“Bitter Roots & Sweet Fruits”

TUPELO

CONVERSATIONS AND MEMORIES

By Susan Willey
Edward J. Arnone
George Cavanaugh
Betty Frecker
Mary Kring
OIA/Long Communications

"Bitter Roots and Sweet Fruits:" Tupelo Conversations and Memories is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, established in 1927, that does research to learn how democracy can work better. The foundation does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions or individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, and education.

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By Susan Willey

A Research Paper of the Kettering Foundation
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| "Go Getters:"
Tupelo after World War II                      | 3    |
| The "Leaderful" Community                         | 6    |
| Common Work and Trust                             | 11   |
| "The Roots Are Bitter": Conflict and Crises in a Learning Community | 15   |
| To Create Community:
George McLean and the *Tupelo Journal*           | 23   |
| Success Breeds Success:
Tupelo and the Future                             | 29   |
Introduction

The North Mississippi Medical Center in Tupelo is the largest hospital in the United States serving a mostly rural population.

When I visited Tupelo, Mississippi, for the first time in January 1998, I was struck by the ordinariness of the town. Having lived nearly 20 years in the beautiful and historic town of Natchez, perched high on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, Tupelo seemed at first glance to be a pretty plain southern town. Compared to Natchez, with its massive, white-columned, antebellum homes and its historic Under-the-Hill area of which Mark Twain wrote, Tupelo seemed a little drab. With a population of about 34,000, Tupelo streets have the usual variety of mini-shopping malls and fast-food restaurants. Its main street has the kind of concrete and brick buildings that easily could fit into Anytown, U.S.A.

If you follow Main Street far enough, you run into a sign directing you to the local claim to fame — the tiny two-room shanty house that was Elvis Presley's birthplace. The small and not-very-well-stocked gift shop is far removed from Graceland. And Tupelo does not resemble Memphis, or any other big city for that matter.

Unlike Memphis or Natchez, the Mississippi River doesn't flow through Tupelo. In fact, as Mississippi sociologist Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., has pointed out in his study of the city, Tupelo has few natural resources to draw upon. There are no rivers or lakes, no mountains or lush valleys, just a landlocked area of earth perched in the middle of nowhere. But, throughout its early history, Tupelo apparently had something more important. As a community, it seemed to have the ability to recognize, treasure, and nurture its greatest resource — its people.

Within a few short years after World War II, Tupelo's people began to climb out of the depths of poverty that proclaimed Mississippi as the poorest state in the union and Lee County as one of the poorest counties in that state. Years later, Tupelo and Lee County were not only being recognized by their own state, but by the nation, for incredible economic development achievements. It received the All-America City Award twice — in 1967 and 1989 — the first southern city ever to achieve that honor. Soon Tupelo was gaining international prestige. Visitors from more than 30 countries have traveled to this small town to study its community and industrial development efforts. From a poverty-stricken area to a county with more than a dozen Fortune 500 companies and 100 industries, Tupelo is indeed an interesting study in economic development. Its industries produce upholstery furniture and furniture components, lawn mowers, radial passenger tires, commercial lighting, venetian blinds, clothing, folding chairs, and garbage bags among other products. The Tupelo trade area of northeast Mississippi has added more than 1,000
jobs and a million square feet of manufacturing space each year for the past 13 years, making this small town third in the state for the highest number of manufacturing jobs. Community Development Foundation brochures boast that the area’s 1995 payroll was more than $6.7 billion.

How could this happen to a small, rural area that had nothing to work with but its people who, in the mid-1940s, were barely able to make a living farming worn-out soil? In the 1930s and early 1940s, per capita income in Tupelo was lower than the state’s average. Its literacy level was lower than the state’s as well. Today, the per capita income is well above the state’s average and Tupelo’s educational system has won national honors. Educational opportunities in the area currently range from preschools to universities, to community colleges and trade schools. The North Mississippi Medical Center in Tupelo is the largest hospital in the United States serving a mostly rural population. All of this happened in just 50 years. And if it happened in Tupelo, could it happen in other places? Can we learn anything from the Tupelo story?

Those are some of the questions University of Mississippi sociologist Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., explored in his historical study, *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community*, published by the Kettering Foundation Press. As Grisham explored the questions through an historical perspective, I pursue them through an anecdotal, storytelling lens. When I traveled to Tupelo to interview some of the early leaders of the 1940s and 1950s, my research was focused more on the stories they told about themselves and that time period of growth and change. Many of the people I interviewed were the older generation. Now in their seventies and eighties, these were the people who spearheaded the early development projects and fostered what eventually became known as “The Tupelo Spirit.”

They have told the story of Tupelo many, many times to many, many visitors, but the stories are important ones that may need to be told again. They weave a narrative of myth and might, the power of people to effect change, manage their own lives, and create a better world for themselves and their children. As one Tupelo businessman commented: “There’s great power in the spoken word.”

But what Tupelo accomplished was not without struggle and pain. Mythic sagas rarely portray easy journeys. There are always tests and challenges to meet and overcome. Jack Reed, Sr., one of Tupelo’s prominent businessmen, tells a story about a visit he made — more than 45 years ago — to Pinney Woods, a school for black children located in a nearby rural area. He listened to a professor speak to a crowd of students, and Reed was transfixed by his words. Drawing on an ancient adage, the teacher intoned: “Plant patience in the garden of your soul. The roots are bitter, but the fruits are sweet.”

For Reed, those words evoked the image of Tupelo. Progress and change are long-term commitments. Developing trust and relationships also take a long time. It wasn’t easy and people went through some tough times, but Tupelo’s citizens decided those goals were worth the time investment, he said. Through world wars, agricultural, industrial, and technology innovations as well as the massive social changes of the 1960s and 1970s, Tupelo continued trying to plant patience. So, once again, the Tupelo story will be told, this time from conversations and memories of those who lived it and who experienced both the bitter roots and the sweet fruits.

Susan Wilkey came to the Kettering Foundation in August 1997 as a pre-doctoral fellow. At the foundation, she works with public journalism research, editorial projects, and with journalism curriculum for the Public Policy Institutes. Susan recently served as the editor of Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr’s book, *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community*. She has been a reporter and writer for more than 20 years, and is currently a candidate for a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri School of Journalism, where her studies are concentrated in religion and media, public journalism, and media ethics.
"Go-Getters":
Tupelo after World War II

Tupelo hadn't really recovered from the Great Depression by the time its young men found themselves being shipped off to foreign lands to fight in World War II. When the men came back home, the welcome wasn't what they had hoped. There were no jobs in industry, except for garment factories, and those "cut and sew" jobs were held primarily by women whose wages weren't sufficient to support a family.

Men sat at home, their day focused on taking their wives to work and picking them up again at the end of their shift. They thought about moving up North to find work. Many did, but others didn't want to leave their families, their roots. Farmers in the rural areas were struggling, too, using the same time-worn methods, planting the same crops, and seeing poor yields. No one had much money. The literacy rate was low, but education wasn't the priority. People just wanted to be able to feed their families.

Harry Martin, president of the Community Development Foundation (CDF) in Tupelo, called the situation a crisis, not only a financial one, but a spiritual one as well. Martin was a young college student in the mid-1940s, and one of his professors asked him to study a new economic development program beginning in Tupelo. He accepted. The next year he joined the town's development team and, more than 50 years later, he remains a staunch Tupelo supporter.

Martin was in Tupelo when World War II ended. He saw the people's exodus North to find work. He and others saw this loss of human potential as devastating to the town's future and to the people themselves. As he tells it:

Beginning after World War II, literally millions of people were uprooted from their culture... out of the culture that their fathers and mothers and grandmothers and grandfathers had built. They were sent into an unknown world where they were not known. There wasn't a minister who knew they were in town, to come and visit them and bring them to church. There wasn't anybody to tell that they were spiritually needy. There wasn't anybody to even see if they had clothing and food.

Martin said the war allowed young men and women serving in the military to see how other people lived and showed them a new world, one filled with technological and industrial wonders. That was good, he said, but it meant that many rural people, who had farmed the land, were now seeking jobs in industry. And Tupelo didn't have many industries. It was a farming community. Martin continued:

They thought, if they moved into the urban centers, they could find employment. So you had a total detachment of the culture of this nation. Here in Tupelo, we saw the price of dislodging this culture and moving away as permanent damage to the structure of this community.

After seeing the world, Tupelo looked pretty bleak to the young men back from the war, and the people in the town were concerned. They didn't want to lose their sons and daughters to jobs up North. They knew that would be a double loss. If their children left home, they'd also lose their grandchildren, the future generation.

Jack Reed, Sr., was one of those young men who returned home after the war. But, unlike others, Reed had a job waiting in his family's businesses, a department store and a garment factory. He

"They called the men 'go-getters' because they'd take their wives to work in the morning and go get 'em in the afternoon."

— Jack Reed, Sr.
Tupelo businessman
remembers that most of the most promising young men from his high school graduating class of 1941 did not return home to stay.

"There were very few jobs in 1946 and 1947," Reed said. "And had I not been coming into the family business, I doubt very seriously that I would have come back myself."

Although Reed's family was financially in better shape than others in Lee County, the area boasted no "old money" or a monied class that some other cities in the state had. This factor encouraged townspeople to welcome others, Reed said.

We've been inclusive rather than exclusive because we needed people to come in. There weren't any old plantation owners. Nobody owned the town. There were mostly hill farmers and yeomen. I think that benefited us far greater than many communities in Mississippi that had larger plantations and a larger agriculture base.

The reference to the lack of "old money" crops up whenever you speak with people in Tupelo. People saw this as an important element in the growth of their city. Former Tupelo banker J.C. Whitehead said:

There was no wealth concentrated in one, three, or four families here. As was common in many ... towns in Mississippi, there was wealth concentration and those people are interested in just the status quo. They don't want to change things very much. It's only the have-nots who are interested in making a change. And there were a lot of have-nots in Tupelo.

People in Tupelo shared the same desperation. Families were being broken up, money was scarce and farming was no longer putting food on the table. They recognized that if one group of people was hurting, it affected everyone. If farmers couldn't sell their crops, if husbands couldn't find jobs, if there was no money to spend, then businesses, retail stores, and banks suffered along with them.

And if young people moved away, their entire community could die.

"We saw exactly how people were living because we were living just like them. We were all in the same situation," said J.R. "Red" Rasberry, a former Lee County chancery clerk. After Rasberry returned home from the war, he took his savings of $200 and bought an old filling station in town, but soon found that not many people had money for gas. Instead, friends would congregate at the station and talk about what needed to be done to help the families in town.

Felix Black, Rasberry's friend and a retired Tupelo businessman, said that everyone knew they had to raise the standard of living for people in Tupelo and the surrounding area. They began their efforts just to help people "put food on the table." That is the way the need was first expressed, but it would soon change. Soon, leaders no longer were satisfied with just food. They wanted people in Tupelo to live a good life, to have opportunities for health care, education, and leisure time. But, in the beginning, the need for something as basic as food was so great that business people and banks put aside their self-interests and focused on the community's well-being, believing that, eventually, they'd all see benefits. Southerners often quote the old adage: "What goes around comes around."

"Even though some of us were competitors of others, there was a process of cooperation, of working together ..., this was the real beginning of the industrial development..." Black said.

But it was more than "cooperation." Reed said citizens recognized that, even though they might have to sacrifice their individual interests for the wider community at the present time, they saw that they'd eventually get a return on this investment. And the benefits weren't necessarily counted in money. Other values were operating besides economic ones. Reed explains:

So much of what we've done here has not been to the advantage of our retail stores. We've brought in all sorts of competition. So really, much of what we've done has been disadvantageous to my own interests economically. But [his emphasis] I have four children who I sent away to college who all came back to Tupelo and married in Tupelo. There are now opportunities here for them.
that were not here when I graduated from
school. And that is a small price to pay to get
our family back.

Reed said that Tupelo leadership clearly
understood what was valuable, and it was people —
families. They also recognized that results were not
going to come instantly. People were willing to
work now and wait for the future to reap the fruits
of their labors. They had wanted something very
simple, to keep their children near and be able to
earn enough money to feed them. Their shared
“poverty” of the 1940s may have ended up not
only saving the town, but also putting it on the
international map of economic development.

Their community was changing. The war had
changed the world. New technologies were
springing forth. Television was on the horizon.
Yet in Lee County, many rural areas still were
without telephones. Some farmers continued to
rely on mules to plow their fields and cotton
remained the crop of choice. But farming couldn’t
escape the sweeping changes in the culture. Could
the farmers change? And in this day of factories and
industrialization, could farming support Tupelo and
Lee County as it once had in the past?

These questions pushed the leadership to go
beyond the idea of “food on the table” and focus
instead on a bigger, long-term goal — to increase
the per capita income and raise the standard of
living, so people could do more than just survive.
They wanted people to enjoy a good life and live
comfortably. As Harry Martin, president of the
Community Development Foundation, said:
“We figure, if people have money, they can afford
education and college for their children; they can
afford discretionary things in life, vacations, nice
homes; they can afford better health care and all
of that.”

To help people achieve the basics of a good life,
the focus was clear, Martin said. “We needed jobs,
better jobs and more jobs and even better jobs.”

How Tupelo could achieve that depended on the
community’s leadership and its citizens.
Harry Martin won’t say exactly how old he is, but he does say with a touch of pride that he has worked for the Community Development Foundation (CDF) 50 years as of October 1, 1998. Actually, Martin’s first memories of Tupelo date to his childhood, when he heard grownups talking about the terrible tornado of 1936 that destroyed the town. It would be years later before he visited the city. He was a college student at Mississippi State University, when one of his professors asked him to study a new program on rural community development being initiated in Tupelo. He spent the summer of 1947 in Tupelo, graduated in May 1948 and, by October of that year, had begun work with the Cooperative Extension Service, which would later become part of the CDF.

Martin likes to tell a story about one of his first days on the job, a story that he says illustrates the "Tupelo Spirit." There was a man named Buford Purser, who was the sheriff of McNairy County, Tennessee, in the early 1970s. Martin describes how Purser, almost single-handedly and at great personal risk, challenged the criminals who were running the county. Purser soon became a legend in Tennessee.

Through sheer guts and determination, Purser sought out and destroyed the gambling, prostitution, and illegal drug and alcohol operations rampant in the county. Hollywood even made a movie about his life, Walking Tall. Books were written about the sheriff and ballads were composed and sung about the "two-fisted, racket-bustin' cop."

For Martin, the story is more personal. Years before Purser became a lone hero for breaking up the crime syndicate in Tennessee, Tupelo friends and neighbors had kicked the same bunch out of their town.

As Martin tells it, a tough district attorney in Alabama ran the unsavory characters out of his state back in the late 1940s so they fled to Tupelo and Lee County, Mississippi, where they set up shop and began taking over the town with their illegal activities.

New on the job at the CDF, Martin was having breakfast at a local restaurant when suddenly he heard a commotion in the street. He looked outside and was surprised to see hundreds of people gathering at the downtown courthouse. He thought he’d better find out what was going on, so he quickly ran outside and joined the crowd.

"There were probably a thousand people there," Martin said. "It was an unannounced meeting. There was no notice in the paper. Word had just circulated across town that there was going to be a meeting on this."

After the crowd gathered, they elected Martin as one of the leaders. "I thanked them very much then asked: ‘What am I supposed to be leading?’" Martin didn’t have any idea what was going on, nor what had aroused the citizens of his county to take action. He soon found out. The people didn’t like what was happening to their town. They didn’t like the unsavory characters and the gambling, liquor, and prostitution they brought with them. They feared for their children and their families. They talked about how these criminals had the potential to destroy their town and their way of life. They talked about the problem at work, in barber shops, at church, at lunch counters, wherever citizens came together,
and they decided to hold a meeting. They wanted the criminal element out and they demanded the sheriff and other law enforcement officials take action. They didn’t act quickly enough for the citizens, and within the year, the citizens had organized into a strong voting force. “They took every elected official out of the courthouse,” Martin said. “I mean they just swept it clean. Our citizen involvement goes back that far.”

Through citizens’ initiative, the criminals were forced out of town and public officials were given a strong message. The criminal elements moved on, eventually establishing their base of operations in McNairy County, Tennessee, which is where Sheriff Passer came into the picture.

Now, 50 years later, Martin laughs as he tells the story.

“Those folks in Tennessee got a movie out of it, but we got a community.”

Martin says this proudly and perhaps he is justified. He makes an important point. There probably will be only one Buford Passer, but there will always be Tupelo citizens to deal with problems and issues of their community.

A movie fades, a hero dies, but a community lasts.

This incident has become part of the story that Tupelo and Lee County citizens tell about themselves, part of the master narrative that helps define them. They say, for example, how they act together to achieve common community goals. This story and others paint a picture of how Tupelo people see themselves. John Gardner, the 1965–1967 U.S. secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and former chairman of the National Civic League, said it this way:

If a community is lucky … it will have a shared history and tradition. It will have its “story,” its legends and heroes and will retell those stories often. It will have symbols of group identity—a name, a flag, a location, songs and stories in common—which it will use to heighten its merciless sense of belonging.

From the early days of this century, people in Tupelo and Lee County began to establish certain “patterns of action” that have continued through to the present generations. The actions may differ, but the patterns appear to remain fairly stable. The citizens of Tupelo and Lee County seem to, in most instances, make choices and take actions that benefit the community as a whole, knowing somehow that those decisions will ultimately benefit them as individuals. Grisham and sociologist Ray Oldenburg call this “enlightened self-interest.”

Although there are numerous examples of leadership in Tupelo, elected officials are not usually mentioned among them. Like England’s monarchs, most elected officials in Tupelo appear to be more figureheads than community development leaders. They attend events, perform perfunctory welcoming activities and take action on city and county affairs, but people I spoke with in Tupelo understood that the real leadership was in the CDF and its committees. J. C. Whitehead, retired president of the Bank of Tupelo, explained:

All of this (industrial development) came from business and professional leadership not the political leadership. Politicians can’t do this because, in order to be successful, politicians have to be re-elected. And with only a few exceptions, most politicians can’t take strong positions, carry it off and do that. We haven’t expected a lot out of our city and county governments other than cooperation and we’ve gotten a lot of that.

In his 1970 Tupelo leadership study, Mississippi State University sociologist Harold F. Kaufman asked people in the community to identify the leaders. He found that citizens in Tupelo were not only generally more aware of their leaders than were other communities, but also that they had more consensus in identifying the leaders. His research found a core group of more than 100 community leaders in Tupelo with “thousands of others involved as general participants.”

Grisham calls Tupelo a “leaderful community” because leaders seem to surface everywhere and any place depending on the need and situation. Grisham argues that, in Tupelo, there were a few pivotal leaders who not only provided vision for the community, but also encouraged others to lead. As he wrote:

Transforming leaders understand the wants and needs of the constituents and seek to meet those needs by involving the constituents in the solutions. In the process of so doing, followers are often converted to leaders themselves.
George A. McLean and the Tupelo Journal

One of the “transforming leaders” in Tupelo’s history was George A. McLean. Returning to his home state after graduate studies, McLean decided to buy a newspaper because he thought a newspaper was likely the best way to help the community. As he described it:

I bought a bankrupt newspaper from a bankrupt bank in Tupelo in June 1934.... I never had a course in journalism or a course in business in my life. Therefore, when I opened up and took charge of the Journal, the first thing I did was paint it green and when people asked, I'd say, I'm just as green as grass. I don’t know a darn thing about this business, but I want to be back in my home state and be of service.

McLean’s motives were clear from the beginning. He believed the newspaper should serve as a “catalyst” in the community to help achieve “a flow of progress,” and he often used it in that manner. McLean and the newspaper will be discussed more fully in a later section, but suffice to say that his leadership — both personally and via the newspaper — had a powerful influence on Tupelo that continues to this day. He was called “persuasive and hot-headed,” as well as “a visionary.” He put his own money and time into development projects as well as encouraging others to do so. He was convinced that his ideas for progress should be adopted. When they sometimes were not — in what crops farmers chose to plant, for example — McLean was upset and baffled. When the Rural Community Development Councils (RCDCs) began, McLean would go into the farming communities and talk with people about his vision for the future. Sam Marshall, Jr., who was 82 in 1998, was the first manager of the RCDCs. As he remembers:

He’d go out there and tell them (the farmers) what he was going to do, and they’d say, “Mr. McLean” I really appreciate what you’re doing, but let me study it for a while. And that always would get to him. He’d say, “What is the problem about studying about it? If someone came to me in my business and told me I could save 10 or 20 percent on something, I’d make the decision right then and there.” He just couldn’t understand, and I had a problem sometimes getting him to see it. I’d say, “George, you’ve got to realize that these people have the county agent coming to see them. They have soil conservation people coming around. They have five or six people telling them how to improve what they are doing.” But this was always a big problem with him, with his enthusiasm and his impatience to get things going as fast as he would like.

Rural Community Development Councils

McLean and other Tupelo business leaders were instrumental in the creation of the Rural Community Development Councils (RCDCs), which encouraged local leadership to emerge. They hired Doane Agricultural Services of Kansas City to study Lee County, Mississippi, and create an agricultural plan. They recognized that, in order to keep families together, farmers needed money, and the cotton agricultural base was no longer able to support families. Farmers had to diversify to survive.

Martin said it was True D. Morse, who worked for Doane, who authored the Tupelo Plan. He later became U.S. undersecretary of Agriculture under the Eisenhower administration. McLean and Doane hired Marshall to implement the plan. Other than the time he spent in school, Marshall had spent most of his life in rural areas. Growing up in Northern Virginia, he spent his youth taking care of the family farm after his father had a stroke and was no longer able to work outside in the heat. After two years of college, lack of money interrupted his education. He finally graduated from Virginia Tech in 1944 with a degree in agriculture. By then, he was in the military and had married a woman from Tupelo. After the war, he returned to his wife’s hometown, met McLean, and learned of the Doane study. In a time when jobs were scarce, Marshall landed himself a pivotal leadership position, one that would affect the area for generations to come.

Marshall knew that reaching the farmers wasn’t going to be easy. As he explained:

People can be pretty sensitive about their turf. When you come into a county, the county agent is going to look at all this pretty carefully. I realized early on that I had to be pretty persuasive and a pretty good salesman to get to these people and say, “Look, this is what we are trying to do.”

One part of Marshall’s job was to coordinate all the people, agencies, and services that dealt with the rural communities in Lee County. The big challenge was not the coordination, he said. The big
challenge was helping people understand the project sufficiently, so that they would want things to be coordinated. He knew, without the people's support, the whole plan could fail. "I'd go out there and tell them, 'We need your help. We want you to be a part of all this.' We had to get this message across."

Marshall said several levels of leadership had to be involved in order for the agricultural diversification plan to move forward. There was a distinct interplay of "expert" and "experiential" knowledge among four leadership levels:
1) the "outsider-experts" such as Doane Agricultural Services; 2) experts who were both "insiders and outsiders" such as Marshall and people from Mississippi State College and the Experiment Station; 3) "insider-experts" such as the local county agents, home extension people; and 4) citizens — farmers, school personnel, homemakers. They all had their part to play, Marshall said.

The RCDCs will be discussed more fully later, but by 1946, the agricultural diversification program began in five rural communities. It was important to establish local leadership in the communities involved so one of the first actions was to elect the president and vice president of each of the RCDCs. These leaders then encouraged more local leadership by creating committees to work on specific projects, Marshall said.

Eventually, the RCDCs would come under the umbrella of the primary leadership organization in Tupelo and Lee County, the Community Development Foundation (CDF).

Community Development Foundation

Harry Martin credits Tupelo's World War II veterans for the leadership that made a difference in the county. They returned from the war convinced that they could change things for the better. He explained:

They saw things done differently in other places and they knew things could be different here. They had a strong dedication to change. They unified themselves and stayed unified. They understood that we not only had to do things differently, but we had to stick together in order to work together.

It was the strong leadership of businessmen, bankers, and retailers, as well as the farmers, that resulted in the creation of the CDF. They disbanded the Chamber of Commerce — with its business-focus perception — and created this new organization with new views on leadership. Instead of concentrating power within a small group, CDF organizers had a different philosophy — the more the merrier. The CDF created committees — a great number of committees — each with its own leader and members, thereby dispersing power among many, but retaining unification through the CDF. Martin put it this way:

There has to be a person linkage. Networking is not the proper word for us. This is where we actually linked together community interests among a lot of communities, a lot of towns and a lot of people. We couldn't do this. We couldn't cross those cultural lines. But what we were smart enough to do, and still are doing, was to find the person who could make us cross those lines. The key is involvement and in having intermediary linkers all the way down the line.

Committees were created for special groups, such as civic clubs, churches, schools, industries and, of course, for each of the RCDCs. Everyone in the community either was represented or could be if he chose. Reed said that, in a town the size of Tupelo, there is not enough strong city leadership to support several organizations. This splintering of talent and energy creates ineffectual leadership. The committee system solved that problem, he said. "If there was any group that had an agenda, we'd try to involve them in the CDF." They wanted the smaller groups connected to each other under the umbrella of the CDF. The committees provided open access routes to all citizens and served as a cohesive entity for the town and county. As Martin said:

"They unified themselves and stayed unified. They understood that we not only had to do things differently, but we had to stick together in order to work together."
Citizens and Families

The language Martin uses to describe this kind of leadership makes a good point and certainly reflects a history of Tupelo citizen involvement. During the 1940s, citizens took charge of the town when the criminal elements came in. Citizens in the rural communities listened when Marshall and others began talking with them about crop diversification and conversations continued among the farmers, who took the leadership in trying new crops. The RCDC leaders readily participated as representatives within the CDF, thereby establishing a linkage between the town and rural areas. Even after the CDF began full-scale industrial development recruitment, after more and more factories came into town, there continues to be strong emphasis on citizen involvement in the community. Citizen groups raise money for the public schools, are active in civic and service clubs, and interfaith religious activities. The CDF continues to encourage the plant managers' breakfast meetings, the school personnel luncheon meetings and any other meetings that link groups and interests. Attendance is not a problem. There is no agenda. The meetings have no formal name. The primary purpose is to encourage conversation.

Martin calls it "building human-chemistry capital." At the time of this interview, Martin was getting ready to leave for the regular Thursday luncheon of COG (Council of Governments), an organization that links all of Lee County's local governments and extends beyond into other counties. Anywhere from 20 to 40 people attend. He explained:

We have jurisdiction reports, just to let people know what is going on in every little town. We just share information. We avoid this thing of somebody trying to come in and do a strategic plan for us. That's for the birds! You know strategic planning is one thing, but when you're building chemistry of people, that's an entirely different thing. We've got so many groups of people like this around town, with very powerful people networking. That is our partnership, our public-private partnership.

Once a year, there is an industry education day to encourage dialogue between the private sector and the school teachers on what it takes to continue to make progress. The plant managers get together with about 1,000 school teachers, principals, and superintendents to share information, visit schools and various industries. Martin said different groups have to establish these linkages to better understand one another. If they are not exposed to the other, Martin said, "They cannot develop the quality of human capital we need to make a living in the future." There are many efforts at these kinds of "exposure" to the other in Tupelo, and within each group are citizen leaders.

The history of citizen involvement is passed down from one generation to the next. For example, Jack Reed, Jr. is active in the Rotary Club as well as other service organizations. The younger Reed, like his father before him, serves on several boards in town, is a member of numerous civic organizations and is active in his church. Neither father nor son see anything unusual about this. It is the way it has been for generations. People feel a duty and responsibility to be involved in their community. It is part of the community's patterns of action. As Reed, Sr. said:

My father had a strong relationship with George Melch and George cultivated me. So, like my father, I really didn't have much choice in being involved in the community. Both of my brothers and I were living here and it was just understood. When they needed volunteers for the Red Cross, United Way, or whatever, why we just automatically worked.
When Mississippi Economic Development Director J. Mac Holladay arrived in the state in 1988, he instantly noted the presence of a different attitude in Tupelo. As he wrote:

In a state rampant with political favoritism and a good-ol-boy rewards system, Tupelo stands out for its separation from those tactics.... Tupelo had risen above the petty politics that dominated the rest of the state. It has primarily operated on its own. When I took over the director's position in Mississippi, there was no development relationship between the state and Tupelo. Tupelo was better off with a separate identity.10

Holladay, like Mississippi sociologist Harold Kaufman two decades earlier, compared Tupelo to the beautiful, historic river city of Natchez and found Natchez wanting. "Inner fighting among political leaders stalls projects and quells progress. So Natchez goes slowly backwards."11

Natchez does well at "putting on events," Holladay wrote, "but has no continuing process for change."12 Current economic development theory recognizes that, without bolstering the infrastructure of the community and addressing human needs, there can be little economic development. It was the creation of the Rural Community Development Councils (RCDCs) in the 1940s, a plan that was both brilliant and unique, that established bonds between town and rural areas and helped chart the course toward economic development of Tupelo and Lee County. The report issued on the RCDCs noted that:

A community will not thrive or reach a high degree of attainment, if the people are neglected. Poor health, ignorance, uneducated religious leadership and neglected homes stand in the way of progress.13

Holladay said: "Clearly, Tupelo was willing to say things in 1946 that many communities won't admit today."

The beginning of Tupelo's industrial development sprung from desperate poverty, terrible need, and a determination of the citizens of the Great Depression and World War II to create a new future for their children.

Felix Black, a local retailer back in the 1940s, said most of the people were struggling with the same problems and it was clear that people had to work together to solve them. He explained:

We had some institutions — the three banks, the Daily Journal, the savings and loan, Rexall Drug stores — who became involved. And, even though some of us were competitors, there was a process of cooperation. I think this was the secret. This was the real beginning of all the industrial development that we've experienced since.

This perspective seemed to create a collective understanding that is illustrated by an often-repeated phrase: "So goes Lee County, so goes Tupelo. So goes Northeast Mississippi, so goes Lee County." It is a recognition that the entire area and its citizens are connected and will forever be linked in development endeavors.

Trust in the leadership also is an important factor. John "Red" Rasberry was part of the group who swept the courthouse clean and helped rid Tupelo of organized crime during the 1940s. Later, Rasberry was elected to public office. Perhaps his most noted claim-to-fame is the story of how he "kept his word." It's another story — about trust — told time and again in Tupelo conversations.

In 1967, after 20 years serving as the chancery clerk, Rasberry declined to run again, despite encouragement to do so. The reason? Twenty years earlier, he had told the citizens that he wouldn't. Martin picks up the story:
He was a king leader who swept the courthouse out. And he was a good enough man to say to the people that, if you let me stay (in office) for 20 years, I promise I'll walk away. And he did. He just walked away.

Raspberry continued to be involved in community affairs, serving for more than 30 years as a member of the hospital board of directors, for example, but the decision not to run again for chancery clerk was a hard one. "I just felt 20 years was long enough for the same person in the same office. It was tough to give up a good-paying job and not run, but I kept my word. I'm sincere about that."

In the years to come, the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Tupelo citizens would continue a tradition of placing a priority on human capital when faced with the challenges of needed health care, better educational opportunities, and racial division. The people were able to make the connection between good medical care for children, educational opportunities, good jobs, and good wages to their earlier concerns about "putting food on the table" and keeping their sons and daughters nearby in their home community. They were able to "see" the advantages of integrating the public schools voluntarily, before they were faced with a divisive court order.

This focus on human capital is part of the success of the RCDCs. The community development councils were a practical way to promote the benefits of working together and building linkages with other rural areas in Lee County and beyond.

**RCDCs**

Sam Marshall's earlier experience working in the rural areas of Virginia gave him valuable insights when he began organizing the Rural Community Development Councils (RCDCs). He understood these people's way of life. He knew they were going to need to have citizen support or the agricultural diversity plan — proposed by True D. Morris, Doane Agricultural Services, and McLean — wasn't going to work.

His first step was to begin talking with six or seven key people in each rural community. He explained the plan and asked for their support. These key people encouraged friends and neighbors to attend a series of talks about crop diversification and produce distribution. Rural communities are built around the school, Marshall said, so the first visit was to the superintendent. The public school would serve as the public meeting space, but the question remained — how could one get the people to come to the schools for the night meetings? Marshall devised a plan.

We decided to buy a movie projector. We'd rent films, show a full-length movie, and the ticket price, so to speak, was that we would expect you to sit and be attentive to a 30-minute talk about agricultural practice, or about a program, or listen to a dairy specialist, or a county agent talk about corn production.

Marshall ran around the county, trying to convince superintendents to allow the use of their schools for this program. Flyers were printed and spread throughout the area to announce the movie and meetings. McLean, through his newspaper, had already laid the foundation, explaining what the program hoped to accomplish.

The rural school buildings offered easy, familiar access, and community members were not only eager to hear what the agricultural experts had to say, but also eager to view the latest film. Marshall recalled:

Those "Wild West" movies were big in those days. The children would take the notices home to their parents, and they got to be a pretty big factor in this. They'd say, "Mama, we've got to go see these." So they'd get them to that picture show and stay for the whole program. We averaged almost 300 people in 5 communities that first week and that first week set the pattern. In two weeks, we would be back with a different show and a different speaker. These were the beginnings of the RCDCs.

After the movies, the program speaker, and ensuing discussion, the group would elect its leaders, the president, and vice president of the RCDC. The series of talks was kicked off in October 1946 with a story in the Tupelo Daily Journal. The newspaper report said that more than 1,000 people attended the first week of meetings to listen to George McLean talk about "Cotton's Future."

Marshall also traveled the countryside networking with farmers, encouraging them to try new crops, telling them about distribution plans. Most people in rural Lee County had no telephones. Marshall drove to farms and, when he arrived, would walk
out to the fields to talk with farmers as they worked. “We spent some long hours and a lot of miles making those contacts,” he said. A 14-hour workday wasn’t unusual for Marshall during the early days of the RCDCs. He made sure all the agricultural agencies, as well as business leaders and bankers, were invited to these early discussions.

We were very conscious of the fact that we had to bring in all these agencies,” Marshall said. “You had to make sure they received recognition and were introduced even if they didn’t say anything. These might be farm loan people, county agents, experiment station people, or civic club representatives. We were trying to get as many of these people involved as possible.

Marshall, Doane Agricultural Services, and McLean soon initiated another plan to encourage farmers to diversify — an annual contest. By 1947, the project had grown beyond Lee County and spread into the other counties in Northeast Mississippi. The Rural Community Contest was open to any rural community in a seven-county area. Prizes totaling $1,250 were to be awarded to communities that had the top score, according to the points noted on a score card. To encourage cooperation, the prizes were for communities only, not for individuals.

There were numerous ways to earn points, including organizing the RCDC itself and holding regular community meetings. Other points could be gained by trying new methods of agricultural production and crop management, as well as organizing events or being active in the following areas of the community life: recreation, health, education, club work, religion, government, and individual home or farm improvements.

Farmers earned points for their communities if they tried innovative farming methods, if they planted hybrid corn, set out at least one acre of pine seedlings, or even if they would “install electric lights in your home.” Marshall said the contests were very successful. They not only encouraged people to work together for a common goal, they became the “talk-of-the-town.”

People would be talking about this at church and the meetings after school and would say, “This is my first time planting hybrid corn.” Or, “I’m doing a special practice they recommended on the pasture,” or others would say, “I’m going to grow an acre of strawberries for the first time...” Then, at the end of the year, they’d come together in Tupelo where they were recognized as communities and awards were given. The individuals took great pride in the fact that what they had done had ended up helping their community. It was a big thing for these communities to accomplish.

The farmers were doing their part in producing new crops. Now the town had to do its part and provide marketing and distribution. There were no distribution problems with the usual crops. Cotton, poultry, and dairy markets were well established.

It was the new crops — sweet potatoes, strawberries, boysenberries — that needed a market. Town leaders — the Chamber of Commerce, the local banks, businesses — founded the Tupelo Marketing Company to meet the distribution need.

The Tupelo Plan was in operation. Rural communities were linked and there was a central group of railroad and business leaders in Tupelo to make sure the produce got to market. By the late 1940s, people were calling Tupelo “the city without limits.”

The Rotary Club, the Kiwanis, the Civitans, the Lions, and other service clubs each had a specific rural community they were assigned to visit. They’d drive out once a month, meet with the Rural Community Development Council leaders, learn what was going on in the area, and report back to their club membership. This not only kept the communication lines open — remember that most of the farmers back then had no telephones — it also established strong relationships among city and country folk, reducing feelings of competitiveness and separateness that residents of other towns sometimes felt.

Although black farmers were involved in the RCDCs, some leaders say the black voices were lost among the decisions made by whites. Their presence in rural development efforts was hardly noticed in a county where only about 20 percent of the population is black. Palmer Foster, a longtime

“The individuals took great pride in the fact that what they had done had ended up helping their community.”
civic activist in Tupelo, called black representation in higher level jobs or leadership position "measly." He continued:

I'd say that in the early 1950s there were probably in the industry the city had then, probably less than 10 black people employed in industry. And I might be pushing it. I'm not talking about the fertilizer plant, the cotton plant and like that. That was normally where you put your blacks anyway. I'm talking about high-paying industry jobs.

Yet the black community strongly supported the efforts being made through the RCDCs and the CDF to bring in more jobs. They, too, needed work, Foster said. And they, like other members of the community, saw some benefits from increased and diversified agricultural and industrial development.

The early focus on development was agriculture because more than 80 percent of the economy was tied to farming. But fledgling efforts to draw manufacturing were already bearing fruit. In 1946, the same year McLean and others contracted with Morse and Deane to develop "the Tupelo Plan," city officials were working to bring one of the first industries, Daybright Lighting, into Tupelo.

But it was the rural development councils - not the Chamber of Commerce or manufacturing - where the interest was in the beginning. Reed said. "It was the tail wagging the dog in a sense. The focus was on increasing farm productivity and getting employment for men."

It became increasingly obvious that a central organization was needed to coordinate all the activity. The Chamber of Commerce seemed a logical place to start, but in Tupelo, the chamber's role was already shifting, moving away from the business concentration toward a community focus. In fact, the agriculture committee within the chamber, already directly linked to the RCDCs, was stronger than the chamber itself. The business leaders didn't hesitate. They got rid of the Chamber of Commerce. A December 8, 1948, newspaper story announced: "Tupelo's Chamber of Commerce exists no more. It has been swallowed up by its own agricultural department." The agricultural department eventually became the Community Development Foundation (CDF).

With the RCDCs in process, the focus shifted to manufacturing and industrial development. But it took money to make money and when CDF's budgetary needs were calculated, leaders saw problems. They needed $90,000 to $100,000 and they had less than $45,000. The CDF did what it usually did when faced with a problem. It created a committee — this time a fundraising committee with Reed and Rasberry in charge. They came up with an innovative plan that not only raised the money, but instilled widespread community ownership of the CDF. Following the biblical directive to "each give according to your means," the committee created various levels-of-giving classes.

"We started out with a $2,000 a plate dinner, then finally got down to a $60 a year membership," Rasberry said. "That way everyone was involved and felt like they owned a part of the CDF."

In 1952, the community raised $150,000 to build a plant for Morris Tutorian, a furniture manufacturer who would later be called "the father of the Mississippi Furniture Industry." The goal then was to seek small industries that would employ 200-400 people. The CDF didn't want large plants that would overwhelm the town and create a potential "company town." They wanted industries that would grow with the town, and essentially that is what they got, Reed said. Martin agreed and said that this was the idea behind True Morse's Tupelo Plan. Morse had told Martin, "Don't build a big Tupelo. Disperse development geographically into the cultural regions." Martin said this protects rural areas as well as communities. Lee County's population is about 75,000 and there are more than 82,000 jobs in the area. The jobs are dispersed across a wide area of northeast Mississippi and there is no one, huge, employer, but many small and mid-size industries. Only a few of the plants in Tupelo have more than 1,000 employees. All of this was part of the Tupelo Plan.
"The Roots Are Bitter": Conflict and Crises in a Learning Community

In a success story such as Tupelo, there is a tendency for people to focus on the good things and gloss over the problems and troubles. When faced with so many objective accomplishments, this is easy to do. Yet conflict and pain are also part of the human condition and, in fact, may have a larger influence on who we are and who we become. Certainly all mythic heroes and heroines must face problems and conflict. It is how they meet those challenges that creates the story and makes it legend.

In one sense, Tupelo is no different from other towns. Throughout its history, it has seen disasters, poverty, racial tension, and inner fighting among the town's people. It is the manner in which Tupelo leaders and citizens address these issues that makes the difference.

Harry Martin said that the town leaders have always focused on the human elements, relationships, and needs. Indeed, that seems to be a kind of pattern of action within Tupelo, one that may have helped citizens meet and move through several challenges and disasters. If community memories and stories help shape citizens, then it is important to briefly consider Tupelo's early history.5 Before George McLean bought the Tupelo Daily Journal, before he hired Doane Agricultural Services to do its study on the rural areas, before True D. Morse and Sam Marshall helped bring about the "Tupelo Plan," and before the creation of the Community Development Foundation, Tupelo citizens were a community.

Just as in the 1940s, Tupelo bankers at the turn of the century were strong community leaders. Marshall recalls that he wasn't the first person sent out into the rural areas to try to improve agriculture. "As early as 1916, The Peoples Bank had started a program ... trying to see what they could do to promote (agricultural) diversification," he said.

Tupelo has been home to Reed's family for generations. He agrees with Marshall's assessment.

As he said:

The Tupelo Spirit didn't start with George McLean. We had strong leadership before and we still have strong leadership today. It has a history to it. It's the culture. Over the years, this commitment to community took root, and it has been passed on from generation to generation.

Sociologist Harold Kaufman, who studied leadership in Tupelo in the 1960s, wrote that: "A community is both process and product. It is a way of doing things as well as the end result. In this age of gadgets and machines, we tend to emphasize the product and overlook the process."6

Part of the "process" explanation lies within relationships and shared experiences. A number of events occurred in Tupelo that citizens there still talk about, still remember — or repeat from generational memory. These events and experiences add to Tupelo's cultural history, its stories and its citizens' patterns of action — the process that eventually brings about the product. When I interviewed some of the people who helped begin the community development projects, I also spoke with people in their 30s and 40s. During the course of conversations, both age groups mentioned four pivotal events in the town's history that illustrated how Tupelo dealt with problems and conflict. These events were the 1936 tornado; the attempt to unionize a local factory;
the 1978 Ku Klux Klan march down the streets of Tupelo; and a questionable purchase of a downtown hotel.

The Tornado

One of the events most often mentioned by the Tupelo citizens interviewed, was the devastating tornado that struck the town April 5, 1936, just as people were coming home from Sunday night church services. The storm ravaged the town, killing more than 230 people, injuring more than 1,000 and destroying the Church Street Elementary School, along with many businesses and homes. One newspaper darkly observed there was no shortage of morgue space in downtown buildings because the Great Depression already had forced the closure of most of the businesses. A New York Times headline read: "Many Report Dead in Tupelo; TVA City Wrecked."

A baby, living in a tiny two-room shack in Tupelo, survived even though a nearby church was destroyed. The baby was Elvis Presley. One woman, Patsy Jackson, was born on the night of the tornado. Today, she proudly wears a T-shirt proclaiming: "I survived the tornado of Tupelo, Miss. of 1936." The event is so etched into community memory that the "Tupelo Tornado" was the name chosen for a Mississippi baseball team in the independent Big South League. And, the tornado explains why some of Tupelo's streets look so empty. All the towering ancient oak trees in downtown Tupelo were destroyed that April day.

It was this tornado that caused then-10-year-old Harry Martin, living in a city hundreds of miles south of Tupelo, to remember the town, when he was asked years later to help study rural development there. He recalls listening to his father talking with neighbors about the horrifying event. "The name Tupelo was indelibly placed in my mind," he wrote.

Marshall said, when he first arrived in Tupelo in the early 1940s to begin agricultural development efforts, the 1936 tornado was fresh in the minds of the people. As he recalled:

I received tremendous support from the people who were working with me, from the community, from the man on the street. I mean, whether he was a merchant or employee or whatever his role might be, the town had come together. I think the experience of recovering from that terrible disaster of the tornado in 1936 had a lot to do with bringing people together. They had to work together to get through that.

Martin said that business and management know-how is important in building or — in the case of the tornado aftermath — rebuilding community, but nothing can replace the "chemistry of working together." That lesson was learned long ago in Tupelo and is still being practiced today, he said. When business leaders, school teachers, and plant managers gather at informal luncheon or breakfast meetings often "the only structure is conversation."

After the tornado struck, citizens hardly were able to believe how close they had come to an even worse tragedy. The storm hit on a Sunday. Had it ripped through town on a school day, all the children would have been inside the school building that was destroyed. They decided to rebuild the school at the same site, but this time the structure would be "tornado-proof." Even the Great Depression would not prevent the town's people from spending extra money to ensure the safety of their children. The new school's walls were constructed with eight inches of concrete, reinforced with steel. It was so innovative in its art deco style and use of materials for a "tornado-proof" school, that a replica of it was shown at the 1938 World's Fair in Chicago. By 1992, the Church Street Elementary School building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and in 1998, school officials and the citizens observed the sixtieth anniversary of the "city's oldest elementary school" and remembered the tornado that devastated the town.

People remember. But they not only recall the tornado, they remember rebuilding the city — together. Palmer Foster, who was 75 in 1998, is one of the older black leaders in Tupelo. The tornado particularly devastated the area of town where many blacks lived. He recalls whites and blacks working side by side after the storm. As he said: "The tornado kind of redirected people toward rebuilding this place. And, we thought, 'If we're going to rebuild, we're going to have to do it by working together.'"
The Cotton Mill and Unions

In the grips of the Great Depression, citizens had all they could do to meet the challenge of rebuilding their city, but about a year after the tornado struck Tupelo, the community was faced with yet another crisis. Union organizers had come to a cotton mill in Tupelo. During the 1930s, cotton was still king in the South. Marshall said that more than 80 percent of the county was devoted to agriculture and about 80 percent of that was tied to cotton. Tupelo's cotton mill and garment industry primarily employed women earning about $12 a week. There was little employment available for men at that time and families depended on the women's paycheck. As Marshall recalls:

People from the outside came in and tried to organize labor in that cotton mill. The employees became dissatisfied because they realized that they were way below the normal pay scale that was being paid in other states. Of course, the union organizers bring in this kind of information. And this got real serious, real serious.

The situation escalated and soon classic division lines were drawn between the business and retail classes and the workers. The factory strike turned violent as strikers and the National Guard confronted one another. The union organizers and mill employees felt the company was taking advantage of the work force, and the mill management decided to close the plant rather than unionize. This forced employees and their families out of the company-owned houses, so now workers had neither jobs nor places to live.

"This brought about a real separation between employees and leaders in the community," Marshall said.

It was a battle no one was winning. The union organizers failed to achieve their goal. The factory was no longer producing and managers lost their jobs. The cotton mill workers no longer had homes or jobs, and the businesses and banks in Tupelo suddenly found themselves without customers and losing money. George McLean, the publisher of the Tupelo Daily Journal, had published numerous articles supporting the rights of the workers, and many business people blamed him for causing the strike. Marshall picks up the story:

He took the side of the employees and was boycotted by the merchants and the businessmen because they more or less went with the managers of the plant and their problems. George had to weather some rough seas with the customers he had and the advertisers because they just stopped supporting him. It took him about three years to win his way back into where he was pretty well accepted again by some of the businessmen.

The cotton mill never did reopen and McLean got most of the blame for that, Marshall said. Some merchants felt, had McLean not lent his support to the employees, the threat of unionization would have disappeared, the situation would have calmed down, and the mill would have stayed open. Now, the town had lost one of its biggest employers, causing severe economic hardship among the people.

The cotton mill closing was traumatic, but important to the community's learning and its memories. It provided dramatic evidence of how interconnected all elements in the town were and, when one suffered, all suffered. It also reinforced the resolve of leaders that the answers to their difficulties lie in achieving economic prosperity and creating jobs. But the town leadership did not ever again want to depend on one big factory for the town's livelihood. As Tupelo gained more industries, town leaders continued to steer away from huge industries and instead focused recruitment efforts on 200-400-worker plants. Finally, the mill closure made the town's citizens—merchants as well as mill workers—very leery of unions, which would ultimately affect the town's response to unionization in the future.

Years later, when Tupelo began drawing more and more industries into the area, people would remember the cotton mill incident. It still left a bad taste in their mouths. Yet people recognized that unions existed for a reason, to prevent factories and uncaring managers from taking advantage of the workers. Town leaders knew that the workers in these factories who were being located in Tupelo deserved a fair shake. Most of the employees would be Tupelo and Lee County citizens and Tupelo leaders wanted to make sure that northern plant managers would treat them fairly. But how to do that without risking union involvement and a repeat of the cotton mill incident?

A group of business leaders involved in the Community Development Foundation (CDF) decided to move beyond the confrontational aspects
of union vs. management, legal contracts, and codes. Instead, they reverted to their past patterns of action and began focusing on the human element and human relationships. The values important to citizens were honesty, fairness, and justice. Leaders knew they had to establish a climate of trust. To this end, business leaders decided to create their own liaison to represent both workers and management. Later, this group would evolve into a regular committee with the CDF. Whitehead explained the philosophy behind this idea:

What we’ve tried to do with the organization we have is to urge managers to operate their plants in such a fashion that there’s really not a threat of unionism that occurred in the past. Most unionism and plants that organize come from people feeling they are being mistreated, not necessarily that they are underpaid, but not being treated fairly.

When there is a grievance, the Community Relations Association gets involved and tries to resolve the problem. This group meets regularly with plant managers to keep the CDF connected to day-to-day happenings at the plants. Members of this group helped resolve the deer hunting situation. Whitehead said that employees at local plants wanted to take time off to go deer hunting. In the South, the opening of deer season is a major event, and CDF leaders instantly recognized there was going to be trouble if management didn’t understand this and allow the workers some time off.

As Whitehead said:

I mean they’re probably going to go do it anyway, so you manage it in such a fashion that those fellows feel good and you were looking after them and giving them an opportunity to do things they like to do.

Reed said some people might say that Tupelo has an antunion stance, but he doesn’t believe that is so. If there is a distrust of unions, it comes more from Tupelo’s memories of the cotton mill experience. Also, rumors of other towns’ experiences may have influenced Tupelo. Rasberry said people heard of other communities whose unionized plants appeared to make it more difficult to entice more industry into those areas. This reinforced Tupelo’s distrust of unions. McLean McLean helped establish the CDF’s Community Relations Association, whose primary responsibility is to serve as mediators between labor and industry and to rebuild and nurture trust.

Today, some plants in Tupelo are unionized, but by focusing on what is important and valuable to employees and employers rather than just the rules, town leaders have tried to raise the ethical level of labor and management relationship. Nevertheless, people recognize some tension may always be present. As Whitehead said:

I think we’ve improved the ability of many of these managers coming in. Their usual experience is with unions, but we’ve had lots of success in getting those folks to be the kind of good managers we wanted as opposed to the rough, tough, hard-nosed type management that many of the people are accustomed to.

The language Whitehead uses is worth noting here. The emphasis is not on unions per se, but on relationships. The focus is on helping everyone get along well enough to achieve the broader common goal of creating a good community and good jobs. As in the case of the deer hunting episode, community leaders try to identify potential sensitive areas that might rip the town apart, then assert their influence to make sure that doesn’t happen. Sometimes, however, leaders fail to accurately assess the situation.

Racial Tensions and the Klan

People in Tupelo also tell about how their city was the first in the state to integrate the public school system without a court order, but racial tensions in the South were evident in places other than the school system. One area of discord was in police departments, specifically the racial makeup of those departments and the treatment of black prisoners.

An incident mentioned frequently by Tupelo citizens occurred in the late 1970s, when white police officers beat a black prisoner. The police brutality incident sparked anger and fear that led
to wide-scale community protests, a boycott of businesses, and a confrontation with the Klan. Tupelo suddenly found itself the unhappy host of national television crews who came to film the marches — not the kind of publicity a city such as Tupelo wants. As Whitehead recalled:

I think we all recognized that we had no place for the Ku Klux Klan here. All they did was create confrontations, and if we didn't manage that, then we were going to lose support of the blacks....

Whitehead and other white leaders were particularly concerned because they had thought, by addressing the integration of the public school system head-on, they not only had made a strong statement in support of public education, but also in support of blacks' education. Now, with the police incident, this support seemed to be eroding rapidly. "We had thought we had gotten above all that," he said.

During the conversations about the Klan incident, most of the white people focused on the idea of trying to pull together as a community. The concern seemed to reflect the long-standing focus of the community at least as far back as the 1940s — to stay united so economic well-being could be achieved. On the other hand, black residents spoke of the concerns for equality in the division of the economic-prosperity pie.

Memories of the time the Klan came to Tupelo are still fresh and sensitive. It is another example of crisis and tension that the community leadership hesitates to discuss, but that is again important to understand. Martin said frankly that, no matter what "stories" were told about this, they were "all wrong," but he declined to explain what "really happened." As he said: "It was dealt with very constructively. It did not come from the business community. It came from the black community, and that's all I'm going to say."

The white business leadership apparently had missed the cues of blacks' concerns and were caught unaware when the police brutality incident occurred and the Klan arrived. This "unawareness" related to another problem within the CDF and business leadership in Tupelo. There were — and for that matter still are — few blacks involved in leadership positions.

Charles Penson is a Tupelo native in his forties. He likes to tell the stories of his mother's childhood friend, Elvis Presley. Although Elvis was white and Penson's mother was black, poverty was a common denominator and made them neighbors in the poorer area of town. Before Elvis moved to Memphis and Penson's mother to Chicago, they played together. "We were great Elvis fans," Penson said. "My mother had every one of his records, and we learned every one of his songs. I could sing them all today."

Penson is one of the younger generation of blacks in Tupelo who is carrying on the tradition of leadership and involvement. He is the president of the board of the Black Business Association of Mississippi and is concerned about the general lack of black leadership in Tupelo. Ironically, some of the gains made by blacks during the civil rights era, had the unintentional effect of destroying black community leadership. As he said:

With integration, what happened is a lot of the black businesses fell by the wayside. Just as a lot of the black schools did. And, in the black community, teachers were truly professionals, and they carried a lot of weight. But with integration, the stronger, smarter teachers got out of the teaching profession, so the black community suffered. The gains that were made economically in Tupelo, in my estimation, were made mainly by the white business owners. They put together the plan.

Penson currently works as the human resource director at the Northeast Tupelo Daily Journal, but previously he worked for the city of Tupelo. It was the confrontation with the Klan and the threat to Tupelo's economic security and development that forced communication between blacks and whites. Penson explained:

To be perfectly frank, I was hired as the personnel director for the city of Tupelo in 1980 because, in 1978, the black community was marching down Main Street going South and the Ku Klux Klan was marching up Main Street going North. And national television networks came down and were filming it and
there was a boycott going on and some of those same business leaders (in the CDF) said, "We've got to do something about this."

The black community wanted the police involved in the incident dismissed from the force. More than that, they wanted to have some black representation within the police department itself. When they boycotted white-owned businesses, the business community took the situation seriously. In the beginning, the situation was very difficult and discussion was tense. As Reed recalls:

The boycott was actually very effective. We got together and met, and we agreed to virtually everything they asked us to do, but that didn’t satisfy them. They were just trying to keep things going.

As often happens, once closed lines of communication are opened, there is a floodgate effect. During the talks, black leaders began listing all kinds of concerns and grievances that extended beyond the specific incident by the police. There was an additional element of tension. Alfred "Skip" Robinson, a black activist from Holly Springs, Mississippi, was — depending on your point of view — using inflammatory rhetoric to encourage the boycott or, using the police incident as a springboard for blacks to seek justice and equality. Whithead said Robinson's words resonated with many of the blacks in Tupelo because there was then, and still are now, feelings that economic and educational opportunities are lacking for the black community. As he said:

What we've been trying to say to blacks, is that somehow we've got to lift ourselves above what's happened in the past, and we can't let people like Skip Robinson poison your minds and your kids' minds.... Once this sort of thing starts, it's hard to control. People get hard-lined on both sides.

Eventually, the white police officers connected with the beating were dismissed from the force. A biracial committee that had formed in 1976 was reactivated now. McLean, Reed, Whithead, and other white business leaders worked with the black leadership to try to resolve the crisis. Past efforts at working together on projects encouraged leaders to try to work through the current crisis. Reed continues:

We were trying to get Head Start going here and that was a catalyst because we had to move together on that. I can remember it took all the patience in the world in those early days to meet biracially and accomplish anything at all. I think the main thing you had to do was just listen and show that you really did want something positive to come out of this. Because we just met and met and met and met. It took a great deal of patience... But we did build relationships.

Palmer Foster is known in Tupelo as one of the first blacks to serve as the state director of the Mississippi Boy Scouts. He had helped create the original biracial committee in Tupelo and was appointed chairperson in 1978. He, along with other leaders, began talking about race relations in Tupelo. As he remembers:

We had problems and we had to address them together. When problems don't get talked about, they don't get solved.... Both groups, I guess, were pushing for their own way, separatism. Regardless of what caused the problem, it was pulling us apart more than pushing us together. But with this biracial committee, we were able to sit down and iron out what the issues were.... We had problems and still do have problems, but we can talk about them. We don't try to hide them. We may not solve them all, but we certainly do talk.

But there was more to the situation than talk in 1978. The black community wanted action. Specifically, the community was concerned about the situation that had created the climate that enabled brutality to occur. Foster continues the story:

Dismissing the police officers in itself was not really the answer to the problems that existed in the police department as a whole. I think what really settled this was when we said that, unless something is done, we will continue to have this type of thing happen again. Two things happened. Those two policemen were let go and they started working toward getting some black police. And we got two,
The racial makeup of Tupelo has remained fairly stable during the past few decades at 20-25 percent black. And, although the black population in Tupelo has benefited from the city's economic development success, Penson said he and other black civic leaders remain concerned about the lack of opportunities in the area for young blacks. As he said:

"It's kind of like catching the crumbs from the rich man's table kind of thing. If you happen to be there, it's going to fall. But we only have one black furniture manufacturer and he wasn't trained by the others because it's kind of a closed society. Most of your intelligent, young blacks who go to college don't come back again.35"

White leaders have learned that, when communication breaks down, problems occur. As Whitehead said:

"One of the things we learned over the years, and I believe most of the whites recognized this from incident about the Klan, is that it is essential for us to have our ears to the ground and be listening to the black community. We're not doing that as well as I think we should.

Inequities remain, but because of economic development and educational efforts made in Tupelo, there may be less racial tension there than in other parts of Mississippi. Penson said that Tupelo is better able to deal with racial problems because of the concentrated efforts to work together. Despite problems, Tupelo is home for Penson.

There is not a community that I know of that I would rather live in than Tupelo. This is a great place. I've served overseas in Munich, lived on the East coast, the West coast, and I haven't found a better community than Tupelo for creating a good quality life for your family.

The Hotel Property

The appearance of conflict of interest can be just as damaging as the reality, and that may have been the crux of the matter a few years ago, when a group of high-profile Tupelo businessmen purchased an old downtown hotel. Of all the stories of conflict, this one is perhaps still the most sensitive. Some people just simply refused to talk about it, at least on the record. Others tried to dismiss it as something that had occurred, but was now past and not worth talking about. Still others spoke of it in hushed and sad tones, obviously remembering the pain and difficulty involved in confronting the town's leaders on their action.

The reader won't get to the root of the matter in this account, but it probably isn't necessary anyway. This story is included because, despite what some people said, it is an important story, but not for the particulars, or even in trying to assign or determine blame. It is important because it shows, once again, how Tupelo citizens spotted potential trouble that could divide the community and immediately took action to prevent it.

The story provides another example of community patterns of action similar to the 1940s incident, when the town's citizens took charge, ran the organized crime elements out of town, and "swept the courthouse clean." They said, basically, they weren't going to stand for it. And they didn't stand for it in their Community Development Foundation leaders either, whether or not there was a conflict of interest. It just didn't look right. And where there's doubt, there's a possibility of division. Tupelo residents already understood that division is not healthy for the town, economic development, or the citizens.

It had started innocently enough, with about ten or so Tupelo business leaders deciding to purchase a downtown hotel. It ended up with Harry Martin's job on the line, an investigative reporter from the Memphis Commercial Appeal tracking the story, and a CDF committee holding court and passing judgment on their leaders. The people interviewed referred to it as "a big uproar." Depending on which perspective you were coming from, Martin and the other business people were either trying to use their positions in the community to get rich quick, or they were trying to save a hotel that was going under and restore it for the beautification of downtown. Martin explains:

"The hotel was a civic center of Tupelo. Ten guys got together and asked me to join them in buying it. They bought it to keep it from getting into the hands of disrepair and bringing in an element that would be negative to downtown development. It was in the exact location of where the Bank of Mississippi is today... I didn't initiate the buying. I was just a party to it. Then, when they bought it, they told me that I was going to run it. I didn't want to run it, but I ran it for a while for them."
People in town started talking. The hotel ownership was a hot topic of conversation. Martin soon began hearing critical comments about him and the hotel, so he called a meeting of the group to tell them it was somebody else's turn to run the hotel because he was taking all the criticism.

So I said, "Okay, who's going to run it?" And they said, "Uh huh, I ain't going to run it," so I said, "Guess what then, we'll tear the thing down," so we tore it down. I had no interest in running a hotel, or owning the real estate. It was a very bad investment in fact for all of us... But we did direct use of it before we turned the property loose, which is why the Bank of Mississippi is standing there today. So we achieved what we were hoping to achieve. But the public perceived it being for a different purpose. Money. But it was not. None of the people involved with that, including myself, made money.

There are, needless to say, other versions of this story. In one version, citizens had been complaining to various leaders, including George McLean, the publisher of the newspaper. They were demanding action be taken. In another version, it wasn't only citizens complaining, but reports that a reporter from the nearby Memphis newspaper was about to break a story charging the CDF and community development leaders with conflict of interest.

Bad press is not conducive to economic development. When McLean heard about this, phones started ringing and leaders took action, and convened a kind of hearing at the CDF on whether Martin should be retained or be fired. Two longtime town leaders and friends were assigned opposite roles. J. C. Whitehead was appointed by the CDF to argue in favor of Martin's staying in the director's position while Jack Reed was assigned the opposite role, to argue for Martin's dismissal.

In one sense, this was a common function of the CDF, to identify problems and serve as a public space in which to discuss them. That was the purpose of the various committees in the CDF because, as Whitehead said, "A lot of differences can become magnified unless you can talk about them. Once you talk about things, usually they can be resolved." Now the talk centered around the head of CDF itself. Whitehead explained what happened:

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We went at it for 30 days. We let everybody talk. There was nothing really wrong with buying the property, but there was a perception that Harry was using his post to help himself financially and there was a broad uproar over it. It all washed out and nobody has any animosity about it. But that's the way things can get fouled up. You have to address problems right away and try to find some solutions.
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As Martin said, the property was torn down, the land sold to the banking institution, and Martin retained his job. Everything may well have been on the up and up, but as in the 1940s, citizens were giving a strong message to their leaders that even the appearance of wrongdoing was something they took seriously. They saw it as detriment to their city and ultimately, to themselves and families.

Tupelo leaders may not always succeed, but they attempt to stay one step ahead of the problems, addressing them straight on and not giving up no matter how long it takes. Reed said that's the "planting patience" part in Tupelo's efforts toward development. The current publisher of the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, Billy Crews, agrees. The newspaper, under George McLean's leadership, was in it for the long haul, Crews said. Community development, educational development, human development are all long-term commitments, he said. And the newspaper was going to pursue those kind of stories.
To Create Community:
George McLean and the Tupelo Journal

The good newspaper should be a catalyst in its community, oiling the efforts of widely varying groups to achieve a reasonably smooth, balanced flow of progress. It seeks to provide coherence to scattered and sometimes conflicting objectives, enabling its community to get a better view of priorities and ways in which joint efforts may prove better than splintered activities.

— George A. McLean
From the Journal Publishing Co.
Employee Handbook

Someone asked me what I did during the 1960s. I said I defended George McLean and I raised money for the CDF. I didn’t have time to do anything else.

— Tupelo businessman Jack Reed, Sr.

My father was a minister and he always told me that he’d much rather see a sermon than hear one. To me, George McLean lived more than he talked, and he talked a lot.

— Palmer Foster, chair of Tupelo’s Biracial Committee during the 1978 Klan march

When you walk into the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, the first thing you see is the newspaper’s motto emblazoned on a wall, “Dedicated to the service of God and mankind.” For whatever else publisher George McLean was, everyone I spoke with agreed that he was a deeply religious man who merged his Presbyterian-rooted values with his business and civic life. These beliefs were intermingled throughout his life.

One illustration of how this worked is seen in a statement signed by McLean and all the newspaper management. Attached to the statement is a column entitled: “A God’s Child Is A Somebody.” The message is about the sacredness of each person.

The statement reads in part:

The comments below express the basic policy of the Journal toward its employees. And we hope that it will similarly express the attitude of all employees toward each other. There are no unimportant employees on the Journal staff and certainly there are no unimportant people...

After, looking over the motto, the second thing you notice is that the newspaper building has no windows. None.

The reason for that is simple, said the current newspaper publisher Billy Crews. The building is a remodeled warehouse that McLean had built with his own money in the 1960s to help entice industry into Tupelo. Actually, he built more than 650,000 square feet of warehouse space. When the newspaper had outgrown its old headquarters, the offices moved into one of the old warehouses. Crews explains:

Back in the 1960s there was a study that said, if Tupelo was to grow, it had to have industrial start up and support space. And apparently there was not enough of that. It was too big a risk for anybody, any normal capitalist, “to take apparently ... (so) the Journal and Mr. McLean built warehouses to stimulate economic development in this community and area.

“The good newspaper seeks to promote a spirit of neighborliness by the features it carries on the activities, the hopes, and the concerns of the average citizen.”

— George A. McLean,
publisher,
Daily Journal
The personal involvement of the newspaper publisher was based not only on a strong business sense, but also on his religious values. Crews continues:

McLean's business philosophy and this organization's business philosophy in the deepest sense is based on: ... biblical references — “give and it shall be given unto you, for the measure you give is the measure you receive in return.” And from my perspective, having been both an observer and a participant, at least in this case, it's worked. These warehouses are now cash cows. You're talking about our profit margin in the newspaper as peanuts compared to the profit margin in this investment that we made.

Crews said you can trace dozens of Tupelo industries that started in these warehouses McLean built more than 30 years ago.

The warehouses are only one of numerous examples of how McLean used his newspaper, its profits, and his own strong-willed personality to help foster community. He was a strong believer in “putting your money where your mouth is,” and as Foster said, he talked a lot.

Crews was a college student of sociologist Vaughn Grisham, Jr., when Grisham introduced him to McLean. The newspaper owner took a liking to the young student and chose him as his successor. He trusted Crews to continue the same philosophical agenda that McLean had pushed since he bought the paper in the late 1930s and, after 20 years on the job, Crews has followed the path set by McLean.

Crews said McLean's philosophy was not only grounded in his religious convictions but also in his strong business sense. It was “shared self-interest.” As Crews explains:

Our corporate approach is grounded in his understanding of community, whether it's economically, educationally, or socially, ethically, so goes our community and region, so goes our business. It sort of takes the traditional business approach and turns it on its head about 180 degrees. But McLean realized that, in order for this business and this community to grow, we had to invest significantly in the key components of community development.

This is a subtle, but crucial philosophical shift that is important to explore. Newspapers usually make a great deal of money and often publishers donate funds toward a variety of community projects. That is nothing new. But at the Tupelo paper, there is a shift in this thinking. There is no sense here at all that, after the newspaper makes its money, it should give back some of it to the community. In fact, Crews said McLean's philosophy was exactly opposite. As Crews explains:

You have to make the front-end investment in order to be successful... Our approach and philosophy has nothing to do with giving back. It’s a community development philosophy. It’s not a business philosophy. It’s a community development philosophy. I don’t think of myself as a publisher.... I consider my role to be that of a community development person....

Certainly that was the way McLean thought of himself as well. The newspaper was a vehicle to be used to create community and encourage citizen participation in the affairs of the community.

Reed said that “genius is not too strong a word” to describe McLean's efforts to create a dense network of associations all under the umbrella of the CDF. The major players in Tupelo's economic development history were the three local banks, the CDF, the schools, and most definitely the newspaper, Reed said.

The newspaper owner and publisher had his hand in nearly every activity in town from the late 1930s until his death in 1983. He was both loved and hated, admired and despised, and even his most ardent supporters agree that sometimes McLean was difficult. Marshall worked closely with McLean in creating the RCDCs. In fact, during the first year of Marshall's work, McLean was president of the Chamber of Commerce so he was not only pushing the creation of the RCDCs and CDF through his newspaper, but also the Chamber of Commerce.
Although he was a prominent businessman, most of the business people in Tupelo still remembered McLean's role in the cotton mill incident, and some still didn't care much for the man. As Marshall and others said, McLean could be overbearing, stubborn, and a touch righteous. Yet the town's development was moving so fast, it was either get on the band wagon or get out of the way, Marshall said. He recalls: "One of the bankers told me, 'I finally capitulated and went over to McLean's side because I didn't want him to get all the credit for what was going to be done.'"

McLean believed that the purpose of journalism was to help community life go well, and he used his newspaper for that end. Scandals come and go, but the newspaper tried to think "long term," Crews said. The "sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll" emphasis was not for the Tupelo newspaper. Crews explains:

Our preferred content has been education, economic development and human achievement. That's what we think of value to our readers and our region.... There is always tension. We've tried to maintain our quality and integrity about our journalistic responsibility. This concept that the media shouldn't be biased is hogwash. I mean it is. We're all biased. It's whether we understand and recognize our biases.

McLean put it this way in the employee handbook:

The Daily Journal is a responsible newspaper that does not believe every time a donkey brays it has to publicize the event. Since some people are seeking to set one group against another, we at the Journal believe our staff has the responsibility of deciding what is constructive and what is destructive... what is newsworthy and what is a waste of space and newsprint. A newspaper or other news media should be judged as much by what it refuses to print or broadcast as by what it does.

Eventually, the area beyond Tupelo and Lee County was linked economically and industrially. McLean decided that the newspaper's name should be changed to reflect that connection. It became the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal. The newspaper has a circulation of 38,000, about 4,000 more than Tupelo's population. As Crews said, "It's unusual to have circulation in excess of your home town population." In fact, Crews said, despite the fact that, nationally, newspapers continue to lose circulation, the Journal's circulation has risen for 13 of the past 15 years.

Crews continues McLean's vision of newspapering. To "get out of an ivory tower" and to "become participants in the process" actually helps reporters and provides deeper insights into stories, making the reports better, he said. It certainly connects with McLean's beliefs on the connections between journalism and community.

Through his newspaper, he encouraged citizens' participation in civic life. Fifty years before public journalism, McLean was citing some of the philosophical underpinnings of the movement. The following comments by McLean were taken from a statement entitled, "What A Good Newspaper Should Be," which is published in the employee handbook.

- The good newspaper seeks to promote a spirit of neighborliness by the features it carries on the activities, the hopes, and the concerns of the average citizen.
- The good newspaper will not merely report but will enlighten....
- The staff of the good newspaper develops expertise not merely to propose progress, but to assume active leadership in bringing it about, even though this involves leaving the impartial, isolated ivory tower and involves one in activities which may stir controversy.
- The good newspaper is one of the hardest workers and most generous givers in civic affairs, but does not seek to dominate the community in a way that causes others to say, "Let the paper do it."
- The good newspaper reaches out as far as it can touch or see to bring to its readers new ideas, new approaches to life, new methods of meeting problems, and new information that adds interest or joy to life.

McLean had thought about becoming a minister, but instead bought a newspaper. Crews explains:

He saw it as a ... critical component of total community development.... He thought he could make a greater contribution through
the newspaper and have greater influence than being a minister ... or than serving in public office.

McLean was very concerned about newspaper chain ownership. He was convinced that, once local newspaper ownership disappeared, it spelled problems for the community. If the owners lived elsewhere, the primary interest for the newspaper would be profits, not community investment. He made certain this would never happen to his newspaper. He created CREATE.

"We have put millions into our beliefs. Millions. And that has helped stimulate more growth...."

CREATE

Reed called CREATE one of McLean's most important legacies. The community foundation provides funds to boost economic development and encourage leadership organizations throughout the region of northeast Mississippi. "It was just another way ... (of) making a major contribution ... for the future of our community," Reed said.

CREATE — Christian, Research, Education, Action, Technical Enterprise — was developed by McLean to serve as a vehicle to collect and fund local development projects. Eventually, McLean willed his newspaper to CREATE so that its community mission would continue ad infinitum. CREATE is the sole stockholder of the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal. After more than 25 years, CREATE is attracting additional gifts and funding resources other than the newspaper. In January 1998, Reed was just beginning a $10 million fundraising effort for CREATE. As he said:

We have been strong on projects, weak on fundraising. And now we're putting the emphasis on fundraising. We have a goal of $10 million endowment by the year 2000. We now have about two and a half million of that raised in the last year. Hard to do in a community like this. But we think we can do it. I think we can do it.

Of that, Crews said $750,000 came from the newspaper. That was matched by a private donation from McLean's widow, Anna Keirsey McLean and the McLean estate. As Crews said:

We have put millions into our beliefs. Millions. And that has helped stimulate more growth.... There is a great capacity in this community, through its organizations and business leaders, to give toward this community-building process.

Just as the bankers, farmers, and industrial development leaders in Tupelo have a different kind of mind-set toward community investment so, too, does the newspaper. Profits are not the goal. In fact, ad rates are about 20 percent less than comparable size newspapers, Crews said.

We could make a lot more money than we make. But that has not been our primary objective in this institution.... We are very sound financially, but ... you could probably take what the industry standard as a whole has been ... and divide that in half and that was what you would see would be our objectives.

Programs and Projects

Vaughn Grisham, in his book Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community, discusses CREATE, and other programs McLean spearheaded in more detail than is possible here. Suffice it to say that one big focus in Tupelo is education. It definitely was one of McLean's interests.

Through his newspaper and personal efforts, McLean was instrumental in encouraging educational advancement in his corner of Mississippi and, for that matter, the state. Rosser said that McLean "was thinking about 10-15 years ahead of the rest of us. He had a vision that was contagious."

McLean believed that individuals have duties and responsibilities to others. This helps nurture human and community development. He specifically focused on education. As he said:

I believe it is the responsibility of the educated people of Mississippi to try to help raise the level of education, economically, spiritually, and otherwise of the people of Mississippi. There is nobody else who is going to come in and do it for us.... You've got to do the job yourself.

Whitehead talked about how, from the beginning of the development, Tupelo leaders were committed to education. Education was essential if
the community wanted to grow. The town managed to integrate its schools before a federal court order forced it. Leaders wanted to get beyond the separatist tendencies of education in the South. But they didn’t want to stop there. They wanted their citizens to have access to higher education as well. One example often mentioned involved McLean’s efforts in the late 1970s to locate a branch of Itawamba Junior College in Tupelo. Immediately, territorial infighting began and the college board of trustees opposed Tupelo as the branch location. McLean was equally as determined to locate it in Tupelo. Terry Wooten, former Journal reporter recalls:

One day I was going to the college on my weekly reporting trip and George asked me to ask the president what the board had done the night before on the vocational move. The president, whom I knew well, started ranting about George’s interference and how the board was not going to be pushed into doing anything drastic. When I reported this to George, he just grinned and shook his head and said, “You can’t do anything with the ignorant even when they’re educated.” Of course the board was soon persuaded by George to put the center in Tupelo and it’s now thriving.

In addition to the junior college, a branch of the University of Mississippi is now also thriving in Tupelo, allowing people to return to school and obtain their college degree. Johnnie Kelso was McLean’s secretary at the Journal. McLean encouraged her to return to school for her undergraduate degree. It took her from 1972 to 1985, but she eventually obtained first a B.S. then a master’s degree in business from the university. The newspaper still offers employees paid tuition and time off work to attend college classes, another legacy of McLean’s. As she said:

He was always looking for ways to improve the quality of life of individuals. He wanted Tupelo to be a better place, but he knew that you had to start with people first. I think that’s why he worked so hard on programs like getting a branch of the University of Mississippi into Tupelo, helping develop the community college Tupelo branch. I think he knew that, if you built people, you built community.

Another program dear to McLean’s heart was the Reading Aide program he initiated. He felt that reading was not only important to future earning capacity for individuals and economic development for the community, but to the future of the newspaper as well. People who can’t read don’t buy newspapers, an argument that would later be used when the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) challenged the newspaper’s federal tax filing.

The program grew from McLean’s concerns about the low reading test scores of children in rural areas of Lee County. Tupelo schools seemed to be doing all right, so McLean took $1 million and distributed it over a five-year period to hire reading assistants for the first grades of all the schools in Lee County.

The Reading Aide program was Crews’ first job at the newspaper. His responsibilities for the first five years of his employment had nothing to do with the operation of the newspaper. His title was “community service representative,” and he oversaw the $1 million investment of corporate profits into the Lee County Reading Aide program. The paper saw it as a business investment, a community investment. The IRS saw it as a charitable donation. It was obvious the IRS did not understand the Tupelo mind-set. Crews explains:

It was a business investment and an investment in community. We could say, genuinely, that, if kids can’t read, they can’t read our newspaper. The IRS later tried to come in and sue us and say, “Oh, this is a charitable deduction.” We argued against that. It was a long-term investment.... And most people in corporate America are so into short-term things.

To expand the program to the second grade level, McLean asked communities to raise money to hire additional reading teachers to assist elementary students. The newspaper and its community foundation CREATE would match the money raised. Crews recalls:

Every time a community reached its goal, we would have this front page picture and an article about how they raised $7,000... and we celebrated that. We made it important.
I would actually argue that it is page one news. Maybe the articles were not timely or cutting ... in terms of appeal or sexiness or whatever term one could use. They didn’t meet any of that criteria. But in terms of the value, importance and significance to life in this area, it certainly did.... So we used our newspaper to focus on those fundamental, critical needs and issues.

The program was such a success that reading aides became part of the educational reform platform for the state of Mississippi in 1982, and now there are assistant teachers in the first three grades of all city public schools to help youngsters learn to read. Penson said, of all the programs McLean was involved in, the Reading Aide program was an important first. “He understood that reading was fundamental to life,” Penson said.

Education was important, not only for personal growth and satisfaction, but also for community and industrial growth as well. Today in Tupelo, there is an organization called Association for Excellence in Education (AED), a private group of citizens who raise additional money for the public schools so they can hire teaching assistants. Penson said last year they raised more than $100,000 for the schools.

“Look around you,” Penson said. “We’re a very prosperous community. Look at all the plants. That’s the money in this town. So people don’t mind raising money for education.”
Success Breeds Success: Tupelo and the Future

J. C. Whitehead tells a story about how industrial development officials in a nearby state would try to entice plants into their area. They'd say, "At least you won't be embarrassed by us. You won't have to tell people that you're making cars in Mississippi." Whitehead calls it a slur, but acknowledges that Mississippi still carries this negative image. As he said:

You know that really never has been a problem for us. Somehow in Tupelo we got above that. When people came here, they did not see us reflecting some of the rest of Mississippi. We got above the integration and segregation business. We got our schools integrated.... Once you get started and people believe in you, success breeds success.

Reflection

Before discussing some of the future hopes and concerns of Tupelo, it may be worthwhile to reflect on some of the themes that emerged from these Tupelo conversations.

Certainly, from the 1930s on, and perhaps even before that, Tupelo citizens felt they were "in this together." This mind-set was cemented further by a number of incidents occurring in the town's history and the nation's history — the tornado, the Great Depression, the cotton mill incident, the experiences of returning World War II veterans, and the common experience of trying to find work, for example.

This, in turn, created a situation whereby people were almost forced to work together in order to, at first, just survive, then later, to prosper. Somewhere during these common-work and community-memory experiences, citizens began to understand how connected they were to one another.

This community learning, represented in a saying I heard many times during my visit to Tupelo, "So goes Lee County, so goes Tupelo," illustrates how citizens approached projects, in a vein of "shared self-interest," knowing that what affected my neighbor would one day affect me.

Although everyone likes to put their best foot forward, it has to be noted that in many ways Tupelo is a town much like others. It had, and still has, its share of problems and crises. But, from the stories people told, it appears that leaders tried to stay ahead of the game by anticipating problems and, if they failed in that, they met the problems head-on, taking as long a time as necessary to resolve them. It is also apparent that citizens watch and take note of the actions of their leaders and hold them accountable.

One creative example of how Tupelo deals with potential problems is the way in which it addressed the labor and union issue. The leadership's creation of the CDF committee to operate as a quasi mediator between labor and management illustrates how citizens try to anticipate problems. And, once a crisis occurs, such as that of the beating of the black prisoner and the subsequent Klan march, leaders were willing to, as one said, "meet and meet and meet." They recognized that division lines become

"There has always been an appropriate sense of dissatisfaction here in Tupelo that has prodded and motivated our progress. In the public and the private sector, the discourse on community development and improvement has focused on the raising of issues and questions ... in an initiative sort of way ... not in response to some external force."

— Billy Crews, publisher
Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal
hard and unyielding very quickly and that dialogue and deliberation were the only means to soften those lines.

In addition to the rich “human-chemistry capital,” as Martin said, Tupelo also has a history of institutional involvement. One Tupelo citizen told me not to underestimate the power of the banks in the town’s community development. The three banking institutions, along with the local newspaper, the railroad, the CDE, the schools, and all the CDCs created a dense, interlocking web that linked citizens to institutions. In turn, the institutions themselves became relational, linking with other institutions both inside and outside the county. The public school system, in the early days of the formation of the Rural Community Development Councils as well as in the present time, has been involved in the community. School personnel regularly meet with business leaders and plant managers and are involved in the CDE. None of these relationships were forged overnight. Relationships are built over lifetimes. The town leaders were patient and willing to wait for the benefits of their investments. Success does seem to breed success, but leaders know that change is a fact of life and many things remain to be done. Tupelo’s story — and any community’s story — is always in process.

**The Future**

From the beginning, Tupelo leaders knew that, if they were successful, their town would change. They attempted to guide and manage the change so that it would be for the betterment of the community. For example, they wanted only the smaller industries to locate in Tupelo, and they steered away from any plants that might have a negative effect on the town. But no one can stop time. The Tupelo of the late 1990s is not the Tupelo of the 1940s.

Martin believes that Tupelo’s focus on relationships will continue to bond people, no matter how diverse Tupelo becomes. As he said:

> What we’ve tried to do is find linkages in people, linkages that bring cultures together and keep them together....

Martin was very insistent that he be understood. He was not talking about creating organizational structures or technical devices or mission statements or planning tools. He was talking about people and their relationships with one another and the necessity of finding people who can relate with others across cultures and differences. He continued. “The power is in the people, not in the organizations.”

But the older generation, formed by the Great Depression and World War II, is passing away and a younger generation is assuming leadership. People are both concerned and confident about the future.

Leaders in the black community are especially concerned about future leadership. Foster, who has spent years working for his community, told me that he worries about the future of black leadership in Tupelo. Young people are too comfortable with what the older generation made possible for them, he said. He added:

> I was talking with a young man the other day ... and I said you don’t want to spend a night with your son going to a Cub Scout meeting, like your daddy did you. You want to sit and watch television.... It’s the same way in the church ... I sit on the building committee ... and I said, here’s a guy who is going to be 75 years old. I should be at the back pushing some younger man and helping him....

Penson is also concerned about Tupelo’s lack of black leadership. As a member of the younger generation, he is helping foster programs that encourage blacks to start their own businesses.
He supports local youth mentoring projects and is active in various civic and service organizations. The Black Business Association of Mississippi, which he heads, monitors the status of business loans to blacks in the state and supports local efforts to sponsor workshops on entrepreneurship.

Foster's concern about the drop in church attendance among young blacks is more than a religious concern. It is a community one as well. Historically, the church has served as a public gathering place for blacks in this country, encouraging leadership training, youth mentoring, and community activism. Ministers are seen as strong community leaders as well as spiritual ones. As Penson said:

The clergy have always been very much involved in what happens in the black community. But a lot of issues in the black community are addressed in the reactive rather than proactive mode. They identify people in authority who can change the situation.

Some of the older, white leaders remain fairly confident that the lessons they've learned, and the mind-sets and belief systems they've generated, have been passed down to their sons and daughters who are now doing what generations before them have done. They attend church, belong to civic clubs and service organizations, work with the CDF, are involved with the public schools, and continue the connections forged long ago.

Yet the white leaders share some similar concerns with black leadership. Both are carefully watching the status of education in the area to make certain that it connects with the people's needs. The focus of long ago remains the priority — good jobs.

"Tupelo faces a unique dilemma," Penson said. "Tupelo has the jobs. Our problem now is a skilled work force. So that has become an issue in economic development."

In a strange kind of irony, Tupelo has become victim of its own success. There are people available to undergo skills training and there are community colleges and technical schools nearby to provide that training. But now Tupelo leaders must deal with a whole new set of issues. As Penson explains:

What has happened is that all the doctors' and lawyers' children are going on to college and looking at management jobs, and what had been the unskilled labor force pool, those kids were dropping out of school. So now those kids are being tracked into special programs and they're getting certificates and not high school diplomas. Our dilemma now is how to get those kids to the mainstream: Get them graduated from high school ... give them the foundation to get those technical skills.

Education has always been considered "essential" in the Tupelo Plan, Whitehead said. He believes Tupelo has done a better job than many other cities in Mississippi, but he agrees with Penson's assessment of the needs. Tupelo needs to provide blacks more educational opportunities, which in turn will allow them to earn a better living. As he said:

You'll find that everyone here supports public schools because they recognize the importance of education to industrial and economic development. I believe about a fourth of our people now get college degrees. We need to make sure that we have the capacity to train and educate the other 75 percent so they can fit into our economic system in such a way that they are productive citizens. That's one of our problems now.

The Public/Private Agenda

During my visit to Tupelo, people repeated certain phrases again and again. One of these was: "You've got to put your money where your mouth is." Businesses and individuals have invested money in Tupelo to help its community and industrial development goals. For example, some people believe that, without the financial support of the three banks in Tupelo, economic development never could have happened. All the financial institutions were locally owned back then, with local presidents all deeply involved in their town and people. One observer wondered whether today, in the age of megabanks, corporate takeovers and mergers, the Tupelo Plan would have even managed to get off the ground.
The tensions inherent in changing times are part of the challenges of the future. Citizens must remain committed to the public agenda. As Reed said:

There are going to be frictions. Bank mergers, outside bankers might change that philanthropy and the focus of our relationship. Baptist Hospital is making moves to come here and that will give competition to our one hospital. As you bring in new industry, there is competition for jobs. Everybody's shifting. People have their private agenda, rather than their public agenda. The town's getting bigger. We're getting more crime. Politics is becoming more fragmented as we lose control of who comes on board.

The monetary commitment from McLean and the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal was, and still is, an important financial factor in Tupelo development. Reed and others told me that Tupelo business people have always been generous and they believe they will continue to be. Reed has no doubt that he and other members of the CDF fundraising committee will, indeed, raise $10 million by the year 2000.

Yet there are signs of concern here as well. Tupelo does not exist in a vacuum. It is affected by national cultural trends. For example, studies have shown that the members of the babyboomer generation are not as prone to philanthropy as their parents were. Churches, foundations, and other institutions share the concern about future donations. As Reed said:

We have a very philanthropic community. I think the giving is there, but we didn't make our United Way goal this year, and I think the United Way is a real indicator of how caring your community is.... But that's gotten fragmented, too. People are giving hither and yon and asking everybody everywhere to give to everything... so, we're getting more and more fragmented. We've got to re dedicate ourselves to the very things that have made us what we are.

For Reed, CREATE is the most promising organization in Tupelo to combat this fragmentation. Through its regional philanthropic efforts in 15 counties, he believes the foundation can help curb fragmentation and help the community re dedicate itself to the primary goal of working together for the benefit of all.

Yet with growth, fragmentation is almost inevitable. For example, there is only one high school in Tupelo, but it has a 2,000-member student body. The school can only grow to be so much before another high school will be needed, Reed said. Then another fragmentation will occur.

But Reed, Whitehead, Martin, Penson, and others believe that, despite changes and future challenges, the Tupelo philosophy — or, as they say, the Tupelo Spirit — is a public one and it will continue to grow and evolve. People here care about their community, their life together. That's the Tupelo story, Reed said.

We keep telling it again and again because every time you tell what the opportunities are, what your successes have been and what your failures have been, you get recommitted to it.
Endnotes


2. The All-America City Award, given by the National Civic League, recognizes communities for civic achievement and grassroots community problem solving.


4. The people interviewed for this report include: Harry Martin, president of the Community Development Foundation (CDF); Ileilis Black, a retired banker; John Roshbery, a former chancery clerk; Jack Reed, Sr., businessman; I. C. Whitehead, a former banker; Billy Crews, publisher of the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal; Johnnie Kelso, former secretary to George A. Mclean; Charles Penzone, civic leader, and director of Human Resource at the Daily Journal; Palmer Foster, civic leader, retired state leader of the Boy Scouts; and Sam Marshall, Jr., the first head of the Rural Community Development Councils (RCDs).

5. For the sake of consistency, I will use the term “blacks” in this report when referring to people of African descent. All of the people I interviewed in Tupelo also used this term.


7. Psychologist Mary Pipher argues that “stories connect and instruct us. They offer us a sense of direction and unity of purpose.” She states that transcendental narratives show people how to act, identify what is valuable and meaningful in the culture, and help people connect to something “larger than themselves.” See Charles L. Simpson, Transforming Narratives, Common Threads (September/October 1998).


9. In Carley S. Dadden’s article, “Launching New Community Miracles,” Kettering Review (December 1997): 17-27, the author discusses how a community’s energy is rooted in a heritage or values from the past. He applies this idea to faith congregations and argues that these communities develop consistent patterns of behavior across time.

10. Dr. Oldenburg is a professor of sociology at the University of West Florida. His comments appear on the back cover of Grisham’s book, Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community.


13. George A. Mclean video, by Grisham 1973. This video is used as a part of the new employee orientation at the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal.

14. This is taken from the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal’s employee handbook, which lists Mclean’s criteria for “What a Good Newspaper Should Be.”


17. Ibid., 19.

18. Ibid., 19. Natchez is nationally and internationally known for its historic antebellum homes. Since the 1930s, the garden clubs have sponsored the Pilgrimage, an event that draws thousands of tourists to the city and helped designate Natchez as one of the top 100 tourist attractions in the United States.

19. Ibid., 39.

20. The name of Tupelo’s newspaper has undergone a number of changes. When George Mclean purchased the newspaper in 1934, its name was the Tupelo Daily Journal. When the paper began publishing seven days a week, it was then known as the Tupelo Daily Journal. As the community and industrial development process expanded, the newspaper changed its name again to the Tupelo Area Journal and, finally, in 1974 it changed to its current name, the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal.


24. This information was obtained from a CDF pamphlet. It is interesting to note that the phrase used was “the community raised...” This credited the citizens rather than the CDF.


28. Ibid.


32. Grisham, Tupelo: 105-106.

33. Tupelo is known as one of the top world producers of upholstered furniture.

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Grisham, *Tupelo: 158.

George A. McLean video, by Grisham 1973. This video is used as a part of the new employee orientation at the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal.

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