

Cutting Time

Two generations of
change in cane country

by PATSY SIMS

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



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.



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 book¹ 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.



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 out of 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-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.



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

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 close-up, low-angle shot of a sugarcane harvester's cutting mechanism. The machine's heavy, rusted metal rollers are positioned to cut sugarcane stalks. The stalks are being processed, with their leaves and tops being removed. The background is a clear blue sky.

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

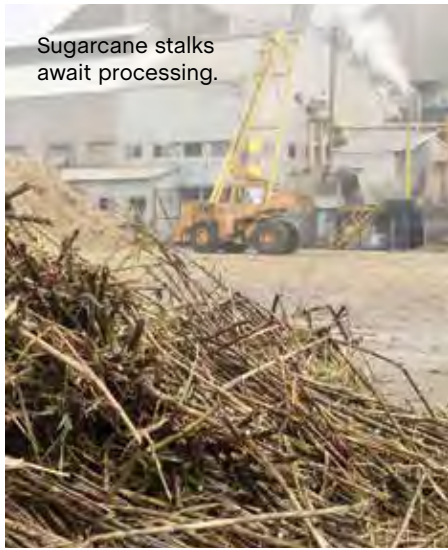
installing one of the latest “extras”—a yield monitor capable of weighing the raw cane as it is cut. The same technician designed the system, which he says anyone with a fourth-grade education can operate by turning the key and pushing a button. At the controls on this day is Judice’s twenty-seven-year-old 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



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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



Viola Freeman surrounded by her children and grandchildren

began a collective college fund so that, as Huet had hoped, his grandchildren can do more and do better.

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.



A Freeman family portrait from the late 1970s



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 Bizalio—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.

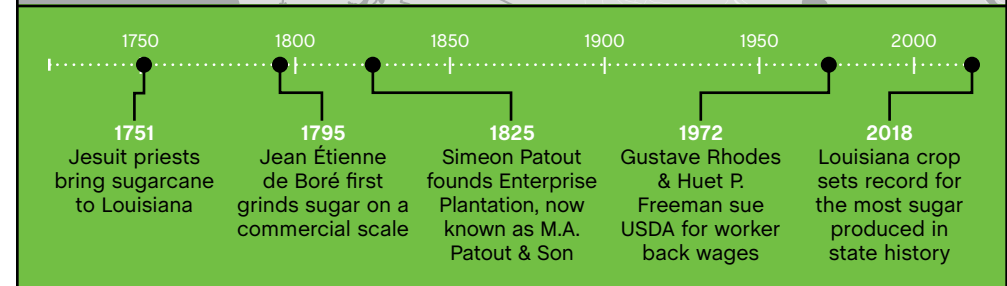
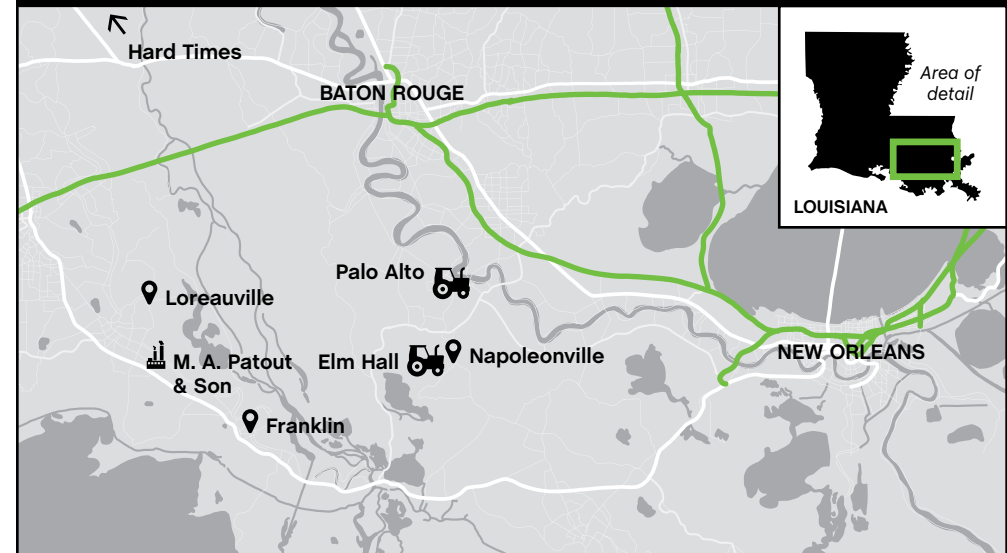
It is a sunny Saturday in October, and yet what I think about is a long-ago December day and the shouts of a man bearing news of Cleveland Benjamin's death, the sound of that man's feet hitting the damp packed earth as he made his way through the living quarters, past the house that now sits in ruins, 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? 🐦

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SUGARCANE AT A GLANCE

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



LOUISIANA THEN (1972) & NOW (2018)

Acres harvested for sugar	Pounds of sugar produced per acre
THEN: 311,377	THEN: 4,237
NOW: 408,000	NOW: 9,106

Sugarcane farms	Sugarcane mills
THEN: 1,438	THEN: 43
NOW: 438	NOW: 11

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

By the Dollars

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