In which we made a day-trip into central North Carolina, where we visited student Hallie Seesons' family horse farm. She and her mother showed us around the farm where we made friends with Mr. Bingo, Hallie's favorite competition horse. After our tour, we stopped at a local dairy where our research compelled us to sample their (delicious) homemade ice cream, before traveling to Chapel Hill. We explored the downtown area, including parts of the University of North Carolina campus, such as the "Dean Dome" (or as Leland called it, the Ding Dong) and also visited many of the local shops, including a vintage clothing store, record store, and even a couple of bookstores.

After that, we made a quick trip to nearby Hillsborough where we met authors Hal Crowther and Lee Smith at their sushi restaurant, Akai Hana. The sushi was delicious (many fish were sacrificed that evening), and then we were treated to a lively discussion with the authors covering a wide range of topics, sprinkled with Lee's light-hearted observations about society and splashed with Hal's dry sarcasm. A long discussion with the authors after dinner was a fitting end to our trip, so we traveled back home to Spartanburg, completing our literary tour of the South.
Driving Miss Daisy Crazy
or Losing the Mind of the South
by Lee Smith

I want to start by introducing you to Miss Daisy. Chances are, you already know her. She may be your mother. She may be your aunt. Or you may have your own private Miss Daisy, as I do: a prim, well-educated maiden lady of a certain age who has taken up permanent residence in a neat little room in the frontal lobe of my brain. I wish she'd move, but as she points out to me constantly, she's just no trouble at all. She lives on angel food cake and she-crab soup, which she heats up on a little ring right there in her room.

Miss Daisy was an English teacher at a private girls school for forty-three years, back in the days when English was English before it became Language Arts. She was famous for her ability to diagram sentences, any sentence at all, even sentences so complex that their diagrams on the board looked like blueprints for a cathedral. Her favorite poet is Sidney Lanier. She likes to be elevated. She is still in a book club, but it is not Oprah's book club. In fact, Miss Daisy is not quite sure who Oprah is, believing that her name is Oprah Winfrey, and asking me repeatedly what all the fuss is about. Miss Daisy's book club can find scarcely a thing to elevate them these days, so they have taken to reading Gone with the Wind over and over again.

Miss Daisy's favorite word is ought—as in, "You ought to go to church this morning." She often punctuates her sentences with "you know: as in, "Lee Marshall, you know you don't believe that!" or, "Lee Marshall, you know you don't mean it!" She believes it is true about the two ladies who got kicked out of the Nashville Junior League: one for having an orgasm, and the other for having a job.

In fact, Miss Daisy reminds me of another lady I encountered many years ago, when I moved down to Alabama to become a reporter for the Tuscaloosa News. The former editor of the ladies page of the paper had just retired. "Thank God!" everybody said, since for many years she had ceased to write up events in the paper the way they actually happened, preferring instead to write them up the way she thought they should have happened.

Pat Conroy has said that the South runs on denial. I think this is true. We learn denial in the cradle and carry it to the grave. It is absolutely essential to being a lady, for instance. I myself was sent from the mountains of southwest Virginia, where I was growing up, down to Birmingham every summer to stay with my Aunt Gay Gay, whose task was to turn me into a lady. Gay Gay's two specialities were Rising to the Occasion and Rising Above It All, whatever "it" happened to be. Gay Gay believed that if you can't say something nice, say nothing at all. If you don't discuss something, it doesn't exist. She drank a lot of gin and tonics and sometimes she'd start in on them early, winking at my Uncle Bob and saying, "Pour me one, honey, it's already dark underneath the house." Until she died, I never knew that another of my aunts had had a previous marriage. It had been edited right out of the family, in the same way all pictures of that husband had been removed from the family albums.

Denial affects not only our personal lives, but also our political lives, our culture, and our literature. In her book Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Toni Morrison talks about a kind of denial she sees operating in American literature and criticism; she chides liberal critics for what she calls their "neglect of darkness." She says that "the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture... but excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly.... A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist." Morrison suggests that Black characters in classic American novels have been as marginalized as their real-life counterparts.

But back to Miss Daisy. I'm taking her out to lunch today. Miss Daisy claims she "just eats like a bird," not deigning to confess to anything as base as hunger or even appetite, but she does like to go out to lunch. And while she's making her final preparations—that is, clean underwear in case we are in a wreck, gloves, money safely tucked in her bra in case her purse is stolen—let me tell you about this restaurant we're going to.

You may be surprised to learn that I actually own this restaurant, and that it is actually a sushi bar. But, hey! It's the New South, remember? And actually, my sushi bar (named Akai Hana and located in Carrboro, North Carolina) presents a little case study in the New South.

The land Akai Hana stands on today, at 313 N. Main St, was farmland not so very long ago, when Carrboro was a dusty, sleepy little farm village on the old road from Chapel Hill to Greensboro. This was an open field, with a tenant house at the end of it. Then Carr Mill came in, and mill houses sprouted up in neat little rows, like beans, to house the families that worked at Carr Mill. As the university grew, Chapel Hill grew, too, spreading outward toward Carrboro, which gradually became a service adjunct of Chapel Hill. This was the place you came to buy your grass seed or to get your tires fixed at the Chapel Hill Tire Company, right across the street from us. Carrboro was mostly black then, and all poor. Miss Daisy never came here except to pick up her cook. Every business in Carrboro closed at noon on Wednesday, because everybody went to church on Wednesday night. And nothing was open on Sunday.

The first restaurant to occupy our brick building here, constructed in the early fifties, was a popular, locally owned cafe named the Elite Lunch, which featured Southern cooking and lots of it. It had two dining rooms, one for white and one for colored. In the early sixties it was superseded by Pizza Villa, whose name alone testifies to Chapel Hill Tire Company, right across the street from us. Carrboro was mostly black then, and all poor. Miss Daisy never came here except to pick up her cook. Every business in Carrboro closed at noon on Wednesday, because everybody went to church on Wednesday night. And nothing was open on Sunday.

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Hill’s—and Carrboro’s—increasing sophistication. By now, plenty of graduate students and even some professors lived in Carrboro. The mill had closed, and those mill houses were affordable.

By the mid-seventies, when an outrageously colorful chef took over and turned it into Avanti, Carrboro was coming of age. The mill became Carr Mill Mall, filled with trendy boutiques. A cooperative health-food grocery named Weaver Street opened up. Artists moved in. Carrboro started calling itself “The Paris of the Piedmont.”

Avanti’s chef hung paintings by his artist friends. He stuck candles in wine bottles on each of his artfully mismatched tables. He opened the patio for outdoor dining. He made soup with forty cloves of garlic. Then, even Avanti was superseded by the truly gourmet Martini’s. The owner’s wife’s mother came from Italy to run the kitchen, while her homemade pasta dried on broomsticks upstairs. My husband remembers that he was eating polenta in this very gazebo when a former girlfriend gave him the gate. Ah, what sweet revenge it is now to own that gazebo, which we have (of course) transformed into a pagoda.

But back to our narrative. The owner died in a wreck, Martini’s closed, and the restaurant underwent a total transformation before opening again, for breakfast and lunch only, as a bakery and cafe, very French, with a marble floor and lace curtains at the windows. Pre-Starbucks, it served muffins accompanied by the first good coffee in Carrboro.

We bought the place from the muffin ladies. Why? You might well ask. Have I always had a burning desire to go into the sushi business? No, actually, my own attitude toward raw fish is closer to Roy Blount’s poem about oysters: I prefer my oysters fried. Then I know my oyster’s died.

It was my husband’s idea. He calls my son the “Samurai stepson;” and their favorite thing to do together has always been to go out for sushi. The closing of the only sushi bar in town coincided with this son’s partial recovery from schizophrenia. New medications made it possible for him to have a regular life, and what better job could a Samurai stepson get than in a sushi bar? I can hear Miss Daisy saying in my ear, “Now Lee Marshall, you know you shouldn’t have told that!” But I am telling it anyway.) We held long conferences with Bob, the sushi chef. We met with the muffin ladies and with the bank. We hired a designer and a construction firm. We were under way, even though nobody except us thought this was a good idea. Our accountant was horrified. The guys from the tire shop across the street kept coming over to ask, “How’s the bait shop coming along?”

Now we’ve been open for a little over eight years. Let me introduce you around. Under Bob’s direction, Akai Hana employs people from diverse backgrounds, including Hispanic, Burmese, Thai, Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, African American, and African. Meet Rick, for instance, who heads the kitchen in back (yes, we do have cooked fish, for people like Miss Daisy, who is enjoying some grilled teriyaki chicken right now). Anyway, both Rick and his wife, a beautician, are Chinese Filipinos who have been in this country for eighteen years, sending for their siblings one by one. Their son, a physician, is now completing his residency in Seattle. Their daughter, who recently earned her doctorate in public health, works for a world health organization in L.A. Rick’s nephew Brian, one of our wait staff, plays saxophone in the UNC jazz band.

Ye-tun, a cook and a former Burmese freedom fighter whose nickname is “Yel,” proudly showed me a picture of himself coming through the jungle dressed in camo, carrying an AK-47. Now my husband calls him the “Rebel Yel,” but nobody gets it.

Okay: Bob, Ryoko, Brian, Helen Choi, Ye-tun, Miguel, Jose, Genita, Mister Chiba, and Mister Choi—these people are Southerners. We are all Southerners. Akai Hana is a Southern restaurant, just like Miss Pittypat’s or Hardee’s.

Judging merely from our lunch at Akai Hana, we are going to have to seriously overhaul our image of the South, and of Southerners, for this millennium.

My little piece of land in Carrboro is typical. The South was two-thirds rural in the 1930s. Now it is over two-thirds urban. One half of all Southerners were farmworkers in the thirties; now that figure is at 2 percent. And out of those farmworkers in the thirties, one half were tenant farmers. Now we have no tenant farmers, but migrant workers instead.

As the largest metro areas continue to attract people and jobs, the viability of rural life comes increasingly into question. One half of all the new jobs in this country are being created in the South, with nine out of ten of them in Texas, Florida, and a dozen metropolitan areas, including the Research Triangle here in North Carolina, where Carrboro is located.

Our Southern birth rate, which used to be famously above the national average, is now below it. This means that immigration is defining the South’s population. Ten years from now, Texas will have a 37 percent nonwhite population. Florida will have a 54 percent nonwhite population. Some of the “big nine” states that now contain half the U.S. population will be eclipsed by the “New South”: Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. Among African Americans, there was a great migration out of the South in the twenties, the thirties, and on into the fifties. But in the 1970s more blacks started moving to the South—in many instances, back to the South—than leaving it. That trend has now accelerated.

Well, all these statistics have given Miss Daisy a headache. She’d like some dessert, but Akai Hana serves only green tea ice cream, which is too weird to even think about, in Miss Daisy’s opinion. So we pay up and drive around the block to Dip’s Country Kitchen, where Dip Council, Miss Daisy’s former cook, has opened her big, fancy new restaurant. She’s published a cookbook, too. She’s been written up by Calvin Trillin and Craig Claiborne; she’s been on TV. She’s an
entrepreneur now. Miss Daisy orders the lemon chess pie. I go for the peach cobbler myself.

Some things never change. Some Southern food will never go out of style, no matter how much it may get nouveaued.

And large parts of the South still look a lot like they used to—the Appalachian coal country where I’m from, for instance, and the old Cotton Belt. As a whole, we Southerners are still religious, and we are still violent. We’ll bring you a casserole, but we’ll kill you, too. Southern women, both black and white, have always been more likely than Northern women to work outside the home, despite the image projected by such country lyrics as “Get your biscuits in the oven and your buns in the bed, this women’s liberation is a-going to your head.” It was not because we were so liberated; it’s because we were so poor. This, too, is changing: now our per capita income is at 92 percent of the national average.

With all these changes, what should I tell my student, one of my very favorite students, who burst into tears after we attended a reading together at which Elizabeth Spencer read times, she had absolutely no sense of place, no sense of the past, no sense of family. How did she spend her childhood? I asked. In the mall in Fayetteville, North Carolina, she tearfully confessed, sneaking cigarettes and drinking Cokes.

I told her she was lucky. But she was also right. For a writer cannot pick her material any more than she can pick her parents; her material is given to her by the circumstances of her birth, by how she first hears language. And if she happens to be Southern, these given factors may already be trite, even before she sits down at her computer to begin. Her neurasthenic, fragile Aunt Lena is already trite, her mean, scary cousin Bobby Lee is already trite, her columned, shuttered house in Natchez is already trite. Far better to start out from the mall in Fayetteville, North Carolina, she tearfully confessed, sneaking cigarettes and drinking Cokes.

I once heard George Garrett say that the House of Fiction has many rooms. Well, the House of Southern Fiction is in the process of remodeling. It needs so many more rooms that we’ve got brand-new wings shooting out from the main house in every direction. It looks like one of those pictures of the sun as drawn by a second-grader. In fact, that’s the name of it—the House of the Rising Sun—which is right over here by the interstate. I’ll run you by it as we drive Miss Daisy home.

Look—there’s my student right now, knocking on the door, suitcase in hand. She doesn’t know yet that once she takes a room in there, she can never come out again. She doesn’t understand that she’s giving up her family and her home forever, that as soon as she writes about these things she will lose them, in a way, though she will mythologize them in her work, the way we all do, with all our little hometowns of the heart.

Allan Gurganus has called ours “the literature of nostalgia,” pointing out that many of the great anthems of the South are written from a position of exile such as “Way down upon the Suwannee River”; “I wish I was in the land of cotton”; James Taylor’s “going to Carolina in my mind”; or “Country roads, take me home.”

The writer puts herself in exile by the very act of writing. She will feel guilty about leaving, and for the rest of her life, she will write, in part, to expunge this guilt. Back home, they will be embarrassed by what she’s become, wishing that she’d married a surgeon and joined the Country Club instead. Mostly, they just won’t mention it, sticking to safer subjects.

Miss Daisy and I sit in the car watching my student, who keeps banging on the door, trying to get in there. “Honey, don’t do it!” Miss Daisy rolls down her window and cries across the grass, “Go back home! It’s not too late to stop!” But of course it is. Now my student is trying to peer in a window, shading her eyes with her hand.

Oh, I remember when I was that age myself, desperate for a room in the House of the Rising Sun. You think you’ll pay for it out of your day job, and maybe you will for a while, but you’ll whore out, too, eventually. We all do. The House of the Rising Sun is full of desperate characters. Some of us are drinking ourselves to death quietly, in our rooms, or loudly, at MLA. A lot of us are involved in secret affairs and unseemly couplings—we’d be real embarrassed if everybody knew who we’re sleeping with. Some of us just can’t do it anymore, but we put on our makeup anyway, and sit at the window all dressed up, and talk about doing it.

Look! The door is opening, just a crack. It’s the Madam herself, but she stands just far enough back in the shadows so you can’t really see who she is—maybe it’s Shannon Ravenel, or maybe it’s Okra.

My student slips inside. She does not look back.

“Well, I never!” Miss Daisy announces before falling over into a dead faint on the seat beside me. But I know she’ll be all right. I know she’ll be herself again by the time I get her back to her room, and she’ll be talking about what’s happened to my student, and she’ll make a big story out of it, and she will never, ever, shut up.

This is the main thing that has not changed about the South, in my opinion—that will never change. We Southerners love a story, and will tell you anything. Narrative is as necessary to us as air. We use the story to transmit information as well as to while away the muddle and chaos of our lives.

Just look at Miss Daisy now. She’s already sitting back up on the seat fanning herself and going on and on about what happened to that poor girl, which reminds her of another awful thing that happened to her niece Margaret’s daughter, not the Margaret I know that lives in Atlanta, but the other one that lives in middle Tennessee who was never quite right in the head after that terrible automobile accident that happened when she was not but six, when Cousin Dan was driving in that open car, you know he was such an alcoholic...
"The Tao of Dixie:
A Stubborn People"

from Gather at the River

by Hal Crowther

A foreigner from Scotland or California will visit a large Southern city—usually Atlanta—and complain that he could never find the South of song and story. Just another Minneapolis, Hal talking to John and Deno as far as he could see, with the heat turned up and a few magnolias. Maybe our visitor stayed at the Ritz Carlton, where businessmen parting company at the bar say, "Hit 'em straight, fella," instead of "My best to June and the kids." He was never invited to the Piedmont Driving Club and never ventured more than a few miles from Buckhead.

Nevertheless he has a point. The vital, urban South, where unemployment is low and ringworm unheard of, has long since built museums for its myths and moved on. Even in the unimproved countryside, where kudzu still creeps and gnats still swarm among the pecan trees, a visitor listens long and hard to catch the faintest echo of Margaret Mitchell or Erskine Caldwell either. Assimilation, once the great fear, is now the great fact of most Southern lives.

Why, then, are libraries bursting with dissertations on the metaphysics of Southernness, why are panels convened, sages summoned, centers dedicated to study the Tao of Dixie? Why is Southern separateness—among the reflective class no less than the belligerent—an enduring strain of separateness no other American region can approach or comprehend?

These are questions people ask me, more often since I published a book subtitled A Personal Landscape of the South. Radio personalities have trapped me and compelled me to answer. Sometimes the pitiless microphone betrays my hesitation, my confusion. And then there are moments when it all seems crystal clear.

There's a musical entertainment called Good Ol' Girls, a collaboration between novelists Lee Smith and Jill McCorkle and Nashville songwriters Matraca Berg and Marshall Chapman. It's a show for seven women, who sing and play various female characters from the fiction of Smith and McCorkle. Girls is a revue with an attitude, one I characterized inadequately as redneck feminism. In spite of its burden of intelligence, it played to raucous sellout crowds in North Carolina and Virginia and attracted the attention of a New York producer.

Mr. Big took the whole cast to Manhattan for what's called a showcase production, to seduce investors for a run in an off-Broadway theater. The "Girls" gave one of their best performances for an audience that included many of the New York theater's prominent rainmakers. Several days later the producer called in director/adapter Paul Ferguson and gave him Broadway's verdict: Nice try, nice music, but not half "Southern" enough. The women were too pretty, too smart, too normal, too middle-class. And all those words between the songs? The Broadway big shots offered their own version of Good Ol' Girls—three or four grits-eating grannies with big hair, bad teeth and banjos.

New York's idea of a good old girl is Mammy Yokum. Since the whole point of the show was to exterminate Hee Haw stereotypes of Southern women, the collaborators were amazed and appalled. They faced a limited menu of conclusions about the creative geniuses who dominate the New York theater: Are they low-grade morons with the cultural IQs of root vegetables, cynical mercenaries who operate on the threshold of pure evil, or uncritical consumers of Southern stereotypes that haven't been updated since the Second World War? From that menu my responses are (1) "possibly" (2) "very likely"; and (3) "definitely." The South has changed rapidly, but it doesn't take many trips to New York to convince you that its image has not.

Faulkner's Gavin Stevens complains that Northerners suffer from "a gullibility, a volitionless, almost helpless capacity and eagerness to believe anything about the South not even provided it be derogatory but merely bizarre enough and strange enough."

"Fundamentalism, Ku Kluxy, revivalists, lynchings, hog wallow politics—these are the things that always occur to a Northerner when he thinks of the South," wrote H. L. Mencken, whose disparaging satires helped keep the South in its unenviable place. What little Mencken left unmarred was soiled forever by the Broadway production of Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road, which logged a record 3,180 performances during the Great Depression.

This nagging Yankee suspicion that the sex is hotter somewhere else—Harlem, Paris, Latin America, Savannah—has been a curse for the sons of the Puritans since the days of Jonathan Edwards. But 7 million Americans saw Tobacco Road, and the South has never recovered from Caldwell’s sordid caricatures. The play closed in 1941; Time proved that New York’s mind was still closed in 1964, and Good Ol’ Girls proved that it hasn’t opened much in the past half century.

Why search any further to account for the South’s stubborn tribal attitude, its adamantly embrace of a separate identity even as the floodwaters of mass culture wash away its monuments and shrines? Tribal consciousness—the chip on the shoulder underdogs wear as a fraternal badge—persists as long as the tribe suffers misrepresentation, misunderstanding, prejudice and contempt. The “pride” of these pride marches—gay, black, feminist—is nothing more than defiance, the beleaguered defiance of tribes who feel excluded, slandered, and oppressed.

Bigotry, which never varies, measures a whole tribe by its most offensive and ridiculous representatives. If we accept witless stereotypes as the common coin of oppression, what group has a more legitimate grievance than Southerners? In a prescient speech titled “The Idea of the South,” delivered in Houston in 1963, North Carolina historian George B. Tindall traced the pedigree of our toxic mythology—from Caldwell and Mencken back to Harriet Beecher Stowe and A. B. Longstreet—and quoted what must be the classic lament of the Southerner misunderstood:

“Even the fumes of progress are in his nose and the bright steel of industry towers before his eyes, but his heart is away in Yoknapatawpha county with razorback hogs and night riders....He wants, above all else, to sniff the effluvium of backwoods-and-sandhill subhumanity and to see at least one barn burn at midnight. So he looks at me with crafty misgivings, as if to say, ‘Well, you do talk rather glibly about Kierkegaard and Sartre...but after all, you’re only fooling, aren’t you? Don’t you, sometimes, go out secretly by owl-light to drink swampwater and feed on sowbelly and collard greens?’”

Northerners are so besotted with these myths, Professor Tindall suggested, they take Faulkner for a realist.

As long as popular culture persists in presenting them as incestuous hillbillies, church-burners, mule-beaters and randy evangelists, Southerners will dip snuff and fly Confederate battle flags just to make New Yorkers wince. This unlikely mixture of defiant pride and self-mockery is a joke Northern liberals never grasp. I think it helps to explain why North Carolina kept Jesse Helms in the U.S. Senate for thirty years. He’s a monstrosous mascot, a gross pet we harbored in the same spirit as people who keep pythons and ferrets. Tar Heels re-elected him as long as he was capable of throwing the Eastern media into apoplexy.

Irony is a secret pleasure, an idiom that eludes the media and tends to multiply misunderstandings. Sly and impertinent, the South has preserved its self-respect at the expense of its public relations. But this cultural impasse was a serious handicap for Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, two of the most intelligent and able men elected president in the twentieth century. The media and the Washington establishment—talk about incest—saw Carter and Clinton through a distorting lens of cornpone stereotype: Carter the peanut farmer, a sort of guileless Southern school Baptist in starched overalls; Clinton the leering fornicator, at best a dirt-roads drummer with an itch for farm girls, at worst Jeeter Lester with a Yale education.

Are we paranoid? I don’t think so. A few weeks ago I was trying to convince a friend, a brilliant, benevolent scholar from the Northeast, that sympathy for defenders of the Confederate battle flag was not beyond all rational consideration.

In 1956 a British reporter famously quoted William Faulkner: “If it came to fighting I’d fight for Mississippi against the United States if it meant going out into the street, and shooting Negroes.” Of course this was recorded out of context while the author was adrift on a two-day drunk. In the same interview he repeatedly said “The Negroes are right” and the white racists “wrong, and their position untenable.” It wasn’t Faulkner’s politics but his fierce, beleaguered tribal spirit the Englishman captured, the spirit that wrote (of Chick Mallison, hero of Intruder in the Dust): “He wanted no more save to stand with them unalterable and impregnable: one shame if shame must be, one expiration must surely be but above all one unalterable durable impregnable one: one people one heart one land.”

He wasn’t just whistling Dixie.
Nearing the end of our Cornbread and Sushi course during the fall, the question of whether or not country stores still exist in our transitioning South remained unanswered. I had previously searched for these stores and had found something similar in Greer, South Carolina. But even though the two stores I found were somewhat authentic, they lacked the atmosphere that seemed to be a key aspect of a true country store. But then I saw an article in the local newspaper announcing the re-opening of Potter's Old Store, a 100-year old country store in Cowpens, South Carolina, that directed me to a relic of bygone days.

On a cold Friday afternoon I made the quick trip from Spartanburg to Cowpens, a small town located only ten miles from a massive Wal-Mart Supercenter, to find out if the real thing existed. For those unfamiliar with Cowpens, it seems to be only an indiscriminate speck on the map. But to those familiar with Revolutionary War history, Cowpens was the site of one of the most brilliant and pivotal American military victories of the Revolutionary War. Daniel Morgan, after whom Spartanburg's Morgan Square is named, led a colonial militia that crushed Banastre Tarleton and his "Black Legion" at what is now Cowpens National Battlefield. Tarleton, due to his ruthless military tactics, was possibly the most hated British commander; the battle cry "Tarleton's Quarter" became common among Southern militiamen after Tarleton's men slaughtered defeated colonial militiamen at Buford's Massacre.

With this history in mind, it only makes sense that Cowpens seems to be, once again, a pivotal battlefield in yet another revolutionary war. But this time, the rag-tag American forces consist of small business owners facing massive retail behemoths such as Wal-Mart. Steve Mathis is one of these entrepreneurial rebels of the changing South, and he wages his war of ideals from his new business in downtown Cowpens. Like his father, the late Steve Mathis, a successful contractor, he follows in both successful business skills as well as preserving his heritage. His father built his business from scratch, and worked to preserve several historical sites in Cowpens; in similar fashion, Mathis started his own recycling business, and has restored several historical buildings in Cowpens as well. Now he's once again saving a piece of history by restoring the old country store. One of the oldest buildings in Cowpens, Potter's Old Store was operated by the Potter family for nearly a century. Ned Potter, the last of three Potters before him, ran the store until eight years ago. His grandfather started working at the store around 1910, and purchased it later on in the 1920's. After that, his father owned and operated it until he took over the business. He sold the business to a man who claimed he would renovate and re-open the business, but he failed to do so. Ned reclaimed the building and sold it to Mathis only a few months ago, because of Mathis' reputation for preserving local heritage. Since then, he has worked to renovate the store, which re-opened after its eight-year hiatus on November 27, 2005.

From the moment I walked through the double doors, one set made of screen wire and the other of wood, I knew I had found something special. The 100+ year-old wooden floors creaked with my every step. Bare incandescent bulbs hanging from the high ceilings lit the first floor of the 14,000 square foot building. The walls were lined with shelves holding all sorts of goods: toys, camouflaged clothing, cooking ware, hardware, antiques, and also jars of candy, pecans, produce, and bottled soda. The sales counter, complete with an old-fashioned cash register, was lined with pickles, pickled sausage, and pickled eggs. Behind the sales counter was a cold case containing various dairy products, including the hoop cheese the store was famous for selling in years gone by, as well as cold Nehi grape soda, the favorite drink of Radar, a character from the old television show "M*A*S*H."

I was fortunate enough to spend a Saturday afternoon with Steve, Ned, Steve's youngest brother Clay, his mother Anne, and Grady, a former high school classmate of the Mathis brothers. They were sitting around an old pot-bellied stove, talking and eating venison—from a 12-point buck Steve had killed about a month ago—which they had been smoking since six that morning, eating that famous hoop cheese, and drinking Nehi grape soda. I introduced myself. Steve asked if I "was one of those book-writers that had been coming to the store a lot lately." I explained to them my mission: to determine if the fabled country store still existed. I was invited to have a seat, sample the smoked venison and cheese, and discuss it with them. Steve began with the brief historical significance of Cowpens, which I discussed above, and then began to describe his views on how the South has changed from an agrarian society into the society of big money, big business, outsourcing of labor, and the urbanization that has transformed the South today:

In opening this store back up, I don't see myself as an anti-Wal-Mart, but I do see myself as a person who is able to sense and see what's going on in this country. And whether you like it or not, the American people have to realize they're getting sold out by big money: OPEC, your big banks, especially foreign banks that hold a lot of interest in Wall Street. But HMO's, big insurance companies, it's all a conglomeration; add Wal-Mart, and you've got it where big money takes control of the market and starts turning the screws on the working man; it's a situation where the working man is being exploited.

These are all lofty claims; many people say similar things, but they often lack the knowledge to back them up. But I found Steve to be very informed; he was familiar with past and current trends in economic legislation, and had evidently done a lot of research.
on the subjects he spoke of. He talked about how the government basically forced farmers off the land through the outsourcing of labor to foreign countries, favored trade nation agreements, and ruthless and efficient large corporate entities. He cites Wal-Mart as a large part of the problem, yet he does not blame them as much as he blames the government, who has allowed large corporate entities to influence them into creating legislation that favors big corporations over the small business owner or farmer. I also discovered that not only is Steve attentive to all of these factors, but his work experiences have shown him first hand the economic changes that are shaping the South:

I was involved in scrap metal and machine moving, doing a tremendous amount of work for Milliken, and other large textile people. I saw hundreds and thousands of people in this area (upstate South Carolina), all these little textile towns, just completely wiped off the map by these trade agreements. But the things like family values, tradition, honesty, quality products, and all the things that made up little towns and country stores, are all disappearing from the face of the earth.

He went on to predict that these changes are going to further stratify our society into a rich class and a poor class. "It takes money to make money." He feels that the country, on the whole, is becoming increasingly more service-oriented. For example, he is also involved in warehousing, and he feels that in most areas, especially areas such as ours, distribution centers are going to become the main source of employment for Americans. All major corporations are manufacturing their goods overseas, but they still have to be shipped back over here, stored, and then delivered to retail centers. Distribution and services, such as fast food and restaurants, are what he feels are going to become the job market in our country. After all of this background, he talked about what he sees as the current trend in retail sales:

Since 9/11, I realized, and a lot of big companies have done research on this too, that the trend in marketing today is trying to get back to nostalgic, traditional-type atmospheres, like your Cracker Barrels and old country stores, and to make money they’re even trying to make their products, like ice cream and such, like it was back in the good old days, back before we had to worry about WMD’s, Al-Qaeda and our troops fighting over there in the desert, fighting over who knows what? That’s where the trend is going, back to the way things were before everything got all to hell.

Then Steve got to the heart of the matter, describing both his perspective of himself and his contemporary country store:

All the big money is just raping the American consumer, even the fuel, that we need so we can get to the stores to buy the stuff, has got out of hand. So I believe that this general store will stand here like a rebel. The more stuff in here that I don’t have to go to Wal-Mart and buy, the better. But don’t get me wrong, if Wal-Mart puts something on clearance, and cuts it to the bone—they’re such a wasteful company—they’ll get to the point where they need store space and they’ll pretty much give it away to get you to take it out of the store, I’ll buy it and bring it right over here and let the people benefit.

This is what I had been looking for, the rebel with a cause, who is not afraid, clinging to good old fashioned American values, to stare Wal-Marts and the like right in the face and shout “No Quarter!” Steve’s comments sum up what a country store really is. As I sat around the roaring wood fire in the pot-bellied stove, their friend Grady threw another log in and recounted stories of their days playing school football and basketball. To me, a few of the details seemed a bit exaggerated, but that was okay. In fact, that was great, because it coincided directly with The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture’s definition of a country store, one in which during “the winter scene men and boys and sometimes a
few women sat around the pot-bellied stove swapping yarns, arguing politics or religion, and recounting details of farming operations. There was a philosophy present in the assumptions underlying this talk, which would now be called "cracker-barrel philosophy." It was December, about forty degrees and raining outside, and I sat with these men and women debating politics. Perfect!

I finished my hoop cheese and swapped a few yarns of my own with them before thanking them for their generosity. I took a few pictures of the store, said goodbye once again, and headed back to Spartanburg with a sense of satisfaction. My previous journey had brought me close to finding the elusive country store; J.D. Lynn's Country Store and the Unique Boutique in Greer both had many of the qualities I had been searching for. No contemporary store will ever be able to replicate the atmosphere of a true country store of the past, because the common man has no need for "store-bought" goods, as they were referred to then, because in our society everything is "store-bought." The true country store catered to the small farmer, and today that market is gone. But in spite of all this, Potter's Old Store still had everything needed to be considered a read country store: history and tradition, true Southerners displaying true hospitality, and a building and equipment seeped in nearly 100 years of operation as a traditional country store.

It was a store that transcended the other two in that it was an integral part of the town—entire time I was there, local residents stopped in to pick up a snack or a necessity, or just to talk with the people there. Although in no way does Potter's Old Store provide any retail competition to Wal-Marts or other corporate behemoths, the store not only competes with, but also wins the battle of ideals and morals. Wal-Mart is a sell-out; it may have been started as a retail operation with a heart for the workingman, but it sold its soul to the almighty dollar long ago in exchange for international labor law violations, the outsourcing of American jobs to foreign countries, and massive profits. Steven Mathis and his store stand like an Alamo of retail business; he may ultimately lose the war economically, but the values he and his store perpetuate will never die in the heart of true Southern Americans rallying to the battle cry of "Walton's Quarter!"

The Cracker Barrel Phenomenon: Compromising our Heritage

by Wilson Peden

In the onslaught of market-driven capital expansion, our rural heritage seems destined to fall to the forces of modernity. After all, the American population is growing everyday, demanding new jobs. Before anyone can be employed, there must be somewhere for them to work. Even in the South, the historical last holdout against urbanity, it's hard to get half an hour away from a Wal-Mart. Further expansion into the last of the hinterlands seems inevitable.

That's not to say it's a hopeless case; the South certainly has its share of historic sentimentality, and there are few other regions where the words "rural" and "culture" are still closely tied together in the collective mind. Rebellion, as well, has always been a proud part of Southern history—if there was ever fertile ground for a grassroots movement, for a compromise between economic stagnation and urban sprawl, surely it is here in the South. Unfortunately, some of the compromises that have taken place may be more harmful to heritage preservation than unfettered expansion. A prime example: Cracker Barrel.

At first glance, a Cracker Barrel restaurant and general store might look like a thoughtful nod in the direction of cultural preservation. There's a cozy front porch with old fashioned checker boards and rocking chairs, a place where folks can sit down and think about things while they wait. The food inside is rich and fried, with country delicacies like catfish and okra that no one cooks at home anymore. And to cap it all, the general store features all the rural nostalgia your American Express can buy. Taken out of context, the place could seem almost quaint.

The problem is the context. Cracker Barrel stores have spread across the U.S. through a symbiotic relationship with a development that has destroyed and bastardized the South like few others: the Interstate Highway System.
It's a familiar pattern. As population rises in an area, traffic increases, and eventually, it becomes too much for the current road network to handle. The roads must be expanded to accommodate more lanes; bypasses must be built around the busiest urban areas. Traffic leading out of the area will increase as well. If two such areas build up together, a highway, will have to be built to handle the heavier traffic flow between the burgeoning new cities. And, of course, all those new drivers are going to need somewhere to fill both their gas tanks and their stomachs. Restaurants and gas stations spring up at every exit, like so many toadstools after the rain of asphalt. Someone has to man the new stores, and they need somewhere to live, and shop, and so on. Pretty soon they're going to need some more roads leading out of there.

Cracker Barrel is not the only chain to capitalize on highway traffic; they are, however, one of the more effective companies to do so. Cracker Barrel offers what other restaurants and pit stops cannot: a feeling of home while on the road. The food may or may not be authentic, and the merchandise certainly isn't, but after eight hours on the road, the place certainly looks a lot better than McDonalds. If all you have been exposed to is urban culture, then Cracker Barrel capitalizes on your inexperience, subjecting you to its blitz of nostalgic merchandise as soon as you step foot in the door.

This is why Cracker Barrel is dangerous: it's a false compromise. If unregulated commercial expansion into rural areas and zero expansion in rural areas are the two extremes, a compromise would be a limited degree of expansion. But Cracker Barrel has nothing to do with limited expansion. As far as urban expansion goes, Cracker Barrel is just a chain like any other. And the illusion of a nostalgic past that this particular chain cultivates is dangerous because it numbs us to the facts of the matter and assuages our guilt while we continue to pave over more land. This is the Cracker Barrel phenomenon.

I don't think there is anything particularly evil or bad about Cracker Barrel in and of itself as a restaurant and store. I don't particularly like the food, and the merchandise in the store just seems like tourist junk, but that's my opinion about a lot of stores and restaurants. The danger is the feeling of rural nostalgia we get from Cracker Barrel. If this is urbanization, is urbanization so bad? After all, isn't this a way of preserving our heritage while still keeping with the times?

The answer is no. And the problem is not limited to Cracker Barrel. A&W Root Beer has created a chain of fast-food restaurants that attract diners with a mythology loosely based on the nineteen fifties. In the consumer goods sector, Mast General Store and others like it have made a fortune selling designer plaid and straw hats to nostalgic folks with an undiscerning eye and money to burn. These stores and restaurants convince us that the rural south is not gone, and that we can enjoy it for a reasonable price.

The problem is not one of aesthetics, but of numbers: our country, and the whole world population, is growing too fast and using too many resources. The demise of rural lands and customs is only one example of what happens with unregulated growth. If we are going to stop expansion while there is still an inch of unpaved earth, we will have to strip off the blinders imposed on us by places like Cracker Barrel and start thinking about how we can actually change our lifestyles.

Urban sprawl, the spread of developments into rural areas, has been a major issue for years now, especially as it continues to grow more and more rapidly each year. The rural areas near cities in the South are quickly becoming suburbs as more and more people seek to live the “American Dream” in friendly neighborhoods which offer larger and more affordable homes free from the dangers and noise of the larger cities. Many people in the South are having a hard time dealing with the growth of developments near their homes in rural areas where they have previously enjoyed the privacy and serenity of nature. My father, Stewart Mungo, owns a development company in Columbia, South Carolina with his brother Steve. The Mungo Company, which was started by my grandfather, has been building in the South Carolina Midlands for over fifty years. The company is often criticized for building large subdivisions in rural areas, and although it has been successful throughout the years, it has met much public criticism and has heard many complaints from residents who lived in these rural areas prior to development. The most common complaints are about the developments bringing too many people to the new area and making the roads crowded.

The Mungo Company started out building large subdivisions in the Columbia/Irmo area of South Carolina, and has recently started developments in Charleston and some community housing projects in Spartanburg. When my grandfather first started the company, he moved out to Irmo, which was very rural at the time, and planned to start developing neighborhoods there. Everyone thought he was crazy for thinking that people were actually going to move out there into the middle of the woods so far away from town. He proved everyone wrong and created a very successful business and was an important figure in the development of Irmo.

Irmo is just one of the many small rural towns in the South to have been urbanized over the years. The South as a region has seen an astounding 59.6% increase in urbanized land between 1982 and 1997, with only a 22.2% increase in the population of the South (according to the Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy.) The “change” in the area is mostly the result of growth of developments and diminishing rural areas.

My father told me that the main issue at hand is that some Southerners who live in rural areas get angry when he plans to develop land near their homes. He said that one thing he has noticed is that he has more problems with people who own smaller pieces of

The Developer's Daughter on Urban Sprawl

by Mary Mungo
I read the note Dad had attached to the letter saying "Curses, our evil plans are out in the open. I guess that we should rethink our scheme of intergalactic conquest. I was hoping that our hordes of flesh-eating henchmen could attack on Christmas Eve and kidnap Santa Claus."

From reading some of these letters and seeing signs that people have put up making "slanderous comments about the company, I have realized how crazy and childish some people can be when it comes to property. There was a sign that someone put up outside of my father's development which read "Asscot," and then different groups are constantly putting signs on their property telling people of the evils of urban sprawl; but my personal favorite is the sign war between my father and the farmer who lives in front of his Farming Creek subdivision in Lexington. Hoping to scare off potential new neighbors, this man put a very large sign up on his property staring at my father's new development which read "WARNING! Agricultural Farmland; BEWARE OF: smells, chemicals used, rats/snakes, and other wild animals!" This would have to be every real estate agent's worst nightmare, according to The State Newspaper, but my dad took a different approach. In response to this sign, my father put up a sign exactly like it on the Mungo side of the street with a huge smiley face which read "WARNING! Home-grown homes; BEWARE OF: Happy kids, bicycles, dogs and cats, and splashing in the pool!" Dad was quoted in The State Newspaper saying that he put the sign up to "keep things on the lighter side. We all tend to take ourselves too seriously." Dad told the newspaper that the home sales have not been off because of the farmer's sign, but that he had never run across anything like this. "I don't think we've lost customers from the message. We might have lost customers because somebody doesn't want to live around a bunch of nuts."

As I looked at these pictures and read some of the letters and articles which have criticized The Mungo Company for urban sprawl, I had to ask, "What are you criticized for the most with your new developments?" He said, "Well, we receive a lot of criticism about everything as you can see, but I guess that we are criticized the most about new neighborhoods bringing in more traffic and making the roads more crowded. So the problem lies in needing effective transportation
systems. The issue is not about houses, it is about cars because these days everyone seems to take their own car everywhere and never car pools with anyone else." Dad then got into one of his historical lectures, telling me about how traffic has been an issue for thousands of years and told me about how Julius Caesar even made a law against carriages being driven through the streets during the daytime, so they could only use the roads at night; but then that did not work because all the noise of the carriages kept the residents of the city up all night and there was too much crowding at night. So I guess the moral of that story was that whenever you have a problem, you can try to change it, but then there will always be another conflict with the change. These people want urban sprawl to stop, but too many people still want to live the "American Dream" and have that nuclear family with a house and a fenced-in yard. It would be nice to come up with a solution to make everyone happy, but the demands of society are too great and there will always be some conflict with anything that is done.

The issue with traffic crowding the roads in rural areas because of all the new developments is a problem with not having enough effective transportation systems because in the suburbs the residents are too far away to walk to many places that they need to go and everyone insists on driving their own cars. Urban sprawl developed because people do not want to live in apartments over stores; they want to have a detached house and a yard and they choose to have a suburban house over a place in the city because they do not mind having to drive if they are happy with their homes.

Another issue my father pointed out is that many people that are from really small towns do not want to keep living there. There are not enough jobs—agriculture does not generate jobs like it used to. Many people had to move to suburbs and cities so that they could find jobs in order to make a living. For example, Dad told me that when he was at Wofford, there were five guys in his class from the rural southern town Estill, which was a lot considering how small the town was. He said that not one of them lives in that town because either they could not find jobs there, or they simply did not want to live in a small town like that anymore. He said that he still knows these men and that all of them live within twenty miles of a big city. It was a choice they made, like the millions of others, which results in urban sprawl. If they are in a larger town or suburbia then there is a much better chance that they will make more money and receive more recognition. One of them became a teacher in Leesville, another became a priest in Irmo, and two of them became doctors in Greenville and Chapin. Dad said that they probably felt that they would never make much progress in their careers in the really small rural towns. There is not enough of a market for them to work in Estill since there are already a priest, and a doctor, and teachers there.

I learned a lot about urban sprawl in the South from doing this research, and after thinking about it afterwards, I see how it does affect the Southern rural lifestyle. With more people moving into the rural areas, the old pastimes of residents decrease and start to die out as more diverse groups of people move in. There will be less and less hunting and fishing on their property. When the country stores are put out of business as the larger corporations like Wal-Mart move in, urban sprawl is not necessarily to blame because it is more of an issue of globalization. The main cause is the people who all want to live in houses but then complain about urban sprawl when they have new neighbors moving into the new developments. My father said that everyone wants to complain about it and critics of urban sprawl think everyone should live in apartments on top of each other in the cities, but the crazy thing is that many of them live in houses out in the suburbs! Many people want to live the American Dream, with their detached houses with yards and two car garages and a pool. Many people want to have that house and family that is constantly presented in the media, and everyone wants to have friendly neighbors with attractive houses as well. A lot of people want to live in places like Wisteria Lane (Desperate Housewives) because that is what the media tells people their lives are supposed to be like, and sprawl is the result.