

Memories of a Mississippi Childhood

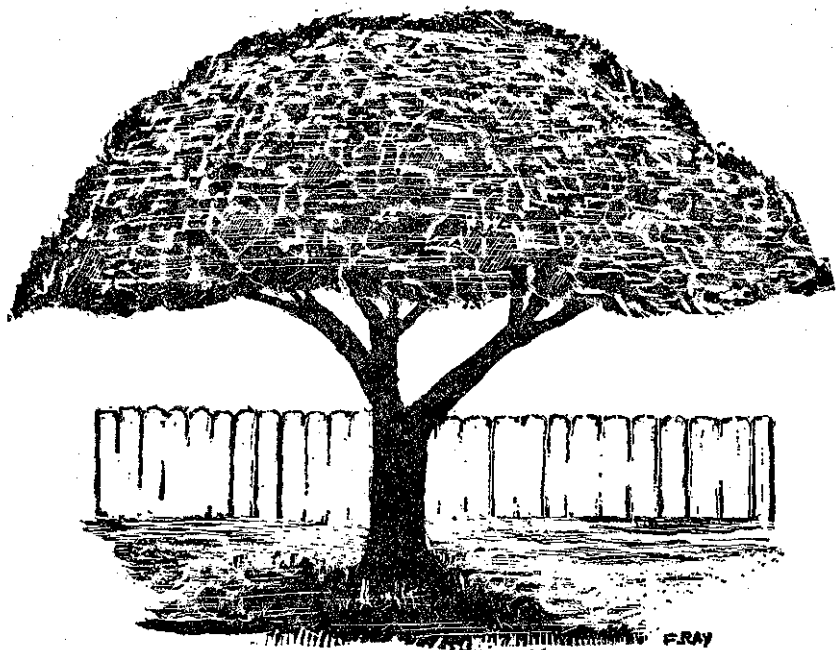
By ELEANOR BLUM

■ I grew up in the 1920's and early 1930's in a tree-shaded little Mississippi town of 35,000 nestling at the tail-end of the Appalachians in a countryside of sandy soil, short-stapled cotton, lean hogs, and skinny chickens. We were only a few miles from the village of Philadelphia which splashed into headlines last summer, although at that time it was scarcely more than a number of stills and an Indian reservation. Poor folks country, some called our part of the state, to distinguish it from the flat, black-soiled delta to the west where cotton staples grew long, and where the plantations were and the slaves had once been. Few of us in our part of the state had ever owned a slave; the soil was not fertile enough to have supported the institution. Placed in a literary context we were Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes*; we were Faulkner's Snopeses without his Sartoris.

A Johnny-come-lately among Mississippi towns, we got our start in the 1880's by accepting the railroad when older communities rejected it as an intrusion of privacy and dirty to boot. With the coming of the railroad, subsistence farmers moved into town to work in the yards or to start businesses, followed by Jewish peddlers. Those who were good businessmen prospered, and they and their children helped shape the town. Jew or Gentile, it made no difference. If you made money you were respected regardless of creed.

My own family was Jewish, although not descended from this group, and from first-hand experience I can say that I never knew

ELEANOR BLUM is an assistant professor and librarian at the College of Journalism and Communications of the University of Illinois. Her previous publications have been largely bibliographical and scholarly articles on publishing and communications.



prejudice. If I wanted to be snide I might say that the town was kind to its Jews, or that, prejudice being somewhat of a burden to maintain, there is room for only one underprivileged minority in a community. Rather, however, I think money and class are strong ties. Even more important, the Southern culture is all-pervasive, leaving little room for another. Within a generation our Jews had lost their orthodox ways. Chopped chicken livers made way for country ham; bagles and lox, for hot biscuits and chicken fried in lard. Our colored cooks could not cope with the intricacies of kosher rites. The few orthodox families who arrived later were somehow of a lower caste, running delicatessens and stores catering mostly to Negroes. They were accepted neither by Gentiles nor fellow Jews. But given time they would make the grade if they made the money.

It was a comfortable and pretty town. The rolling terrain, the prevalence of trees and flowers softened and flattered the mish-mash of architecture ranging in middle-class neighborhoods from late Victorian and imitation colonial to 1910 bungalows and pseudo-Spanish stucco, which was the latest word in the 1920's. Water oaks arched over the principal avenues and giant magnolias shaded

the front yards. Honeysuckle and columbine twined around fences, attracting hummingbirds. Crepe myrtle trees were everywhere, their branches all summer and well into autumn heavy with grape-like clusters fashioned intricately from shocking-pink blossoms. Chinaberry and fig trees grew in backyards of middle-class homes and front yards of Negro quarters, for even our plant life had a segregation system. What with this abundance of flowers and also of fruits and vegetables, the summers as I grew older began to seem endless and so excessively beautiful that I welcomed the bleak and restful monotonies of winter. Home from college on weekends, I would drive alone through remote countryside after the first frost, finding a stark beauty in the fields of withered corn and cotton stalks and in the long stretches of brown sedgegrass.

However, if you belonged to a middle-class white family your only cause for worry about overabundance was aesthetic. Certainly, it never made for extra work—the tending, the picking and the preserving—which we would have had to perform ourselves in other parts of the country. For a pittance, we hired Negroes to tend our gardens, our homes, and us.

I believe that the proportion of colored to white was half-and-half, but facts like this were too much taken-for-granted to be discussed as long as the supply of servants exceeded the demand, as it always did. Domestic service was the largest single source of income to most Negro families. Although some of the men performed semi-skilled labor like construction work, or truck driving, or loading or unloading cotton, an equal number were houseboys, delivery boys, janitors, and chauffeurs. Because pay was meager, men seldom made enough to support their families, so that women, too, hired out as cooks, nurses, and housemaids, or took in washing. And even this would not have brought in sufficient income except for that wonderful institution, the basket.

Middle-class white families ate bountifully of hot food freshly prepared three times a day and served at the dining-room table, set with white cloth and silencer. Only poor whites ate in the kitchen, which, for us, was the cook's domain. We served far more than we could eat, but nobody who was anybody lived skimpily. An abundant table was the mark of gentility.

It was also a mark of gentility for the lady of the house to

look the other way while the servants took home the leftovers in a large basket. However, a steady diet of scraps made slim pickings, and once again the mistress turned her head while the servants supplemented with flour, lard, butter, cornmeal, coffee. "They eat you out of house and home" was the phrase most often used to describe this practice, but the words were uttered fondly, as one might speak of a child's failings.

The commonsense solution, higher wages, never crossed anyone's mind, and if it had I am sure it would have been rejected on the grounds that "they" were natural-born thieves and would have helped themselves anyway. We did not, of course, really believe this. If we had we would not have permitted them to care for our homes and children. Too, we knew full well that valuable articles like clothing, silver, and jewelry did not disappear. But we preferred largesse to logic.

I became aware of this lack of logic at age ten. A family named Morgan, transferred from Indiana by Sears Roebuck, had rented the bungalow next door. People from so far away were a novelty, and although the neighbors on the whole liked the Morgans, we thought them strange. For example, why did Mrs. Morgan prefer to do her own work rather than to hire a servant and spend her time like the rest of the ladies at bridge, gossip, movies, driving, and shopping?

One summer afternoon while she was visiting us, Mother broached this question. Kate, the maid, had just appeared with napkined tray holding tumblers of Coca-Cola brimful of ice crushed by hand and decorated with wedges of lemon.

"My, Kate, how pretty!" Mrs. Morgan exclaimed. Kate, beaming gratitude, bowed out.

"You know, Mrs. Morgan," Mother said (women of that more formal generation never got on first-name terms), "I could get you one just like her. They're not expensive."

"It's not that," Mrs. Morgan admitted reluctantly. "I just don't want one."

"But why don't you want one?" Mother persisted.

"Well, it's just that I don't feel comfortable around them," Mrs. Morgan confessed. "How do I know they're clean?"

"Mrs. Morgan!" Mother exclaimed, as horrified as if she herself had been accused of being dirty, which in a way she had. "If they weren't clean, do you think we'd let them cook for us? Do you think we'd let them nurse our children?"

"But if they are clean," Mrs. Morgan reasoned, treading delicate ground carefully and apologetically, "then why do you mind their sitting by you at restaurants and movies? Why can't the children all go to school together? Not all white people are so clean, either," she digressed, naming a few examples from the fourth grade which Mildred and I had attended the previous winter. "Why do you let them cook for you but not sit down at the table with you?" She was not being sarcastic. There had been no Negroes in her Indiana community and she was genuinely bewildered by the inconsistencies.

"But you don't understand," Mother replied huffily. "It's just that they're different from us. We love them and take care of them and we just couldn't get along without them." She recounted numerous examples of the care we took of them, the castoffs we bestowed, the times we went to bat at the police station. "You just don't understand," she concluded sadly.

And I am sure Mrs. Morgan did not, nor did my Mother, nor did I. Our relationship with our Negroes did not function on the level of understanding. It functioned on the level of pure, unsullied emotion.

The Negroes did not seem to mind. Such resentment as may have existed lay so far below the surface that it was unapparent to the whites they served. If they harbored bitterness, they hid it well. But I doubt that they did—not at that time. I think that they accepted their poverty, their servitude, their shanties on stilts as part of God's law, like seasons and birth and death. And so did we.

From the time I learned to drive a car when I was twelve (we had no state regulations) I spent much time in the Negro quarters chauffeuring. Neither of my parents drove, and I took Maggie, the cook, and Kate, the housegirl, back and forth. I picked up Ruby, our dressmaker, who sewed out by the day. I delivered and called for our laundry.

In this way I came to know quite well the various Negro quarters scattered about the town. Today young Southerners say to me that they dare not enter Negro neighborhoods alone. Perhaps the decades since World War II have made the difference, for I never felt fear, and I am sure no cause for it existed. In fact, I loved the quarters. As I have said, I had no social consciousness as we know it today. Why should I? We fulfilled our obligations well. Social responsibility meant paternalism. Most Negro families had their white families who helped them, and they in an entirely different manner helped us. Indeed, we passed rigorous judgment on the way in which whites treated their Negroes. To be mean or stingy was to be poor white trash, than which there was no greater stigma—so many of us having so recently worked ourselves out of that category.

In any case, I would wander through the winding dirt roads in my model-T Ford, with clear conscience and happy heart. Sometimes I used even to go with no errand at all, poking around this and that little street very slowly to avoid skinny dogs and chickens fed off the leavings of our leavings. Impressed by a way of life so foreign to our own, I would see the picturesqueness but not the poverty.

What drew me? I never tried to analyze it then; as a community we were not given to self-analysis. Now, however, I know that I was fascinated by the difference between that world and my own. To understand this, remember that Mississippi is one of the most isolated parts of the United States. Except for an occasional transfer by a national firm, as in Mr. Morgan's case, there was little in our cotton-railroad-lumber economy to attract Northerners, as we termed all non-Southerners. In fact, the Morgan family was such an exception that when Mildred Morgan first entered our school several children threw small rocks at her because she "talked different." Mildred, an attractive child, was soon accepted; I mention the incident to show how unfamiliar most of us were with any accent except our own.

A great part of my childhood was spent wondering what people in other parts of the world were like. Once on my way to school, shortly before the Morgans arrived, a big car with an Iowa license came slowly up the hill, and I went charging after it to see

what manner of people Iowans were. God knows what exotic species I expected, and it is just as well I did not outrun the car. But at the time, my failure so disappointed me that, big girl that I was, I sat on the curbstone of somebody's terraced lawn and wept. Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee—these bounded my world. My explorations of the Negro quarters were my foreign travel.

Unpaved, grassless, with sandy soil deeply eroded and shanties unpainted and sagging, the quarters would have depressed any normal stranger. But to me, the shacks, built precariously on high stilts to prevent flooding during rainstorms, seemed picturesque rather than rickety; the glow of kerosene lamps, softer than electricity; the zigzag paths fashioned by feet often bare, more interesting than our straight brick sidewalks; the tangled flower patches wild with color, more exciting than our neat gardens. The inconvenience of backyard wells and tumbledown outhouses never got through to me.

Nor was I altogether wrong in seeing the quarters as foreign territory. In point of culture, distance can have little meaning. I was as far away from my prim Anglo-Saxon world as if I had traveled thousands of miles. Although the Negroes professed Protestantism, their brand was warmer and livelier, stemming from Africa rather than Calvin. Even the sunlight possessed a different quality due to lack of shade; for here no one had planted ordered rows of oaks, and the sun beat down hot and fierce, unobstructed except for an occasional umbrella-like chinaberry tree. The noises, too, were different. Voices were more resonant, less nasal than ours, laughter easier and deeper, yet closer to the surface. Though I had no desire to be a Negro, I envied what seemed to me their carefree, irresponsible existence, like permanent childhood. It never occurred to me that they might carry their own burden.

However, not all our colored population lived in this fashion. A handful of middle-class, more prosperous Negroes, in the professions and small businesses, came much closer to us than to their own race in their way of life, yet not so close otherwise. We and the poorer Negroes were linked together by the patterned interdependence of our relationship. These others, with their independence, were linked neither to us nor to their own kind. Whiter, better

educated, better housed, and better fed than other Negroes, yet not so white, well educated, well housed, or well fed as middle-class whites, they were a minority within a minority. By our more affluent standards their plain solid housing, originally built for white people, was not very good; but by average Negro standards it was the height of comfort, with grass, electricity, and indoor plumbing. I found their small quarter too nondescript to merit exploration, and I would never have entered it except for Ruby Walker.

Ruby Walker, who sewed with high style, was one of the few links between the middle classes of both races. As a dressmaker she commanded a greater price than we could have afforded but for the fact that she lowered her prices in payment of an old debt. Years before, in another town in the far southern part of the state, my father had saved the man who later became her husband from hanging.

At this time, Father, a bachelor, had moved from New Orleans to the little Mississippi town to open a cotton brokerage. Joe Walker, young, strong, handsome, and single, was the best of his crew of Negroes who hauled the heavy bales about. Even when cotton was not in season there was much to be done with it, and the men worked a nine- to ten-hour day, with only Sundays off. Joe was in charge.

All week he worked very hard, and on Saturday night he played equally hard. Saturday nights were for women, liquor, and gambling, with the gaiety ever so often ending in a brawl and Father bailing Joe out of jail Sunday morning. "One of these days you'll go too far," Father used to warn.

One night his prediction came true. Joe killed a woman from Natchez while he and she were drunk. He had accused her of cheating at dice, and she went after him with a knife, nicking him on the shoulder. An enormous woman, physically his equal, she wrestled with him on the floor. No one could pull them apart. Finally, Joe turned the knife back on her just to stop her, so he said, but he cut an artery, and when the doctor arrived she was dead.

"What chance has he got?" my father asked the chief of police at four o'clock Sunday morning.

The chief shrugged. "That's up to you." Courts had little patience with Saturday night carryings-on in Niggertown. Still, this had been self-defense. With a good white man back of Joe a case could be made. "It'll take a top-notch lawyer, though, and it'll cost you plenty."

Father, never stingy, did not hesitate. Even if he had been stingy, he would still have had the obligation. To abandon one's Negro could be very damaging to what we now call one's public image. So at considerable cost Joe was freed.

Joe left jail a chastened man. Knowing he could never repay Father financially he did what he considered next best and offered himself for life. "I'm your man, sir," he said. "Just say what you want me to do and you got it done."

Father did not want a slave. However, he took advantage of the situation and ordered Joe to settle down and marry a nice steady girl right away. "You know the kind I mean," he said.

Joe did. In fact, he knew two, both of whom had had a baby or so by him. "Now which, sir?" he asked, describing them.

Father, by now recently married himself, tossed the question to his bride. After investigation, she favored Ruby Simmons, who was from an excellent colored family and sewed beautifully. "Joe can marry her and she can sew for me."

Thus it came to pass that Ruby sewed for us. My father used to say that Joe's marriage worked out better for Mother and Ruby than for Joe and him, because Mother gained a seamstress while he lost his best cotton-sampler. He also said, only half in jest, that it might have been better for Joe to have hanged. The dimpled, *café au lait* girl he married turned out to be formidable, with vast ambitions narrowly channeled toward the goal of respectability for herself and her rapidly increasing family. Within two years after the Walkers accompanied my parents to their new home, Joe switched to a white-collar job selling burial insurance.

In spite of the change, he and Father remained close until my father's death years later. Theirs was one of the few friendships between blacks and whites that broke the color barrier, though not openly. Over corn liquor, made by our bootlegger in a still deep in the Philadelphia hills near the spot where the three civil rights workers were to be murdered years later, they

visited by the hour at Father's office. When father was dying, during the mid-1940's when hospitalization and help were hard to get, Joe, no longer young, came every evening after his work to care for him like a nurse.

I did not like Ruby nearly so well as Joe. Ruby put on too many airs. By the time I knew her, she had grown stout in a disciplined, well-corseted way, and sat at the sewing machine with the dignity of an empress. Her speech was as disciplined as her figure, her English the purest I heard from anyone, black or white, with each word emerging from her lips clean and rounded, the final *g*'s nailed down as though in punishment.

Bad blood existed between Ruby and Maggie, our cook, whose side I took. Maggie—mahogany-colored, wizened, monkey-featured, and not only illiterate but unable to tell time—was gentle and beautifully mannered, and the best cook I have ever known. She seemed to me a far greater lady than Ruby, for her manners were innate rather than put on. Final *g*'s meant nothing to Maggie, but kindness a great deal.

Ruby refused to eat with Maggie in the kitchen. Since she obviously could not eat in the dining room with us, she had to be fed in the sewing room. Maggie, for all her gentleness, balked at serving her. "Uppity," she pronounced, lips tight. So it fell to me to take Ruby her meals.

Ruby also refused to ride in the front seat of our Ford with Muck, Joe's replacement at the office, who doubled as chauffeur without uniform when I was unavailable. Ruby and Muck had a natural enmity that transcended race. Muck—small, lithe, beautifully made, but with a goat-like face—waged his private war against respectability. Both he and his wife, a schoolteacher, were wellborn, and, as Negro education went, well educated. But Muck was a natural rebel. Joe's Saturday night flings had sprung from *joie de vivre*, while Muck's were calculated. He was much too intelligent for his time and place.

I am sure no Negro now could get by with his unconventional behavior toward us. Our Ford being family as well as office car, Muck often drove Mother back and forth to town. On hot summer days he and his crew worked in blue jeans only, and when Mother summoned him he never put on shirt or undershirt. I can still

see my mother, a stately woman, hatted, gloved, powdered, rouged, and dressed to the hilt, being driven by Muck, naked from the waist up. Yet so secure were we all in our highly structured society that this never struck anyone as improper or even humorous. We allowed our servants their eccentricities.

By the same token, no one commented when I sat with Muck in the front rather than the back seat. Muck, a reverse snob, tried to make me get in the back where I belonged, but I insisted it was too much trouble. In truth, however, my refusal stemmed from subconscious protest against Ruby's treatment of Maggie and Muck.

Between insurance and sewing, the Walkers prospered. All of their children went to college and several to graduate school. One day when I was grown I congratulated Ruby on her family.

"Honey, it's our good white blood," Ruby explained, thanking me. Proudly she told me how some of the purest blood in Virginia flowed in her veins. Generations back an ancestress, a house servant in Tidewater Virginia, became the plantation owner's mistress. While he was in England disposing of his tobacco, his wife sold the girl and her infant daughter down the river. Upon his return he traced them to New Orleans and bought them their freedom, but dared not take them back to Virginia. Instead, he set them up with ample allowance in a small house in Natchez. Smugly, Ruby told how successive generations almost succeeded in breeding themselves white. Indeed, some of them did go up the river and passed. Ultimately they might all have done so had not Ruby's recalcitrant grandmother married into a colored family and bred them black again.

Ruby, of course, did not put it this bluntly. Nevertheless, her pride in the various liaisons the women of her family had maintained with men of good family was evident, and so was her disappointment that one of them had finally settled for marriage with a Negro. Ruby set greater store on whiteness than on marriage.

Yet, given the time and place, her attitude was natural. Most middle-class Negro families were light-skinned and proud of it. Ruby's white blood was her status symbol. From the points of view of both races, nothing was wrong and much was right with the intermingling of black with white blood as long as it was mixed in the approved manner—the male white, and the

female colored, and no wedlock. Such relationships were standard practice ranging from casual encounters to liaisons of such long standing as to amount to common-law marriages. It was well known that some of our most prominent white men had colored families on the side. The fact that they kept Negro mistresses—indeed, the fact that they kept mistresses at all—enhanced rather than tarnished their reputations. It took money to maintain two families and showed gentlemanly instincts to provide for them well.

Most of our middle-class Negro population consisted of descendants of these liaisons. It was almost impossible for a Negro, however bright, to get his own business or educate himself unaided. Frequently a white father or grandfather had given him his start. Even as a child I learned to identify certain of these light-colored Negroes by their white families, just as I learned to identify Negro servants by the white families for whom they worked. I pitied neither Negro nor white.

All my pity was reserved for the poor white. Being a different color was a barrier, but being the same color was no bond. The millworkers and subsistence farmers had a much harder time than the Negroes. I must surely have driven through the Negro quarters on many a dull day, yet I can remember only the special brightness of sunlight, while I remember the mill district in terms of grayness, as a place where sun never shone. Nevertheless, I went there during all seasons, driving my father on business. The particular mill he dealt with was of dark, dilapidated brick, like a prison only worse, for our jail was a nice new building with garden. But no one would have dreamed of landscaping the mill, which set squarely in the midst of a sandy yard on which a few patches of grass survived like hair on a mangy dog. Some of the window panes were broken, their gaps filled with corrugated paper. As I waited in the car I could hear the whirr of machinery. To work here day after day seemed the worst possible fate.

The millworker's homes were scarcely better. Either the people were too tired to garden or didn't care; whatever the reason, their streets were flowerless, treeless, and their shoebox houses as neglected as the mill itself. And from what I knew of millworkers, their lives were as barren as their streets. Except for Holy Roller meetings, at which there was said to be much shouting and coupling,

they had no gaiety. I pitied them as I did not pity our servants, who had us to look after them.

At the beginning of the Depression, the millworkers tried to strike. At the first whisper, one of the owners, old and ailing, simply closed his mill. A rumor spread that an organizer from up North came down to interfere and was tarred, feathered, and ridden out of town on a rail. Shortly thereafter some of the men banded together and marched through the downtown district at midnight, breaking store windows and taking food. The police quickly stopped them. I do not remember whether or not anyone was jailed. No mention of any of this except the closing of the mill made the paper.

I had opportunity to know the rural poor whites far better than the city ones. As I have said, we were not plantation country. Our more prosperous farmers had none of the style of Delta cotton-planters. They lived comfortably if tackily in big, plain houses, and were too much like us in town to interest me.

Rather, I liked to visit the subsistence farmers in their dogtrot shanties. (For those who do not know, a dogtrot shanty is an H-shaped house joined by a breezeway through which occupants must pass even in coldest weather to get from room to room. The style of architecture was inspired by the superstition that death will come to anyone who crosses directly from one room to another.) Except for my father's occupation and his inability to drive I would never have known this backwoods country; and even so, Muck could have taken him. Indeed, his trips were not really necessary, for no profit lay in the purchase of a few scattered bales. But over the years he had become interested in these small farmers, whose business could not be transacted by telephone because they had none, any more than they had electricity or running water.

He liked to chat with them and their families, to catch up on happenings since last year's crop was in. Sometimes, when the quality of cotton was poorer than usual or the price was down, he would berate them with agricultural advice. "Damn fools, the lot of you," he would say gruffly. "You plant too much cotton. Try peanuts. Try sweet potatoes. Try a few pecan trees. Rotate your crop." His advice was well meant and well taken but never followed.

Curiosity drew me on these expeditions. I enjoyed seeing what

it was like off the main road, and finding out how other people lived. In contrast to town, vegetation was bleak. Narrow sandy roads, often of red clay and slippery as glass when wet, led through eroded land dotted with scrub pine and largely uncultivated. We would turn from this road to a still narrower one, scarcely more than a cowpath but cleared so that the family car, usually a decrepit Ford, could get through. Finally, in the midst of a field we would see a shanty with an icebox on the porch. Chickens scratching in the yard would scatter wildly at our approach. The men would come out of the fields with slow, shuffling gait to greet us, followed by women and children.

Everything about these people seemed pallid and diminished, their clothing faded, their skins pasty in spite of hours in the open, their eyes lackluster, their hair thinning, their teeth untended. They had none of the Negro's vitality.

A classmate of mine named Earleen, who spent her first two years out of college teaching in the backwoods (a fate worse than death but considered necessary to get proper experience for city teaching), told me a story which illustrated their physical condition. Earleen noticed at once that the children's hands were perpetually raw from scratching. Obviously this was itch, a condition common in our part of the country. On her first weekend home she bought little jars of itch remedy which she distributed to her pupils. Two weeks later they showed no improvement.

Shortly thereafter the principal summoned her. Did she know that she had gotten the parents all stirred up with her little jars?

But why? she asked. Why on earth? Nobody wanted itch.

These people did, he explained patiently. They were a proud people, and you weren't supposed to notice the scratching. They were used to their ills. Some of the best families in Moundville community had always had itch and their parents before them, though they never named it. Naming it was admitting it. Itch was a familiar friend, God-given, hereditary, like the poorness of the soil and the long, hard hours of field work.

Poor cotton was also a familiar friend. They ignored my father's advice to plant other crops, but they made us very welcome. There would be much handshaking, and someone would fetch a jug of homemade corn whiskey to pass around among the men, with

Father, the honored guest, drinking first. Often, if the season was right, one of them would go to the fields to fetch me a stalk of sickly sweet sugar cane, which I would politely chew on.

Although not consciously a reformer, Father had a second and non-agricultural mission with these farmers. He tried unsuccessfully to wean them away from Bilbo—which brings up the subject of Mississippi politics.

Like the rest of the Deep South, Mississippi was a one-party state, with everyone a Democrat and the real runoff at the primaries. The arena was the courthouse square or a clearing in a hamlet, rather than the living room with the TV set, as now; and the level of interest was local rather than national. Hot summer nights the candidates made their pitch on the courthouse lawn. Bleachers and a platform were erected, and the spotlight focused on the speaker, behind whom loomed the inevitable statue of a Confederate soldier. Everyone dressed up for the occasion, the men in seersucker suits, the women in voiles and linens, fanning themselves with fans distributed by the local funeral parlor.

Seldom was so little said so eloquently. There were men in the state whose careers consisted of running for office. Through experience they became silver-toned orators, experts in raising and lowering the voice, masters of the vindictive and the wisecrack. Regardless of content, delivery was masterful, and so was its prelude. Gubernatorial candidates in particular put on a fine show, with bands and drum majorettes and even on one occasion the state's champion hog-caller, and on another its most distinguished beagle hounds.

County electioneering was different. The unctuous, suave, impeccably dressed candidate who had addressed city folk the day before arrived to stump the backwoods with a cud of tobacco and without a shave. Coatless, tieless, sweating with fervor, he would mount the rickety porch of the general store to speak to his rural constituents. Tattered posters advertising Clabber Girl baking powder and bygone circuses were the backdrop for his one-man show. He bayed and pranced, wailed and boomed, as he extolled himself and castigated his opponent. For the delighted crowd, he was beagle hound, drum majorette, hog-caller, and high school band all rolled into one. When tension reached its height, he would come to a dramatic pause. In the city at this calculated moment he would have taken several swallows from a glass of water. Here in

the backwoods to ease his throat he spit—away from the audience and wind, of course: if there was a spittoon within a dozen feet, he could hit it unerringly. Resuming his oration, he would lower his voice to a resonant whisper and slowly work his way back up to a climactic boom. For vote-gathering purposes, no performance could top it. Finally, the speech over, he would mingle, shaking hands and stopping now and then to bite off a chew from a plug of tobacco. Zero, Enterprise, Hickory, Why Not, Molly Stop—no hamlet was too small for a visit. These men had real talent, and some were able politicians as well.

But few were honest. Now and then a politician both able and honest got elected, though not often. For one thing this style of campaigning was unsympathetic to the scrupulous, intelligent young lawyers who decided to try politics. Appealing to reason, they could not hold the crowd. More important, however, these young men seldom had the backing of the Bilbo machine.

During most of my years in Mississippi, Theodore (The Man) Bilbo ruled. Bilbo's path to power was strewn with graft, but his multitude of supporters did not care. He aimed at the illiterate poor whites, the underprivileged who constituted most of the voting population, and was indifferent to the middle class except for those few essential to his machine. Many of his votes were said to be bought for a dollar each. Yet I doubt that the dollar alone got his support. His strength lay in his first-rate showmanship and his illusion of concern, which the dollar perhaps helped to foster. The fact that the schools and highways and other good things he so eloquently promised seldom materialized did not disturb his supporters, whose devotion lacked logic or ethics.

Once when I was earning extra money selling textbooks at a local store during the fall school opening, I waited on a stooped, skinny little farmer with eyes and blue jeans of the same washed-out color and the smell of dry sweat. It being a rainy noontime with no other customers, he lingered to talk. We began with the poor cotton crop but in no time got around to Bilbo, who was running for office in spite of a devastating scandal. It had just been made public that he was misusing a large sum of money appropriated for highways to build himself a mansion in a pecan grove, which he referred to as his dream palace. True to form, nobody seemed to mind.

As I suspected, the farmer planned to vote for him.

"But how can you vote for a man who admits he stole thousands of dollars to build himself a dream palace in a pecan grove?" I inquired. Here was no Robin Hood, robbing the rich to give to the poor, but a crook, taking from the poor to give to himself.

"Miss," he replied, looking at me long and hard with watery eyes that held pity and contempt, "you got a lot to learn." He shifted his cud of tobacco from one cheek to the other, and for a moment I thought he was going to spit on the floor. "Any man what'll admit he stole thousands of dollars, no matter for what to build, is a goddam honest man."

Small wonder that Bilbo was the most powerful politician in my world. Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, even the great FDR himself, just come to power, did not loom so large as Bilbo; nor did the Presidency of the United States loom so large as the governorship of Mississippi. Black or white, well-to-do or dirt poor, we did not think on a national level. Harding's Presidency with its scandals failed to disturb us. We had bigger and better scandals at home. More disturbing was Al Smith's candidacy. I remember hearing that it would never do to elect a Catholic. Yet no one, I am sure, crossed party lines, although many did not vote. Our world centered around Jackson, not Washington.

Middle-class whites had always opposed Bilbo, but more in word and ballot than in deed. Blacks, of course, had no say. Our indolent way of life did not prepare us for the energetic campaigning necessary to topple him. Violent action went against our grain. It was unseemly, impolite. Besides, bad schools and roads and state hospitals were to us like itch to the poor whites of the backwoods. We knew no better. The fact that Bilbo was a redneck who had never picked up a gentleman's ways bothered us more than his dishonesty. I remember my shock, on my first trip to Jackson, at seeing a row of geraniums in coffee tins in front of the governor's mansion. What a poor thing it was to be represented in the highest office by so unrefined a governor!

At last, however, Bilbo did succeed in arousing middle-class wrath. Either feeling invulnerable or driven by necessity, he began filling administrative positions in the state colleges with his henchmen. The president of our woman's college, a courtly old gentleman,

died my sophomore year (at his funeral each girl filed past, dropping a rose on his casket), and was replaced by a Bilbo man. We had rightfully been proud of our president, although by the time I came to college he was slipping. Recently widowed, he embarrassed the girls by overtures of friendship. I realize now that he was lonely, in failing health and perhaps afraid. He would cross the street from his house, or mansion, as we called everything, to the campus each evening after supper to fraternize. Slipping a fatherly arm about our shoulders he would engage us in conversation about family and studies. We cringed from his overtures, not because he violated us in any way but because he violated our image of a college president by seeking us at our level rather than his. We wanted a god, not a daddy. Nevertheless, when he performed his duties of presiding at banquets or introducing distinguished speakers he presented a proud figure. To the end he was a marvelous presider.

His successor was not. I cannot remember the occupation from which Bilbo elevated him to the presidency, but nothing in it had prepared him for public speaking. It did not bother us that he lacked the required degrees, for let it be said for Mississippi that it was not a degree-conscious society. He never embarrassed us, either, by seeking our companionship. Far worse, however, he humiliated us before the outside world by his monstrous misuse of the language. When he introduced speakers we cringed at his "this here's," his double negatives, and his numerous other grammatical atrocities.

While we worried about his English the Southern Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges worried about his lack of degrees. Public schools were forced to question our qualifications to teach. As Bilbo continued to replace incumbents with his henchmen throughout Mississippi, professional associations repudiated graduates of all state schools. Middle-class Mississippians, seeing their children humiliated and deprived of livelihood, became truly aroused for the first time. Their wrath coincided with Bilbo's downfall, and I have always felt that it contributed.

For several years after he lost power he continued to hold office. For a while he was in the Senate where his fellow senators tucked him away keeping a scrapbook. "Pastmaster General," he

dubbed himself. Toward the end of his life he was a ludicrous rather than a powerful figure, and he ultimately died of cancer of the jaw, a peculiarly fitting location.

I cannot recall that Bilbo's decline made a difference in our politics. Other, less flamboyant figures succeeded him. Yet it was a relief to have proper flower pots instead of tin cans in front of the governor's mansion. What we most deplored about Bilbo, I think, was his lack of taste.

For above all else we admired gentility. Our code, geared to a traditional, semifeudalistic society, was based on courtesy rather than moral values. We, the ruling class, so to speak, were kind and paternalistic, with a deep sense of responsibility toward our servants and the old and less fortunate members of our families, although not toward the poor whites who occupied an ambiguous twilight zone. Centuries behind the times, we lived in a bygone age.

The economic and social reasons for this go deep into history. But regardless of reasons, we were an isolated, highly structured society. The larger world passed us by—a fact few of us recognized. Our community, our state, were all most of us knew or cared to know. Our behavior stemmed from ignorance rather than from Machiavellian design.

Our educational system fostered this attitude by sheer default. We were taught how to make a living, how to be ladies and gentlemen, but not how to question or doubt. Manners were more important than mind. Those few who were born with doubt or acquired it somewhere along the way usually left early or stayed on as misfits, tolerated because of family but treated with derision. Others quieted their doubts because the life was easy and good.

I and many others like me were forced out of Mississippi, not because we doubted but because we could not make a living. Unlike my friend Earleen, I was not willing to teach in the backwoods. Afternoon visits were one thing, permanent residency another. A year in New York taking graduate work and seeing what the rest of the world was like, and I would return where I belonged—so I thought. But once I had seen the larger world I was no longer so sure I belonged in Mississippi; and besides, no job materialized. I do not know how I would have felt had I returned. More important, I do not know how I would have felt if I had never left.