SFA GRAVY

SPRING 2019 • NO. 71

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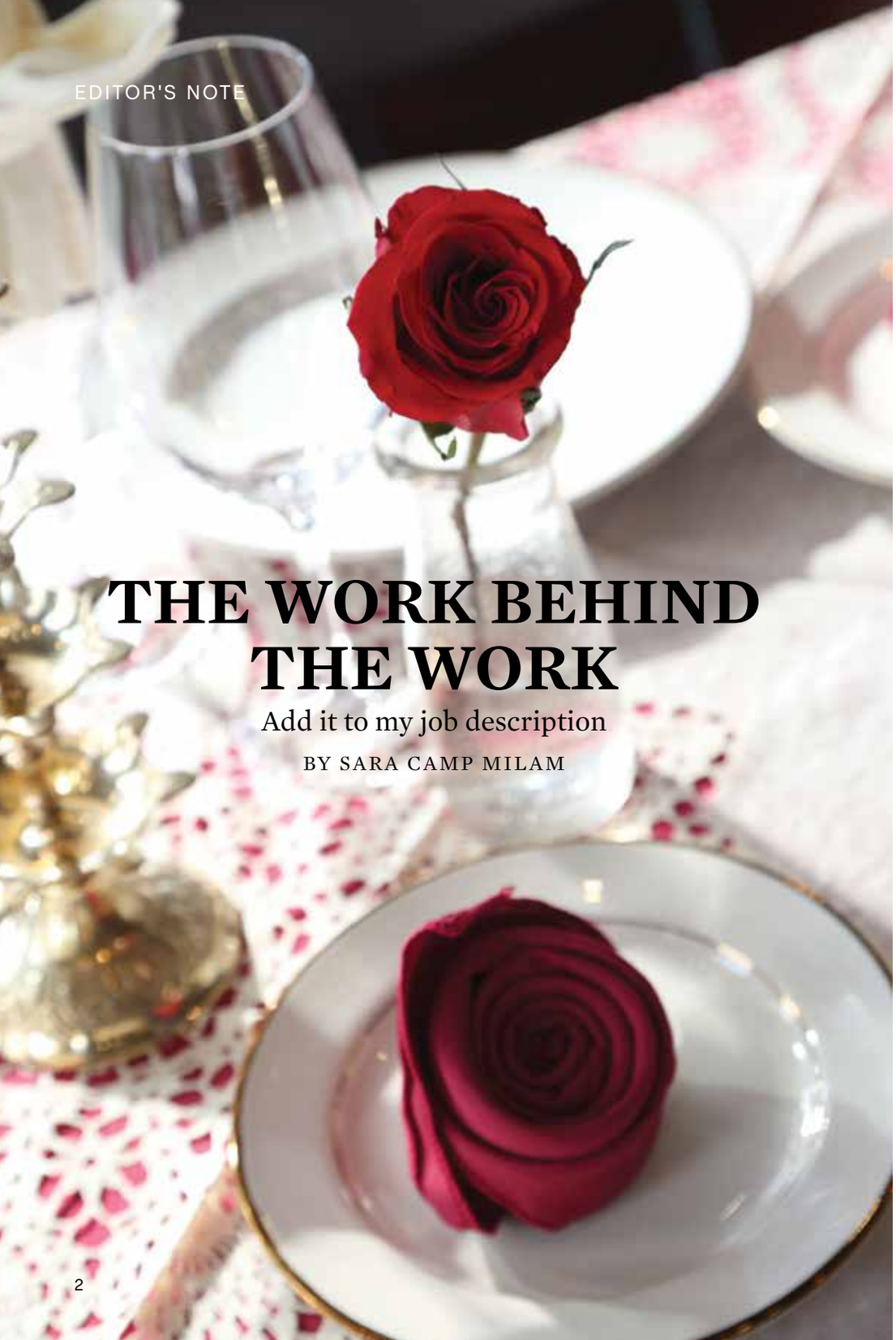
SFA GRAVY

ISSUE NO. 71 • SPRING 2019

THIS PAGE: L. Kasimu Harris

ON THE COVER:
Armstrong Manuel Jr. works as a sugar warehouse operator at M.A. Patout & Sons in Jeanerette, LA. *Photo by L. Kasimu Harris*



THE WORK BEHIND THE WORK

Add it to my job description

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

Brandall Laughlin

I FOLD. CHAIRS, NAPKINS, AND programs, that is. I came to the SFA as a volunteer at the 2009 Fall Symposium on food and music. I alphabetized nametags. I threw away half-drunk cups of coffee. I was hooked. Ten years later, I still am.

Last fall, I learned how to fold a rented maroon poly-cotton-blend dinner napkin to look like a rose, a technique that seems to borrow heavily from tight-rolling blue jeans.

Look, I hate to brag. But I've hauled cases of bottled water in a Kentucky downpour. I've driven to the Birmingham airport at eight o'clock on a Saturday night to exchange a rental van with a bolt in the tire. I've sat on the floor of a catering van clutching leaky bags of ice on a ninety-degree Mississippi day.

The best part, aside from the stories with which I'll bore my future grandchildren, is that I've done none of these tasks alone. Team-building ropes courses have nothing on the bonding that happens among SFA staff behind the scenes of our symposia. We've donned foodservice gloves to serve plate lunches in Jackson and banh mi in New Orleans. We go on candy runs. We wrangle AV coordinators and tardy speakers and rental emergencies. We unload the podium, we set it up on stage, and we load it again. Amen. (Cue Jackson Browne.)

We have strategies, and we have supplies. Travel toothbrushes, emergency antiperspirant, and a fresh swipe of lipstick. A surfeit of caffeinated beverages and nutritionally void snacks. New outfits from LOFT—essentially our town's only purveyor of moderately priced clothing for adult women with jobs and hips—whose storewide 40 percent off sales always fall right before a major SFA event. And all of the teamwork and togetherness we can stand.

I'm under no illusions that we're the ones doing the heaviest lifting at our symposia, literally or figuratively. We couldn't pull off the events without the rental company workers who haul tables and chairs and glassware and linens. Or the chefs and cooks who prepare our meals. Or the women and men who scrape plates, wash dishes, and haul trash.

At our recent Winter Symposium in Birmingham, an attendee said to me, "Your staff seems to like each other."

"We do," I replied. "We really do. Except maybe toward the end of a three-day event, when we've been together for seventy-two hours straight." But you know what? Even then.

Several food editors attended the Winter Symposium. As the last guests were leaving, we picked up cocktail cups and boiled peanut shells and dragged full trash cans to the dumpster in the parking lot. At the edge of the stage, I held one end of our decorative podium so that my colleague Melissa Hall could unscrew the side and take it apart for transportation in the rental van (the one that would, minutes later, turn out to have a flat tire). She jokingly asked me if I thought the other editors ever did this kind of work. Surely they must, I said. I bet they went straight back to the office tonight, as a matter of fact.

> Caffeine, candy, resourcefulness, and teamwork fuel SFA staff through our symposia.

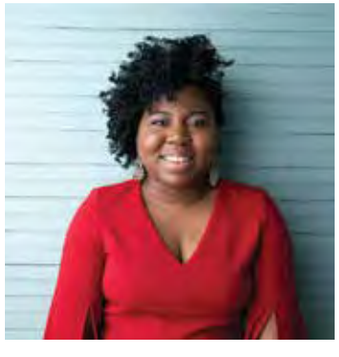
Maybe they did, or maybe they didn't. If they did, I hope they had a team. I'm sure glad to have mine. Not only at symposia, but every day in the office—and of course, on this issue of *Gravy*.

L. KASIMU HARRIS

L. Kasimu Harris' photographs push narratives and represent the underrepresented. A 2017 *Louisiana Life* magazine Louisianian of the Year, the New Orleans–based Harris has shown over twenty exhibitions across the United States and abroad. One of his recent group exhibitions, *Changing Course: Reflections on New Orleans Histories*, was named Museum Exhibition of the Year by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. This fall, he's part of a show at Oxford's Southside Gallery. It's a homecoming of sorts for Harris: He graduated with a master's degree in journalism from the University of Mississippi in 2008. A man of many talents, his writing has also appeared in the *Bitter Southerner*, *Edible New Orleans*, and *Best Food Writing* 2016. One day, he hopes to learn how to cook gumbo. We have faith in him.

ASHLEY M. JONES

Ashley M. Jones opened SFA's 2019 Winter Symposium with her poem "Photosynthesis," a chronicle of memories from her dad's backyard gardens. "We eat because he works," she read, and waved to her parents sitting in the audience; the symposium fell on her father's birthday. The Birmingham poet just released her second book, *dark // thing*, which explores the otherness by which the world sees black people, and follows her 2017 debut collection, *Magic City Gospel*. Jones is the founding director of the Magic City Poetry Festival. Once a John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Fellow at Florida International University, she now teaches creative writing at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. Jones recently wowed friends with her macaroni and cheese, featuring a three-cheese blend: sharp cheddar, cream cheese, and smoked gouda. Nutmeg in the béchamel is a must.



Top: Aboul Aziz; Bottom: Cary Norton

ANN TAYLOR PITTMAN

Ann Taylor Pittman counts boiled peanuts, field peas, cicada songs, and good bourbon as her inspirations. The Mississippi native lives in Birmingham, where for twenty years she created healthy recipes at *Cooking Light* magazine, most recently as executive editor. During that time, she was honored by the James Beard Foundation with a feature writing award for her article "Mississippi Chinese Lady Goes Home to Korea," and with a cookbook award for *The New Way to Cook Light*. Today, Pittman is a freelance writer, recipe developer, video producer, and mom to twin thirteen-year-old boys. Her favorite meals to cook are the most elaborate ones, preferably Korean or Southeast Asian. "The more sub-recipes and from-scratch elements that require me to go to a specialty market or push me to learn and explore, the better."

PATSY SIMS

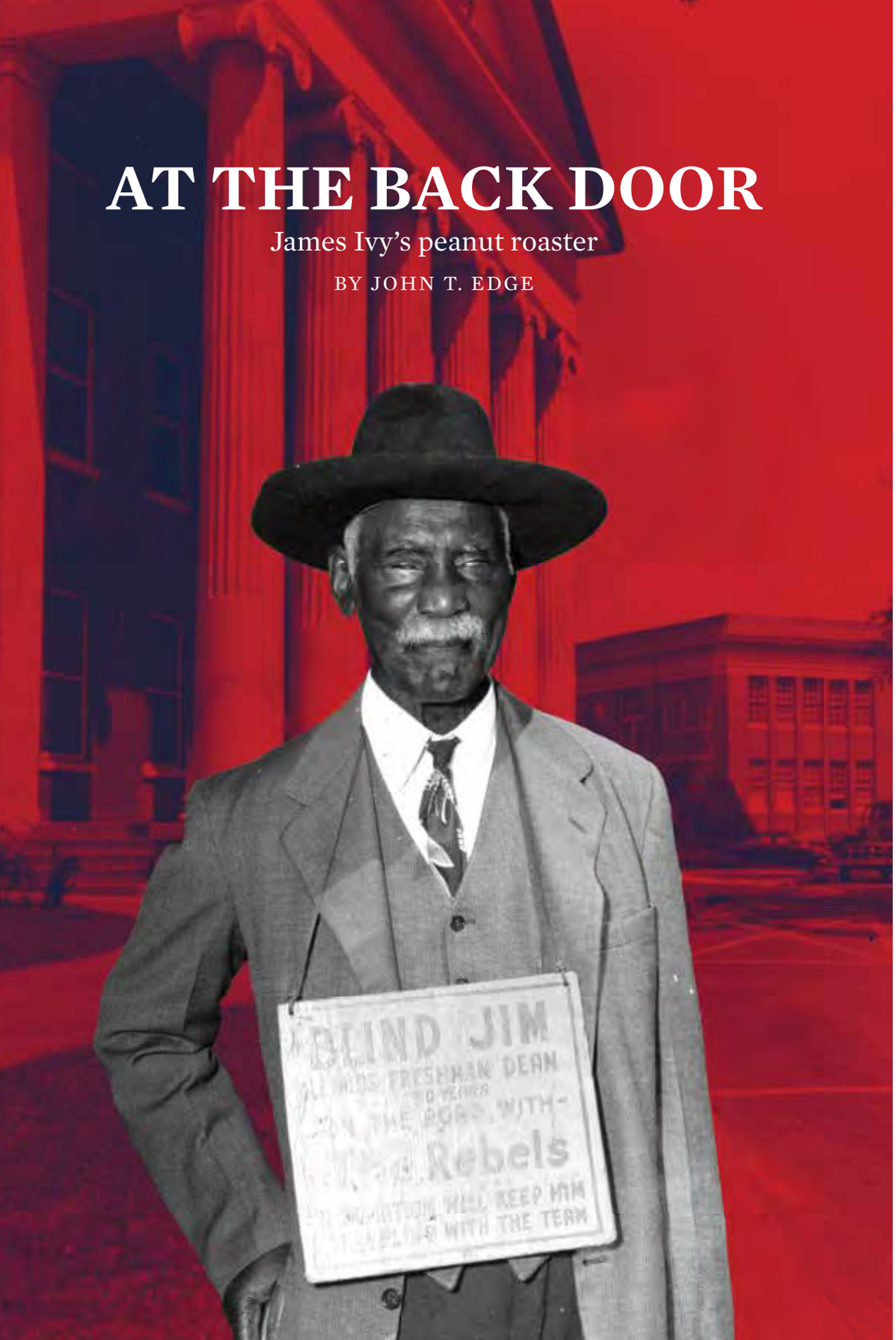
Raised in Beaumont, Texas, and New Orleans, pioneering journalist Patsy Sims is known for her investigative work. Her 1978 book, *The Klan*, profiled Ku Klux Klansmen from rank-and-file members to leaders like David Duke. Sims, who lives in Washington, DC, is also the author of the nonfiction books *Can Somebody Shout Amen!* and *Cleveland Benjamin's Dead!*. Her essay "No Twang of Conscience Whatever," published in the *Oxford American* in 2014, received a notable mention in *Best American Essays*. She directed Goucher College's MFA in creative nonfiction program from 2001–2014. Grits, grillades, and gin keep her fueled.

Top: Randy Maynor; Bottom: L. Kasimu Harris

AT THE BACK DOOR

James Ivy's peanut roaster

BY JOHN T. EDGE



Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries

BEFORE HE "TORE VIOLENTLY" A planation, when he was still a teenager, Thomas Sutpen, protagonist of William Faulkner's 1936 novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, knocked at the plantation house door of a neighbor. A child of poverty whose family had risen to some respectability, Sutpen was rejected by the enslaved man who answered the front door. Sent to the back door, Sutpen was sent reeling. That simple affront compelled him to flee the South for the West Indies, where Sutpen made the fortune with which he would, on his return, do that violence.

On the University of Mississippi campus where I work, the idea of the back door still resonates. A statue of James Meredith, installed in 2006 after then-Chancellor Robert Khayat rejected a public art process led by students and juried by art and museum professionals, stands at the back door of the Lyceum, the columned administration building at the heart of our campus. There is power in Meredith's presence, and subjugation in his rear-guard stance.

Back doors are places of import. Before President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, black citizens often entered white-owned restaurants in the South through back doors, if they entered at all. On the other end of the spectrum, back doors, screened and otherwise, have long been places of informal welcome in this region, free from the rigid social strictures that define front doors.

Here at Barnard Observatory, the antebellum headquarters of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and the Southern Foodways Alliance, a collection of rusted metal parts has stood at the back door since the year 2000. You have to know the peculiar history of this University to recognize, in that jumble of metal, the remains of a gas-fired peanut roaster. Once operated by one of the most beloved and complicated figures to walk this campus, the relic was donated to the Center by an alumnus. My friend and colleague Andy Harper, who directs the Southern Documentary Project here, saw the value and meaning in the artifact, moved it from a corral out back to the back door, and made plans to restore the roaster. Years passed.

Lately, the University of Mississippi has installed plaques across campus that contextualize the legacies of slavery. Affixed to the base of the Confederate memorial in 2016, one plaque explains that, although it was erected to "honor the sacrifice of local Confederate soldiers, it must also remind us that the defeat of the Confederacy actually meant freedom for millions of people." A plaque now installed in front of Barnard Observatory explains that enslaved laborers laid the red brick in 1859 for our home.

It's harder to contextualize Jim Crow and the attitudes that took hold in that era. That's because so many of the symbols adopted then are still in use on this campus. In those years, the University came to be called Ole Miss, a term of respect used for the white mistress of the plantation. And the University embraced as its mascot Colonel Reb, a goateed man in Confederate grays.

Alumni and faculty and friends of the University continue to debate the origins of that now-defrocked figure. David Sansing, a retired University of Mississippi history professor, suggests that Colonel Reb may have been based on a man named James Ivy, known on campus as "Blind Jim." To support his thesis, Sansing points to an image of Ivy on the cover of the 1937 yearbook that looks a lot like Colonel Reb.

A black man born to once-enslaved parents, Ivy went blind in his teens and lived much of his adult life on or near the University. On campus he roasted and sold peanuts, ran a concession stand in the Lyceum, and led cheers at sporting events. Ivy became such a beloved figure that Jim Crow–era students often referred to him as the freshman dean.

Depending on their political stance, white Mississippians came to see Blind Jim Ivy as a symbol of positive white-black relations, an icon of University fidelity, or a totem of paternalism. Little has been published about how black Mississippians regard him. When Ivy died in 1955, alumni

> You have to know the peculiar history of the University of Mississippi to recognize that jumble of rusted parts as "Blind Jim" Ivy's peanut roaster.

and students raised money for Blind Jim scholarships that would fund black Mississippi student attendance at black Mississippi colleges. In other words, beginning in the year of his death, one year after the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision, in the same year white Mississippians lynched Emmett Till, white Mississippians co-opted the Blind Jim story to further the segregation of higher education in Mississippi.

Here at Barnard, we collect few Southern artifacts. Instead, the Center and the SFA display photographs from this place. Downstairs, the Center has installed Bill Ferris photographs of Alice Walker in a stylish afro and Eudora Welty behind the wheel of a large American car. Upstairs in the SFA offices, we adopt a similar aesthetic, displaying photos of oral history narrators like Florida oysterman Unk Quick and Chicago restaurant owner Edna Stewart. Now that Blind Jim has come into focus, the SFA's inclination against artifacts may change.

This winter, on the first day of classes, which was also the day after the national Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Andy Harper and I began texting back and forth about Blind Jim. The next day, we met at the back door of Barnard to survey his old machine. It appeared to be rusted but restorable. In light of the University's recent plaque installations, we asked each other, "What text would best contextualize Blind Jim's peanut machine?" And: "If someone hauled it from the back door and refurbished it and displayed it in, say, the building where the SFA headquarters, what should a plaque relate?"

After we talked, Andy texted to share what he had been thinking, way back when he moved Blind Jim Ivy's peanut machine to safety: "I knew there was a legacy there that should be honored, but I didn't want to be part of the perpetuating the Blind Jim myth and the wrong legacy. And at that time, because of the perceived attack on symbols and heritage...and because of Sansing's assertion that Col. Reb was based on Mr. Ivy...I decided to drop it. But now feels like a pretty good time to address it again...."

I'm with Andy. Now might be just the right time to claim and contextualize this story of the Jim Crow South, to honor Jim Ivy, the person, and to bring this tool of his labor in through the front door for all to see.

John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and host of TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*

Southern Foodways Alliance

SFA Announces 2019 Programming:

FOOD IS WORK

SUMMER FIELD TRIP

JUNE 14–15

Featuring Angie Maxwell of the University of Arkansas and Matthew McClure of The Hive
Bentonville, AR • Tickets go on sale April 1

FALL SYMPOSIUM

OCTOBER 24–26

Featuring writer Kiese Laymon, critic Hanna Raskin, and chef Edouardo Jordan
Oxford, MS • Tickets go on sale August 1

NUEVA ORLEANS

A Mexican wedding, a Honduran soup, and a family secret

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

"NEW ORLEANS?!" I SCOFFED WHEN my cousin Vic told our group of friends where he was going to get married. Why should a Mexican from Orange County, California, have his wedding *there*?

"Calm down, Gus," said Victor. "You've never been, so you don't know. It's beautiful—and cheaper than anywhere my wife and I could find in Southern California. And besides, it's just like Jerez."

New Orleans, a city famous for its civic gumbo of Spanish, West African, French, and Caribbean influences, bore similarities to the isolated mountain birthplace of our parents? I scoffed again.

I knew that after Hurricane Katrina, over 100,000 Mexican and Central American immigrants helped to rebuild the New Orleans metro area. Officials welcomed their labor to clean up disaster sites, but cracked down on their attempts to create permanent businesses.

In 2007, Jefferson Parish passed regulations that essentially made it illegal for food trucks to operate. More impolitely, New Orleans City Council President Oliver Thomas told the *Times-Picayune* that he opposed "food trucks from Texas" setting up shop in town because they took away business from longstanding eateries.

"How do the tacos," Thomas wondered out loud, "help gumbo?"

Would New Orleans welcome my cousin and me? I remained skeptical as I drove my rental car from the airport into the city. But I soon learned that the roots Latinos have planted were deeper than I'd realized.

NEW ORLEANS AND Mexico have had a cultural exchange for more than two hundred years. In the 1830s, dozens of mixed-race Creole families migrated to the Gulf of Mexico port city of Tampico, Tamaulipas, to escape rising racism in Louisiana. They brought to their new

Illustrations by Ran Zheng

ciudad architecture and okra, and they mingled New Orleans Mardi Gras traditions with those of the existing Carnaval. As a result, Tampico Carnaval splits the difference between Rio de Janeiro (skimpy costumes, long parades) and New Orleans (krewes, copious alcohol). The festivities commence with an effigy burn to exorcise the *mal humor* (bad moods).

Refugees went both ways: During the 1850s, Benito Juarez twice found sanctuary in *Nueva* Orleans, where he worked in a tobacco factory. He'd go on to liberate Mexico from the French occupation of the 1860s. Juarez's home country never forgot which city sheltered him. Today, a statue of him stands on the corner of Basin and Conti streets, a donation from the Mexican government.

The night before Vic's wedding, we hit the French Quarter for one final evening of bachelorhood. He was right: It felt just like Jerez.

The two-story buildings with balconies. The narrow streets. The open-air drinking. The live music popping out of bars. Tourists strolled; natives talked on benches.

Jackson Square reminded me of the main plaza in Jerez. The topography was different—Jerez is in Mexico's interior highlands, while NOLA is at the end of the Mississippi Delta—but the vibe was the same. In my drunken haze, I thought I saw a mistake: Day of the Dead skulls in January.

Creoles, like Mexicans, know that the wall between the living and the dead is porous. Our respective cultures celebrate that fact. So there was a warm familiarity in the voodoo embrace I saw throughout the Quarter. Unlike other parts of the United States, where skeletons and skulls are used for kitsch or menace, macabre markers here were everyday—even more so than in most of Mexico.

T-shirts, tchotchkes, and posters emblazoned with Day of the Dead–style skulls were everywhere—bejeweled, colorful, vibrant. They weren't tied to the holiday. Most accompanied T-shirts emblazoned with NEW ORLEANS.

I dismissed the mementos as just tourist junk. But the more I thought about what I saw, the more I felt Bourbon Street merchants were onto something. They obviously sold the Día de los Muertos merchandise because it made money. Pop culture usually presages an eventual mainstream embrace. Those vendors seemed to know local politicians didn't recognize a decade ago: Mexican culture is now as much a part of the city as the Saints and Louis Prima.

After the wedding ceremony, my cousin and his bride hired a brass band to follow them from St. Louis Cathedral to Brennan's. We do it the same way in Jerez, except ours are the thunderous rhythms of Zacatecas norteño. As we second-lined through the streets, I remembered New Orleans' unofficial motto: *Laissez les bons temps rouler.* Let the good times roll.

Total cliché, yes, but I felt it because we *jerezanos* have a similar saying: *Que nos siga la banda*. Let the band follow us.

Party, because life is short. So we did. I recognized no Mexican influences in the restaurant's Creole dishes, but my aunts and uncles enjoyed it. The etouffee was as rich as our moles, and the DJ spun equal parts Los Tigres del Norte and Louis Armstrong into the night.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I discovered a hangover remedy *gracias* to New Orleans' largest Latino group: Hondurans.

They have migrated to New Orleans since the 1930s, when New Orleans became a hub for the banana trade. The United Fruit Company treated the country like its own private banana plantation, which originally attracted Honduran businessmen and politicians to the city. In recent decades, disasters like Hurricane Mitch brought working-class migrants. Their presence is such that many Mexican restaurants around the city also sell baleadas—folded flour tortillas smeared with red beans and other ingredients such as eggs and meat. (Clueless Mexicans like myself mistake them for stuffed quesadillas.)

At Casa Honduras, a massive restaurant in New Orleans East that broadcasts soccer matches during the day and turns into a dance club on weekends, I scarfed down baleadas as an appetizer to sopa de caracol—sea conch soup. It's the most famous dish of the Garifunas, a Central American population of African and indigenous descent. The cooks lightly fried strips of the chewy conch and served it in a coconut broth bobbing with chunks of yucca, two types of plantains, and rice, served with a side of crispy plantains called tajadas.

I squeezed lime over the sopa. Sweet, savory, buttery, electric, it was a manifestation of the New Orleans I had just experienced. Though I had arrived suspicious, I found a vibrant, welcoming town enlivened by Latinos past and present. Sopa de caracol tasted like a gumbo for the *Nueva* Orleans.

ALREADY PLANNING MY next visit, I returned home to a sobering postscript: My family had tragic ties to New Orleans that not even my father had known about.

When he told my ninety-five-year-old grandmother about my trip, she revealed that over ninety years ago, her older brother migrated to New Orleans to work. Macario Perez was supposed to stay there for about a year and to return to marry his fiancée.

He never came back. Nothing was ever heard of him again. My great-grandmother assumed someone killed him. My *abuelita* had prayed the entire time I was away that I would not meet my great-uncle's fate.

I never once felt unwelcome in New Orleans, but I'm a middle-class Mexican American with disposable income, not the poor Mexican that my Tío Macario was in the early 1930s.

I hope New Orleans welcomed him the way it welcomed my cousin and me. Better yet, I hope that Macario fell so in love with the Crescent City that he, like so many, reinvented himself here and created his own Nueva Orleans.

Though I have traveled through the South for a decade, my family remains afraid of what I might encounter. All they hear is that *el Sur* is xenophobic and backwards, and that few Latinos live here. But Victor and I could now tell our extended family otherwise. And just two months after Vic's wedding, a group of our younger cousins also traveled to New Orleans. They loved it.

Gravy *columnist Gustavo Arellano is a feature reporter for the* Los Angeles Times.

Lucy Hewett

PHOTOSYNTHESIS

BY ASHLEY M. JONES

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, MY FATHER TAUGHT US

how dirt made way for food,

how to turn over soil so it would hold a seed,

an infant bud, how the dark could nurse it

until it broke its green arms out to touch the sun.

In every backyard we've ever had, he made a little garden plot

with room for heirloom tomatoes, corn, carrots,

peppers: jalapeno, bell, and poblano—

okra, eggplant, lemons, collards, broccoli, pole beans,

watermelon, squash, trees filled with fruit and nuts,

brussels sprouts, herbs: basil, mint, parsley, rosemary—

onions, sweet potatoes, cucumber, cantaloupe, cabbage,

oranges, swiss chard and peaches,

sunflowers tall and straightbacked as soldiers,

lantana, amaryllis, echinacea,

pansies and roses and bushes bubbling with hydrangeas.

Every plant with its purpose—

flowers to bring worms and wasps. Even their work matters here.

This is the work we have always known—

pulling food and flowers from a pile of earth.

The difference, now: my father is not a slave,

not a sharecropper. This land is his and so is this garden,

so is this work. The difference is that he owns this labor.

The work of his own hands for his own belly,

for his own children's bellies. We eat because he works.

This is the legacy of his grandmother, my great-granny—

Ollie Mae Harris and her untouchable flower garden.

Just like her hats, her flowerbeds sprouted something special,

plants and colors the neighbors could only dream of.

He was young when he learned that this beauty is built on work—

the cows and the factories in their stomachs,

the fertilizer they spewed out—

the stink that brought such fragrance. What you call waste,

I call power. What you call work I make beautiful again.

In his garden, even problems become energy, beauty—

my father has ended many work days in the backyard,

worries of the firehouse dropping like grain, my father wrist-deep

in soil. I am convinced the earth speaks back to him

as he feeds it—it is a conversational labor, gardening.

The seeds tell him what they will be, the soil tells seeds how to grow,

my father speaks sun and water into the earth,

we hear him, each harvest, his heartbeat sweet, like fruit.

Ashley M. Jones is a poet and educator based in Birmingham, Alabama. Her latest collection is dark // thing.

IN SERVICE

A heavy legacy born of domestic work

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

Natchez, Mississippi, 1940

Marion Post Wolcott/Library of Congress

IN MY PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS' house, there was no such thing as spring cleaning. There was all-the-time cleaning, every day God sent. When I was on summer break in elementary school, I stayed with my grandparents while my parents were at work. Most days, after my grandfather left for his janitorial job, my grandmother and I remained in that little ranch house in Tallahassee. After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, a hot dog (split down the middle, pan-fried until its edges were crisp) and cups of coffee (nobody worried about giving coffee to kids back then), we began our daily chores.

I sprayed lemon Pledge onto a rag until the foam mounded on the cloth. First, I slicked down the old clock case in the dining room. Its pendulum, gears, and face were long gone. All that was left was the mahogany carcass, yet it was a prized possession, a piece my grandfather salvaged before a former employer threw it away. Once the clock body was shiny inside and out, the china cabinet was next. I took out each plate, each delicate figurine, a sugar and creamer set, and a teacup and saucer in radiant hues of lilac and butter, then polished each shelf, top and bottom. Everything in there was for show. The glass-front doors were washed until the panes were invisible. I dusted each item, including a child's tea set adorned with painted deep pink roses. Playing with it was out of the question, despite my periodic pleas and promises to be really careful. Like the clock case, some of the pieces were surely castoffs. My grandparents never had money for decorative frills.

My grandmother stopped vacuuming long enough to inspect what I'd done—every inch, every nook, every cranny. Her seal of approval was a soft smile that crept across her slender, high-cheekboned face, a slow nod, and an "umhmm." Then it was on to the living room. The house couldn't have been more than 1,000 square feet, but for me, at eight or nine years old, it seemed the work would never end.

After Grandmama passed away and I bought my first house in the mid-1990s, I continued to clean furiously, often on my knees, until everything sparkled, especially the toilets. One day, I stopped to wonder why I was scouring to a point of obsession. No one lived in my house but me. Why was I mopping the kitchen floor with soapy water first, then swabbing it with plain water, repeating the last step until the liquid in the bucket looked clear enough to drink?

> Farmhand, domestic, "colored" school teacher: Those were the options open to black women of my grandmother's generation.

Of course, I had slovenly lapses along the way, but I always returned to the rituals of my grandparents' house. I loved the way my baseboards gleamed after wiping them down; how the scent of lemon oil lingered after I finished my ministrations to the dressers and nightstands. Then it dawned on me: My grandmother had worked much of her life as a domestic. I was cleaning my house the way she taught me—the way she had been made to clean the homes of the white people she worked for. My countertops, spotless and bright, reflected the subordination she endured.

UNLIKE MY MOTHER'S side of the family, who farmed their own land in the

San Augustine, Texas, 1943

John Vachon/Library of Congress

Florida Panhandle after Reconstruction and lived as much as they could apart from white people, my father's people followed a different trajectory. After Emancipation they stayed on plantations on the Florida side of the Florida-Georgia border, land that became quail-hunting grounds for America's wealthiest families: the Whitneys, the Vanderbilts, the Hannas. Foshalee Plantation, as it came to be called in the early 1900s, is where my paternal family worked. Their decision wasn't an anomaly. Though six million African Americans followed the Great Migration north and west in the early twentieth century, millions remained behind. Farmhand, domestic, or, for those lucky enough to get an education, maybe a "colored" school teacher: Those were the options open to most black women of my grandmother's era in the South. Her education stopped at the eighth grade. I still have her diploma.

After marrying my grandfather, she began her career at Foshalee as a domestic. She surely learned how to do the work as a child. I don't believe her primary job was cook, even though she taught me to how to beat cake batter by hand and thought dishwashing machines were silly. She ironed shirts and sheets with a brew of Argo starch and water, until the cotton was luminous like porcelain and soft as down. Given those skills, I believe those are the jobs she was responsible for while she was "in service." That is the term older people used to described domestic employment. It was a discreet phrase, usually spoken a little lower than the words that preceded it in a sentence. "She works *in service*." The inflection held ground between shame and dignity.

It was honest work. It provided. But the pay was low. In the 1940s, domestic workers could make as little as $3.50 a week. For workers like my grandparents, building wealth to pass down was tough.

I spoke recently with Tera W. Hunter, a history professor at Princeton. Hunter's book, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*, documents the 1881 Atlanta laundress strike, in which African American women demanded fair wages for washing other people's dirty laundry.

Laundry was some of the least desirable work. It required handling fabric soiled by strangers in the most intimate ways. It was also laborious, especially before the advent of electric washing machines and dryers. There was no shame in the task or in any sort of household vocation, Hunter said. But the diminishment of a domestic worker by an employer could take many forms: giving her a bag full of cast-off clothes rather than cash as payment for a week's work; hovering over her as she cooked or cleaned. Calling a domestic by her first name without the respect of an honorific was standard practice.

"And it's not just about the work, it's about defining race," Hunter said. "It becomes a marker for what it means to be white and what it means to be black."

MY GRANDMOTHER NEVER talked about her work. For a short time, she held a job at the Florida Governor's Mansion, where one of her in-laws also worked in service. I remember asking her about her time there, excited that she'd worked in such a supposedly prestigious residence. She shut me down without skipping a beat.

"No, un-uh, hush," she'd said.

I knew better than to press her.

Silence was a common decision among Grandmama's generation of domestics, Premilla Nadasen told me recently. A history professor at Barnard College, Nadasen wrote *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement*. Now she's working on a project called We Dream in Black, to help organize Southern African American domestic workers.

Cleaning someone else's home, especially when the lady of the house was present, required an invisible mask, Nadasen told me. The ability to cloak exhaustion, disdain, or worry was part of a maid's tool kit. Their livelihoods depended on the ability to have a "public face" and a "private face." So they were reluctant to talk about what they endured day in and day out, Nadasen said.

And as it had been in slavery, predation was a constant danger. Domestics often worked in isolation inside homes. No one was charged with protecting them, and if they were assaulted, who would believe them? Dorothy Bolden, who founded the influential National Domestic Workers Union of America (NDWUA) in 1968 in Atlanta, spoke in a 1978 interview about the way the husbands of some of the women she worked for treated her. How the men would touch her buttocks as she worked in their families' kitchens.

"A lot of things went on in those days that a lot of maids wouldn't dare to talk about," Bolden said.

The enslaved learned silence as a survival tactic. They passed it down to subsequent generations like a gene.

Cleaning someone else's home required an invisible mask. The ability to cloak exhaustion, disdain, or worry was part of a maid's tool kit.

Port Gibson, Mississippi, 1940

Descendants like me, who want to understand why we do what we do, must rely on scraps of oral history or glean what we can from the public records of our ancestors' employers.

My mother told me that Grandmama continued to do domestic work after she and my grandfather moved to Tallahassee. She got a job in the household of Guy and Ada Belle Winthrop. The Winthrops lived in a Victorian confection along one of the city's main streets. Ada Belle Patrick Winthrop taught French in the 1920s and 1930s at the women's college that would become Florida State University. Guy Winthrop descended from one of Leon County's largest slaveholding families. A real estate titan, he developed the plantation he inherited into a prestigious subdivision called Betton Hills. It was closed to black people except as a place to work—and to die. Enslaved African Americans, and later emancipated ones who continued to work on the old plantation, were buried in a cemetery on land that became part of Winthrop's development. Remnants of the graveyard brush the north end of the neighborhood park. Burials went on until the 1940s. A state historical marker and a few headstones tell the story of black lives spent making fortunes they'd never share.

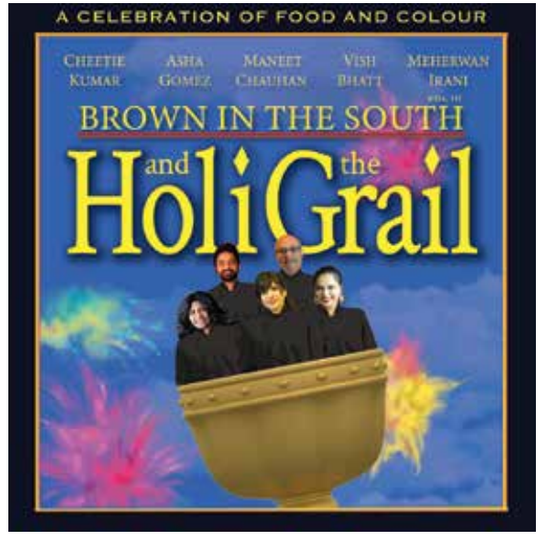
As far as my mother remembers, my grandmother never said how much money she made a week. It could not have been much. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, organizations were forged that fought for fair wages and better working conditions for domestics. Bolden's NDWUA and the Household Technicians of America were a couple. They came too late for my grandmother. By then, she was deep into middle age and had stopped working full-time in white homes. Her eyesight was beginning to fail.

After she retired, she still did chores around the house she and my grandfather built with their modest savings. She hung clothes outside on the line to dry, pulling wooden clothespins from her apron pocket as we went along. Sundays she anchored the amen corner at Mount Zion Primitive Baptist Church at Dawkins Pond, where she served on the Mother's Board. When she got the spirit, she stood and rocked her arms back and forth as if pushing away an unseen burden. On weekdays, we carved out time for neighbors and the soap operas she called "the stories."

Grandmama was proud of her home. In it, she taught me skills she hoped I'd never use for anyone but my own family. She showed me what her life in service had been like without telling the tale.

Marion Post Wolcott/Library of Congress

Rosalind Bentley is an SFA Smith Fellow and a senior writer at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *Follow her on Twitter @rozrbentley.*



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FINDING MY RELIGION

A family of sinners and saints

BY JENNA MASON

THE FIGHT STARTED WHEN THE guy called me out for flirting with my singer-songwriter ex-boyfriend, who was performing moody ballads from the stage.

I marched out of the downtown Athens dive and booked it to my beat-up Corolla, with its missing muffler and wires dangling out of the dash where a stereo should have been. The guy followed me—you could say he'd been following me for weeks—and before I could crank the engine, he yanked open my driver's side door, put his back against it, and demanded we talk.

"You can't just storm off when someone makes you mad."

I don't remember what I yelled at him or for how long, but when he still didn't budge, I forced my way past him and cut east up Clayton Street.

"Where're you going—Compadres?" he snorted behind me.

"Yeah. You wanna follow me?"

He knew it was a dare, not an invitation.

He knew a whole kitchen line would be downing shift drinks at the back bar of the Mexican spot where I waited tables. They always had a stool for me. He didn't follow.

I bought a round of Patrón and toasted to a slogan I remembered from an old T-shirt: "You mess with me, you mess with my whole family." Long before I'd even heard of a "restaurant family," restaurants *were* my family.

My father was a sailor. It was tough to feed a family of five on his Navy salary. He'd always picked up second and third shifts at pizza houses and all-night diners. Every relative I could name had put in years under restaurant roofs. On my fifteenth birthday, I applied to the Chick-fil-A Dwarf House in strip-malled metro Atlanta, where both my big brothers held leadership positions. The oldest, Chris, had given me that T-shirt to remind me he had my back.

The Dwarf House staffed the registers and drive-through with straitlaced, middle-class kids with good grades and impeccable manners, kids who worked a few hours a week to put gas in their cars or pay their pager bills. Behind the spotless counters and the stainless chicken-sandwich chutes, the kitchen buzzed with the unseen labor of the cooks: an undocumented couple who'd held white-collar jobs back in Mexico and half a dozen just-out-of-high-school misfits who smoked cigarettes by the dumpster and weed in their cars, and dropped a week's wages to see Ozzy's Retirement Sucks tour at the Omni.

Chris played Cool Hand Luke to these nonconformists. Aside from a sarcastic streak and a penchant for Southern rock, I didn't have much in common with him or them. I didn't drink until I was twenty-one, didn't touch cigarettes until my thirties. I devoted time to my youth group and my schoolwork. I waited tables to save for college.

Photos by Lucy Hewett

The kitchen's screw-The-Man attitude intrigued me. They worked their asses off on the line, and they didn't seem to give a damn about much else. A classic little sister with something to prove, I could banter, swear, and snap towels with the best of them.

But I belonged in the front of the house, serving and smiling. I gave a damn about everything. I had everything to lose.

A dozen years, two degrees, and two kids after the Athens bar fight (with the man I eventually married and had just divorced), I signed up for another tour in the service sector. We'd relocated to Oxford, Mississippi, for my now ex-husband's career; my part-time wages alone wouldn't keep me afloat. I struggled with my mental health and my performance at my full-time job. I went to therapy like my life depended on it. (It probably did.)

The extra income from waiting tables helped soothe the cruel voice in my head that questioned what kind of parent couldn't scrape together rent.

My therapist and my family members, even those who'd made careers in restaurants, questioned the prudence of inserting myself into the chaotic, vice-driven environment of the service industry. But I needed a second job to keep my finances in the black. I waded back into the river that had carried me through high school, college, and graduate school. This time, I was a thirty-two-year-old single mother of two with a full-time day job and a much more jaded outlook.

My children spent the second half of every week at their dad's, so I picked up shifts whenever they weren't home. The extra income helped soothe that cruel voice in my head that questioned what kind of parent couldn't scrape together rent. I made friends with people outside of academia, people who didn't already know my ex. Sunday brunch became my saving grace.

If you say "brunch" really slowly, it sounds like the collective groan of every restaurant employee in America. It is the most detested shift of servers and cooks alike. Customers come hurried or hungover but never happy. The former flood in ten minutes after church lets out, having exhausted all their generosity in the collection plate. The latter drift in thirty minutes to close, hammering bottomless mimosas and lingering long after the kitchen shuts down. Short ticket times and low check averages mean everyone works twice as hard for half the money.

Most of my brunch tips went straight to the babysitter who watched my kids while I worked. But that Sunday shift shielded me from the bleakest byproduct of my failed marriage: the loss of a deep-rooted faith that had sustained me in dark times. By the time I changed restaurants and attended church again, I no longer felt comforted by sermons and hymns and handshakes. I had nothing left to lose. Like the restaurant rogues I'd idolized as a wide-eyed teen, I just didn't give a damn anymore.

I realized then why I'd instinctively picked up a serving job for extra cash rather than tutor college kids or teach night classes at the University. I'd retreated again to Compadres to win a fight I'd already lost. I sought refuge among folks I knew would have my back. Now we had everything in common.

Staff meetings, smoke breaks, and shift drinks made it clear I'd been wrong all along. These people whose lives hadn't followed traditional trajectories—they do give a damn, more than most. They're single parents whose plans, like mine, didn't quite pan out. They're artists, musicians, and writers who grind through shifts to finance their vocations. They're college dropouts who feel unqualified for another career. They're funding an addiction, or they're fighting one. They aren't getting child support, or they're struggling to support intact families.

In the most ungodly of circles, I found church again. And church, it turns out, isn't just a sanctuary. It isn't just protection.

It's belonging. Knowing and being known. Carrying and being carried. It happens wherever people give enough of a damn to accept others' failings and to admit their own.

We are all messed up in one way or another. But we give a damn, about ourselves and about each other. We celebrate victories together—births, weddings, and promotions. We mourn divorces and deaths along solemn bars. We cover shifts, cover bills, send covered dishes. And if you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us.

Jenna Mason is the SFA's content and media manager.

Harvesting sugarcane on Palo Alto Plantation in Donaldsonville, LA, October 2018

Cutting Time

Two generations of change in cane country

by PATSY SIMS

photographs by L. KASIMU HARRIS

An abandoned worker's house on the remains of Elm Hall, Napoleonville, LA

1

A New Day

THE ROAD IS GONE, ALONG WITH all but one of the houses, and even that is so overgrown with brush I feel certain it, too, will soon disappear. An old easy chair sits on the porch as if someone might at any moment reclaim it, though I know the African American field workers and their families have long since left the plantation—they will not be back again.

It is October—grinding time—and cane eight, nine, maybe ten feet tall surrounds the ruins of the Elm Hall living quarters, as it did when I first visited the plantation forty-six years ago. At that time I was working on a series about sugarcane workers for the New Orleans *States-Item* and had, that December day in 1972, found my way to the modest home where Gustave and Beverly Rhodes lived with six of their seven children.

In July 1972, Gustave and another worker named Huet P. Freeman filed a lawsuit against Earl Butz and the United States Department of Agriculture for back wages owed them and the state's 22,000 field workers. It was a bold move for two cane workers who could barely read and write. They knew they could lose their jobs and the only homes they had ever known. They also knew it was time for someone to stand up to the growers.

Both men had dropped out of school when they were in their early teens to work in the fields. Gustave operated a cane cutter on Elm Hall, where he was born and where his parents and his parents' parents had lived their entire lives. Huet drove a tractor on a nearby plantation known as Hard Times, where he lived with his wife and six daughters, across the road from his aging grandparents, next door to an uncle and aunt. His mother and stepfather lived nearby on yet another plantation.

THE SERIES, CALLED "BEHIND THE Cane Curtain," ran in the *States-Item* for

three weeks in the spring of 1973. Few people, even in nearby New Orleans and Baton Rouge, knew anything of these workers. NO TRESPASSING signs were often posted on the dirt roads leading to their living quarters, and outsiders, including me, were sometimes threatened with arrest if they dared venture beyond the signs. Year after year the tall green cane would shoot up, lining highways and hiding the workers and their raw-wood shacks. The workers still called the growers "Boss." The growers still called them "Boy."

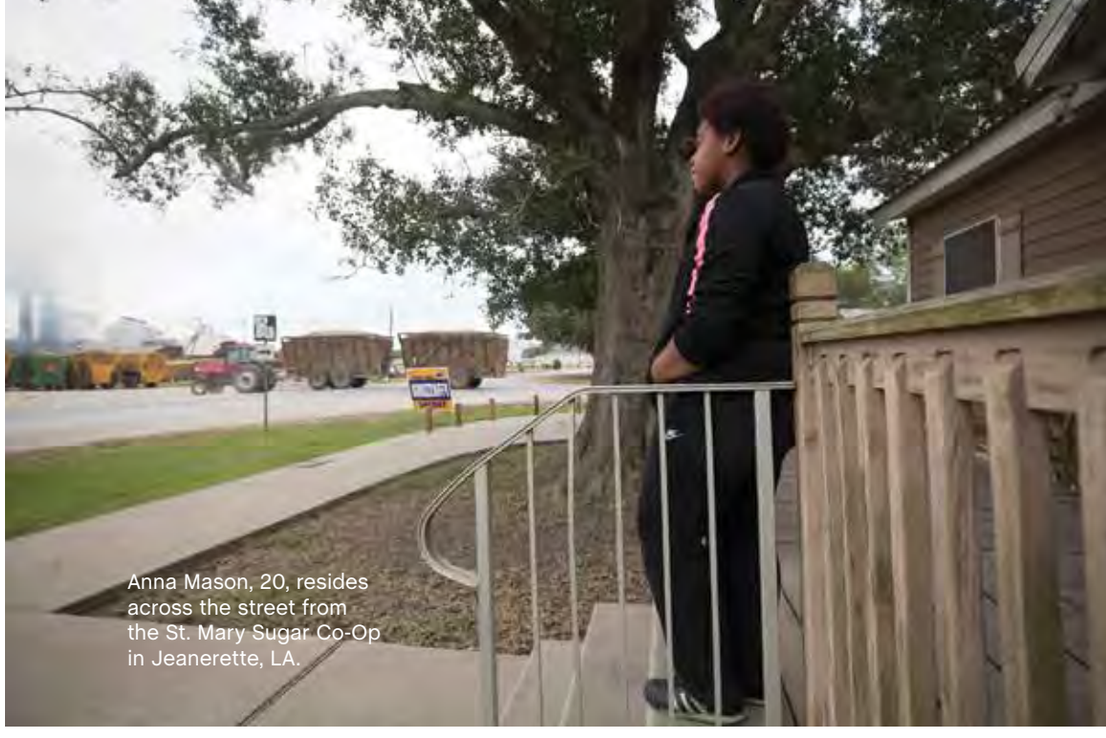
A typical worker raised a family of six or seven children on less than $4,000 a year, on a diet of beans and rice and little else, in houses with a fireplace for heat and no indoor toilet or running water. They worked without benefit of sick leaves or pensions. Many lived and died without traveling the seventy-five miles to New Orleans. Representatives of the US Department of Agriculture, who made little or no effort to hide their friendship with the growers, determined the workers' hourly wage.

Our initial plan was for one writer and one photographer to create a record of conditions in the cane fields. Fearing a camera would call unwanted attention, the editor decided I should complete my reporting before the photographer joined me. In the beginning, I accompanied volunteers from an adult education program; after I gained the workers' trust, I went alone. For more than three months in the fall of 1972, that world became mine.

The assignment would earn me the wrath of growers and deeply involve me in the lives of the workers and those dedicated to helping them, namely the Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA). A small, fearless group of mostly rural priests and nuns and college students, SMHA existed solely to help the workers and had been instrumental in persuading a Washington firm to take on the lawsuit pro bono. As much as I tried to stay under the radar, the growers eventually became aware of my presence. At one point a grower approached the Governor to seek his help in blocking the series; another paid the *States-Item* publisher a visit. After the series ran, the growers and their lobbyists bombarded the paper with letters. One suggested the editors reprint the series on rolls of six-inch perforated paper.

I REMEMBER THE DAY I MET Gustave and his family, the first of many we were to share over the years. That morning, a man had run through the Elm Hall living quarters shouting news that a tractor had jackknifed on a neighboring plantation, crushing a worker between the tractor and a wagonload of cane. I remember how news of the death shook Gustave. He was a strong, sturdy man of thirty-nine, his muscles lean and hard, his voice soft, his manner gentle, almost shy. The accident reminded him of another that had taken place on the same plantation and cost a worker his legs.

Gustave spoke that night of his struggles to raise a family, never knowing what his income would be from one week to the next. His employer paid a nickel over the minimum, and the hours varied wildly. The previous January, after the busy grinding season ended, his paycheck for one two-week period was ninety dollars. Throughout their marriage, he and Beverly had worked hard to better their lives. Gustave had installed an indoor toilet and hot and cold running water in their home, paid for with the help of Beverly's earnings from babysitting and cooking in the school cafeteria. Out back they raised vegetables and a couple of hogs to supplement what they could afford on their incomes. A simple bookcase held a set of encyclopedias the Rhodes bought at the supermarket, one volume at a time.



Anna Mason, 20, resides across the street from the St. Mary Sugar Co-Op in Jeanerette, LA.

Gustave approached more than thirty workers about joining the lawsuit. All of them declined. Then he thought of Huet P. Freeman. Three years earlier, Gustave had secured a school bus and offered to transport workers to the annual wage hearings in Houma. Only Huet joined them. He was, in many ways, ideal to become the lead plaintiff in the case. His mother had named him after Huey P. Long, not knowing how to spell it or what the middle initial stood for, only that she wanted her son to bear the name of the man who had championed poor people like herself.

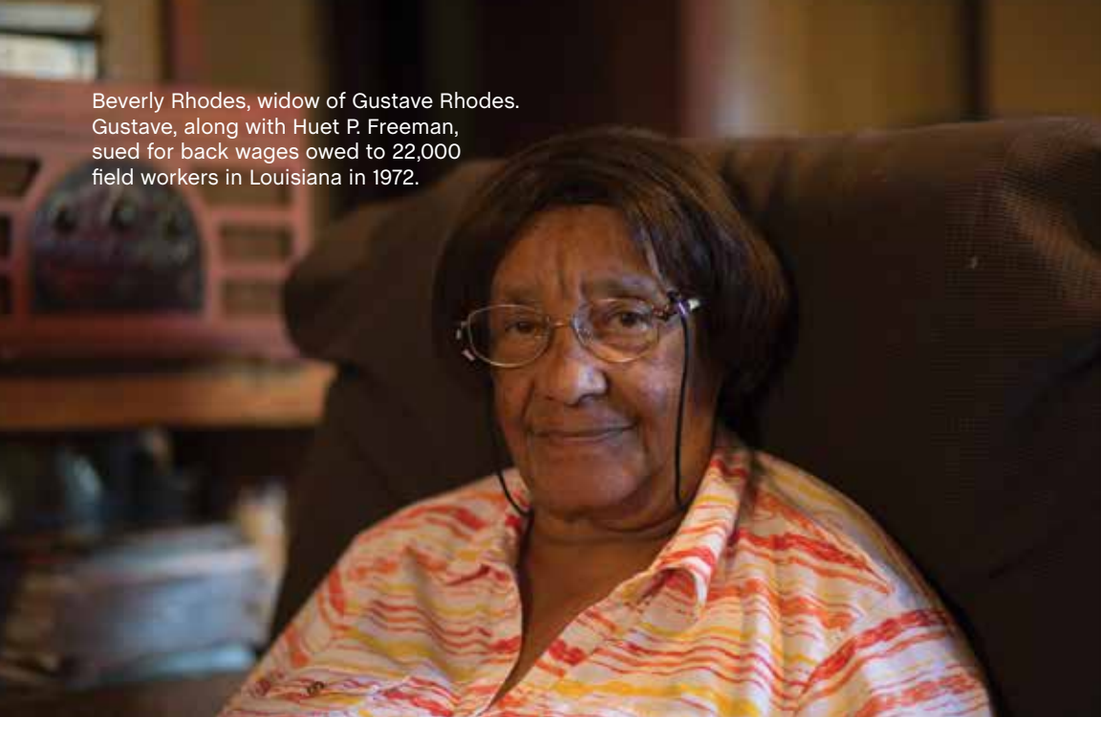
A federal judge in Washington had issued a preliminary injunction that ordered the Department of Agriculture to withhold subsidy payments to growers until the case was settled, and the night I met Gustave, he was excited by the possibilities. "I believe within myself we've made a major step," he told me. "We are on our way up."

Four months later, the US District Court for the District of Columbia decided the lawsuit in favor of the workers. The victory was short-lived for Huet. Eight months later, the grower fired him and told him to leave Hard Times. It would be the first time he would live anywhere other than on a plantation.

On the day of the move, Huet and his wife, Viola Freeman, loaded their belongings into family friend Woodrow Brown's pickup and drove to Napoleonville, to an apartment complex known as the Pink Palace. There were no other offers of help, no wishes of good luck from neighbors, not even from relatives.

Nevertheless, Huet and Gustave refused to give up. They continued to speak out on behalf of the field workers. With time, Huet landed a job as a pipefitter at Avondale Shipyards, and he and Viola bought the house they had always dreamed of. Gustave was promoted to a mechanic's assistant at Elm Hall's shop, but he, too, eventually decided to become a longshoreman on the river and moved

Recently cut sugarcane is loaded onto a truck bound for the mill.



Beverly Rhodes, widow of Gustave Rhodes. Gustave, along with Huet P. Freeman, sued for back wages owed to 22,000 field workers in Louisiana in 1972.

the family into a house Beverly's parents owned in Napoleonville. Even then, the couple remained committed to their activism, with both serving on SMHA's board. Beverly was a driving force in her husband's life. She bolstered him when she thought his courage might be wavering. She traveled with him to Washington to testify before Congress and another time to meet the Pope. She accompanied him to nearby plantations to register workers to vote.

From time to time I would be in touch with the two men and their families as their lives improved. Our visits often took place around one or the other's kitchen table, where we would reminisce over a bowl of Beverly's gumbo or a plate of Viola's fried chicken, laughing about the leaky roofs, the rotten porches—the way you joke about bad times you no longer have to endure.

During a weekend visit to New Orleans several years ago, I drove to Napoleonville to have lunch with Beverly and Gustave, who had retired. By then, a good deal of the land had been taken over by strip malls and subdivisions or planted in soybeans and other crops. Nevertheless, sugar and grinding remained central to that part of Louisiana. The giant combines hungrily made their way through the fields, the massive trucks racing up and down the highway to load and unload cane as they had so many years ago.

On our way to the restaurant, Gustave pointed out a battered trailer parked in a field. It was, he explained, living quarters for the migrant Mexican workers who had largely replaced the black field workers. According to him, most of the old shacks had been demolished, and the few blacks who remained on the plantations rented places in town and reported to work each morning the way most people do.

"It's a new day," he said, explaining that the younger generation of blacks was more interested in education than working on a plantation.

2

Back to the Grind

GRINDING HAS BEEN UNDERWAY for almost a month when I return to cane country. In many ways, it is a trip into my own past, a return to a time, a people, and a place that was to have a major impact on me and my writing. It is a chance, too, to renew friendships and acquaintances that for three months became so much a part of my life. After my series was published in 1973, I made trips back to expand the series into a book[1] and to celebrate the book's publication, but decades have passed since I traveled through south Louisiana for a firsthand look at the cane economy and the lives of the workers. Gustave and Huet and many of the workers are dead. Still others have retired or have been lost to the anonymity of town, replaced by migrant workers and sophisticated new machines.

Some of the sugarcane plantations have been overtaken by urban sprawl, while only eleven sugarcane mills now service the state, a third of what had operated at the time of my series. Yet sugar and grinding remain vital to Louisiana's economy, last year yielding 1.8 million tons of raw sugar—enough to feed almost sixty million Americans. That figure is an all-time record for the state's sugar industry, despite the fact there are fewer plantations, fewer growers, and less acreage planted in sugarcane.

According to the American Sugar Cane League's James H. Simon, advances in science, cane varieties, and sophisticated new equipment make it possible. And even those remaining mills are faster and more efficient than their predecessors.

"Today's farmer is not the farmer of twenty years ago," Simon says. "They're using GPS technology, mapping, laser, and precision-leveled fields to improve drainage, and what's called 'variable-rate

[1] *Cleveland Benjamin's Dead!: A Struggle for Dignity in Louisiana's Cane Country* (E.P. Dutton, 1981. Expanded and reprinted by University of Georgia Press, 1994.)

fertilizer application' so you can vary the rate of fertilizer being applied in a field."

As a result, growers must now be more than good agronomists. They must understand and implement the latest advancements in farm equipment. And, says Simon, "farmers today have to be savvy and keen to business knowledge. They can't simply be able to grow sugarcane."

No one, including Simon, can say precisely when the black workers began disappearing from the fields, or when the migrant workers made their way up from Mexico and other points south, or when the machines began taking over so much of the work. Most everyone agrees, though, that the changes have been gradual. Over the last twenty-five years, the older black workers died or became infirmed, and when their children did not follow them into the fields, growers sought a new labor pool.

The transition is virtually complete. Today, African American field workers, most of them on the older end of the workforce, are far outnumbered by men from Mexico and Guatemala and Puerto Rico. Those laborers, many of them migrants, are attracted by the opportunity to earn several times what they would make for the same work back home.

While the workers spend most of their time in the fields, their presence is visible in the surrounding towns. In a part of the country that has long prided itself on its French-Cajun culture, more and more communities are reaching out to the workers. Community groups offer programs and services to meet their needs, including ESL and GED classes and tutoring for their school-age children. Some Catholic churches offer catechism classes in Spanish. Every day during grinding, a cart selling burritos pulls up at the entrance to one of the state's largest plantations. At night a truck returns to the living quarters hawking tortas and tamales.

Robert "Bubba" Lemann Jr. has managed his family's Palo Alto Plantation since 1995.

3

Bubba and Peppy

ROBERT "BUBBA" LEMANN JR. WAS born the year my series ran, a time when a sizeable number of black employees lived and worked on Palo Alto, his family's Donaldsonville plantation. Two of his childhood friends grew up in the worker housing. They played basketball together. They rode the school bus together.

"They were older than me," Lemann recalls, "and I remember one time this kid from the neighboring plantation was picking on me, on the bus—I don't remember what it was about, but I remember when the bus got loaded two of the boys from Palo Alto took the boy to the back of the bus and they beat the crap of out him, and they said, 'Don't touch him ever again.'"

Lemann remembers how his family attended the black families' funerals, and the black families attended theirs, including his father's in 2014. He traces that bond back to his great-great-great-grandfather Jacob Lemann, who immigrated from Alsace-Lorraine and bought Palo Alto in 1867. Faced with assembling a labor force in the wake of the Civil War, he and his sons made a concerted effort to educate and elevate the former slaves, Bubba Lemann says.

The plantation continued to employ a large number of black workers until the 1970s, when Lemann's father gave all the workers a wage increase and stopped paying their utilities. Lemann says he still doesn't understand his father's reasoning in making the change or why the workers left. It all happened before he was born. Whatever the case, enough workers remained that in 1995, when Bubba Lemann graduated from Louisiana State University and took over as farm manager, twenty or so black workers who had grown up on the plantation still lived and worked there, and would do so for the rest of their lives.

Palo Alto hired its first migrant workers in the early 1990s to supplement the full-time workforce during the August–September planting season.

Nelson Collins, a resident of Jeanerette, LA, often comes to this spot to watch combines and tractors in the sugarcane fields.

Grinding has been underway for almost a month when I return to cane country. In many ways, it is a trip into my own past. Decades have passed since I traveled through south Louisiana to report on the cane economy and the lives of the workers.

Arturo Diaz, a native of Zacatecas, Mexico, has worked at Palo Alto for more than twenty years.

After Lemann returned from college, the plantation began bringing in the mostly Mexican workers on H-2A visas to operate equipment.

Today, Lemann employs ten men, nine of them in Louisiana from Mexico on green cards or H-2A visas. Eight of the nine are related in some way, their children around the same ages as Lemann's and students in the same Catholic school. The tenth employee is a white man who lives a mile down the road and has worked on Palo Alto for more than twenty years.

The H-2A visa program, conceived as a response to seasonal farm labor shortages, allows visa holders to do agricultural work in the United States for up to ten months a year. By 2017 Louisiana ranked sixth among the states in use of H-2A workers; one of the largest—if not *the* largest—user is the sugarcane industry.

To hire migrant workers, growers file applications with the Department of Labor to prove they have been unable to find American workers to fill their jobs. This process requires placing ads in three regional newspapers on two separate days, one of those a Sunday. They must provide housing that meets certain health and safety standards, utilities, daily transportation between the workers' living quarters and their worksite, and the cost of round-trip travel to and from their homes (the vast majority of H-2A workers are citizens of Mexico). The federal government also sets a minimum hourly wage rate: $10.73 in 2018, more than three dollars above the federal minimum wage. The regulations are in marked contrast to the lack of protections provided generations of black workers.

In the beginning, Palo Alto contracted with a labor agency out of Brownsville, Texas. After a while, the workers themselves became the source of referrals, which is how Lemann came to employ a crew of workers from Zacatecas, Mexico, all of whom are related by blood or by marriage.

"I had a guy here that came from Brownsville, Texas," Lemann recalls, "and he says, 'I got a friend,' 'I got a cousin,' 'I got a something'—and so maybe three or four iterations down the road, my guy Arturo shows up.... He had never seen sugarcane before, and he just worked his way up, and now he's the supervisor to my guys."

Arturo is thirty-eight-year-old Arturo Diaz. Lemann calls him "Peppy." Diaz was seventeen when he arrived at Palo Alto twenty-one years ago after briefly doing maintenance work in Chicago. Over the years, he has recommended all or most of Lemann's current employees: three brothers, a nephew, a cousin, one of his wife's cousins, and an uncle. His nineteen-year-old son works as a mechanic-in-training for Lemann's Farm Supply in Donaldsonville. Still other relatives and friends work at other plantations and sugar mills up and down Bayou Lafourche.

Diaz and his wife, a US citizen, live in Louisiana year-round. He has received a green card and is applying for citizenship, too. The morning a photographer and I visit Palo Alto, Lemann spots Diaz driving a red combine and motions for him to join us. Neither man has mastered the other's language, but after years of working together they have developed their own way of communicating.

The two men are of similar height and build and close in age. While it is difficult to judge a relationship on the basis of a brief encounter, Diaz seems to enjoy our three-way conversation. I ask questions, which Lemann translates into "their" language, and Diaz answers in his unadorned English. He tells me that Chicago was "terrible"; that he likes working in the fields; that on his second day in Louisiana, he told his wife, "I stay here all my life." To which Lemann adds, "He's got a house until he's dead."

That house is a neat brown bungalow with a trampoline and a swing set out front. It's set back from the oak tree–lined lane that runs the length of the plantation, just down from Lemann's restored 1880 farmhouse and across the road from the board-and-batten houses where the rest of the workforce lives rent-free, all utilities paid, as they were for their black predecessors before Lemann's father made the decision to stop. Some of the houses reflect the years the workers have spent on Palo Alto, with as many as three rooms added to the back as the families have grown.

The workers celebrate Thanksgiving, and the Lemanns participate in quinceañera celebrations. On the last day of harvest season, they come together for a big party—an event Bubba Lemann remembers fondly, as far back as his childhood, when the women would cook, his father would barbecue, and folks would get, as he puts it, knockdown drunk."

Lemann describes Palo Alto as "a little forgotten area." If there were a grocery store on the property, he swears he would never leave. He farms two thousand of the six thousand acres, leases some of the acreage to other farmers, and leaves the rest in woods and pasture. In the century and a half since Jacob Lemann bought the plantation, it has evolved into a corporation run by a board of directors. The Lemann family owns roughly sixty percent; two other families hold the rest. Bubba Lemann was elected board president after his father's death, yet he considers himself part of the workforce and takes pride in his bunged-up hands.

"It's a different way of life," he says, speaking of the bonds he shares with his workers. "I think it's because it's so labor intensive and you have to rely on people. I've got ten employees. I need those ten—we're a unit, we're a group, and they become like family and we work hard. We work really hard."

A sugarcane harvester cuts the cane at the base of the stalk, removes the leaves, and trims the cane into billets.

4

Cut It!

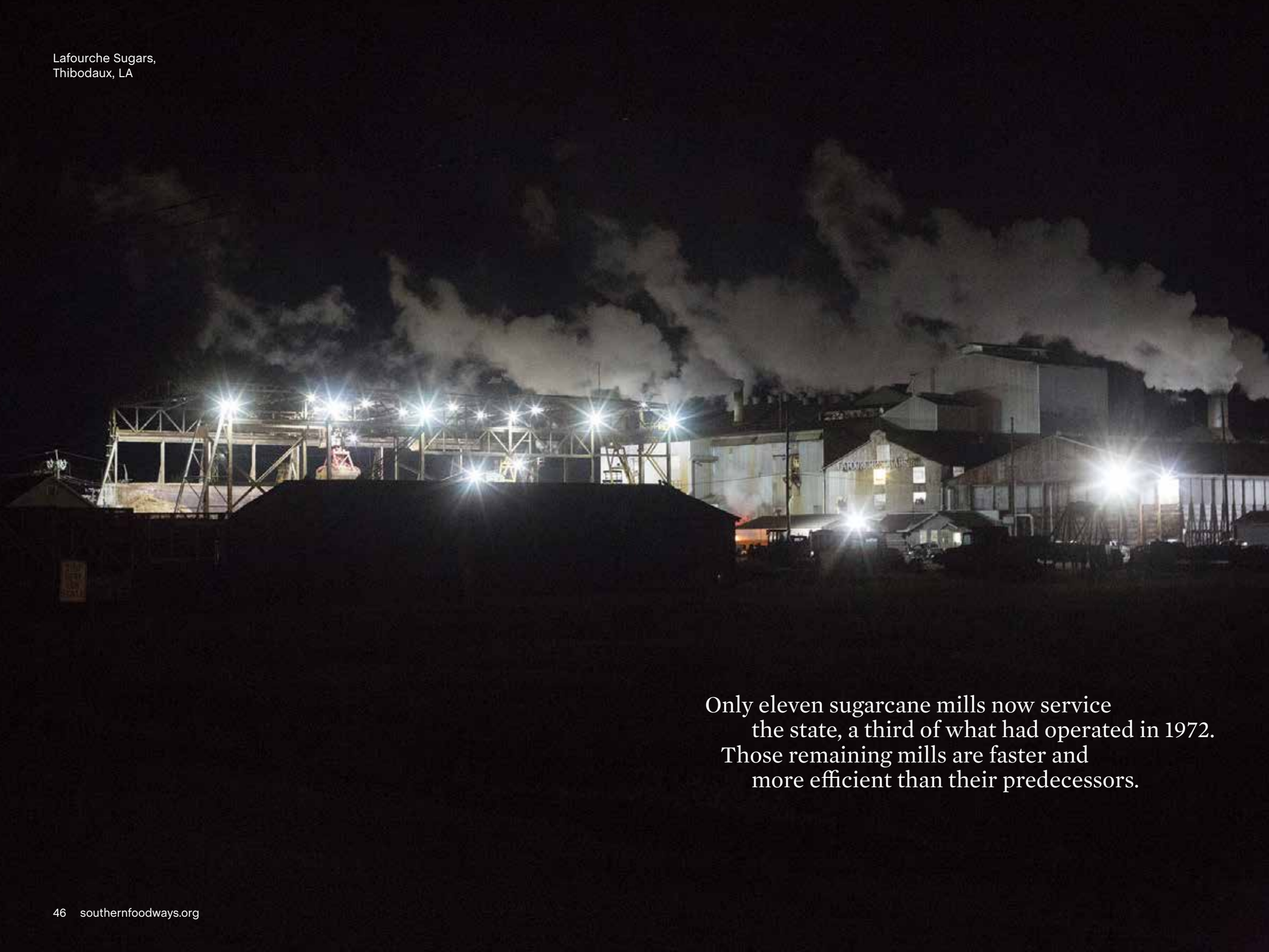
BY THE TIME I RETURN TO SOUTH Louisiana, the land and the business of growing cane have passed on to the next two generations, a pattern that has been repeated since Jesuit priests introduced the crop to the area in 1751. Few growers use the word "plantation" anymore, perhaps because most no longer live on the land they farm, or because of the negative weight the word carries.

The cost of the latest combines and tractors, equipped with air-conditioning and GPS and Bluetooth, makes it virtually impossible for a newcomer to break into the business. A combine can cost $350,000 or more; a tractor runs $150,000 to $250,000, depending on the horsepower and size. Add to that optional features like a monitor to determine how much fertilizer is needed in a particular part of a field.

The day Jackie Judice shows me around the acreage his sons Clint and Chad farm near the town of Franklin, a John Deere technician is on-site installing one of the latest "extras"—a yield monitor capable of weighing the raw cane as it is cut. The same technician designed the system, which he says anyone with a fourth-grade education can operate by turning the key and pushing a button. At the controls on this day is Judice's twenty-seven-year-old grandson Hayden.

"We'll be able to get a pretty doggone close estimate of how many tons per acre he's harvesting as he is cutting," the elder Judice tells me.

Hayden operates one of three combines owned by Northside Planting Company, the family business that in recent years Jackie turned over to his sons. Their transportation inventory includes eight 18-wheel trucks, nineteen tractors, nine trailers, two service trucks, and two 15-passenger vans to transport employees from the company boarding house to the worksite. The payroll includes twelve full-time, year-round employees (four of whom have moved to Louisiana from



Lafourche Sugars,
Thibodaux, LA

Only eleven sugarcane mills now service
the state, a third of what had operated in 1972.
Those remaining mills are faster and
more efficient than their predecessors.

Sugarcane stalks await processing.

Puerto Rico). Northside brings in twenty-one workers from Mexico during the August–September planting season, and another twenty-one workers (three from Mexico, eight from Puerto Rico, the rest local) for grinding in October.

Jackie Judice is the sixth generation of his family to raise sugarcane. His sons Chad and Clint are the seventh. Hayden and his brother, Noah, will be the eighth. Their family planted its first crop in 1800, five years after Jean Étienne de Boré, born in the United States to French parents, introduced Louisiana to the process of granulating sugar on a commercial scale. Besides Judice and his sons and grandsons, his brother and two sets of cousins run their own operations.

Judice was a small boy when he began working on his parents' farm in the one-stoplight town of Loreauville, population 887. The only time he has been away from either the town or the cane fields was the four years he served in the Marines. He believes that the way to keep a business in the family is to involve the family, especially the young. That's how Hayden came to run the combine. To prepare for the day when his generation takes over, he studied drafting in college; his brother, Noah, completed a two-year course in diesel mechanics.

Before Judice retired, he worked alongside his sons and their employees, even operating the old-style cutters before the days of onboard computers and air-conditioned cabs. While he says he doesn't miss those days, he is always willing to show someone like me around and to explain how everything works.

He is a young seventy-two, with a relaxed sense of humor. I soon understand why M.A. Patout & Son, the country's oldest family-owned sugar mill, tapped him to serve as an ombudsman. In that role, he helps settle disputes among growers, or between growers and the three Patout mills.

To reach that day's loading site, we follow Highway 87 through miles of cane fields interrupted by the occasional town, until we reach a clearing at Irish Bend Road. Chad Judice rides high on a tractor, opening a ditch to drain water off the fields before a predicted rainstorm. His older brother, Clint, handles the books and the combines. Chad takes care of everything else. When we pull up, he is waiting for a truck to return from the mill with empty containers, or "boxes," that can be transferred to a tractor-pulled wagon and allow the crew to resume cutting.

One truck carries roughly twenty-eight tons of cane. Northside fills fifty to sixty in a day that begins at six o'clock in the morning and ends when they reach a quota set by the mill. A little after three o'clock, the crew is close to wrapping up. It's an overcast day—gray in all directions, and chilly for Louisiana in October. They're in a hurry to get the cane in before the rain comes, so as soon as the truck arrives with empty boxes, a tractor pulls up.

Jackie Judice looks from the tractor to me. He knows I want to interview a worker. "You want to take a ride with him?" he asks, barely waiting for an answer before he and the driver lift me into the cab.

"All right, cut it! Cut it!" Judice shouts over the din. We're off across a field of stubble, the ride as rough as crossing the Atlantic in a storm.

"I got seatbelts!" the driver assures me. "Don't worry, I go slow!"

He is a chunky man of fifty-one, with a gray mustache, gray beard, strands of the same gray hair showing from under his cap, and an accent that takes me a while to process even though we are both speaking English. He is from Puerto Rico, where he worked as a truck driver. He moved to Louisiana permanently eight years ago, and his family followed. His name is William Soto.

"My wife came here," he says. "No more babies in ten years, but one year ago, one baby more!" He chuckles as we make our way across the field.

His days are sometimes "eleven, twelve, ten" hours, doing whatever Chad and Clint need. As he speaks, I notice the first-name familiarity, the absence of "Boss" and "Boy."

"Puerto Rico, I like," he says. "It's tropical island, but no pay, no pay. Sometimes two hundred fifty dollars a week, three hundred dollars a week, while here, seven, eight, nine hundred dollars a week."

"That's a big difference," I remark.

He chuckles again. "I got house, I got boat, I got two cars in eight years!"

I volunteer, "And a new baby."

The ride becomes smoother as we reach the far side of the field. Soto positions the tractor next to the waiting combine, and we move side-by-side down the row, the foot-long billets of cane moving through a chute into the box container attached to our tractor. Within five minutes, the container is full and we head back to the loading area.

Judice lifts me from the trailer, as we both admire the container spilling over with cane. "We've come a long way from cutting by hand," he says, shaking his head.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Jackie Judice with his dog, Dixie; Derell Madison, a forklift operator; and Paul John Lewis, a truck driver.

Viola Freeman, widow of Huet P. Freeman, at her home in Belle Rose, LA

5

After Hard Times

A HALF-DOZEN SHACKS COVERED in brick-patterned tarpaper, their roofs rusty and patched, huddled in the Hard Times workers' quarters where Huet and Viola Freeman lived. The day I first went there in December 1972, Viola was waiting on the front porch surrounded by six small girls, the youngest clinging to her mother's skirt. I remember them as happy children, unfazed that their water came from a garden faucet out back, or that their bathroom was a privy. They were too young to be disappointed when their birthday present was an orange or when four of them had to share a single Christmas present, too young to know what in life was possible and what was not.

But they had a father who did know what six little girls might do with the kind of education he never had. "He was all about that," says Rose Worley, his middle daughter. "He encouraged us to do more and to do better for ourselves, to establish a career where we could stand on our own and not have to depend on anybody."

She and her sisters Shirley Jones and Lenora Carter have invited me to the home where Viola still lives and where she and Huet moved after he was fired and thrown off the plantation. The gathering is as much for the Freemans' grandchildren and for younger brother Huet Jr., born two years after my series ran, as it is to fill me in on their own lives. There are stories I might know about their patriarch that even they do not know or remember.

A stroke and dementia have weakened Viola, who remains quiet for most of the evening. From time to time, we touch on a memory that makes her smile or utter a soft response. Lenora sits next to her, rubbing her mother's hand affectionately, sometimes giving a gentle hug. She and her siblings take turns caring for their mother, in what seems more an act of love than a responsibility.

The siblings—six grown women and one man—have heeded their father's admonitions, pursuing studies and careers that ensured they would never have to answer

A quiet moment between Viola Freeman and her daughter Lenora Carter

to any overseer. Ann Marie Neely, the oldest, remembers how her father, with his eighth-grade education, helped with her homework each night, and how proud he was when she graduated at the top of her class from a New Orleans business college. She eventually took a job in Atlanta as executive assistant to an officer at AT&T, a position she would hold for twenty-two years. Her siblings have followed their own career paths: a nurse, an auditor for a pharmaceutical company, an assistant director of the local council on aging, and a building manager for the federal government.

On several occasions after they left Hard Times, financial troubles forced Huet and Viola to return to the fields. They would not, however, allow their children to do the same. Once, when Huet Jr. approached his father about planting cane to buy a pair of tennis shoes, Huet Sr. told his son he never wanted to see a stick of cane in his hands unless he was eating it.

Huet and Viola were unable to help their children pay for college educations. To remedy that for the next generation, the family decided in 2017 to quit exchanging Christmas gifts. Instead, they began a collective college fund so that, as Huet had hoped, his grandchildren can do more and do better.

A Freeman family portrait from the late 1970s

Viola Freeman surrounded by her children and grandchildren

The siblings share a strong sense of pride in their father and the courage he showed when he and Gustave filed their lawsuit. "He carried himself with so much dignity," says Shirley. "He was a fighter. He didn't give up." She and her siblings are equally proud of their mother's strength during those times and her willingness to give Huet a push when she felt he needed it.

Life was hard for the family after Huet was fired. Yet, as the siblings see it, leaving the plantation made their accomplishments possible. In Dorseyville, Lenora discovered the bookmobile. Her love of books deepened after she began taking her own children to story hour at the Assumption Parish Library, where she began volunteering and eventually took a paid job that led to a twenty-year career as a librarian in Assumption and Lafourche Parishes.

Seven months after my series ran in 1973, I returned to find the tarpaper shacks boarded up. All that remains now of the place called Hard Times are the stories of the people who lived and worked and died there—including Huet P. Freeman, who took on the establishment and won.

6

Too Far to Turn Around

ON THE DECEMBER NIGHT WHEN I first met Gustave and Beverly Rhodes, twelve-year-old Rodney and a younger brother sat wide-eyed and serious. The two boys were close in age and size and not much younger than their father had been when he first went to work in the cane fields. When I asked about them following in his footsteps, the younger boy giggled and said he would, but Rodney vigorously shook his head.

Now Rodney is fifty-eight and in his twenty-sixth year as captain of the Assumption Parish sheriff's office, his twenty-eighth in law enforcement. We both laugh as we look back on his headstrong response. He had worked in the fields while earning a degree in criminal justice at Southern University, as did his brother David while studying chemical engineering, but that was the extent of the time he or any of his siblings had spent farming cane.

"My dad did that because he had no other alternative but to work in the fields," he says. "I wanted to break that chain."

David served a two-year term as police chief in Napoleonville, then worked as a pipefitter. Today he drives a school bus. So does their younger sister Charlene Rhodes. Cookie Sheffie, the eldest sister, worked for twenty-three years as a teacher's aide and still substitutes occasionally. Wanda Hamilton worked as a custodian at the regional hospital until two aneurisms left her partially paralyzed. Matthew is a caterer in New Orleans.

Rodney stressed the value of education with his own children. Ten years ago, his oldest daughter, Stasha, was applying to law school, and she contacted me to learn more about her grandfather. She ended up writing her law school admissions essay about him, and we've stayed in touch ever since. After her graduation from Southern University law school in Baton Rouge, she moved to Washington, DC. She has worked at the Center for American Progress and now as engagements director at Giffords, former

Rodney Rhodes stands in the former machine shop at Elm Hall where his father, Gustave Rhodes, once worked.

Congresswoman Gabby Giffords' advocacy group to end gun violence. Both are positions that might have once been seen as unattainable for a young black woman, but not for Stasha Rhodes.

Beverly still lives at the edge of Napoleonville, in the house she and Gustave moved into in the late 1970s. She had planned to accompany me on my rounds, as she had years ago, but is homebound following a serious fall. That setback is hard for her. Even after Gustave left the fields to work as a longshoreman, the couple continued their involvement with SMHA, introducing their children to a group of activists—including Father Vincent O'Connell, Henry Pelet, Lorna Bourg, and Sister Anne Catherine Bizalion—who would enrich all of their lives.

"Some of my friends used to say, 'What are all those white folks doing going to your house?'" Rodney recalls. "And I would say, 'Your dad's invited.' And they would say, 'Oh, my dad says he's not getting involved in that!'"

He and his siblings recall how Father O'Connell—once thrown out of Louisiana by church superiors for trying to organize the field workers—would come to see their father and take a nap on their sofa after one of Beverly Rhodes' home-cooked meals.

"My daddy used to tell us, '*Shhhhh*, y'all go to the back door,' because he didn't want us to come to the front and wake up Father," he says. "And here we have this white man laying in *our* house and we gotta be quiet! And you know what, it wasn't just one time. It was *all* the time—our house was Father's house."

He leans forward, his voice earnest. "And that wasn't normal. When you're on a plantation and on the black side—because the plantation was segregated, you had your white side way on away from the blacks—and here's this white guy with his collar on."

"Many times, I think Father kept my dad in the fight," Rodney says. "He painted this picture in my dad's eye, and my dad would say, 'Well, you know, you're right, we're too far to turn around.'"

Life is better now for Beverly, and yet she feels a certain fondness for those days back on the plantation. The peace, the quiet, the neighbors.

"At night we would sit on the porch, this one hollering at this one and the other one, and then on a Sunday morning getting ready for church you could hear everybody with their radio on the spirituals," she says.

On my last day in cane country, we sit in her living room reminiscing about the old days and a long friendship we never imagined the day we met. We recall the evening I accompanied her and Gustave to Cleveland Benjamin's wake and how, after the party marking the publication of my book, we walked to the cemetery to place a yellow wreath on his grave, blocking traffic as we did. Beverly was in her late thirties when we met, a tall, strong woman. Now in her eighties, she is one of the only survivors from those days back on Elm Hall. "You won't recognize it," she tells me.

GUSTAVE'S GRAVE STANDS A SHORT distance from the house, a simple concrete vault with his name, the dates of his birth and death, and the nicknames he was known by: "Putt" on the plantation; "Dusty" on the river. Cane surrounds the

A field of mature sugarcane by the roadside at Palo Alto

cemetery. By grinding's end, it will be reduced to stubble and return for another season. Beyond that, in a clearing, are the living quarters.

"This is where I lived," Rodney says, gesturing toward an empty lot next to the ruins of an abandoned house. The last tenant, a woman, liked flowers, and the bushes are overgrown but still in bloom.

Across the way, Rodney points out the rusted remains of the shop where his father worked as a mechanic's assistant. Beyond that, in the distance, had stood the quarters for white workers. Cane and weeds consume them, too.

"It was segregated," Rodney explains. "There was the white, this was the black, and the houses were much different. They were more up to date than we were."

Across the road, a neat, blue house sits alone—home to the migrant workers who now farm the land.

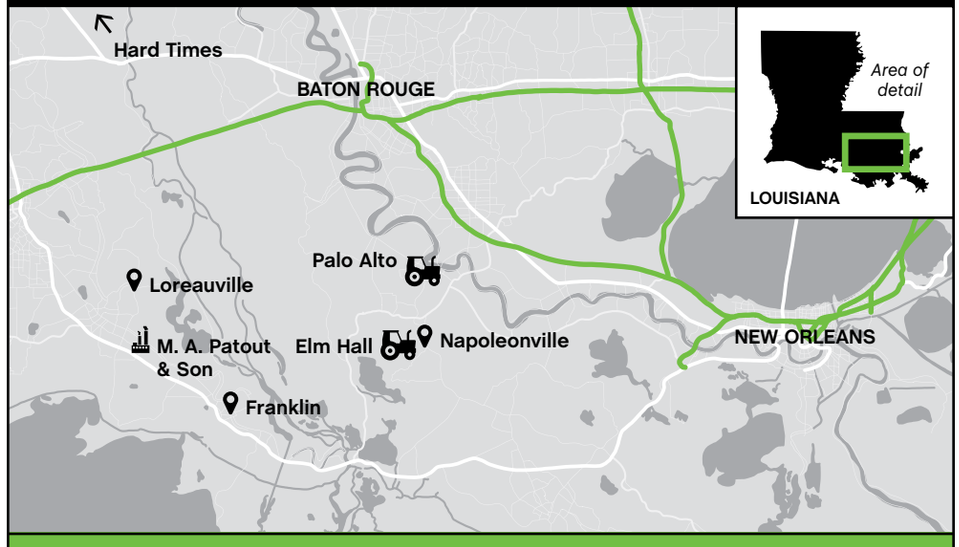
It is a sunny Saturday in October, and yet what I think about is a long-ago December day and the shouts of a man bearing news of Cleveland Benjamin's death, the sound of that man's feet hitting the damp packed earth as he made his way through the living quarters, past the house that now sits in ruins, past all the others that no longer exist.

I think of the African American workers who tended this land for more than two hundred years. And I wonder how many seasons the migrant workers will work these fields. Will their tenure be measured in decades or centuries? What will become of that little blue house, and who will tell the story of the people who once lived there?

Patsy Sims is the author of three books and the former director of Goucher College's MFA program in creative nonfiction.

SUGARCANE AT A GLANCE

Louisiana growers have cultivated sugarcane for nearly three centuries. Here's a snapshot of an industry outsiders know little about.



1750 | 1800 | 1850 | 1900 | 1950 | 2000

1751 Jesuit priests bring sugarcane to Louisiana

1795 Jean Étienne de Boré first grinds sugar on a commercial scale

1825 Simeon Patout founds Enterprise Plantation, now known as M.A. Patout & Son

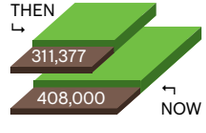
1972 Gustave Rhodes & Huet P. Freeman sue USDA for worker back wages

2018 Louisiana crop sets record for the most sugar produced in state history

LOUISIANA

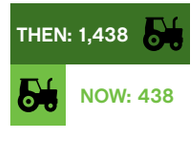
THEN (1972) & NOW (2018)

Acres harvested for sugar

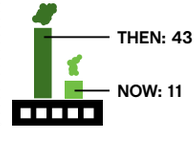


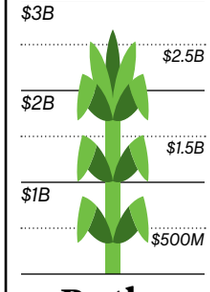
Pounds of sugar produced per acre

Sugarcane farms



Sugarcane mills





By the Dollars

In 2018, the Louisiana sugarcane industry generated $2.6 billion for growers and factories.

LABOR

Over the past three decades, migrant workers on temporary H-2A visas have slowly replaced locals in the cane fields.

300%

National growth of H-2A issuances for foreign agricultural workers since 2007

10,079

H-2A positions certified in Louisiana in 2018

THE PROMISE OF WOMEN-LED RESTAURANTS

How do you identify?

BY ASHLEY CHRISTENSEN

WHO AM I? THIS QUESTION HAS been on my mind since writer and activist Julia Turshen interviewed me for her podcast, *Keep Calm and Cook On!*. We talked about the betterment of our industry, equality, self-care, work-life balance, and love. The last question she asked me was, "How do you identify?" I said confidently, "I'm Ashley Christensen."

Afterward, my answer haunted me. It reminded me of how I feel every time someone asks me, "What's it like to be a woman chef? What are the challenges of cooking in an industry dominated by men?" It's how I feel when someone introduces me as "one of the best women chefs in the country" or invites me to cook a "women chefs dinner" alongside a group of badasses I know will work smoothly, neatly, without ego, and in harmony. In these moments, the word "women" feels like a marketing tool. I feel diminishment alongside the pride, because the accolades are contextualized by gender. My male peers never have to deal with that.

Throughout my professional life, I have addressed my thoughts on these issues, questions, and labels through action, but Julia's question showed me that there was a shortcoming in my approach of letting the work speak for itself.

Unlike the experience of many women in our industry, overt sexual harassment was absent from my journey in kitchens, and this was in large part due to the leadership and vision of the people in charge. As a defense, I was careful to not to say or do anything that would separate me from others in the room, whether by gender, sexual orientation, or beliefs and opinions. I put my head down and worked.

Opening my first restaurant, Poole's Diner, was the hardest thing I'd ever done professionally, but it also cemented my leadership approach. I worked like crazy to make it all come together, pushing myself to lead a scrawny but passionate team, and working alongside them with fervor to create an experience for our guests. I maintained my easy-to-digest persona, both to guests and to my team. It was genuine, and it dovetailed with my greatest professional goal of creating spaces that make people feel comfortable. But it wasn't a complete picture.

Photos by Cary Norton

After Poole's had been running for a few years, I decided to open a new project, Beasley's. I found an incredible space, but it was bigger than what I needed. The owner was willing to split it up, but I decided to take the whole space and create three separate concepts.

Within three months, I went from managing a staff of about twenty-five to a staff of over 100. I took on $1.2 million in debt, made up of an SBA loan and private investment—from two women, I might add. On the outside, I was all smiles and strength. I received a lot of attention from the community and beyond. I felt a responsibility to continue with the persona I'd been cultivating for years: warm and relatable and motivated by the work.

For the majority of my time as a business owner, I was a solo operator. As part of my "strength and positivity" narrative, I shouldered the terrifying risks, expensive mistakes, and disappointments. I was reluctant to share the reality of how difficult it all was with anyone. In the years that followed the opening of Beasley's, Chuck's, and Fox, I fell into a depression that I kept to myself.

My coping strategy for feeling completely overwhelmed, incapable, unworthy? Open more restaurants. The problem with defining your self-worth through work is that it can propel you into a cycle in which you avoid something

by moving on to a new, all-encompassing challenge. Two years after those projects opened, we opened Joule, a coffee shop. Two years later, in 2015, we opened Death & Taxes and a two-story event space called Bridge Club. We simultaneously opened a commissary kitchen to help service the restaurants and the events business.

It was a time of incredible growth, and that was the outward message that I shared with the world. On the inside, I was overextended in every way—mentally, physically, and financially. The company, too, was showing symptoms of this illusion-based thinking. We made mistakes, and things felt out of control.

I won't be so dramatic as to call it a rock bottom, but I did get to a place where I knew I had to make a fundamental shift, or I'd lose myself and what I'd worked for. I had to ask for help and lift the veil. I had to accept the parts of me that felt weak, vulnerable, or offensive. That included embracing who I am as a woman—specifically a gay woman—in a fuller, more realized way. I had to actively claim those things out loud.

It is a process. There are still moments when I find myself putting up a front. But thanks to a deeply caring, smart, hardworking team, and a dedicated partner in life (fiancée, actually), I've gotten better at leadership and am more fulfilled as a person. It's led to a realignment of how I lead. Strength, though still important, has made way for other qualities and behaviors, like confidence and transparency. I have coupled positivity with vulnerability.

In the last two years, I've been more honest with my teams, family, and friends than I ever could have dreamed of. I've been vulnerable about what I don't know, and invited capable people to the decision-making table to help me. I've gained confidence to speak out about things that may not be popular to everyone, but that are deeply important to me and my values. Most importantly, I've made three core promises for my business.

Mentorship

I restructured the company so I could actively mentor and motivate the team. If I hadn't come to terms with myself, I would have had a hard time accepting that I couldn't and shouldn't do it all. This new approach is working, by all the metrics that matter to me. It's made me realize that there is power in vulnerability.

Stewardship

Rather than figuring everything out inside a vacuum, I try to approach issues from a perspective of "let's develop a system that would be helpful for more than just us." I've been outspoken about the work we all need to do to create and maintain safe workplaces, and I've been vocal in questioning the way our industry measures success.

Hospitality

While I'm never going to hang a candidate's poster on my restaurant door, I have realized there are certain issues that are, at their core, issues of human rights. I can no longer stay neutral. Our guests provide us our livelihood, keep us inspired, and hold us accountable to our mission. We provide them comfort, help them celebrate and commiserate, and push them toward a more inclusive idea of community. If they don't want to be pushed, they don't have to be in a relationship with us, and that's OK.

WHAT I LIKE MOST is that these promises are impossible to achieve without the perspective and commitment of a diverse set of voices, including women, people of color, immigrants, and gender non-binary people.

I would not have been able to set down this path in any meaningful way without first finding confidence in the parts of me that once felt like a weakness. I hope that, by finding my voice and using it, speaking out about what I practice and why, without fear of humiliation or harassment, I will encourage others to do the same.

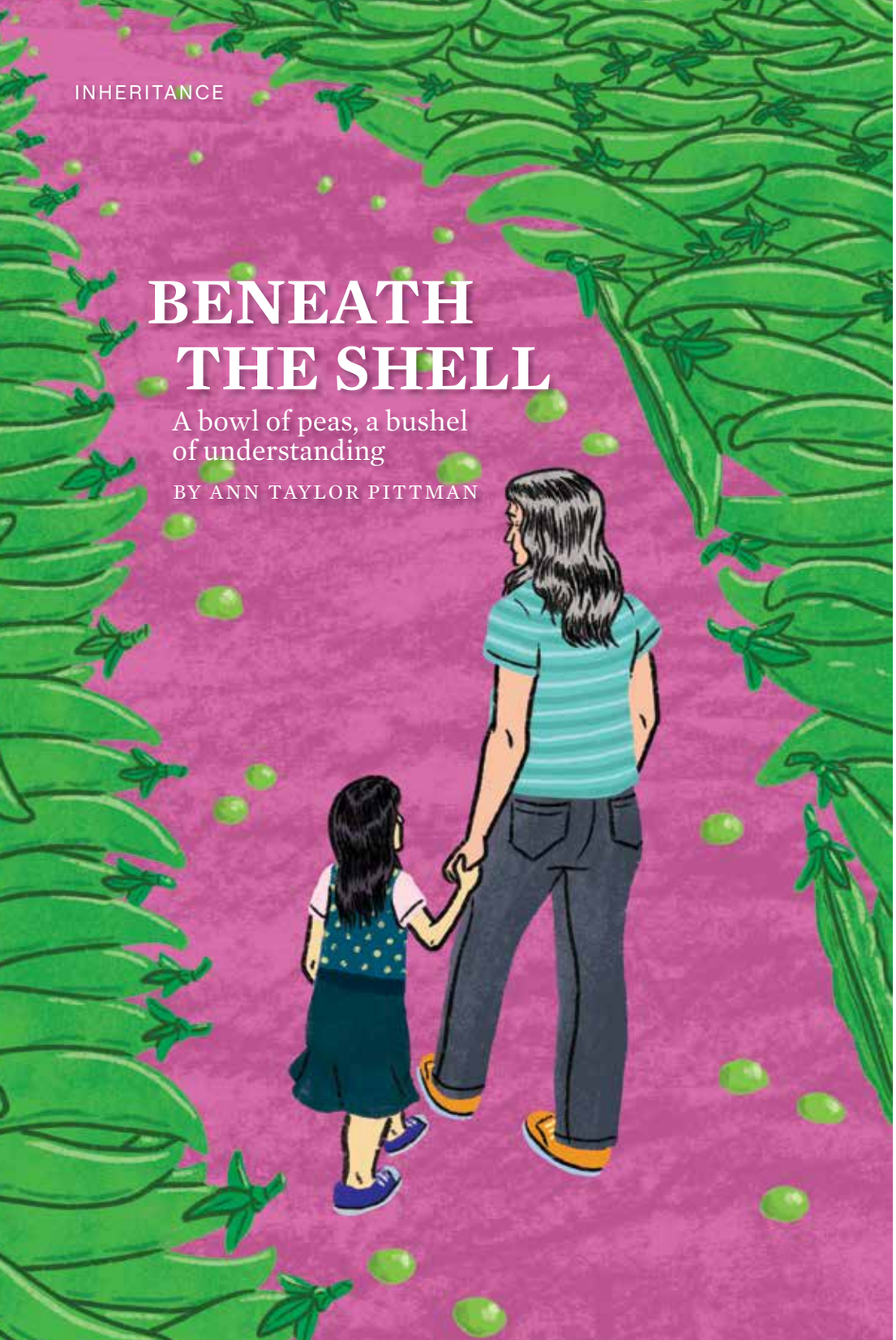
I'm Ashley Christensen, I'm a gay woman, I'm a leader, I'm a voice and a catalyst for positive change, and I'm an employer of many badasses who will be a part of making our industry the best version of itself—I promise.

Ashley Christensen is the chef-owner of AC Restaurants in Raleigh, NC. This article is adapted from her presentation at the 2019 SFA Winter Symposium and published in collaboration with Food & Wine. *Special thanks to Kat Kinsman.*

BENEATH THE SHELL

A bowl of peas, a bushel of understanding

BY ANN TAYLOR PITTMAN



Illustrations by Daniel Fishel

THERE'S A TRICK TO SHELLING peas. If you tear into a pod just right, you can pry open one seam all the way down like a zipper, revealing the seeds lined up inside. This is easiest to do with slightly dried-out pods that show the first signs of shriveling. Wait for them to get old enough to open up. Run your thumb along the length of the splayed-open pod, and the peas fall into the bowl with a satisfying percussive beat.

I learned this technique from my paternal grandmother when I was eight. That's when my older brother, Tim, and I spent a week in late July on our grandparents' ten-acre farm outside Grenada, Mississippi. Our house was in town, so this world seemed wild and exotic—tractor-furrowed rows of my favorite vegetables, a horse in a pasture, and a huge barn full of lumber and discarded machinery (including a *Star Trek*–like motherboard from the machine-coil factory where my grandfather worked for decades). Their land spread down a gently sloping driveway off the main road. It felt contained and isolated, their own private bottom.

On the first day, Tim and I played outside as long as we could, until Grandmama and Granddaddy coaxed us inside for supper. "Ben Haive," my grandfather said. "You be Ben [pointing to Tim], and you behave [directed at me]." It was a corny saying that didn't quite make sense, but it cracked us up and got our attention.

As a treat, they let us spend the night in the pop-up camper in the yard, sending us back out with sweaty glasses of cold sweet milk. We heard, or pretended to hear, the screams of what our relatives called panthers. We recounted our uncles' and aunt's stories of being stalked when they were kids, the distinctive click-clack of claws on blacktop a few paces back as they walked home in the dark. I don't know if they made these stories up to scare us, or if they really believed in them. If it was a scare tactic, it didn't work—I pictured a cartoon Pink Panther lolling in the yard.

Grandmama and I planned to spend a day together, just the girls. At that time, I was her only granddaughter. This was special. But the idea of being alone with her filled me with dread; she was as foreign to me as I must have been to her. She was always humming gospel tunes. Her hands, the skin puckered and tenderized by wet kitchen work, smelled of onions (a clue to why her vegetables tasted so good). She was a tall, plump, deeply religious white woman who had lived near Grenada all her life—very different from my petite and slender Korean mother, the only other woman I really knew. I imagine that Grandmama searched my face but, disappointed, found no echoes of her family there.

We spent our day picking and shelling peas from the garden. My grandparents grew crowders and purple hulls and butterbeans, too. While I adored the purple hulls, I despised the crowders, which seemed muddy, too starchy, slightly bitter (the qualities that make me love them now). They also grew tomatoes, okra, corn, yellow squash, onions, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and all kinds of peppers. None of those would give us enough activity to fill a day. So peas it was, and we focused on purple hulls, my favorite.

The long garden rows offered no shade from the sun's merciless heat, but the picking went fast. That's because I impatiently grabbed handfuls of irregularly ripened pods—some inky purple and some still too green—yanking more than a few stems with them as I shoved them into a Sunflower grocery sack. Then we sat on the rusted glider in the breezeway, moving to the rhythm of the gospel music crackling from the transistor radio.

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.
Because He lives, all fear is gone.
Because I knooow-oooooh-oh He holds

the future,
And life is worth the living
Just because He lives.

Grandmama belted that one out like nobody's business, her voice shaky on the high notes. I would have much preferred The Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival, or, my favorite from my parents' music collection, Queen. Even at that age, I found her gospel to be presumptuous and a little too instructive.

The shelling took the bulk of the day. We emptied our pods into scratched Tupperware bowls (mine green, hers yellow). After the initial attempts at conversation failed—her telling me all the goings-on in her Church of God congregation, my trying to explain what a Wookiee was—we fell into silent, concentrated work.

Grandmama shelled her peas with grace and ease. That's how I learned the trick. She never outright taught it to me; I learned because I cared enough to observe. Because of my hasty picking, many of the pods in my sack did not comply. They were too young, with strong cell walls that resisted my attempts at opening. I mangled many; Grandmama made easy work of the more mature pods she had picked. It took me at least four times as long to fill my bowl as it did her.

When she saw me grow frustrated, she told me a story: "When I was a little girl," she said, looking in the distance, "and my daddy had me crank the cream separator, it sounded like the city of New Orleans." She pronounced it "New Orlyeans," as if the second word stuck to the roof of her mouth and her tongue had to scrape it down. I had no idea what a cream separator was or what the city of New Orleans might sound like or what it had to do with shelling peas. But I loved such a poetic idea coming from such a practical woman.

I wanted to ask her about a foggy memory that, even as a child, felt dark and ugly. It happened on Christmas Eve when I was maybe four years old. The whole extended family had gathered at my grandparents' house. Tim and I and our cousins looked out the front window at the flashing red light on the microwave tower in the distance. We knew it was Rudolph—never mind that the light blinked in that same spot every other night of the year. I heard raised adult voices from the next room and felt a tension that made my face prickle and burn. My grandmother's shrill inflection and my mother's thick accent rose above the rest.

I remember our family leaving earlier than we usually would on Christmas Eve, the ride back into town weighted with silence. My child brain could not grasp the complexity of what must have happened. Many years later, I would presume that the tension stemmed somehow from my mother's otherness, but I never knew exactly why. I still don't.

When we ran out of pods, my grandmother and I took our bowls into the kitchen. We'd worked all afternoon just for a damn pot of peas. Grandmama cooked finely chopped onions slowly in butter until they almost disappeared. If I had detected any crunch, I would have painstakingly fished out every last speck of allium from my serving. I was a picky eater, in that contradictory childlike way: I claimed to hate raw onions, but I loved the "rice" on a McDonald's hamburger.

She added the peas, covered them with water, sprinkled salt and pepper, and brought the water to a boil. I skimmed the foamy scum as the peas simmered. The finishing step, what I've come to realize is probably the most important one, was to take the peas off the stove, cover them, and just let them sit for a while. They became creamy, tender, fully seasoned throughout—absolutely perfect. That night at the table, as we ate those peas with cube steak, sliced tomatoes, and boiled yellow squash, I beamed at my grandmother and relished the "secrets" between us.

We sat on the glider, moving to the rhythm of Grandmama's gospel music on the radio. I would have preferred The Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival, or Queen.

We repeated the pea ritual the next summer, and the next. The tradition may have only lasted a few years, but it punctuated my entire childhood. I learned to be more patient and more selective when I picked, and I got faster at shelling. I also came to look forward to this time with my grandmother, two Mississippi girls working together on a shared goal. She would recount the story of the cream separator each time, often more than once in a sitting. Maybe she knew how much I liked hearing it. Or maybe it was an early sign of the Alzheimer's that would overtake her decades later. Now, I realize she was talking about the train called the *City of New Orleans,* the separator roaring like a locomotive. But I prefer the romance of my childhood interpretation.

I love to shell peas. I find the slow, methodical work soothing, rich with nostalgia and melancholy. I can almost never find them still in the pods, though, so the ritual has faded into rarity. I often cook lady peas, and I use chicken stock instead of water. But my grandmother's method still makes the perfect pot. I've thought about trying to shell peas with my sons, now in their early teens. I hate to reinforce gender roles, but this feels like work to be shared between women. If I ever have a granddaughter, I will shell peas with her as I force her to listen to what she will think is terrible music—bands like Pixies or Guided by Voices.

I still don't know exactly what happened that Christmas Eve more than forty years ago. I am certain, though, that my mother and my grandmother eventually came to love each other. This love was expressed in the practical, self-sacrificing way a grandmother, a mother, or a wife labors over fertile dirt with seeds, hand tools, muscles, patience, and luck to feed the ones she loves. Late in my grandmother's life, when her farm was a distant, foggy memory and an assisted living facility was home, my mother would hold her hand and soothe her. While more and more things would become less and less clear to her, in those moments my grandmother remembered my mother—her daughter who had once seemed so different but had become family. And my grandmother remembered me, insisting proudly and persistently that I had her dimples.

Ann Taylor Pittman is a writer based in Birmingham, Alabama. For twenty years she worked as an editor at Cooking Light.

Photos by Eric Wolfinger

FROM FILLMORE WITH LOVE

Fernay McPherson drives a Soul Movement

BY LETICIA LANDA AND CALEB ZIGAS

IN 1961, WHEN FERNAY'S MOM, Loretta, stepped off the Greyhound bus after a three-day ride from Port Arthur, Texas, escaping the sticky heat of the South, Fernay's grandmother, Lillie Bell Riley, served fried chicken and pound cake to welcome her to foggy San Francisco. That wave of the Great Migration is long gone, but you can find its legacy still.

Fernay was born at Kaiser Hospital on Geary Street in 1977, the year Ella Hill Hutch was elected as the first female African American city supervisor in San Francisco, a year before Jim Jones's Fillmore Street utopian dream disintegrated, a time when African Americans made up 13 percent of the city's population.

By 1979, San Francisco's redevelopment agency was nearly finished bulldozing through the most vital parts of the Western Addition and Fillmore neighborhoods. The bulldozers erased 2,500 Victorian homes, displaced 4,729 households, and led to the closure of well over 800 businesses in the core of San Francisco's black community.

The 22 Muni bus runs the length of Fillmore Street. It passes by Fernay's family home on McAllister. In that proudly purchased home, Fernay's mother served barbecued meatballs and Pace Picante–laced spaghetti, then popular products in a modern woman's kitchen. But it's the mac and cheese that Fernay remembers most from those days; that's what her mother would bring to parties.

"The whole hood would come out to the block parties," Fernay remembers. You might have caught Fernay getting low with the Get Low, rocking a "Fillmore Kickin' It" T-shirt while JD Walker cooked ribs in between DJ sets. Farther south on Fillmore, the 22 passes the former site of Virgo's, a black-owned convenience store that served as

community center and the center of Fernay's childhood world. At Virgo's, you could get anything from hot links to Kool-Aid pickles, and if they knew you well enough, they'd let you pay on credit. Everyone in the neighborhood knew Fernay. She was that hustle-harder type, selling enough Betty Crocker cupcakes to fund a bowling trip for school in her crisp white tees and Girbaud jeans—never knockoffs.

The 14 Mission is another city-life-blood bus, and Fernay drove it for a couple of years, a municipal employee just like her parents before her. While the Fillmore was being torn down, downtown was getting built up. You can get on the 14 near the Embarcadero waterfront, head through the Financial District's towers of capitalism and into stretches of a drug-plagued South of Market. The route winds through the Mission itself, from 16th Street all the way to 24th Street, through sometimes still-contested gang areas, to Fernay's high school, Mission High, and then past the city border and into Daly City. Driving that route, Fernay got all the beauty, the bounty, the banality, and the downright insanity of city living, distilled into a forty-five-minute ride. To take that journey is to know San Francisco—its streets and its demons. Fernay smiles when she thinks about it. "It's not an easy job."

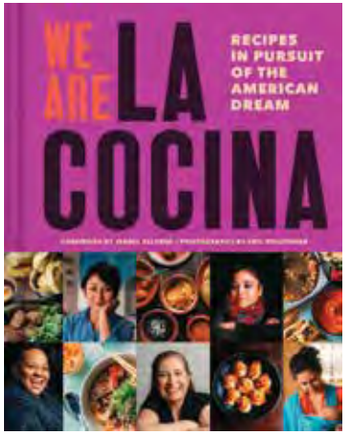
When she wasn't driving in the Mission, she was cooking in the Fillmore. In 1981, the city built the Ella Hill Hutch Center, a community space that replaced the courts right outside Fernay's house. When the Center, or the hood, needed someone to cater parties, they would call Fernay. When there was a barbecue or a baptism, she would pull out the recipes that her grandmother had taught her and get to work: baked turkey wings, her mother's macaroni and cheese, gumbo, okra, green beans, and rosemary fried chicken.

In 2012, Fernay joined a program from the Mayor's Office of Economic and Workforce Development that was designed to repair some of the damage from the earlier redevelopment by offering planning support and a mobile trailer to potentially viable food businesses. More than anything, Fernay wanted to cook for her neighborhood.

Her first shot was at Proxy, an innovative public space activation born out of the rubble of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in what had been the shadows of a now-dismantled freeway. The project opened with good intentions but would need to shake the specter of city-level decisions that had never worked out for Fernay's family and community. Fernay parked her Soul Movement truck amid city-funded Burning Man sculptures, reimagined public park space, and newly renamed neighborhoods like NOPA. Same streets, though.

On a sunny day in the city, Fernay waved as friends drove by her food trailer and leaned out the windows to holler hello on the new streets that had replaced the freeway that had divided their neighborhood from downtown. She served tritip sliders, slow-cooked and smothered with onions, handing them through the small window. Her sister and aunt helped her out, taking money and making conversation. To her left was a mobile juice cart, a rolling brick pizza oven, a coffee shop in a shipping container with a logo that recalled Communist Russia, and a German beer garden surrounded by a chain-link fence.

By 2016, the black population of San Francisco had decreased to forty-six thousand, 5 percent of the population, less than half of what it had been just forty years earlier. On a corner in what used to be the Western Addition, Fernay welcomed customers, and served the food that she had grown up eating in that very neighborhood.



We Are La Cocina hits shelves June 4, 2019

Customer after beaming customer would step up to order. After commercial transactions and pleasantries were completed, almost invariably the customer would look up to Fernay and her family in the truck, thank them for the food, and kindly offer, "Welcome to the neighborhood."

"Thank you," Fernay would say, "but we've been here."

Reprinted from We Are La Cocina *by Leticia Landa and Caleb Zigas with permission by Chronicle Books, 2019. Fernay McPherson is an SFA Smith Fellow. Find her mac and cheese recipe at southernfoodways.org.*

MY WORK AS A PHOTOGRAPHER HAS MOSTLY KEPT ME IN WESTERN places—Italy, Scotland, and all over the United States. As a Filipino American, I rarely see overlap between my inherited culture and the subjects of my photos. I am always the brown girl on the outside.

It was a gift, then, to be in Hong Kong. Although it was different in countless ways from my motherland, there were similarities enough that I could feel a little bit at home. My black hair was happily lost at sea in waves of more black. Families ate loudly, helping themselves from communal dishes and pushing food onto each other's plates. There were enough overseas Filipinos in Hong Kong to hear bits of Tagalog everywhere I went.

And on this particular morning, the streets were calm as I was on the hunt for congee, a rice porridge similar to the lugaw, or arroz caldo, my mother made for me. I hoped it would have chunks of ginger in it, too. The air was thick with humidity or steamed rice or both, and I basked in the perfume.

— CELESTE NOCHE, *photographer*

SFA GRAVY

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