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Reaping What Was Sown On the Old Plantation

A Landowner Tells Her Family's Truth.
A Park Ranger Wants a Broader Truth.



Fred R. Conrad/ The New York Times

Leslie Vercher stands in the doorway of one of the slave cabins at Magnolia Plantation, where his forebears lived as

By **GINGER THOMPSON**

sharecroppers.

NATCHITOCHEs, La. -- At the south edge of Magnolia Plantation, eight simple cabins

stood in a field of clover. Generations of whitewash were peeling from the mud-brick walls. All but one front porch had rotted away, and there were gaping holes where doors and windows used to be.

Hidden from the main house by rows of live oaks, the cabins had been forgotten by many and ignored by most. There was almost nothing left -- except the stories of the slaves who once lived in them.

Betty Hertzog hadn't been thinking about slavery when she agreed to go along with her rich friends' plans to turn part of her beloved Magnolia into a national park. She had been thinking about her family's land, and her struggle to hold onto it.

Ms. Hertzog's ancestors settled that fertile land at the south end of Cane River more than 200 years ago, and she had lived in the big house at Magnolia nearly all her life. She had too little money to keep it going, no children to pass it on to. Sometimes when she talked about her devotion to the land, it sounded almost like religion. "If you had land," she would say, "you were raised that it is very important, and that if you had it, you had to keep it."

To listen to Betty Hertzog is to feel the abiding power of Old South symbols. Slight but still sturdy at 70, Ms. Hertzog is reserved to the point of reclusiveness, happiest walking the plantation grounds alone. But she had come to believe that the new national park, with its droves of tourists, offered a way to hold onto the land -- to preserve her family's stories and teach future generations about the agricultural practices that made Magnolia the Goliath of Cane River when cotton was king.

Bobby DeBlieux hadn't been thinking about slavery, either, when he began his campaign to turn Magnolia's work buildings into a national park. He had just been trying to

rescue his town.

He had been trying since he was mayor in the mid-1970's, and Natchitoches (pronounced NA-kuh-tish) was drying up: farms were dying, working families were fleeing, much of downtown was boarded shut.

"I knew that history was the key to turning the whole town around," said Mr. DeBlieux, 67, who owns the Tante Huppé Bed & Breakfast on Jefferson Street. "First people would want to come here to visit, and if they did, they would want to stay."

Mr. DeBlieux -- pronounced like the letter W -- doesn't look like an economic-development visionary. With his shock of cottony-white hair, his shirttails hanging over sagging jeans, he generally seems to have just rolled out of bed. But he was right. Before long, that ugly downtown had become a National Historic Landmark, a mile-long quarter of French Colonial buildings converted into antique shops, restaurants and souvenir emporiums. The tourists came, and they stayed, often in the 32 B & B's -- as people here will tell you, the most in the state.

Still, when Mr. DeBlieux and his preservationist friends thought about Natchitoches's larger possibilities, they tended to look down Cane River to Magnolia and its sister plantation, Oakland. The old places had gone to seed some, but with a little help and money from the National Park Service, they could make Natchitoches the Colonial Williamsburg of Louisiana.

In 1994, with some deftly applied pressure from Louisiana's senior senator at the time, J. Bennett Johnston -- Betty Hertzog's cousin by marriage -- Congress created the Cane River Creole National Historical Park. As for how slavery would fit in, Betty Hertzog hoped the Park Service wouldn't dwell on it too much.

"A lot of people around here have put slavery behind them," she said. "It is a part of the history here, and no one wants to

ignore it. But I don't want them to talk about slavery and get stuck on that."

A little more than a year ago, though, she started to feel uneasy about the Park Service's plans. A new ranger, a black woman named Carla Cowles, had begun scratching around the old slave cabins.

Slavery was pretty much all Ms. Cowles was thinking about when she came to Cane River. A heavyset woman of 40 with a booming laugh laid over an edgy determination, Ms. Cowles (pronounced coals) had started her career at Colonial Williamsburg. But she came away with a very different ambition than Bobby DeBlieux's: to provide a face and a voice to the often-ignored stories of African slaves.

For a decade, in re-enactment and song, she had shown the violent fate of captured runaways and the pain of families torn apart, had explained how people treated as property had held onto humanity and hope. Magnolia's slave cabins, she thought, would be the perfect stage for her work.

"I'm here to tell the whole story," she said. "Some people might call it revisionist history, but I think what's been going on around here is a lot of revisionist history."

Stories, of course, have consequences. And from the beginning, what hardly anyone really counted on was how a new park, on a plantation that once had 260 slaves, might stir things up in a place where people had agreed long ago that the last thing they wanted to talk about was race.

When the Park Service held hearings about what kind of programs people wanted at the park, there was a lot of enthusiasm about restoring the old buildings. When slavery came up, there was silence.

"Speaking about slavery proved difficult for whites and blacks, and promised complications for park interpretation," the Park Service reported. "Blacks and whites treated slavery as a delicate, nearly taboo subject for public

discussion."

The Role of a Lifetime

Betty Hertzog had spent weeks getting the big house ready for the Natchitoches Fall Pilgrimage of Historic Homes, and on opening day last October, it looked like a movie set. Sunlight cascaded over the portrait of Magnolia's patriarch, Ambrose LeComte 2nd, striking a dandy pose in his ascot and Colonial jacket. The Baccarat chandelier bought years ago in New Orleans was up in the grand foyer once again. The air was suffused with the history of Ms. Hertzog's ancestors -- it hung from every wall, filled every shelf -- and she wondered if she was doing her family proud.



Fred R. Conrad/ The New York Times

Carla Cowles, a National Park Service historical interpreter.

"Daddy wouldn't have liked these tours, because he didn't like strangers roaming through his house," she said. "But you can't make a living from farming anymore. The tourists help pay to keep up this old place."

As an only child, she had always known she would someday take over Magnolia. But she had expected to live a little of her own life first. She was just out of college and heading to Houston to look for work when the call came. Her father had had a heart attack. Someone had to manage the harvest. "It was panic, pure panic," she said. "I really wasn't sure I could manage it the way Daddy did, but I had to try, or else we might lose it all."

So at 23, she traded her big-city dreams for a job at a local bank, and began her turn as caretaker of the land. No one

asked her to stay. No one had to. Magnolia was simply not going to go the way of the other Cane River plantations, into strangers' hands.

But it has been more than 10 years since Ms. Hertzog oversaw a harvest. In the late 1980's, when the bottom fell out of cotton, she rented her fields to corporate growers. Soon, she began the house tours. And then, in the early 90's, her rich preservationist friends began talking about turning Magnolia's work buildings -- the slave cabins and hospital, the blacksmith shop and cotton gin -- into a national park.

On opening day of the fall festival, though, she talked about Magnolia's good times, not her own struggle. Dressed in a pink satin Civil War-era gown, she showed tourists the wooden clock rescued from the original big house, burned down by Union troops; the 1851 trophy won by the family's prize racer, an auburn thoroughbred named Flying Dutchman; and the chapel fashioned from an old workroom at the back of the manor.

Of the 700 tourists, all but 10 or so were white. One black visitor, 55-year-old Sam Dugar, had come looking for his own history. Mr. Dugar's father and grandfather had been sharecroppers at Magnolia, but till now he had avoided the place. As the tour ended, he said he felt cheated.

"All I kept thinking was that they accumulated all this wealth because of the blacks who worked here," he said. "But there was nothing on the tour about black people. It's as if their place in history was erased."

Betty Hertzog insists she is not trying to erase history. "We are showing this house," she explained. "I try to talk about what's here, and the history that I am aware of. The slaves didn't have a lot of records, and so you don't know who was here and where they all were on the place." If visitors are interested, she tells them the slave cabins are out there, on the Park Service's portion of the land.

Besides, she says, talk of slavery can offend. Her cousin Ambrose recalled a black visitor who demanded back her \$5 admission after learning that the house was still owned by the original slaveholding family. "She was yelling so loud, I could hear her from my house," said Mr. Hertzog, who lives next door. "I was wondering, what does that woman know about Betty? The days of owning slaves was long ago."

Certainly, Ms. Hertzog says, it was not right for humans to be held as property. But she feels no shame. "The government has given them every opportunity in the world," she said, "so stop complaining about the past and go out and do something."

She has a low opinion of the idea, embraced by some black intellectuals and politicians, of reparations for slaves' descendants. "I think they should be grateful they got their freedom back then," she said. "I think they ought to be glad they are Americans, living in a free country. The more of that stuff that gets stirred up, the more hate there will be on both sides."

From the little she has learned, she says, her family did not mistreat its slaves. A Northwestern State University historian has found no evidence of abuse or neglect, though a set of ankle stocks was evidence of punishment. A Park Service archaeologist also told her that the two-family brick cabins were larger and more comfortable than the log dwellings on other plantations. And inventories show that Magnolia's slaves had more balanced diets than others in the area.

Strolling among the cabins one evening, Ms. Hertzog said that in her mind, slavery looked a lot like the lives of the sharecroppers -- slaves' descendants she remembered from childhood, who worked the land for part of the crop. To this day, that is the only way she has known blacks. Even after the last families left the cabins in 1968, she continued to employ a few black workers.

"That's just the way things have always been," she said. "Each group had different networks, I guess."

Some black old-timers, she says, have told her that their years at Magnolia were the best of their lives. While segregation governed life in town, she says, on Magnolia blacks and whites raced horses together and played on the plantation baseball team, the Black Magnolias. She knew that black children would not have the same opportunities as whites. "But for them," she said, "that's the way life was and they accepted it."

As for Magnolia's slaves, she knew some of their stories would be told at the new park. But she wanted those stories to reflect her family's hardships and kindnesses as well. Which was why she was getting so worried about the Park Service's plans.

Ms. Hertzog almost never talked directly about Carla Cowles. And for more than a year after Ms. Cowles arrived, Ms. Hertzog never met with her. "I guess I have just been too busy," she said.

But she complained a lot about the Park Service, and said she had heard Ms. Cowles and her boss were giving tours and talking about slaves who had never even lived on Cane River. She had been led to believe the park would be devoted to agriculture, she said, but increasingly it seemed the emphasis would be on slavery, on portrayals bound to vilify her family. She felt betrayed.

"That's the way people from other places feel about the South anyway," she said, "so I don't doubt it a bit."

An Outlet for the Anger

"When we learn about history, we are often told about kinder, gentler times," Carla Cowles was telling a tour group at the cabins. (Though the park won't open officially for a year or two, she has begun giving tours of the work buildings and cabins.) "We are taught to think about the lives of the rich and glamorous, not about the common, everyday people -- people like you and you and you."

"How many children do you have, sir?" she went on, turning to a man in the crowd.

He held up two fingers.

"If you lived here, with your two kids, would work be all that you did in your life?" she asked.

"No, I would have to take care of my kids."

"Well, the people who lived here couldn't even do that. Their children could be taken from them at any time and sold away."

This is the kind of simple exchange that Ms. Cowles uses to pull her audience into the lives of the mothers and fathers, cooks and carpenters who lived in bondage. The history of slavery is so painful and mind-bending, she says, that teaching anything meaningful in an hour seems impossible. So she makes it personal, makes the tourists become slaves, if only for one mental moment.

It was just such a moment that set her on the road to Cane



Fred R. Conrad/ The New York Times

Leslie Vercher is working to restore Magnolia's slave cabins as well as other historic buildings that will make up the Cane River Creole National Historic Park.

River. In 1989, with a 16th-century literature degree from the University of Virginia and yet another dead-end job, she answered an ad for a job at Colonial Williamsburg: "Talk about black history and get paid," it said. It sounded promising -- except for having to portray slaves.

Growing up in Williamsburg, the daughter of a millworker and a teacher's aide, she had revered America's civil rights leaders. She had watched her mother, who never graduated from junior high, fight to get her children into Advanced Placement classes. And in college, which she remembers as "a sea of whites," Ms. Cowles organized sit-ins to demand more minority professors.

She saw no spirit of rebellion in slavery. "I was like a lot of people who think slaves were weak, and I didn't want to portray weakness," she said.

Her bosses at Colonial Williamsburg persuaded her to try. She started off in secondary roles, singing songs that showed "the lighter side of slavery." Later, in a burlap costume, she portrayed a slave named Secundia, who had just learned that her mother had died on another plantation.

"I was singing to my dead mother," she recalled, "saying how we were so busy working in the fields that I never had time to tell her I loved her."

The experience, she says, was transforming. Suddenly, the slaves she had studied in documents came to life and had her face. Their history became her cause. And her portrayal of Secundia got her a job at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, organizing programs about the Dred Scott Decision, which barred slaves and their descendants from citizenship.

About a year ago, Ms. Cowles was assigned to develop the Cane River historical and community outreach programs.

She imagines the old cabins as a "living, breathing slave community," complete with people in costume portraying

slaves.

She expected some resistance. She had read the reports from all the public hearings. Early on, she turned to Frankie Ray Jackson, a black former school-board member, for help in navigating people's sensitivities. As for Bobby DeBlieux and his friends, she had little to do with them; at one meeting she did attend, she asked why she was the only black person there. And she never knocked on Betty Hertzog's door. She just hadn't had the time, she said.

It's not that Ms. Cowles doesn't often deal with whites in Natchitoches. She speaks warmly of her boss, Laura Soulierre, who has encouraged her pursuit of slave history. She gets along well with the park volunteers, most of whom are white. And she deals comfortably with white tourists, putting them at ease when they make clumsy comments about slavery.

"We can't heal old wounds until we look at the way life was and all its problems," she often says.

Yet for all the healing power of history, it has increasingly channeled her racial anger. When she talks about that anger, she casts back in her mind -- to the St. Louis landlord who at first refused her an apartment because she was black; to the man who called her a "pickaninny" as she guided him through Colonial Williamsburg in her slave costume; to the grade-school teacher who tried to fail her for refusing to pick a hero from a list of white American leaders.

Today, away from work, she leads an essentially black life. She dates a black man who calls himself a separatist. And though she says she does not share those views, she has had only two white friends. She tries not to wallow in anger, but the more she learns about slavery, the more she regards the old plantation elite with suspicion and reproach.

"It is almost impossible, living as a black person in America, and as a person who has studied so much about slavery, not to be angry about the injustices done to black people," she

said.

She avoids talking directly about Betty Hertzog, just as Ms. Hertzog will not talk directly about her. She speaks of no one in particular when expressing resentment at the "furniture and antiques" tours popular around town. And while she is offended at the wealth that plantation owners accumulated on the backs of slaves, she is disturbed more, she says, by whites who ignore the less noble truths of their families' pasts.

"They don't have to say, 'I'm sorry,' " she said. "But if you remain silent about it, then you have blood on your hands, too."

A Social Contract of Silence

Last fall, for the first time, a black man ran for mayor of Natchitoches. He was a vice president at the local university and a six-term councilman. Many whites quietly talked of supporting him; polls predicted record black turnout. Then the candidate, John Winston, started talking about race, with the slogan, "Let's make history! Let's elect the first black mayor."

That didn't go over too well. White callers to the "Talk Back Natchitoches" radio show worried that Mr. Winston would not serve all equally. Some criticized him for making race an issue. White support faded.

In the end Mr. Winston lost, by 63 votes, to a white



Fred R. Conrad/ The New York Times

Betty Hertzog is descended from the slave-owning family that built Magnolia Plantation. Though the work buildings and cabins are now on Park Service land, the house belongs to Ms. Hertzog, who gives her own tours of it.

anesthesiologist named Wayne McCullen. More than 95 percent of Mr. Winston's supporters were black; more than 95 percent of Mr. McCullen's were white. Both men agreed there had been a backlash over the race issue, and Mr. Winston has had second thoughts about his slogan.

"When it comes to race, the truth gets twisted to mean a lot of different things," he said. "And so most people just prefer not to talk about it."

Public discussion of race is never easy, anywhere. But in this town of 17,000 in central Louisiana, not talking about race is at the heart of a social contract, rooted in the slave-owning past, that governs all sorts of black-white relationships -- or nonrelationships. Whatever the inner tensions, Natchitoches has tended to get along.

Black and white Natchitoches are separate worlds of roughly equal size. (The black half generally includes the mixed-race Creoles, though socially and politically they float in between.) Whites live east of Fifth Street, blacks west. Natchitoches Junior High is mostly black; the junior high at St. Mary's Catholic School is mostly white. On Sundays, blacks fill the all-you-can-eat buffet near the Wal-Mart; whites crowd restaurants on the historic waterfront.

Though there are a handful of influential blacks, economic and political power rests in white hands. Indeed, even if Mr. Winston had won, he would have had less power than the three well-endowed, and virtually all-white, private committees that turned Natchitoches into a tourist town. Whites own all the new businesses in the landmark district. In this place where so much revolves around history, the history it tends to revolve around is white Colonial history.

"The thing is, blacks think this historic district is white elite," Bobby DeBlieux said. "Well it is. But it's not because we designed it that way. It's sad, but black people here segregate themselves."

Blacks do not dispute those facts. They just give them a

different spin. "It's true that blacks have not gotten involved in the historic things," said Clifford Blake, who owns a po' boy shop. "I had a chance to open up a place on the waterfront, but I didn't do it because it seemed like it was too white-dominated, and I didn't believe they really wanted blacks involved."

To local preservationists, the racial climate reflects Natchitoches's history as a "cultural island" in the South. From its founding by French traders in 1714, they maintain, its colonists were more accepting of other races than the British were, and generally kinder to slaves. Natchitoches, they say, is the best place to tell "a side to slavery most people have never seen."

"People here have always gotten along and respected one another," Mr. DeBlieux said, adding, "Maybe there's no social closeness now, but there's no tensions."

Even through the turmoil of the civil rights movement, Natchitoches was calm; there were no protests, and a single brief boycott. But silence, Mr. Winston and other blacks say, has been less a matter of contentment than ingrained reticence. They recall the one time Natchitoches did come close to open confrontation.

Back in 1927, a white plantation owner had given the city a bronze statue of a slave tipping his hat and bowing his head in greeting. A plaque said the statue had been erected "in grateful recognition of the arduous and faithful service of the good darkies of Louisiana," and whites saw it as a symbol of their enlightened view of slavery.

For 40 years the Good Darkey stood on Front Street. But in 1968, as civil rights protests gripped the South, young blacks vowed to bomb it, calling it an abominable symbol of servitude. In the end, after a meeting with the mayor, blacks stood down and the Good Darkey went gently, removed by officials late one September night.

There was a sense of victory among blacks, and integration

came peacefully. But that progress, many blacks say, has gone only so far. They remain in their separate world, profoundly wary of whites.

Across Cane River from the new park is St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church, organized 133 years ago by freed slaves. Even today, says the pastor, the Rev. Leo Walker, many in his congregation are struggling to overcome generations of distrust.

"A lot of them harbor deep anger about things that happened to them or their ancestors in the past," he said, "and they honestly believe that no whites can go to heaven."

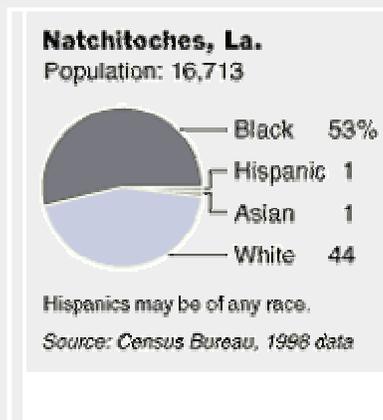
A Son of 'the Quarters'

Leslie Vercher winced whenever he heard people call Magnolia's brick cabins "slave quarters." They had once been his home.

His father was born and raised in the cabins, and his family did not move off Magnolia until the late 1960's. Those people were not slaves, he pointed out. They were the Hertzogs' employees, and they called their homes "the quarters."

But when pressed to think about any ancestors who lived there as slaves, this fireplug of a man looked as if he might become physically ill. He refused to watch movies like "Roots" or "Amistad," and rejected the term "African-American" because he had never known any relatives from Africa. Certainly some black people on Cane River were interested in seeing slave stories, however painful, resurrected at the new park. But Mr. Vercher saw slavery only as a shameful part of the past, and tried to wipe it from his mind.

"I don't want to hear about my people being beaten and



raped," he said, with his Cajun twang and willful scowl. "Let it go."

But in a twist of fate -- he sometimes saw it as a divine trick played by his late father -- Mr. Vercher, 35, was now working for the Park Service, restoring the cabins. For a black man, especially one with a ninth-grade education, it was one of the best jobs on Cane River, with decent pay and benefits for his common-law wife and two sons.

His father, Ellis, had been happy that the cabins were going to become part of a new national park. The son was still coming to terms with the idea.

Ellis Vercher was one of Betty Hertzog's father's chief hands, and the family -- there were 12 children -- lived in the cabin at the end, the one with the porch still on the front. Ellis Vercher was always proud to say he was reared on a plantation, as if it gave more meaning to the five-bedroom house he built when the family moved away. And he tried to instill that feeling in his children.

"I don't mind being out here," Leslie Vercher said, "because I feel my daddy when I'm here."

Asked what he thought life was like for slaves, he frowned and said, "Hell, what you think?" But then he thought again about his father. There were indeed hard times, when they would work all season and not make a cent. But there were also good times -- cookouts, horse races and dances at the company store -- and good friends.

"I found a marble the other day and it felt funny in my hand," Mr. Vercher said. "I thought to myself, 'I bet my daddy played with this marble.' "

Bringing Up Slavery

A wintry chill hung over Cane River the November evening Carla Cowles brought slavery back to Magnolia Plantation.

For the opening of an exhibit called "Free at Last," Ms. Cowles had invited two black historical interpreters from Arkansas to perform skits showing slave life through fables and song. "We are going to be talking about things that are uncomfortable," she told the audience gathered at the cabins. "We are going to show you how people endured the institution called slavery."

Discomfort had been swirling through town ever since a notice appeared in The Natchitoches Times the week before. Ms. Cowles had enlisted her boss to deliver Betty Hertzog's invitation -- "I have had very little contact with Miss Betty," she explained -- and Ms. Hertzog seemed leery about the whole thing. "You can never tell," she said. "It might just be a bunch of stereotypes."

Leslie Vercher was also worrying about stereotypes. "It's easy for Carla to talk about slavery because she don't come from here," he said. "I don't think it would be so easy for her to tell those stories if she was talking about her own people."

Ms. Cowles had invited all 15 schools in the area. But while teachers at three schools accepted, the rest did not respond.

She shrugged it off at first. With such short notice, there probably hadn't been time to arrange transportation. Then she heard that Samuel Jackson, a black man who is principal of Natchitoches Junior High, was worried the performance might ignite racial tensions. She went to see him, to explain that everything would be handled with great sensitivity. But he stood firm.

Mr. Jackson said he had worked hard to keep the peace at his school, where more than 70 percent of the students are black and almost all the whites are bused in by court order. Just a few weeks earlier, he said, a white student had shown up wearing a T-shirt with a drawing of Ku Klux Klansmen and the words, "We were the original Boys in the Hood." A black student had come to school upset that a local white fraternity was planning a mock slave auction. Exposing students to slave re-enactments, Mr. Jackson said, would be

like throwing a match into gasoline.

"I am afraid you would have white students making fun of the way black people talked, and then blacks might respond in a combative way," he said. "It could fester into a big problem."

In the end, about 70 people -- black and white -- showed up that evening. Leslie Vercher, anxieties and all, stood in back, pacing and puffing hard on a cigarette. Betty Hertzog came, too. If the story of slavery was going to be told, she said, she was going to make sure it was accurate.

The two performers, Curtis Tate and Daryl Minefee, leapt into the spotlight. They wore tattered pants, bright shirts and oversize shoes. Their stage was a bench. Mr. Tate stood on top, joking like a country bumpkin. Mr. Minefee, wearing that same foolish grin, sat playing an African drum.

First, Mr. Tate told several fables set in Africa. Then he transported the audience to America, and told a story about a slave beaten by an overseer for bringing her baby along to the cotton fields.

"The overseer was full of the master's whiskey," Mr. Tate growled, flailing one arm as if cracking a whip, "and when he saw that baby he started whippin' that girl, and whippin' that girl until she and the baby started to bleed."

But instead of returning to the fields, the woman ran to a wise elder who began chanting an African incantation, and all the slaves flew happily away.

For the finale, Mr. Tate portrayed a slave named Luther and his master, James McVicar. Luther had learned to read and write, but kept it secret for fear of punishment. The year was 1849, and one day he blurted out something from the morning paper about a gold rush in California.

A disturbed Mr. McVicar forced a Bible into Luther's hands and ordered him to read his favorite passage.

Luther trembled and said: "Naw suh, Massa McVicar. I can't read."

Mr. McVicar insisted.

Luther opened the Bible and read in a quavering voice, "Moses said unto Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.' "

The audience held its breath as Luther slumped over in fear.

Then Mr. McVicar grinned and jumped with excitement. "I'll be darned, Luther, you can read! Can you write, too?"

Luther, paralyzed by confusion, forced his head to nod.

"This is great," his master shouted. "You can help me keep my books; you can help me with my ledgers."

For a moment, the audience seemed as stunned as Luther. But soon people were laughing and applauding in relief.

Betty Hertzog joined the standing ovation, then headed home, elated. "I liked it," she said. "I thought they did a real professional job. It was especially good for children."

Students and teachers from Simpson Junior High, a white group who had seen the show earlier that day, said they had learned important lessons about blacks.

"It makes us understand what they had to go through," said Jenna White, 13. "It opens our eyes and makes us respect them more."

Mr. Vercher, though, was pacing and dragging harder on his cigarette. With their silly grins and floppy hats, he said, the actors had given no dignity to the memory of slaves. It was as if the Good Darkey statue had come to life, not the strong, resilient people who were his ancestors. Slaves could not fly from the fields, he said, and if a master learned that a slave could read, he would reach for a rope.

"What kind of historians are they," he asked, "if they make

up things instead of telling it like it was?"

When to Water Things Down

Carla Cowles was not stunned at all by the show. It went exactly as she had planned.

The week before, she had called Mr. Tate with a warning about the anxieties around Cane River. She told him that blacks had been feeling uncomfortable about slave re-enactments, and that Principal Jackson was concerned. She also told him that the direct descendants of Magnolia's original family would be in the audience, along with some of the town's powerful preservationists. She went over the details of Mr. Tate's stories, and did not ask him to change the content in any way. But be sure, she cautioned him, that none of the stories appear to reflect the lives of Cane River slaves.

"There was a lot that went unsaid," Mr. Tate recalled. "But I got the clear impression that she was feeling pressure."

After the morning performance, over lunch at Lasyone's, a local meat-pie diner, they discussed the surprise ending to the Luther story. It did not, they acknowledged, reflect the reality of life for most slaves, who were beaten or separated from their families for seeking education.

But the story was not a complete lie. The truth is that there is no one truth to slavery. It was different from state to state, plantation to plantation. Mr. Tate had documents about a slave whose masters had taught him to read and write, and others about a slave beaten by whites when discovered reading a newspaper. In using that first slave as raw material for the Luther story, Mr. Tate said, he was concerned more with whites like Ms. Hertzog than blacks like Mr. Vercher.

"They are the ones who can't handle the truth," Mr. Tate said, crouching over his plate and lowering his voice. "Isn't it the same for all black people, that we have to be careful to make white people comfortable?"

As they struggled to reconcile the Luther story with their strident commitment to teaching what they saw as the holocaust of slavery, it became clear that more pragmatic issues were at play, too. At historical sites across the country, a new generation of interpreters had begun to pull stories of slavery from the dust of history. And often, as Ms. Cowles and Mr. Tate kept hearing, they ran into turbulence.

"It all comes down to economics," Mr. Tate said. "Whites still control most museums and historical parks. Unless black people start putting more money into these places, then we will never really be able to have control."

Ms. Cowles added, "If you make them uncomfortable, they'll shut you down."

She had seen that kind of power right here in Natchitoches. Just weeks before, another Park Service official had come under attack from local preservationists. The official, John Robbins, headed up a prestigious federally financed center that develops and teaches preservation technologies. Mr. Robbins had supported a Congressional proposal that would have allowed the center to be moved. But after a few well-placed calls to Washington, the bill was killed, and Mr. Robbins was transferred to Washington.

"These people around here may come from the country," Ms. Cowles said, "but they are very smart and well connected, and if you cross them you're out of here."

A few days after the performance, Ms. Cowles stood in the doorway of a cabin and reflected on all that had happened. "I did not want to make the message too hard the first time," she said, "especially with me being an outsider and a black woman."

So she began to settle in for the long haul. Early in the year, she turned down an assignment on the East Coast and began looking for land where she could build a house. It might take years, she realized, for the truth of slavery to be told on Cane River.

"If they felt good after that performance, they'll come to the next one and the next one," she said. "And I'll be able to present something a little bit stronger each time."

Bobby DeBlieux says he understands that slavery will be one of the park's main themes, and he thinks that, too, will ultimately be good for business. There is an untapped well of black tourists out there, he says, who might spend money on a plantation tour that incorporates slave history.

Over at the big house, Betty Hertzog sounds as if she is ready to move on. The 27-room house has become more showplace than home. Almost all her personal belongings are crammed into two bedrooms; the rest of the house stays dark unless tourists come by. Her relatives don't come too often, either, and so her most consistent companions are her two dozen cats.

Not long after the performance, she decided she was not going to worry about the new national park anymore. She asked Senator Johnston's daughter, Mary Catalo, to look out for the family's interests, and in April, Ms. Catalo met with Carla Cowles and offered herself as the family liaison.

Ms. Catalo, who is 37 and sells real estate in New Orleans, is from the ninth generation of the family that built Magnolia, and her feelings about how its history should be portrayed seem to mark a clear shift from those of the woman she calls Aunt Betty.

"It is not a comfortable thing for me to come out and say that my relatives owned slaves," she said, "but it is important that we all openly acknowledge where we came from so we can start to work through the problems that were created in the past.

"Racism is a difficult thing to deal with because it runs so deep. To me this park offers a chance to at least help start a dialogue that doesn't exist right now."

Years ago, Betty Hertzog built herself a house near the river,

thinking she would move there after her parents died. What with the responsibilities of holding onto Magnolia, she has yet to spend a night there.

"Every time I got ready to move, something else would happen and I needed to stay," she said. "But maybe the time has finally come. Used to be that it was hard to leave this old place. But now it's harder and harder to stay."

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