

Mound Bayou, MS

By Brandon Thibodeaux

On June 12, 1910 a New York Times headline declared, “Ex-Slaves Dream of a Model Negro Colony Comes True...Where No White Man Can Own a Square Foot of Land.”

I apply to the Michael P. Smith Fund with the intent of continuing my work in Mound Bayou, the first completely African American freedmen settlement in Mississippi - once heralded by Booker T. Washington and President Theodore Roosevelt as being a “shining example of black achievement.”

Isaiah T. Montgomery founded Mound Bayou in 1887. His intentions were to create an autonomous settlement for freedmen seeking shelter from the less stigmatized version of slavery known as sharecropping that began to take hold as the new South emerged.

The social experiment eventually flourished with 8,000 souls. The town boasted two newspapers, a regional hospital and numerous black owned businesses, including Dr. T.R.M. Howard’s insurance company for which the slain civil rights activist Edgar Mevers once worked prior to his assassination.

Though, unable to compete against large-scale agriculture, most of the original 30,000 acres of family owned farms were eventually sold and consolidated. The railroad that brought a bright-eyed, hand waving Theodore Roosevelt, rerouted and took the town’s economic stability with it. And the separatist agenda of the town’s founders, though noble and just in their time, has left it devoid of outside investment for decades.

In short, its 99 percent African American demographic, along with its schools, paved roads and brick homes – all signs of a brighter past - are the only attributes separating it from the rest of the Delta’s impoverished communities.

I believe we as a nation can take strength in recalling the vision of a man that took the dreams of enslaved generations and turned them into a reality filled with bankers, doctors, and lawyers.

I have spent the past two years photographing in and around Mound Bayou. In December 2010, I established residency with the town’s Baptist preacher, from whose home I shall continue my work. My proposal is to compare and contrast life in the historic town of Mound Bayou with that of the less established villages of the region.

The aid of the Michael P. Smith Fund will allow me the financial freedom to live in Mound Bayou for another three months. It is only through this concentrated investment of time that I can truly begin to understand life in the community and continue my photographic pursuits.

As economies crawl, walk, pace, and sprint toward development their strides are perched upon the backbones of men. It is the marrow of those bones - the vibration of that spirit - that drives the citizens of Mound Bayou and those of the greater Delta to endure today.

I seek to evoke this collective spirit in my work.

I feel it in the fecund fields, where memories of the blood and sweat of generations stir amidst the roar of combines.

I hear it issue from their lips in lessons of divinity.

I see it in their eyes.