

# Cane Brakes, High Water, Drought: The Mississippi Delta

Tom Rankin

*"This land, this  
South ... with  
woods for game  
and streams for  
fish and deep  
rich soil for  
seed...."*

*—from Go Down, Moses  
by William Faulkner*

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The term Delta is used in different ways up and down the Mississippi River. But when most people, especially those not from the region, say Mississippi Delta, they refer to the area formed by the alluvial flood plain of the lower Mississippi River and incorporating parts of four states, a region distinguished by both geographic and cultural characteristics. From the flat, rich land of west Tennessee through parts of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, the entire region owes many of its cultural traditions to the Mississippi River and the many smaller rivers that permeate the area, some with names reflective of the Native Americans who first settled there or other groups who came later: the Obion, Hatchie, and Loosahatchie in Tennessee; the Yazoo, Tallahatchie, Sunflower, and Coldwater in Mississippi; the Arkansas, White, and St. Francis in Arkansas; the Ouachita and Black in Louisiana. Entire communities, operating with varying codes and customs based on indigenous traditions, have evolved around the region's rivers and bayous: from the commercial fisherfolk, trappers, and towboat workers, whose houses often cluster near major rivers, landings, and levees; to African-American ministers and their congregations, who

wade into the waters to baptize believers "the old way"; to the privileged planters' sons, whose membership in the exclusive hunting clubs along the river is bestowed by the accident of birth. The rivers are imbued with personal, local, and regional symbolism and significance.

Acknowledged as the birthplace of the blues, the home of "King Cotton," America's "last wilderness," and the source of a variety of uniquely American art forms, the Delta is often discussed and portrayed as a powerful, evocative place. The Delta "shines like a national guitar" to singer/songwriter Paul Simon, and to Mississippi writer Eudora Welty the Delta is a place where "most of the world seemed sky ... seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it." Indeed, a great deal has touched the Mississippi Delta to form it and to distinguish it from other regions. Much of its distinctiveness has been attributed to its "Southern-ness." Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Richard Ford called the Mississippi Delta "the South's South." "The Deepest South ... the heart of Dixie.... Nowhere are ante-bellum conditions so nearly preserved as in the Yazoo Delta," observed Rupert Vance in 1935, as he contrasted the living conditions and lifestyles of the Mississippi Delta's planter elite with those of its illiterate and impoverished Black masses. Certainly one of the common legacies of the entire Mississippi Delta region is the stark contrasts evident there. Just as the Delta can be rich and fertile, it can also be poor and desolate; just as one can hear the powerful chords of humanity's best music there, one can also witness Delta nights of terror and inequality; just as natural resources are abundant, so can everyday life be harsh. But in each of the extremes is a powerful culture.

Truly few places exhibit a more striking example of the affinity and interaction between humans and nature than the Mississippi Delta. Today's Delta is still largely rural and agricultural, its economy very closely tied to the land. With its vast expanses of sky, one can actually watch the weather, as clouds gather and boil across one horizon and the sun or moon blazes brilliantly on the other. In spite of a century of clearing, cultivating, draining, and land leveling, the region retains its primitive swamps, bayous, and cypress brakes.

In *Go Down, Moses* William Faulkner described the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta:

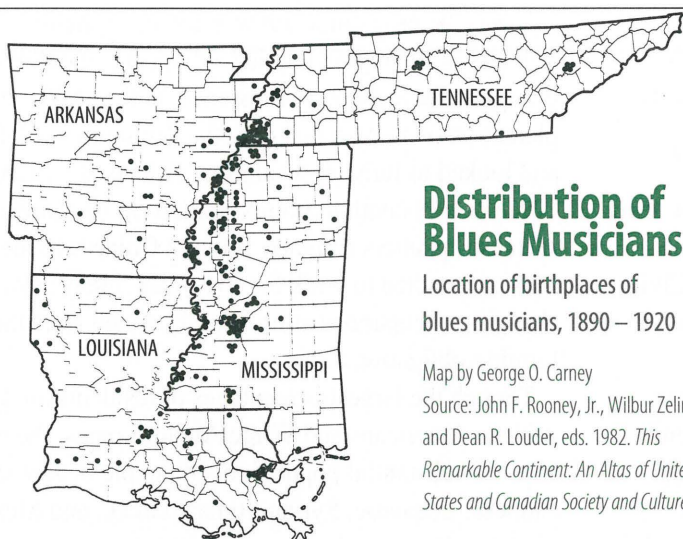
In the beginning, it was virgin — to the west, along the Big Black River, the alluvial swamps threaded by black, almost motionless bayous and



# Mapping the Mississippi Delta



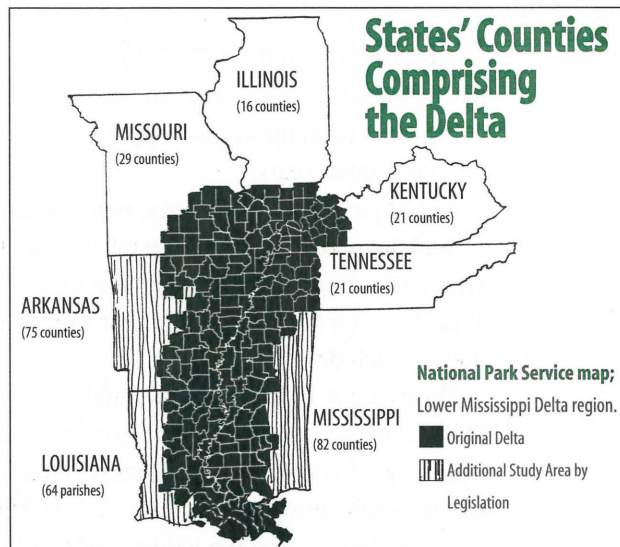
**Region Represented in  
The Mississippi Delta at  
the Festival of American  
Folklife**



## Distribution of Blues Musicians

Location of birthplaces of  
blues musicians, 1890 – 1920

Map by George O. Carney  
Source: John F. Rooney, Jr., Wilbur Zelinsky,  
and Dean R. Louder, eds. 1982. *This  
Remarkable Continent: An Atlas of United  
States and Canadian Society and Cultures.*



## States' Counties Comprising the Delta

**National Park Service map;**  
Lower Mississippi Delta region.  
■ Original Delta  
▨ Additional Study Area by  
Legislation

impenetrable with cane and buckvine and cypress  
and ash and oak and gum.... This land, this South  
... with woods for game and streams for fish and

deep rich soil for seed and lush springs to sprout  
it and long summers to mature it and serene falls  
to harvest it and short mild winters for men and



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animals.... That's the trouble with this country. Everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image.

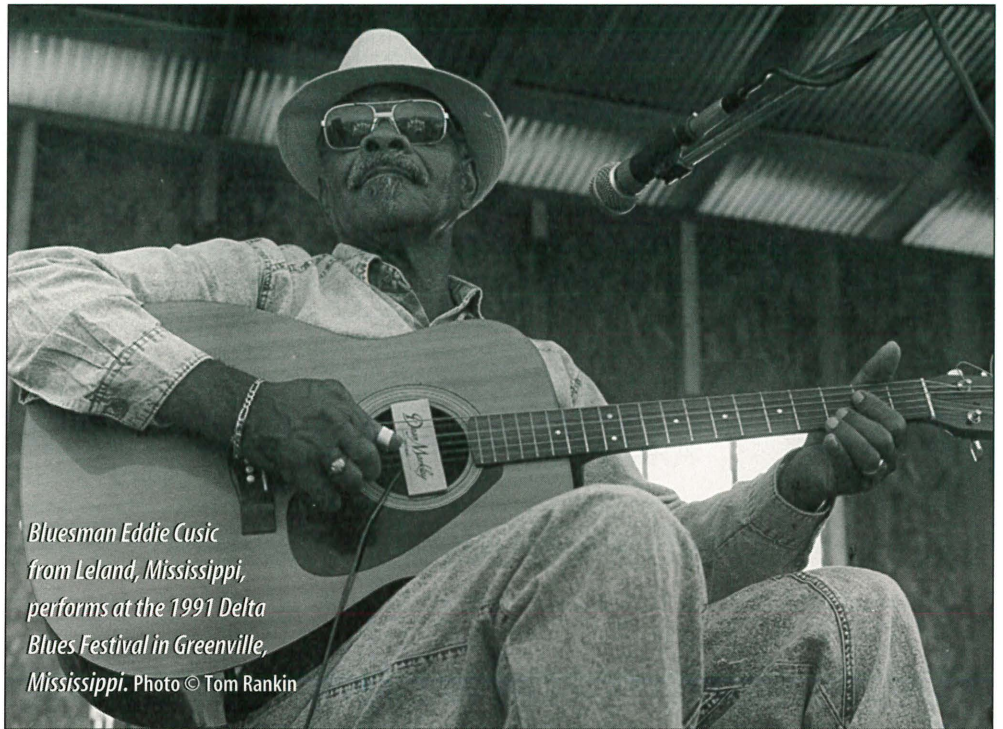
Greenville, Mississippi, native and newspaper editor Hodding Carter, Sr., characterized the region in his 1942 book on the Mississippi: "The Lower Mississippi's valley is a precarious Eden, which the river has fashioned and caused to be populated because of its promise. It is a promise beset by ordeal and still only partly fulfilled."

Carter also echoed Faulkner when he wrote about the historical legacies of the fertile, overgrown landscape:

Go quietly at dawn into those brakes of cypress and cane and cottonwood and water oak. Paddle beside the banks of the Mississippi's bayous and false lakes which once were part of its channel. You will find something of what the Spaniard, the Frenchman, and the Englishman swore and marveled at: the disordered lavishness of a wilderness sprung from the earth droppings of a river's uncounted years.

Full of pestilence — malaria, typhoid, and yellow fever — and unyielding and unnavigable terrain, the Delta remained a frontier wilderness until well after the Civil War. This is a fact that the familiar Delta stereotype doesn't include.

More recent accounts still highlight the Mississippi Delta's place as a veritable wilderness, in part. Thomas Foti, an ecologist with the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, described the lower White River as a "special place ... still the wildest region of the Delta." According to Foti, in addition to supporting a core of committed houseboat dwellers who work on it, the White River also hosts the "only indigenous black bear population in Arkansas, the only productive eagle nest in



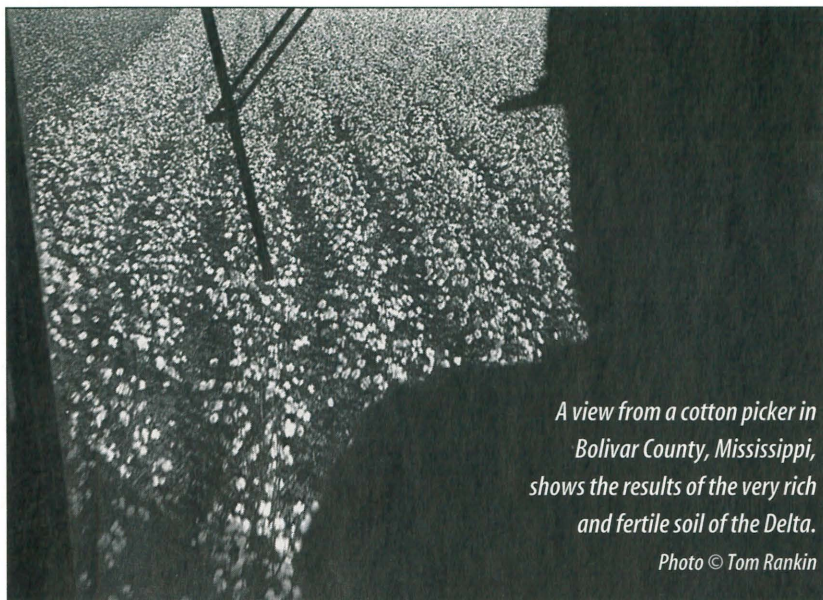
*Bluesman Eddie Cusic from Leland, Mississippi, performs at the 1991 Delta Blues Festival in Greenville, Mississippi. Photo © Tom Rankin*

the state." H. F. Gregory, a Louisiana folklorist, has written that many older residents make a distinction between the "front lands" and "back lands" of the Louisiana Delta, the "back lands" being the wilder, natural, swampy landscapes. "The back lands remained as swamplands," explained Gregory, "refuges for animals, birds, and people displaced from the plantation areas." Agricultural interests began draining the back lands in the 1970s, changing the environment, Gregory argued, to the point that "today only in game preserves can one see the original landscapes."

It was the environmental wonder and agricultural richness of the region that led a diversity of cultural groups to settle there. For instance, in the 1890s several plantation owners fretted over the declining work force and looked to Italy for a solution. Arkansas's 11,000-acre Sunnyside Plantation brought Italians to be sharecroppers. Arkansas planters similarly brought Chinese to the Delta. Most contracted to work for five years, many relocating or changing occupations after being liberated from their farming obligations.

Though the largest percentages of residents are Black African Americans and White Anglo-Saxons, the region also has substantial populations of people of Jewish, Chinese, Lebanese, Syrian, Italian, Greek, and Mexican ancestry. One can observe small Chinese groceries in many Delta towns, the large presence of Italian families and traditions throughout Mississippi and Arkansas, and the wonderful assimilation of ethnic foodways such as Delta tamales. Probably brought to the Delta by Mexican



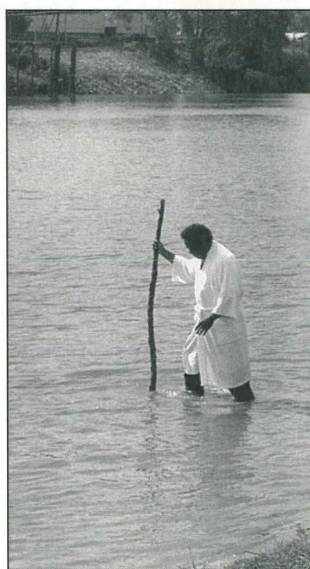


*A view from a cotton picker in Bolivar County, Mississippi, shows the results of the very rich and fertile soil of the Delta.*

Photo © Tom Rankin



*One of the few remaining traditional Southern occupational crafts in the Delta is the making of gourd or tiered wooden birdhouses. Atop tall poles near farm buildings, they lure purple martins, which every day eat their weight in mosquitoes. Photo © Maida Owens*



*A church official stakes out the baptismal area in the Ouachita River in Monroe, Louisiana.*

Photo © Susan Roach

farm workers who came to earn a living in the cotton fields, tamales now are made, sold, and eaten by Whites and Blacks, farm laborers and plantation owners.

With the growing settlement of the area, the landscape began to change, most drastically with the stripping away of the hardwood forests and the drainage of the swamps. Slaves were used for the cruel and dangerous work of swamp drainage, until holders of large acreage refused to risk valuable slave property and began hiring Irish

immigrants instead. For a brief time during the Reconstruction period, convict labor was used to clear thousands of acres, though this scandal-ridden lease system was outlawed in 1890. Later, African-American laborers accomplished most of the difficult task of clearing the forests. William Ferris in *Blues from the Delta* quoted blues singer Jasper Love talking about his work in the 1930s. "Times was so tough we couldn't cut it with a knife, man," recalled Love. "Plowing four mules.... Hitting them stumps and that plow kicking you all in the stomach. I had to get up around three in the morning by a bell. The bell rang two times. First time you get up. The second time, be at the barn. Not on your way, at the barn."

The fertility of the Delta has led to some pretty harsh working conditions. Wiley Cochral, who was born in 1925, grew up as the son of a sharecropper, working with his father, mother, and siblings, farming on halves. By the fall of 1947 — thirty-three years after moving to the Delta — his father was able to buy 100 acres of land and an old house in Stephenville in Sunflower County. A White man, Cochral's explanation about sharecropping and his feeling toward the arrangement speak for many who farm as sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta:

Farming on halves, you give the boss man half of the crop to start with. You work it, then you take the other half. Whatever you owe him, you pay it out of your half. Not his half. His half is give to him. Automatically. Your half, whatever

you owe him. If you owe him sixty dollars, you pay him the sixty dollars out of your half. And a lots of times that half, you didn't get your half when you come to that. Cause they didn't give it to you. I don't know how that worked. They would say you got so and so. They could add anything they want. And so that's the way it was. No, they wasn't always honest. They wasn't no way in the world. Tom, there wasn't no way in the world for



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them to be honest. People finally realized. Somebody got smart. It wasn't right to start with. They figured you owed him half of it.

You want to know the truth about it, at the end of the year, the Boss man gave you what he wanted you to have. The big man bought this land. They give nine dollars an acre to fourteen. That's all they give. And they bought it. And then the slaves. I've always been a slave myself. I call myself one of them. Everybody was slaves that worked in the damn fields.

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Many sharecroppers, including Cochral's father James, initially had come to the region to clear timber. Logging operations continued until the early decades of this century.

As the powerful Mississippi River cuts through this peculiarly American region, it both gives and takes away. Formed by regular flooding, the region owes its existence to the building of levees, yet another testimony to the legacy of work in the Delta. Still, however, the region sees flooding regularly, floods that are rarely matched in the devastation they bring. Bluesman Charlie Patton, once a resident of Dockery Plantation just east of Cleveland, Mississippi, chronicled the Delta experience with a poetry rivaled by no one. His "High Water Blues," a song depicting the vicious 1927 flood, asserted to all the reality of life in the rich alluvial plain of the Delta:

Lord, the whole 'round country, Lord! river has overflowed

You know I can't be stayin' here; I'm — gotta go where it's high, boy!

I was goin' to the hilly country, 'fore they got me barred.

Just a few years later, in 1930, Charlie Patton entered the studio to record another lament of nature's wrath, "Dry Well," a song that depicted the 1930 drought. Seen together the two blues songs suggest the ebbs and flows of the Delta's past and present, the pattern by which natural forces have created a rich and diverse region that has been both blessed by wealth and powerful expression, and also burdened by human suffering and despair.

Way down in Lula, (hundred an' ten heat?)

Lord the drought come an' caught us an' parched up all the trees.

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