PART I

THE FAMILY IN AN INTEMPERATE COMMUNITY, STATE, AND NATION

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Families' Cross-Century Struggles to Leave Dispossession Behind

What can be learned by examining mobility from poverty in the counties of Sunflower and Scott, Mississippi, two rural communities within the state with the largest share of blacks in the nation? How can learning here shed light on intergenerational rural upward economic mobility elsewhere in the nation and the world? If states like Mississippi or regions like the Mississippi Delta can go from rich to poor, and from middling to rich, how does either happen? And how can Mississippi's status as a rich state and the Delta's as a wealthy region be recovered in ways advantageous to the historically disadvantaged – black, brown, and white? Interdependent historical and contemporary factors, mutually cumulative in their effects, are in play.

In the early 1900s, 89 percent of blacks lived in the South, mostly in the rural South. Today, roughly 20 percent (2,600,000) of rural dwellers are black in the United States. The rural families examined in this work lived and worked in Mississippi for at least eight decades, some spanning two centuries. They labored, and others profited more than they should have been able to do so by law. The wealthy lived disproportionately off the labor of the disadvantaged. The cycle of poverty and disadvantage the wealthy perpetuated (with the help of federal policies, man-made and natural disasters) is palpable. Both patriarchal and coercive, poverty in the Mississippi Delta was sustained by vestiges of enslavement and Jim Crow caste policies and practices, and their contemporary manifestations.

In 1939 John Dollard published a study of caste relations in Sunflower, a place he called Southern town, where he spent five months, and Hortense Powdermaker stayed in Sunflower – her Cottonville – for a year.[1] Cynthia

[1] John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1937); Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1939).

Duncan completed her five-year comparative study of Appalachia, the Delta, and New England in 1999.[2] These studies, covering sixty years, offered an excellent foundation to extend their findings into the present. How, if at all, has the trajectory of upward mobility changed over the last hundred years, since the births of the Sunflower Seven: Agnes in 1909, Josie in 1914, Williams in 1916, Jack in 1918, Matthews in 1920, Lonnie in 1922, and Clementine in 1932?

In Sunflower County, Mississippi, I found two perennial croppers, three quasi-croppers, a tenant farmer, and a kinship land-owning family. In the mid- to late 1930s, when John Dollard and Hortense Powdermaker examined Sunflower County, the youngest member of the Sunflower Seven, quasi-cropper Clementine Richardson, was in early childhood at age two. Jack Harper, the son of a tenant farmer; Lonnie and Isaac Byrd, Sr., the land-owning kinship family; and Matthews, the son of a midwife and mechanic, were coming of age as prepubescent youngsters between ten and twelve years old.

The eldest members of the study group, perennial croppers Agnes Brown and Josie Landfair, were born into families with illiterate parents who had been field laborers their entire lives. They would become homeless perennial child laborers, working in the cotton fields with their parents and missing what schooling there was available. The lives of seven intergenerational Sunflower families, mostly the granddaughters and grandsons of the enslaved, are interrogated to examine pathways toward mid-twentieth and twenty-first century upward and downward economic mobility. Depicted in Table 1.1, I refer to these families as the Sunflower Seven.

BACKGROUNDS OF FAMILIES

Three primary women-led families – all widowed – and four married households are featured. Seventy-five percent of the men in this study married college-educated women, "one time for life," increasing their stability and social status in the community and in their families. The brides' levels of education far outstripped that of their parents and that of their spouses. Varied outcomes are evident among the Sunflower Seven. This work attempts to explain their patterns and diversions.

Agnes Brown and Lonnie Byrd both grew up without wedded parents. Agnes Brown was one of seven siblings; Lonnie grew up without any full

[2] Cynthia Duncan, *Worlds Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

Table 1.1. *The demographic characteristics of the Sunflower families*

Name	Birth and death years	Rung/ladder	Years ladder	Schooling	Marital status	Post-field profession	# Children completing education	Grandparents' education/occupation
Brown	1909–2007	Cropper	45	6th	Widowed	Custodian	(4) College	0 Sharecropper
Landfair	1914–1999	Cropper	44	6th	Widowed		(4) College	0 Sharecropper
Williams	1916–2005	Cropper	5	GED	Married	Barbershop	(5) MD, HS	0 Sharecropper
Harper	1918–2004	Mule-renter	10	JD	Married	Lawyer/ politician	(4) MD, JD, MA, [unknown]	6th Tenant farmer
Matthews	1920–2015	Cropper	12	MA	Married	Teacher/ minister	(1) HS	6th Midwife
Byrd	1922–1999	Farm owner	51	12th	Married	Farm owner	0	3rd Farm owner
Richardson	1932–2018	Cropper	11	MA	Widowed	Teacher	(4) BA, BA, BS, BA	0 Sharecropper

siblings. All the parents – except Lonnie's cousin by marriage, Hattie – had parents who worked in the fields for some, if not most, of their lives. Hattie's mother, Leona, did not. Four of the seven families had landless parents. The landless families were the Browns, Landfairs, Matthewses, and Williamses. The parents of the seven families lived in Sunflower County at least a decade or more in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition to the Sunflower Seven are the Paytons, an eighth intergenerational family from the Mississippi Hills, and examples from the Sunflower Seven's children's contemporaries (families in which economic and familial disintegration happened early, and others where it did not). Black rural families from the Delta and Hills had faced the same inequitable past, but some possessed more, mostly more familial aspiration and land, though not more income security.

Like 80 percent of the rural poor in the nation in 1910, the black families in Scott and Sunflower Counties opened life on the agricultural ladder; six were enslaved descendants and five began on the lowest rung – as sharecroppers. Jack, the lone white, began life as the son of a three-fourths mule-renter. Three-fourths of the crop was offered to the white tenant, but the tenant provided the rented mule. Lonnie, one among the enslaved descendants, inherited hundreds of acres of land, while five others – Agnes, Josie, Williams, Matthews, and Clementine – clawed their way out of poverty – most of them off the agricultural ladder.

As mentioned, in addition to the Sunflower Seven and the Hill Scott County families, there are, for example, non-college completers, Rebecca and Evelyn, contemporaries of children of the Sunflower Seven. Rather than an intergenerational history, theirs is presented as reflections from which to reason about scholarly economic mobility premises and intergenerational stereotypes. Their economic stories and journeys, and those of their contemporaries, are still unfolding. The trajectories are sometimes troubling. Evelyn and Rebecca were both estranged from their parents; a grandma had reared one, but she died when the granddaughter was nine years old. This age is a critical life stage for children, as they construct a sense of self-worth and compare themselves to peers and seek acceptance.

Early pregnancies (while in high school) complicated their high school completion pathways and thus their pathways out of poverty, but, before that, loss of a beloved guardian, childhood despair, and corresponding familial instability had riled their self-confidence and reduced their perceptions of self-worth and heightened their emotional vulnerability. In the early 1990s, Rebecca and Evelyn were no longer responsible for all their

children. As heads of households, they were partially reliant on part-time employment, erratic child support, and government transfer payments. Their lives were in an upheaval.

Other contemporaries who did complete college and law school are also found in these pages. They struggled in ways different from Rebecca and Evelyn. Their journeys are illustrative of the stickiness of upward mobility in rural and town contexts, where confirmation bias and discrimination loom from local elites, homegrown white superiority, and holders of authority – mayors, supervisors, state legislators, police, justices of the peace, and sheriffs. Black children and their parents would become multi-generational targets. A prison record, an unjust firing, poor quality high school completion, or non-high school completion, homelessness, and chronic job exploitation could impair employment prospects and set black families up for downward or stalled mobility.

African American farmer Lonnie Byrd, a high school graduate and one of the Sunflower Seven, was bequeathed by his father, William Byrd, a modest land inheritance of 700 acres. Both son and father could read and write. Both son and father were ambitious land owners and farmers. The average acreage of farms in Sunflower during the early 1900s was several magnitudes less than the Byrd holding. Lonnie Byrd, who was born in 1922, was the Byrd family patriarch.

Jack Harper was born the son of a tenant farmer in 1918. Jack's father was poor and barely literate. Harper's father was a tenant farmer, a three-fourths mule-renter. Still, Jack Harper climbed both the economic and political ladder in Sunflower, upending Lonnie Byrd, as Jack accrued both wealth and political power, becoming president of the Indianola Chamber of Commerce and serving a forty-year reign as chancery clerk in Sunflower County. All land records in the county are maintained by the chancery clerk, and the clerk serves as secretary of the Board of Supervisors, functioning as auditor and treasurer. The clerk collects and disburses prior-year delinquent taxes. Jack Harper was an immensely powerful local politician, whose ascendancy to the political class is as integral to Sunflower County as James Eastland's.

James Eastland, the scion of a wealthy planter was propelled into political prominence in Scott County by the economic and political status of his father, Woods Eastland. Jack Harper had no opportunity for sponsorship by his father. Absent generational family income or wealth positioning, Jack would have to claw his way to political and economic power and so would Lonnie Byrd. Eastland, in contrast, would leapfrog over

others to jump easily into a privileged economic and political class. He would ingratiate himself with the powerful to maintain political leverage as the twentieth century unfolded.

An interrogation of the vestiges of enslavement, legal segregation, and modern discrimination can build a set of empirical narratives to better inform public policy, and familial and community striving. These vestiges include lawlessness, as manifested in mob, individual, and regime violence against black people, the presumption of white superiority, and corresponding physical and mental health, wage, job, career, and educational theft.

The vestiges from 1956 until 1965 also included not a single piece of civil rights legislation reported voluntarily from the Senate Judiciary Committee, which Eastland chaired for twenty-two years. It is important to note the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which occurred during the Eisenhower administration, when Lyndon Baines Johnson was the leading southern Democrat in the Senate. The Act, the first of its kind since 1875, attempted to protect and secure the civil rights of persons within the United States. It created the civil rights division of the Justice Department and established a Commission on Civil Rights. The primary goal of HR 6127 was to protect the African American vote from disenfranchisement efforts of southern Congressmen, including James Eastland, Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. The Civil Rights Acts of 1960 and 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, prevailed over the objections of Eastland.[3]

The most muscular provisions, those wanted by President Dwight Eisenhower, were diluted by Eastland. Stiff penalties for intimidation and taking economic retribution were much needed in the still segregated and tyrannical Deep South. The Civil Rights Act passed the Senate without a single "no" vote from Republicans. Eighteen senators, all Democrats, voted "no." The senators voting "nay" were from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Johnson, the Senate Majority Leader, worked to ensure the bill's passage by appeasing southern senators.

These senators had been fully mobilized against black citizenship, not just the 1957 measure; they had earlier recoiled against the 1954 *Brown*

[3] In addition to the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, civil rights legislation has included the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1870, 1871, 1875, 1957, 1960, 1964; the Voting Rights Act of 1965; the Fair Housing Act of 1968; the Voting Rights Acts of 1970, 1975, 1982, 2006; the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987; the Civil Rights Act of 1991; and the Fair Housing Amendments of 1988. See History and Archives, US House of Representatives, Constitutional Amendments and Major Civil Rights Acts of Congress, Historical Data, Office of the Historian.

v. *Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling[4] and formed a formal massive resistance battalion. Politicians who maintained their roles for life formed a bulwark to maintain the vestiges of legal segregation while also accruing the familial advantages attendant to their roles. At the local and state levels, the ability to maintain political and economic advantage has been made possible by gross policy indifference to the basic life source citizenship needs of blacks and the poor.

White familial planter wealth-making in the Delta was ably assisted by government, as were black disfranchisement and poverty. The study of economic mobility in Sunflower will contend with the men who occupied positions of power in state and local governments and in Washington DC, and therefore with governmental and nongovernmental levers of economics and politics and their manifestations. How, if at all, have these state- and federal-sponsored vestiges – intemperate judicial and political elites, regime violence, legal racism, weakened civil rights legislation, and modern discrimination – impeded the upward mobility pathways of the poor and black in rural Sunflower County and Scott County, Mississippi?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Families frequently rise above the circumstances of their birth; as frequently, however, in some of the nation's rural and urban communities, they have not been able to do so.[5] Disparate opportunities to achieve upward economic mobility exist in rural and urban America. In a landmark 2014 income mobility study, economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues offered a sweeping national view of the disparate opportunities for intergenerational mobility in the United States.[6] Their findings showed that possibilities of climbing to the top of the economic rung, if one is born in the lowest economic quintile, are not good for anyone, but those

[4] *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* 347 US 483 (1954).

[5] Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez, "Where Is the Land of Opportunity?: The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 129(4) (November 2014): 1553–1623; Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Herndon, "The Effects of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 133(3) (2018): 1107–1162.

[6] Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135(2) (2020): 711–783; Raj Chetty, David Grubsky, Maximillian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility since 1940," *Science*, 356 (96336) (2017): 398–406.

possibilities are especially poor if one is black or brown in the United States. In addition, if one is born in the middle-class or higher, the possibilities for slipping or losing ground are higher for those who are brown and black in America.

This study will examine three questions: Why have the greater number of rural blacks not been able to reach the middle-class and stay ahead? How have some, despite unfavorable odds, been able to climb? What might we learn from the experience of this second group and study the factors impeding upward economic mobility? These questions matter for our understanding of intergenerational and intragenerational thriving in rural and urban contexts. In their totality, these, and related questions, enumerated throughout this work, invite an intentional focus on whether there has been and are now patterns to the routes, rates, and stability of movement toward the middle and upper class over two generations. An awareness of the pathways out from poverty in Sunflower and Scott ought to inform policies about how minimal levels of rural poverty exits, entry, and descent have been possible, and under what conditions they have been sustainable intergenerationally.

I arrived in Sunflower to conduct research in 1989. I found the Sunflower Seven in two related ways. I chose five of these seven families from among the fifty-three randomly selected property owners born between 1909 and 1935 (on the property and registered voter rolls in Sunflower County in the late 1980s). I looked for landowners and registered voters then in their sixth, seventh, and eighth decades – those who had come of age during the segregation era, when cotton was the essential crop in the Mississippi Delta, and when both white political and economic oppression held African Americans back. I wanted to understand how the oldest living black residents of the county had traversed the economic ladder. Their birth years, land-owning status, and political participation mattered to me for this reason.

I visited, observed, listened to, and interviewed residents and institutional actors in the county for well over two decades. As a student of Mississippi politics, I knew of Jack Harper but met him early 1990. I also knew the Byrds, through an eight-year acquaintance with Isaac Byrd Jr., initially through our service with the Mississippi American Civil Liberties Union, where I served as president. I had visited monthly with the Isaac Byrd family for at least seven years before the formal study in Sunflower had begun. During 1980–1990, I would frequently visit Lonnie, Evelyn, Hattie, and Isaac Byrd, Sr., just outside Shaw in what is called the Springhill Community.

I began face-to-face interviews with the Sunflower Seven in the summers of 1991–1994. Over the next several years, I met and eventually interviewed town elites, including Jack Harper, who had pulled ahead to become a power wielder and a wealthy individual. Like the five randomly selected families from the property and registered voter rolls, Harper and Byrd are and were landowners. Unlike the randomly selected five, Harper and Byrd had positioned themselves on rungs well above their birth cohort. How might their economic mobility stories inform our knowledge of rural poverty exits and their precariousness and sturdiness?

As shown in Table 1.1, the Sunflower Seven and their twenty-two children had various levels of schooling. In each instance, three generations had stalled educational pathways – that meant sixty years of delay – of too little exposure to quality education, living wages, opportunities to buy a healthy home in a high-growth community, and participate in civic life. Four spouses of the seven Sunflower families had served in the military – Clementine's late husband, Elmira; Jack Harper; Lonnie Byrd; and David Matthews. Matthews, Jack, and Lonnie entered the military and returned to Sunflower to build a robust personal and civic life. The military pathway was promising for this generational cohort. In the generations to come, would illiteracy, poor health, and the heavy policing of black boys and girls eliminate or reduce the military as a pathway toward upward economic mobility?

Among the Sunflower Seven, one or both parents had been descended from the enslaved – all but Jack Harper's. The person born into the greatest property assets – the rural outpost Springhill resident, landowner, and black farmer Lonnie Byrd – pointed out the rungs on the black agricultural ladder, starting at the top. "There were black landowners/plantation owners, cash tenants, share tenants, small farmers, the renters, the day workers, and the sharecroppers."[7] In the early 1900s, 25 percent of black farmers owned the land on which they worked.[8] By 1930, only 8 percent of the farm owners were black, in contrast with the 40 percent of white farm owners.

In 1900, black men were nearly twice as likely to be laborers as white men. In 1900, black and white women were equally likely to list their work

[7] Lonnie Byrd interviews with the author, July 2, 1991, June 19, 1992, July 2, 1992, August 15, 1992, and January 23, 1993, Springhill, Mississippi.

[8] Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 121; see also Center for the Study of Southern Culture, Mississippi Encyclopedia, available at http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/sunflower-county, accessed July 19, 2021.