Attorney for over a decade before winning a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives; in 1913, he moved on to the Senate. While in Congress, Ransdell ably represented the interests of his primary constituencies, the large cotton and sugar planters of rural Louisiana and the commercial interests of New Orleans, by working on flood control, maritime trade laws, and river and harbor improvements. A devout Catholic, Ransdell also poured some of his greatest efforts into national healthcare issues, perhaps his most lasting legacy.¹⁵

Long's candidacy against this pillar of aristocratic society drew opprobrium from a wide array of conservatives who dreaded his continued

¹⁵ "Jeff Snyder Apologizes for Backing Long," *Tensas Gazette*, 16 May 1930. On the 1930 Senate campaign, see Williams, Huey Long, 460-80, and Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 195-205. The only study of Ransdell is Adras Laborde, A National Southerner: Ransdell of Louisiana, New York: Benziger Bros., 1951. A great deal of useful newspaper coverage on Ransdell's career can be found in the Ransdell Scrapbooks, Joseph E. Ransdell Papers, Mss. 1127, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

influence in state politics. The Monroe Morning World called him a "first class hypocrite." The New Orleans States cited the "failures, oppressions, and outrages" of his brief tenure in the governor's office: "the scandalous mismanagement and bankrupting of the penitentiary" and "debauching of the highway commission"; his "terrorizing of the banks" and "flagrant violations of the constitution." State Representative Gilbert Dupre of Opelousas concluded that he had a "malformed or diseased mind." Ranged against this wild, irresponsible man, the much older Ransdell appeared upright and honest, a man who had given over many years to respectable public service. He offered an "irreproachable character" in both his public and private life, a record "free from stain or blemish" and full of "unselfish devotion to the interests of his constituency." In addition, his influence in the halls of power in Washington, D.C., where the future of flood control policy would be shaped, was a valuable asset to his supporters in northeast Louisiana. As one editorialist noted, with such major policy decisions on the line, this was "no time for experimentation." The manager of Ransdell's campaign, friend and fellow East Carroll planter J. Martian Hamley, who also happened to be married to his niece, called him "safe and reliable" and a "faithful public servant." Hamley felt confident that the people of the state would recognize his sterling qualities over those of Long.¹⁶

¹⁶ On the conservative opposition to Long's candidacy, see "An Impersonal Campaign," Monroe Morning World, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 25 July 1930; "Long Announcement," New Orleans States, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 25 July 1930; and "Dupre Raps Long for Making Race Against Senator," Tensas Gazette, 8 August 1930. On Ransdell's qualities, see "Ransdell Supporters Organize," Monroe Morning World, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 1 August 1930; "For Ransdell and Wilson," Monroe Morning World, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 1 August 1930; and "Joseph Ransdell Sweeping State," Tensas Gazette, 1 August 1930. For another article espousing support for Ransdell because of his preeminent position in the flood control debate, see "Ransdell

But, Ransdell's character and long service were not rewarded. In the September Democratic primary, the youthful Long swept past the aged Senator, relict of an earlier time, in a dramatic victory that left no questions as to his popularity. Indeed, the victory showed Long to be the "acknowledged and unchallenged" leader of the state, still holding the "whip handle" and "master of his own destiny in Louisiana politics." Josiah Scott in Tensas Parish underestimated Long's vision when he guessed that the Governor and Senator-Elect would somehow scheme to maintain his seat in Baton Rouge for another term and resign as Senatorial candidate, but he surmised that no matter what the course, "a dark future" lay ahead.¹⁷

After Ransdell's defeat, the anti-Longs, as a political faction, were dead in the water, and many either gave up the fight or sought to make peace with the Long machine. State Senator Norris Williamson was among those who threw in the towel, retiring from his seat in the legislature after sixteen years to pursue personal and business interests. In his retirement notice to the general public, though, he encouraged voters to select qualified, conscientious men who would help restore fiscal sanity to the government. With the state bonded debt at over a hundred million dollars, he warned, "taxpayers must face the facts for the faith and credit of Louisiana is behind these bonds and the property is always available for purposes of taxation." Further, in one last parting shot against Longism, he urged voters to observe carefully the direction of political affairs in the state and on

Needed, Too," Monroe Morning World, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 8 August 1930.

¹⁷ "The Senatorial Race," 12 September 1930.

election day put their trust in "real men to restore Constitutional Government in Louisiana."¹⁸

Williamson understood the surging political power of Longism in his own district, and wisely avoided a contest in which he would be cast as part of the old establishment. New faces appeared to challenge for his vacated seat, and that of state Senator C.C. Brooks of Tensas Parish, in the 1931-32 state elections. Emerging out of Ferriday, a center of New South industry and agriculture in the lower Delta, D.B. Fleming offered his candidacy. Fleming had respectable credentials as a banker in town and as a member of the Fifth District Levee Board, and even the Tensas Gazette acknowledged him as a "man of sound judgment, strong character and indefatigable energy." As a businessman, Fleming was all for making the necessary accommodations which would guarantee support from the state administration. In Madison Parish, Andrew Sevier, a World War veteran and attorney offered himself as well for a Senate seat. Sevier came from a plantation family and had joined the law firm of the prominent anti-Long legislator Mason Spencer when he finished school at Louisiana State University. He managed several plantations of his own, and was prominent in local banking and finance institutions as well. He therefore represented a conservative choice for office, but one who, like Fleming, would do what had to be done in Baton Rouge to gain administrative support. These men, like Joseph T. Curry, elected from Tensas Parish to the state House of Representatives in 1930, were part of the younger generation, willing to work within the system, rather than oppose it out of principle.¹⁹

¹⁸ "To the People of the 31st Senatorial District," Tensas Gazette, 15 May 1931.

¹⁹ "D.B. Fleming for State Senator," Tensas Gazette, 22 May 1931. "Local Attorney Enters Senate Race This Week," and "A.L. Sevier for

There were rewards to be had for cooperation. The state annual budget had increased gradually from \$25.8 million in 1926-27 to \$27.8 million in 1929-30; for 1930-31, it shot up to \$47.5 million, and still cleared \$37 million in 1931-32. Long, of course, was a master in wielding these funds to buy legislative support. Representatives and Senators who acquiesced to Long's demands found themselves and their districts amply compensated; those who refused to go along with his program were frozen out of the state's largesse. Delta politicians, in the opposition, had more firsthand experience with the latter. In fact, Josiah Scott had objected to Long's huge roads program not only on fiscal grounds, but also because of his belief that Tensas Parish would receive little tangible benefit. He proved to be accurate in his assessment of the situation.²⁰

Senator Brooks, then, faced a tough challenge in his bid for re-election, and attempted to qualify his former anti-Long stance as much as possible. The Gazette noted that he "had a way of 'standing in' with both sides . . . keeping posted on all that goes on in the camp of his friends and in the camp of his enemies alike." Indeed, the editor Scott remarked that Brooks "knew how to play his cards to get what he wants without antagonizing the opposition," and cited several incidents in which Brooks utilized his legislative prowess to secure general support for Delta initiatives that otherwise would have languished under the often vindictive Long administration. Brooks even appeared

Senator," Madison Journal, 26 June 1931. On Sevier and Curry, see Appendix A.

²⁰ On the annual budgets, see Edward Francis Renwick, "The Longs' Legislative Lieutenants," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 1967, 121. On Long's willingness to reward and punish legislators, see Renwick, 228-30, 237-43. "The Gazette Was Right," Tensas Gazette, 22 August 1930. Also, see Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 83, who noted a lack of relief funds due to political opposition.

at a pro-Long rally in Lake Providence in late December 1931, sitting with Senator-Elect Long himself and his handpicked gubernatorial successor, Oscar K. Allen. Introduced by the Mayor of Lake Providence as a man who had "the endorsement and support of the present administration," Brooks went on to thank Long and Allen for allowing him to speak on their campaign tour, and pledged his support to their program for the next four years. Although he realized that "the majority of the people of our river parishes, and their representatives in both Houses . . . have been classed with the opposition to Governor Long's policies and measures," he claimed that the Delta country had still received its fair share of the good roads money from the administration's coffers and would continue to do so under Allen; he therefore urged the crowd to vote the Allen ticket in the upcoming primary election.²¹

In the end, though, Brooks found himself caught between the surging pro-Long sentiment in the lower Delta that would go overwhelmingly to Fleming, and the popularity of Sevier, a solid conservative candidate in the upper Delta, who would draw the vote of both Madison and East Carroll Parishes. Yet, he was strongly supported in both of these latter parishes by the old elite; Jeff Snyder, for instance, offered his key endorsement shortly before the election. Brooks and his backers, however, realized his precarious situation, and feared that, with defeat, Tensas Parish, with "all her glorious traditions" would fall from grace, and that, "Humiliation will darken the brows of our manhood and womanhood, once so beautifully illumined by the light born of conscious power and success." Brooks' loss, it

²¹ "Senator C.C. Brooks for Re-election," Tensas Gazette, 5 June 1931. Brooks did help secure legislation that aided bridge work in the Delta; see Editorial, Tensas Gazette, 29 June 1928. "Senator Brooks' Address," Tensas Gazette, 25 December 1931.

seemed, would mark the last step into political oblivion. And, in the end, this is what happened. Fleming mobilized almost his entire vote in Concordia behind Sevier, thereby pushing the Madison candidate far into the lead and denying any substantial vote to his rival, Brooks, in the lower Delta. But, Brooks, for his part, only narrowly carried East Carroll and lost Madison, while pro-Long voters in Tensas Parish turned against him, giving over three hundred votes to Fleming. His effort, then, to straddle the fence, to claim support from both the old guard in the Delta and from the Long administration, ultimately failed.²²

The string of losses stunned conservative leaders in the Delta but, being shrewd readers of the political scene, and hoping that Huey Long had been shunted off to Washington, D.C., they sought to make peace with the Longite camp. The usual way, from the old school, was to bring in the new official for a camp hunt, where they could be worked over in an indirect way; swapping stories, drinking whiskey, and enjoying fine cooking and company had a way of making unfriendly politicians more agreeable. Jeff Snyder had perfected this lobbying effort to an art, and in early April 1932, he hosted the new Governor, O.K. Allen, and some other key Long associates, including the powerful state Senator James Noe from Monroe, at his Lake Bruin camp for a turkey hunt. The hunting party itself was put in the very capable hands of planters Elliott Coleman and L.T. Collins; Avery Hollis, the veteran woodsmen and game warden served as a guide. Allen bagged himself three birds and led the group, of course.²³

²² Public Notice for C.C. Brooks, "Elect Your Senator," and "C.C. Brooks Strongly Endorsed in Madison Parish," Tensas Gazette, 15 January 1932. "Proceedings of the Thirty-First Senatorial District Executive Committee," Tensas Gazette, 29 January 1932.

²³ "Gov. Allen a Good Sport," Tensas Gazette, 8 April 1932.

Allen, though, was only a figurehead, and Long continued to run the state, eventually turning Louisiana into his own personal fiefdom. Once on the path of accommodation, though, Delta leaders, along with everyone else, found it difficult to resist his advances. The complete submission of the legislature, even among anti-Longs, became apparent in the 1934 legislative sessions, when Long consolidated even more revenue and appointive power at Baton Rouge and gradually moved his National Guard and secret police, the Bureau of Criminal Identification, into positions of increased supervision and authority. This proved a bitter pill to swallow for the die-hards. In Tensas Parish, Josiah Scott, at the Gazette, took the young legislator Joseph T. Curry to task for his craven performance at these sessions, during which he either voted to affirm or, being absent, did not oppose, the odious acts that reduced the state to virtual dictatorship under Long. Curry, perhaps above all the members of the legislature, Scott intimated, should have taken some sort of stand. His father, Joseph Curry [Sr.], a hero of the Reconstruction era, and his grandfather, Eli Tullis, a Confederate veteran, both represented the very best the planter class had to offer, and both had stood as true men in opposing powers that they believed wrong, even when the only reward appeared to be death or prison. The younger Curry's behavior made Scott, for one, glad that these two fine specimens of Southern manhood were resting in their graves across the River in Natchez.²⁴

Such bitter sentiments tore at the very fabric of old Delta society, exposing planters to feelings they had never experienced before. Frustration, confusion, and powerlessness were not easy

²⁴ "Tensas Betrayed," Tensas Gazette, 14 September 1934. On the 1934 Regular and Special Sessions, see Williams, Huey Long, 712-48, and Hair, Kingfish and His Realm, 276-97.

emotions for these men to accept. And, as much as they reeled from their loss of power at the state level, they feared the emergence within their own midst of a new political force. The new whites in the Delta who had arrived from the hill country in the 1920s and early 1930s were overwhelmingly pro-Long in their political sentiment and, by the mid-1930s, had become established and organized enough to have a real impact on local and parish politics. In Tensas Parish, overall voter turnout increased by over 200 percent between 1930 and 1940. Around Newellton, a hotbed of "new ground" activity, the seventy percent increase in population led to a jump of close to 400 percent in voting activity. As a share of the total parish vote, the Newellton area increased its numbers from nineteen to thirty-one percent. These new people, then, exercised the franchise more ruthlessly than had ever been seen before in the parish, which, in previous years, usually saw less than a quarter of all voting age whites turn out on election days. And, they voted their interests. The pro-Long vote from 1930 to 1940 in Tensas Parish jumped from about a third to almost half of the total. In East Carroll, it likewise swelled to fifty percent, and jumped from nineteen to forty percent in Madison Parish. Newellton, for instance, only gave thirty percent of its votes to the Long machine in 1930, but sixty percent in 1940. St. Joseph, the seat of planter power, by comparison, only gave a little over a third of its total to the Longites in 1940.²⁵

This internal revolution in voting strength forced Delta planters to adjust their political strategies for the long term. When Huey Long met his end in September 1935, for instance, the conservatives in the Delta remained muted in their enthusiasm, masking their true feelings

²⁵ Hoffsommer, New Ground Farmers, 182-87.

of relief, if only poorly. Josiah Scott, in his paper, refrained from any crass editorializing, but refused to mourn excessively either. His only mention of Long's death came in a brief obituary taken from the Monroe Morning World, which ran on page five, this, one of Louisiana's defining moments! Others likewise kept quiet, having seen the political landscape so transformed that they feared the dead Senator's influence even from beyond the grave. With an important election cycle upcoming in the fall and winter, anti-Longs from across the state rallied to challenge the administration machine with a "Home Rule" ticket that attacked the graft, corruption, and abuse of power by leading officials, but steered clear of any charges or insinuations against Long himself. Although anxious to restore their hold on power, conservatives nonetheless realized the need to court the increased strength of the pro-Long masses that still revered their fallen leader.²⁶

In Tensas Parish, the well-known St. Joseph merchant German Baker signed on as a candidate for state Senator with the opposition ticket, presenting himself as a friend of the common farmer and advocate of good government. Avowing support for the more progressive legislation pushed through during the Long years, such as the homestead exemption and free schoolbooks, he nonetheless rebuked the restrictions on local governmental authority, which had prevented St. Joseph from securing Federal funds for a water filtration plant and had stalled the Police Jury's attempts to borrow money to meet payroll obligations. He also carefully stayed away from any criticism of the deceased Senator Long,

²⁶ For coverage of Long's death, see Long Obituary, Monroe (LA) Morning World, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 13 September 1935. On the precarious state of the anti-Longs in the 1935-36 elections, see Betty Marie Field, "The Politics of the New Deal in Louisiana, 1933-1939," Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1973, 196-280. Also see, "Challenge To Leche," Tensas Gazette, 3 January 1936.

couching his opposition to the administration more in structural or bureaucratic, rather than personal, terms.²⁷

Baker, though, had considerable baggage to overcome with the new whites in the parish. Although raised outside of the Natchez district, he had arrived with his father in Tensas Parish in the late 1890s and had become firmly entrenched as one of the leading merchants and furnishing agents in the St. Joseph area. He had made strong associations with the old planter establishment, circulating in the same social circles, at Lake Bruin, in backwoods hunting camps, and at society functions. In short, he became part of the establishment itself, serving as parish treasurer, mayor of St. Joseph, and as a director of both the Tallulah Production Credit Association and the Federal Land Bank in New Orleans. From these last two positions, he exercised considerable influence over production loans and other forms of credit essential to the plantation economy in the Delta.

In his campaign, Baker carefully stressed his small farm origins, distancing himself from the aristocratic, old-line planters with whom he socialized. Knowing that many of the new whites in the parish had come from Mississippi and Arkansas, he reminded them that he had actually been born in the former state and had lived in the latter, where he "became a regular field hand in a cotton field." He avoided using the terms "planter" or "plantation" in describing his activities, choosing rather to emphasize that he had managed his uncle's "farm" when he first arrived in Tensas Parish, and had assisted "all worthy farmers" in securing credit from his personal business and loans from the Federally-sponsored production corporation.²⁸

²⁷ Baker Political Announcement, Tensas Gazette, 18 October 1935; "Platform Explained," Tensas Gazette, 17 January 1936.

²⁸ "Vote for German Baker," Tensas Gazette, 17 January 1936.

Baker's rivals for one of the two state Senate seats in the riverfront district were the incumbents, Andrew Sevier of Madison Parish and D.B. Fleming of Concordia. Both these men had proven themselves capable supporters of the administration, Fleming as the choice of the backcountry around Ferriday, and Sevier as a member of the local gentry in Tallulah who had cast their lot with Long. Against these candidates, Baker, running in opposition, had little hope for victory, and, in fact, did not win even a single ward in his home parish, a surprising blow to the conservative cause. Fleming, in fact, polled over 300 votes in St. Joseph alone, and Sevier had similar results from Newellton. Both these areas had large numbers of white tenants and new ground farmers who turned out to support the Longite ticket.²⁹

In other local races, Joseph Curry, member of one of the most prominent families in the parish, easily won re-election as a state representative, crushing his opponent by over 600 votes, including an impressive 369 to 65 tally in the St. Joseph area, the old planter stronghold. Curry attracted across the board support as both a member of the established elite and a legislative supporter of the Long administration. The planters could offer no one else as well qualified or understanding of their position as the young Curry, one of their own, even if they disagreed with him, and the new whites in the parish appreciated his recent pro-Long record.³⁰

In the more interesting local contest, Elliott Coleman, the respected member of the old planter class, upended his fellow planter and longtime sheriff, John Hughes, in a bitter contest that also saw a

²⁹ "Vote for the Tensas Candidate," Tensas Gazette, 17 January 1936; Election Results, Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1936.

³⁰ Election Results, Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1936.

challenge from newcomer Dan Morris. Coleman, from an old local family, was born out at Live Oak Plantation, in the Highland area west of Waterproof, spending his youth and middle age as a sheriff's deputy, state Conservation agent, and planter, among other things. Through his connections with the state Department of Conservation, headed by the powerful Long associate, Robert Maestri, Coleman had taken a position with the Long retinue as a member of the Bureau of Criminal Identification (BCI), and in this capacity, as one of Long's bodyguards, actually participated in the events surrounding the Senator's fatal wounding in the state capitol.³¹

Returning to Tensas Parish afterwards, he decided to run for sheriff, knowing that his position within the community as well as his ties to the administration gave him a very good chance at winning. Sheriff Hughes, who had held the office since 1905, refused to go quietly, and mobilized his own supporters, especially among the old courthouse ring in St. Joseph. He had several marks against him. His age and long tenure no doubt discouraged some, and his association with the old establishment hurt him with the new whites in the parish. In fact, Hughes had to publicly defend himself on at least one occasion against accusations that he was anti-Long, which presumably was the actual case. Dissatisfied with a choice between two old-time planters, no matter what Coleman's connections to Long, many white tenants and new ground farmers turned to challenger Dan Morris. In the election, Coleman narrowly edged Hughes, 462 votes to 458, with Morris picking up 362 in third place. Coleman won the lower end of the parish, his home area of Waterproof and its environs, and ran strong in Newellton and St. Joseph as well. Hughes triumphed in St. Joseph, picking up 267 of

³¹ For biographical information, see Appendix A.

his total votes there, and Morris won the northern part of the parish, the areas around Newellton, where the new white voting strength was greatest. Among the three, Coleman had the most widespread appeal across the parish, with the other two tapping their main sources of strength. Although Coleman by no means was the overwhelming winner, in a run-off against Hughes, he clearly could have rallied the supporters of Morris to his cause, a fact that Hughes himself understood in declining to carry on the fight. Coleman, once in office, would hold the post for the next two decades, until retirement in 1960.³²

For the anti-Longs in Tensas Parish, and other parts of the Delta, the 1935-36 elections proved both frustrating and disturbing as the administration ticket, draped in the memories of the martyred Long, swept triumphantly across the state, unseating opposition office holders in almost every district. Locally, the real voting power of the small farm and tenant whites revealed itself, marking a new direction in political and social affairs. The old establishment, of course, still carried considerable weight; Joseph Curry, as state representative, and Elliott Coleman, as newly elected sheriff, were themselves very well recognized members of the planter hierarchy, but they now classed themselves with the Longite power structure. To a degree, the continued presence of planter families in positions of power showed their political flexibility in the new era. In reality, though, their ability to shape state and national policies was on the wane, and the new leaders of the Delta, usually younger and more pragmatic than the old guard, began to adjust themselves to the interest group politics taking hold in the New Deal era.

³² On Hughes, see Appendix A. Election Results, Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1936.

The final blow to the old establishment, though, came with the defeat of Riley Wilson in the 1936 Congressional elections. Wilson hailed from the hill country but had always been friendly to Delta interests, and had been loyally supported as a reward, not only in his bid for the governor's office, which he lost badly to Huey Long in 1927-28, but in all of his Congressional campaigns as well. As a Congressman, he had a mostly mundane record, believing in conservative fiscal principles, no doubt a product of his impoverished, hard scrabble upbringing. By the mid-1930s, though, after twenty years in Congress, he did hold a considerable amount of influence at the national level, especially as chair of the House committee on flood control. In the midst of the Eudora Floodway fight, Delta leaders needed Wilson's experience and legislative muscle to protect their interests, as others stood ready in the wings to push the project to completion. The Gazette, as an example, accused Congressman Will Whittington of Mississippi, in line to take the chairmanship if Wilson was not returned, of wanting to "relieve the entire Mississippi Delta from further danger of water by diverting it and bringing it over us." In a point blank statement to his readers, the paper's editor, the fiery Josiah Scott, called it "economic suicide" for anyone in the riverfront parishes to vote for someone other than Wilson, and he fully expected the citizens to give Wilson an "overwhelming majority" in the election.³³

Wilson, however, could not turn back the pro-Long tide awash in the state, falling to the administration candidate from the backcountry, Newt Mills. Knowing that "Share the Wealth" sentiment was

³³ "Riley J. Wilson Must Be Returned to Congress," Tensas Gazette, 17 January 1936; "Opposition to Mr. Wilson Means Suicide to Tensas," Tensas Gazette, 17 January 1936.

"resounding loudly" in his district, Wilson had "unwisely closed his ears" and paid the ultimate political price. Among the river parishes, he carried only Madison and Tensas, and the latter just barely, 348 votes to 346. In East Carroll Parish, he lost 620 to 335, and in Concordia, 738 to 489; overall, the district as a whole went two to one in favor of Mills, as thorough an endorsement as any politician could desire. Disheartened by the blind allegiance of the voters, the editor of the Gazette discoursed simply that, "Truly this is the age of dethroned reason in Louisiana." Other supporters were equally as demoralized by Wilson's defeat. The big planters had looked to him for assistance in their struggle against the Floodway; they now faced the daunting prospect of battling the project on their own, without any allies in the state or national governments.³⁴

³⁴ "Congressman Wilson is Defeated," Tensas Gazette, 6 March 1936, and "Riley J. Wilson is Submerged," Tensas Gazette, 13 March 1936.

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE FLOODWAY FIGHT

In the aftermath of the 1927 Flood, the Federal government, under immense pressure, sought to develop a comprehensive flood control plan for the Mississippi River Valley. The many and varied parties involved in this process, though, clashed often and bitterly over the best means and methods for containing the mighty River. Delta planters in northeast Louisiana comprised one of the most vocal and aggressive of these factions, perhaps because they had the most to lose. Both of the major plans submitted by the United States Corps of Engineers to Congress for approval included major floodways through the plantation district, a potential disaster for the big landowners. These men, then, utilized their considerable political skill and a newfound sense of group identity, forged by the struggles for organization in the post-war decades, to not only win over an unfriendly state administration but also defeat the plans in Washington, D.C. This fight proved to be the defining moment in the transformation of Delta planters from disconnected individuals to viable interest group.

The very magnitude of the 1927 Flood proved the greatest motivator in developing a wide-ranging control system. At the national level, many were appalled by the Flood and its destruction, and blamed a lackadaisical government for not putting up the funds to achieve real, integrated flood control in the decades since the establishment of the Mississippi River Commission (MRC) in 1879. Leaders from the affected areas, attentive to the needs of plantation owners who not only endured frequent flooding but also bore the brunt of levee taxes, clamored for action. Senator Joseph Ransdell, himself a large planter,

argued that, "\$1,000,000,000, if that much be needed . . . would be a small price to pay for this nation of boundless wealth to safeguard so large an area of America from the danger of overflows such as we are now having." He personally urged President Calvin Coolidge to visit the flooded districts and make flood control his chief task while in office, even to the point of calling Congress into special session if necessary to tackle the issue.¹

Ransdell, of course, had made flood control a major part of his own agenda since arriving in Congress in 1899, first as a Representative and then as a Senator; in a letter to Mayor William Davidson of St. Joseph, he indeed called it his "life's work." But, his vision largely had been frustrated by the shortsightedness of other national leaders. He recalled, for instance, the "parsimonious" appropriations of the pre-war era and criticized the handling of two of his major accomplishments, the 1917 and 1924 Flood Control Acts. The former had set aside forty-five million dollars for levee and channel improvements, but only allowed its dispersal in nine million dollar annual increments; much of this money, at any rate, was siphoned off by the demands of American involvement in the First World War. The 1924 law had made similar provisions, authorizing the expenditure of sixty million dollars over six years, but a large portion of these funds still remained in the bank, unused, when the 1927 Flood erupted across the land.²

¹ "Congressional Views Pro and Con on Special Session of Congress," Manufacturer's Record, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 3 June 1927.

² "Honor to Whom Honor is Due," Tensas Gazette, 8 June 1928. "Senator Ransdell Holds the Failure of Congress to Provide the Money Needed as Responsible for This Great Disaster," Manufacturer's Record, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 15 July 1927.

A sense of moral responsibility, then, brought even the wary, fiscally conservative Congress of the Coolidge years to the table. In crafting new legislation, its members relied on both the MRC and the Corps of Engineers, both of which agreed in principle to basic flood control measures such as the construction of new levees, floodways, dams, and reservoirs, and the improvement of the Mississippi River's channel and those of its tributaries. They differed, however, both in scope and financing. The MRC, for instance, envisioned a massive project sprawling across the entire lower Valley, with its estimated cost of well over \$900 million to be paid for wholly by the Federal government. In contrast, the Corps of Engineers, led by General Edgar Jawdin, proposed a less ambitious, cheaper program and expected local interests to pay for twenty percent of the construction, as well as for all land use and flowage rights. Both Ransdell in the Senate, and Riley Wilson in the House, then, supported the more attractive MRC plan, but even its revised budget of \$473 million proved too much for the tight-fisted Coolidge and his floor leaders. Under his steely gaze, Republicans in Congress eventually forced a compromise package that fell back on the less expensive Corps of Engineers' plan that came in at only \$325 million. This still represented an astronomical investment in infrastructure for pre-Depression America but, for planters in northeast Louisiana, the new legislation proved a major disappointment.³

³ For a detailed description of the two plans and the political wrangling that surrounded the 1928 Flood Control Act, see Charles A. Camillo and Matthew T. Percy, Upon Their Shoulders: A History of the Mississippi River Commission from its Inception through the Advent of the Modern Mississippi River and Tributaries Project, Mississippi River Commission, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2004, an electronic resource found at www.mvd.usace.army.mil/mrc/Upon_Their_Shoulders/index.html, Chapters 10 and 11, n.p.

Jawdin's plan, though complicated, had several features in common with that of the MRC. Both anticipated the construction of new levee lines to widen the Mississippi River's channel and, anxious to protect the commercial center of New Orleans, both supported the establishment of a spillway directly upriver from the city. They also concurred on the need for a floodway through the Atchafalaya River basin, to open at Morganza on the Mississippi River above Baton Rouge and run south to the Gulf of Mexico. Jawdin differed with the MRC substantially, however, in his absolute insistence on an upper floodway as well, one that would stretch from southeast Arkansas through the Boeuf River valley and eventually empty floodwaters into the lower Red River and then the Atchafalaya. Although the MRC tentatively had suggested such a floodway, not everyone agreed upon its necessity, and certainly few expected one as large as Jawdin's, which sprawled across a million acres of agricultural land and hardwood forests. This facet of his plan drew immediate criticism. For one, he made provisions for only a limited set of guideline levees to channel the floodwaters, thereby laying open more territory, especially in Concordia, Catahoula, Avoyelles, and Pointe Coupee Parishes, to their destructive force. Although not ideal, this design kept government costs down, an all-important imperative for the Coolidge administration. Jawdin's decision to employ a "fuse plug" levee to open the floodways likewise reflected budget concerns, and appeared equally as ill conceived to his critics. Rather than building an expensive steel and concrete flood control structure that would allow a controlled flow of water, Jawdin proposed leaving an exposed section of levee, built at a lower grade than the rest of the line, as a "fuse plug," over which the River would rush once it reached a certain stage. The problem with the "fuse plug" concept, of course, was that once the River hit the designated flood

level, it once again became uncontrollable, a major concern for local landowners who rightly worried that the raging waters may spill out of the established channel and swamp their supposedly "safe" properties.⁴

These men, the large planters of northeast Louisiana, reacted strongly once they understood the full scope of Jawdin's plan. In December 1927, the Fifth District Levee Board, representing the interests of the riverfront parishes, took the lead role in this protest, rallying the neighboring boards in the backcountry and in southeast Arkansas into the Tensas Basin Flood Control Association and drafting a resolution of disapproval. First and foremost, they objected to the requisition of local funds to pay for improvements on a river that, as they pointed out, "drains forty-two percent of the United States." The Federal government once again seemed to be shunting a national responsibility onto an already over-burdened group of taxpayers. The Association members felt, too, that Jawdin's "fuse plug" concept represented unsound engineering and would threaten not only the thousands of acres in the proposed floodway west of the Macon Ridge, which was bad enough for those in the backcountry, but would rampage outside those lines as well, perhaps even pouring water down through the Delta itself. Joining in the opposition, the region's Congressional delegation sounded off on these same points, but found little sympathy on the national scene. In fact, pro-Jawdin supporters roundly criticized both Ransdell and Wilson as blanket defenders of the big plantation interests, which appeared willing to condemn the rest of the lower Mississippi River Valley to continued flooding rather than make any sacrifice at all. Congressman James Frears of Wisconsin went so far as to submit a listing into the Congressional Record of many of

⁴ Camillo, Upon Their Shoulders, Chapters 10 and 11, n.p.

these private "interests," mostly prominent landowning families, agricultural corporations, and timber companies, as part of his indictment. Frears, and others across the nation, worried that this small bloc of wealthy men in a thin section along the Mississippi River might upend the entire flood control plan.⁵

Their fears proved accurate as the big landowners in the Delta did indeed resort to obstructionist tactics to block both the new levees and the upper floodway. Initially, these took the form of bitter lawsuits intended to delay the Jawdin plan, if not defeat it outright. One major suit emerged out of the levee construction plans. In developing the new levee line along the Mississippi River in accordance with the 1928 legislation, the Corps of Engineers found that it would be necessary to cut through a number of large, established plantations, ruining their productivity and exposing those sections thrown out onto the riverside to the ravages of flooding. Joseph Harper, of China Grove plantation, for one, objected strenuously to this plan that would put a large portion of his property, where he was "born and reared," outside the new line. He and others joined Dr. Thomas Wolfe, an absentee landlord who owned a string of plantation properties in the upper part of Tensas Parish, in suing the Corps of Engineers over its assertion of the right of eminent domain. The case worked itself all the way up to the Supreme Court, where the justices sided with the War Department. Hugh Tullis, the prominent Delta lawyer, pleaded the planters' case, but the Court felt that the Corps' plans were sound and their compensation packages just. In another, related case, though, the Tensas Basin Flood Control Association, backing a small farmer, won a critical victory that temporarily closed

⁵ "Proceedings Fifth Louisiana Levee Board," Tensas Gazette, 30 December 1927. "Go Away From Home to Get News," Tensas Gazette 3 August 1928.

down action on the Boeuf River floodway. Both the Federal District and Appeals Courts supported claims that the floodway would negatively impact normal economic functions in its proposed zone and therefore amounted to illegal confiscation without compensation, since the Federal government did not purpose to buy the land outright. The Federal courts ordered that the government offer fair prices to landowners in the region in return for a clear title. Major General Lytle Brown, having taken over the Corps from Jawdin, threw up his hands in frustration; such compensation, he argued, would bankrupt the allotted budget and force abandonment of any and all improvement projects along the whole lower part of the Mississippi River. Although they did not intend to destroy the whole flood control program, Delta planters were at least pleased with delaying its implementation and, perhaps, overturning the Boeuf River floodway component entirely.⁶

While lawyers wrangled over property rights and compensation, though, the MRC, ever fearful of the next great flood, pressed for improvement work along the main channel of the Mississippi River in an attempt to speed its water on to the Gulf. During flood stage, the River tended to slow down and back up as it winded its way through a number of tortuous bends, putting extreme pressure on the levee system and often causing breaks. The Greenville Bends, upriver from Lake Providence, for instance, covered a distance of only fifteen miles as the crow flies, but because of its serpentine course, the River stretched out for fifty, slowing down its overall velocity and causing

⁶ "A Tensas Protest Against the Jawdin Plan," Tensas Gazette, 4 January 1929. "U.S. Supreme Court Denies Land Owners Payment for Land Taken by Levees," Tensas Gazette, 8 May 1931. "Statement from Chairman Bernstein of Tensas Basin Flood Control Assn.," Tensas Gazette, 12 June 1931. On the muddle of lawsuits and claims, see Camillo, Upon Their Shoulders, Chapter 11, n.p.

water to "pool" in the area. The solution, as proposed by General Harley Ferguson, working with the MRC, seemed to be a system of carefully planned cutoffs that would straighten the River and deepen its channel, thereby increasing both its capacity and velocity. Cutoffs were a new experiment in river control; of course, they had occurred naturally over time, but until 1930, most engineers had feared their destructive effect in terms of rapid erosion and bank collapse. Ferguson, though, saw them as a potential ally, if constructed correctly, in the struggle for flood control, and pressed forward with his carefully considered and designed plans. They had an almost immediate impact; with only a few of the cutoffs in actual operation by 1932, observers already noted a lowering of the River's height by several feet at both Vicksburg and Natchez. Future cutoff work promised an even more dramatic effect. Ferguson's success, then, proved to be a godsend for Delta planters as it not only reduced the chances of catastrophic flooding but also gave them a key weapon in their future floodway fights.⁷

Throughout the early 1930s, as the nation wallowed through the Depression, the great flood control program for the lower Mississippi River Valley languished. Having avoided the implementation of the Jawdin Plan through direct pressure and studied inaction, Delta planters hoped that they had seen its last and placed much of their faith in the ongoing projects of General Ferguson. However, by 1935, the Corps of Engineers had come under the leadership of Major General Edward Markham, a very active man determined to press the overall plan to completion, including the construction of all floodways. On this last issue, Markham utilized the deep political divisions in Louisiana

⁷ On Ferguson and his cutoff projects, see Camillo, Upon Their Shoulders, Chapter 11, n.p.

and the lower Valley to put the Delta in a tight box, from which escape appeared improbable. South Louisiana interests, especially in New Orleans, wanted the protection that upriver outlets, like the Bonnet Carre spillway above the city and the Morganza floodway through the Atchafalaya, could offer, but seemed mostly ambivalent about a floodway through north Louisiana. They simply wanted action of some kind and put pressure on their representatives at the national level to make things happen. Planting interests in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, though, insisted on the upper floodway, as they felt it would relieve the flood threat in their own region. Markham, then, crafted a revised flood control plan that attempted to isolate the Delta from its potential allies by negating major criticisms and fostering consensus. The "fuse plug" concept, for instance, had caused considerable concern; to assuage these fears, Markham agreed to build actual control structures at the floodway openings to allow the intake of water in a more gradual fashion. And, responding to the outrage at the size of the proposed Bouef River floodway, he laid aside these plans, opting to build a more compact floodway along the eastern side of the Macon Ridge, to run south from Eudora, Arkansas, through the Tensas River basin, the very heart of the riverfront parishes. In this way, then, he hoped to unite New Orleans, Mississippi, and the backcountry of northeast Louisiana into a powerful lobby that would overcome all resistance.⁸

Previous to this scheme, Delta planters, although major players in the opposition, could always find solace in the fact that the floodway, at least, was not going directly over their property, even if other threats proved very real. They now faced a disastrous turn of

⁸ Camillo, Upon Their Shoulders, Chapter 12, n.p.

events. Under the Markham plan, almost 500,000 acres in East Carroll, Madison, Tensas and Concordia Parishes would be given up to periodic overflow from the Mississippi River. In return, landowners would receive one-time "flowage" rights payments, up to one and a half times the normal property assessment; timber, buildings, roads, bridges, or crops impacted by floodwaters in the future, however, would garner no compensation. This last provision doomed development projects in the floodway zone, as no bank would possibly make loans or investments in such a high-risk area. Further, Markham suggested paying no money at all for "backwater" areas already subject to inundation, including almost all the property under consideration in Tensas and Concordia Parishes, both of which had suffered badly during the 1927 flood. In effect, the floodway would destroy the very lives and livelihoods of the people in the Delta and make the area, as the planters put it, "fit only for habitation by alligators, water moccasins, bull frogs and the beasts and varmints of the jungle."⁹

Faced with such a potentially devastating situation, the planters, now accustomed to working together, reacted vigorously and, in a meeting at Tallulah attended by between 350 and 500 people, organized the Northeast Louisiana Protective Association, with the

⁹ On the Eudora Floodway Plan, see Camillo, Upon Their Shoulders, Chapter 12; the new plan reduced from about 1.32 million to 800,000 acres the amount of land within the floodway. Delta planters were aghast; for their views on the new plan, see Fifth District Levee Board Special Committee to Board of Commissioners, 15 March 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Senator John Holmes Overton Collection, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana. This report and other resolutions were enclosed in a letter, Jeff B. Snyder to Senator John H. Overton, 19 March 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Overton Collection. The other opposition resolutions included were: Madison Police Jury Resolution, 6 March 1935; Village of Tallulah Resolution, 7 March 1935; Tallulah State Bank & Trust Company Resolution, 14 March 1935; Business Men's Luncheon Club of Tallulah Resolution, 6 March 1935; and Madison Parish School Board Resolution, 16 March 1935. Last quote from Special Committee to Board of Commissioners.

venerable old Senator Joseph Ransdell as president. Tensas Parish submitted as its emissaries state representative Joseph Curry, former state Senator C.C. Brooks, Sheriff John Hughes, Harry Goldman of the Police Jury, and L.H. Cook of the School Board, all identified as "large property owners." Other attendees included Elliott Coleman, Harrison Miller, and Sidney Shaw, powerful voices in their own right. After seconding a resolution submitted previously to the Fifth District Levee Board in opposition to the Markham Plan, the delegates voted to send a special committee, including Ransdell, Curry, Benjamin Young, Frederick H. Schneider, J. Martian Hamley, and Henry Sevier, to Washington, D.C., to lobby directly against the proposed legislation.¹⁰

Concerned that the floodway would, "make a waste of more than 400,000 acres of the most fertile land in America, and create a constant menacing danger hanging over the heads of the people left in the thin line along the Mississippi River," the planters also turned, in a more personal fashion, to their longtime ally in Congress, Riley Wilson, chair of the powerful House Committee on Flood Control. Jeff Snyder, active as always, reported to Wilson that at the Delta wide meeting in Tallulah, presided over by former Senator Ransdell, opposition against the floodway had been unanimous. Summarizing the general sentiment, he exploded, "We do not need the damned thing and we are going to fight it by every means in our power out of court and if necessary in court." He called the floodway "an engineering experiment

¹⁰ P.O. Benjamin, Secretary, Northeast Louisiana Protective Association, to Senator John H. Overton, 22 March 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Overton Collection. Also see, "The Northeast Louisiana Protective Association Organized at Tallulah, to Oppose Construction of Eudora Floodway," Tensas Gazette, 29 March 1935; "Meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Fifth Louisiana Levee District, Tallulah, Louisiana, March 26, 1935," Tensas Gazette, 29 March 1935; and "Both Police Jury and School Board of Tensas Condemn Spillway Project and Appropriate Funds to Oppose Construction," Tensas Gazette, 29 March 1935.

pure and simple," and, becoming agitated, closed with a desperate plea to Wilson for help: "For God's sake, do not assist in our ruin." Later, in another letter to Wilson, Snyder regained his composure enough to lay out an emotional but business-like argument against the Markham plan. "Practically half a million acres of land, the most fertile in the world, would be utterly destroyed," he contended, since "all houses, fences, barns, schools, [and] churches, would be washed away the first time the water was turned into the floodway." Further, no investment firms would loan money for crop production in a region subject to periodic overflow, leading to an almost enforced depopulation of the Delta parishes and crippling the local governments' ability to raise and collect taxes. The floodway was going to be "unshirted hell any way you look at it." The most galling aspect of the proposed project might have been the fact that, potentially, it was not needed. General Harley Ferguson told Snyder that the cutoff construction he had implemented in the early 1930s had so lowered the river levels that "it would never be necessary to turn the water in[to] this Eudora Floodway." Why not wait a few years and see, Snyder suggested. If accurate, Ferguson could be commended as a "great engineer and a most splendid gentlemen," but if not, there was "ample time to construct a floodway after it is so proven."¹¹

Wilson, for his part, agreed with Snyder's assessment of the situation and attempted to build a unified front of opposition from his base of power. When the Delta delegation made their way to Washington,

¹¹ Initial quote from, P.O. Benjamin, Secretary, Northeast Louisiana Protective Association, to Senator John H. Overton, 22 March 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Overton Collection. Jeff B. Snyder to Congressman Riley J. Wilson, 22 March 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Overton Collection, and Jeff B. Snyder to Congressman Riley J. Wilson, 29 March 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Overton Collection. For more on Snyder's opposition to the floodway, see "Proposed Eudora Floodway," Tensas Gazette, 19 July 1935.

D.C., to testify at a Congressional hearing in the early spring of 1935, he offered them a warm welcome and steered their barely contained rage into productive testimony. He even browbeat other Louisiana witnesses into supporting an anti-floodway stance, eventually producing a formal statement of opposition that reversed several previous, pro-Markham testimonies before the House committee. The Delta interests, though, faced unrelenting pressure from others within the lower Valley, especially from their fellow planters in Mississippi. Congressman Will Whittington, representing these men, became the leading advocate for Markham's plan to would link the Morganza and Eudora floodways into a joint endeavor. Such a formulation, Whittington well understood, would bring an almost unbearable amount of political pressure upon the Louisiana Delta from those who favored some sort of control project, even if they did not favor necessarily an upper floodway.¹²

Delta planters in Louisiana, indeed, came in for severe criticism from these interests. W.J. Abston, president of the plantation investment firm of Abston, Crump & Wynne out of Memphis, which owned some 9000 acres in East Carroll Parish in addition to large swaths of property elsewhere, wrote Senator John Overton with his concerns. Although sympathetic to the plight of local owners in Louisiana, he supported the floodway system as the only logical solution to the problem of flooding in the lower Valley. But, he urged Overton to secure a fair plan of compensation in legislation approving the Markham plan; incomplete measures had doomed the Jawdin plan and a similar reliance on local levee boards to provide funds simply put "a club in the hands of the landowners in the spillway to hold up the Government,

¹² F.H. Schneider broadcast his views of the committee hearings in Washington, D.C. over the radio. See "Broadcasting Station WOW," Tensas Gazette, 26 April 1935.

and if the Government holds to this position, we will be very old men before any project of this kind is completed." Abston and his partners, including the infamous Mayor Ed Crump of Memphis, did not mind the loss of their property, if justly compensated, as they were invested heavily in the Mississippi Delta as well. Yet, he intimated that other, less noble individuals had different motives. "You would be surprised," he scowled, "to know the very intelligent men who are trying now to kill the project, but not with the idea that it is not a good plan, but with the idea of obtaining more money for their property."¹³

Fred Hudson, of the law firm Hudson, Potts, and Bernstein in Monroe, likewise complained about opposition to the Markham plan by Delta planters. In a letter to Benjamin Young, which he copied to Jeff Snyder, F.H. Schneider, and Senator Ransdell, among others, Hudson urged that the whole flood control package not be sacrificed because of selfish interests. Such "more or less local controversies," he reasoned, "are going to result in either defeating any relief at all or bring about another confusing and inadequate state, such as the Flood Control Act of 1928." Young responded vigorously, however, outlining his own opinions. If the Eudora floodway "could be eliminated and the balance of the bill, as applying to the upper part of the River, and the Morganza and Atchafalaya, carried into effect," he argued, "we would be, in my view, comparatively safe." With Ferguson's cutoffs already lowering the water against the levees by two and a half to three and a half feet, Young now had only little fear from floods except once every fifty or hundred years. Instead of wasting time over the Eudora floodway, which the Delta would fight tooth and nail, Young

¹³ W.J. Abston, President, Abston, Crump & Wynne Co., to Senator John H. Overton, 18 April 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Overton Collection.

wanted the government to hurriedly proceed with work on the Morganza. Like Hudson, though, he too worried that pro-Markham forces might abandon the whole project or, even worse, attempt to divide the lower Delta from the upper parishes. This would be an unmitigated disaster, he grimly warned, since "nothing can be done to alter the views of the East Carroll people."¹⁴

J. Martian Hamley of Lake Providence indeed later wrote Hudson about the depth of opposition in the upper Delta. "We are bitterly opposed to the construction of the Eudora Floodway," he stated, "and when I say we I mean practically every property owner in this Parish, and a vast majority of the people who don't own any property at all." The floodway would take practically all of the best land and about three fifths of the total area, he contended, while also forcing the resettlement of fifty percent of the parish's population, including such new, white communities as those at Lane's Ferry, Elmwood, and Monticello. In addition, it would destroy the parish tax base, cripple local government, and, with well over a million dollars of indebtedness, would force either bankruptcy or ruinous levels of taxation. The scheme to link the Morganza and Eudora segments, at any rate Hamley deduced, came from the Mississippi interests anxious to save their own lands while offering up those of Louisiana in sacrifice. His fellow planters on the Police Jury and School Board offered up similar justifications for their rejection of the Markham plan. In a joint resolution, they pointed out that the Eudora floodway would virtually destroy the four riverfront parishes, which had "an assessed

¹⁴ F.G. Hudson, Jr. to B.F. Young, 8 February 1936, Box 41, f. 318, Overton Collection, and B.F. Young to Fred G. Hudson, 12 February 1936, Box 41, f. 318, Overton Collection. For more on Young's views, see "Statement of B.F. Young, Levee Board Commissioner, Fifth Louisiana District, Before Sub-Committee of Committee on Commerce, U.S. Senate," Tensas Gazette, 14 February 1936.

value of about thirty millions," and would especially impact East Carroll, with "more than half of the area of which would be taken, and which could not maintain its separate political entity . . ." All of this, they complained, would be done without anything close to fair compensation and for a dubious purpose, since, as MRC reports testified, substantial protection could be gained from a less invasive tributary dam and reservoir system. Ferguson's cutoffs, at any rate, they suggested, had already achieved major goals in reducing high water levels on the River.¹⁵

The arguments spelled out by Young, Hamley, and other Delta leaders reflected an evolving strategy to combat the Markham plan. In large part, this strategy revolved around turning a single man, Senator John Holmes Overton, to their side. Overton came from an aristocratic family in Alexandria that included Civil War Governor John Overton Moore and an impressive array of lawyers and judges. He had run for the U.S. Senate in 1918, garnering the support of the Delta establishment, but after his defeat, returned to his law practice. During the 1920s, though, he became tied to the Long machine, defending Governor Long during his 1929 impeachment hearings and earning the domineering politician's respect. Overton, indeed, emerged as one of the few men that Huey Long implicitly trusted and treated with courtesy during his stormy reign. As such, he became the handpicked choice to join Huey in the Senate, and subsequently defeated the incumbent Edwin Broussard in the 1932 elections. Overton was no simple "yes man," however, and took his position with great seriousness. For Delta

¹⁵ J. Martian Hamley to Fred G. Hudson, 17 February 1936, Box 41, f. 318, Overton Collection. "Resolution of the Police Jury and School Board of East Carroll Parish, La., on the Proposed Macon-Tensas Floodway, 28 March 1935," in F.A. Babb to Senator John H. Overton, 29 March 1935, Box 71, f. 645, Overton Collection.

planters denied their usual position of influence by Ransdell's defeat in 1930 and Riley Wilson's loss in early 1936, the conservative Overton represented their best chance to shape the new flood control legislation being put together in Congress.¹⁶

Although sympathetic to the cause of the Delta, Overton had to placate New Orleans and south Louisiana as well, and sought to craft a compromise between the various interests both in the state and within the lower Valley itself. Pushed by powerful forces, he acquiesced on the issue of the Eudora floodway, but in return insisted upon fair treatment for the impacted region. His 1936 omnibus bill, which authorized the Markham plan, then, eliminated the requirement that local governments pay for rights of way and provided for a fair compensation for landowners from the Federal government. To ensure a general consensus, Overton also inserted a provision that linked the construction of the floodways together; only when seventy-five percent of the rights of way were secured for both the upper and lower projects could work begin on either. This meant that work on the Morganza floodway could not proceed until the property rights in the Eudora floodway zone had been acquired. This slight amendment, inserted after Overton had received assurances of support for the whole plan from Delta interests, proved to be the wedge that these same men later used to break the Markham plan entirely.¹⁷

¹⁶ On Delta support for Overton in 1918, see "John H. Overton," *Concordia Sentinel*, n.d., reprint, *Tensas Gazette*, 16 August 1918. The *Sentinel* supported Overton over Edwin Broussard and Edward Gay in the campaign to succeed Broussard's deceased brother, Robert. Both Broussard and Gay had a claim to the seat, being from south Louisiana, and used this against Overton from Alexandria. Ransdell ran un-opposed for his seat that year. Also, see "Overton for Senator," *Tensas Gazette*, 23 August 1918. On Overton's background and his relationship to Long, including the 1932 Senate race, see Williams, *Huey Long*, 255-56, 367-69, 593-99.

¹⁷ Camillo, *Upon Their Shoulders*, Chapter 12.

In a frank discussion of these plans with District Attorney Jeff Snyder in early 1936, before the bill's passage, Senator Joseph Ransdell concluded that Overton's just compensation amendment perhaps had killed the Markham plan already, since the War Department opposed it strongly. Yet, he urged Snyder to "strain every nerve to secure legislation for the projects south of the Red River, as every one seems to favor them, and their completion would remove a great deal of the pressure for Eudora, in our opinion." With "our two Senators and all our Representatives" collaborating "in a vigorous effort-working together as one-and bringing every possible pressure on the War Department, there would be a chance to secure it either as a separate measure, or an amendment to some appropriation bill." Ransdell likewise urged Snyder to use his influence as chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee, "and your friendship for the State Administration," to press for action on the Morganza floodway, especially the acquisitions of valuations and commitments from landowners. Although he felt that Overton was "pretty well set in his views," he also thought that the Senator would cooperate if everything were laid out before him. "It should be made perfectly clear in handling this matter," he emphasized, "that nothing is to be said about Eudora, the whole effort being centered on projects below the Red."¹⁸

After passage of the 1936 Flood bill, Delta leaders indeed reneged on their earlier pledges of limited support and continued to lobby for the abandonment of the Eudora floodway. Overton appeared greatly disturbed by this hostility. "After the Overton Act became a law," he wrote to F.A. Babb of the East Carroll Parish Police Jury, "I was advised by the leaders of the opposition that they would cooperate

¹⁸ Joseph Ransdell to Jeff Snyder, 22 February 1936, Box 41, f. 318, Overton Collection.

with the State and Federal Governments in granting flowage easement options and expediting the construction of the Eudora Floodway so essential to the successful operation of the flood control program in the Lower Mississippi Valley." Now, it seemed to Overton that the planters had resolved themselves to continue the fight. The Delta leadership took an indignant tone. In a curt response, F.H. Schneider reminded Overton that, "To our minds one outstanding fact presents itself, and that is the Eudora Floodway is proposed to be built not as a flood control device or project for Louisiana, but for the state of Mississippi and southeast Arkansas." He noted that General Markham himself had seen a reduction in flood levels as much as seven to ten feet, and that when the cutoffs were operating at full capacity "the reason and necessity of the Eudora Floodway disappear." Further, Schneider claimed that the cutoffs and the Morganza floodway would provide Louisiana with "as complete a solution of its flood problems as we reasonably can expect," while building the Eudora would only place the people in the flood-prone backcountry of the Tensas River basin "in the position of criminals in the death cells waiting for execution." In a personal appeal laden with meaning, he asked that Overton "save Louisiana first for Louisianans, then lend a helping hand to Mississippi and Arkansas."¹⁹

Despite such raw emotion and the not so veiled reference to his own sense of honor, Overton maintained a stern veneer. He did not see a way out for the Delta, and warned Schneider that the "Eudora Floodway

¹⁹ Senator John H. Overton to F.A. Babb, 22 May 1937, Box 71, f. 343, Overton Collection. F.H. Schneider to Senator John H. Overton, 29 May 1937, Box 71, Folder 647, Overton Collection. Also, see F.H. Schneider to Senator John H. Overton, 16 June 1937, Box 70, f. 632, Overton Collection. For a view similar to that of Schneider, see "The Eudora Floodway, as Outlined by Sheriff E.D. Coleman," Tensas Gazette, 14 May 1937.

will be constructed by the Federal Government in spite of any opposition that may be brought to bear in or out of Congress." The real question for Delta planters, as Overton saw it, appeared as whether or not they desired "a Eudora with all its safeguards that, as you know, after considerable work and worry I incorporated into the Overton Act . . . or another and perhaps much less desirable Floodway." And, as Overton predicted, the movement towards acquiring both title and flowage rights to property within the floodway zone began in earnest in the spring of 1937. Delta leaders, though, urged resistance. State Representative Joseph Curry even issued a public notice warning his constituents in Tensas Parish not to sign the floodway options, since, he claimed, the government expected to pay only about a quarter of the assessed value of properties while the destruction would be "almost 100%." Like Schneider and others, Curry also fostered the idea that the Eudora floodway had been "forced upon us" by Arkansas and Mississippi politicians, but suggested that if the rights of way were not secured by the government, then it could not be built. Such strident methods paid off. Although the government secured eighty-five percent of the needed rights of way in the Atchafalaya region within three months of the passage of Overton's bill, it never received anymore than thirty percent in northeast Louisiana. The people of the Delta, it seemed, remained overwhelmingly in opposition, resolved to use whatever means available to defeat the floodway.²⁰

²⁰ Senator John H. Overton to F.H. Schneider, 18 June 1937, Box 70, f. 632, Overton Collection. "Meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Fifth Louisiana Levee District, Tallulah, Louisiana, 8 June 1937," in B.F. Young to Senator John H. Overton, 9 June 1937, Box 70, f. 632, Overton Collection. "Do Not Sign Flood Options," Tensas Gazette, 11 June 1937.

As the pressure mounted, their leaders appealed to close friends and allies for assistance. They especially made a concerted effort in Mississippi, where Congressman Whittington, with Theodore Bilbo and Pat Harrison in the Senate, aggressively pushed the floodway bill to their supporters. F.W. Foote of the First National Bank of Hattiesburg, which owned plantation property in the Delta, sent a flurry of letters to the state's Congressional delegation in which he explained his opposition. In one to Congressman McGehee, of the Natchez district, he flatly stated, from a businessman's perspective, that, "Mississippians, your constituents, are largely interested in the overflow area west of Natchez, and . . . have a huge investment exposure from one end of Louisiana to the other, and we think our Congressmen should give this feature some consideration" In a letter to Whittington, he further emphasized the economic ties. "If you have never made inquiry as regard[s] the magnitude of financial interests of Mississippians in this part of Louisiana, you would be astonished should all the facts be placed before you. Mississippians," Foote explained, "not only own large quantities of land . . . but they also extend large credits and carry on huge trading with [the] people who reside [there]." Foote's bank, especially, had acquired considerable property in Concordia, Catahoula, and Tensas Parishes over the years, and he, personally, had made close friends in the region and admired them as true gentlemen. Although Louisiana's geological position had, unfortunately, put it in danger, Foote felt that had the planters he knew, "not been extraordinarily virile specimens of manhood and character, and had they not possessed the enlightenment which nourishes hope and confidence, it is conceivable that the now great agriculture and other industries in the area would have become negligible in character and quantity." He hoped that Whittington might give in on the Eudora floodway issue, if

only as a concession to such strong, honorable men. At any rate, Foote felt that the efforts to widen the River, combined with the opening of the Morganza floodway, would provide more than adequate protection from the threat of flood, without the necessity of the floodway. Whittington, though, continued to defend his stance, claiming that, "the impartial agency of the Government, as represented by the Chief of Engineers, still maintains that the Eudora diversion is imperative," even if he did offer a more compelling argument as well. "We are interested in protecting Louisiana," he assured Foote, "but the Mississippi Delta contributes approximately 25% of the ad valorem taxes of the State of Mississippi," and this, for him, was reason enough to press through with the Eudora.²¹

Delta planters, however, continued to mobilize their allies in Mississippi as much as possible. A.B. Learned, Chairman of the Board of the Britton & Koontz National Bank in Natchez, and Hobson Alexander, President of the City Bank & Trust of Natchez, both maintained a constant communication with the Mississippi Congressional delegation, "heartily sustaining the severance of the two floodways." Learned, in fact, was "trying to get a brother of Mr. Whittington's, who is a prominent lawyer in Natchez, and who is strongly in favor of the Morganza Floodway, to call on his brother to see if any results can be obtained." W.D. Cook, executive vice-president of the National Bank in Meridian also wrote to Whittington to express his views against the Eudora floodway. He and his brother, L.H. Cook, had purchased a plantation in 1917 in Tensas Parish, and his brother had been selected

²¹ F.W. Foote to Congressman Dan McGehee, 11 February 1938, Box 71, f. 641, Overton Collection. Also see, F.W. Foote to B.F. Young, 16 February 1938; F.W. Foote to Congressman W.M. Whittington, 4 February 1938; and Congressman W.M. Whittington to F.W. Foote, 7 February 1938, in Box 71, f. 641, Overton Collection.

a Master Farmer for his efforts. Cook argued that the Morganza would effectively drain and protect both the Louisiana and Mississippi Deltas, and that its completion would double the money of the, "Hundreds of Mississippians [who] have hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in this section" He urged Whittington to at least support the Morganza for the meanwhile, and come back to the Eudora at a later date if it proved necessary.²²

Delta leaders in Louisiana also sought to solidify their base at home, lobbying the state administration extensively for support. Jeff Snyder, for instance, wrote Senator Allen Ellender asking for help, since he felt that, "if this Eudora Floodway is constructed it will be a colossal crime costing millions in money and the wreckage of families and destruction of human[s] never before witnessed in America except as an aftermath of war." They also cultivated the Longite governor, Richard Leche, who proved much more accommodating to the conservative business interests of the state than Long himself, and enjoyed the good times that could be had through association with the old guard. After working through the proper channels, in November 1937, the leading planters in the Delta hosted Leche for a multi-day deer hunt in classic fashion. They started out at state Senator Andrew Sevier's plantation in Madison Parish, before drifting down into Tensas, where Lucille Watson, mistress of Cross Keys, entertained the Governor as well. In a show of support for the planters, and a distinct turn away from Long's principles, Leche arrived with the State Police, who, aided by the local parish sheriffs made a sweep through the area and arrested some

²² B.F. Young to Senator John H. Overton, 11 February 1938, Box 71, f. 641, Overton Collection. On the support of Natchez, see "Natchez Stands with Northeast Louisiana," and "Natchez Joins in Floodway Opposition," Tensas Gazette, 25 June 1937. W.D. Cook to Congressman W.M. Whittington, 15 February 1938, Box 71, f. 641, Overton Collection.

sixty game law violators. By such measures, Leche and the local powerbrokers achieved a measure of understanding and mutual support.²³

By early 1938, then, the political leaders of the Delta had built a considerable anti-Eudora lobby, and became more explicit in their attacks on the floodway's proponents. Sheriff Elliott Coleman, for example, argued vigorously that Congressman Whittington already had secured ample protection of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta as chairman of the House flood control committee by building that state's levees to a higher grade than those in Louisiana. Yet, Coleman fumed, he still wanted the Eudora Floodway even though the engineers had seen the flood stage on the River drop by seven feet due to Ferguson's cutoffs and expected it to drop another five feet once all were fully operational. Others in the Delta took an equally defiant stance and accused the Mississippi delegation of playing politics with a national problem, of wanting to sacrifice 800,000 acres in Louisiana for 300,000 far in the Yazoo-Mississippi interior.²⁴

The Delta forces in Mississippi, though, maintained their own, fearsome propaganda campaign. Claiming that a "highly organized, well financed and determined political machine" lay behind the move to separate the two floodways, the editor of the Greenville Delta Star

²³ Jeff Snyder to Senator Allen J. Ellender, 2 July 1937, Box 70, f. 632, Overton Collection. On the conservative nature of the Leche administration, see Alan Sandler, Huey Long's Louisiana: State Politics, 1920-1952, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956, 122-32, and Harnett Kane, Louisiana Hayride: The American Rehearsal for Dictatorship, 1941, reprint, Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 1990, 193-210. Delta leaders presented Leche with a clear outline of their plans, which he generally supported. See "Eudora Spillway," Tensas Gazette, 11 June 1937. On the big game hunt, see "State Police Round Up Game Law Violators," Tensas Gazette, 5 November 1937.

²⁴ For Coleman's comments, see "War Department Expected to Back Morganza Plans," New Orleans Times-Picayune, n.d., Tensas Gazette, 4 February 1938. Also see, "The Eudora Spillway," Tensas Gazette, 25 February 1938; "Proposed Eudora Floodway Solely for the Benefit of Mississippi," Tensas Gazette, 4 March 1938.

prophesied that "there won't be any Eudora floodway" if they achieved their goal. The author even castigated his fellow citizens for buying into the "rotten political story" that had been sold by the Louisianans. "Poor old Natchez has been duped," he cried, causing confusion in the state's Congressional delegation and bringing danger to "important segments" of Mississippi, Arkansas, and even other sections of Louisiana.²⁵

But, Delta leaders in Louisiana became more and more confident as the fight dragged on. The editor of the Lake Providence Banner-Democrat, in fact, slyly predicted as early as January 1938 that, "the Floodway through this country will never be a reality." New Orleans, he argued, would join with northeast Louisiana to demand action on the Morganza floodway, at the very least, and after that, he felt sure that the Eudora would wither on the vine. And, indeed, Senator Overton, lobbied heavily by both New Orleans interests and the Delta itself, had changed his tune on the upper floodway idea. Writing Benjamin F. Young that February, he suggested that it might be "the better policy to give the green light to Morganza and wait a while to examine what course should be pursued in reference to the Eudora." In a wry bit of humor, he added, to Young's great amusement no doubt, that, "I trust that you will agree with me in that policy." Former Senator Ransdell offered his services to Overton in pushing the necessary legislation through Congress. Having retained his contacts with old friends and colleagues in the Senate, he thought that he might be useful, especially in talking the issue over with Senators Morris Sheppard of Texas and Hiram Johnson of California, with whom he was "right friendly." Both of

²⁵ "The Spillway Menace," Greenville (MS) Delta Star, 18 February 1938, in Sheriff E.D. Coleman to Senator John H. Overton, 22 February 1938, Box 71, f. 641, Overton Collection.

these men sat on the Flood Control Subcommittee that would eventually handle Overton's 1938 amendment that divorced the Morganza and Eudora projects.²⁶

The continuous pressure on Overton from the Delta interests, combined with the success of the cutoff system, and the acquisition of the necessary percentage of options in the Morganza floodway area, led to the effective end of the Eudora threat. Delta planters, in the greatest of jeopardy at one point, now appeared triumphant when the modified bill passed both houses of Congress in the summer of 1938. Having successfully navigated the perils of state and national politics in a reduced condition, the victory represented a new way of doing business. They had won because of their solidarity, their vision of themselves as a solid interest group rather than as a collection of interested, but unconnected individuals. Such realizations would continue to shape their definition of themselves in the new order.

²⁶ "The Floodway," Lake Providence Banner-Democrat, n.d., reprint, Tensas Gazette, 14 January 1938. On the role of the 1937 flood in building Delta confidence, see "Flood Proves Program of Control Successful," Tensas Gazette, 19 March 1937. Senator John H. Overton to B.F. Young, 15 February 1938, Box 71, f. 641, Overton Collection. Joseph E. Ransdell to Senator John H. Overton, 9 February 1938, and Senator John H. Overton to Joseph E. Ransdell, 11 February 1938, Box 71, f. 641, Overton Collection. Also see, Joseph E. Ransdell to Senator John H. Overton, 17 March 1938, and Senator John H. Overton to Joseph Ransdell, 19 March 1938, Box 71, f. 642, Overton Collection.

EPILOGUE

In the midst of a bitter cold spell in January 1930, William Davidson, the long-time mayor of St. Joseph, slipped on an iced over patch of sidewalk outside his downtown office, and fell, fracturing his skull. Carried into the Bank of St. Joseph, of which he was president, Davidson lapsed into unconsciousness within a few minutes, and passed away that night. His death came as a sudden and bitter shock to the people of Tensas Parish, who had grown accustomed to his leadership over the decades. The editor of the Gazette cried that the very fabric of society had been "rent in twain" and that the tragedy seemed apparent "on every face, of every color, of every age." Indeed, Davidson's death elicited an evident outpouring of emotion from all races and classes. A.H. Jackson, principal of the all-black Tensas Parish Training School in St. Joseph, recalled that the Mayor had been a friend to the black community, "always straightforward, full of advice and sympathy," and supportive of "movements which he felt were good for all the people irrespective of race or color." A collection of other black citizens likened him, "as a father ever ready always, to advise and assist the more unfortunate ones among us, sparing neither council, talent nor money." For white society, Davidson, as proclaimed by the Natchez Democrat, was a "man of sterling character, honest and upright in his dealings with his fellow man, possessing all of the attributes of a true Christian gentleman." The list of pallbearers, actual and honorary, at his funeral reflected this belief, including virtually all of the important men in Tensas Parish, as well as

significant figures from surrounding areas in Louisiana and Mississippi.¹

For the planter class in Tensas Parish, Davidson's death, in many ways, reflected the passing of the old order itself in the 1920s and 1930s, as the stalwarts of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras succumbed to oblivion. Amidst the ongoing cultural tumult of the Modern era, the very foundations of social order seemed to be crumbling and Davidson, in particular, represented the ideals of this disappearing way of life. Born in New York City to Scottish immigrants, he was brought to Waterproof as a youth and raised in that district. His father had served in the Confederate army, and Davidson earned his own stripes during the racial turmoil of 1878, during which white Democrats crushed the last remnants of black political activism in the parish. Moving to St. Joseph in 1880, he became a merchant and planter, and married Carrie Moore, daughter of one of Tensas' richest men, thereby securing his status and place among the local elite. Over the years, Davidson gradually expanded his interests and influence. In addition to his own private planting operations, at the time of his death he was president of the parish's most stable bank and general manager of one of the Delta's earliest and most successful agricultural corporations, the Panola Company, which he had helped organize some twenty years earlier. Even after passing his seventieth birthday, he remained active in "progressive" affairs, helping to secure the Experiment Station at St. Joseph and lobbying extensively for the Mississippi River bridge at Natchez that linked the lower Delta to one

¹ For coverage of Davidson's death, see Davidson Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1930, and Davidson Obituary, Natchez Democrat, 19 January 1930, reprint, Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1930. For the remarks from black leaders, see "In Memoriam" and "Eulogy to Hon. W.M. Davidson- By the Colored Citizens of St. Joseph and Tensas Parish," Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1930.

of its major trading partners. He also exercised considerable political clout, serving as parish treasurer for thirty-six years and as mayor of St. Joseph from its incorporation in 1901 until his death. Naturally, he also involved himself heavily in internal Democratic Party politics, as a member of both the parish Executive Committee and the State Central Committee.²

Davidson's life, then, touched upon many of the key events and elements that held together the traditional vision of the Delta as it existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Confederate and Reconstruction experiences proved especially important for this conservative worldview, as they represented examples of manly honor and virtue, of taking principled stands for civilization against barbarism. Although the workings of the Lost Cause religious impulse had slowly worn away the bitter feelings of loss and defeat, the Reconstruction era, fraught as it was with racial violence and struggle, still loomed large in the minds of white Delta society. Both memories, though, seemed to be fading rapidly as the new century pressed forward, with a younger generation rising to prominence and new challenges to the old order emerging even within the midst of Delta society itself.

Josiah Scott, who edited the Tensas Gazette for over fifty years, felt these changes keenly. Having grown up in the shadow of Civil War veterans and Reconstruction heroes, and thoroughly grounded in late Victorian culture, he often ruminated on the crass and abrupt cultural shifts he witnessed in the 1920s and 1930s. He did not shy away from expressing his feelings on these developments; indeed, he frequently

² On Davidson's life and accomplishments, see Davidson Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1930; Davidson Obituary, Natchez Democrat, 19 January 1930, reprint, Tensas Gazette, 24 January 1930; and Appendix A.

took sardonic jabs at modern life and criticized, at times in brutal fashion, the youth of the parish. Yet, on occasion, he seemed somewhat resigned to the eventual overthrow of all that he knew and loved. The hewing down of a giant oak on the courthouse lawn in St. Joseph in the summer of 1933 sparked a particularly bitter realization, for in the loss of this "monarch of the primeval forest," Scott foresaw his own culture's fall to the "march of progress." The "old forest king" had witnessed the "advance of civilization, the abolition of slavery, the rise and fall of governments, the passing of old customs and the birth of new ideas." It had seen the "horse-drawn vehicle give place to motor-driven speedsters of land and air," and the decline of women from the domestic pedestal. Dwelling overly long, as usual, on the young "rosebuds" of the new era, the granddaughters of many a fine old plantation mistress, he mused that they seemed less concerned with their reputation and good name than with what their date had "on the hip," or the "relative merits of [cigarette] brands that do or do not produce a cough." But the indignities of youth grieved Scott less than the gradual disappearance from the collective memory of so many men like William Davidson, those stalwarts from an earlier time who so creditably represented the old order itself. With the arrival of the new whites, "a tribe who do not know and cannot love our traditions," the desecration appeared complete, and it seemed to him little wonder, then, that this great oak, which had "raised its head in regal pride in the courtyard of the grand old parish of Tensas, in the days of her glory and splendor," now, at last, bowed "in shame" and became only "cordwood for winter fuel."³

³ "The Last of the Mohicans," Tensas Gazette, 18 August 1933.

As Scott ably reflected, the Delta country of northeast Louisiana indeed witnessed tremendous upheaval and transformation during the years spanning the First World War and Great Depression. Much of the change, of course, was structural, in terms of economic and political realignments. Scott himself, though, mourned the loss of an old plantation culture, one that, perhaps, he only vaguely remembered from his youth. But, this study has shown how these two shifts, one structural, one cultural, are intertwined, and in fact, demonstrate as a whole the movement of America from the Victorian age into the Modern era. As a monograph on Louisiana history, the work also has captured the realities of Longism as they emerged and changed in the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. It is important to understand Longism initially as a rebellion of frustrated lower and middle class elements in Louisiana society seeking access to the market and basic necessities that had been denied them through the conservative rule of the old Bourbon oligarchy. As Louisiana came to terms with the twentieth century, a vast majority of the lower classes wanted the things that were out there to be had: roads, schools, hospitals, all things which Long promised and in many cases delivered through his astute manipulation of the processes of state organization. Perhaps more than any other Southerner at the time, Long was able to break through the traditionalism that had stymied progressive reforms and modernization. The planters of northeast Louisiana, used to having their own way, of asserting their own independence through the domination of others, be they poor blacks or poor whites, had to come to terms with this new democracy embodied by Long. And, indeed, they did grudgingly make this turn, giving up considerable independence to the Federal government in agriculture, welfare, and flood control, and eventually making a compromise with Longism to secure protection against that same Federal

authority, with regards to the Eudora Floodway plan. Of course, by that time, the terrifying form of Huey Long had been swept away and the new establishment he created had settled into place, more intent on the business of making money than anything. This political legacy proved much more amenable to the needs of the new plantation order that had emerged in the wake of the New Deal. In fact, from the remnants of the old guard had emerged a younger generation of leaders, many of them steeped in the traditions that had been nurtured by their fathers and grandfathers. But, in many ways, these were new men, conditioned by a different economic and political environment. They were still powerful, more or less within their small realm, but they appeared less and less like the proud princes of an earlier time.

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APPENDIX A
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION¹

Adams Family- Frank O. Adams, b. 1844 in Adams Co., MS, to an old antebellum family; came to Tensas Parish with father; served in Confederate army; married in 1879 to Susan Drake, of the well-known Drake family, who was born and reared in Tensas Parish; planter; their sons included F.O. Adams, Jr., and Magruder Adams (Goodspeed, Biographical and Historical Memoirs, 244; W.M. Drake, "Mrs. Susan Drake Adams, of Tensas Parish, Louisiana," Yearbook of the American Clan Gregor Society, re-print in Tensas Gazette, 10 November 1939)

Allen, James P.- Family roots in Virginia; attended Vanderbilt Univ.; practiced law in Missouri; sold lands in Indian Territory (Oklahoma), Texas, and Arkansas; bought plantation property in Tensas Parish (Sunnyside, Yelverton, Eastland, and Bellevue) and founded Tensas State Bank in Newellton; his son, Charles B. Allen served in the U.S. Army during the First World War but died at Newellton in 1928 (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 807-09)

Amacker Family- Robert Amacker arrived in East Carroll Parish from Tangipahoa Parish in late 19c.; a prominent planter, he also served in the LA Senate for many years; sons included Robert Nicholson Amacker and David Amacker; the son Robert attended the University of Arkansas and ran a 6000 acre plantation in 1937; he also served as president of the East Carroll Farm Federation; other son David attended Princeton, served as an officer in the Rainbow Division during the First World War and as an interpreter at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919; later went on to become a university professor (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1105-06)

Ashford, Daniel Farrar- b. 1879 at Rose Hill plantation in Adams Co., MS; father attended Yale and practiced medicine; arrived in Tensas Parish in 1895, managed a plantation for Eli Tullis, and then received plantation property as a wedding gift from his father-in-law, the "merchant prince" Joseph Moore; served in LA House of Representatives, 1916-29; stockholder in Panola Company; owned a stable of racing horses; enjoyed camp life as a member of the Cooter Point Club on Tensas River, with B.F. Young and

¹ This biographical list is comprised of men who had prominent associations with the social, political, and economic life of Tensas Parish during the 1920s and 1930s. I have included a few figures from the other Delta parishes, especially from East Carroll and Madison, and often have included material on fathers or grandfathers to show family continuity and influence across several generations. I used several period histories that included biographical components to compile this list, as well as some key local accounts and newspaper sources, especially the Tensas Gazette. The most important citations are noted in parentheses.

- others; Episcopal; had a reputation for impeccable dress, fashion, and manners, and spent lavishly on himself and his children; owned first wristwatch and automobile in Tensas Parish. (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1414-16; D.F. Ashford Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 26 July 1929)
- Berry, Burton Wesley- b. 1885 at Mayflower Plantation in Tensas Parish, 1885; traveled in the West as a youth but returned to work as a clerk for W.M. Davidson on the Panola Plantation, then took over as manager for Davidson's 2000 acre Maryland plantation; later owned his own property and moved into stock raising; Methodist (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 372-73)
- Bondurant Family- Among the earliest settlers in Tensas Parish; Albert was a planter and commanded the Tensas Cavalry during the Civil War; his wife, Laura, was born in Louisville, KY (Laura Bondurant Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 20 July 1917)
- Brooks, Clifford Cleveland- b. 1886 in Oglethorpe Co., GA; graduated in 1908 from the University of Georgia, where he had been active in fraternal and athletic activities; went West due to illness, sold real estate in Oklahoma, then came to Shreveport as a cotton broker; settled in Tensas Parish in 1918 where he purchased the Botany Bay plantation; served in the LA Senate during the 1920s on the Agriculture and Land and Levees committees (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 71)
- Brown, William Denis- b. 1876 in Terrebonne Parish, where his father managed a sugar plantation; arrived in East Carroll Parish in 1895 to work with his uncle, a levee contractor; married into a local plantation family; founded Providence Drug Company in Lake Providence, then purchased Gossypia plantation 1907; succeeded brother in 1932 as president of First Natl. Bank of Lake Providence; owned 10,000 acres in 1930s (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 686-87; Durham, Place to Remember,)
- Burnside, Wade Walker- b. 1882 in Kentucky; arrived at Newellton in 1913; purchased plantation property, bought Newellton Grain Elevator, and had interests in lumber, feed, and hardware businesses; served as President of Tensas State Bank and as a director of the First National Bank of Vicksburg; married daughter of Wade Newell, a member of an old Tensas Parish family; served as mayor of Newellton for more than twenty years; in 1930s, owned over 8500 acres; Mason; Methodist (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 955-56]
- Clinton, George Henry- b. during the 1860s in Natchez; father came from East Feliciana Parish, served in Confederate army, and as District Attorney for Sixth Judicial District; mother connected to the Briscoe family in Claiborne Co., MS; attended school in New Orleans, at Chamberlain-Hunt Academy in Port Gibson, MS, and at LSU (Class of 1889); worked as a sugar chemist in LA, Mexico, and Cuba until returning to St. Joseph to practice law in 1898; on Board of Supervisors for LSU; served in LA House of Representatives, 1908-10, and in State Senate during 1920s; on State Board of Appraisers and Board of Directors for East LA State Hospital; served as president of Tensas Parish School

Board and as a delegate to 1913 and 1921 state constitutional conventions (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1373-75)

Coleman, Elliot Devereaux- b. 1881 on Live Oak plantation in Tensas Parish; family ties to Natchez and Tullis family; planter; heavily involved in law enforcement, becoming a deputy sheriff at age 18; wounded in shootout in 1900; state Conservation agent and member of Huey Long's BCI; present when Long was shot; sheriff of Tensas Parish, 1936-1960; delegate to 1921 state constitutional convention (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1253-57, incl. photograph)

Cordill, Charles C.- b. 1844 in Coahoma Co., MS, but raised in Tensas Parish; served in Tensas Cavalry during Civil War; planter and merchant in Waterproof and St. Joseph; elected parish judge on Republican ticket, but then helped suppress black voting rights in 1878 violence; served in state Senate, for Tensas and Concordia Parishes, 1884-1912; chaired Lands and Levees Committee in that body; president of Tensas Parish Police Jury for a quarter century; recognized leader "with almost dictatorial power" of the Fifth District Levee Board (Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 24 November 1916)

Curry Family- Included a prominent set of individuals, Joseph Curry, Sr., Frank Curry, and James Curry, all well-known planters and businessmen in St. Joseph; Joseph Curry, Sr., as a young man, was involved in the violence surrounding the 1878 elections - he was arrested and carried to New Orleans for trial on fraud charges but the case was suspended; he later served for many years as the parish Clerk of Court; his son, Joseph T. Curry, b. 1895, attended Culver Military Academy in Indiana and the University of Virginia; served as an officer during the First World War; a planter; secretary-treasurer of the Panola Company and a director of the Bank of St. Joseph; chair of the Anti-Eudora Floodway Committee in Tensas Parish; served in the LA House of Representative during 1930s, chairing Public Works, Lands, and Levee Committee; Mason; Episcopal. (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 943-45]

Dale, John- b. 1859 in Concordia Parish, son of a prominent planter; attended the University of Louisiana (Tulane); began the practice of law at Vidalia in 1886; President of Concordia Bank and Trust; Mayor of Vidalia, state judge, state legislator; Methodist (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 791-793)

Davidson, William Mackenzie- b. 1856 in New York City, the son of Scottish immigrants; his father served in the Confederate army; raised in Natchez, and then Waterproof in Tensas Parish; attended Jefferson College near Natchez; involved with violence surrounding 1878 elections, arrested and carried to New Orleans to stand trial on fraud charges, but case suspended; merchant and planter; general manager of the Panola Company, comprising over 10,000 acres; Mayor of St. Joseph, 1901-30; parish treasurer for 30 years; president of the Bank of St. Joseph (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 982-83; Tensas Gazette,)

Goldman Family- Carneal Goldman, Sr., b. 1847, near Waterproof; CSA veteran, serving with Tensas Cavalry; associated with violence surrounding 1878 elections, arrested, and sent to New Orleans to stand trial on charges of electoral fraud, but case suspended; prominent planter near Waterproof; delegate to five National Democratic conventions; steamer "Carneal Goldman" named in his honor; sons Briscoe, Carneal, Jr., and Henry, all prominent in plantation society; Carneal, Jr., married Bessie Spencer of Tallulah, a popular society belle in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and the only daughter of a prominent politician; her brother was the strident anti-Long attorney and state legislator, Mason Spencer (Fortier, Louisiana, 618-19; Spencer-Goldman Marriage Announcement, Tensas Gazette, 19 and 26 June 1914)

Hamley, John Martian - b. 1883 in Lake Providence, East Carroll Parish; his father, a planter, served as mayor of the town for over a decade and sat for two decades on the Levee Board; J.M. Hamley was Catholic and attended Christian Brothers Academy in Memphis; married to a daughter of Judge Felix Ransdell (see below); planter; LA House of Representatives, 1912-24 and clerk for House from 1924-32 and again in 1938; Tax Assessor for East Carroll Parish during 1930s; appointed in 1936 by Governor Richard Leche to LA Flood Control Committee (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 986-88, 1147-48)

Hughes, John- b. 1865 in Natchez; son of Irish immigrants; his father served in the Confederate army; orphaned at age five, reared by his uncle on a plantation in Tensas Parish; attended Jefferson College outside Natchez; merchant and planter, also organized Bank of Newellton in 1904; elected Tensas Parish Sheriff in 1905, serving until 1936 (Fortier, Louisiana, 627-28; Chambers, History of Louisiana, 210-11)

Hunter, Napoleon B., and Family- b. 1843 in Kentucky, moving to Tensas Parish with his parents at a young age; merchant and planter in the Waterproof area; Mayor of Waterproof and president of the Tensas Parish School Board; children included Louis, Guy, and Randal; Louis served in the state legislature from 1920-24; (Goodspeed, Biographical and Historical Memoirs, 486; Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1407-08)

Kell, A.E.- b. in Mississippi, the son of a planter; moved with father, Thomas Phares Kell (see below), to Madison Parish and engaged in planting; in 1937, he owned a 1000 acre plantation with 35 families, its own gin, and making 500 bales of cotton annually; member of the Fifth District Levee Board, 1921-36, serving as president for four years (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 710-11)

Kell, Thomas Phares- b. 1860 near Natchez, planter in Tensas and Madison Parishes; brother-in-law of Dr. Kirk McMillan; member of the state House of Representatives, 1897-98; member of the Fifth District Levee Board, 1912-21, and president of the Board, 1916-21 (Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 29 April and 6 May 1921)

McMillan, Dr. Kirk B.- b. 1855 in Mississippi but with family ties to East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana; attended University of Kentucky and school in New Orleans; practiced medicine in Tensas Parish

- from 1879; owned The Burn and Point Clear plantations; only one daughter, Irene, who married Wade Newell and would become the mother-in-law of both W.W. Burnside and Philip Watson (Goodspeed, Biographical and Historical Memoirs, 228)
- Miller, David D.- b. 1843 in Concordia Parish, but his family had migrated from Kentucky; his father had moved to Natchez to help other family members in the merchandise business, but then settled in as a planter across the Mississippi River; David D. Miller grew up "surrounded by wealth and refinement" and was considered a "polished, high toned and chivalric Southern gentleman"; educated in Virginia and served in the Confederate army; locally, he was a member of the Tensas Parish Police Jury and parish School Board; member of Episcopal Church; his sons included John and David F. Miller. (Goodspeed, Biographical and Historical Memoirs, 257; Chambers, History of Louisiana, 17-18; Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 10 and 17 May 1918)
- Miller, David Franklin- b. 1880, on Highland plantation in Tensas Parish, the son of David D. Miller (see above); attended Chamberlain-Hunt Academy in Port Gibson, Mississippi, then took over Richland Plantation in Tensas Parish from his father at age 18; owned other plantation properties as well, more than 6000 acres in the 1930s; served on Tensas Parish School Board for over 30 years, with a number of those as president; chaired the parish Game and Fish Commission; aided fundraising efforts during First World War; president of Texas Road Gin Company; chief proprietor of the Gladeville Hunting Club; both his wife and his family were Catholic (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 17-18 Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1394-97]
- Miller, Harrison Coleman, Sr.- b. 1840 in Natchez, but family arrived from Kentucky; raised in Concordia Parish; cousin of David D. Miller (see above); educated as a medical student in Geneva, Switzerland and Tours, France, but returned to fight for the Confederacy during the Civil War; settled in Tensas Parish as a planter in 1869 (Goodspeed, Biographical and Historical Memoirs, 257)
- Miller, Harrison Coleman, Jr.- b. 1887 in Tensas Parish, son of Harrison C. Miller; cousin of D.F. Miller (see above); brother of Balfour Miller, who married Katherine Grafton Miller, later the founder of the Natchez Pilgrimage; educated at Chamberlain-Hunt Academy in Port Gibson and Soule College in New Orleans, but returned home to oversee Highland Plantation; killed Henry May in dispute, 1924 (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 302)
- Netterville, James Howard- b. 1879 in Wilkinson Co., Mississippi; his mother belonged to the Swayze family, one of the oldest in the Natchez District; brother of Wade Netterville (see below); began work as a plantation manager for the Panola Company in 1907 under William M. Davidson (see above); eventually served as general manager for all properties, including about 10,000 acres and 150 tenant families during the 1930s; Mason; chaired local Red Cross committee during the First World War; member of Tensas Parish School Board (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 373; Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 985-86)

- Netterville, Wade- b. 1876 in Wilkinson Co., Mississippi, brother of J.H. Netterville (see above); father a planter in Adams Co., Mississippi; came to Tensas Parish as a commissary manager, then took on management of plantation property for the Panola Company (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 372)
- Peck, William S., Jr.- b. 1873 in Catahoula Parish to an old antebellum family; father commanded Tensas Cavalry during the Civil War and led white militia during Reconstruction period; William, Jr., the leading figure in Catahoula Parish; during the 1930s, owned thousands of plantation acres; president of Sicily Island State Bank and Sicily Island Gas Company; served in the state legislature during the 1920s; Catholic (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1002-04)
- Poe, William- b. 1874 in Missouri; from a poor background; raised in Scott Co. and Yell Co., Arkansas; self-educated; arrived in Tensas Parish as a plantation manager in 1915; bought his own plantation in 1922, and added to this property over the years; in the 1930s, owned several thousand acres with 300 head of cattle; prominent in Newellton, where he helped build the Union Church; aided other poor whites coming into Tensas Parish; member of Tensas Parish School Board (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1218-22, incl. photograph]
- Ransdell, Felix X.- younger brother of Joseph Ransdell (see below); attended Union College in New York; practiced law in Lake Providence; served as District Judge 1900-1936; his son-in-laws included J. Martian Hamley, a planter and politician from Lake Providence, and Frank Voelker, also from Lake Providence, who took over as District Judge in 1936 (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 796-99; Durham, Place to Remember)
- Ransdell, Senator Joseph E.- b. in Alexandria, Louisiana, to an old plantation family, he was educated at Union College in New York and began the practice of law in Lake Providence in 1883; served as district attorney for Madison and East Carroll Parish, 1884-96; member of the United States House of Representatives, 1899-1913, and succeeded former Governor Murphy Foster to the United States Senate in 1913, serving until 1931; served on the Rivers and Harbors Committee while in the House and on the Commerce Committee while in the Senate; very active in flood control legislation; strong supporter of commercial interests in New Orleans as well as sugar and cotton planters in the countryside; prominent in fight against the Eudora Floodway during the 1930s (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 586-95; Durham, Place to Remember,)
- Ratcliff, A. Bonds- b. 1875 in Amite Co., Mississippi; raised in Adams Co. and attended Jefferson Military Academy near Natchez; arrived in Louisiana as a plantation manager; married a daughter of Douglass Muir, of an old Tensas family; served as the chief deputy under Sheriff John Hughes, and then was elected as clerk of court for Tensas Parish (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 199; Douglass Muir Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 9 August 1918)

- Ratcliff, Clyde Vernon- b. 1879 in Amite Co., Mississippi; the brother of A.B. Ratcliff; educated at Jefferson Military Academy near Natchez; engaged in planting in Tensas Parish and also managed plantation properties of the Davis family (descendants of Joseph and Jefferson Davis); like his brother, married a daughter of Douglass Muir, of an old Tensas family; served as president of the Tensas Parish Police (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 208; Douglass Muir Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 9 August 1918)
- Scott, Josiah- b. 1874 at Vidalia; father served as a captain in the Confederate Army, but died shortly after his son's birth; raised by a maternal uncle, who edited the Concordia Sentinel; took over the Tensas Gazette in 1894, then owned by Judge Hugh Tullis, and purchased the paper outright in 1906; continued as editor and publisher until his death in 1953 (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 206-07)
- Sevier, Andrew Jackson- b. 1872 in Claiborne Co., MS; moved to Madison Parish as a youth, and elected to eight consecutive terms as Madison Parish sheriff, dying in office in 1941; Episcopal; uncle of Andrew L. and Henry C. Sevier ("Sevier Family," Madison Parish Historical and Genealogical Data)
- Sevier, Andrew L.- b. 1894 in Tallulah, cousin of Henry C. Sevier (see below); father came to LA from Mississippi in 1880, engaged in planting, and served as parish assessor and as a delegate to the 1898 state constitutional convention; mother was a Madison Parish native, of an old family; Andrew L. Sevier attended LSU, served as an officer during the First World War, and then returned to finish law school; entered practice with well-known planter, lawyer, and state legislator Mason Spencer; owned two plantations; served in state Senate, 1932-52; president of Tallulah Production Credit Association and Madison National Farm Loan Association; Mason; Presbyterian (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1385-86; "Sevier Family," Madison Parish Historical and Genealogical Data)
- Sevier, Henry Clay- b. 1896 in Madison Parish; cousin of A.L. Sevier (see above); served as an officer during First World War and wounded in France; finished law school at LSU and entered into practice with political boss of the upper Delta, Jeff Snyder of Tallulah; served in state House of Representatives for sixteen years; chaired the State Democratic Central Committee; Mason; Presbyterian (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1035-36; Sevier, "Sevier Family," Madison Parish Historical and Genealogical Data)
- Snyder, Jefferson B.- b. 1859 in Tensas Parish to a prominent family; his brother, Robert Snyder, served as lieutenant governor in the 1890s; settled in Tallulah in 1877; served on Fifth District Levee Board and in the LA House of Representatives; appointed a customs official in New Orleans and finished law school there; returned to Madison Parish to practice law; elected as a delegate to the 1898 and 1921 constitutional conventions; served as District Attorney for Sixth Judicial District from 1904 to 1945; vice-president of the state Democratic Executive Committee; publisher of the Madison Journal (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana,

569-71; Article, New Orleans Times-Picayune, April 1938, Madison Parish Historical and Genealogical Data)

Tullis Family- an antebellum family from Tensas and Concordia Parishes; brothers Hugh Tullis and Robert Lee Tullis both prominent attorneys, Hugh serving as District Judge in the Delta and Robert Lee Tullis serving as Dean of the LSU Law School, 1912-1933; Hugh's son, Garner Tullis, headed a cotton brokerage firm in New Orleans and served three consecutive terms as President of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange (Assorted Biographical Information, Wade Collection)

Voelker, Frank- b. 1892 in East Carroll Parish; his father was a planter and a member of the East Carroll Police Jury; his mother was Kate Ashbridge, of an old antebellum family; brother of Stephen Voelker (see below); Frank Voelker attended Christian Brothers Academy in Memphis and graduated from the Tulane Law School; a veteran of the First World War; married daughter of Judge Felix Ransdell (see above) and elected in 1936 to fill his position as state judge over the Sixth Judicial District, serving until 1960; Catholic (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 782-86)

Voelker, Stephen- b. 1900 in Lake Providence; brother of Frank Voelker (see above); veteran of First World War; attended Tulane; organized Tallulah Production Credit Association in 1930, which loaned out over a million and a half dollars in 1937 to farmers; Mason; Episcopal (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 734-35)

Watson, Eli Tullis- b. 1883 at Chetwynde Plantation in Tensas Parish; connected to Tullis family and A.C. Watson family in lower Delta; raised in New Orleans; associated with banking and commercial interests in that city; senior partner in Watson, Williams, & Co.; a member of the Boston Club and other Uptown social clubs; placed Allied war bonds during the First World War and partnered in 1920s bridge building endeavor across Lake Pontchartrain; Episcopalian (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 381-82)

Wade Family- Thomas Wade, Sr., b. 1861, Jefferson Co., MS; had two brothers, Benjamin Young Wade, owner of Frogmore plantation in Concordia Parish, and state Senator R.H. Wade of Jefferson Co.; educated at Jefferson College near Natchez, he married a Magruder girl from that same area, but settled in Tensas Parish; Superintendent of Education in parish for 28 years; served as a member of the state legislature for 16 years, and also as a delegate to 1898 Constitutional Convention; Episcopal; his son, Thomas Wade, Jr., attended LSU Law School, clerked for the powerful state Senator Charles Cordill, and practiced law in St. Joseph (B.Y. Wade Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 5 July 1918; Mrs. Thomas Wade Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 21 June 1918; Thomas M. Wade, Sr., Obituary, Tensas Gazette, 25 January 1929; Assorted Biographical Information, Wade Collection)

Wilds, Richard Stockton- b. 1868 in Natchez; his father was Abner Wilds, one of the largest planters in the South; settled in Concordia Parish in 1889 as a planter; served on Concordia Parish Police Jury for 30 years; elected to state legislature in 1928 (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 1359-60]

Williamson, Norris C.- b. 1874 in Mississippi; attended Miss. A&M; arrived as levee contractor in East Carroll Parish in 1898; bought his own plantation in 1904 and became a huge advocate of cotton interests; organized and served as director of the local Farm Bureau Federation; organized and led LA Cotton Cooperative Association; helped organize American Cotton Cooperative Association in 1930 and became president of this organization in 1933; served as president of East Carroll Police Jury (1912-1916) and elected to state Senate in 1916; chaired Agriculture Committee for 16 years (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 770-73]

Yerger, George S.- a veteran of the Spanish-American War, he came to Madison Parish from Jackson, Mississippi, around 1900; he married the daughter of a Union general who had settled in Madison Parish at the end of the Civil War; at one time, he controlled over 20,000 acres, with a variety of other business interests; served as a director of the Pan-American Life Insurance Company and the Tallulah Bank and Trust; Episcopalian (Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 821-22)

Young, Benjamin Farrar- b. 1863 in Natchez, the son of Judge S. Charles Young and grandson of Dr. B.F. Young, who had arrived in the Delta from Philadelphia; B.F. Young attended LSU, Georgetown, Tulane, and the University of Virginia, and began practicing law in St. Joseph in 1886; served as District Attorney for a number of years; sat on the Fifth District Levee Board for over 30 years and on the St. Joseph town council from its inception in 1901; president of the Panola Company and St. Joseph Bank and Trust after the death of W.M. Davidson (see above); Colonel on the staff of Governor Richard Leche; Mason; Catholic (Chambers, History of Louisiana, 208-09, Williamson, Eastern Louisiana, 975-76)

APPENDIX B
 SELECTED PLANTER KINSHIP NETWORKS

Figure 1
 A Well-Connected Family from Tensas Parish

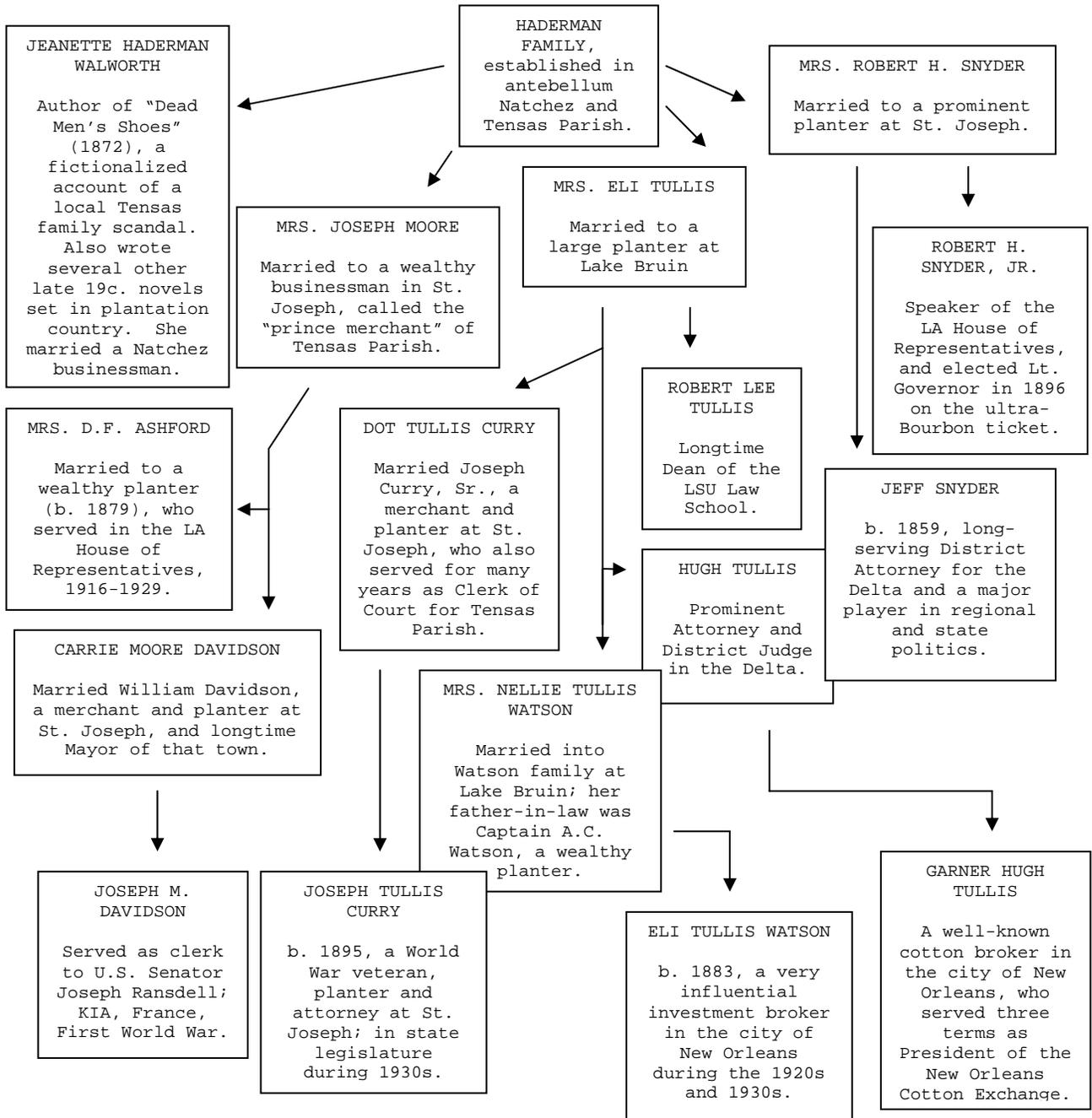


Figure 2
The Young Family of Tensas Parish

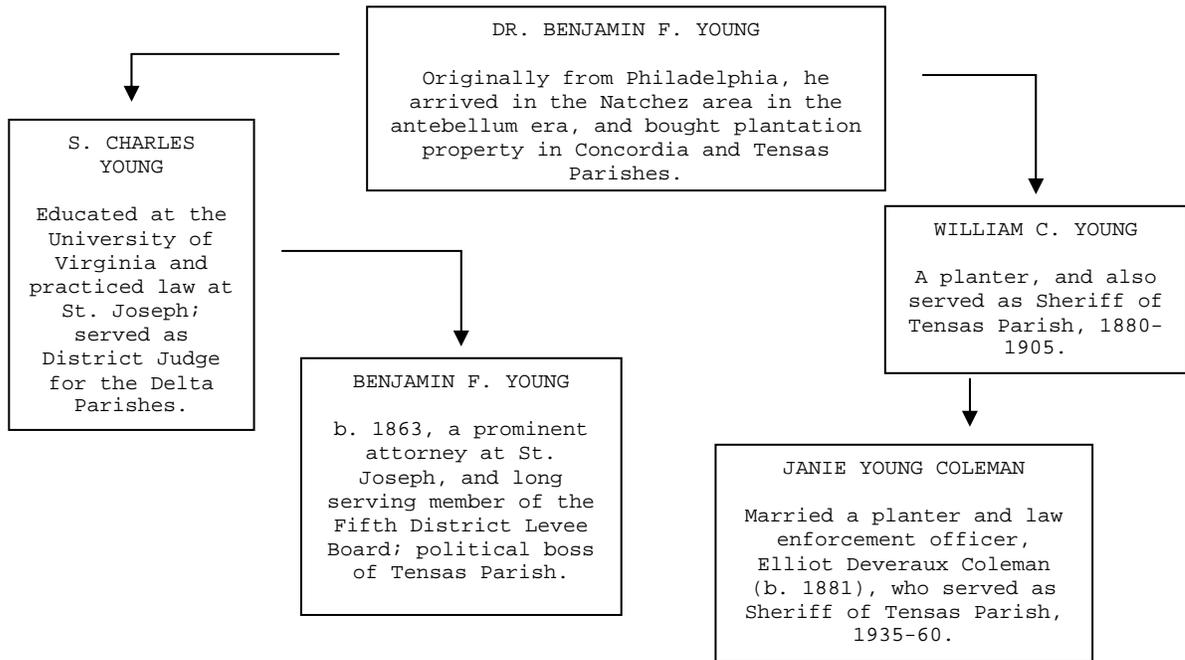


Figure 3
The McMillan-Newell-Watson Families of Tensas Parish

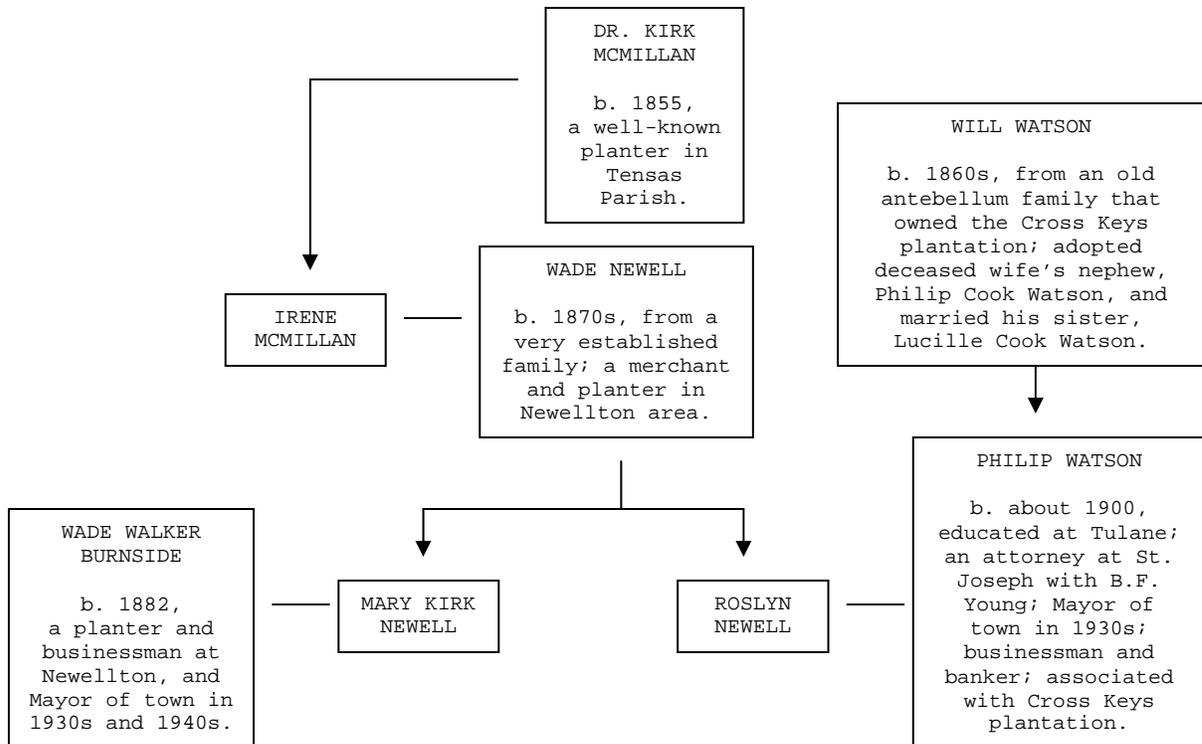
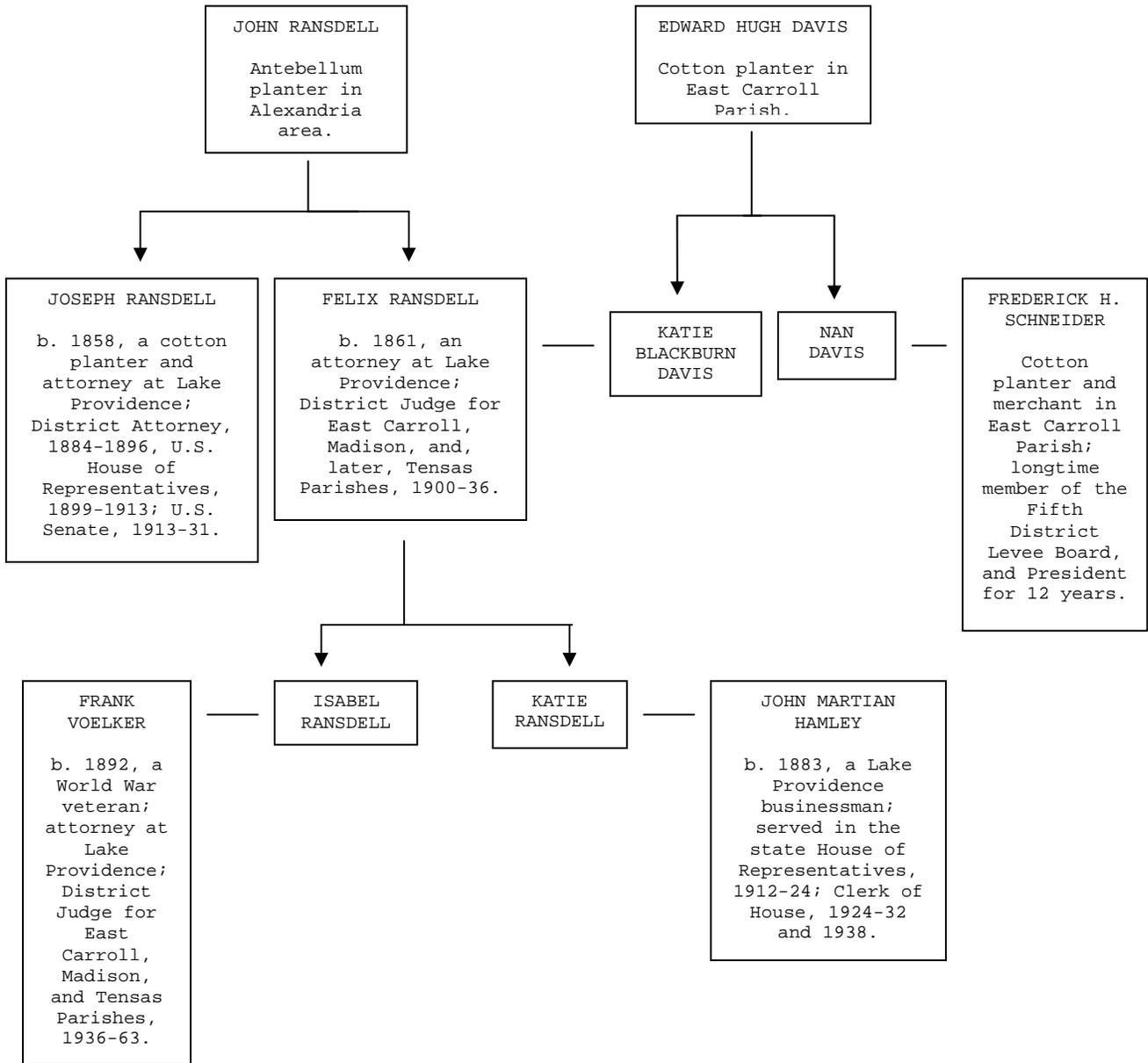


Figure 4
A Family Group from East Carroll Parish



APPENDIX C
STATISTICAL TABLES²

Figure 1
Population Trends,
Tensas Parish, 1900-1940

	White	Black	Total
1900	1231	17,839	19,070
1910	1446	15,614	17,060
1920	1771	10,314	12,085
1930	4301	10,795	15,096
1940	4746	11,194	15,940

Figure 2
Important Trends in Ownership and Tenancy, by race,
Tensas Parish, 1910-45

	White Owners	White Tenants	Black Owners	Black Tenants
1910	80	55	64	2660
1920	49	88	83	1795
1925	83	145	19	1825
1930	98	520	58	2429
1935	129	389	88	1847
1940	177	383	150	1608

Figure 3
Land in Farms, by acres,
Tensas Parish, 1910-39

1910	1919	1924	1929	1934	1939
182,036	161,155	142,197	176,029	208,155	209,365

² These statistical tables were compiled from a variety of sources, including electronic and hard copy census records, Extension Service agent reports, and material found in archival repositories. A very good source for much of this statistical information, in fact, much more than is presented here, is the Historical Census Browser, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, University of Virginia Library, found at: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

Figure 4
Harvested Acreage of Select Crops,
Tensas Parish, 1919-1939

	1919	1924	1929	1934	1939
Cotton	31,357	27,991	44,534	25,354	26,543
Corn	18,871	8982	10,570	21,741	25,973
Oats	668	505	1882	2205	5727
All Hay Crops	3086	-	2354	8795	9334

Figure 5
Harvested Yields of Select Crops,
Tensas Parish, 1919-1939

	1919	1924	1929	1934	1939
Cotton	7516 bales	15,124	22,407	13,882	23,102
Corn	289,368 bushels	112,409	188,941	295,245	415,423
Oats	9300 bushels	14,487	50,465	75,381	210,680
All Hay Crops	3033 tons	3000	3224	9122	11,983

Figure 6
Cotton Production, Tensas Parish,
1928-1932

Year	Acres in Cotton	Bales Produced	Lint Yield Per Acre (in pounds)
1928	36,823	15,581	211.5
1929	45,167	23,985	265.5
1930	46,374	24,552	264.7
1931	46,364	27,760	299.5
1932	33,159	18,960	285.8

Figure 7
Selected Examples of Plantation Income,
Tensas Parish, 1930-1934

	1930	1931	1932	1930-32 Average	1934, With Parity Prices	1934, Adjusted for Government Rental Payments
Example 1	\$23,781	\$11,292	\$11,618	\$14,740	\$17,984	\$20,764
Example 2	\$5219	\$1920	\$2289	\$2350	\$2771	\$3207
Example 3	\$9912	\$5587	\$6468	\$7111	\$9131	\$10,550
Example 4	\$10,184	\$7340	\$4578	\$7267	\$9495	\$11,253

Figure 8
Total Cotton Production Value,
Tensas Parish, 1928-38

Year	Bales	Average Price/lbs.	Bale Price	Total Value	Government Rent Payments	New Total Value, Adjusted for Rent Payments
1928	15,561	\$.179	\$89.50	\$1,392,709.50	-	-
1929	23,985	\$.167	\$83.50	\$2,002,747.50	-	-
1930	24,550	\$.094	\$47	\$1,153,850	-	-
1931	27,760	\$.056	\$28	\$777,280	-	-
1932	18,960	\$.065	\$32.50	\$616,200	-	-
1933	13,116	\$.091	\$45.50	\$596,778	\$225,000	\$821,778
1934	13,890	\$.114	\$57	\$791,730	\$176,000	\$967,730
1935	18,000	\$.107	\$53.50	\$963,000	\$255,000	\$1,218,000
1936	31,000	\$.119	\$59.50	\$1,844,500	\$130,000	\$1,974,500
1937	38,500	\$.08	\$40	\$1,540,000	\$314,000	\$1,854,000
1938	18,500	\$.085	\$42.50	\$786,250	\$373,000	\$1,159,250

Figure 9
Value of Assessed Land and Property in Tensas Parish, along with Tax Burden, for 1920, 1932, and 1937

Year	Value	State Taxes	Parish Taxes
1920	\$10,967,830	\$54,839	\$217,153
1932	\$7,208,148	\$41,450	\$209,224
1937	\$5,519,628	\$31,736	\$182,339

Figure 10
Distribution of Local Taxes in Tensas Parish,
1920, 1932, and 1937

	1920	1932	1937
Parish Tax	\$43,871.13	\$26,156.52	\$22,078.50
Road Tax	\$58,509.15	\$58,221.46	\$54,092
School Tax	\$28,983.27	\$66,396.14	\$56,394.25
Levee Tax	\$76,183.55	\$48,783.53	\$40,666.26
Drainage Tax	\$9606.03	\$9666.23	\$8298
Total	\$217,153.32	\$209,223.88	\$182,339.01

Figure 11
Value of Agricultural Land and Hardwood Forests for Tensas Parish,
1920, 1932, and 1937

	Class A Land		Class B Land		Class C Land		Hardwood	
	Average Per Acre	Total Value						
1920	\$51.19	\$1,509,960	\$26.12	\$1,104,913	\$19.66	\$317,733	\$19.84	\$2,579,504
1932	\$35.62	\$706,555	\$21.78	\$667,999	\$12.88	\$305,502	\$11.59	\$693,408
1937	\$35.16	\$644,797	\$21.87	\$634,424	\$12.95	\$327,557	\$7.67	\$384,763

Figure 12a
Relief Food Distribution to Black Families,
Tensas Parish, 1932-33³

	Man, over 18	Woman, over 18	Boy, 12-18	Girl, 10-18	Child, 6-12	Child, 2-5	Child, Under 2
Flour and/or cereals	4.5 pounds	4	4.5	3	2.5	2	2
Bread and cereals	2.5 loaves, 5 pounds	2 and 2.5	1.5 and 3	1 and 2	1 and 1.5	.75 and 1	.75 and .5
Milk	.5 quart	2	.5	2	3	3	4
Potatoes, Sweet and Irish	3.5 pounds	2.5	2.5	2	2	1.5	.5
Dried Beans or Peas	1 pound	.75	.75	.5	.5	.25	.25
Leafy Vegetables	.75 pound	.75	1	1	1	.75	1
Fat Pork	1 pound	.5	1	.5	.25	.25	.25
Lean meat or fish	.5 pound	.5	.5	.25	.25	.25	-
Eggs	2 eggs	3	3	3	3	3	6
Tomatoes	.5 No. 2 can	.5	.5	.5	.5	.5	.5
Syrup	1 pint	1	1	.75	.75	.5	.5
Misc. salt and coffee	.25 pound, .5 pound	.5 coffee	-	-	-	-	-
Total- Min. Cost	\$.977	\$1.020	\$.870	\$.823	\$.882	\$.767	\$.888
Total- Max. Cost	\$1.161	\$1.080	\$.903	\$.844	\$.902	\$.771	\$.916

³ This information comes from Relief Distribution Tables, Box 5, f. 10, Cross Keys Plantation Records.

Figure 12b
Relief Food Distribution to White Families,
Tensas Parish, 1932-33

	Man, over 18	Woman, over 18	Boy, 12-18	Girl, 10-18	Child, 6-12	Child, 2-5	Child, Under 2
Flour and/or cereals	5 pounds	4	5	3.5	3	2	2.5
Bread and cereals	2 or 3 loaves, and 4-6 pounds	2 and 3	2 and 4	.5 and 2.25	1.5 and 2	1 and 1.5	1 and 2
Milk	1.75 quarts	2	4	4	5	5	5.5
Potatoes, Sweet and Irish	4-5 pounds	3	3	2.5	2	2	1
Dried Beans or Peas	.5 to 1 pound	.5	.75	.25	.33	.25	-
Leafy Vegetables	1 pound	1	1.5	2	1.5	1	1.5
Root Vegetables	1.5 pounds	1.5	1.5	1	1	1	.5
Butter or Other Fats	1 pounds	.5	1	.66	.5	.25	.25
Lean meat or fish	.5 pound	.5	1	.75	.66	-	-
Eggs	2 eggs	3	4	6	6	6	6
Tomatoes or Oranges	1 No. 2 can, or 3 oranges	1 or 3	1 or 6	1 or 6	1 or 3	1 or 6	2 or 6
Sugar or Syrup	1 pound	1	1	.75	.25	.25	.25
Misc. salt and coffee	.25 pound, .5 pound	.5 coffee	-	-	-	-	-
Total- Min. Cost	\$1.273	\$1.142	\$1.510	\$1.366	\$1.317	\$1.147	\$1.293
Total- Max. Cost	\$1.435	\$1.225	\$1.596	\$1.351	\$1.367	\$1.189	\$1.336

VITA

Matthew Reonas was born and raised near Atlanta, Georgia. He attended the University of Mississippi for his undergraduate coursework and was graduated *magna cum laude* from that institution in December 1997, having met the requirements for majors from the Department of History and the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. Moving to Baton Rouge, he enrolled in the Graduate School at Louisiana State University, and received the Master of Arts degree in December 2000 through the Department of History. He subsequently completed work for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, in history, graduating in December 2006. Prior to this, he took a position with the Louisiana Office of State Parks in May 2005 as a historian and interpretive specialist and is still employed in that capacity. He is married with one child.