

Unexpected Gifts

Notes on My Mississippi Photographs

...*(O)ccasionally photographers discover tears in their eyes for the joy of seeing. I think it is because they've known a miracle. They've been given what they did not earn, and as is the way with unexpected gifts, the surprise carries an emotional blessing.*

Robert Adams¹

Some time back we were visiting college friends in Vermont. Both Vermonters, they had moved to Kansas to attend college, and then moved back home afterwards. I, in contrast, grew up in Kansas, stayed there for school, and motored east the day after graduation, never looking back. During college, I spent an unhealthy dose of my time wallowing in self-pity, sore at the incredible flatness, sameness, dullness of the place. Visiting with Gary and Debbie a few years out of school though, I gathered they had gone to school in a very different place than I: they told stories of exploration and discovery in the country and in small towns outside of Manhattan². They had vivid memories of mom and pop diners, flea markets, and couldn't say enough about the "incredible" landscape that is Kansas. They had, basically, enjoyed their time in college, in foreign and exotic Kansas.

I was stunned. In a flash of recognition that I will always remember, it occurred to me that I probably could have enjoyed it too, if I had had the insight to consider myself a tourist rather than a hostage. It bummed me out. My only consolation was that perhaps I could enjoy Vermont more than they could. A shallow thought, but it gave me bitter comfort.

Probably two years later: I was flying home for a springtime visit. The plane descended into the Kansas City airport in the late afternoon light. Three hours earlier I had left a gray and dreary Boston (a city that I love), city of endless winter, narrow streets, and mean people. But as we landed, I looked across the green, gridded fields and I remember thinking: I am Home. "This," I felt, "is so much cooler than the place from where we just came. There

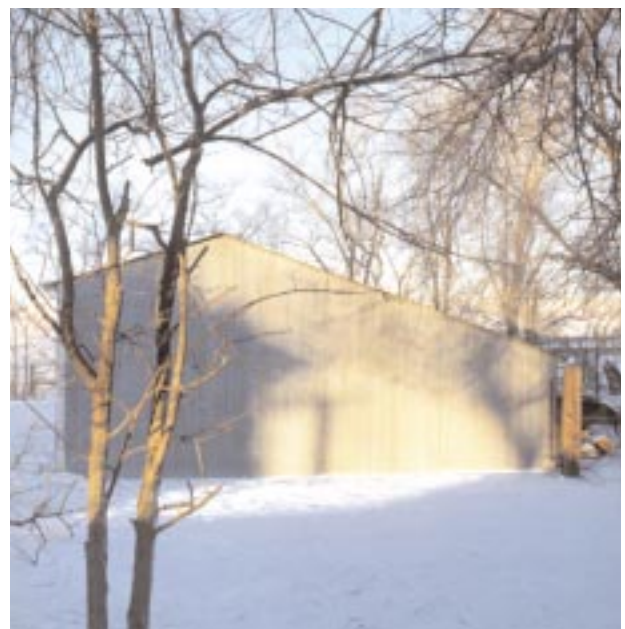
This paper is a speculation on landscapes and some of the photographs I have taken while living in Mississippi. It was published in the Spring 2000 issue of *Mississippi Folklife* magazine.

1. Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph* (Aperture: New York, 1994.) p. 15.

2. Manhattan, Kansas: "The Little Apple"



Whirligigs. Mullinville, Kansas.



Tin Barn. Cimmaron, Kansas.



Western Auto Store. Eupora, Mississippi.

3. *It's a loaded question for many people who ask it, especially the ones who've never been here. My response probably disarms the ones who expect me to affirm their pre-conceptions.*

4. *I now crave the opportunity to go home and explore. It's a strange and wonderful place. Like being on another planet in places.*



Old Cove Hunting Club. Webster County, Mississippi.

is space; the people here are friendly; the air is scented with manure instead of monoxide." It was a strange thing for me to be thinking about the Midwest.

This feeling was quickly stunted with another flash of self-recognition, equally powerful as the one in Vermont: "You, buddy, are plagued by the 'grass is greener' complex." In this case it was literally true—but I realized I also suffered from the figurative, and much more serious strain. I've told this story to a few people over the years, and I always say that "from that moment on," I resolved to stop being sore about where I happened to be, and that I vowed I would start looking at my world with "hungry eyes."

Real life, at least for me, rarely has those instantaneous flashes I describe. I tend to muddle it through, weeks turning into months and years, my time outside of making a living spent in remarkably unremarkable ways: balancing the checkbook, sorting through junk mail, deciding what to cook for dinner. Perhaps I've fashioned these epiphanies as a colorful way of responding to people when they ask how I like living in Mississippi³. To give my story force, a punchline, a moral. Nonetheless, a change has occurred in me over the years. I do try hard to view my world with hungry eyes, to receive its "unexpected gifts" with gratitude, and furthermore, to record it when I have the time and resources.

These photographs are my record of some of the places visited, of things seen, since I moved to Mississippi in 1993. Most are taken in and around Webster County, in north central Mississippi. A few are from Kansas, taken on trips home⁴; there are some from California, as well.

Mississippi is a strange and fine place. Like most people, I imagine, it occupied a paradoxical slot in my imagination before I had the good fortune to move here. It comes to mind, and automatically brings with it images of stately magnolias and insidious kudzu vines, Southern hospitality and KKK lynchings, magnificent Greek revival mansions and sharecropper shacks. My imagination of Mississippi was fashioned by the magic of mass media, and consisted largely of poverty and illiteracy statistics (where it ranks forty-ninth or fiftieth, in a constant tussle with Alabama and Louisiana), images from Mississippi Burning, and the sound of Robert Johnson's wailing Delta Blues.

As in most places, the reality is infinitely more complex and interesting. Mississippi is, without exception, the most civil place I have ever lived. Daily business—at the bank, the post office, even the driver's license bureau—is always conducted with a high degree of congeniality. In Boston, I could always expect such encounters to be tinged with, at minimum, indifference, and more

often, outright hostility⁵. In what, to some, would be “inhumane” circumstances—say, a grubby country gas station in the middle of nowhere—one finds a sincere and fundamental human decency incomparable to none. Relations between the races, as in most places, are not perfect. They are, it seems, from my observations, in a sort of stasis: there is a tolerance, an equilibrium, that on the surface anyway, projects an image of harmony, although I sense that, under the surface, things are more likely at a low simmer—once again, as in most places in America.

I hope that my photos might reveal, in some small way, some of the complexity found in this place. My way of working is rather un-strategic: I simply try to make myself stop and photograph the most interesting things that catch my eye. Or if I don't have my camera with me, to remember to go back and make a photo someday. I don't attempt to thematize the work, though several themes have emerged on their own.

There are lots of buildings (no doubt because I'm an architect and tend to notice buildings). I'm not sure what I expected when I came here, but there is a rather small range of building types to be found in rural Mississippi: houses, barns, schools, small mercantile buildings and churches are just about it. But within that limited taxonomy, one finds an incredible diversity. And this is where it gets interesting for me. So, you don't just have houses, you have trailer-houses of assorted vintage and hybrid; you have agricultural buildings from ancient cotton gins to modern chicken houses; you have precious country churches built out of the sweat of brows (and not much more). Each is a rarity born of its circumstances: economy, weather, labor, aspirations, chance.

There are also lots of what I call rural artifacts. I suppose these artifacts are like miniature buildings in a sense, because they are constructed; some manufactured, the best made by people. I use rural to describe these because I don't recall seeing things like this in any of the cities I'm accustomed to: homemade tombstones, flashing arrow signs, the tools of agriculture. Rural people everywhere have a way of making do. It's what they do. Take a seed, put it in the ground, give it some care and, God willing (or with a little luck, depending on your theological outlook⁶) before you know it you have a bushel more. The same goes for other things: take some tree branches and some old wire: you've got a fence; take some used plywood and some leftover paint: you've got a sign; take a cleared-off quarter-mile ring of dirt and a hopped-up four-banger: you've got Friday night's entertainment. The engines of



Mount Pleasant MB Church. Montgomery County, Mississippi.

5. In a very peculiar way, I actually miss some of that. Here, decorum forces me to hold my tongue, when a sharp word is what is really called for, in order to get things moving.

6. It's not necessary to tell you Who gets the credit around here.



Sweatman Hunting Club. Montgomery County, Mississippi.



Snack Bar. Attala County Speedway.

7. Or at any rate, that it frees up some hard-earned money for lunch.

8. "Celebrate" is a strange word to use in this context but I can think of no better one.



Gas Station. Calhoun City, Mississippi.

Capitalism appropriate little fuel from this process of squeezing something from nothing. That's the magic of it for me. You get the sense that for some people here there is a free lunch⁷.

The landscape of this part of Mississippi is real special. I'm not the first to have noticed this; but I'm hopeful that I've been able to record it in a slightly different way. As I've come to know the landscape here, I consider it to be a landscape in transition, as opposed to a completed landscape. These terms are not absolute of course. But when you go to, say many parts of New England, you get the sense that the landscape is done there. That the landscape has been made, and that it probably won't change a lot in the future. The landscape in Webster County is being made, full-tilt, as I write these words. Trees are being cut and re-planted, shacks are being dozed, highways are being built. Progress is being made, regardless of the consequences. Consequently, it seems like a good many of the things I have photographed existed for a mere blink in time. A good many of the things I intended to photograph, and never got around to, are gone. It's the nature of life here.

The nature of nature here is a comparable story. This is a fertile, fecund place. Without continual human intervention, nature is a resolute antagonist. Kudzu vines, mildew, termites, dirt-daubers, water, and the gumbo clay soil are all set to consume anything built by humans. Coupled with chronic poverty, a by-product of Mississippi's complex and tragic history of class and racial politics, one finds many of the things made by humans to have a fairly tenuous existence, and hence, engaging subjects.

Shannon, my wife, shortly after moving here, observed that at some level, life here is about death. It's always been the story of agriculture, as the seasons come and go, but in industrialized 'modern' farming, the intensity is turned up a few notches. Crop-dusters de-foliate the cotton fields in a few loud, short, simple passes, skidders rip out ancient pines in an eye-blink, pigs are slaughtered by the hundreds, chickens by the thousands, and farmers die of cancers catalyzed by the chemicals they pour into the air and soil. Deer hunting has to be the state sport, if one exists. Roadkill is also serious sport here, the losers smashed flat on the pavement (picked at by buzzards), crumpled in body shops, and interred beneath concrete grave markers. The people here celebrate⁸ death in touching and notable ways. Graves get decorated with silk and plastic flowers, styrofoam hearts and little

homemade signs. It's the custom among some to maintain the soil hump on graves for some time after burial. I don't have a sense for how long, but I know there are a few in a cemetery not far from my house that have been there at least a year and they still look like they were buried last week.

Though it's tempting to try, and a lot of people would welcome the opportunity, these photos are not trying to preach about ethics. It's springtime here now, and I always get the itch to go exploring in this fine weather. I know I'll see something interesting, and if I'm lucky, or not too lazy, maybe I'll get a photo of it. It's the exploring I'm really interested in; it's witnessing the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Mississippians. My pictures are a lucky by-product, as Robert Adams—a gifted photographer who has written persuasively about the ethics of inhabitation—notes:

One does not for long wrestle a view camera in the wind and heat and cold just to illustrate a philosophy. The thing that keeps you scrambling over the rocks, risking snakes, and swatting at the flies is the view. It is only your enjoyment of and commitment to what you see, not to what you rationally understand, that balances the otherwise absurd investment of labor⁹.



Logging Road. Webster County, Mississippi.

9. Adams, p. 153.

1998



Concrete tombstones. Macedonia Baptist Church, Webster County, Mississippi.