



Eugene Dattel

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I knew my paternal grandfather, Harry Dattel—Big Papa—the immigrant, well. Now I regret the unasked questions—about the family in Riga and Tukum, Latvia (then officially classified as part of Russia), his immigration to the US around 1900, and his first impressions of his new country. Perhaps I would have met with the same reluctance to speak about the old country that my older brother Jerome encountered when he probed. The prospect of conscription into the Russian army, the Russian czar Nicholas II, and anti-Semitic pogroms were the probable causes of his decision to leave. His older brother Jake had preceded him to America. Details about the journey from New York City to the Delta are sparse and vague. Importantly, why on earth did these Eastern European Jews settle in a most unlikely place—the cotton country of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta? Harry Dattel came as a fourteen-year-old with no knowledge of English and an abbreviated education at a heder, a Jewish secondary school. His wife, Pauline Rubenstein—Big Mama—also came from Latvia around the same time.

My maternal grandfather, Joseph Marks, came from Hungary, and his wife, Rose Balkin, arrived from Lithuania. Rose's brother Sam Balkin had settled in the Delta, become prosperous, and brought several family members, including my grandmother, to America. Sam Balkin was business partners with William Crump Sr., a Protestant, whose son William Crump Jr. liked to go to Hebrew classes with his Jewish friends!

The Delta became their new home. The immigrants' Yiddish accents were replaced in the next generation by soft Southern accents.

What was the Delta that shaped my grandparents and their descendants? It bore no resemblance spiritually or physically to New York's Lower East Side or to the urban centers that became home to most Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century. It was part of Mississippi but a distinct, different part. The Delta was a subregion—a sociological and geographic entity—flat and fertile and prone to flooding. According to the Jewish Delta native author David Cohn, it extended from the lobby of the Hotel Peabody in Memphis to Catfish Row in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Still 90 percent virgin forest after the Civil War, the Delta attracted whites and blacks to clear the land and plant King Cotton. A series of small towns connected by rivers and railroads dotted the landscape in this majority-black region. A Delta native, when asked where he or she is from, will invariably say “the Delta” rather than the name of a town. The Delta became the epicenter of cotton farming after the Civil War. The cotton world was a risky commodity-based economic roller coaster. My family's cotton legacy led to fascination and my book *Cotton and Race in the Making of America*. Some have accused me of having cotton in my DNA.

The frontier Delta was opening, and enterprising people like Jake and Harry Dattel, probably by Jewish word of mouth and contact with relatives, heard about an opportunity and found their way to the Delta. Harry Dattel peddled and then purchased a store in Sunflower, Mississippi, and then bought a much beloved farm, Lonesome Pine, nearby. In Sunflower (population five hundred), Dattel's Grocery and Market with an adjoining dry goods store was born. Delta towns needed a commercial class, and Jews were welcomed. Towns in the Delta were divided into two categories—those with stores on only one side of the main street and those with stores on both sides. Sunflower had stores on one side only—mostly Jewish owned—Dattel, Borodofsky, Liebowitz, and Siegel. Big Papa had two sales clerks, one white and one black. The black sales clerk, Mose Miles, determined early that communication with my grandfather was best accomplished in Yiddish.



Dattel sign remained in 2006, decades after the store had closed and the demise of Sunflower, Mississippi.

Big Papa lived in the present, not the past. Big Mama was quiet, genteel, and always catered to me. Their son, my father, Isadore Dattel, was born in 1912. Big Papa was avuncular, solid, always smiling, and a constant companion on my visits. I was with him from our early-morning breakfast and then a trip around the farm before we arrived at the store. He was always impeccably dressed in a tailor-made three-piece suit. From an early age, I liked hanging around the store with its smells and stream of customers. Until the 1950s, there was a vacant lot used for parking mules, not cars. I pilfered candy and locked myself in our car to consume my plunder—much to my parents’ consternation.

Big Papa was elected alderman in Sunflower, succeeding his Jewish predecessor, Sinai Brownstein. At the town board meeting on May 1, 1951, “a motion was made by H. Dattel and seconded by W. J. Martin and voted in the affirmative... to elect H. Dattel pro-tem mayor.” It hardly needs translation. The confident immigrant nominated himself for mayor. His brother Jake would win a seat on the Rosedale board of education. Later, my brother Richard was elected alderman in Sunflower, and my uncle Mickey Dattel would become mayor of Rosedale—both won contests in majority-black towns after African Americans were reenfranchised. Big Papa as well as my father served on the boards



Dattel store opening in Ruleville, Mississippi. Family members surrounding the cash register (1951).

of local banks. My grandfather's first business partner was a Protestant, his neighbor Charlie Holland.

My maternal grandfather, Joseph Marks, died at age fifty in 1917 and by all accounts was a well-educated man who even visited the old country. His hero was Theodore Roosevelt. Rose, my grandmother, had the challenge of supporting two young girls, my mother, Elsie, and her sister, my aunt Hannah. She ran the family store in the Delta river town of Rosedale. She then moved with Elsie and Hannah to Webb, Mississippi, and started another store. Rose was a wonderful cook, and baking was her specialty. Fortunately, the trait was passed along to my mother, who always made sure that delectable pastries were in the house.

Education was paramount. My father had to travel a couple of times a week by train to the larger town of Greenwood for violin lessons; eventually, he forsook the violin for saxophone and a jazz band. He was sent off to the Gulf Coast Military School and then to Washington & Lee for a brief stint shortened by the Depression. He came home to run a farm and a business. Mother went to the Webb public school, where she was very bright and an accomplished pianist. She would travel with her friend Margaret Webb to Clarksdale for piano lessons taught by a graduate of Juilliard. The baccalaureate ceremony for her high school

class of eight students was conducted by Rabbi Rabinowitz from Greenville, Mississippi. After a few years working in Memphis, she married my father and they lived in Sunflower. In 1946 when my bored older brother kept climbing out the window of the one-room schoolhouse in Sunflower to go home, my parents moved ten miles away to the larger town of Ruleville (population fifteen hundred).

Sunflower still loomed large in our lives. Big Papa had purchased a home—formerly owned by the family of food critic Craig Claiborne, on the banks of the Sunflower River. There was a huge vegetable garden that extended toward the river. It was great fun to sleep in the screen porch room. Mary Long, our black cook, was a disciplinarian, and knowing how prone to mischief I was, watched me carefully. She was especially attentive at Passover, when Jake Dattel's family would come to Sunflower. The patriarchs—Harry and Jake Dattel—would sit at the end of the table and mumble in Hebrew. Big Papa would make gefilte fish from scratch. Mary Long was well acquainted with Passover, having worked for the Sinai Brownsteins. I remember sitting in the backyard watching black baptisms on the other side of the river and listening to spirituals. The racial chasm was depicted physically, not metaphorically, by the river.

Judaism was alive and well in the Mississippi Delta. My grandfather was one of the founders of our temple in Cleveland, Mississippi. Almost all Jews were members of a congregation—the result of peer pressure from living close to our religious Christian neighbors. In the 1920s, one Jewish merchant in Indianola (the town where B. B. King grew up), did not close on the high holidays. A group of Christian leaders entered his store and asked him why his store was still open on an important Jewish holiday. He said that he didn't want to close. They informed him that this was a religious community and that people should take their religion seriously. He complied.

We trooped to Sunday school ten miles away in Cleveland, where our Rabbi, Moses Landau—a scholar who mastered German, Hebrew, French, Latin, and Greek before English—presided with humor and a real love of history. His interests extended beyond Judaism—in

particular to Abraham Lincoln and the German classes he taught at the local college, Delta State. In one town at the beginning of the century, the Torah for the recently constructed temple was met by the townspeople at the train station; a parade led by a band proceeded triumphantly to the new house of religion.

Ruleville had stores on both sides of the street. Daddy's store was on Floyce Street. As in many Delta towns, Jews owned most of the dry goods stores. If you wanted to buy clothes in Ruleville, you went to stores owned by Jews—Baker, Turner, Sklar, Dattel, or Orlansky. Jake and Harry Dattel helped other family members come to America and start businesses; there were Dattel stores in twelve Delta towns at one point. Dattels who were not equity owners would appear at store openings as a symbol of unity.

My parents were fully integrated into the town's civic activities—president of the Rotary Club, officer of the PTA, and several volunteer organizations in addition to board member of the Adath Israel congregation, and head of the Temple Sisterhood. The store was both a great learning experience and a source of entertainment. Working there on Saturday night was exciting. African American farm laborers filled the town, and they were my customers from an early age. One became sensitized to the needs and wants of poor people. The stores, like my father's, in small towns were an integrated place within the separate racial experience. I would walk around Ruleville's few streets. Front Street—home to Chinese grocery stores, white-owned stores, a random blues musician, and Mack's Café, a lively juke joint—was packed with African Americans. I then would check out the businesses on Ruby Avenue and Floyce Street. There again, everyone, black or white, knew I was the "Dattel boy." I generally had dinner alone at the Lebanese-owned Eddy's Café when the store was very busy.

Mother taught her black employees how to cook. One started her own restaurant. Another left Ruleville and began her own catering business in Oklahoma. Years later, I would find out that her menu was mostly from my mother's kitchen. So the recipes traveled from Eastern Europe

to Mississippi to Oklahoma and from white to black. Fried chicken, corn bread, turnip greens, and coconut cake were the undisputed first choice of meals in Ruleville.

As Martin Luther King Jr. often observed, despite the oppressive overt racial segregation in the South, the contact between blacks and whites, unlike in the North, offered hope for the future. As a young person in a very small town, a kid learned to navigate among groups—middle-class (there were no rich people) and poor, old and young, white, black, and Chinese. There was no anonymity; you saw the same people a lot.

Assimilation among whites was the norm. In Mississippi, one of the most sacred ecumenical events was the Friday-night high school football game. The coach would check the dates of the high holidays before planning games. If a high holy day occurred on Friday, the coach would accommodate the Jewish athletes by scheduling the game on Thursday. Rabbi Landau would hold Shabbat services early so that congregants could arrive at the high school games on time during football season. Our neighbor Esther Florence Silverblatt's parents were religious Jews; nevertheless, Esther Florence (Flo) had a beautiful voice and would alternate Sundays singing in the Baptist and Methodist churches where her friends worshipped. Maurine Weinberg Lipnick, as a Jew in the 1920s, was president of the Methodist church youth group in Indianola; she would become an active member of her Jewish congregation, a merchant, head of the Indianola Chamber of Commerce, and beloved Latin and algebra teacher. In Greenville's Temple Israel, some Christians attended Shabbat services. One of whom, Mr. William Moose, is commemorated with a *yahrzeit* plaque, a Jewish tradition that remembers someone on their passing. The highest civic award in three towns—Cleveland, Greenville, and Indianola—was named for a Jew.

In his 1940 tale of life in the Delta, the Greenville author William Alexander Percy wrote of the Jewish intellectual tradition:

“Every American community has its leaven of Jews. ...I was talking to one, an old-timer, not too successful, in front of his

small store. He suddenly asked in his thick Russian accent: ‘Do you know Pushkin? Ah, better than Shelley or Byron!’ Why shouldn’t such a people inherit the earth... because of a steadier fire, a tension and tenacity that makes all other whites seem stodgy and unintellectual.”

The Delta continues to be an indelible part of me. In 2003 I sponsored an oral history and art project for a group of elderly black women in the famous all-black Delta town of Mound Bayou. When I was introduced to the group, one woman stood up and said that she had bought her wedding dress from my father’s store. Then she began a conversation about him. A hundred years after my grandfather had settled in the Delta, the stores still remained a connective tissue.

In Europe, the family was Jewish; in America, we were Americans who practiced Judaism. Big Papa told us many, many times, “America is the greatest country in the world.” After all, he had traded a despotic Russian czar and a terrible fate for one of his heroes, Franklin Roosevelt, and the promised land of possibility.



My grandfather, Harry Dattel. Memphis, Tennessee (1940s).