

Local Voices Speak of the Meaning of Magnolia

Magnolia's black former tenants and its white owners and their kin, former business associates and neighbors, preservationists, and former employees were asked what they thought about the meaning or importance of Magnolia. Different people used somewhat different language and concepts to describe their views, but overall, their responses showed few variations across ethnic/class lines. People generally agreed that Magnolia's past and present importance rests on three major themes:

1. the plantation as a successful and continuing organization,
2. the plantation as a self-supporting and family-run agricultural venture, and
3. the plantation as a combined residential and working unit or rural company-town where residents were both community members and players in the productive unit.

White Views

White respondents noted the importance of Magnolia's continuity as a recognizable and extensive physical entity with largely intact standing structures and still-cultivated

fields. Admiration was expressed for the farming and business acumen required to successfully manage an agricultural undertaking of its size. Farming skills were seen as crucial to success but not the single most important factor. Instead, skills were seen as operating in tandem with the deep and steadfast emotional investment needed to persevere over the centuries despite unpredictable natural threats, political disasters, and economic uncertainties. While acknowledging that Magnolia is privileged by its location on rich farming lands, respondents recognized that "just keeping the farm going is an accomplishment" and considered Magnolia one of the better farmed units in the area. Its designation as a Bicentennial Farm, one that is still productive, is seen as richly deserved.

Continuity is also a critical attribute in terms of kinship and Magnolia's centuries-long unbroken association with a particular local family line. Magnolia is seen as the only historic family-managed farm still working on the Lower Cane River in an area and era where ownership by extended families or family corporations is increasingly rare and public corporations or agribusinesses managed from impersonal board rooms and by remote decision-makers are expanding. As such, it is considered symbolic of a way of life that once characterized much of rural Louisiana. One older white interviewee noted: "Magnolia is in a class by itself, representing the best example of plantation life; like *Gone With The Wind*, it was the old south." Mr. Matt was called a Southern gentleman who exhibited the best of the old

qualities, like caring about the welfare of his servants who were seen, reciprocally, as devoted to him. These long-term ties between the family and the place and their active involvement in the long history of Magnolia and Cane River are also viewed as giving current family managers "a feel for Magnolia." A sense of connectedness to the farm and the workers who made it run is seen as distinguishing the family management style and relationships to the farm community from those of other local agricultural enterprises.

Several whites drew on childhood memories to recall Magnolia as a wonderful place, "a fun place to visit." There always was something to entertain youngsters—horseback riding, surrey rides, swimming at the camp, and the magic tricks Mr. Matt performed for them. "There always were caring people around."

Some whites perceived Magnolia's black community as a peaceful place occupied by relatively happy people who were well treated. People in different households at the quarters were thought to visit frequently and attend church together, although they sat apart from others if the church congregation was mixed. White people who had visited Magnolia as children recalled "good natured blacks" and fishing or horseback riding around the place with little black, or "colored," boys. They rode to the hayfields, the blacksmith shop, or where the hoe hands were working. From the perspective of whites, who primarily viewed blacks in public rather than private venues, it seem that "no matter where you

would go, when blacks were working they were always laughing and having a good time, no matter how hot it was or how hard the work was."

White former employees or their offspring, who worked at Magnolia for several years, also appreciated the plantation as a self-sufficient unit. But they perceived Magnolia in less personal terms, although expressing respect and affection for some Magnolia people and pleasure in recalling some experiences. These few specialists did not experience a strong attachment to the place. They tended to see their roles compartmentalized, primarily as work related, but not as irrevocably linked to a more complex set of social and political plantation roles. One person explained: "Magnolia was where I worked and where Mr. Matt taught me about farming and the philosophies needed to make it work. He was a strategist. For example, he said the crops that fronted the road had to be as "clean" as possible so that people driving by, rubbernecking, would be impressed. Crops in the back need not be so good-looking." He recalled Mr. Matt's delight in having the tractors repainted in time for Christmas and lining them up near the Big House, glistening like new, to impress the arriving family visitors and passers-by. Still, from the overseers' perspectives, working at Magnolia "...was a job, like going to a plant. Unlike some neighboring plantations, which are just showplaces, Magnolia was where people worked. It needed to make money for the family and for the workers." Planting was a business. As these comments demonstrate, Magnolia was a place in which management and

workers had a complementary concern for productivity, for "clean," not "dirty," fields. From management's perspective, "clean" fields indicated effective husbandry, good labor relations too, and a basis for enhancing the owners' standing in the community. Whitewashing the quarters at Christmas is a counterpart of "clean" fields, reflecting good management and another sign of the Hertzogs' pride in their place. "Clean" meant "cared for" and well-managed.

Black Views

Black former tenants did not explicitly articulate Magnolia's importance as a persisting Hertzog family establishment, working farm, and community. That sentiment was expressed in other terms. Sensitivity to the strong connections among the Hertzog family, its lands, and the community was repeatedly implied by personalizing and individualizing the plantation and its community. As mentioned before, local people preferred to identify the farm by its owners' family name, the Hertzogs', or the Hertzogs' place, rather than by its impersonal formal title, Magnolia. One lived at the Hertzogs', worked for the Hertzogs, and shopped at the Hertzogs'. So compelling was the link between the place and the family name that interviewees who had lived in the area for decades failed to recognize "Magnolia" as a local entity. On the other hand, they responded immediately

and with interest when "the Hertzogs' place" was mentioned. Like "Ms. Lizzie's place," "the Cohens' place" and "the Carnahan store" in Cloutierville, families long associated with particular sites lent their names to the social geography.

Pride in "the Hertzogs'" and an association with it, as well as pride in their own contribution to a well-managed place, is implied in criticisms of the present appearance of the quarters, the store, blacksmith shop, and some fields. According to one former resident, "When we lived here, this was a superb place. It was clean then." Other observers disapprovingly commented on the presently "dirty" place. "Dirty" did not mean trash-strewn fields or residential areas, or even the exuberant growth along the riverbanks. "Dirty" implied neglect. It described overgrown and weedy areas in and around the quarters that formerly were occupied, or cultivated, weeded, cleared, and otherwise managed for a traditionally recognizable farming purpose. While they lived and worked at Magnolia, laborers and sharecroppers, it seemed, considered themselves responsible for maintaining a worthy place, and took pride in doing it. Without them, the quarters, the farm center in general, and the fields had suffered, had shifted from the clean to the dirty status, from the cared for to the uncared for. The National Park Service was admonished to clean up the place.

Black tenants, like white respondents, saw Magnolia as a company town that met their needs from birth to death.

However idyllic these recollections might strike outsiders, Magnolia was seen to have provided food and shelter, health care, religious ministering, and a limited cash income. Not that living with meager funds, few material possessions, and limited options was good, rather, people who remained at Magnolia until the 1960s fashioned a life in which problems and good times co-existed as integral parts of a larger complex package. As one person recalled, "you could make that little money and you were so happy over it and everything...It was a good life for me and I enjoyed it, because I didn't know nothing no better than that." A different woman appreciatively noted the gifts of elegant children's clothes she received for her own family when children from the Big House outgrew them. Another elderly woman reminisced: "It was a wonderful place to grow up. No one ever went hungry. Either everyone had milk cows and chickens or people shared and exchanged the foods they had." Someone else recalled, "...we always had good neighbors; it wasn't like it is now where everyone is for himself." Tasks were shared too. "You weren't the only one to raise your children. Everyone raised them in these quarters and if they saw some kid doing something wrong, well, they would tell the kids about it. Everyone raised the kids in these quarters...I loved it (this place) because it did so much for me."¹

1. A Brief Ethnography of Magnolia Plantation by Muriel Crespi

