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## Mississippi Delta Revitalization Through Tourism: An Examination of Community-Campus Partnerships for Economic Development

Samuel Claiborne Russell

*University of Mississippi. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College*

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MISSISSIPPI DELTA REVITALIZATION THROUGH TOURISM:  
AN EXAMINATION OF COMMUNITY-CAMPUS PARTNERSHIPS FOR  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By Samuel Claiborne Russell

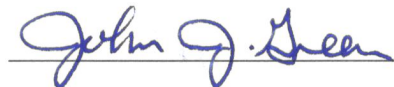
A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

University, Mississippi  
May 2016

Approved:

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dwight Frink", written over a horizontal line.

Reader: Dr. Dwight Frink

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Samuel Claiborne Russell

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The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College challenged me to complete this thesis. It has been vital to culminating my college career and believing that knowledge can truly be power.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Samuel Russell: Mississippi Delta Revitalization Through Tourism: An Examination of Community-Campus Partnerships for Economic Development**

This thesis is an examination of how community-campus partnerships support community engagement efforts in the Mississippi Delta. Since Ernest Boyer's clarion call in the 1990s for institutions of higher education to reconsider their commitment to community engagement, many institutions have initiated centers of engagement and service to connect their scholarly efforts to underserved populations. By mutually sharing in social, intellectual, and economic resources with communities, both community and campus prosper (Boyer 1990).

The Mississippi Delta, an hour's drive from the University of Mississippi campus, is one of the most impoverished regions in the United States. According to the US Census (2016), those with the most severe poverty are found in historically poor areas of the Southeast, particularly the Mississippi Delta. Through tourism, however, opportunities are underway to bring needed jobs and resources to this impoverished region. This study shows how communities and universities are partnering through community engaged programs to support community and economic development.

From 2014-2016 I served as a member of the University's Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CEED) initiative through the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement. Throughout the thesis I will share stories and present findings from the 30-member CEED team's work. Through personal research, interviews, survey data, and my own experiences, findings indicate that community-campus partnerships are beneficial in supporting local community

betterment. An abbreviated version of this work will be presented to the community partners where I served my internship within the delta in hopes that it will be of added benefit for innovation and progress through university and community partnerships.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **A. Mississippi Overview and Problems**

The University of Mississippi's community engagement efforts offer university students opportunities to make a difference for Mississippi. C. Wright Mills (1959) argued that long term solutions to society's pervasive social ills demand a whole-system approach through education. The University has taken this whole-systems approach by making "Transformation Through Service" one of its key priorities. Serving as a member of the University's Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CEED) initiative, this ethnographic study shows how community-campus partnerships are supportive to communities and businesses in underserved areas.

Mississippi is a place with a diverse and controversial history, but nowhere as interesting and unique as the Mississippi Delta (Duncan 1999). The fertile soil from thousands of years of Mississippi River flooding brought forth life to crops, people, and history. With the bountiful land came great wealth, although often at the expense of African Americans who worked the land (Cobb 1992).

With cotton production serving as the sole economic driver, the success of the economy relied on a rigorous hierarchical system of social classes. The system functioned, however, due to the political control at both the state and national levels. Any threat to the system led to quick and negative reactions from the white planter elite. Powerful Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland believed that "freedom meant unfettered economic freedom for white people" (Asch 2008, p. 95). For most of the Mississippi Delta's history, African Americans, who make up the majority in the region, were not

permitted equal access to the market economy. Due to this historical exclusion, this region struggles today with some of the worst social and economic indicators in the nation.

According to the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), in the 256 counties that surround the Mississippi River in the delta region, 1,971,679 people (or about twenty-one percent of the population) lived in poverty in 2010, making it one of the most impoverished areas in the United States. The Mississippi Delta makes up the 18 counties in the Northwest part of the state (See Figure I). In 2013, The McLean Institute at The University of Mississippi conducted a survey of those living in the DRA defined Mississippi Delta to discuss possible solutions to the area's immense poverty. One respondent stated:

I have a very grim view of this. Much of the area identified as 'the delta region' is bleak and will not change any time soon. I have more than twenty-five years of experience working at a regional planning agency in this region, and I have seen millions of dollars wasted in the region in an attempt to have a positive impact. Every few years some other group comes up with another new and improved idea to transform the delta; the names change, but the results are always the same. There is no substantial change. People have to take some personal responsibility for changing their situation. Government is not the panacea (Nylander 2013). Regions throughout the world have been revitalized, yet the delta remains impoverished. Upon returning from a CEED trip to Jonestown, Mississippi, a McLean Institute staffer noted an African American male living in the community

who commented that the world has made changes for the better, but the community of Jonestown has forgotten to keep up with those changes.

Although the historical inequities are connected to the present social problems, many fail to understand the significance of the past. Responses to the McLean survey blamed poverty on the government, the rich people, the poor people, and other hardships facing the area (Nylander 2013). With an emphasis on the Mississippi Delta, this thesis examines the McLean Institute's community-campus initiative to institutionalize a culture of community engagement, through a student engagement entrepreneurial program that instructs students on how to mutually engage with community partners to make a difference.

2014 All Ages in Poverty

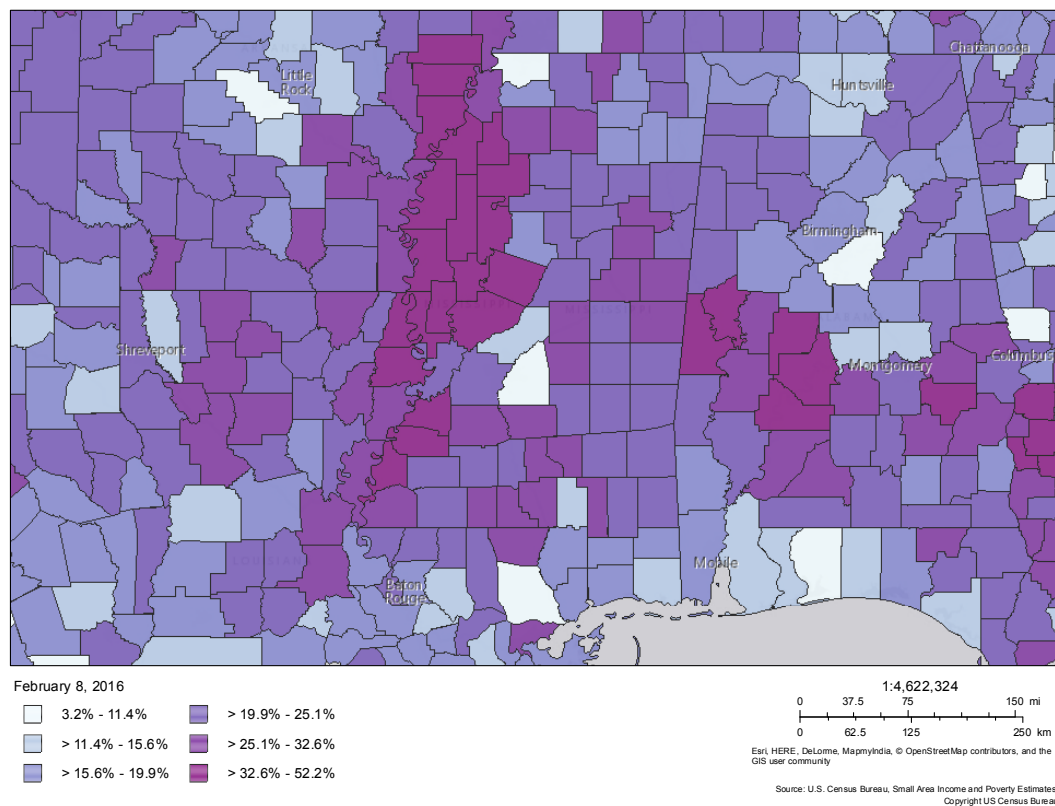


Figure I- Poverty Map of Mississippi. Source:

[http://www.census.gov/did/www/saige/data/interactive/saige.html?s\\_appName=saige&map\\_yearSelector=2014&map\\_geoSelector=aa\\_c&menu=map\\_proxy&s\\_state=28](http://www.census.gov/did/www/saige/data/interactive/saige.html?s_appName=saige&map_yearSelector=2014&map_geoSelector=aa_c&menu=map_proxy&s_state=28)

As a business student I am interested in hospitality management and being an entrepreneur. Therefore, I selected a hotel in the delta to complete my internship through the CEED program and to examine how community engagement might support the tourism industry in one of the poorest areas of the country, thus revitalizing it.

The blues is woven into every community in the delta, and because of this, blues tourism can and should serve as a source of economic stability and a chance to preserve the vast history of America's music. Despite being the self-proclaimed birthplace of America's music ("The University of Mississippi Libraries"), very few towns and communities have successfully combined music, history, accuracy, and culture for financial gains. Blue tourism has become a necessary response to the extreme poverty of the Mississippi Delta and with the creation of programs such as the Americana Music Triangle and the Mississippi Blues Trail, tourism is increasing, but has a long way to go. Being labeled as the "poorest region in the poorest state in the nation" gives Mississippi a less than ideal public image, but the delta would not be the first region to use tourism as a new source of much needed revenue (Doolittle and Davis 1996).

Tourism, however, does not just appear. Communities must work together and build an infrastructure for the new industry. Many of these communities, however, do not have the resources needed to promote tourism on their own. Eight public universities in the state of Mississippi could assist in developing solutions to the delta's poverty (Mississippi.collegesonline.net) through community-campus partnerships. Universities around the state of Mississippi can partner with communities to provide engagement

opportunities and to provide economic, social, and intellectual resources, through faculty, staff, and students, to promote community and economic development such as tourism and ensuring that development efforts help to alleviate poverty. The colleges themselves will also benefit by providing applied learning opportunities. Are community-campus partnerships and programs beneficial for community and economic development in Mississippi?

This study utilizes Weerts and Sandmann's (2008) theoretical framing of universities and communities engaged in a two-way mutually beneficial relationship to explore how such partnerships can create positive change.

While traditional conceptualizations of public service and outreach emphasized a one-way approach to delivering knowledge and service to the public, higher education leaders began using the term engagement to describe a two-way approach to interacting with community partners to address societal needs. The new philosophy emphasizes a shift away from an expert model of delivering university knowledge to the public and toward a more collaborative model in which community partners play a significant role in creating and sharing knowledge to the mutual benefit of institutions and society (p.74).

Although the Mississippi Delta continues to face socioeconomic difficulties, this region has a rich cultural history, which will be highlighted throughout the upcoming chapters. Our community partners are constantly searching for new ways to improve the economic and social conditions in this most impoverished part of Mississippi.

## **B. Methods**

Through this study, I served as a participant observer in examining how community-campus partnerships make a difference for this region. This social science research method relies on personal experience and participation, not just observation. In participant observation the researcher shares in the activities of the people in the observed setting. Such participation offers an insider's view of what is happening. As one of 30 student-engaged members on this project, I conducted interviews with selected community partners. I took field notes during the CEED fieldtrips and made observations of other CEED projects. Finally, I reviewed extensive documents on the tourism industry and researched other UM community engaged endeavors.

I lived, worked, and learned in Clarksdale for a total of seventy-five days during the summer of 2015. During my internship at the Shack-Up Inn, I spoke to many guests about their reasons for visiting. The Shack-Up Inn caters to a wide-array of tourists, with forty percent being international (mostly European and Australian). I tried to speak to both foreign and domestic guests to compare their visits. I also interviewed people around Clarksdale, while most were “friends of the shacks,” others included Teach for America teachers, and other friends I made during this experience. Most interviews with guests were casual with their reasons for visiting the Mississippi Delta my main focus. I received IRB approval to conduct formal interviews after the summer internship. Because the Shack-up Inn catered to a wide-array of people from different places, of multiple races, and of varying social classes, my assessment of the “delta tourist” is an accurate representation of the summer experience. When interviewing entrepreneurs, I stuck to three broad questions:

1. How do you foresee tourism having an impact on the MS Delta in terms of economic development?
2. What do you believe is a strength of the tourism industry in the MS Delta?
3. What are the greatest obstacles for promoting tourism in the MS Delta?

These methodological techniques provided data to assist in telling the story of the community-campus engaged approach. Surveys conducted by the McLean Institute also informed this work. My approach is to include the participant observations and analyses throughout the chapters. Exploring the university's emerging community-campus engagement foundation frames the research questions. The process described herein is valuable for the advancement of research and for the economic benefit of the partner communities.



## **CHAPTER I**

### **Community and University Engagement**

While steps are being taken throughout the delta to promote tourism, in most places there are not sufficient resources to create a viable tourism industry. The first colleges in the United States were created in order to serve society and create leaders to continuously better it. Institutes of higher education have an abundance of resources such as students, faculty, and staff, who can bring expertise and skills to their surrounding communities. Colleges and universities are tasked with creating and molding young students to become educated and productive members of society. While community and campus engagement has the potential to drastically improve rural areas in Mississippi, civic engagement is not a top priority of many colleges and universities (Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton 2009). Community and civic engagement must be seen as an essential mission of colleges and universities around the state.

The University of Mississippi and other state institutions have begun to help the delta promote its attractions. In possibly the largest celebration of Mississippi music, Cleveland, Mississippi, in a partnership with Delta State University opened the Mississippi Grammy Museum in March of 2016. Located on Delta State's campus, this museum will honor Mississippi's title as the "Birthplace of America's Music." According to its website, this museum will be the most technically advanced music museum in the

world upon opening. The museum was created to showcase Mississippi's impact on modern recorded music by intertwining the past and the present. Like the museums in Clarksdale and Indianola, this too will be an interactive, hands-on museum celebrating Mississippi's music culture ([grammymuseummississippi.com](http://grammymuseummississippi.com)).

Not only will the museum bring in tourist dollars to the town of Cleveland, the museum plans to give back to the community with educational programs and musical performances according to Lucy Janoush the president of the Cleveland Music Foundation. While the museum will showcase the history of all recorded music, there will be a key focus on the impact of Mississippi artists, songwriters, and producers who have had an impact on the worldwide music landscape. By focusing on the successes that The Delta Blues Museum and the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center have, The Mississippi Grammy Museum can easily draw in tourists from around the globe. According to Mississippi governor Phil Bryant:

Music is much more than a form of entertainment for Mississippians, it's a part of our history and legacy. We're thrilled to have a museum dedicated to our part in shaping the nation's music history. Throughout 2014, we celebrated the Year of the Creative Economy in Mississippi. We invited home our greatest Mississippi artists to celebrate our creative spirit. This museum will extend that invitation, and will bring visitors hoping to catch a glimpse of our vibrant energy and dynamic musical contributions ([MississippiGrammyMuseum.org](http://MississippiGrammyMuseum.org)).

The museum has already had a positive effect on the community of Cleveland. The city of Cleveland received a grant from the U.S. Commerce Department for \$1.25 million in 2014 to build an access road to the new museum (*Mississippi Business Journal*

2014). Along with the new road, the money will upgrade the infrastructure of the host campus Delta State to allow for the new influx of visitors. The massive construction project was estimated to provide 187 temporary jobs. The museum provides ten full-time jobs as well as internship opportunities for Delta State students. New hotels and restaurants have already begun construction around the area, which will support additional jobs in the service and tourism industry. Hotelier Suresh Chawla has announced that Chawla Hotels Inc. will open The Lyric by April 2017, a boutique hotel in Cleveland designed for Grammy museum guests from around the world (Weatherly 2016). The museum's development was advanced because of Delta State's Delta Music Institute's Director's Grammy connections.

The University of Mississippi has helped promote tourism by creating the Mississippi Blues Archive in 1984. The Blues Archive is one of the largest collections of blues recordings. Researchers from around the world visit to access this Mississippi treasure. After learning about the blues in Oxford, many scholars are encouraged to venture about an hour west to explore the land that created the music. Tours and trips led by blues scholars from the university could further promote this art form and give visitors a chance to see sites they would otherwise likely miss.

In 2012, the University of Mississippi expanded the role of the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement. The expansion came as part of the university's strategic plan, UM 2020, which calls for an increase in service and engagement to benefit Mississippi. The Institute's mission is to advance transformative service throughout the university and to fight poverty through education in Mississippi. Through partnerships with Mississippi communities, the university is able to utilize its

resources to assist in addressing the delta's challenges. These community-campus partnerships, however, hinge on building trust (Leiderman et al. 2002; Schultz et al. 2003).

Community engagement opportunities allow universities to demonstrate their commitment to the public by creating specific partnerships to help them grow, particularly in tough economic times. However, it is not just in tough economic times that universities should play a role in the communities in which they reside, it should be their mission. As suggested by Cantor and Englot (2014), "We [universities] can get out of the ivory tower and fulfill our role as members of anchor institutions in our own communities, drawing connections to national and global contexts, but we need to relinquish some control and to operate in a much messier world than we are accustomed to in the academy" (p. 5).

Communities in Mississippi and in the delta have many assets (such as non-profit organizations, hospitals, schools, community colleges and universities, and churches), but these organizations, especially local nonprofits, are often understaffed and underfunded. Universities have resources and expertise in teaching, research and applied learning, and they have institutes and centers with missions of providing a service to society. They also offer the research expertise and public mission of playing a role to evaluate that the gains accrued from economic development are distributed equitably.

The McLean Institute has informed its work in Mississippi communities by implementing community survey research to assess the community's perspective regarding social change and development. These community evaluations allow for the Institute and its programs to gain knowledge and understanding of the area from its

residents. In 2013, surveys were sent to 4,214 individuals throughout the region, with 589 surveys started and 413 of those completed. Some notable responses from the Mississippi Delta included:

(1) The Mississippi Delta is rich in cultural heritage and offers excellent dining and recreational opportunities. (2) Though this region is still struggling to educate a group of its citizens who systematically held back and oppressed for generations, the citizens live side by side and interact in a positive manner on a daily basis with true integration in education finally arriving in a unique forum (the private academies that were originally founded to ensure segregation). (3) As a traditionally agricultural area, the residents are accustomed to "boom and bust" in business so they will be supportive of individuals or companies who have previously experienced setbacks (Nylander 2013).

#### **A. Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Initiative**

The McLean Institute's Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CEED) initiative works with undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Mississippi to create partnerships with rural Mississippi communities and their leaders. The goal of each innovation scholar and fellow is to develop a specific and lasting solution within a Mississippi community. Through these partnerships, CEED hopes to spur business development in the delta and alleviate social problems. Sharing talents and resources between communities and universities allows for mutual success.

In 2014 the CEED program funded 30 university students with scholarships to plan and implement community projects mutually with community partners throughout Mississippi and in the delta region. In 2015 the program served Tallahatchie, Calhoun,

Coahoma, and Lee counties. The students are grouped by counties and focus on ways to serve each region. A CEED colleague, Caitlin Brooking, described her experience in the program by saying, “I’ve been able to lend my own experience in developing programs that fight poverty in Mississippi, and knowledge from my master’s work in sociology to help them expand their reach and implement new programming in the community. The CEED program is a unique opportunity to learn by doing in an academically supportive environment, and it provides the necessary support system to engage directly with communities and organizations, conduct research and pilot strategies to affect change.”

During the summer of 2015, CEED students completed internships in rural Mississippi Communities. Current partnerships include: the CREATE Foundation and North Mississippi Medical Center in Tupelo; the Tallahatchie Wellness Center in Charleston; the TriCounty Workforce Alliance and the Shack-Up Inn in Clarksdale; the smART program in Vardaman; Insight Park in Oxford; the Mississippi Development Authority in Jackson; and the Tutwiler Community Center in Tutwiler. The McLean Institute aligned existing university resources for teaching, research, and community engagement toward these community partners to assist them in engaging real world problems. The CEED program’s curriculum is taken from real world problems that allow students to see the interplay between theory and practice.

With my interest in tourism and hospitality management, I completed an internship at the Shack-Up Inn in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Through this opportunity, I lived, worked, and learned at one of the most unique hotels in the country for ten weeks during the summer of 2015. This entrepreneurship experience provided me an opportunity to manage the hotel and to operate the front desk. I also worked with

business owner and entrepreneur, Bubba O’Keefe, to write a business plan for a new hotel in Clarksdale. The immersive experience offered by McLean through CEED works to benefit everyone: the educators, students, and members of the community.

Many of the issues Mississippi encounters are embedded in the history and culture of the state and breaking this cycle of poverty has proven difficult. The structure of the plantation agriculture that founded the delta depended on a system that forced workers into positions of dependency, illiteracy, and powerlessness. Therefore, it is understood that there are no easy solutions to these structural inequities. These historical disparities in the delta have created many challenges to its momentum toward counteracting poverty, but out of these challenges have come opportunities for long-term growth (Falk and Duncan 1993).

Tourism has the ability to bring in new jobs and revenue to the area, but the Deltans’ overall satisfaction with their community’s tourism will likely be viewed as a consequence of their evaluation of the job opportunities it provides. If tourism brings jobs to the community, it has the potential to be an economic driver; however, if it primarily serves the interest of the power structures, it will be received negatively. In a 2015 McLean survey of delta business owners, a bed and breakfast operator said, “Tourism is virtually our only asset. We have got to promote tourism to survive.”

Another respondent said, “Education is failing our kids. We need community and business partnerships to sponsor kids to make sure they are successful” (Nylander 2015). Universities have the ability to prepare children and teens for college, thus increasing the education level of the area. College students can work with and learn from delta leaders and business owners providing them with fresh energy and talents, while the students

learn valuable skills. Through community-campus engagement strategies, higher education can retain its commitment “to educate generations of informed and engaged democratic citizens through the conjunction of theory and practice, curriculum and engagement, and campus and community” (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). This two-way engagement benefits not only college students’ learning, but the more civically engaged universities become, the greater the impact will be on creating local and state economic vitality, and collective action to address public problems. In 2012, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement stated the following:

A Crucible Moment explores how higher education can serve—for this generation of students and for the nation’s globally situated democracy—as one of the defining sites for learning and practicing democratic and civic responsibilities. Since it is now considered necessary preparation for today’s economy, postsecondary education has a new and unparalleled opportunity to engage the majority of Americans with the challenges we face as a diverse democracy. Moreover, today’s US college campuses, physical and virtual, bring together a wider range of students—across class and color, religion and gender, nationality and age—than ever before in our history. As such, two- year and four-year colleges and universities offer an intellectual and public commons where it is possible not only to theorize about what education for democratic citizenship might require in a diverse society, but also to rehearse that citizenship daily in the fertile, roiling context of pedagogic inquiry and hands-on experiences (p. 2).



## **CHAPTER II**

### **Blues Tourism**

“My idea of heaven is a place where the Tyne meets the delta, where folk music meets the blues” (Knopfler 1996). Internationally, the view of Mississippi is a negative one. In a state that has been troubled by racial oppression and violence, many struggle to move beyond this painful past. Despite these issues, positive change and progress are occurring, and the tourism industry is gaining momentum in one of the most impoverished parts of the state, the Mississippi Delta. This land, known for its extreme poverty, painful past, and fertile soil, is often called “The Birthplace of the Blues” (Dattel, 2009, p. 25). The blues is a raw musical form that emphasize hope when all else seems hopeless. The passion felt in the blues has inspired various artists for decades from Eric Clapton to Elvis Presley to Fleetwood Mac, among others. After years of hiding behind their history, today tourism boards, economists, developers, and business owners are all embracing the blues in an attempt to profit from music lovers from around the world.

#### **A. Tensions Surrounding the Blues**

In an effort to promote tourism, many Mississippi cities attempt to hide unsavory elements of their pasts. Those involved in tourism often feel that they cannot honestly portray historic scenarios without avoiding major aspects of daily life. Doing so would require reminiscing on slavery, segregation, and the socioeconomic disproportion of so

many due to these institutions. In *The Southern Past: a Clash of Race and Memory*, William Brundage (2005) writes that, “Tourists could enjoy the picturesque spectacle created by servile African Americans without needing to understand them. Indeed, an exaggerated concern for African Americans might have interfered with the tourist experience” (p. 184). This observation represents the dilemma that the Mississippi Delta faces as it begins to open up to blues tourists.

In order to help small towns benefit from historic tourist attractions, The National Trust for Historic Preservation created a Cultural Heritage Tourism Explorer. Through this website, city planners are urged to assess the potential for the attraction, plan and organize events around the attraction, prepare for new visitors to the community while preserving the culture of the town, and to market the attraction and the town for success. By following these steps, city planners and developers can maximize the economic potential for tourism in an area. In order for towns to successfully encourage tourism, the trust says that towns must focus on resources that are readily available to them, rather than attempting to rebrand the entire community (Cultural Heritage Tourism Explorer 2015).

Today many communities in the delta have opened museums, blues-themed restaurants and stores in an attempt to reconcile their past neglect and profit from this resource in the future. To many blues musicians the rise in popularity of the blues diminishes the meaning of the blues. In “Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: Race, Standpoint Theory, and Perceptions/Denials of Exploitation,” Stephen King (2011) notes that today most blues fans are middle-to-upper class white males. King states that while

the fans are embracing black musicians they are continuing hundreds of years of segregating and “othering” blacks in the musical genre they created (p. 54-77).

White tourists now flock to the delta from around the world to watch black musicians and to see the “real America.” Many of the businesses benefiting from blues tourism are owned and operated by white individuals, most of whom transplanted to the delta from various states and countries within the past twenty years. Because of this, blues tourism has created a rift among many white and black communities throughout the Mississippi Delta. To many black communities, white communities are profiteering from this historically black art form. In contrast, many blues promoters believe that by embracing and celebrating this musical movement they can promote progress and racial reconciliation among both communities. King suggests that because the white community never suffered from the oppression they are celebrating they can never understand the frustration felt in the black community.

While it is often white business owners who are creating blues tourist attractions for mostly white fans, some African American entrepreneurs are supporting the industry. For many, however, the risk and cost needed to begin a blues themed business is not worth the time. Jimmy “Duck” Holmes, blues musician and owner of the Blue Front Café in Bentonia, Mississippi says that, “people around here have zero interest in the blues.... The audience for my type of music is all from other places now and mostly white” (Newman and Grant 2015).

Criticisms have come from both sides of the aisle on the issue of who the blues and subsequently blues tourism should cater to. Outspoken Clarksdale city commissioner Buster Moton believes that white citizens are exploiting and profiting off of a “black art

form.” He believes that the blues should benefit the people who created it. While many African American natives object to this whiter blues fan base, Po’ Monkey (owner of a juke joint in Merigold) believes it is his job to celebrate the blues for whoever is listening saying, “My people come from all over the world” (Newman and Grant 2015).

Blues tourism has the potential to unite Mississippians under a common goal and give the state a more appealing image. Being the birthplace for the blues brings tourists in and allows them to see what all Mississippi has to offer. Tourism brings currency into communities, and where there is a potential to make money jobs are created, and jobs will bring revenue and greater economic strength across the state. Blues tourism has the potential to catalyze economic and entrepreneurship development as long as Mississippians embrace it and build around the industry.

### **B. Clarksdale, Mississippi, “Home of The Blues”**

Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the devil at the Crossroads in exchange for the ability to play blues music, is one of the leaders in blues tourism development. Several businesses catering to blues tourism have opened in downtown Clarksdale in just the last decade. In 2010 Travel and tourism expenditures by visitors reached almost sixty million dollars in Coahoma County alone (See Table I).

Mississippi Development Authority/Tourism Division  
Fiscal Year 2010 Estimates

THE DELTA REGION	Travel and Tourism Expenditures by Visitors	Direct Travel and Tourism Employment	Travel and Tourism Employment Percentage*	State and Local Taxes Attributed to Travel and Tourism**	Tourism Capital Investment
Bolivar	\$30,896,032	525	4.4	\$2,534,619	\$257,384
Carroll	1,020,132	15	1.5	\$93,895	\$245,283
Coahoma	57,623,478	900	11.0	\$5,735,501	\$886,549
Holmes	3,836,277	50	1.3	\$296,162	\$740,205
Humphreys	2,262,128	30	1.0	\$179,532	\$0
Issaquena	194,483	3	0.9	\$14,553	\$0
Leflore	46,873,079	720	4.8	\$3,644,186	\$1,143,418
Quitman	1,274,684	17	1.2	\$109,792	\$0
Sharkey	1,229,768	16	1.6	\$105,474	\$2,124
Sunflower	12,575,235	175	2.0	\$1,029,339	\$200,226
Tallahatchie	3,489,583	47	1.7	\$263,977	\$0
Tunica	824,750,443	10,540	82.4	\$96,403,454	\$12,562,357
Washington	84,217,845	1,445	7.2	\$7,988,516	\$3,583,442
Yazoo	10,190,805	155	2.7	\$852,089	\$214,824
<b>Regional Totals</b>	<b>\$1,080,433,972</b>	<b>14,638</b>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>\$119,251,089</b>	<b>\$19,835,812</b>

Table does **not** include Gasoline Sales at the pump, Diesel Fuel Sales, or Non-Resident Licensing Fees.  
It includes estimated Net Tourist/Visitor State-Licensed Casino Gaming Revenues for Coahoma, Tunica and Washington.

\* The Travel and **Tourism Employment Percentage** equals the estimated direct Travel and Tourism jobs/county Establishment-based nonfarm employment. Data are based on where the employees work, not where they reside.

\*\* **Estimated State and Local** Travel and Tourism Taxes from Tourist/Visitor Expenditures and some other activity. Includes the 7.0 % sales tax and the 18.5 % portion diverted to cities; state-licensed casinos; city-county state-licensed casino gaming tax revenues; Room/Restaurant special Taxes; motor vehicle rental tax and petroleum tax diversions to counties; Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) county level share of permit license fees; Use Taxes; and reported Tourism Capital Investment (TCI) permit fees. Data attributable to Travel and Tourism.

SOURCES: Mississippi Department of Employment Security, Labor Market Information Department, 2010.  
Mississippi Department of Revenue, 2010.  
Mississippi Gaming Commission, 2010.

Table I Source:

<http://www.visitmississippi.org/app/webroot/files/FY%202014%20Visit%20Mississippi%20Delta%20Region%20Stats.pdf>

Clarksdale residents, such as Kinchen “Bubba” O’Keefe, are leading the charge to revitalize Clarksdale and make the city more attractive to tourists. Civic engagement has been a lifelong love for O’Keefe that started with his grandfather and father (who served as Clarksdale mayor from 1949 through 1954), and was later passed along to him.

Through his tireless efforts, he has brought several successful businesses to town to revitalized historic buildings that were in disarray. He believes that if people come to Clarksdale in search of the blues, they will find it, but they will also find much more.

Along with the addition of blues related businesses, many non-blues businesses have formed to serve the tourists’ needs. Hotels, Mississippi and Sunflower River tours, restaurants, and Bubba’s own coffee shop, Yazoo Pass, all keep tourists in Clarksdale

after they have viewed the town's blues markers. Clarksdale has done well adapting its city around blues tourism without changing the city into something it is not. Clarksdale is not attempting to become a music mecca like Memphis or Nashville, rather it is focusing on creating a unique blues culture in Clarksdale. By expanding their offerings beyond solely the blues, tourists staying at hotels, such as The Shack Up Inn or The Riverside Hotel, can stay longer than one day unlike in other Mississippi rural towns. As Mr. O'Keefe said to the Clarksdale Press Register, "The bottom line is that Clarksdale has the potential to be whatever it wants to be. It's a long-term venture, but what we do now determines the success of the future (Rushing 2002)."

Today several innkeepers have assumed the responsibility for housing Clarksdale's guests. Bubba O'Keefe manages the Lofts at the Five and Dime, Bill Talbot and Guy Malvezzi have the Shack-Up Inn, Royce Ader owns the Big Pink Guesthouse, Toni Nasser operates Ground Zero's Delta Cotton Company Apartments, John Magnussen has The Squeeze Box, James Butler at the Loft at Hopson Plantation, and Rat Ratcliff manages The Riverside Hotel. These lodging operators know the importance of keeping guests in Clarksdale, so they will frequently refer guests to each other. If a guest requests an experience that one owner cannot offer, chances are another of Clarksdale's unique hotels can satisfy the guest's need.

Despite the arguments on each side, blues tourism is growing and bringing new revenues to the delta. Entrepreneurs, such as Roger Stolle who moved to Clarksdale in the 1990s and opened Cat Head Records, have embraced the changes that are occurring and profited from them. Stolle vowed to "organize and promote the blues from within." Blues preservationists such as Roger Stolle and Bubba O'Keefe believe that by

preserving at least some of the blues culture it prevents the blues from fading into history. Local venues and juke joints such as The Shack-Up Inn's Juke Joint Chapel, The New Roxy, Red's and Ground Zero Blues Club all offer musicians young and old opportunities to perform and earn money. Without tourists, many of the traditional blues establishments and juke joints such as Red's in Clarksdale and Po' Monkeys in Merigold would likely not have a large enough revenue stream to stay in business. After Stolle, more than a dozen tourists have come to Clarksdale and stayed to open blues related businesses. These new change agents include Adrian Kosky and Clara Maxwell, an Australian couple, bought an old Masonic Temple in downtown Clarksdale and turned it into The Holy Moly Drug Store. This site now features an apartment, lofts, an ice cream shop/restaurant, and a performance venue. Right down the street, Robin Colonas, a merchant mariner from Seattle bought and renovated the old African American theater, The New Roxy, and created a bar/music venue. These Clarksdale implants have kept blues tourism as well as downtown Clarksdale alive. Anyone can be a catalyst for change in a community, it just takes a passion to do so and a love for that community (Grisham and Gurwitt 1999).

Clarksdale entrepreneurs "Magical Madge" and "Poor William" opened a guest house and created a blog website ([deltabohemian.com](http://deltabohemian.com)) to offer tours throughout the delta for tourists from around the globe. Through the website, visitors can plan and prepare for their trips and when they arrive Madge and William will serve as a guide for the tourists. This all-encompassing concierge style of delta tourism allows visitors to see attractions that they would otherwise not visit.

### **C. Economic Impact of Mississippi Blues**

Mississippi is known as “The birthplace of America’s Blues.” During the last decade the popularity for “real blues” music and history has exploded. According to the *Fiscal Year 2008 Economic Contribution Report of Tourism in Mississippi*, “Travel and Tourism is a \$739 billion national industry in terms of direct domestic and international expenditures with 7.7 million direct jobs, \$186 billion in payroll income, and \$116 billion in combined federal, state and local tax revenues, per the U.S. Travel Association, CY 2007 data” (Mississippi Development Authority/Tourism Division Research Unit, 2009, p. 4). These numbers were published after a world-wide recession and more recent numbers indicate that tourism will only bring more revenue to Mississippi in the future. 2015 estimates from Visit Mississippi place travel and tourism expenditures in the Mississippi Delta is \$877,834,690. Because of its rapid growth, tourism is a key part to the development initiatives of many Mississippians.

### **D. Blues Festivals and Their Benefits**

In Mississippi, many towns have festivals celebrating their uniqueness to promote growth in their towns. Through these blues festivals communities have the ability to preserve the blues and its musicians. Many tourism boards state that the main reason to promote the blues is to display and preserve this cultural resource. In Stephen King’s essay (2004), “Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Function of Blues Festivals,” he quotes Victor G. Smith stating that:

The Mississippi Delta Blues and Heritage Festival allows us a chance to welcome visitors from all over the United States to our community, and gives us a chance



to show off. I think that one of the best ways for Mississippi and the delta in particular, to overcome past negative stereotypes is to encourage visitors to come here and see what we are really like- a progressive community, wise enough to hold on to the heritage and traditions that define us” (p. 14).

By encouraging others to embrace and love the blues, blues tourism works to preserve significant pieces of blues history such as gravesites, juke joints, houses, and recording studios. When festival visitors come to celebrate the festivals, tourists bring a large influx of cash to the surrounding areas. For the Juke Joint Festival in Clarksdale, now preparing for its twelfth year, the immediate influx of cash is apparent. When the Juke Joint Festival comes to town every April, every hotel within an hour radius is booked, restaurants are reserved, night concert tickets are sold to more than 3,200 people, and almost every local business profits.

The long term effects of festivals such as the Juke Joint may seem less apparent, but they are nonetheless present. The city councils and festival boards work hand-in-hand to present to town to tourists from around the world. Downtown beautification committees work tirelessly to keep the city appealing. Businesses relocate to downtown locations to gain a greater share of the profits. When towns work together to make festivals successful the town benefits and the preservation of the blues is encouraged.

Some fear, however, that by solely focusing on monetary gains, towns can diminish the integrity of the blues. Certain festivals have been known to expand their musical line-ups to genres that are rooted in the blues, such as R&B, Soul, and Rock musicians. Many residents find small ways to earn money from naïve tourists. At the funeral of B.B. King in May 2015, shirts with the artist’s likeness, newspapers

documenting the event, and various other trinkets memorializing the musician were sold by entrepreneurs just yards away from the deceased. Proper blues tourism must celebrate the history and culture of the blues and not focus solely on individual monetary gains. To fight this promotion over preservation attitude held by some, festival organizers such as Roger Stolle of the Juke Joint Festival book local musicians first and then branch-out from there to ensure the authenticity of their line-up.

Music festivals are also gaining popularity in younger crowds which allows for blues music to reach a new, younger audience. Through the Internet, Millennials can rediscover music that had previously been lost to history. This new fan base can be seen by the growing mainstream popularity of blues music. In Rob Hoerburgers New York Times article, “Can a nerd have soul?” he hypothesizes that youths are drawn to traditional musical forms such as soul and the blues because they are raw and unaltered unlike much of the pop music of the past few decades.

#### **E. Cultural Heritage Museums Surrounding the Blues**

Another tourist attraction that has become increasingly popular in the Mississippi Delta is the museum. Museums such as the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, and The Gateway to the Blues Museum and Visitor Center in Tunica all began within the past two decades and have experienced great successes thus far. Museums provide a context for their guests to the entire blues story. Indianola, Mississippi has been home to the The B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center since 2008. Indianola has always attracted dedicated blues fans with sites such as Charley Patton’s grave, Club Ebony, and locations connected

various blues performers including B.B. King who was raised here. Since the museum opened, however, Indianola has received a substantial increase in the quantity of blues tourists. With the public viewing and burial of B.B. King on site at the museum, the number of tourists flocking to the small delta town will only increase.

Like Clarksdale about a decade earlier, Indianola is slowly beginning to discover how to reshape its identity around their larger image as a blues destination. Several restaurants, stores and art galleries catering to blues tourists have sprung up around the town since the opening of the museum. The museum's central focus is on how Mississippi shaped B.B. King into the artist he became. By emphasizing the hardships suffered by King and his determination to overcome them, museum contributors such as Jim and Donna Barksdale and the State of Mississippi hope to further the arts and show that Mississippians can preserve through adversity just as King did.

“Blues music, a form of cultural expression whose very ground was the unjust and painful relationship between black and whites in the segregated South, is also a music that has helped minister to the lingering wounds of segregation during the post-civil rights era” (Gussow, 2006, p. 33-54). By offering King as an example, the museum hopes to encourage racial reconciliation within the community and to give Mississippians an icon to be proud of.

When communities have a common goal and objective to rally around, civic pride is sure to grow. The Indianola Chamber of commerce distributes promotional tourism material such as maps of historical blues sites to several local businesses including the museum. One pamphlet reads that Indianola is “where we have not forgotten what it means to be a community.” For a town to have the ability to move past their issues and

gather around the town's history speaks wonders for the citizens of Clarksdale and Indianola and gives hope to the rest of the Mississippi delta region.

Businesses already in existence before the museum opened in 2008 are also using the museum to draw in profits. In downtown Indianola sits The Crown Restaurant which adopted the slogan, "Visit the King, Eat Lunch at the Crown," around the time the museum opened. While blues tourism is not necessarily a traditional form of economic development, it does provide an alternative revenue stream to an area that has seen economic downfall and depopulation for several decades. The vastness of the delta also contributes to the influx of tourism dollars. Because many sites are spread apart (Clarksdale and Indianola are about an hour apart) tourists must travel through at least one delta town along the way and usually stop for food, lodging, or gas which provides tourist traffic to multiple cities and towns.

While the B.B. King Museum is a museum that tells the narrative of King's life, it is also an "Interpretive Center." Because the blues is about feelings and emotions as well as music, most blues museums offer far more than just facts and figures. At the King museum, patrons can hear the music, play instruments, see the artifacts, and fully indulge in the blues, all while learning about the historical significance of this art form. The Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale offers an afterschool blues program which teaches young delta residents the opportunities to learn and perform the blues. Many of the participants from this program have gone on to become blues musicians and perform at festivals and local venues, the program participants even had the opportunity to perform for the

Obama's (See Figure II) at the White House in 2014 (Ritter 2015).



Figure II Delta Blues Museum Performers at the White House Source:

<http://clarksdaleinfo.com/keeping-beat-delta-blues-museum/>

#### **F. Mississippi Blues Trail and Americana Music Triangle**

With the influx of tourists to the Mississippi Delta, three separate historic trails have been created, all with a focus on the Mississippi Delta. The Mississippi Blues Trail, The Mississippi Freedom Trail, and the Americana Music Triangle have all begun drawing tourists into the region within the past two decades. By setting markers throughout the state and offering maps and smartphone applications, these trails allow visitors to create their own journey and visit the landmarks they view as most important.

In the past decade, museums, music venues, festivals, restaurants, tours, and art galleries have all sprung up throughout the delta in hopes to attract blues tourists. In order

to preserve blues history, the Mississippi Blues Commission created the Mississippi Blues Trail which placed markers throughout the state to display important locations in the history and development of the blues in Mississippi. The Mississippi Blues Commission offers maps showing marker locations, as well as a smart-phone application, which allows visitors to conduct self-directed tours and visit the markers that mean the most to them.

Before the creation of the Mississippi Blues Commission, much of the knowledge about the blues was vague or inaccurate. Slavery, segregation, and word-of-mouth story telling all contributed to the lack of detailed information available. The markers helped separate fact from fiction and offered fans true stories and facts about blues legends. The Mississippi Blues Trail has already begun attracting tourists since the first marker was placed in 2006 ([mississippibluestrail.org](http://mississippibluestrail.org)). Through encouraging tourism, the Mississippi Blues Commission hopes that their trail will promote education while stimulating the Mississippi economy.

To fight the misrepresentation of Mississippi's blues history, historians such as Jim O'Neal and Scott Barretta from the Mississippi Blues Commission must constantly research and revise their stories and knowledge. There are hundreds of Blues Trail markers that span several states, with the majority here in Mississippi. While Mississippi claims to be the birthplace of the blues, the influence and span of the blues culture has spread internationally. The Blues Trail reminds local communities of their impact on the blues and gives citizens a greater sense of community pride. In order to benefit from these new tourist attractions, towns must understand and embrace the role the blues had

on their community, and market and promote the towns other offerings while connecting them to the blues.

The blues was born from oppression that was prevalent in Mississippi's past, and therein lies the greatest problem facing blues tourism in Mississippi. Many Mississippians are ashamed of this past and avoid recognizing the advancements the state has made towards race relations by pretending there were never any issues. Blues history is not meant to be glamorized. The blues is meant to represent raw emotions and therefore the history of this movement must recognize the historical context for which it was born. Separating history from the blues movement diminishes the narrative. The Mississippi Blues Trail provides the historical context needed to tell the story, but the markers are not enough on their own. Communities must develop their own blues culture around their unique histories and through these actions, whitewashing can occur.

By granting visitors accurate knowledge about the blues, its artists and its history, The Mississippi Blues Trail helps preserve the authenticity of the blues by providing context and information about the history and culture of the art form. Markers such as the one at Club Ebony in Indianola, Mississippi also provide businesses, which were struggling, a steady source of tourism revenue by attracting the tourists to the sites.

Similar to the Mississippi Blues Trail, The Americana Music Triangle which goes through the "Cradle of America's Music" goes from New Orleans, Louisiana, through the Mississippi Delta to Memphis, Tennessee, and then up to Nashville, Tennessee. According to their website, "The Americana Music Triangle connects you to the people, places and stories of the world's number one music destination." Like the successes of the delta museums, the Americana Music Triangle focuses on being interactive and

hands-on by allowing patrons to plan and customize their routes using the website and smartphone application

Since its launch in May of 2015, the trail has already brought in tourists exploring the land that created nine musical genres: blues, jazz, country, rock and roll, rockabilly, bluegrass, Cajun, zydeco, and gospel. Few areas in the world have had such an impact on the development of music. Of the Americana Music Triangle, Clarksdale mayor and owner of Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, Bill Luckett says, "Pulling this project off will be a tremendous help to this whole region. It puts money in this economy that wasn't here before."

#### **G. My Experiences and The Shack-Up Inn**

Through the McLean Institute's Catalyzing Economic and Entrepreneurship Development Initiative, I was given the opportunity to learn about delta tourism first hand. During the summer of 2015 I served as the first ever intern at The Shack-Up Inn. Joey Young an employee of the Shack-Up Inn and The Delta Blues Museum says that the blues and the delta as a whole are meant to be simple, and that is just the philosophy the Shack-Up Inn uses. Despite the resistance of some, and the often decentralized and disjointed efforts of others, some Mississippians have embraced the history around them and profited from being first-movers in the delta tourism business.

In 1998 the Shack-up Inn was created to serve as a refuge and retreat for music lovers located on the outskirts of Clarksdale, Mississippi. Beginning with one sharecropper shack that was moved onto the site of the old Hopson Plantation, The Shack-up Inn now manages over forty rooms and shacks which are rented to tourists from



around the world. Even the site the shacks stand on holds historical significance. Hopson Plantation is the site where the first mechanized cotton picker was introduced which decreased the number of sharecroppers needed to farm cotton and increased the number of African Americans who moved North in the Great Migration.

While they pay no money on advertisements, The Shack-up Inn has been featured in many prestigious magazines and news stories from Time Magazine to Al Jazeera America. Today the shacks, usually booked to capacity, serve guests from all regions of the world who want to experience first-hand where the blues was born.

The idea of renovating and reusing sharecropper shacks was unique to The Shack-up Inn when it first began. Shotgun houses have served a vital role in the history and culture of Mississippi and the South. Elvis Presley was born in a shotgun house, BB King grew up in one, and Robert Johnson is said to have died in one (Maiké 2015). International visitors now visit Mississippi to explore its region's blues. When booking rooms, the Shack-up Inn prioritizes international guests from such distant places as Australia and Canada. It is common to see international tourists exploring Clarksdale and the surrounding areas carrying cameras and guitars, and buying flowers to place on the graves of blues musicians. When these tourists choose to stay in the delta and embrace the blues culture the towns benefit economically. In fact, geographers Stephen Frenkel and Judy Walton believe that "The post-World War II era has witnessed the decline of a number of rural, resource-based economies and an increasing turn to tourists as an alternative economy" (Frenkel and Walton 2000: p. 559).

For the Shack-up Inn, history comes alive for many of the guests. The hotel is situated on Hopson Plantation, one of the oldest plantations in Mississippi, and the site

where two major farming innovations took place in the mid-1940s. During this time Hopson unveiled the first mechanically planted cotton crop, the first aerial application of pesticide, and the first mechanical cotton picker (two of which still stand on the Shack-Up Inn grounds). With the introduction of these technologies and the falling prices of cotton, it no longer made sense to employ large numbers of sharecroppers to plant and harvest the cotton. When the workers found themselves out of work, they headed north to Memphis and Chicago, taking their musical heritages with them (Kinnon 1997).

Beginning with just one shack and transforming to what now is a complex of a couple dozen shacks, a grain bin hotel, a bar, a restaurant, a gift store, and a juke joint; the Shack-Up Inn shows no signs of stopping. The Shack-Up Inn even hosts musicians, music festivals, songwriting camps, guitar camps, harmonica camps, and many more musical events for their eclectic guests. Owners Guy Malvessi and Bill Talbot say that their primary goal is to encourage creativity and preserve the music that began in that area. The idea behind the shacks is that if musicians could escape distractions and write about what they saw and experienced, the music would be more authentic and therefore of a higher quality. Artists such as Robert Plant and Eric Clapton are frequent guests of the shacks and when Charlie Musselwhite stayed in 2013, he recorded *Juke Joint Chapel* which was nominated for a Grammy Award.

While interning at the Shack-Up Inn, I met guests from around the world, all eager to learn more about the Mississippi Delta and the blues. The strictly word-of-mouth advertising technique allowed those who truly wanted to visit the opportunity to come. I frequently sat with guests and inquired why they made the interesting trek to the Mississippi Delta. Reasons abounded from a love of the blues to wanting to find the “real

America,” but regardless of the reason they were all ecstatic to stay in their very own shack. Clarksdale businesses have had to adapt to the new accents, languages, and customs of the international tourists, but from my experiences many of the visitors crave authenticity in their adventures.

While the Shack-up inn may not be advantageous to everyone, many of the people who are coming know what they are coming to and they are also seeking progress. While these shacks now have running water and air-conditioning, the guests understand that these modern conveniences were not present when people actually resided in these shacks. While many guests come for music and to see how many of their favorite blues artists lived, guests come for a wide array of reasons. An African American family rents the entire property for a weekend every summer to hold a family reunion because it reminds them of how far they have come since several family members lived in similar shacks in the Delta.

Sharecropper shacks once dotted the Mississippi Delta landscape and were the homes to many rural and impoverished Mississippians. By purchasing and renovating these shacks with authentic and realistic time-period items, guests of the Shack-Up Inn can feel as if they are living in the same conditions that Elvis and BB King did as children. While most of these shacks were not originally located on Hopson Plantation, the shacks seamlessly merge with their environment and local history. Cultural tourism emphasizes the uniqueness of a place, and that is exactly what the Shack-Up Inn does. The uniqueness of the Mississippi Delta is embodied by the compound of shacks and plantation equipment (See Figure III).

The Shack-Up Inn took what was unique to their area and profited off of it. Learning from Bill Talbot and Guy Malvessi allowed me to see cultural tourism in action and meeting with guests allowed me to discover what makes Mississippi desirable to outsiders. While sharecropper shacks may not be appropriate for all areas of the delta, all communities have unique aspects that if promoted can and will bring visitors.

The cultural heritage of the Mississippi Shack-up Inn has already been replicated in another Mississippi Delta town. Tallahatchie Flats owner Steve LaVere “became enchanted with the idea of creating a venture similar in scope to that of The Shack Up Inn near Clarksdale” (TallahatchieFlats.com). Today LeVere and his partners maintain six refurbished sharecropper shacks on the Tallahatchie River near Greenwood, Mississippi. Tallahatchie Flats is proof that many of the unique cultural heritage attractions throughout the delta can be replicated.



Figure III Shack-Up Inn Shacks

Source: My Summer Internship 2016

#### **H. New Blues Tourism**

Blues tourism has existed as long as the blues itself. However, Jeff Titon (1998) argues that with the release of Robert Johnson's box set in the 1990s, the once forgotten art of blues music was reborn and the "New Blues Tourism" age was formed (p. 5). Today tourists can remember the past through activities such as searching for the "authentic" gravesites of Robert Johnson, to visiting historic places such as Hopson Plantation or Dockery Farms where blues musician Charlie Patton once worked.

This tourism movement has also brought forth a new age of blues music and blues musicians. In the past decade, several blues festivals have sprung up around the region offering fans an opportunity to hear the blues year-round. Various clubs and juke joints have also begun offering concerts and events throughout the week to draw in blues fans. In fact, Roger Stolle releases a daily calendar of music and events happening around the area. Change agents like Roger Stolle are a crucial reason why the blues are gaining popularity worldwide. Various travel guides, such as Lonely Planet's *Mississippi- USA* and *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues*, cater to the rising demands of blues tourism and allow visitors to explore on their own and search out unique locations.

The characteristics of blues fans and blues tourists have changed rather drastically since the age of "New Blues Tourism" has emerged. What is unique to the Mississippi blues is that the music is directly linked to the history, people, and culture that produced it (Titon, 1998, p. 9). What traditionally served as field songs sung by slaves and sharecroppers, is now music that is enjoyed by a wide array of people. The majority of blues tourists and fans are no longer an oppressed people, but rather older affluent whites. This change occurred in the 1950's when record companies noted a decreasing African American fan base for blues music and began repackaging the music for a white audience (Davis 1995).

Because of the changing fan bases, the blues have been adapted and changed to fit this new specialized white market without accurately representing the history of the Mississippi Delta. One of the key features to "New Blues Tourism" is embracing the past that created the music instead of running from it. Mississippi has had a turbulent past, but

out of it has come some of America's greatest music. Today many people, such as Roger Stolle, attempt to show tourists both the music, and the history that created it.

Despite some resistance and negative views from many outside of Mississippi, the Mississippi Delta is progressing. Using the harsh history of the region as a source of growth and a catalyst for social and economic development, several businesses and social programs are bringing new ideas and fighting the injustices associated with the area. Because of cheap land, and a low cost of living, developers are moving into the region and creating jobs and opportunities for the people there. While change can create problems when misused or abused, with change there is the possibility for positive growth in the region. For those who live in the Mississippi Delta, revitalization brings with it a renewed sense of community pride.

Mississippi must embrace what occurred in its history and display how the state has grown through the struggles. Historic education can inspire progress in the region, by teaching residents where they came from and showing them where they can go. By creating festivals, museums, and historic markers, Mississippi is showing that it is finally embracing its past for what it was and what grew from it. Mississippi Blues Trail markers not only show the great things that blues musicians did, but also the hardships they faced. Mississippi is a land of determination and success and by highlighting Mississippi's historic sites, visitors and locals alike can be inspired to make a difference. Mississippi's musical heritage is so deeply intertwined with Mississippi culture that it is a logical base to build a bright future.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Agritourism and Food Tourism**

#### **A. Agritourism**

“Wilderness is not a luxury, but a necessity of the human spirit” (Abbey 1968, p. 211). Tourism is the largest industry in the world and has prospered in the past few decades due to easier travel methods and larger concentrations of wealth within the leisure class (Honey 2008). With the growth of tourism, demand for experiential forms of tourism such as agritourism, ecotourism, and adventure tourism has grown. These alternative tourism methods focus on rural communities rich in natural amenities rather than urban environments and allow urban visitors to experience the rural landscape and culture in its natural form (Bessiere 1998).

The Mississippi Delta was built on agriculture and farming due to the abundance of incredibly fertile soil deposited from the Mississippi River. While farming built the delta, today most farms are owned by large corporations that ship the products out of the state. By bringing visitors to family-owned farms, the history of farming in the delta could be preserved while providing an alternative revenue stream to the farmers.

Agritourism, perhaps the most popular type of rural tourism in the United States and Western Europe, can provide a substantial alternative revenue source by allowing farmers to add value to their land without adding acreage. Because of this, agritourism preserves



America's traditional farmscapes (Che, Veeck, and Veeck 2005; McGehee and Kim 2004).

Agritourism has become a popular trend throughout the world, yet has not taken-off in Mississippi. Currently [agritourismworld.com](http://agritourismworld.com), a website that provides a directory of farms that features agritourism attractions, only lists twenty-five agritourism destinations in the entire state of Mississippi. For the landowners and farmers, bringing visitors onto their operations will encourage product variation and increase their visibility to the public, thus increasing demand for the products grown at that farm. Direct sales to visitors decrease the need to package and ship as much product and keep locally grown products in the same area. Value can also be added to the products grown by allowing the farmers to sell at a premium price to visitors.

Agritourism allows many farmers to farm smaller sections of their land because of the increase in revenue brought by visitors. This prevents excessive farming and waste and can help preserve Mississippi's forests and streams. By allowing visitors on their farms, farmers can educate them on the importance of the farm, rural life, and agriculture in Mississippi. This education will therefore increase demand for products grown locally.

For the delta tourism industry, agritourism can provide more attractions in the area. This means that local economies would benefit from an increase in tourists to the area. Tourists that were already present in the area would have reason to stay in the area longer and spend more money in the local communities. Jobs also would be created by encouraging agritourism.

The agricultural infrastructure is already in place in Mississippi and has been since Mississippi was settled. By promoting agritourism, rural communities could capture

tourism dollars, increase local revenue, provide jobs, and keep struggling farms and farmers in business. While Mississippi has not fully supported the agritourism industry like states such as Colorado, where they use government funds to support the industry, the Natural Resource Enterprises Program with the Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Aquaculture at Mississippi State University reports that the economic impact in 2011 of the agritourism industry was at least \$3,583,135 annually. Other activities associated with agritourism such as hunting, fishing, horseback riding, and wildlife viewing on Mississippi farms bring the economic impact of agritourism to almost \$3 billion annually.

#### **B. Mississippi Wildlife Heritage Museum**

Mississippi is known as a hunting and fishing destination throughout the world, and it is the number one state east of the Mississippi River based on the percentage of the population (over eighty percent) that engages in outdoor recreation such as hunting and fishing (Mississippi Senate Resolution 8 2015). The area surrounding the Mississippi River abounds with doves, ducks, turkey, whitetail deer, rabbits, squirrels, and fishing lakes. Farmers in the area have begun conducting hunting expeditions using their harvested fields prior to the replanting season. This provides a steady source of income outside of the planting seasons. Rice fields in the area attract more ducks from the Mississippi River Flyaway than any area of the country. To accommodate their destination hunters, many farmers, such as Steve Prather, have built guest houses on their farms.

Leland, Mississippi has already begun the process of bringing the hunters from the fields into town to share the tourism revenue steam among the community.

Washington County, where Leland is located, was named one of the top one hundred places in the country for outdoor pursuits (Mississippi Senate Resolution 8 2015). The town is currently home to the Kermit the Frog Birthplace and Jim Henson Boyhood Museum on the banks of Deer Creek, and the Highway 61 Blues Museum. The founders of the latter museum, Billy Johnson, in collaboration with Pulitzer Prize nominated author Robert Hitt Neill, have planned and begun construction on the Mississippi Wildlife Heritage Museum in downtown Leland (Mississippi Senate Resolution 8 2015).

Neill noticed from the world map in his wife Betsy's coffee shop that Leland was already receiving tourists from around the world, and realized that the longer tourists stay in the town, the more money they give to the community. The Mississippi Wildlife Heritage Museum, which is Mississippi's only facility of this kind, will house hunting and fishing memorabilia from the Native American times to modern day. The hope of the museum founders is that the museum will appeal to the sportsmen and sportswomen from around the world who already visit the delta for destination hunting and fishing (See Figure IV).

This museum will celebrate Mississippi's connection to nature that has existed for thousands of years. The Mississippi Outdoor Hall of Fame, which will be housed in the museum will celebrate Mississippians and those tied to the state who have led the way for innovations and preservation efforts that have turned Mississippi into the wildlife destination it is today.

When I visited Leland with my CEED cohort during the fall of 2015, Leland resembled a ghost town. The world map in Neill's wife's coffee shop inspired Neill to bring visitors to the community he has loved and served for so long. Neill showed us an

abandoned building and described his vision to us. While Neill's vision seemed impossible to me, today the museum has gained funding and the building is looking less like an old hardware store and more like a tourist attraction. The McLean Institute brought Robert Hitt Neill to campus during the spring of 2016, so that he could meet with students and other community leaders and broaden his network. The experiences and stories he told hopefully will inspire other public servants to make positive changes in their communities.

If city organizers, such as Robert Hitt Neill, can successfully keep tourists in Leland overnight, then these visitors will spend more than twice the amount they would if they were solely visiting on day trips. Neill believes that this museum will draw sportsmen and sportswomen from the fields into downtown Leland where they can spend money at businesses such as Betsy's coffee shop. Currently there are no hotels in the city of Leland, only guesthouses run at local homeowners' discretions. The Leland Chamber of Commerce has had plans drawn to put a hotel in downtown Leland, but the resources to make this plan a success are not available at this time (Neill 2016).

Apart from the lack of infrastructure such as hotels and restaurants, several other factors make promoting delta tourism difficult. Neill believes that roads and bridges around the delta are not currently suited to support tourist travel. The Yazoo Mississippi Delta Joint Water Management District wrote in 2007 that irrigation is resulting in a decline in aquifer levels. This water loss has shown to damage bridges and roads (Powers 2007). On top of the sinking soil, overloaded truckers transporting grain have also caused major wear on the motorways. The Mississippi Department of transportation must maintain and improve highways such as 61 and 82 (and the newly approved bypass) in

order to make towns such as Leland accessible to visitors. Neill hopes that by creating a third museum in Leland (and eventually a Jim Henson theme park) that highway progress will become a priority for Mississippi legislators.



Figure IV Artist Rendering of Finished Mississippi Wildlife and Heritage Museum

Source: <http://mswildlifeheritagemuseum.com/>

While the Mississippi Wildlife Heritage Museum will be the only hunting and fishing museum in Mississippi, the Mississippi Delta landscape has attracted visitors for centuries. In 2009, after six years of lobbying by Representative Bennie Thompson,

Senator Thad Cochran, and Senator Roger Wicker, the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area was created by Congress. This area, managed by the National Parks Service, is located in the Mississippi River's alluvial floodplains and contains the counties of Bolivar, Carroll, Coahoma, De Soto, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Panola, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tate, Tunica, Warren, Washington and Yazoo (National Parks Service 2016).

### **C. National Parks and Land Preservation**

The National Parks Service hopes that by establishing this heritage area the unique landscape and traditions of the delta will be preserved, community pride will be enhanced, and the story of the Mississippi Delta will be shared with the world. The five themes the heritage area focuses on include Moving Toward Freedom: Changing America's Character in the Struggle for Rights, Growing More than Cotton: The Delta as a Wellspring of Creativity, The Delta Divide: Building Communities, The Culture of the Blues and the Birth of an American Sound, and The Mississippi River and the Land It Embraces.

While the area around the Mississippi has a fascinating history and is home to many unique plants and animals, this area is the first and only national park in the Mississippi Delta. The National Parks service is not the only government agency that has seemingly ignored the delta, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks only supports one state park in the region, The Great River Road State Park in Rosedale, Mississippi. The United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service maintains The Delta National Forest and Sunflower Wildlife Management Area. Located in Sharkey

County, this forest contains more than 60,000 acres of forested wetlands and bottomland hardwoods. Today this forest serves as the only bottomland hardwood national forest in the country and one of the few hardwood forests still standing in the Mississippi Delta.

Preserving the natural beauty of the Mississippi Delta is essential in order to share the delta with future generations. These parks are vital to the delta's preservation efforts, but because few parks exist, communities must also do their part to maintain the areas. In Leland, businesses and community members got together and cleaned Deer Creek, a creek that runs through downtown Leland. The creek now serves as the birthplace of Kermit the Frog, and home one of the delta's largest and most unique Christmas celebrations, Christmas on Deer Creek. Now Deer Creek draws tourists to its banks and to Leland.

By promoting the positives surrounding Mississippi's agriculture today, Mississippi can display the progress it has made in terms of civil rights. The lands that were once farmed by slaves and sharecroppers are now providing food and entertainment for the world. Mississippi must not forget its past. "...We have yet to solve old problems—above all, that of the yawning gulf between the haves and the have-nots of the world (McMichael 2016:p. 222). Stories must be told of Mississippi and the hardships that it has faced and that it has overcome. Through storytelling, visitors and locals alike can gain new appreciation and understanding of the lands and people around them. The delta is full of stories and story tellers, yet few are heard by many people. To solve this problem, Colquitt, Georgia, a small struggling town got together and combined community stories to create *Swamp Gravy*. *Swamp Gravy* allowed for Colquitt to preserve their history and continues to bring tourists to the area.

When our CEED cohort visited Betsy's coffee shop during the fall of 2015, Mr. Neill showed us the progress that was being made on the new museum and in Leland. During an interview with him, I learned how much advancement had come to the community in just a few months' time. One of my CEED colleagues at the university, Zack Grossenbacher, who is a graduate student in Integrated Marketing Communications, is working on documenting and sharing the Mississippi Delta's colorful stories with the help of Robert Hitt Neill and other delta residents. By building relationships within communities and working together to recognize and solve problems, lasting change is being made.

Mississippi can and will benefit from agritourism, but the story that is told must not whitewash the history that shaped the land. Through careful planning efforts of government officials and leaders such as Robert Hitt Neill, the delta can promote the land to visitors from around the world. And in doing so, the whole story can be shared, highlighting what is sustainable for the Mississippi Delta. Growth and development are not only material, but development growth is about the increasing capacities of all that it means to be a human. "Degrowth economics is designed to counter the prevailing economic orthodoxy of unbridled growth that translates into development today and to create integrated, self-sufficient and materially responsible societies. The disenfranchised must be invited to share their views on Degrowth and how to build more equitable societies while living on the earth" (McMichael 2016, p. 293).

#### **D. Food Tourism**

In addition to agritourism, food tourism of local food systems has been gaining popularity worldwide (Smith and Xiao 2008). As tourism seeks to bring emphasis to



specific areas and draw in visitors, connecting foods to their rural places of origin brings people a greater appreciation of the area and the foods it produces. Agritourism often focuses on single farms and private enterprises, food tourism expands on this curiosity and links multiple sectors of the local economy, and thus could potentially provide a greater source for rural economic development (Green and Dougherty 2008; Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003).

In 2014, Thrillest listed New Orleans as the number one destination in the country for food travel (Infante 2014) and Memphis as number twenty-two, putting the Mississippi Delta in the perfect location to benefit from food tourism. Eighty-five percent of luxury travelers say that dining in new and unique restaurants is one of the most important parts of their travel experience (Hospitality Net- Portrait of Affluent Travelers). Delta restaurants should draw in these tourists, because nationwide travelers and tourists account for about twenty-five percent of sales at casual-dining restaurants and over forty percent of sales at fine-dining restaurants (Chadwick 2012).

In Mississippi, The Viking Range Corporation and the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA), are working to make the Mississippi Delta a culinary mecca. SFA is another center at the University of Mississippi, which partners with numerous community partners to address quality of life issues in Mississippi. Together, these two entities created the Mississippi Delta Hot Tamale Trail which highlights the delta's unique history with this traditionally Mexican dish. This trail stretching from Vicksburg to Tunica, provides visitors with a complete guide to the tamale in the delta.

How they came to be a delta staple is open to interpretation and the stories have been passed down through various oral stories and traditions, but today tamales are as

much a staple of the Mississippi Delta as they are of Mexico. In 1936, legendary delta bluesman, Robert Johnson used a tamale vendor to describe a woman in “They’re Red Hot.”

Whether brought to Mississippi by Mexican-American war veterans, Native Americans, or Mexican laborers, the meat and corn meal dish has been embraced by the delta. Today they can be found throughout the region in countless variations. Hot Tamales even have their own “Hot Tamales and the Blues” Mississippi Blues Trail marker in Rosedale, Mississippi, making the tamale the first culinary blues marker on the trail.

Tamales are not the only culinary attraction in the delta. Belzoni, also known as the “Catfish Capital of the World,” shows how Mississippi’s farm-raised catfish industry has created demand for the dish throughout the world. To draw in tourists, Belzoni offers farm tours, a catfish museum, The World Catfish Festival, and the world’s largest catfish statue, “King Cat.” Some Mississippi U-Haul trailers even advertise Belzoni’s claim to fame (See Figure V).



Figure V: U-Haul Advertising Belzoni Catfish

Source: <http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/10520947@N08/4872035022/>

In Greenwood, the home of the Viking Hospitality group, also features several culinary attractions. Greenwood is known throughout the southeast as a culinary oasis (VisitGreenwood.com 2015). At the luxury hotel, The Alluvian, visitors can dine at Giardina's Restaurant and Mockingbird Bakery. After their meals, visitors can learn to cook in the Viking Cooking School from professional chefs preparing gourmet dishes during 90 minute or three hour sessions. This program keeps Mississippi meal traditions alive and allows guests to take new skills home and spread Mississippi's food culture.

#### **E. Challenges Related to Agritourism**

While delta staples like tamales and catfish are renowned throughout the world, many of those living in the Mississippi Delta suffer from a lack of fresh food. During a

2014 survey of “grocery store” accessibility in the delta I conducted with some of my CEED cohort members, I realized that there is very little fresh produce for sale in Mississippi Delta grocery stores. While farmer’s markets are beginning to see success in larger delta communities, much of the area is still a food desert. In 2015, a group of CEED students began planning a mobile food market for the Mississippi Delta. While this idea is still in the planning stages, the McLean institute has already pledged \$3000 towards its success. Once the issue of food accessibility is solved, delta natives can focus on new ventures such as tourism.

A challenge the Delta faces concerning agritourism is that people interested in learning about food systems are less likely to be interested in the delta's dominant approach to agriculture - a plantation system that gave way to sharecropping, then mechanized, and resulted in extremely large-scale commercial industries with some of the highest concentrations of chemical usage coupled with displaced workers.

What is needed for agritourism to take off is to tell the minority side to the story, such as how black farmers formed cooperatives in the context of white hostility, settled towns (such as Mound Bayou), and created institutions for rural development and sustainable agriculture that fundamentally shaped what later became the small farmer, cooperative, credit union, community health center, and now local food systems movements. For instance, black farmers and other families in Mound Bayou, working through out-of-state community-university collaborations and with health care providers in Jackson, founded the nation's first rural federally-qualified community health center 50 years ago. That center is now promoting local food systems and health (Green 2016).

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Civil Rights Tourism**

Throughout the south, monuments to African American heroes are being erected in an attempt to remedy past wrongs and to take advantage of the emergent civil rights tourism market (Parker 2001). These sites and attractions provide tourists with a chance to discover and better understand the South's civil rights narrative. Many throughout the delta are attempting to go a step further and create a sustainable civil rights tourism industry.

Mississippi often hides from its civil rights past, and therefore many Mississippi residents do not understand the value of these or how to market these stories to tourists. In Tallahatchie County, the story of Emmett Till provides an opportunity for its residents to overcome their past actions and take ownership of the story.

Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago came to visit his family in Money, Mississippi in the summer of 1955. After “inappropriately” interacting with a white woman at a Money grocery store, Till was kidnapped and murdered by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam (Carrier 2004). His mutilated body was put on display by his mother and Chicago and pictures were published in *Jet* magazine. This event sparked nationwide outrage and fueled the need for change in the Civil Rights movement (Cobb 2008).

Today, just off of U.S. Interstate 49, a small sign advertising the Emmett Till Museum can be seen. The Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center (ETHIC) is located in

Glendora, Mississippi, near the Tallahatchie River where Till's body was discovered. The museum itself is housed in the barn where Till's murderers attached a gin fan to his body with barbed wire. Inside, visitors can view displays chronicling Emmett Till's story and the effects he had on the nation. While this museum is a major advancement in the story of Mississippi's civil rights history, the museum is drastically underfunded and run by a small group of locals. This lack of resources makes the museum difficult to visit due to its varying hours.

Glendora, with a population of just about 285 people, has already made great strides to preserve history and promote tourism (Christian 2006). ETHIC, along with the Emmett Till Memorial Commission, has started the process of promoting civil rights tourism; however, there is still a "culture of silence" throughout the area especially among white residents. In order for the county and the delta to truly create a sustainable tourism industry, the area and its people must undergo a reconciliation process. The Emmett Till Memorial Commission released a public Statement of Regret over the Emmett Till injustices in order to ensure that their efforts are truly beneficial to everyone. This statement aimed to bring the people of Tallahatchie County together and bring an honest, open dialogue about race. The William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation was involved in these efforts, which is another example of The University of Mississippi's community-campus partnerships.

While the cornerstones of civil rights tourism have been laid in Tallahatchie County, the county currently serves mostly pass-through visitors, requiring tourists to eat and stay in neighboring counties. Tallahatchie County must build a tourism infrastructure including hotels and restaurants in order to fully benefit from tourism. Several delta

counties have already begun creating tourism infrastructures such as Clarksdale with the blues and Tunica with gambling. In the 1980s, Tunica went from being one of the poorest counties in the United States with almost no infrastructure, to a multi-million-dollar tourism and gambling destination. While civil rights tourism will probably not be as profitable as gambling was for Tunica, the county should utilize their unique heritage and history.

Through the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center, the restoration of the Tallahatchie County Courthouse where the Till trial took place, and the creation of an Emmett Till Memorial Day, many people are working to fulfill the goal of restoration through tourism. Not every civil rights heritage site in the delta has received the same level of care and attention. The Bryant grocery store in Money, Mississippi, where the story of Emmett Till began has received almost no attention and is near collapse today (See Figure VI). This skeleton of a building accurately represents how many people and communities continue to neglect and hide their history of racial injustice. In a 2005 panel at the Old Capitol Museum in Jackson, the Mississippi Heritage Trust listed the grocery store as one of the ten most endangered historic places (Mississippi Heritage Trust 2016).

CEED gave me opportunities to visit various tourism sites such as the Money, Mississippi grocery store where the Emmett Till story began, and the newly renovated courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi, where the trial of Emmett Till's murderers occurred. These first hand experiences gave me the passion to further explore the delta and to fall in love with it. I first saw the ruins of Bryant Grocery during a CEED trip in March of 2015. I revisited this site in February of 2016 and the remnants of the building had fallen into further disrepair. Seeing civil rights sites such as Bryant Grocery and the Sumner

Courthouse again after spending time living and working in the delta made the Emmett Till story more impactful to me. People I had interviewed and learned from throughout the delta actually lived in the areas where these atrocities occurred.

Standing next to the grocery store where the Emmett Till stood sixty years before was unnerving. But with every night comes a day, and many Mississippi residents are working to correct their pasts. A gas station next door to the Bryant Grocery ruins has been restored to its former glory to show residents and tourists alike what it looked like in 1955. The fuel station owner's father served on the all-white jury that acquitted Till's murderers. The owner of the fuel station has a personal connection to the Emmett Till story and does not want future generations to repeat past mistakes. Through this woman I witnessed Mississippi's resilience and reinforced my beliefs that tourism can give Mississippi a brighter future.

Walking through Sumner, Mississippi where the Emmett Till trial took place opened my eyes to injustices that occurred in the state. Patrick Weems, a University of Mississippi alumnus and director of Sumner, Mississippi's Emmett Till Interpretive Center, gave the CEED Scholars the tour of the town and the newly renovated courthouse explaining the region's history that led to the Emmett Till trial's results. This immersive tour showed that the cultural principles of the delta are advancing. Of the center Weems said, "our main mission is to tell the truth, to give young people a chance to know their history and to use the arts as a way to engage the past" (*Personal Interview* 2014).





Figure VI Bryant Grocery in Money, MS

Source: CEED Trip to Mississippi Delta March 2015

In 2011, Mississippi created the Mississippi Freedom Trail to commemorate the people who fought for civil rights in Mississippi. To date, sixteen markers, similar to the Mississippi Blues Trail markers, have been placed throughout the state. These markers make it easier to locate important sites that had been forgotten and ignored by many. One of the first markers placed was at Bryant's Store, allowing it to serve its proper role as an important civil rights site. Like the Mississippi Blues Trail did with the blues, The Freedom Trail allows Mississippians to recognize the history around them and the significance their communities played the nation's history. Visit Mississippi has created

interactive websites and blogs that makes exploring the civil rights history of Mississippi much easier. Visitors are also drawn from the highways to more secluded areas which brings much needed revenue to rural towns ([VisitMississippi.org](http://VisitMississippi.org)).

As with all branches of tourism, consumerism and souvenir shopping and gift shops are an important element of civil rights tourism (Sturken 2007). People feel connected to specific people and events in history when they buy these “pocket-sized pieces of history” at gift shops (Stanonis 2008). At the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center and the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, tourists can purchase items commemorating famous African Americans from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to President Barack Obama. By selling civil rights souvenirs, tourists can remember the past, and celebrate the accomplishments of the African-American Community.

Civil rights tourism is a relatively new idea and while progress is being made, there is still a long way to go. This is a difficult task, because it challenges people to remember their past struggles and move forward. A cohesive narrative about civil rights in the delta must be created and shared with visitors and locals alike. When communities come together for a common goal, reconciliation and healing can occur. Civil rights tourism should be aimed at “tourism healing divided societies” (Freya Higgins-Desbiolles 2003)!

Today, visitors to Tallahatchie County can see first-hand the world that Emmett Till stepped into in 1955, as well as the changes that occurred after his death. The county has embraced their past and is now working to move ahead together. Civil rights tourists crave authenticity, therefore communities must restore and preserve important sites before they fall into disrepair like the Money grocery store.

During the summer of 2010, Hollywood descended on Greenwood, Mississippi to film Kathryn Stockett's best-selling book, *The Help*. The filming took place near the site where Emmett Till was killed. Unlike many stories with white protagonists, *The Help*, features strong African American, female characters living in Mississippi during the 1960s. Since the success of the movie, the city of Greenwood has begun offering self-guided tours of filming locations. The city hopes that by showing where the movie took place, visitors will become interested in civil rights sites around the delta. Greenwood is currently attempting to turn Money Road into a tourist destination. With Bryant Grocery, one of Robert Johnson's three graves, and *The Help* filming locations all on one road, Greenwood hopes visitors will drive down the street and into Greenwood.

The creation of museums, markers, and plaques honoring civil rights people and events shows courage from the state of Mississippi and a willingness to accept and accurately portray their scandalous and racist past. To the eyes of many, Mississippi has not changed much in the past fifty years, and outsiders can feel as if they are visually and geographically in the past. The Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center brings the Emmett Till story into the twenty-first century. Patrick Weems, said that the civil rights tourism efforts of Sumner serve as a "way to acknowledge where we've been but also take responsibility for where we're going" (2014). By embracing their past, civil rights tourism allows for communities to gain new revenue streams, new job opportunities, and better racial reconciliation. This sustainable tourism method also allows visitors to gain new knowledge and understanding by visiting physical sites where history was made.

As part of our Sumner CEED trip in both 2015 and 2016, we read the resolution created by the Emmett Till Interpretive Center and presented to the family of Emmett

Till. The words in the resolution mean more and more to me every time I read them. The Emmett Till story must be shared with the world. The Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center in Glendora, The Emmett Till Interpretive Center in Sumner, and the gas station in Money all seek to tell Till's story. One problem I have seen with these multiple entities is lack of communication. This event was the seed of the American Civil Rights movement. This is not a Sumner story, not a Mississippi story, not even an American story, but it is a story of world heritage and progress. When Emmett Till was pulled from the Tallahatchie River, Mamie Till, his mother, demanded that her son's casket be opened "so all the world can see what they did to my baby" (Merda 2015).

The resolution states that "Working together, we have the power now to fulfill the promise of 'liberty and justice' for all" (Emmett Till Memorial Commission 2007). The multiple Emmett Till attractions must do just that and work together to teach the world of Emmett Till. The Money, Mississippi grocery is disappearing before our eyes. University students and delta leaders must work together to prevent the Emmett Till story from vanishing into history.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. What Now?**

What is the University's role to the greater society in which it resides? This thesis has been an exploration of community-campus engagement, and a qualitative description of university students' engagement in these communities. I have taken a participant observer position in this analysis, as I have been immersed in the student engagement project.

Institutional theory posits that organizational structures have meaning and importance beyond the individuals. Applying this to community engagement, “institutional theory suggests that engagement structures may exist simply to communicate a set of values about the importance of community and that the structures themselves may be more important than the outcomes” (Weerts and Sandmann 2008). This theory forces us to confront the practice of institutional branding. In other words, does the university's key priority of “Transformation Through Service” match its engagement practice? And if that alignment has not yet been achieved, is there sufficient infrastructure and institutional commitment to further these goals?

Community and economic development projects in the Mississippi Delta have long been a challenge due to systemic poverty. In the context of massive out-migration from the region, tourism business folks and their followers are sometimes the only in-migrants. However, that does not mean there are not concerns and conflicts. So, this is where community-campus partnerships have the opportunity to help explore these

challenges and bring diverse perspectives to the table and ask questions about being innovative, solving problems without creating new ones, and embracing diversity. This study suggests that community-campus partnerships and efforts around community engagement do offer opportunities to address some of these persistent social problems. An institutional approach, with the community and university interacting in a mutually beneficial way, offers both the community and university programs an opportunity to improve society.

Standing on the banks of the Tallahatchie River, reaching my hand into the waters where Emmett Till's body was found, was sobering. Seeing how far the Mississippi Delta has come, and seeing progress made by change agents throughout the area gives me hope for Mississippi's future. In 2010, the U.S. census found that of the fifty counties with the highest poverty rates (out of 3,144 U.S. counties and parishes), fourteen were in Mississippi and ten were in the Mississippi Delta. Mississippi has suffered in the past, but Mississippi has the opportunity to change its course. All members of the community-campus must understand that their success is interconnected, and through community engagement, meaningful social change can be enacted.

The CEED initiative at the University of Mississippi has shown me a new side of the Mississippi Delta, and has given me a vision of delta revitalization through community and university engagement and tourism. Students of higher education must venture out of the classroom and explore their surroundings. This can inspire the students to use their talents and make changes in the communities that they live so closely to yet see so little of. The resources that institutes of higher learning, such as The University of Mississippi, possess, including funds, knowledge, students, and professors, can alleviate

some of the resources needed to create a tourism infrastructure in the Mississippi Delta. This topic gave me a broader and deeper understanding on sociology and social injustices in the Mississippi Delta, as well as my initial goal of business development and entrepreneurship related to tourism.

Change is already occurring. After the CEED program began building relationships with communities around north Mississippi, other entities at the University of Mississippi began partnerships with rural communities. Noting the lack of productive outlets for children, two CEED scholars created a summer program in Vardaman, Mississippi. This program taught and entertained thirty Hispanic children during the summer of 2015. During the summer of 2016 this program will be replicated in the delta in Marks, Mississippi. The CEED model can work and is working at building relationships, creating change, and informing university students about what is in their backyard.

I have always been fascinated with the tourism industry, and the CEED Initiative gave me a chance to connect my passions with the Mississippi Delta. Working with Bubba O'Keefe, the Shack-up Inn, and various other delta leaders allowed me to see multiple aspects of how tourism is working to better the region. By allowing other students from the university to explore their passions in practical and beneficial ways, meaningful partnerships and change can and will occur.

In 1864 Robert Browning said, "Progress, man's distinctive mark alone, not God's, and not the beasts'; God is, they are. Man partly is and wholly hopes to be" (Browning 1864). Much of Mississippi's progress depends on the perceptions of others. Therefore, opening our gates to tourists and visitors will allow others to see the state's

progress. Owning and accepting our past is the first step to reconciliation, and tourism can aid in this process. In order to share our past we must teach our residents. I lived in the delta for a summer thanks to The University of Mississippi's McLean Institute, and I believe that everyone should see all the state has to offer. The resources universities in the state have can support the building of a tourism infrastructure in Mississippi and with the infrastructure in place, money and jobs will be brought into the state.

“About half of the world's workforce holds casual jobs—which means that around 90 percent of the global workforce is poor, vulnerable, or unemployed” (McMichael 2016, p. 218). Community-campus partnerships, framed within the theoretical perspective of Institutional Engagement (Weerts and Sandmann 2008), might not be the panacea to eradicate poverty as we know it, but these principles of engagement model one way to approach development, which may in turn, address some of these old patterns of inequality and poverty. Community partners, who have been historically separated from college campuses, will bring much needed knowledge to academic programs. This “two-way” approach to learning might also address the pervasive poverty of the mind that weakens both white and black communities. This mindset among communities that perpetuates the racial and class divide and paralyzes the region into patterns of social stagnation does not have to continue.

Using “Tourism” as a way to explore these engagement practices has identified replicable models for other universities. Reciprocal engagement brings the community-campus as equals to the table and empowers all to understand that in order to build a universally beneficial society, we must recognize that development is not owned by one group within the community but by everyone.



## **B. Limitations**

While I believe that through personal research, interviews, survey data, and my own experiences this thesis is an accurate assessment of the role community-campus partnerships play in revitalizing the Mississippi Delta through tourism, limitations do exist. Because business men and women were a major focus of mine, I did not interview every aspect of every market, but as a business major, my focus was on entrepreneurship and the ideas that can be replicated. Time was another major limitation throughout this process. Change and progress take time, but because I was only in the delta for the summer and sporadic trips, I did not spend enough time to fully become a member of the community. A larger number of community residents could have been interviewed, more diversity could have existed in my interview participants, and the newness of this research left some ambiguity; but regardless of the limitations I believe that this thesis serves as a catalyst for economic development in the Mississippi Delta. In the end, questions might remain about engagement as a strategy to transform communities and society at large. Yet, engagement has emerged as an important strategic initiative in higher education.

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## CONSENT FORM

### Consent to Participate in Study:

#### Economic Impact of Tourism in the Mississippi Delta

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☐ By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Use unless it's impossible for a minor to volunteer. Use for all student samples.
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### The purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to understand how tourism in the MS Delta region is being utilized to spur economic development and to understand the role colleges and universities play in this process.

### What you will do for this study

The survey will take less than one hour total. I will ask you questions related to the research question. During the interview, I will take notes for reference purposes.

### Time required for this study

Each interview will take less than one hour in length.

### Possible risks from your participation

In this study, you will not have any more risks that you would in a normal day of life. You are free to pause or stop at any point during the interview.

### **Benefits from your participation**

You should not expect benefits from participating in this study. However, you might experience satisfaction from contributing to scientific knowledge. Also, answering the survey questions might make you more aware of habits you'd like to change – sometimes this can help lead to improved habits.

### **Confidentiality**

We will keep your interview private to the extent allowed by law. Printed data will only be stored in cabinet that can be opened with a key. Sam Russell, Albert Nylander, and JR Love will have access to the data to be used for educational purposes.

### **Right to Withdraw**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during this interview.

### **IRB Approval**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, then decide if you want to be in the study or not.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have been given an unsigned copy of this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and I have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Printed name of Participant

## Appendix B

### **Interview Questions**

4. How do you foresee tourism having an impact on the MS Delta in terms of economic development?
5. What do you believe is a strength of the tourism industry in the MS Delta?
6. What are the greatest obstacles for promoting tourism in the MS Delta?

## **IRB Approval:**

Mr. Russell:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, "Economic Impact of Tourism in the MS Delta" (Protocol #16x-283), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi's human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

- You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.
- Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.
- You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

### **Jennifer Caldwell, PhD**

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