

Bringing Culture to Life through Children’s Literature: The Mississippi Delta in the 1930’s

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Abstract

After hearing reminiscences from her parents about childhood adventures that took place in the 1930’s Mississippi Delta, the author, Peggy F. Hopper, decided to document these stories in two children’s books, *Peggy Sue and the Pepper Patch* and *The Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt Hollumway Jones and John Hart: Chasing Bandits*. Her mission more directly was to give voice to the positive stories of multiracial relationships during a time of racial tensions in the Delta. With a background in reading and English education, the author faced challenges for deciding which aspects of culture representative of the time should be included. Since both books are categorized in the genre of children’s nonfiction, care was taken to make each book as historically accurate as possible given that the books are memories from that era.

Introduction

As an avid reader of children’s literature and a secondary educator, I have paid special attention through my career to the research that validates using books written for children for educational use in secondary content area classrooms. Educational use includes using children’s literature to create interest, bridging the language gap for ESL students, and using pictures from children’s books to illustrate history or culture (Clary 1991; Neal 1992; Hadaway and Mundy 1999). With a background in reading and English education, I know how to analyze each word choice and literary convention, but none of that helped when I chose to document stories told by my parents who grew up in the 1930’s in the Mississippi Delta. They are both great story tellers, and through the years, I have heard many stories of their childhood adventures. It wasn’t until 2010 that after hearing familiar stories one more time, I decided to put them down in writing, both to document these oral histories for generations to come, but also to promote positive stories of the Delta.

Named “the most southern place on earth” by historian James Cobb (1994), the Mississippi Delta is thought of as being not just a geographic region but a state of mind. Although the actual Delta region is created by the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers, the Delta has far reaching culture that colors all parts of the Deep South. Since the Delta of the 1930’s is known for its racial tensions, the story I felt needed to be told was one of a positive nature—the innocence of children of different colors growing up together in a rural farming area. As a result of this personal mission, I wrote and published two books, *Peggy Sue and the Pepper Patch* and *The Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt Hollumway Jones and John Hart: Chasing Bandits*. They are classified in the genre of children’s nonfiction because both books are true, or as true as memories of 80 year olds can represent.

The first decision I made was not to write in dialect to make each book accessible to today's children who might find southern dialect, especially from the 1930's, difficult to read and comprehend. By finding artists who live in Mississippi, I was able to keep the illustrations of each book authentic to the Mississippi Delta of the 1930's. The trees, flowers, and vegetables included in each book, for example, are found in the Delta, and the landscapes are realistic views of Delta landscapes from that time. By using actual family photographs, the illustrators were also able to incorporate actual houses, cars, and people from my parent's childhoods which further worked to make each book historically accurate.

Peggy Sue and the Pepper Patch is a story about my mother as a child helping her black neighbor, Mr. Henry, pick vegetables from the garden. She unfortunately begins to pick hot peppers, and after getting the peppers all over her, Mr. Henry takes her home to her mother where she is treated to a bath of vinegar and ice to soothe her skin. Her dog, Frisky, is also put through the same treatment! *Peggy Sue and the Pepper Patch* illustrates the importance of gardening in the south. Gardens were a necessary part of feeding a family, and children were often required to help. Patches of land used for growing gardens were often shared within a neighborhood or community, and historical records show that it was not unusual for black and white families to share the work and the bounty (Dallas 1987; Smith 2004). Peppers were a garden staple in the 1930's as they are now, and hot peppers were often grown to be used in the tamales that the Delta is known for even today (Streeter 2011). As any gardener will confirm, extra vegetables grown in the summer are canned or pickled for eating during the winter months, and vinegar would be prominently featured in the kitchen for this use and others. Vinegar was used for many purposes in the 1930's including a mild antiseptic for bug bites and minor wounds, a general cleaning product, and of course as the story *Peggy Sue and the Pepper Patch* demonstrates, a soak for neutralizing the sting of picking hot peppers. And finally, taking a dog into the garden was considered a safety move for the gardener in hopes that the dog would raise an alarm if a snake was present.

My father's story, *The Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt Hollumway Jones and John Hart: Chasing Bandits*, is the tale of my 7 year old father and his best friend, Theodore. The story begins as the two boys are on their way to fish for supper in a local pond. As the childhood friends were influenced by the John Wayne movies during this era, the book details their attempt to follow in his footsteps by catching the farm mule, Dora, and chasing imaginary bandits. Mules were the poor farmer's horse during this era and still are since the versatile and sturdy mule could be used to ride, plow, and to pull a heavy wagon. After Dora objects to the cap guns the boys are firing by throwing the boys off, they abandon their attempts to emulate John Wayne. The book ends with Theodore's mother feeding the boys and advising them to mind their manners and behave. Since my father is white and Theodore was black, the book documents that they were unable to sit together during the John Wayne movies they loved, but they walked together from home to the theater and back every Saturday to see and then discuss the new John Wayne movie. My grandmother purchased them both a cap gun for 15 cents each and a roll of caps for 5 cents. Guns played a prominent role in the Delta and were often used as tools to kill

game for food, for example, or protection against other wildlife such as poisonous snakes. As a result of this broad acceptance of gun use, cap guns were a favorite toy of this time. It was not unusual, according to my father, that the boys were accepted into each other's homes, so one of the final scenes of the book pictures the boys eating an authentic meal of fried sunfish, sorghum molasses, and Irish potatoes at Theodore's house. Even Theodore's name is a reflection of the culture of this generation as children, black and white, were often named after American presidents.

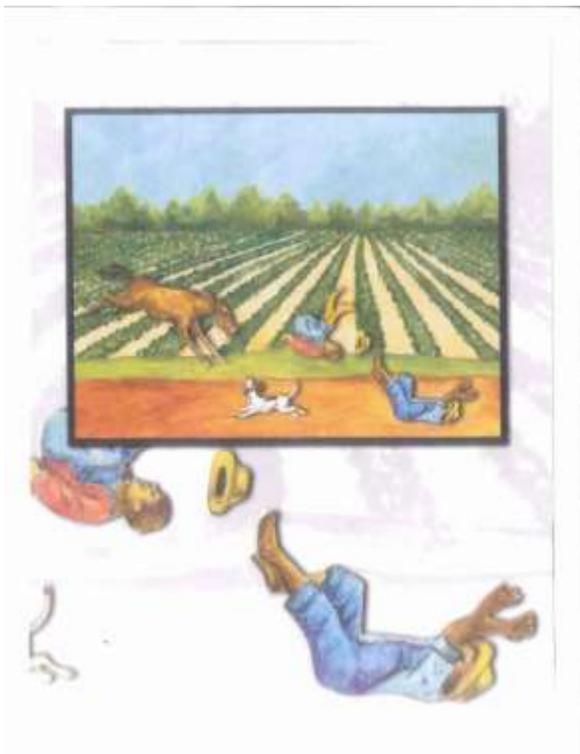
Conclusion

As illustrated, both books are multiracial in nature. My mother last saw her gardening buddy, Mr. Henry, during her college years when they saw each other unexpectedly on opposite sides of a busy street. They ran to give each other a hug and share family news. There were unfortunately no pictures of him available to include in the book. In my father's story, however, an actual picture of Theodore Roosevelt Hollumway Jones is included. The boy's friendship was caught forever in time running through a field of cotton together. Through these stories, it is my hope that positive racial relations that existed during the 1930's have been brought to life. An unexpected reward for publishing these books has been the many similar family stories from this era that people have shared with me after reading one or both of the books. There are apparently many positive stories of racial relations during this time, but to my knowledge, my books represent the only formal attempt to put these stories in writing. It is not my purpose to deny that there were racial problems, but rather to tell the rest of the story. As I stated previously, I felt it was time to relate a more encouraging view after hearing so many wonderful reminiscences from my parents and others. In attempting to find research to validate some of these memories, I was unable to verify each one specifically, so memories in each book will have to stay as just that, two people's memories of childhood in the Mississippi Delta of the 1930's depicted as accurately as possible.

Illustrations



Peggy Sue and the Pepper Patch



The Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt Hollumway Jones and John Hart: Chasing Bandits,

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