

Thefinalword



Delta memories and legacies

BY GENE DATTEL



Gene Dattel was born and raised in the Mississippi Delta. He became a cultural and economic historian after a long career in finance. His latest books are *Reckoning with Race* and *Cotton and Race in the Making of America*. He lives in NYC with his wife Licia.

Home was Sunflower County, Mississippi Delta. My grandfather—“Big Papa,” the Jewish immigrant—settled in the town of Sunflower (population 500) at the turn of the century. Still with his Yiddish accent, Big Papa was elected an alderman. With an abundance of self-confidence, a Dattel family trait, he nominated himself for vice-mayor and won by a unanimous vote. He bought the home of the Claiborne family on the banks of the Sunflower River.

When my six-year-old brother kept climbing out of the window of Sunflower’s one-room school house, it was time to move down the road to Ruleville (population 1500) in 1946. There I was raised and went to school.

Delta children were the original free-range kids. Life for me in the 1950s was defined by the freedom of small town existence. Afternoons adjusted to seasonal sports—touch football, basketball, and baseball—at a friend’s yard until we were old enough to play organized sports. (Even now, I remember those August football practices in ninety-degree heat.) At thirteen, my friends and I had a rock-and-roll band that progressed from a high

school show to a TV contest in Memphis. Delta dances featured live music by the legendary band the Red Tops.

The seasons themselves were delineated by their role in the Delta’s *raison d’être*—cotton. The stark muddy winter would give way to the tilled rows, and then to the green shoots bursting through the spring air, followed by the beautiful blooms of summer and finally to the autumn harvest. Fall brought the humming sound and smell of the cotton gin. The sight of the trailers of cotton and the eternal talk of cotton are etched in my senses and memory: “Did you get a rain? How is your crop? Price talk? Government programs?”

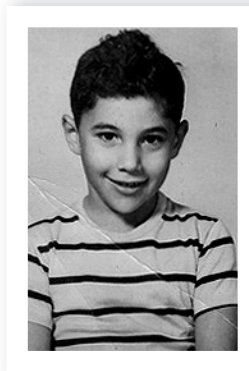
There was no anonymity. As an adult, my older brother Jerry once called the florist, Mrs. Rule, to order gardenias for Mother’s Day. “Boy,” Mrs. Rule replied, “I am not going to send gardenias to your momma. She has the town’s best gardenias in her yard.” I was often identified with reference to my father; I was Isadore’s boy. Familiarity reigned. You saw people often and adjusted seamlessly to everyone. The warm sociability and community closeness never leaves you. As my world expanded to other Delta towns, I experienced the easy kindred spirit with other Delta folks in Cleveland, Greenwood and Greenville.

Northerners are still surprised that Jews lived in the Mississippi Delta. Their amazement reaches a higher level when they hear about the degree of assimilation. By way of one of my many examples, I respond that Ruleville’s high school football coach, Mr. Gunn, would contact Rabbi Landau in Cleveland to see if there was a

Friday night conflict with the high holy days. If there was, Coach Gunn would reschedule games so that we could play.

Saturday nights often meant working, by choice, in our department store. The buzz on Saturday night was exciting and educational. Selling clothes and “working” the cash register taught me about relating to people, learning to listen and understanding that everyone has a story.

My small town Delta background prepared me well for a peripatetic career in London, Hong Kong, Tokyo and New York. It is no coincidence that I became obsessed with learning about the international economics of the cotton world—from my college days to the present. And along came my book, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America* whose major muse was Delta writer David L. Cohn. The imbued sense of civility, humor, respect and ease in social



situations within a multi-ethnic society helped me to acclimate to various cultures and places. From my family’s experience, especially that of my grandfather, I embraced and retain the importance of assimilation while retaining a sense of tradition.

I discovered that while I left the Delta, the Delta never left me. During my early days in New York’s financial world, Craig Claiborne, Sunflower native and food guru for the *New York Times*, welcomed me along for restaurant reviews, Delta talk and an education about food. Each time that I drive from Memphis to the Delta and the hills give way to the flat open landscape, I know that I am home. DU