

Which New South?

Written by Bethany Chaney

Tuesday, 23 November 2010 16:51 -

We buried my mother in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where she'd been the first-born in her family, raised by a teetotaling auto mechanic with deep southern roots and a daughter of Lebanese immigrants with shallower ones.

The arrangements were relatively simple, not counting the navigation between the old Durham funeral home that embalmed her and the old Vicksburg one that would lower her into the ground. We fretted most about how to dress her, wandering the racks at Pemberton's department store, named after the commander of the Confederate Army who had defended the besieged city back in the day. When finally we made our choices, the saleswoman asked whether we would need a box. "No, thanks," one of us said. "We already have one."

Then there was the matter of the headstone. There were only two stonecutters in town, the white one and the black one. My uncle told us which one to visit, and knowing why he chose the one, we decided to visit both.

The white stonecutter, my uncle's choice, was situated just outside the gates of the cemetery at the end of Lover's Lane, like a box office to a strange ballpark. We asked for a modest and respectful stone, for which we were quoted a price with delivery in three to four weeks, on account of the backlog of the dead.

The black stonecutter was located on a small lot on Washington Street, just up from the bluffs of the Mississippi River in an area of progressive decline. A large metal floor fan cooled the rooms where he kept his business, his wife, and his baby daughter, who cooed. He matched the price of his competitor and promised delivery before the funeral the next day. We confirmed the spelling of my mother's name and wrote the check.

At the funeral my uncle asked me where we bought the headstone. In Vicksburg, neither grief nor decorum prevented a man from wondering aloud whether his kin had patronized a black-owned business in order to mark a grave.

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I looked my uncle in the eye. It was the first time I had done so as an adult. "Gibson's," I said.

"He gave us next day delivery for the same price." It was a hard point for my uncle to argue. "I have never known anyone to buy from them," he said, moving his lips slowly and with a particular measure of care. I held my breath for what seemed to be a year. "It's nice," he said, and walked away.

This was nearly a dozen years ago. People already were talking about the New South back then. They had been talking about it for a long time, well before North Carolina turned electoral blue, before NASCAR became a middle-class sport, before the last Southern state adopted the federal holiday named for Dr. King. People had been talking about the New South since General Sherman had burned the old one to the ground, which is why, through the turn of this century, like many others born and raised here, I had understood that when people talked about the New South they really meant Atlanta.

But this funereal encounter with my uncle, this familial rite of passage, challenged my thinking just a little. I realized then that the New South is not about Atlanta, or Birmingham, or Charlotte or Charlottesville, all those Old South places now hailed as "metropolitan" by virtue of their Northern migrants, Unitarian churches, or voter demographics. That New South is a statistical matter, suited better to the media, human resource recruiters, and various sorts of carpetbaggers. The South I know is still creating itself, still finding its way, just like the rest of the nation. What's so new about that?

My grandfather liked to call us Yankees because we lived in North Carolina. Mason-Dixon Line aside, any state with the word North in its name just plain was. He would quiz us each visit to test our Southernness. "Spell Mississippi," he'd say. "And do it right. Don't let me find out you're some educated fool."

"Emm-line-dot-crooked-letter-crooked-letter-line-dot-crooked-letter-crooked-letter-line-dot-hump-back-humpack-line-dot." We could chant the old joke in unison. In our sleep. With our mouths taped shut. Anything less was considered unacceptable.

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We didn't like being called Yankees, although our Episcopalian membership might have confused us for them. It was an unforgiving thing to be considered so differently from the rest of the family, to be perceived as so far away. For her entire life with us my mother regularly complained that living afar from family wasn't healthy for a Southern woman.

But we knew that being a Yankee didn't just mean distance, it meant being on the wrong side of things. My grandfather, a World War II veteran who left school after the eighth grade, was serious about those educated fools—Northern graduates with a lot of information, too many opinions and too little common sense. They were a nuisance to hard-working people. Snobs when they came down South. Most Yankees, he told us, were educated fools, still smug because they won the war.

It was true that I grew up in what might be called a Yankee place to my grandfather and a New South place to others: Chapel Hill, a university town with liberal politics, "the best schools," and plenty of good coffee shops. Very few of my friends were born in North Carolina. They had come with their families from other places like India, Canada, England, and Michigan. By the time we made it to high school, none of us spoke with a Southern accent, but rather with an amalgamated, nearly neutral one. Yet even in a place like this, a place teeming with educated fools, its southern identity was unmistakable. As a high school junior, I could take a full semester of Civil War history. I could shoot a cannon in one direction and hit an historic battlefield, and in another, a pretty good bait shop. I could witness a Klan rally an hour away, an anti-Klan rally within a 10-minute drive, and afterward eat the best damn barbecue this side of Kentucky. Mostly I could watch and listen as the adults in our town, both white and black, said some things publicly and others under their breath.

The first thing wrong with the term the New South is the word New. When I think about what most people envision as the Old South, the *Gone with the Wind* kind of South, perhaps it makes a little sense. But when I think about the deer-killing, hardscrabble, real-life South of my Uncle Junior, who, until the day he died, lived in a double-wide trailer on Jeff Davis Drive completely frightened of black people, there are reasons to object.

There have been a few obvious changes since 1861, all for the better, but these changes do not belong to the South alone. Slavery had been tacitly supported by those in other places, by virtue of economic interest and just plain human prejudice. Jim Crow and segregation were institutionalized throughout the nation, if not legally, then as a matter of business and social principle. To name the South as New, then, simply diverted attention from still-old places that had yet to claim their own painful past. To me, it's like a salesman hocking a used car—his own.

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The second thing wrong with the term New South is who generally speaks it, and I don't mean the people who, upon passing Latino day laborers milling about at the corner store, say beneath their breath, "Now, there's the New South for you."

What concerns me more is that certain vein of college-educated white Southerner, not the transplants from Ohio and New Jersey that decided to stay once they figured out the weather is nice. The kind of Southerner I am referring to is in every state of the Confederacy, is of every political persuasion and in all lines of work. Some come from old money, some from new. All suffer from a kind of latent guilt and also some sincere indignance, and as if to prove both their distance from the Old South and their worth in the New, they do some things differently than their parents or grandparents. They eat and vote a little differently, spend money differently, socialize, marry and hire people differently. They raise their children to love all people equally, with varying levels of success. All of this is very nice and there's nothing wrong about it. In fact, I am one of these people, just without the children.

Here's what bothers me. In the end we are all just like those Christians who call themselves non-denominational and wear jeans to church. It's splitting hairs, I tell you. We are all still sinners no matter our clothes. Despite some social evolutions, demographic revolutions, and a few revised moral codes, the circumstances in which we move through our South have not changed, because the system in which we move has not changed. White people still call the shots, especially the wealthy ones. It is that way here in the South, and also in the Old Boys Network of the North. It is simply the way it is, the long version of an even longer story.

I do not understand everything about the South, but I understand just enough to know that it is not a new place, not even a renewed place in the way so many would like to think it, as though the process is finished. Since we returned my mother, who attended segregated schools, back to her home in Vicksburg, I have come to realize that the changes that will matter most in the South are those that have yet to happen.

Last year, on a business trip to Louisiana, I drove over the bridge to Vicksburg to visit family and my mother's grave. I arrived on a Sunday morning, when there are only three things to do: gamble, hunt, or go to church. My uncles and cousins were hunting and so I opted to attend services at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, founded at the turn of the century by Lebanese immigrants. The church rolls once thrived with extended Arab families like mine, but now Eastern Europeans and Baptist converts increasingly fill the pews. To the neophyte, Orthodox services are truly old world. The sanctuary is lined with gilded icons and ablaze with

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ornate chandeliers. It reeks of frankincense, smoldering in small pots. The priests wear headdresses akin to the Pope's, and worshippers chant for most of the service.

I am a neophyte and nearly passed out from the incense. After the service I stopped at a local restaurant for lunch and some stiff caffeine. I sat near a window with a view of Pemberton Plaza, the mall where years before we had purchased my mother's burial clothes. The department store was no longer there, but at the entrance to the mall was a monument to the commander. Everywhere in this town there are monuments like these, eight miles of them alone in Vicksburg Military Park. There are the intentional monuments, and the unintentional. The empty Pemberton's. The casinos rising against the river bank, like the caves where Confederate families once hid. The Orthodox Church. My uncle's trailer. Out on the highway, Mr. Gibson, the stonecutter, has moved into larger digs.

I had an early supper with my uncle, aunt, and two generations of cousins. Over catfish and fries I told them about visiting the old family church. My cousin, a freshman at Southern Miss, told me all about polymer science and the fact that he is dating a Democrat. I fed some catfish to the youngest cousin, just two, and nodded with approval. "Sounds like my kind of woman," I said.

My uncle looked up from his fries. "Lord, Beth, don't tell me you voted for Obama," he said, with the same, measured tone he had used a dozen years ago. I looked him in the eye and caught what I thought might be a glimmer, a tease, at once a sense of humor, recognition, and resignation. My cousin smiled.

"Yessir," I said. "I voted for him. I liked his ideas, and someone's got to do things a little differently around here."

My uncle sighed heavily and glanced at his wife, then watched as I offered the baby another bite. She sucked in the catfish with tiny wet lips, innocent of her place in a New South.

"I hope you did the right thing," my uncle said, and swallowed his sweet iced tea.