

"PICKETS IN THE LAND OF CATFISH": THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LABOR RIGHTS
STRUGGLE IN THE CATFISH INDUSTRY OF THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA, 1965-1990

By

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To those who fight for the freedom of others

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The commercial production of catfish began in the Mississippi Delta in the mid-1960s and expanded rapidly through the '70s. During this time, wealthy stockholders established processing plants to supply fish to domestic markets that independent farmers could not reach. The processing plants in the Delta are owned and operated by white men, while most of the actual processing work is conducted by African American women. Low-level workers at processing plants behead, fillet, and package fish on rigid schedules set by the management. In the industry's early years, factory conditions were deplorable and pay was low. Furthermore, the methods of control adopted by plant supervisors reveal Jim-Crow style labor relations.

This paper examines the organized resistance of workers to the oppressive division of labor in the catfish industry. Two worker strikes, one in 1981 at Welfed Catfish, Inc, and the second in 1990 at Delta Pride, succeeded in securing representation by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). The 1990 walkout was the largest planned by black workers in Mississippi and set important precedents for labor relations in Mississippi, but the daily routines of upholding the

union contract are of equal importance. The relationships between UFCW employees, workers unionized or not, and plant executives and supervisors are multifaceted and complex. This paper will examine these relationships by situating them around the 1981 and 1990 strikes. By using oral histories, I will reposition women at the core of the historical narrative as agents of change. In addition to this, I will also examine how the organizing tradition of the civil rights movement exhorts African Americans in the Delta to take leadership roles in local-level politics and labor unionism.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Belzoni is a small town located in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. It looks like most other Delta towns in that a few of the shop-front windows down Main Street are boarded up, the roads are rutted, and long-abandoned buildings have been allowed to crumble in disrepair. There is, however, one glaring exception that sets Belzoni apart; scattered throughout town are twenty-five anthropomorphic catfish sculptures, each of which stands about five feet tall. “D. Fin-Der Esquire” guards the local law firm. “Miss Small Fry” purses red-lacquered lips, and from a slit in her dress she suggestively reveals a bare leg. When entering Belzoni from highway 49, one is greeted by a brightly painted billboard that proudly proclaims “Catfish Capital.” It seems impossible to escape these reminders; turn a corner and come face-to-face with “Catz” the catfish clown. Leave town and pass a self-congratulatory billboard. Travel hundreds of miles in any direction, leave the South, and spot on the side of a U-Haul truck in upstate New York; “Belzoni, MS: Catfish Capital of the World.”

In 1976, then-governor Cliff Finch pronounced Humphrey’s County, and Belzoni specifically, the “Farm-Raised Catfish Capital of the World.”¹ At the time, Humphreys County produced more farm-raised catfish than any other region in the United States. The business of farming catfish is a relatively recent endeavor that enjoyed a rapid expansion in the 1970s, and today, farm-raised catfish is the largest aquaculture

¹ “The Catfish Capital of the World. Humphreys County, Mississippi,” Belzoni-Humphreys Development Foundation, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.catfishcapitalonline.com/cfcapital.htm>.

industry in the United States.² The industry is celebrated as a success of Southern ingenuity, and the farmers and stockholders who established it cast as brave pioneers.

Black elders in the Delta feel differently about catfish. To them, Belzoni is still “Bloody Belzoni,” the hallowed site where the Reverend George Lee was murdered for organizing black voter registration drives.³ Elsewhere still, blacks were terrorized for attempting to vote during the modern civil rights movement, and in the uneasy aftermath of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, white Deltans clung to the vestiges of the Jim Crow ideology as if it were a religion. According to several black political leaders in Belzoni, change has come agonizingly slow to the Delta. Underneath the pleasant veneer cast by the catfish success story is the harsh reality that the industry is still segregated along a deep racial divide. The commercial catfish industry owes most of its success to the substantial amount of cheap labor available in the Delta. When the sharecropping system collapsed in the 1960s, thousands of poor blacks were left unemployed and destitute, pushed to the very margins of society when the farms where they lived as tenants expelled them. Into this vacuum arrived the first large-scale catfish processing plants. These corporations employed black women to complete the most physically demanding jobs, while white men assumed supervisory and management positions.

To delineate this color line, consider a comparative analysis of two different catfish festivals that take place annually in Belzoni. The World Catfish Festival has attracted a large audience since its inauguration in 1976. The festival is a day-long event in which attendees compete in catfish eating contests, peruse arts and crafts booths, and enjoy

² “Commercial Catfish Production,” Mississippi State University Cares, accessed March 19, 2012, <http://msucares.com/aquaculture/catfish>.

³ Juan González and Joseph Torres, *News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media* (London: Verso, 2011), 292.

musical performances. The festival celebrates catfish as “a saga of Southern enterprise, ingenuity, determination, dedication and just plain down-home good neighborliness,” and the official website explains that “all of these ingredients, plus inherent agricultural know-how, have figured in the phenomenal progress that has been made in the county since the mid-1960s when catfish was introduced as a new cash crop.”⁴ The highlight of the day is a beauty and talent contest that competitors take quite seriously; to be crowned Miss Catfish is a great Belzoni honor.⁵

Just as Miss Catfish is crowned on the courthouse steps in downtown Belzoni, catfish workers -- those responsible for beheading, filleting, and package catfish at one of the Delta’s many processing plants -- march in protest against the World Catfish Festival. These workers enjoy their own day of celebration at a less-advertised venue. The African American Heritage Buffalo Fish Festival was organized to identify the inequalities in the catfish industry, not the wild success of the crop or the auspices of Southern enterprise. The festival is held explicitly and solely for the workers, and there is not much overlap between the competing events.

Two festivals, two different messages, held on the same day but clearly segregated; so summarizes the racial tension in the business of farming catfish. While executives at processing plants and representatives of the Catfish Institute of America insist that the racial and economic inequalities are the unintentional side-effects of an industry still suffering from growing pains, it is difficult to deny the position assumed by

⁴ “37th Annual World Catfish Festival,” Belzoni-Humphreys Development Foundation, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.belzonims.com/catfishfest.htm>.

⁵ Steve Anderson, interview with Candice Ellis, January 20, 2012, digital recording, interview MFP107, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

catfish workers. As exemplified by the strong manifesto on the front page of the Buffalo Fish Festival website, there is no point in equivocating. The front page reads;

The National Juneteenth Christian Leadership Council (NJCLC) requests your support for our National Campaign For Justice & Hope, concerning the Catfish Industry. The Catfish Industry, the new plantation in America, makes millions of dollars of profit off the labor of African American catfish workers who are paid low wages and given little in benefits. These workers are forced to work under deplorable and dehumanizing conditions where racism is rampant. In the Mississippi Delta, America's poorest region, there are no African American top level catfish industry executives, catfish processors, or few, if any catfish farmers. African American catfish farmers are forced out of business because they are unable to sell their fish. The only African American catfish processor was driven out of business several years ago.⁶

The website lists additional grievances, including claims that “a downtown Belzoni restaurant will not serve certain African American community leaders and their guests, both black and white, because they support efforts to bring justice and fairness to the catfish industry for the black community.” Furthermore, “the Belzoni-Humphreys County Industrial Development Foundation refused to allow an organization of African American catfish workers to become members of the foundation while many catfish processing plant companies are granted memberships,” and finally, “city resources and street closings used in support of the World Catfish Festival are not granted to the African-American Heritage Buffalo Fish Festival.”⁷ The section concludes with a despairing request to pray for Belzoni and Humphreys County. Regardless of the veracity of these claims, the message is clear; the gap between workers and executives is inexcusable, and Belzoni whites consistently refuse to practice egalitarian politics.

⁶ “National Campaign for Justice and Hope,” The Buffalo Fish Festival, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.buffalofishfestival.com>.

⁷ Ibid.

Until the mid-1960s, wild catfish were caught and sold locally in Mississippi towns. Independent fishermen did not possess the capital necessary to process, package, and ship their hauls to broader domestic markets, so catfish remained a dish exclusive to the South. The introduction of large-scale processing plants marks the transition to commercial production. In addition to packaging and distributing catfish, processing plants developed advertising campaigns to access the markets most difficult to tap into, specifically those in large northeastern cities. The industry expanded rapidly through the '70s as farmers flooded their cotton and soy fields with increasing zeal and fish farming transitioned from a Southern pastime to a viable livelihood. A testament to this growth, approximately fifty-five percent of all catfish are currently farmed and processed in the Mississippi Delta.⁸

Processing plants, while crucial to the success of the early industry, created a new set of problems and were not immune to the caprices of the market. As evinced by statistics published by the United States Department of Agriculture, many of the plants established in the '70s lost their momentum in the following decade and closed down. Additionally, worker strikes organized to protest low pay and substandard factory conditions drew unwanted attention to the racial division of labor apparent in catfish processing work. Because consumers in the northeast are relatively unfamiliar with catfish, or perceive it as a distasteful bottom-feeder and esoteric Southern dish, marketing catfish in a positive light is crucial to the success of the industry. Charges of racial inequality run the risk of driving away the politically aware Northern consumer, and are therefore quickly and emphatically denied.

⁸ "Catfish Farming in Mississippi," Mississippi History Now, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/217/catfish-farming-in-mississippi>.

The commercial production of catfish is vertically integrated; the fish are bred at privately owned farms and sold to the processing plants that prepare and package them for market. In 1986, the largest processing plant in the Delta employed 1,046 employees. Of the 903 that worked the processing line, 856 were black.⁹ Considering this alongside the dark history of race relations in Mississippi, it is not surprising that processing catfish has been equated to plantation work. Journalist and poet Charlie Braxton explains that “working at these factories is like being on a plantation... you walk in boots because your feet are covered in entrails and blood. It’s the worst kind of work you could possibly do.”¹⁰ In the ‘70s and ‘80s, poor factory conditions and draconian management techniques had a dehumanizing effect on low-level employees. Workers at Delta Pride were only allowed five minutes per week for bathroom breaks, which were strictly monitored by floor supervisors. To avoid incurring penalties, terrified workers wore diapers, and others, pushed to cruel limits, wet their pants. Those who did ask for permission were followed into the stalls by supervisors carrying stopwatches.

Humiliation as a tactic of control was often used to establish superiority over plantation slaves, and Delta Pride’s bathroom policy indicates a contemporary adaptation of this mentality. When the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) began its efforts to unionize Delta Pride in the late ‘80s, executives argued that the corporation was still too young to support the increased wages that a union would bring. They tirelessly maintained that the issue was not racial, but economic. The bathroom policy swiftly and effortlessly dismantles this claim by illuminating the

⁹ Todd Moyer, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1954-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 200.

¹⁰ Kristal Brent Zook, “Dreaming in the Delta: A Memoir Essay,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 2 (2003): 281.

continuity between plantation and processing plant. By pointlessly forcing workers to ask for permission to use the restroom, or denying this right so tenaciously that others wet their pants, white supervisors effectively suppressed worker autonomy and self-respect. Underpaid, overworked, and malleable employees were the ideal. In a clear demonstration of the Jim-Crow mentality adapted to labor relations in a modern American industry, the atmosphere at processing plants grew increasingly hostile when workers began to court the UFCW for union representation in the late '80s.

Catfish workers have indeed fought tirelessly to secure union contracts through the UFCW. Agreeing upon a contract is not a passive process; labor unions are neither encouraged nor supported by businesses in Mississippi. Mississippi, in fact, ranks near the bottom of unionized states. Approximately four percent of its workers belong to a union, a sharp contrast to New York at the top of the list, with twenty-four percent of workers unionized.¹¹ The right-to-work laws in Mississippi prohibit corporations from requiring union membership as a precondition of employment. In alignment with the ideological import of this position, executives at catfish processing plants have historically refused to cooperate with the UFCW.

In a blunt interpretation of Mississippi's right to work laws, union organizer Rose Turner described them as "the right to be a slave, the right to be treated unfairly."¹² Turner began her career in labor rights activism by unionizing nursing homes in Tennessee. In the mid-1980s, Turner turned her attention to catfish processing plants

¹¹ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 5. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by state, 2010-2011 annual averages," <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t05.htm>.

¹² Rose Turner, interview with Candice Ellis, January 18, 2012, digital recording, interview MFP103, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

and played a critical role in the 1990 strike at Delta Pride. She described the walkout as a powerful event that forged familial bonds amongst those who participated. By using oral histories to illuminate the experiences of black political leaders and union employees in the Delta, I intend to shed light on how the legacies of civil rights organizing exhorts people to participate in grassroots activism in the Delta today. The Delta has generated a rich historiography on civil rights and labor unionism, but the existing literature largely overlooks the conflicts in the catfish industry. I plan to amend this gap by describing worker's strikes and the relationships between union stewards and representatives, workers unionized and not, and plant supervisors.

Upholding a contract within a processing plant requires constant attention. If workers lose interest in cooperating with the union and the contract is not renewed, then the precedents set by a successful walkout will most certainly begin to erode. Thus, while certainly the most conspicuous form of protest, strikes are only one facet of a much broader struggle. Workers turn to public protest as a last resort after all other avenues of negotiation have been thwarted by inflexible plant managers. Without the sustained efforts of union stewards and representatives, a contract would provide only fleeting relief in an industry that has largely dismissed the physical demands of catfish processing and basic worker needs. Union representatives must uphold the presence of the union on a daily basis and encourage non-unionized workers to join. As described by Eddie Steel, a union representative for UFCW Local 1529, the job requires long hours and infinite patience. One must possess a "strong love for people," and "a strong love for justice." Steel further explained that despite even small victories, "it's still a constant struggle, even when it comes down to contract negotiation... they want to take

certain things away from you, they don't want to give you nothing... every time a contract is up to be negotiated, it's a constant struggle to keep what you got. Not just to get something new, but it's a constant struggle to keep what you got."¹³

The relationships between low-level employees, unionized and not, union representatives and stewards, and upper-level management, is multifaceted and complex. Executives expend a great deal of energy to thwart union contracts, but in some cases, negative rumors spread through gossip networks in black communities and cause workers to doubt union stewards and representatives. These rumors, often created and circulated by executives at processing plants, are usually rooted in the belief that union affiliation might lead to termination or render one an undesirable candidate to future employers.

To study these relationships at catfish processing plants, I will focus on two different strikes. Separated by a decade, the 1981 Welfed strike, followed by the 1990 Delta Pride Strike, are important to consider in conjunction because they build upon each other in both negative and positive ways. For example, the earlier strike formed a bond between workers and set a precedent for the future. People learned how to organize public protests and did so with increasing proficiency. On the other hand, executives at Delta Pride attempted to use the Welfed strike as an example of how the UFCW would destroy the catfish industry; Welfed closed its doors in 1985 for reasons unrelated to the walkout. By using these events as the centerpieces around which to frame this study, I will examine the organizing methods used by union stewards and

¹³ Eddie Steel, interview with Candice Ellis, January 19, 2012, digital recording, interview MFP104, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

representatives to recruit workers and reinforce the presence of the union within a processing plant that has already been unionized.

In *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Charles Payne argues that grassroots organizing did not begin in the Black Church in the late '50s and '60s, but that it had existed in Mississippi as an indigenous tradition that predates the modern civil rights movement.¹⁴ To support this thesis, Payne uses oral histories gathered from an older generation of Afro-Mississippians who provided crucial support for young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). Payne found that the older activists were "radical democrats... committed to participatory political forms, because people develop by participating, not by being lectured to or told what to do."¹⁵ By providing numerous opportunities for catfish workers to secure and maintain their own rights, the work of UFCW employees is distinctly participatory in this manner. Through the use of oral histories, this paper will build on Payne's thesis and methodologies by tracing connections between civil rights organizing and union activism in the catfish industry. Alternatively, this paper will also examine the correlation between plantation and processing plant by casting the relatively modern catfish industry against a broader historical backdrop.

That this study is centered on Mississippi, and the Delta specifically, is significant for several reasons. The Delta is the largest domestic producer of farm-raised catfish, so it makes sense to focus this study on the epicenter of production. Beyond this, historians of the American South recognize Mississippi as the state least

¹⁴ Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

accommodating to the modern civil rights movement, and the site of the most brutal and extensive acts of racial terrorism. In the years between Reconstruction and the civil rights movement, 539 blacks were lynched in Mississippi, more than in any other Southern state.¹⁶ In 1955, the torture and murder of Emmitt Till in Money drew the attention of the nation, and in 1963, Medgar Evers was shot in the back as he walked up the driveway of his home in Jackson. During voter registration drives organized by SNCC in the 1960s, the Delta was considered a proving ground for young activists; it was deeper South than Mississippi itself, a place defined by its isolation from the rest of the country and marked by a history of violence.

Historians describe the Delta as a place wherein “the fundamental problems facing blacks in Mississippi -- racism, poverty, lack of educational opportunity -- were writ large in the Delta.”¹⁷ Any attempt to list the heinous acts of brutality wrought against Mississippi blacks runs the risk of overlooking important events. Rather, this is simply an attempt to cast Mississippi against other Southern states and highlight the distinct history that its current residents live in memory with.

In the Delta, the sky is a hollow amphitheatre so vast and heavy that it almost seems to weigh down on the land beneath it and iron out the wrinkles for miles in every direction. Drawn together by country roads, orderly grids of corn and cotton stretch into a distant horizon. The houses that dot the fields are unpretentious structures in various stages of disrepair. This is old, rural America, developed along historic rail lines that connected a vast network of antebellum plantations that James Cobb called “the most

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 124.

Southern place on earth.”¹⁸ Comprised of eighteen counties situated between the Mississippi and the Yazoo rivers, the Delta stretches as far north as Memphis and southwest to Vicksburg. The region suffers from a legacy of concentrated poverty evident in failing infrastructure, widespread illiteracy, poor healthcare, and a devastating lack of jobs. Between 2000 and 2009, the region lost approximately 14,000 residents. In roughly the same timeframe, thirty-four percent of its manufacturing positions vanished.¹⁹ Many residents blame the state government, which they feel considers the Delta an isolated stretch of country. Lawrence Browder, the first black to hold the position of chancery clerk in Belzoni, believes that the state treats the Delta like its “red-headed stepchild,” and lamented that “to me, the state has forgotten the central part of Mississippi.”²⁰

Pockets of wealth do exist in the Delta, but these neighborhoods are exceptions. In Greenwood, the Grand Boulevard is canopied by stately oak trees and lined with mansions. The Boulevard is referred to as “America’s Most Beautiful Street,” but during the civil rights movement, whites in town did everything in their power to prevent blacks from voting. SNCC, COFO, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) were all highly active in Greenwood due to its volatile nature. When Martin Luther King visited the city in 1963, the local Ku Klux Klan distributed a flyer that read

TO THOSE OF YOU NIGGERS WHO GAVE OR GIVE AID AND
COMFORT TO THIS CIVIL RIGHTS SCUM, WE ADVISE YOU THAT
YOUR IDENTITIES ARE IN THE PROPER HANDS AND YOU WILL BE

¹⁸ James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Martha Beard, “Unemployment, Community Development, and Tourism in the Delta,” *Business Perspectives* 20 (2009).

²⁰ Turner, interview.

REMEMBERED... AFTER THE SHOWING AND THE PLATE-PASSING AND STUPID STREET DEMONSTRATIONS ARE OVER AND THE IMPORTED AGITATORS HAVE ALL GONE, ONE THING IS SURE AND CERTAIN — YOU ARE STILL GOING TO BE NIGGERS AND WE ARE STILL GOING TO BE WHITE MEN. YOU HAVE CHOSEN YOUR BEDS AND NOW YOU MUST LIE IN THEM.²¹

As exemplified by the case in Greenwood, the Delta is rife with contrast and inequality. While the mansions along the Grand Boulevard appear stately and unsoiled, African American neighborhoods of rotting, wood-frame shotgun houses offset the opulence of America's most beautiful street. Open violence against blacks and the unwillingness of the white community to integrate remains a problem that black political leaders in the Delta currently struggle with. As Belzoni's first African American mayor explained, "change [in the Delta] is hard to come by."²² The hardships that catfish workers face at processing plants demonstrate this resistance to change.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, I will examine the legacy of organizing in the Delta and describe how it relates to worker strikes organized in the catfish industry. Situated against this, I will also attempt to reveal how attitudes of the Jim-Crow South carry into late-twentieth-century labor relations at catfish processing plants. Then, I will examine the relationships between union stewards and representatives, workers both unionized and not, and the executives at catfish processing plants. To accomplish this, I will frame these interactions around the 1981 and 1990 strikes.

The efforts of historians to rewrite African American women into civil rights history are commendable, but women's roles in labor rights issues of the late twentieth century

²¹ Michael Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: A History* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 150.

²² Wardell Walton, interview with Candice Ellis, January 20, 2012, digital recording, interview MFP106, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

are lacking. Scholars have argued that black women were more likely to participate in high-risk forms of activism and life threatening activities.²³ Additionally, women developed grassroots networks of support that were critical to the success of local movements. As the next generation of organizers, the women who fight now for representation by the UFCW utilize similar community-based networks and grassroots campaigns to garner local support. Through the use of oral history, this thesis will reposition women at the core of the narrative as agents of historical change.

In chapter one I will cover the key changes, trends, and themes in the labor historiography that this thesis fits within. While topics of gender and civil and labor rights issues have been covered exhaustively, the catfish industry and the struggle of the women within it have been overlooked. It is, after all, a relatively new venture in Mississippi, but one that deserves close consideration. Chapter two thusly connects the present to past with a brief introduction to civil rights movements in Mississippi. This is not meant to be a comprehensive history, but a quick overview of critical events that will situate current-day union organizing within the appropriate historical context. Chapter two opens with this summary, and closes with a case study of several black political leaders in Belzoni. By examining their life histories, I will demonstrate how the organizing tradition in Mississippi continues to play a role in both local politics and labor rights struggles in the Delta.

The third and fourth chapters examine the Welfed strike of 1981 and the 1990 walkout at Delta Pride. Again, by using oral narratives, I intend to trace the lives of several union stewards and prominent union representatives to explain how the tradition

²³ Jenny Irons, "The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation: A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement," *Sociological Forum* 28 (1998): 692.

of community organizing has endured into the twenty-first century. In addition to this, I hope to illuminate the connection between plantation and processing plant by examining the deplorable factory conditions, inattention to worker health, and the hostility that workers faced when attempting to unionize.

I will conclude by demonstrating that the fight is far from over; in 2010, workers poised to strike again as executives at Delta Pride threatened to roll back progress with a devastating new contract. Workers in the catfish industry are locked in a war of attrition in which hard-won union contracts run the risk of revision, or worse, expiration. As this thesis intends to demonstrate, events like the Delta Pride walkout, while commendable efforts, do not necessarily remain fixed in the memory of processing plant executives.

CHAPTER 2 HISTORIOGRAPHY: GENDER AND LABOR

The obstacles that catfish workers face in the late twentieth century are rooted in the entwined histories of black labor unionism and the long civil rights movement in the South. Therefore, important research to consider is the work of Michael Honey. In *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* and *Black Workers Remember*, Honey places black workers in the center of the historical narrative. *Southern Labor* elucidates the connections between labor and the long civil rights movement by relating African American unionism in the 1930s and 40s to the black sanitation worker's struggle in Memphis in the late '60s. In the earlier period, workers joined new unions formed by the CIO and challenged the political and ideological hegemony of Jim Crow in the workplace. This set the groundwork of organized activism that underpinned the civil rights movements of the '60s and later connected to the sanitation worker's strike. Honey's thesis strengthens the argument that activist organizing is generational and guided by earlier periods of resistance.¹

Black Workers Remember can be read as a companion piece to *Southern Labor*. In the introduction, Honey concedes that "this is not a universal story, in that it concerns a particular group of black labor activists who found themselves on the cutting edge of change."² Using oral histories as a major source, Honey describes the struggles of black workers in Memphis. "The life stories in this book implicitly contain a vision of what we might call civil rights unionism, a unionism engaged simultaneously within striving for

¹ Mike Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 216

² Mike Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xxi.

decent jobs and equal political and legal rights,” writes Honey.³ Both of these pieces are important because they place African Americans in the center of the historical narrative, and while there are discussions of interracial unionism, but always most prominent are the voices of black workers.

Research on black women’s roles in the workplace in the years preceding the civil rights movement is considerably more thorough than post-movement literature on the same subject. In *To Joy My Freedom*, Tera Hunter describes the lives of black washerwomen in Atlanta in the mid-to-late 1800s. These laundresses contracted their labor and enjoyed fairly independent lifestyles by establishing their own rates and terms of business. By 1880, laundry work employed more black woman than all other forms of domestic labor. As Hunter shows, washerwomen exercised a substantial amount of influence; if employers displeased them, then they simply demanded higher wages or threatened to strike.

Laundresses also played an important role in community building because their jobs and independence encouraged women to work together in public spaces within black neighborhoods. This cultivated networks of friendship that helped to sustain blacks through hard times in the South. Hunter describes the washerwoman’s space as “social space... where they [African American women] could wield power in their own right.”⁴ Hunter argues that “domestic workers’ protests were a part of a flourishing urban resistance campaign among African American workers in the Reconstruction South.”⁵

³ Ibid., 237.

⁴ Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 85.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

Washerwomen understood the value in staging walkouts as a form of resistance. On July 19th, 1881, the Washing Society marched in a strike to demand higher fees and a uniform rate of pay. Hunter considers this protest to be one of the “largest and most impressive among black Atlantans during the late nineteenth century.”⁶

Women also have a spotlight in *Civil Rights Unionism*, wherein Robert Korstad chronicles the efforts of black laborers in the Tobacco Workers International Union to secure their rights in the Winston-Salem factory and their attempt to “change the arc of American history surrounding World War II.”⁷ Korstad shows how poor blacks countered the paternalism of their white supervisors and asserted their rights. The tobacco industry offered an attractive alternative to the low-paying domestic work that black women were often forced into. Korstad focuses on these women to describe subtle forms of daily resistance and the more dramatic worker-organized protests. He ultimately contends that the North Carolina tobacco workers initiated the modern civil rights movement, and that union activism taught them how to fight for equality. Local 22 “did double duty as a trade union and as a laboratory for the practice of participatory democracy.”⁸ Present again is the argument that labor unionism paved the way for the civil rights movement and taught people how to organize and stage protests.

Finally, Jacqueline Jones’s work on the daily routines developed by black women to tackle the double burden of motherhood and paid employment is an interesting take

⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁷ Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 1.

⁸ Ibid., 230.

on the intersection of gender, race, and labor issues.⁹ *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* is a cultural examination of black women's lives as they took on their dual-role of mother and provider. Jones examines a century-and-a-half of history, and in doing so weaves together seemingly disparate eras that, when considered as an unbroken narrative, illuminate the enduring resistance to racial oppression.

While these pieces provide a good framework upon which to study the experiences of women in the catfish industry, there is an obvious dearth of research on African American working women in modern industrial settings in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and collapse of Jim Crow. We are presented here with several accounts in which historians have found the root of the civil rights movement in black labor unionism, but the ways in which the movement impacted Southern industry in the late twentieth century is absent. Working relationships at catfish processing plants require that we use the historical context presented by the preexisting literature to critically examine factory conditions and the actions of supervisors. Only in doing so may we determine how whites in the South have understood labor and race relations after the '60s. Considering the fact that it is not in the economic favor of plant executives to exhibit any form of racism, uncovering the legacy of Jim Crow at these corporations requires a deep analysis.

⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

CHAPTER 3 THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN MISSISSIPPI

To Organize in Mississippi: Reflections

To better contextualize the atmosphere in which UFCW employees worked to unionize catfish processing plants in Mississippi in the late '80s, this section will provide a brief history of white resistance to egalitarian politics as they preceded and persisted through the civil rights movement. Today, catfish workers describe a simmering racial tension that manifests in passive-aggressive displays of power. While white supervisors are not outwardly violent, they use alternative but equally frightening methods of oppression to override worker agency.¹ This type of control connects symbolically, if not literally, to various practices of Jim Crow in the South.

During the civil rights movement, Mississippi whites were so deeply resistant to black enfranchisement that SNCC activists developed special programs to organize black voter registration drives there. The White Citizens Council was formed in the mid-fifties in Indianola and exercised considerable clout in opposing, sometimes violently, the goals of SNCC activists.² Finally, at around the same time that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 institutionalized national desegregation, white farmers were testing the viability of large-scale catfish farming. The temporal distance between the hostility that marked the civil rights movement and the drives to unionize catfish processing plants is marginal at best. It was within this tense transitional atmosphere that the first processing plants were founded and the racial division of labor established.

¹ Catherine Bacon, interview with Candice Ellis, September 23, 2011, interview MFP097, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

² Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

The collapse of sharecropping in the 1960s left thousands of poor blacks without work. As farming techniques were increasingly mechanized and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Agricultural Adjustment Administration provided planters with economic incentives to employ wage laborers rather than sharecroppers, "the people who had been the economic foundation of the region had become economically expendable."³ Catfish processing plants benefited from this surplus of cheap labor and enjoyed massive growth through the '70s. The current conditions of labor relations in the catfish industry must therefore be critically re-examined and positioned against this historic backdrop, and only by doing so may we begin to fully comprehend the implications of the sustained resistance to unionism at processing plants.

In addition to examining shifting structures of white resistance to racial equality and labor unionism, I will also emphasize how grassroots organizing developed to overcome the circumstances in Mississippi. Voter registration drives in the Delta were coordinated at the local level by young activists who went on to rear the next generation of organizers. The oral histories gathered in Delta towns reveal that parents and grandparents either openly exhorted their children to participate in public forms of protest, or at least provided some level of support. The methods of organizing developed by SNCC activists reflect in the efforts of UFCW employees to organize catfish workers at the local level, and also serve black office seekers in the Delta.

The Roots of Resistance

As evinced by the existing literature, Mississippi has rightfully earned a reputation as the most brutal of all the Southern states. Racial discrimination, segregation, and a

³ Chris Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 130.

penchant for violence developed quickly in the practices of white Mississippians during Reconstruction. By the time the state institutionalized these practices with Jim Crow laws, whites had already created a discourse and belief system of racial superiority that black political figures are still working to dismantle. To separate Mississippi even further, the decades of racial violence that defined the Jim Crow period unfolded against a backdrop of lawlessness unique to Mississippi towns. Mississippi was admitted to statehood in 1817, but farmers had been moving to the area in the decades before this to enjoy the cotton boom sweeping through the South.⁴ Although the planter class grew wealthy, the state developed no large city centers. The population was scattered throughout rural towns described as hotbeds of unrest; “whiskey flowed freely in their world, and personal disputes were often settled in the dirt-floor taverns or dueling fields outside town.”⁵ The only cities with modern infrastructures were Natchez and Vicksburg, which were defined not by population density, but by the grandiose display of planter wealth and highly concentrated violence.

Historians have not yet come to a consensus about the origins of this violence. Conditions such as physical isolation from the rest of the country, an obsession with honor, vengeance, and chivalry, and a structure of slave labor that reinforced the belief that whites belonged to a superior class all contributed to the unique circumstances in Mississippi.⁶ This did not go unnoticed; by the 1830s, the nation had labeled Mississippi a place of unrestraint wherein impassioned vendettas left people dead in the street and

⁴ David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

took precedent over the law. Mississippi was dubbed the “lynching state,” its victims both white and black. Indeed, in 1837, Abraham Lincoln famously stated that “dead men [are] literally hanging from the boughs of trees by every roadside” in Mississippi.⁷ There were not enough sheriffs or judges in the state to oversee the scattered population, so criminals lived in no true fear of the law.

White men throughout the South sustained the practice of racial lynching by normalizing the image of the black man as an insatiable sexual deviant hungry for the bodies of white women. The defense of the white family against the black threat formed the central theme of lynching narratives in the late nineteenth century, and newspapers served as the primary conduits through which this fear was disseminated.⁸

In *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, V.O. Key remarks that the nation viewed Mississippi in a category of its own as “the last vestige of a dead and despairing civilization.”⁹ John Dittmer further explains that “the image of Mississippi as America’s dungeon not only persisted but intensified over the next three decades.”¹⁰ While any attempt to summarize the decades of racial terrorism that preceded and persisted through the modern civil rights movement runs the risk of omitting important events, it is important to at least consider several points to better illuminate the history of violence that current-day UFCW employees organize within. This is not a forgotten history, and

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁹ V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 229.

¹⁰ Dittmer, *Local People*, 9.

events associated with racial terrorism and the civil rights movement exhort labor organizers and black political figures to take powerful positions of leadership

The campaign for black enfranchisement in the South has contested origins, but for the purpose of this paper, let us begin with Medgar Wylie Evers's return home from his tour through France and Germany during World War II. After risking their lives in Europe, Evers and a group of African American veterans approached the county courthouse in Decatur, Mississippi, and attempted to vote in the Democratic primary election. As described by John Dittmer in *Local People*, when the group arrived at the courthouse, "some 15 or 20 armed white men surged in behind us, men I had grown up with, had played with... We stood there for a minute. We were bluffing. We knew we weren't going to get by this mob."¹¹ As the veterans withdrew, Evers noticed a black Ford following them, and "a guy leaned out with a shotgun, keeping a bead on us all the time."¹² Humiliated but determined to vote, the men returned with concealed firearms. As they approached the polls, they were met the same reaction. Years later as the NAACP state field secretary, Evers commented that "I was born in Decatur, was raised there, but I never in my life was permitted to vote there."¹³

Mississippi politicians urged their white constituents to use all means necessary to prevent blacks from voting in the 1946 primary elections. Most notorious was Senator Theodore Bilbo. Bilbo represented Mississippi's poorest whites, and was a fervent white supremacist who believed that the best solution to the race issue was to send blacks to

¹¹ Ibid., 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 2.

Africa.¹⁴ As quoted by Dittmer, Bilbo advised that “if you let a handful go to the polls in July there will be two handfuls in 1947, and from there on it will grow into a mighty surge... the white people of Mississippi are sleeping on a volcano.” Bilbo also encouraged violence against blacks; “you and I know what’s the best way to keep the nigger from voting. You do it the night before the election. I don’t have to tell you any more than that. Red-blooded men know what I mean.”¹⁵

Whites soon realized that the most effective way to keep blacks from voting was to prevent them from registering. In order to register to vote, the state of Mississippi required a two-year residency and a two-dollar poll tax.¹⁶ The state enforced this law with a religious zeal. Even more effective was the “understanding clause,” which held that a voter attempting to register had to read and interpret any given section of the constitution.¹⁷ The circuit clerk in charge of choosing questions for black applicants ignored the rules, or asked impossible questions. Those who did muster the courage to vote put their lives on the line. Angry white mobs torched homes, threatened family members, and brutalized members of the black community who dared to exercise their right to participate in democratic elections.

With these precedents set, SNCC organizers found their greatest challenge in Mississippi.¹⁸ Although SNCC established a presence in Mississippi during voter registration drives in the early ‘60s, solid and quantifiable victories were slight. Of the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 35.

blacks that organizers convinced to register, only a fraction actually completed the process. Without a strong federal presence, state lawmakers acted as they saw fit, and their constituents followed suit. While projects like desegregating lunch counters and public restrooms were successful elsewhere in the South, these initiatives were considered too dangerous to undertake in Mississippi.¹⁹ SNCC also lacked the resources necessary to embark on national advertising campaigns, so the problems in isolated Mississippi remained obscured by more mainstream civil rights stories.

The Freedom Summer Project was drafted in 1963 to combat this stalemate. By managing a statewide voter registration campaign, SNCC extended its presence into the most rural regions of Mississippi where white resistance and violence was strongest.²⁰ In the summer of 1964, thousands of student volunteers from elite universities in the North traveled to Mississippi to assist in canvassing black communities and registering voters. Freedom Summer volunteers also established a network of Freedom Schools and Freedom Houses, which served to support those in the most isolated areas. These organizations worked with the support of local people -- the classes offered by Freedom Schools were taught by members of the community and located at churches or family homes. By participating alongside black teenagers in the Delta, SNCC activists imparted valuable lessons in grassroots organizing and laid the groundwork for the political and labor activists of the UFCW.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁰ Ibid.

Case Study: Black Political Activism in the Catfish Capital

We may again return to the town of Belzoni to examine how the black organizing tradition transitioned into the late twentieth century. When considered against the historical backdrop of the civil rights movement, the profundity of this leadership is cast in sharp relief. The first African American to hold a political office in Belzoni was elected in the mid-nineties by a close margin; Lawrence Browder won the position of chancery clerk by only two votes. Several years later his daughter ran for clerk of the courts and also won. In 2005, Belzoni's first black mayor was elected, and reelected in 2009. These leaders were either active in the civil rights movement, or had family members who participated in voter registration drives.

During the civil rights movement, Belzoni was similar to other Delta towns in that it earned a reputation as a place of racial tension that manifested in public acts of violence. In 1955, the Reverend George Lee was shot for organizing black voter registration campaigns. Then-governor Hugh White refused to investigate the incident, and the murderers were never found. Multiple news sources called the event "mysterious" and "suspicious," and to this day rumors still swirl around the murder.²¹ Elders in the black community know the story well, and explain that Lee was warned repeatedly to get out of politics.²² SNCC activists who participated in Freedom Summer remember the dangers in Humphreys County. Margot Adler recalled how "difficult it was to register people: the fear was palpable. I remember that after one month of daily work there were only seven people registered, and a bunch of us almost got ourselves killed

²¹ "Minister's Mysterious Death Stirs NAACP in Mississippi," *The Day*, May 23, 55.

²² Lawrence Browder, interview with Candice Ellis, January 20, 2012, digital recording, interview MFP102, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

after being chased onto private property by a group of men who belonged to the White Citizens Council.”²³

Lawrence Browder was born in 1954; he was an infant when George Lee was shot. When considering his success in Belzoni, Browder reflects that it was a “big part of Belzoni history because it shows form where we came to where we are.”²⁴ As a teenager, Browder was encouraged to participate in local-level politics by his father, who used his juke joint as a headquarters from which to organize voter registration drives. Browder’s father was deeply dedicated to the movement; the Blue Room closed only for Christmas and on voting day.

In 1996, Lawrence Browder ran for the office of chancery clerk in Belzoni and secured his victory after taking miscounted votes to court. On the day that he won office, the former clerk threw the keys to the office onto the table, and acidly wished him good luck. Browder has served as the chancery clerk since, and in reelection years he has managed to secure the position with greater ease. Of this he explained that Delta whites grew more accustomed to these changes over long periods of time, and commented that change in the Delta was certainly occurring, but painfully slow in its arrival.

Browder’s stepdaughter, Timaka James-Jones, is the first black circuit clerk in Belzoni. Jones names her grandfather as one of the primary influences in her involvement in local level politics. She remembers serving cookies and juice at the Blue Room, where she often overheard the adults discuss upcoming elections and the

²³ “Margot Adler,” Civil Rights Movement Vets, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.crmvet.org/vet/adler.htm>.

²⁴ Browder, interview.

challenges of black voter registration. When Jones ran for circuit clerk, she did so with the desire of becoming the first black female to hold the position. Although she did not have a lot of money at her disposal, Jones won the election by building a local network of support. In Delta-style grassroots organizing, Jones charmed her constituents by going door-to-door, maintaining a strong presence in town with homemade posters and flyers, and attended community events and local churches.²⁵ When she was elected, Belzoni citizens -- both white and black -- were well familiar with her.

Belzoni elected its first black mayor in 2005. With the exception several years spent South Dakota for college, Wardell Walton has always lived in Belzoni. His father died when he was young, so his mother took on additional jobs to provide for her children. On the weekends she worked the fields from “can’t see to can’t see,” and during the week she performed various domestic duties for clients in town. Walton described his childhood in Belzoni as interesting and enjoyable, but hinted at the downsides. Like many black children in the South, he and his siblings were expected to help support the family. Chopping and picking cotton was backbreaking work. However, it was easy to build solidarity and familial relationships in these shared experiences. According to Walton, many black families did not even consider their financial situation as hopeless or dire;

we all didn’t have much, but we really didn’t know that we didn’t have much. Some folks said that you were poor, but we never considered ourselves poor because I guess everybody was in the same boat... Growing up in Belzoni as a child, we had some enjoyable times; even going to the cotton fields to chop cotton and to pick cotton. There were some unbearable situations there, but then too some enjoyable situations. Because of the fact

²⁵ Timaka James-Jones, interview with Candice Ellis, January 20, 2012, digital recording, interview MFP105, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

that everybody went to the fields, and so you had good times out there because you intermingle with one another.

Walton started to notice segregation by the time he reached middle school; he wondered why some people could do certain things and why others could not. On a shopping trip with his mother at the local grocery store, young Walton was surprised when a white couple cut in front of them in the check out line. “They just told us to back off, and we didn’t understand why we had to move when we was already at the front of the line,” he explained. His mother told he and his siblings “look don’t y’all say anything about it, let that be done.”²⁶

In high school, Walton joined SNCC and marched in public protests. He was more interested in activism than his siblings, who did participate, but to a lesser degree. SNCC members described how to stage nonviolent protests and taught young organizers how to defend themselves, how to respond to various situations, and how to get others involved. In the Delta, SNCC worked locally and attempted to organize voter registration drives at the community level. Walton emphasizes the importance of kinship ties in local organizing, and explained that in order to become an integral and important part of the movement, blacks had to come together as a community and demand their rights with a united voice.

Walton was once arrested for intervening in a scuffle between one of his friends and a white police officer. When Walton stepped in, the policeman pulled a gun and forced him to retreat. That afternoon, a sheriff came to his house to arrest him. The sheriff put a .38 to his head, and, as Walton describes, told him “nigger, if you breathe

²⁶ Walton, interview.

I'm going to blow your G-D brains out." Walton explained that he and fellow activists always felt unsafe because

we would always hear of threats that they were going to come in and bomb the place, or that they were going to raid the place, or that they was going to beat everyone up, or that they were going to shoot tear gas... you were always afraid. If a car pulled up, loud doors, you would jump out of anticipation as to what's going to happen next because during those times, we knew that it could happen. We knew that somebody could be drawn out and beaten; we knew that, we saw that. I saw that happen right here in Belzoni, downtown.... When the gun was put up to my head, I knew that there was a possibility that I could be shot and that I could be thrown in a river and that nobody would know anything about it. Nobody would question it.

For Walton, the aftermath of the civil rights movement brought a new element of struggle. He recalls a series of tense moments that occurred through the '70s and '80s that, while not explicitly violent in nature, demonstrated the resistance of Delta whites to interface with their black neighbors. In 1973, Walton and his then-pregnant wife ordered dinner at a restaurant in Greenwood, Mississippi. Walton explained that "when I walked in the place I should have known something was wrong because I saw all these rebel flags all over the place."²⁷ The two ordered their food without incident, but when they returned to their car to eat, his wife found that the cook had loaded the hamburger with salt. Shortly after that, Walton was denied service at a Belzoni restaurant. The owner pulled a gun on him and said "I don't give a dog if you ever come here, I don't want your 'n' dollars."²⁸

Walton also encountered discrimination in the work place. As the first black to be hired at Air Co, an oxygen company, Walton endured several years of quiet resistance

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

before he became the plant manager there in 1981. Before he had proved his worth as a competent maintenance man, the management often assigned him jobs that normally required two people. Walton remained steadfast, and as the plant manager was able to travel extensively. He proudly recalls ringing the bell at the New York Stock Exchange and speaking to young blacks in New York City. His words here are powerful; “I am a young black man from the Delta of Mississippi, from a single parent home. I went from the cotton fields of Belzoni of Humphreys county, all the way up to where I could stand in the halls of the NYSE. If I could do it, then the opportunity exists for everybody. Yeah, we had some hard times, but they were learning times. I know now that it can be done.”²⁹

Walton ran for mayor of Belzoni in 2005, and was reelected in 2009. Like Browder and Jones, he sought to make changes in Belzoni. Walton highlighted the fact that his involvement in politics is not important because he is black, but because he could be an instrument of positive change. Of this he said “I’m not here for my own. I’m standing on the shoulders of those who came before me; those people who were beaten, those people who were killed. I stand up on their shoulders, and I am a representative of all those who stood out.” Evident in this is the theme of tradition, of picking up where one’s ancestors left off and continuing the fight for equality. Walton exists as a purveyor of justice in place to carry on the legacy of activists who are no longer alive.

In preparation to study the process of unionizing at catfish processing plants, these stories make an important point; change after the civil rights movement has come slowly to the Delta. As I will describe in the following sections, worker strikes pushed

²⁹ Ibid.

this change along, but did not dismantle the old plantation mentality and anti-unionism amongst the most difficult opponents. In 1981, workers at Welfed organized a strike to secure representation by the UFCW. In the late '80s, the UFCW increased its efforts to unionize processing plants in a union drive through the Delta. The resistance to unionism is most apparent in the actions and policies adopted by Delta Pride to thwart this progress. While the majority of processing plants acquiesced after putting up some initial resistance, Delta Pride consistently refused to negotiate.

CHAPTER 4 THE 1981 STRIKE AT WELFED

Setting the Stage: The Early Industry and the Will to Strike

The 1981 strike at Welfed Catfish, Inc marks the first walkout organized by low-level workers at a Delta processing plant. Present here are the connections between civil rights organizing and women's roles in coordinating worker's strikes in the twentieth century. In typical fashion, Welfed executives ignored the presence of the worker-elected union, and challenged the National Labor Relations Board when it found that the pro-union vote held. This event, although smaller in scale than the 1990 strike at Delta Pride, marks an important beginning. Women learned how to approach the UFCW, how to collect the required signatures from employees that might be fearful of supporting the union, and finally, how to organize in protest when Welfed executives denied them their right to unoinize.

The feelings of independence and pride associated with mobilizing for one's own rights are distinctive to this moment in history. Labor organizer Sarah White commented that; "... When you get a taste of what prejudice feels like, it hurts. And then when you get a taste of freedom, you never forget it. It makes you feel good about yourself. It gives you peace."¹ Women who marched on the picket line at Welfed expressed a similar reaction. The indignity and helplessness associated with working for long hours in deplorable conditions at such low pay must have been profound for these women. To demand a union presence and organize a strike was indeed liberating, and demonstrated their ability to affect real and meaningful change.

¹ Zook, "Dreaming in the Delta," 288.

“Pickets in the Land of Catfish”

Welfed was one of the first large-scale processing plants established in the Delta. Launched in 1968 amidst the first echoes that would later become the roaring boom of the early industry, the company utilized new and cutting-edge methods of production that allowed it to compete in the domestic market. Welfed was founded by a group of wealthy stockholders, so the company possessed the capital necessary for extensive production. Processing plants supply fish to a market that small farmers can not reach, and the ability to process, package, and tap into domestic markets requires sufficient advertising and the capacity to transport shipments. Plants without the resources to do so are simply not viable. During the 1970s and '80s, Welfed played a critical role in developing the early industry by improving processing techniques that expanded the market for catfish.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture began to publish statistics on the production of catfish in 1980.² The first report was issued in October, and it revealed that only eight processing plants, including Welfed, were large enough to be considered in the survey. The attention of the USDA was an important development because the monthly reports drew attention to the viability of catfish as a crop. Much to the delight of Mississippians, the studies revealed what many had been hoping for; Mississippi was indeed ahead of other catfish-producing states in both total production and average land devoted to catfish farming. The rapid growth of the industry in these early years proved to

² “National Agricultural Statistics Service,” United States Department of Agriculture Economics, Statistics, and Market Information System, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/MannUsda/viewDocumentInfo.do?documentID=1546>

enterprising farmers and state agricultural officials that catfish farming could realistically replace more traditional forms of agriculture practiced throughout the South.

Improvements in harvesting and processing techniques were created as the industry expanded. In the early '70s, the timetable used for harvesting was modified. The old method of processing catfish was planned linearly along the fish's two-year life cycle; the fish were harvested only when they reached adulthood, which created a gap in production and a uniformly sized fish. In the new system, breeding timeframes were modified so that catfish could be collected year-round and sold in different sizes. As this technique was adopted throughout the Delta, companies like Welfed increased total output.³ This did not come without its own set of concerns, and processors grew wary about the possibility of overproduction. In order to maintain a steady supply and demand, catfish processing plants worked to expand their markets in the northeast.

The production data collected from five processing plants in 1969 reveal that the plants collectively processed approximately three million pounds of fish.⁴ Data gathered from ten plants in 1979 reveals that 40.6 million pounds of catfish was processed. This demonstrates expanding production and an increase in the number of processing plants. Once Mississippi farmers realized the potential in catfish, maintaining fish farms began to transition from a hobby to a livelihood. "It was downright un-Delta to raise anything but cotton and soybeans and rice, but Tom Reed had read enough to be pretty sure of what he was doing when he plowed up a soybean field and dug the hole for his first catfish pond," reads one article in the *Clarion Ledger*, a newspaper based out of

³ Jerry Ogelthorpe, "Catfish Entrepreneur Has Right to Laugh Last," *The Clarion Ledger*, April 9, 80.

⁴ Ibid.

Jackson.⁵ However un-Delta catfish farming might have been, the involvement of the USDA and increasing production certainly seemed promising. As farmers flooded their soy and cotton fields, the placid greens and browns of agriculture, so commonplace in the Delta, slowly let way to the sparkling dark blue of a perfectly rectangular catfish pond.

Welfed was founded at the very threshold of this decade of expansion and enjoyed enough success to operate from two different locations. In 1973, a Georgian farmer named Henry Williams moved to the Delta to participate in the developing industry and became the executive manager at Welfed. Williams was of the belief that “today’s catfish people are pioneers, and they often have to find the way.”⁶ This attitude captures perfectly the sentiment of the industry; catfish farmers were resourceful leaders who had to set the standards of efficient farming techniques. There were no guidelines other than those created as innovators experimented with different types of farming and breeding methods. Those who risked their livelihoods by flooding cotton and soy fields were celebrated for their bold streak of resourcefulness and courage, and the plight of catfish processing workers was virtually unknown.

As production increased, so too did the pressure on these workers. This set the stage for the Welfed strike, in which company executives refused to bargain with a union formed by the employees. Although repeatedly prompted to do so by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), Welfed would not negotiate. A Welfed supervisor had allegedly influenced workers to vote for the union. According to executives, this

⁵ “He Goes for Catfish, Hook, Line, and a Sinker,” *The Clarion Ledger*, October 27, 76.

⁶ Ibid.

rendered the possibility of collective bargaining impossible. Welfed's resistance to the union, coupled with substandard working conditions, ultimately pushed the workers to organize a strike.

Catfish processing plants are described as cold and uncomfortable; many workers wear sweaters and slacks to offset the damp chill. The days are long, and the work is physically demanding. Employees are expected to meet strict quotas that require constant monotonous motion. Catherine Bacon, an African American woman who has worked at a plant for nineteen years, explained that "they have taken benefits from us. My pay [has] been dropped three times. They said because they moved me from one department to another... they drop your pay. It don't matter how many years you have served that company. It doesn't matter."⁷ Employees are not guaranteed a set number of weekly hours, and for a single mother with mouths to feed, this uncertainty is daunting. Considering these conditions, not much has improved for the marginalized black worker. The damp chill of the factory has replaced the white-hot sun, and instead of picking cotton, workers behead, fillet, and package fish on a rigid schedule designed to meet quotas set by the white management.

The 1981 strike is important because it marks the first walkout to draw attention to the inequalities in the division of labor at catfish processing plants. The vote to unionize Welfed and the subsequent power struggle also provided an example for anti-union spokespersons who disapproved of the 1990 Delta Pride strike; indeed, Welfed closed in 1985, close enough to the time of the strike to create a convincing story. As tension

⁷ Bacon, interview.

mounted in the late '80s at Delta Pride, executives purchased the Welfed plant in Isola and organized daily walk-throughs of the abandoned building.⁸

As Rose Turner explained, supervisors sought to send a harsh message. “You all vote for the union? You see; this is what is going to happen to you all,” she mocked.⁹ This tactic played heavily into the most sensitive of worker fears; losing one’s job due to involvement in, or the failure of, a labor union. Because jobs in the Delta are so scarce, the risk associated with public protest proved the breaking point for some workers, who crossed the picket line of both strikes to return to work.

Coverage on the Welfed strike is minimal; while numerous articles in *The Clarion Ledger* praise the success of catfish or speculate about the future of the market, *The Ledger* reported only briefly on the Welfed strike. Due to the sparse coverage, constructing a narrative around the walkout was difficult. An article entitled “Pickets in the Land of Catfish” describes the picket lines and worker complaints, and reveals an event similar to the Delta Pride strike.¹⁰ The most important aspect about the Welfed strike is that it taught workers how to negotiate for their rights, and how to organize a collective protest when executives denied them the ability to do so.

In 1981 the Welfed plant employed about 100 African American women, all of whom worked in non-supervisory positions.¹¹ Wages remained fixed at low levels regardless of one’s seniority. Employees were not compensated for the idle hours spent waiting at the plant for catfish shipments to arrive. These periods of waiting added up

⁸ Moyer, *Let the People Decide*, 201.

⁹ Turner, interview.

¹⁰ “Pickets in the Land of Catfish,” *The Clarion Ledger*, August 16, 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

from one to three hours per day. Employees did not receive any form of health insurance, sick days, paid holidays or vacations, or a retirement plan. The working conditions described at Welfed are characteristic of processing plants. Those stationed near dry ice coolers complained that it became difficult to breathe as the ice melted and emitted clouds of carbon dioxide. When Virgie Pitts strayed too close to a whirring machine, her skin caught in the blade and ripped off. Pitts took off for seven weeks to heal, and received only \$214 in workman's comp.¹² There are additional reports of workers losing fingers, or requiring skin grafts for various injuries. The repetitive motion of beheading and filleting fish also causes severe cases of carpal tunnel syndrome, and standing for such long periods of time without relief leads to back and foot problems. When workers complained of similar ailments at Delta Pride, they were either dismissed or offered aspirin. One worker remarked that "they hire you, cripple you, and fire you."¹³

As worker resistance typically unfolds at processing plants, the conflict between low-level employees and company executives did not begin with the strike. In June 1980, Welfed employees voted 90 to 41 for representation by the UFCW in collective bargaining agreements that would propose a contract to increase pay and improve factory conditions. Welfed executives refused to bargain and ignored the presence of the union. In March of 1981, the NLRB found that Welfed had "interfered with, restrained, and coerced... employees in the exercise of their rights" and concluded that

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard Schweid, *Catfish and the Delta: Confederate Fish Farming in the Mississippi Delta* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1992), 123.

“[Welfed] is engaging in unfair labor practices.”¹⁴ Following this, the NLRB applied for an enforcement of the order to unionize.

Welfed contended that Gus Lampkin, a supervisor, coerced employees into voting for the union and therefore skewed the results. Workers seeking his support allegedly visited Lampkin at his home in May 1980. Lampkin signed a union card and took ten additional cards to distribute amongst other employees. According to Welfed, Lampkin attended a union meeting and passed out several of the cards at this meeting. A week later, on May 18, he signed an attendance roster at a second meeting and revealed that he had attempted to encourage some of the upper-level management to unionize. Ten days later, officials at Welfed learned of these activities. Lampkin was called into the office by the plant superintendent, who explained that he could neither exhibit support for the union nor vote in the upcoming election. This was emphasized again at a supervisor’s meeting in early June.

At risk of losing his job, Lampkin severed his ties to the worker’s union. He requested that his May 18 statement be redacted and destroyed the physical copy of it. Despite this, the union won the election on June 24. The newly formed union accused Welfed of committing unfair labor practices, and following this, the NLRB’s Acting Regional Director issued a complaint against the company.

Welfed executives argued that the results of the election were invalid because Lampkin’s actions had destroyed the “laboratory conditions” ostensibly required in the election. Welfed sought a hearing based on this accusation, but the NLRB maintained that Welfed was unable to object because other executives that had learned of

¹⁴ *Petitioner, v. Welfed Catfish, Inc*, 674 F.2d 1076 (5th Cir. 1982).

Lampkin's involvement with the union and did not act quickly enough to deter him. According to the NLRB, Welfed failed to take immediate action to dispel any influence that the supervisor might have had over the employees. In the case that the employer fails to take these steps, then the corporation cannot use the argument of supervisor misconduct to devalue the results of the election.

Welfed maintained that it did not idle, but told Lampkin and other supervisors not to advocate for the union in the weeks before the election. In response the NLRB stated that "it communicates nothing to the employees and leaves the impact of the supervisor's remarks unsoftened... Once Welfed learned of Lampkin's actions, it could not await the election results, without making any effort to dissipate any coercive effect Lampkin's conduct may have had, then use his activities to challenge the outcome if the vote proved unfavorable to Welfed... Because Welfed never communicated with its employees about Lampkin's alleged misconduct, its first argument must fail."¹⁵ Welfed ultimately felt that any public disavowal of Lampkin's behavior was ineffective because he had already dealt irreversible damage.

Welfed's workers organized the protest by planning it amongst themselves. First, employees voted on the strike, and then began placing calls to the Mississippi branch of the UFCW. Workers set a date of April 22, 1981, to walk out. Of the 100 workers on strike that morning, eight returned to the processing line at Welfed. Welfed hired outside labor to compensate for the losses in its workforce. The replacements were difficult to

¹⁵ Ibid.

train and produced at a much slower rate than seasoned employees, but Welfed reported that it was operating at close to normal levels of production.¹⁶

Strikers marched for about fifteen weeks. Some grew impatient with the deadlock, and others used the experience to their advantage. Ruth Nalls, mother of eight, felt as if the strike was “like a training school where we’re learning to be good union members. The strike is showing us that we have to help each other and care for each other if we’re ever going to get anywhere.”¹⁷ Virgie Pitts told a reporter that “I’ve never felt so good. One day we’ll get what we deserve. If not for me, then for those that will come later.”¹⁸

As expressed by the passion with which these women discussed their involvement in the strike, the formation of kinship ties through a shared struggle and a collective victory appear strongly here. Several years later, when Sarah White began canvassing her coworkers at Delta Pride for their support of the UFCW, she comforted terrified workers with speeches that appealed directly to the allure of resisting the plant supervisors;

I know throughout this South... of plants with inhumane treatment of women. Because they feel we can't fight, and we have no other choices. But you do got other choices... you don't have to just bend down and let the man ride your back! And then, once you break that barrier it's a relief that lifts up off of you... Like you could never imagine! I want every woman to feel that feeling of joy that I have. That I'm proud, black, beautiful, and free. Got a voice of my own.

White bluntly points out that the issue is not purely economical. To her, one is ultimately fighting for self-preservation and dignity. She identifies the gendered divide in catfish processing plants by identifying the perceived vulnerability and helplessness of

¹⁶ “Pickets in the Land of Catfish.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

female laborers and using implicit sexual imagery to urge women to prove supervisors wrong by asserting their independence. By striking, women “brought something that had been missing far too long from the lives of working women: dignity.”¹⁹

Workers at Welfed won their contract and enjoyed several years of moderate improvements before the company closed in the late ‘80s. Despite the claims of executives at Delta Pride, the strike itself did not close Welfed. Simply put, the catfish industry is capricious. As revealed by several decade’s worth of USDA reports, catfish processing plants, especially those established in the 1970s, enjoyed a rapid but ephemeral success. Nearly all of the plants founded during the early years shut down or merged with other corporations. In the prophetic words of Rose Turner: “Unions don’t close places. Bad management does.”²⁰

¹⁹ Zook, “Dreaming in the Delta,” 279.

²⁰ Turner, interview.

CHAPTER 5 THE 1990 STRIKE AT DELTA PRIDE

Making Connections: From Plantation to Processing Plant?

The 1990 strike at Delta Pride strengthens the connection between the organizing tradition of the civil rights movement and women's leadership roles in union activism. At the time of the strike, Delta Pride was the largest catfish processing plant in Mississippi. When Delta arrived in Indianola in 1981, workers felt that the new factory would provide an opportunity to escape the substandard conditions at other plants.¹ Sarah White left her position at Con Agra and applied for a day job at Delta, but she soon found the working conditions there no different. Without a union presence, the only holiday honored was Christmas, sick days were not permitted, and no form of health care was provided. When employees suffered injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome or burns from boiling-hot fish water, the company either dismissed the complaints or simply treated injuries with aspirin.²

Humiliation as a method of control kept workers tethered to the processing line like children. In addition to normal breaks, workers were allowed a maximum of five minutes a week to use the bathroom. Some workers wore diapers to avoid breaking the line, and others lost control and wet their pants.³ Those who did leave the processing line were followed into the bathroom by supervisors who monitored them with stopwatches. Before the 1990 strike, the bathroom stalls at Delta Pride did not have doors. Women risked revealing themselves to invasive male intruders on a daily basis, and reported

¹ Zook, "Dreaming in the Delta," 279.

² Ibid., 280.

³ Ibid.

numerous instances of sexual harassment. Sarah White described that “they [the supervisors] would come up behind you.... They’d feel on you, and ask you where you live. And say that if they could come by and see you, they’d put you on an easier job.”⁴ When these stories reached the mainstream, the public was enraged at the connection between Jim Crow and a modern American industry. The similarities are certainly disturbing. Jim Crow laws were designed to “regulate nearly every aspect of black life,” and they “seized every opportunity to belittle and humiliate African Americans.”⁵ Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 established institutional desegregation, Jim Crow dictated where blacks could sit in public, the types of jobs they could perform, where they were allowed to live, and what public spaces they could visit. The ways in which these customs have adapted to modern labor relations at catfish processing plants are most clear when considering the bathroom policy. By pointlessly insisting that adult workers ask for permission to use the restroom, plant supervisors effectively created a racial caste system identical to the structures of subordination and humiliation of Jim Crow.

Descriptions of the factory conditions are graphic. According to Mary Young, a skinner at Delta, “I’m right next to the line where they take the heads off, take the guts out, and then I skin them. Guts and blood are flying everywhere.”⁶ Workers wear rubber boots because the floor is usually submerged beneath blood and fish water, and the stench is unbearable. The names given to different processing jobs sound as if they were inspired by b-horror films; “rippers” slice the fish open from belly to anus to expose

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William Chafe et al., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 268.

⁶ Zook, “Dreaming in the Delta,” 281.

the guts, which are then eviscerated by a machine. Next along the line, “skinners” run both sides of the fish over rotating blades in quick and efficient motions. Worker’s uniforms are spattered in blood, and their faces obscured by protective masks. The scene is almost apocalyptic; jump-suited figures drenched in blood, working silently to meet the daily quota.

Considering the history of the Mississippi Delta, it is not surprising that catfish workers draw connections between plantation and processing plant. Charlie Braxton, a poet and journalist based out of Mississippi, explained that “the people who run the catfish farms are related to the same people who ran the plantations,” and that “they’re on the same family land.” Plantation families in the Delta did not disappear after slavery, but worked to maintain their economic foothold by expanding already-vast agricultural monopolies.⁷ The resistance to unionism reinforces the argument that the plantation mentality has persisted through the twentieth century in labor relations at catfish processing plants.

In September 1990, approximately 1,200 workers engaged in a monumental strike at Delta Pride. The 1990 walkout is considered a watershed moment that united local civil and labor rights movements, and it has since been referred to as “one of the most significant labor and civil rights victories of the decade.”⁸ This chapter will detail the major events leading up to the strike and the methods that union stewards and representatives of the UFCW used to organize the walkout. In order to maintain the emphasis on black political organizing in the Delta, I have included brief narratives of

⁷ Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*.

⁸ Zook, “Dreaming in the Delta,” 278.

several UFCW employees whose activist backgrounds compel them to continue the struggle for economic equality. As each narrative demonstrates, familial legacies of civil rights activism influenced women's roles in organizing workers behind a union contract. Those who do not have family members who were involved in the civil rights movement experienced other formative encounters with racism and use the language of the movement to describe worker's struggles. By intertwining these narratives with an examination of the relationships between UFCW employees and workers, unionized or not, I aim to shed light on the daily task of upholding a union presence at Delta Pride in the wake of the strike. Here I argue that while the walkout was highly visible and set precedents for the future of unionism in Mississippi, it is only one aspect of the more mundane day-to-day struggle of maintaining worker morale and reinforcing the presence of the union amongst company executives.

The Origins of the Strike

The roots of the 1990 strike exist in the failure of a union contract established at Delta Pride in the late '80s. Described as a phase in which the UFCW performed a "blitz" through catfish processing plants in Mississippi, this period marks the first real push toward unionizing multiple plants.⁹ The blitz was only moderately successful. In August 1986, workers at Con Agra voted against joining the UFCW, and in 1987, the union lost at Simmons Farm Raised Catfish in Yazoo city.¹⁰ Con Agra executives were allegedly "very happy and excited" with the outcome.¹¹ The young industry, they argued, was still too unstable to support the increased wages and benefits that a labor union

⁹ Turner, interview.

¹⁰ Reed Branson, "Union Fishes for Members at Plants," *The Clarion Ledger*, July 6, 88.

¹¹ Rebecca Hood-Adams, "Delta Catfish Workers Reject Unionization," *The Clarion Ledger*, August 8, 86.

would bring. The executive board at Pride of the Pond in Tuna threatened to cease operations if employees voted in favor of the union, but many workers felt that conditions were so bad that they had no other choice. When the workers voted the union through, stockholders closed the plant immediately to “mull over” whether or not production levels could remain viable with a union presence.¹² The plant reopened after workers voted for union representation at Delta Pride, a suspicious maneuvering that led UFCW reps to believe that Pride of the Pond closed to sway the Delta vote.

Some executives seemed more resigned to the inevitability of the union’s presence; Harry Simmons, president of Simmons Farm Raised Catfish, said “It’s possible. I’d like to say no, but certainly any time you’re working a large group of people there’s a possibility of unionization.”¹³ By the 1990 strike, the UFCW had successfully organized the Hormel and Con Agra plants. However, the executive board at Delta Pride remained deeply intransigent to unionization, more so than anywhere else.

In the winter of 1986, Sarah White and Mary Young began canvassing for representation by the UFCW after they realized that conditions at Delta Pride were not going to change without explicit concessions granted by a contract. The two organized support at the local level by going door-to-door in White’s unheated jalopy and canvassing outside of shopping centers. Many workers were terrified of the union, a reality that White and Young had to work around. White reveals that “we’d known...

¹² Mike Alexander, “Fishy Business,” *Southern Exposure*, Fall 1986, accessed on March 10, 2012, http://www.soc.umn.edu/~samaha/cases/fishy_business.html.

¹³ “Union Fishes for Members at Plants.”

since the days of Dr. King, that people had been shot and hung for doing this kind of work. As far as being afraid for our lives, that was a sense we all had too.”¹⁴

White and Young were persistent in their efforts. It took them two months to gather the amount of signatures required for representation by the UFCW. In addition to strong support at the local level, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also endorsed the 1986 contract.¹⁵ However, the Delta remained mostly isolated, and the plight of catfish workers still shrouded in obscurity. Thus, even with the attention the NAACP, workers were not safe from the coercive methods of resistance adopted by plant managers. Suspicious of the recent push to unionize, Delta supervisors threatened termination should employees choose to sign a card or help to recruit members. Those who supported the 1986 initiative took an immense step of faith in an environment wherein the presence of the UFCW was faint, and supervisors and managers blunt in their positions. There was no guarantee that the union would win the election, and even if it did, a weak contract ran the risk of failing to protect the workers who stood in solidarity behind it.

In the weeks before the union vote, Delta scrambled to charm the unhappy workers. Executives hired Charles Evers, the brother of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, to take a tour of the processing floor and convince workers that their struggle was imagined and that Delta managers were supportive and fair.¹⁶ The calculated use of the Evers name here reveals something about Delta Pride; executives were not only cognizant of the racial division, but sought to exploit it by using the iconography of the

¹⁴ Zook, “Dreaming in the Delta,” 281.

¹⁵ Schweid, *Catfish and the Delta*, 126.

¹⁶ Zook, “Dreaming in the Delta,” 283.

civil rights movement. Surely, what could have hit closer to home for these workers, the most of whom were separated from the movement by only one generation? Medgar Evers's legacy as a civil rights activist and his martyr's death is looked upon as a great point of pride and strength, and the willingness to mar something so sacred in order to thwart a union vote exposes the strike's racial undertones that Delta executives tirelessly deny.¹⁷

Even when faced with Medgar Evers's living relative, catfish workers saw through Delta's ploy, a testament to their sophistication and prowess as organizers. On the night before the election, Delta threw a party and urged workers to "keep the party going, vote no!"¹⁸ One can imagine how tense this event must have been; obsequious plant managers promising better days, offering pizza and refreshments to women who, months before, might have been sexually harassed or followed into the restroom. Empowered by taste of freedom that Sarah White so vividly described, the workers smiled tightly and without comment. The next morning, unmoved Delta Pride employees voted 489 to 346 to join Local 1529.¹⁹

The 1986 contract represented a small and tentative improvement in factory conditions, but it was far from a breakthrough. Instead of ameliorating some of the greatest problems, it fostered even greater hostility at the plant and drove the wedge between workers and management deeper. Plant supervisors did not bother to conceal their anger, and allegedly claimed that "we was good to you before... we gave you

¹⁷ Michael Williams, *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Mike Alexander, "Fishy Business."

¹⁹ Zook, "Dreaming in the Delta," 281.

catfish for the holidays, but that's all over now."²⁰ Mary Young described an increasingly tense environment in which foreman rapped workers in the back and told them that they could go "back to the cotton field."²¹ This, if nothing else, should dismantle the argument that Delta Pride acted solely for economic reasons. That white supervisors were physically assaulting workers near the turn of the twentieth century is remarkable. The use of physical intimidation to humiliate and debase African Americans was standard in the Jim Crow South; indeed, as Neil McMillen explains; "White Mississippians of every class seemed to regard coercive acts against erring black individuals as object lessons of universal benefit to the subordinate race."²²

Even more visible than this is the streak of paternalism exhibited by plant supervisors as they revealed their resentment to the worker-organized contract. Indeed; "advocates of paternalism likened the plantation to an extended family, in which masters governed their slaves with firmness and benevolence."²³ Particularly distinct to the lower South, the idea of paternalism grew popular because it allowed one to assume a humanitarian position as a slave owner.²⁴ At Delta Pride, executives often argue that the catfish industry is a strong generator of jobs, and that poor blacks should be grateful for this. Delta Pride is therefore excused from the responsibility of paying higher wages or improving factory conditions because it is, after all, providing workers with a reliable

²⁰ Ibid., 283.

²¹ Alexander, "Fishy Business."

²² Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 29.

²³ Lacy Ford, *Deliver us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

income. The mentality that plant supervisors and executives were once “good” to their workers, and that they could deny them this fair treatment should the workers choose to act out, reveals quite clearly the way that paternalistic urges have endured in the minds of white Southerners. This is simply paternalism as adapted to modern industry, wherein the punishment for resisting the benevolence of one’s employer lies in a return to the cotton field of old.

In the aftermath of the 1986 drive to unionize, Mary Young became a union representative and traveled to the six different unionized processing plants in the Delta to listen to grievances and monitor contracts. The UFCW purchased offices in Indianola so it could operate locally.²⁵ Even in the midst of these changes, Delta Pride remained inflexible. Young was able to raise concerns at Farm Fresh and Country Skillet with relative ease, but executives at Delta Pride refused to speak with her on informal terms and usually forced her to file grievances. Delta was also reluctant to treat carpal tunnel syndrome, even while Con-Agra had established a special health committee to deal with the problem. In 1989 the United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined Delta Pride \$32,800 for failing to treat several severe cases. Delta appealed the fine, and after several years of hearings, it was reduced to \$12,500.²⁶

With the 1986 contract nearing expiration in August 1990, Delta issued an offer to raise wages by six-percent annually and increase pension payments by one percent. The UFCW rejected the offer and set a date of September 10, 1990 to renew and improve the old agreement. As negotiations dragged toward midnight on September 9,

²⁵ Schweid, *Catfish in the Delta*, 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

it became clear that neither side was willing to compromise; Delta executives argued that the company could not afford to make drastic changes, and the UFCW continued to push for better wages, increased benefits, and healthier working conditions. Infuriated with the impasse, Leon Sheppard, the president of Local 1529, advised his colleagues to begin preparing for the strike. Turner recalls his angry outburst as such; “you know what, we’ve been trying to work with you all,” he said, “y’all haven’t done anything but try to beat these people down and beat us down... now we got a chance to change some of the stuff. I got my gloves on just like y’all got y’alls on. You know what? We might not whip y’all ass but when we get through with y’all you know your ass has been in a fight.”²⁷

Delta certainly came prepared to fight. Sheppard, Turner, the other union members in attendance, and workers on the night shift began picketing around midnight. In response, Delta called Mississippi Power and Light to turn off the flood lights in the parking lot. One by one the lights flickered out until the picketers were left in a jet-black night. That morning, 1,200 workers joined them in the parking lot, and “the strike was on.”²⁸ Supported by the UFCW, workers marched for ninety days until Delta was forced to agree on a new contract. The sheer volume of the strike drew the attention of the nation, and with the assistance of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), workers staged a boycott of Delta Pride catfish.²⁹ For the first time, popular news outlets began to question the racial division of labor at catfish processing plants throughout the South. The 1990 strike also exhorted other processing plants to

²⁷ Turner, interview.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Schweid, *Catfish and the Delta*, 127.

comply with the UFCW; these corporations did not want to attract negative press or the threat of a boycott. The union blitz that had yielded mixed results in the late '80s finally took hold as enraged workers made an example out of Delta Pride and intimidated other plants to unionize.

Similar to the situation at Welfed, workers marched only when they were most desperate for change; “We didn’t want to strike there, but we had no other choice because they would not listen. It let the people in that community really know... that those people were treating them like dogs. We had people that were so scared that they want their job... they were literally wearing Pampers and stuff because they didn’t want to go to the bathroom,” explained Turner.³⁰ The walkout brought the community closer together and created strong familial bonds amongst those who participated. By organizing the strike on a day-to-day basis and recruiting members to join, workers learned valuable lessons in community organizing. Those who remember the strike often recall it fondly; it was not fear but the promise of better days that kept them marching.³¹

Delta workers who walked the picket line received a weekly stipend of sixty dollars, groceries, hot meals throughout the day, and Christmas gifts for their children. Despite these small benefits, marching all day was difficult, and some left to work at Hormel and Con Agra. Additionally, because jobs are so scarce in the Delta, hiring replacement workers to thwart the strike was relatively easy. Production at Delta was

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

slowed but not entirely immobilized, and executives published an outpouring of positive news releases to reassure their clients.³²

Delta used other strategies of control. Armored trucks and guards were hired to loom over the picket line, and wheelbarrows of money symbolic of the wages that workers would supposedly lose to the union were flaunted daily. In gestures less threatening, Delta also planned cookouts and parties and passed out free groceries. Rose Turner told workers to enjoy themselves at these events, but added “know that when all of that is over, where do you stand? When all that is over with, you still don’t have a contract -- so where do you stand?”³³

Joseph Lowery, then-president of the SCLC, traveled to the Delta in 1990 to address the workers. He told them “90 percent of the work [is] done by blacks; 90 percent of the money [is] gotten by whites.”³⁴ Lowery prophesied a new era in the civil rights movement in which the epicenter of struggle would shift to the economic arena, and catfish processing specifically.³⁵ The walkout also caught the attention of Jesse Jackson, who sent the strikers a public letter of support that read “your cause is generating more than sympathy; it is generating anger against those who have turned a plant into a plantation. That anger will be heard resoundingly at checkout counters across America ringing up ‘no sale’ on Delta Pride products.”³⁶ By framing the strike as

³² Ibid., 127.

³³ Turner, interview.

³⁴ Joseph Atkins, “Still Fishy Business: Workers in Mississippi’s Huge Catfish Industry Poised to go on Strike,” *Facing South*, May 11, 2010, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.southernstudies.org/2010/05/still-fishy-business-workers-in-mississippi-huge-catfish-industry-poised-to-go-on-strike.ht>.

³⁵ Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 202.

³⁶ Schweid, *Catfish and the Delta*, 127.

a civil rights struggle, the UFCW turned the tide in its favor. Numerous reports on the bathroom policy and sexual harassment were editorialized in widely circulated outlets like *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. The importance of the press is undeniable; when SNCC failed in its efforts to register voters in Mississippi, it was in part due to the relative obscurity of the region. Even today the Delta remains isolated. Couched in the language of the civil rights movement, stories on deplorable factory conditions created a damning portrait of inequality that enraged the nation and secured the union victory.

With support from the NAACP, the SCLC, and powerful civil rights leaders, and the country watching, the strike finally broke in late November when the *Today Show* aired a special piece about Delta Pride and the workers.³⁷ Turner Arant, a chair of the board of directors at Delta Pride, was shown gallivanting around his catfish ponds and palatial home. During an already-sensitive time in which powerful groups were bristling at the situation in the Delta, Arant spoke with grand unrestraint about how “good” catfish had been to him. Juxtaposed with this footage were images of an equally proud Delta Pride worker. Instead of sweeping farmland, a stately mansion, and a self-aggrandizing speech, she displayed a modest home in a black community and described how difficult it was to support a family of eight on the meager wages provided by Delta Pride.³⁸

Executives at Delta were furious. Arant was forced to publicly resign at a meeting after the broadcast, and a man named Harold Potter was hired to replace him. Union officials breathed a sigh of relief as Potter seemed considerably more reasonable; negotiations resumed immediately and without resistance. A new contract was

³⁷ Ibid., 128.

³⁸ Ibid.

extended in December, and Delta quickly appointed a special safety committee to improve working conditions.³⁹

Maintaining the Union Presence

While the 1990 strike played a critical role in helping to secure benefits for employees at processing plants throughout the Delta, it should be considered within the broader struggle for worker's rights rather than positioned as a beginning or an endpoint. A successful walkout is only one tool in the union's arsenal. In the wake of a strike, UFCW employees must critically examine the particular shape that their leadership should assume. A successful walkout would be useless without the union stewards and representatives who work to uphold the contract at a unionized plant. This section will investigate the multifaceted and complex relationships between workers, unionized and not, and UFCW employees. As I intend to demonstrate, positions of leadership within the UFCW are usually assumed by those with family backgrounds in organizing. These leaders face a range of daily obstacles, such as worker apathy toward the union, difficulties in collecting signed union cards, and the refusal by some to pay union dues. Additionally, because women have played a critical role in organizing workers at the grassroots level, this section will place a special emphasis on their lives as activists. This serves to amend the gaps in labor rights historiography that tend to omit the experiences of female laborers in the South.

As a representative for the UFCW, Rose Turner traveled between the main offices in Memphis, Tennessee, and south to Indianola and Greenwood during the 1990 strike. She currently drives this route several times a week to assure that worker morale

³⁹ Ibid.

remains high. Turner's life story reveals a lasting commitment to fairness and equality, traits instilled within her by nurturing parents and like-minded siblings. Certain experiences during her childhood and early adult life shaped her current role as a union leader, and as she explains, provided her with the dedication needed to organize for worker's rights.

Turner was born in Arkansas in 1959, and is the youngest of three sisters. She uses a story from her father's childhood to highlight his unyielding devotion to raise open-minded children within a hostile South. While hunting with friends, he accidentally shot himself in the thumb. While it was a minor injury, Mr. Turner was forced to travel over 170 miles south to Jackson to receive care because there were no doctors in the area that treated black patients. By the time he arrived, he had lost so much blood that surgeons were forced amputate his arm from the bicep down. Turner describes how he used his empty shirt sleeve to whip playfully at her, and laughed when she recalls her aversion to his amputated arm. Underneath this lightheartedness is a harsh reality that Turner is careful to highlight as an integral aspect of her childhood development; her father lost his arm due to deeply entrenched racial inequalities in the South, but even so, he taught his children to accept and love unequivocally.

Turner began her career in labor rights organizing while working at a nursing home in Tennessee. She recalls that administrators at Beverly Enterprises arbitrarily fired employees they did not like by removing the worker's name from the schedule, a cruel way to relay the news. One woman was fired for allowing several line cooks to bring leftover supplies home after they pooled their money to buy extra food during a shortage at breakfast one morning. For Turner, this was a major turning point in her

career. Her sister, an R&N practitioner, already belonged to a union and urged her to join. With this advice, Rose began seeking support and within two months she and her coworkers successfully unionized Beverly Enterprises.

Administration was naturally averse to this new development. The medical records clerk attended union meetings to spy on the proceedings and reported her findings to the vice president. Of this, Turner laughed and said “we scared her so damn bad that she wouldn’t even come to a meeting. When she saw that the union had won the election, she quit that job.”⁴⁰ Turner became the medical records clerk after the woman left. Oftentimes she returned to lunch to find her personal belongings waiting in a plastic bag outside her office; an unspoken warning that Beverly Enterprises wanted her out.

Turner was not happy with just one victory, and so continued to organize other nursing homes. The management grew wary of her dedication and wondered “how can she work all day and then at night, she’s out from nursing home to nursing home talking to people!” When Turner finally announced that she was leaving to work full time for the UFCW, Beverly Enterprises threw her a convivial going-away party. In a speech, Turner joked “You know what? I appreciate you all giving me the opportunity to work here almost nine years... I’m seeking better and higher adventures. But I’ll tell you what; I’ll see y’all next week because I’m going to work for the union.”⁴¹

Turner started working with the catfish industry during the push to unionize processing plants in the ‘80s. She grew close with Sarah White and Mary Young during the 1990 strike, and has since recruited numerous stewards and representatives to

⁴⁰ Turner, interview.

⁴¹ Ibid.

work for the UFCW. To Turner, the most important aspect of her job is educating apathetic or misinformed employees. She describes a common attitude in processing plants wherein workers expect the union to solve their problems. “What a lot of people don’t understand,” explains Turner, “the union is the people... it doesn’t matter what kind of representative I am if I don’t have members who are educated. It’s just like playing a chess game; if you don’t understand the rules of the game, you are going to get beat every time... the union isn’t an outside monster looking in, the union is the people, and the union is only as strong as the people.”⁴² Turner constantly reminds workers that because they represent the union, and that because they essentially *are* the union, they possess the power to determine its future.

Shop stewards also serve an extension of the union in the workplace and are considered the “the first line of defense” against breaches in contract.⁴³ If a worker feels that their rights have been violated, it is up to the plant shop steward to decide whether or not the complaint is legitimate. Shop stewards also act as the liaisons between management and the union, and must therefore be familiar with the contract and willing to listen to worker complaints and negotiate agreements with plant supervisors.

If a worker’s complaint is found legitimate, then the steward files a grievance and brings the issue to a plant supervisor.⁴⁴ In the event that the supervisor does not respond to the problem, the steward contacts upper-management, and finally, calls in a union representative. Luetha Sibley was a shop steward at Delta Pride during the late ‘80s and ‘90s. When her daughter began working at Con Agra in 1988, she urged her to

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Steel, interview.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

sign a union card. Raised by a staunch union activist, Mary Sibley joined the union and began paying dues without hesitation. She considers her mother a strong leader, and an influential figure in her life. “She was one of the ones that was outstanding in making a change” remembers Mary of her mother’s participation in the 1990 strike.⁴⁵ During the strike, the two assisted the picketers by bringing food and water to the picket line. Taking after her mother’s example, Mary currently works as the chief shop steward for Local 1529 in Indianola. She is frank about the nature of catfish work, and stated that processing plants “brought us from the cotton fields, from outside to inside. We had a lot of cotton fields back in the day, but now it’s catfish, it’s ponds.”⁴⁶

Catherine Bacon, another Rose Turner recruit, is a shop steward for the UFCW at Country Select. When she assumed this position, she had been working at Country Select for nineteen years. Despite her seniority, she suffered several pay cuts when the company changed her department. Bacon describes a strong urge to help people, and enjoys troubleshooting worker complaints; “when I see someone in pain, I try to help them if I can. I like to listen to them,” she says.⁴⁷ Bacon spends long hours comforting workers who suffer pay cuts and reduced hours.

Bacon comes from an activist background and grew up listening to her father and siblings discuss their involvement in the civil rights movement. When her father registered to vote, the plantation the family lived on evicted him. Bacon’s mother had to send her fifteen children to live with different families throughout the Delta because they

⁴⁵ Mary Sibley, interview with Kenisha Cauley, September 23, 2011, digital recording, interview MFP090, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Bacon, interview.

did not have enough money to buy a new home. In the late sixties, Bacon's father and two of her siblings were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi for participating in a March. Bacon's father was beat during his imprisonment, but her sisters escaped relatively unscathed. Another important event that Bacon remembers was an instance in which her father was forced to leave town after hitting a white man in an argument outside of a gas station.

Bacon was born in 1967, so her family passed these stories down to her. During her childhood, Bacon's father so often lectured on his involvement in the movement that she grew tired of listening to him. As an adult she recalls the guidance provided by her family as crucial to her work for the UFCW. Bacon feels that current race relations in Mississippi are quietly tense rather than openly hostile, and therefore places a special emphasis on befriending Delta whites.

While it is true that the 1990 strike began to dismantle barriers, Mississippi remains one of the least-unionized states. To bring UFCW representation to a business, an organizer must visit the workplace to discuss the union and determine whether or not the employees wish to sign union cards. If the workers exhibit an interest in the union, then representatives and shop stewards help to gather signatures. These signatures are gathered by either visiting workplaces, or traveling through Delta towns and finding workers on their days off. This type of organizing, in which union employees must approach the workers who have not yet been unionized, is another important aspect of organizing labor in the Delta. Of gathering signatures, union employee Yolanda Veal explained that;

I go out into the field, you talk to people about organizing and [the] union in their workplace... you try to gather some names of people that work inside

that industry, you go into their homes--you *find* their homes, you *find* them. I mean, you're running up and down the highway actually looking for these people. Once you find them, you have a story you have to tell them about the union, because here a lot of people are not educated on the union. So, we have to sit there... sometimes, we really don't want to sit there, but we have to sit there and we have to go over it from the beginning to the top, and we have to listen to their problems and their demands, and we try to get them to sign a card. Yes, if they do, no if they don't... You have people that would turn around, they would slam the doors in our face... sometimes say nasty things to us and cuss us out real bad, let the dogs chase us... when you knock on that door, you never know what you're going to get. You never know.⁴⁸

Veal spoke with determination as she described her daily efforts to unionize workers. When asked about the reception of her door-to-door efforts, Veal laughed and said “you have people that would turn around, they would slam the doors in our face... sometimes say nasty things to us and cuss us out real bad, let the dogs chase us... when you knock on that door, you never know what you're going to get. You never know.” Before Veal even arrives at a house to discuss the union, she must locate the workers at home and catch them after business hours or during the weekend. Veal does not believe in making phone calls because people either immediately hang up or do not arrive to the agreed-upon meeting time. This necessitates hours of driving in a day, of getting lost in the country, or turned around in a Delta town.

Once Veal is able to locate a worker she describes the benefits of the union. Many union employees memorize a speech, which makes it easier to convey the most important points even while someone is attempting to back away. Veal explains that many people are unable to read the union cards, which is unsurprising given Mississippi's low literacy rates. Further, some might have heard a negative story about

⁴⁸ Yolanda Veal, interview with Candice Ellis, September 24, 2010, digital recording, interview MFP061, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

the union. Misconceptions about the union pass through gossip networks in black communities quickly, which occasionally hinders progress.

Veal's coworker, Dechaner Willis, was recruited as a steward in 2009 by Rose Turner. At the time, she worked at Consolidated Catfish as a trimmer. She described the plant as "a good place to work for your family, but it's not a place where you want to be."² When asked if her job was difficult, she responded "well... really it is, your hands and things ache, your bones and your shoulders." Willis spoke positively of her decision to join 1529; "the union influenced me a lot. It made me a better person. A stronger person."³ Similar to Veal's accounts of going door-to-door in impoverished and rural Delta neighborhoods, Willis explained "we go out on home-call... When we started out it was good, but now it's getting harder and harder... Sometimes we get door slammed in our face, and crazy talk and all that."⁴⁹

These women represent a new generation of organizers who utilize structures similar to SNCC-style activism as they move throughout the community. While their success in this is certainly commendable, it is important to stress that the catfish industry remains deeply divided along racial lines. In 2010, workers at Delta Pride readied to strike again when the management posed unacceptable revisions to the 1990 contract. "They want to keep the Delta area 150 years in the past. Everything we fought for, they just want to sweep away," lamented Leon Sheppard.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Dechaner Willis, interview with Mike Brandon and Josh Moore, digital recording, September 24, 2010, interview MFP062, The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

⁵⁰ Atkins, "Still Fishy Business."

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

UFCW employees and workers at Delta Pride are locked in a war of attrition. A triumphant victory like the 1990 strike was not strong enough to set a clear precedent, and executives at Delta have clearly bunkered down for protracted fight. The only line of defense between an unfair contract and the small victories already won are the organizers who fight, every day, to uphold the presence of the UFCW. The work is tiring. Sarah White expressed her own discouragement in 2003; “it be close fights... but somewhere at the end, the man give ‘em ten cents more. And it frustrates the hell out of me. They just don’t wanna get up off them minimum wages.”¹ Rose Turner echoed similar concerns. Strikes are glamorous events in which workers can loudly assert their rights, but the mundane day-to-day routine of upholding the union contract is far less exciting. The women who do fight for this, who are captured not by the excitement of a strike but rather by a deep desire to help others, come from activist backgrounds and experienced important events early in life that later influenced their work as union organizers.

In 2010, workers at Delta Pride poised to strike again. According to labor attorney Roger Doolittle, the new contract posed by Delta Pride would “roll the block back to the time of the 1990 strike... If we agreed to this contract, it would be an all-time low for workers in the history of the catfish industry.”² In 2010, employees earned about \$8 to \$9 an hour, and most had not received a raise since 2006. The new contract sought to establish a seven-day work week, eliminate overtime, double the probationary period for

¹ Zook, “Dreaming in the Delta,” 287.

² Atkins, “Still Fishy Business.”

new hires to six months, eliminate certain seniority benefits, increase worker contributions to the company health insurance plan, and deny severance pay should the plant close. According to Delta executives, the contract was needed to compete with non-unionized processing plants.³ While tensions eventually subsided and the workers did not strike, this recent development reveals that anti-unionism in the catfish industry is still strong despite the concessions already won.

Questions for Further Research

The clear connections between Jim-Crow style labor relations and the methods of subjugation used to dominate catfish workers should indicate that we must begin to change the way that we understand labor relations in the South during the late twentieth century. As I have demonstrated, plant supervisors reacted with increased hostility when worker's supported the union and clearly wanted to keep their workers docile. When workers did not comply with the status quo, supervisors used oppressive and racist language and exhibited modern adaptations to plantation-style paternalism.

The obvious gap here are the voices of these supervisors; to have their oral histories would allow us to examine more critically the patterns of internalized racism as they manifest in choice of language and action. Uncovering family lineages would be useful as well. I left several messages at the offices of one plant manager, and never received a call back. Executives and supervisors at Delta Pride consistently refuse to talk to the press, and the statements they do make are generalized and predictable. Another unanswered question lies in the collapse of plantation families and whether or not this old money is associated with catfish processing plants. An educated guess

³ Ibid.

would suggest that yes, the wealthy Southern stockholders who invest in catfish processing, just like the women who they employ, have family histories in the Delta. The ability to spend several years researching these connections would undoubtedly yield fruit, and would add another dimension to this study by reinforcing important historical connections.

Whether or not the catfish industry is moving forward would be a difficult conclusion to make. As evinced by the 2010 contract, the answer would probably tend to “no.” In 1990, over 1000 workers marched for ninety days to protest the plantation mentality at Delta Pride and demand higher wages and better working conditions. Delta executives were humiliated by the actions of Turner Arant, powerful civil rights organizations threw their weight behind the marginalized workers, and the nation finally watched. It took twenty years for Delta Pride to forget this. This is not to devalue the UFCW employees who have dedicated their lives to upholding the union, but to show how short-lived a victory for worker’s rights in the South can be. Regardless of their job titles or seniority, employees of the UFCW are still rising at dawn to collect union cards. Let this story be theirs.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Candice Ellis matriculated at the University of Florida in 2007. After three years of study, she graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts in history. She remained at UF to earn her Master of Arts in history. During her time in Gainesville, she worked as a graduate coordinator at the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP). In the summer of 2009, Dr. Paul Ortiz, the director of the program, invited her on a trip to the Mississippi Delta to gather interviews with local civil and labor rights leaders there. These trips determined the trajectory of her academic career.

Candice will be attending The George Washington University in the fall of 2012 to begin her study towards a Doctor of Arts in history.