

Southern Journal

Reflections on the South

Island Roots

Cropping cotton with one eye on the land of chrome and concrete.

By FORREST SHOAF, MA'80

THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER, figuratively and literally, is central to the American experience. Certainly, it has been central to mine. I grew up in rural West Tennessee, approximately 50 miles north of Memphis, in the '50s and '60s and spent most of those days on my family's cotton farm. That's not so unusual. Lots of boys have done that. What distinguishes our farm and my early life there is that it was situated on an island in the Mississippi River, approximately one mile off the "west coast" of Tennessee. In fact, the state line between Arkansas and Tennessee, which everywhere else lies along the middle of the channel, runs through the island. (The river has a mind of its own and, after the border was established, the river decided it wanted to go somewhere else and bit off part of Arkansas.)

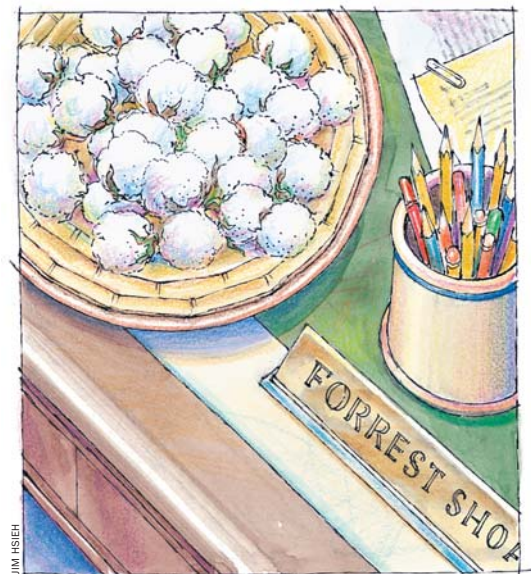
As far as I know, Shoaf's Island, as it is known locally (the bureaucratic Corps of Engineers refers to it less picturesquely as Island No. 26), is the only inhabited island in the lower Mississippi. Most river islands "ride low" in the water and flood when the river rises. Shoaf's Island sits 30 feet above the channel, just out of reach of the high water. Only once, during the Great Flood of 1937, has the entire island flooded.

The island came into my family in the late 19th century, when my grandfather, who had been hired to herd cows on it, found that its solitude ideally suited his reclusive nature. (And it didn't hurt that the topsoil is at least 30 feet deep and that the Minnesota bank that had foreclosed on the island wanted to

sell.) In any event, he borrowed money, cleared a thousand acres, and started planting cotton, a crop suited to the long, humid summers of the Tennessee Delta. In those days—indeed, well until the 1960s when mechanical pickers were perfected—planting, tending and harvesting cotton was labor intensive. As a result, people began to move onto the island to find work. By the time of the Great Depression, 2,000 acres were under cultivation and several hundred people called it home.

In many ways the island resembled any other Southern cotton farm. There were important differences, however. To begin, all staples not raised on the island for consumption by the inhabitants (corn, wheat and molasses) had to be brought over on a small ferry, which was the island's sole connection to the mainland. Not surprisingly, perishables were kept to a minimum. (I didn't eat ice cream in the summer until I was 12 years old.) And the only concrete in the entire place was in the barn. I still recall, with the wonder of a child, my first sight of sidewalks and paved streets when I visited my grandmother on the Tennessee mainland.

But the real difference was isolation. Obviously, there was no newspaper service, and the only contact with the outside world came through the weekly mail run or a battery-powered radio. That changed when electricity and phone service came in the '50s from Arkansas, but even then I knew that we were different. Lots of baby boomers recall their first television, but nothing in my early experience prepared me for network television. Those first images of Middle America



were literally alien to me. The Apollo 11 moon landing was eerie, but nothing compared to the shock of *Howdy Doody*.

Moreover, you couldn't go anywhere. Many people who learn about my background extol its presumed simplicity and say, "How idyllic—just like Huck Finn." I point out that Huck kept moving and got to see a lot of the world. We, on the other hand, could see the mainland, the land of chrome and concrete, but we couldn't go there. In addition, life on the island could be dangerous. If you were hurt, as sometimes happened in agriculture, it was more than 20 miles to the nearest hospital, and the trip was increased by the time it took to cross the river. And if you were bitten by a snake (they abounded), you pretty much had to take your chances. About the only thing not done in isolation was education. Shoaf's Island had one of the last one-

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of sucking away their intellectual, professional workforce.

“It’s irresponsible to go to developing countries because they desperately need nurses,” says VUSN’s Linda Norman. In South Africa, for example, roughly 50 percent of nurses leave the country within three years of completing training so they can make more money, send that money home to destitute families, and take advantage of opportunities unavailable in developing health-care systems.

“These countries spend a lot of money educating nurses, which further depletes their struggling economies,” she says. “On the other hand, the Philippines is a country that has always over-trained nurses. They have more trained nurses than positions. Filipino nurses are considered an export commodity.”

Estimates suggest that foreign-employed Filipino nurses funnel billions of dollars back to their home country each year. But *Nurse-week* (April 11, 2005) questions the end result. According to a recent report, “Exportation of 15,000 nurses each year to developed nations ... poses a serious long-term threat to the Philippines’ health system. ... Filipino physicians, realizing they can make more as nurs-

es in America, are enrolling in nursing school with the intention of immigrating to the U.S. to work.”

Recognizing that the foreign nurse debate will need to be resolved on an international level, Norman helped set up a communications and training program in collaboration with Medlink International, a health-care recruiting firm that places foreign nurses in jobs in the U.S. and Europe. Although Vanderbilt does not recruit foreign nurses, Norman believes that both foreign nurses and the receiving institutions to which they are recruited must prepare for and accommodate multicultural differences. Easing this complicated transition ultimately works for the good of patients—even while the politics are being hammered out.

In the end, politics will likely determine how the nursing shortage is solved anyway. For years Buerhaus and others have been frustrated by Congress’ lack of action. Recently, the Federal Bank of Boston convened Buerhaus and others to examine the state of the nursing workforce, fearing that if the workforce in New England were not adequate, the economic viability of the health-care industry—a large driver of the region’s economy—

could be at risk.

Dean Conway-Welch proposes that Congress implement something akin to the Cadet Nurse Corps of the 1940s, when the U.S. faced a critical nursing shortage after entering World War II. The federal government provided stipends for people to attend nursing school, funds for tuition and fees, and expanded residential facilities. Thanks to the Cadet Nurse Corps, the nursing workforce grew by 169,443 within two years.

Says Conway-Welch, “I expect something like that will happen when things get serious enough.”

They’re already getting pretty serious. Buerhaus’ data predict an escalation of the nursing shortage—estimated to be as high as 400,000, but which the U.S. government says may reach 800,000, by 2020. This deficit looms at the same time nursing schools are turning away thousands of qualified students.

“Congress needs to step up and quickly fix this capacity problem because, frankly, we’re never going to get through a shortage of 400,000 to 800,000 nurses,” Buerhaus says. “The lights will be turned off long before then.” ▼

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room schoolhouses in Tennessee. I began my schooling there, learning to read, write and “cipher” in a class of about 30 students. We were taught by a single teacher who had charge of eight grades. There was no electricity or running water in the schoolhouse. It was lit by kerosene lanterns and heated by a potbellied cast-iron stove. My teacher was a superb instructor, however, and I benefited from the setup. When I was not being instructed myself, I would listen to the lessons of the other students. Thus began my formal education.

I learned other things, too, mostly about myself. As I indicated earlier, everybody on the island participated in planting, tending and harvesting the cotton crop. All of that is done mechanically now, but in my boyhood most of it was done manually. That meant chopping cotton in the summer (hoeing weeds) and picking it in the fall. Both labors are incredibly difficult, but they wonderfully concentrated my mind.

I never keep a New Year’s resolution today,

but I’ve kept two that I made in the cotton fields on Shoaf’s Island as a boy of 10. The first was to get an education. I noted in my infrequent trips to the mainland that most of the people who weren’t working in the sun had a college education, so I resolved to get myself one. The second was that I was never again going to wear blue jeans or boots, the garb of the field hand.

I didn’t know it then, but I would soon test those resolutions. Change came slowly to the island, but it came nonetheless. The mechanical harvesters became more efficient, and factories moved from the North to the Tennessee mainland. Thus, as the ’60s came on, people began to leave, until only a dozen remained by decade’s end. In fact, I left myself. My parents divorced, and I moved to the mainland with my mother and became a “town boy” enrolled in Ripley schools. Even that was temporary. I got a scholarship to a boarding prep school and left West Tennessee for good in 1966. I’ve been on the run ever since, living all over

the world and trying my hand at several professions. I also picked up some book-learning (some of it at Vanderbilt), although I’ve concluded that Mark Twain, another boy who grew up on the River, was right: You shouldn’t let your schooling interfere with your education. And part of that education arose from the fact that I was singularly fortunate to have grown up on the island. I came to love the land, appreciate the value of hard work and, mostly, to know in an increasingly rootless world where I’m from.

I still don’t own any blue jeans. But every October I renew a ritual I began in 1972. I go home, back across the river, and into the fields where I labored as a boy. My father, now the island’s lone inhabitant, is too old to put in a crop. But the people who lease the island from him know good cotton land when they see it. So I snap off one boll of cotton and carry it back to Nashville. For the next year it, like 33 bolls before it, will sit on the corner of my desk to remind me what real work is and where I came from.