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On arriving and our search for place



Commentary on our life and times

By Dorothy A. Williams

Rarely a day passes that someone does not ask about my Southern accent; however, to my amusement, the questions are always indirect: "You're not from New England, are you?" or "Were you born in Vermont?"

My standard reply is, "Lord, no."

Next question: "Why did you come to Vermont?" which is perhaps more germane than the one asked by an inquisitive Vermonter at a yard sale recently: "Well, what brings you to Montpelier today?"

Somehow the obvious reason escaped her.

Nonetheless, it reminded me of a lesson I learned shortly after my arrival about the two classifications of inhabitants in our state — Vermonters and flatlanders. Since then, especially that Saturday, I have often wondered if there isn't a third category for displaced Mississippians.

I was born and raised in the Mississippi Delta on Lake Ferguson, a tributary off the Mississippi River. It is a region where rich alluvial soil is now dominated by catfish farms instead of cotton plantations and enslaved Africans. This delicacy, which is sold in some Vermont grocery stores, has given the region its new name: "the catfish capital of the world." The Mississippi Delta also has the largest indigenous population of African Americans in the United States.

Naturally, I was reluctant to leave this cultural cocoon, yet, my circuitous journey to Vermont began in 1988 with a telephone call from a friend in Mississippi while I was still a struggling (favorite lament of Ph.D. candidates) doctoral student in Illinois.

She told me that a small, liberal arts Catholic college in Vermont (St. Michael's) would soon be recruiting applicants interested in developing its new minority student affairs program and she wanted me to apply.

How could applying for a job take precedence over the humbling task of revising data to the exacting specifications of a five-member dissertation committee? I was literally dangling between Chapters 3 and 4.

Besides, why would a black person move to the whitest state in America?

"Where did you hear that nonsense?" my friend inquired.

"From Ebony," I retorted.

Considering this a curious response, she totally dismissed the Ebony reference, and encouraged me to apply anyway. I was unyielding. Vermont was too far from Mississippi, too cold and too ethnically homogeneous.

That was then, and this is now. After a two-year stint at an historically black college, I finally made the quantum leap to Vermont in the summer of 1990.

With all my worldly possessions, I, and two friends, arrived on a sultry night (did I say sultry?) and were promptly greeted by swarms of mosquitoes larger and more aggressive than those back in the Mississippi Delta. We hastened to the store for cans of insect repellent (one for each person, of course) and, to our amazement, we saw another African American. Well, I surmised, with the mosquitoes, the heat and the existence of at least one other black person, I just might survive in Vermont after all.

The next day, the three Mississippians set out to relocate a sign that one of the trio claimed he saw the night before on our way to Burlington. The sign, he insisted, advertised an African art gallery.

"Get outta here," said the Doubting Thomases, "it was the heat, the mosquitoes and the darkness. There can't be such a place in Vermont. No way."

Sure enough, we found his mirage. There, nestled off Route 7, in Charlotte (pronounced Char-lotte, instead of Char-r-lat, as we would say in the South) was Lydia Clemmons' Authentica. Meticulously browsing through those African treasures was spellbinding because we were touching bits and pieces of our ancestral legacy. Indeed, that encounter with my historical roots greatly eased my anxieties about settling here.

But the real test of survival in Vermont, especially for a Southerner, is living through endless months of brutally cold weather. Hence, the prevailing question that first winter was: "How is the Mississippian coping with the cold Vermont winter?"

"Fine," I'd say, lying through my chattering teeth.

The second most frequently asked weather question was did it ever snow in Mississippi? "Yes, it does, but since there is only one snowplow in the entire state, we'd have to wait for the sun to melt the snow" (only a minor exaggeration).

July 3 marked the beginning of my fifth year in Vermont. It has been an ambivalent sojourn as I try to cope with the geographic distance from my hometown, the racial subtleties and demographics and the regional nuances that differ vastly from mine.

Yet, as a displaced Mississippian, I search for compromise between my Southern Mississippi Delta mindset and the no-nonsense Vermont/Yankee character.

The irony is that perhaps the progeny of slaves can find her niche in the state that was first to denounce slavery and later become a major depot of the Underground Railroad system.

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