

Even Though

Even though I have taught history for 20 years in both high school and middle school, mostly US History, my mind and spirit broke open and I thank Delta State's 2023 "Most Southern Place" Institute sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

1. **Even though . . .**

I TEACH about *Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857)*— where the Supreme Court decided that both free and enslaved African Americans are not citizens and the Constitution does not apply to them, and that enslaved African Americans are property, banned the Missouri Compromise that ensured the continuance of slavery into territories and therefore the Union -

I DID NOT KNOW about the Jewel of the Delta – Mound Bayou – and the great experiment of freed slave Isaiah T. Montgomery, and his cousin, Benjamin T. Green founding Mound Bayou which became the largest African American community after 1872. In the video shown at Founders' Day, one of the African American residents having grown up in Mound Bayou, said he felt bad for Whites because the community was so successful. Former Mayor Eulah Peterson spoke about the tight-knit community growing up and the strong emphasis on education in Mound Bayou schools, which have since been combined with Shelby.

2. **Even though . . .**

I TEACH about *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)* – where the Supreme Court wrote that the Louisiana "separate but equal" treatment did not violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment and allowed the continuation of Jim Crow laws.

I DID NOT KNOW about Mississippi's use of food as a weapon of control and reward during President Johnson's War on Poverty. As Bobby J. Smith II in Mississippi's War against the War on Poverty: Food Hunger and White Supremacy writes; "Thus, food as an economic weapon, like military weapons, 'can be used to punish enemies and reward friends.'" The White Senators, white power structure including plantation owners and white grocery owners, punished Blacks receiving free food and pushed for food stamps, which gave a cut to white grocery owners. I did not know about the Kennedy Administration's sole focus on the Cold War at the expense of War on Poverty. I knew that Bobby Kennedy had been there, but I guess I thought that more was done after that trip to the Delta. Moreover, to keep African Americans poor and dependent, the Senators cut programs such as Head Start to keep "agitators" out, continue white supremacy and continue control of African Americans.

3. Even though . . .

I TEACH about Emmet Till's murder, travesty, and impact on Civil Rights.

I DID NOT KNOW about his fun-loving personality, the ring that was used to identify him and the specific grisly details of his murder. Hearing from Reverend Wheeler Parker, Jr. and his experience gave me more of a personal connection that brought history alive. I also did not know that five African American men were part of the murder. Hearing and seeing Mayor Johnny B. Thomas's story was powerful and added an additional dimension. Seeing the timeline gave more strength to my teaching of the murder, and especially focused on Emmett's mother.

4. Even though . . .

I TAUGHT AND VOLUNTEERED at a creche (known as a preschool in the US) in a South African location (formerly called townships) called KwaNoxola near Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth). I also protested South African apartheid at Occidental College. However, until I worked in the location, I did not know about the extreme poverty and lack of infrastructure, work and opportunities in the location. I learned that Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth) had taken formerly rich diverse neighborhoods and move the "colored" about 10 minutes away to another community, and blacks to a location (township) about 20 miles away. Little electricity, sewers, trash pickup, and bus transportation exist and there is very poor education. While visiting middle schools (primary schools) in math, seventh graders were adding up three-digit numbers, which is usually taught in second or third grade in the US.

The "creche" (preschool) classrooms are transportation containers which are very hot in the summers and cold in the winters. The creche teachers I worked with are not paid and volunteer their time. They used to be paid but currently are not due to funding problems in South Africa. The creche teachers I worked with were not trained, so we were working with them on their curriculum. Due to donations, a playground structure was created. According to one of the teachers, "now we are a real school." Lack of sewers, electricity, water, and trash pick-up keep Black residents in poverty and completely dependent on the government. Black location residents in KwaNoxola do not have buses and residents must use private group buses called "taxis" to get into job sites, businesses, malls and majority white cities of Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth) and the beaches at Jeffreys Bay, "the Malibu of South Africa" and surfing mecca. All of the children that I saw wore shoes (which differed from Lalee's Kin). Many of the residents have "Mandela" homes which are basic living structures that they are grateful for. However, many of our teachers and students lived in faulty structures that were built with left over wood and whatever else they can find. Their roofs leak in the winter and most have dirt floors that also turn to mud in the winter.

The creche used to have electricity but they got their electricity illegally from the electrical suppliers so they were sent a huge bill that the school could not raise funds for. We raised money for that bill, but even after several months of government

payments and bureaucracy, the electricity was still not turned on when we left. We took the children to the beach at Jeffreys Bay, and most had not been there before, as well as an animal refuge close by that was mainly visited by tourists. For some of them, it was the first time they were out of the location.

There are miles and miles of these residents on the road to Cape Town. However, I also have similar structures in Los Angeles housing the non-homed (homeless) even around my middle-class neighborhood. So, homelessness, poverty, mental illness and drug addicts exist in Los Angeles as well and are increasing despite California spending \$17 billion on homelessness.

I DID NOT KNOW about Mississippi's extreme poverty that even exists today. As we learned that Jesse Jackson called Tunica, Mississippi - "the Ethiopia of the United States" and from the documentary "Lalee's Kin," many of the same living conditions are currently present in parts of the Delta as I saw in South Africa. In the documentary, Lalee's grandchildren bathe in buckets of water hand-carried from the water source. Her granddaughter did not have the basic required school supplies of paper, pencils, and pens. She was embarrassed by her clothes and missed at least the first day of school due to that. Most of Lalee's grandchildren and extended family did not wear shoes in the documentary. Lalee was dependent on the government for her monthly check of approximately \$600. She was ecstatic in the beginning to get a trailer for \$12,000, which was from a government grant. However, it was not what she expected. She was not hooked up to a water source and I'm not sure about the electricity. I saw propane tanks for cooking. The children moved around a lot between different relatives. Even when we saw Lalee's granddaughter "Granny" doing well in school at a home with her grandfather, she was brought back to live with her mother and help to babysit the children.

5. **Even though . . .**

EVEN THOUGH . . . I did not know about the Emmett Till Memorials and Museums and their attempt to become a National Park. But when I heard about it from Benjamin Singletary at the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, I was very supportive.

I DID NOT KNOW that there are so many costs to a community when a memorial becomes part of the National Park Service. Keena Graham, who is the Superintendent for the Medgar and Myrlie Evers National Monument in Jackson, Mississippi spoke about several costs to the neighborhood and community, including:

1. The gentrification of the neighborhood that drives many residents out of their homes;
2. Tourists coming into an area;
3. First Amendment rights where all different groups must be able to speak when they up;

4. The funds to run the National Park that may take away money from other National Parks;
5. The toll and trauma experienced by employees; she said that most employees last about nine months;
6. Staffing: Many qualified candidates may not want to work where the parks are located.

Even though

I TEACH about the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In that case, the Supreme Court ruled that education's "separate but equal" was unconstitutional. The impact outlawed segregation in public schools.

I ALSO TEACH about the landmark Orange County, CALIFORNIA case *Mendez, et al vs. Westminster School District of Orange County, et al.* (1947). The Mendez family won the landmark Orange County case, This case allowed for desegregation of California schools seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). I have had the pleasure of hearing Sylvia Mendez twice speaking about her case. She is currently 87 years old and still presents about her family's case. When she was a little girl, she took the bus to school. She loved the playground of the white children that had a lot of playground equipment and manicured lawns. But she had to go down the street to the "Mexican school" which had dirt fields and just shacks for classrooms. Her parents and her community came together to fight for integration of Orange County Schools. Meeting Ms. Mendez and hearing her story added personal depth and a connection for me as a teacher. I feel that I also have a deeper connection to the Emmet Till story from having heard from Reverend Warner and others. One of my co-teachers in the NEH program grew up near that area. When she was about four years old, she remembers the white murderers of Emmet Till coming to her black neighborhood in a red truck selling fish. Those murderers, she said, "had no fear" about being in the black neighborhood due to their acquittals and double jeopardy.

I DID NOT KNOW about the Mississippi case involving the definitions of race, who is white and who is non-white, and Chinese in Mississippi - *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927). This is from "Lessons From Black and Chinese Relations in the Deep South" by Imani Perry. Historically, Martha Lum and her siblings were students at white schools in Mississippi. However, the Lums they were forced to attend black schools. In this case, the Supreme Court ruled that excluding Chinese from white schools did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. According to Perry:

"The Lum children had been attending white schools in Mississippi, but in a wave of renewed anti-Chinese sentiment fueled by the 1924 Immigration Act (which banned all immigration from Asia), they were expelled and told they must attend the schools for African American children. They fought back, all the way to the

Supreme Court. The Court sided with Mississippi, declaring that excluding Chinese children from white schools was not a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Lum family was told that their children could either attend Black schools or create their own Chinese school. Anywhere was fine, as long as it wasn't white space."

I had not thought about Chinese in Mississippi. I teach about the Chinese Exclusion Act, but I was not aware of Chinese in the South. We further saw this when we visited the Chinese Cemetery, across the street from a white cemetery, for one of our field trips.

Overall, the NEH Most Southern Place workshop was eye-opening and transformative. It makes history come alive. There are so many more events that I could write about, including the history of the blues, the Delta University sit-ins, African-American owned banks, the Great Flood of 1927, working with Fannie Lou Hamer and so much more. Thank you for this experience. I am very grateful.