

Delta Studies Center

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Inside this issue:

Jesse James in Arkansas? Pat Snodgrass	2
Community Awareness Christine Perry McKenley	3
Delta Beyond 2000 Vaneta Williams Harvey	4
Poems from the Delta Rasheda Hamilton	4
On the road with Burr Swann	5
Greetings	6

A Message from the Center

By: Peggy Robinson Wright

So much talk these days about Y2K readiness, I cannot help but to think about the Delta Studies Center as we enter the new millennium. What does it hold for us? New contacts, partnerships and funding opportunities come to mind.

Because of the support and willingness of Dr. Wyatt to allow me to travel and promote ASU, I have been able to go out and build new relationships for ASU and Delta Studies Center. While

attending a conference in Robinsonville, MS early this year, I met a representative from a major foundation, The Ford Foundation, who I immediately introduced to Dr. Wyatt, who was in attendance also. From that meeting and introductions, we have been given a small 18 month grant of \$150,000 for the Delta Studies Center for staff capacity building and hosting of a regional Conference on Culture, Tourism, and Economic Development in the year 2001.

So, as we enter the new millennium, we, the staff of the *Delta Studies Center*, look forward to great things continuing to happen in the next few months.

Great things have been possible because of the support of all of you and so during this holiday season, to all of our many friends and supporters, I would like to take this opportunity to wish each of you a Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah, and a Joyous Kwanzaa.

Special points of interest:

- Jesse James Fact or Fiction?
- Poems from the richest land in the South, the Delta.
- Delta Listening Sessions: "Beyond 2000" What do the people of the Delta see in their future?
- Community Awareness
- On the road with Burr Swann, the Rural Development Project.
- Holiday Greetings





Jesse James in Arkansas?

By: Pat Snodgrass

Jesse James in Arkansas?

You've got to be putting me on! No, its true, according to the stories from around the Grubbs area, Jesse James did ride in Arkansas, as a matter of fact, quite a bit. In fact his first stage coach robbery was reported to have been right outside of the city of Malvern, which is located close to Hot Springs, Arkansas. Net haul for that robbery was between \$1000 to \$3000, back when the dollar was worth something. Jesse, Frank and some of his gang has just visited the warm springs of Hot Springs and were recuperating from wounds from their days with the Confederate Army.

Everyone talks about his or her job, but I have one of the most interesting jobs on this campus! I get to go into the different parts of the Arkansas Delta and talk to people. My goal is to try and get them to recall some of the interesting things that occurred in their earlier days and some of the true stories told to them by their parents or grandparents, concerning what they remember from the "good ole' days." And believe it or not they can corroborate it. So what is my job you ask? Well I work as an Oral History Interviewer for the Oral History Project, headed by the Delta Studies Center. A lot of my time is spent in the field with people of all ages. Talking to them about historical things, as well as the everyday things, that has happened to them or members of their family that was

passed on down the line and is now given to me, hence the "oral history project." What really happened and how it effected the people of the Delta, plus how the children of the Delta can benefit from our past mistakes and achievements.

Just imagine sitting down with your grandmother or grandfather and letting them tell you about their early days. You've all heard the stories where they tell you about how they "walked to school five miles every day in the snow and rain uphill both ways." Well I get to sit down and talk to all of those grandparents plus all the uncles, aunts, and everyday people and converse with them about 'yesterday'. I tape these sessions and then transcribe them into a printed format so that the future young people will be able to hear and see some of the everyday artifacts, which we call life, that are presented to the ASU Archives and Special Collections for the Oral History Project. These are records of families that have passed from one generation to another and now will be recorded in the archives of the ASU Library.

Okay, you may be wondering what this has to do with Jesse James? Well, according

to three different families that I have had the privilege of talking with remember and have stories from their grandparents, and parents.

Tales of when Jesse and his gang had a racetrack in Haw Haven Valley, an area close to the Cache River in the sloughs of Grubbs, Arkansas, on the edge of Poinsett and Craighead county lines. The story centers on the horse races. It seems that they would hold the races and then 'acquire', by whatever means, the fastest of the ponies that ran in the race. I understand they would even sometimes pay for these horses. Not that I would dare call Jesse James and his brother 'horse thieves.'

In my interview with Mr. Calvin Dawson, from Grubbs, Arkansas, he recalled his father telling him stories about when Jesse and his gang would race horses on a quarter of a mile racetrack over close to the county line. There they would pick up the fastest ponies by trading for or buying them from the owners. In one incident, an owner was reported to be a little hesitant about selling or trading his horse, and so one day his horse was reported to have, presumably, ran away. Not to long after this incident it just so happened that Jesse found the pony and was nice enough to take care of him for his hesitant seller.



Jesse James
Hot Springs, AR
1874

"Just imagine sitting down with your grandmother or grandfather and letting them tell you about their early days. "

Continued on Page 3

Jesse James continued

Mr. Dawson’s dad shared many stories about the races with him, and they were reported to have happened about two or three years before Jesse and Frank were killed.

Also in this area where Jesse James and his gang loved to race horses, there was a train track that ran through Pochontas, Walnut Ridge, Grubbs, and Newport, which took guests down to Hot Springs, Arkansas. It was reported that Jesse James use to visit the baths in Hot Springs, and it is said that he held up a stage, not to far from there, on January 15, 1874. In this robbery fourteen guests were held at bay and several of the victims swore that the hold-up gang

was the Jesse James crew. So the path for the racetrack is supported by the events that happened up and down this trail. A stage coach robbery in near Malvern, train robbery along the same area as Hot Springs, also in Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific, so the probability of these events happening in this area are very likely.

You can call it fiction or folklore, but in the minds of those who live in Grubbs, and Poinsett and Jackson counties these events are real, and you would have an extremely hard time convincing residents that these stories weren’t true. They are true, because their dads or grandmothers told them they were true and since they

lived it they should know. So goes the oral history report. Without the ‘word of mouth’ the South would be badly hurt for historical accuracy. One thing that you should always keep in mind is that most Southern pioneers were not able to read or write and therefore they had to totally rely on their memories to recall past events. And it is these memories that are past down from generation to generation that give us the ability to believe that Jesse James and his gang really did ride the neighborhood of Grubbs, Arkansas.

See, like I said I have the greatest job on campus, for I get all the stories from the people who know the facts!

Community Awareness

By: Christine Perry McKenley

In my short time being a part of the Delta Studies Center, the one thing that I have learned from my job is that the heart of the Delta is it’s people, especially one of it’s greatest assets, the children. On December 3, 1999, I got the opportunity to walk into a classroom and actually interact with our future. The children in Mrs. Patti Wallace’s class at the Crowley’s Ridge Develop-



Mrs. Patti Wallace’s class at the Crowley’s Ridge Development Head Start Program.

ment Head Start Program shared with me their love for life, their infectious energy, as well their creative talents. In my visit, they decorated ornaments for a tree that is being displayed at the Delta Studies Center for the holiday season. Through these children’s eyes you can see the future, and the future is as bright as we all want it to be. Through our work here at the center, we want to do our part in making the future bright for these children and one way of doing this is by getting involved with the individuals and organizations that are making

positive changes in the Delta. The Center feels that through these interactions we can accomplish positive change by giving our expertise and time to those organizations that need our help. We are currently involved with the Judd Hill Memorial Scholarship, Inc. in Trumann, Arkansas. The Judd Hill Memorial committee is working to pull together the individuals that grew up on or near a plantation named Judd Hill. It is through working with these organizations like the Judd Hill Committee, and volunteering in the public forum that the Delta Studies Center hopes to make positive changes that will insure a bright future for the Delta.



“Through our work here at the center, we want to do our part in making the future bright for these children and we do this by getting involved.”



Delta Beyond 2000

By: Vaneta Williams Harvey

The Delta Beyond 2000 Listening Sessions were held in four different locations in the Lower Mississippi Delta: West Memphis, Arkansas, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Cape Girardeau, Missouri. As an interviewer for the Oral History Project at Arkansas State University, I attended and taped the Listening Sessions in West Memphis and Cape Girardeau. Even though both are located in the Delta, the needs for these areas are very different.

Transportation, conserving our nature resources, and race relations were the main topics in West Memphis. In Cape Girardeau, Missouri the main topic was "Why are we not a part of the Lower Mississippi Delta?" Of course many voiced that they had not taken part in the planning of the Delta and they were not doing their part to feel a part of the Delta. As one thinks of the

Lower Mississippi Delta, the far most Southern states come to mind, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas. The northern states that border the Mississippi River are a smaller geographical area, and feel left out of the planning for the Mississippi Region since most of the attention has been focused on the Lower Mississippi Delta Southern states.

The Listening Sessions reported many admirable achievements that have taken place in the Mississippi Delta in the last decade, and reveled that much more needs to be initiated in order for the Delta to be able to develop completely. The area needs to develop to maintain it people, especially its college graduates. As Wilbur Hawkins, Former

Executive Director of the Lower Mississippi Delta Commission noted at both sessions, "the "C" students are staying and working in the Delta." But our more advanced students who acquire an education leave the Delta. One common goal of both sessions was to discover ways to keep our young people in the Delta.



Attendees at the Cape Girardeau Listening Session October 1999

The West Memphis Session as well as the Vicksburg, and Baton Rouge sessions was more successful due to the presence of Rodney E. Slater, U.S. Secretary of Transportation who addressed the different concerns as they were reported. Subsequently, people did not have to wait till the Committee returned to Washington to get answers to their questions.

"One common goal of both sessions was to discover ways to keep our young people in the Delta."

Poems from the Delta

by: Rasheda Hamilton

Unlikely Friends

Most people fear you
Not me,
You're my unlikely friends
I don't know whys
But I feel so special.
Just because of my unlikely friends.

Inspired by an interview with Mrs. Mildred Bowman of Trumann, talking about a pair of blue racers that followed her from one end of the rice field to the other everyday.

Rich

Does rich always express extreme wealth?
Does rich always mean full of flavor?
Yes it does in the Delta.
A land with an abundance of valuable resources.
A land bursting with stories, songs, food, and music.
Rich does always mean that.



Rasheda Hamilton
Oral History Interviewer

Discovery

In a rich land, there is a vault of special treasures.
It lies closed and untapped.
Finally, it is opened and explored.
Within is found wit, humor, and precious stories.
All on the richest land, the Delta.

On the road with Burr Swann

By: Burr Swann

On December 6, Arkansas State University (ASU) will host its second annual Arkansas Soil & Water Education Conference. Swann has co-chaired the planning of the conference. A large attendance is expected at the conference that includes farmers, agribusiness's and other agricultural leaders. The program will feature U.S. Rep. Marion Berry, who represents the First Congressional District of Arkansas. The conference will provide a forum on timely information on critical soil and water issues to appropriate clientele, this includes farmers and local and regional leaders involved in natural resource management. Other speakers will include staff members of the Arkansas Soil & Water Conservation Commission, U.S. Corp of Engineers, U of A Cooperative Extension Service, USDA-ARS, USDA National Mgt. Center, Farmers, Agri-Business and ASU professors.

A Nitrate Leaching and Economic Analysis Package (NLEAP) grant was finalized in November 1999 between Colorado State University, USDA and ASU AG Department. This \$13,000 grant is the first phase of a multi-phase project that will initiate a cooperative relationship with ASU where NLEAP can be evaluated as a tool to assess the impact of agriculture on nitrates moving below the root-zone in the Mississippi River Delta. Benefits to Arkansas State University include the acquisition of

technology beneficial to the university and the agricultural community in and around Jonesboro. ASU staff will become skilled in the use of the NLEAP tool and will gain insight into the use of pollutant loading models in the evaluation of environmentally sensitive situations.



Burr Swann
Project Manager
Rural Development Project

This program has made a highly successful rural development thrust in Eastern Arkansas. During the past 18 months, many of our rural development successes have been due or party due to the establishment of this rural development position. The following accomplishments were made:

- Co-planned three conferences.
- Planned three workshops; and setup ten project steering committees.
- Served as a member of the Governor's Task Force on "Water for Arkansas."
- Contacts were made with state representatives, county judges and other elected officials.
- Chaired numerous project committees, in all events, good networking occurred and many contacts were made and renewed.
- A pool of over thirty projects have been identified. The esti-

mated cost for these projects is \$1.1 billion.

- ASU has received \$181,000 for four projects. \$10.5 million for the Grand Prairie and Bayou Meto Basin Irrigation Demonstration Districts and another \$0.8 million for Eastern Arkansas. Six of the more significant projects are:
 - Arkansas Delta Oral History Project.
 - Boydsville Lake Project.
 - White River Grand Prairie and Bayou Meto Basin Irrigation Demonstration Projects.
- Hog Tusk Flood Protection Project.
- International Agreement with Argentina.
- NLEAP, a field-scale computer model developed to provide a rapid and efficient method of determining potential nitrate leaching associated with agricultural practices.

Since its establishment in April 1998 the rural development project has opened many doors and been many places, and with the continued support from Dr. Les Wyatt and Congressman Marion Berry the project will continue to move in a positive direction.

So, on behalf of the Delta Studies Center and Arkansas State University, I would like to thank everyone who has participated in this program and especially the many volunteers and project sponsors.



"Since its establishment in April 1998 the rural development project has opened many doors and been many places."

Rasheda Hamilton

Peggy Robinson Wright

Lenka Soukupova'

Pat Snodgrass

Merry

Richard Brewer

Burr Swann

Christmas

Precious Coppage

Christine Perry McKenley

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