# TUPELO

## How a small Mississippi town moved from being almost dead last in

Vaughn Grisham once had a dog, J. E. B. Stuart, who thought too much. A mutt of dubious parentage, Jeb had a spry personality, lively political prejudices–at least, he howled whenever anyone mentioned Jesse Helms, the conservative senator from North Carolina–and an uneasy preoccupation with Grisham's other dog, a golden retriever named Rusty.

"Jeb would get a bone, and I could see him think, 'Where can I hide this where Rusty won't find it?'" Grisham remembers. "Now, Rusty was not the smartest dog around. So Jeb would find a great, just a *great* spot, and I'd tell him, 'Say, Jeb, that's a terrific hiding place!' He'd bury it and then come in and lay down, five minutes at most, then he'd suddenly pop up–now remember, Rusty's lying there fast asleep–and you could see him thinking, 'Uh-oh! Rusty's figured out where it is!' He'd go running out and dig up the bone, and I'd say, 'No, Jeb! Don't dig it up! That's a great hiding spot, Jeb, you won't find a better one!' But sure enough he'd find an even better hiding place, come back in, lie down, and then five minutes later he'd decide that Rusty had figured *that* one out so up he'd pop and run out and dig it up again. And I'd say, 'Oh no, Jeb!' but he'd find an even *better* spot, come back in, and five minutes later. . . . Well, this would happen a few times, and finally he'd just dig it up, bring it in, and drop it at Rusty's feet, like he was saying, 'Oh, you might as well have it–you've figured out where it is anyway.' That was when Rusty would wake up, look around, see the bone and go, 'Oh! Look! A bone for me!'"

Grisham loves this story. He tells it late one night, perched awkwardly on the stairs that lead down to the den of his home in Oxford, Mississippi, carried away by the memory. He stares frantically around as he limns Jeb's anxiety. He bobs his head slowly at every mention of Rusty. He throws himself back in fond dismay–"Oh noooo, Jeb!"–as Jeb outfoxes himself. Grisham is not an expansive man by nature–in other circumstances, especially when there's a crowd around, he has the shy person's habit of effacing himself by standing utterly still–but as a storyteller he is vibrant and enthusiastic, entirely inhabiting his material.

This may be why Grisham, who has spent the last three decades in relative obscurity teaching sociology and community development at the University of Mississippi, is suddenly developing a certain luster in small-town America. Over the last several years he has traveled far afield, to spots like Farmington, Maine, and Willapa Bay, Washington, and Morrilton, Arkansas, to Montana and Texas and Alabama and West Virginia, and there are people in all these places who not only can recall in detail what he told them but have decided to steer their lives by it. Academics usually seek influence beyond the classroom through their writings; Grisham is a firm believer in the catalytic power of a tale well told.

And a particularly unlikely tale, at that. He has mastered the story of a single place–Tupelo, Mississippi–and how it transformed itself from one of the most miserable, beaten-down communities in the United States into a showcase of the southern economy. The plot is wildly inspirational: a poor town, with nothing going for it, pulls itself up by its bootstraps thanks to a remarkable group of town leaders and the bullheaded, visionary publisher of the local newspaper. As Grisham says, "There are these stories that humans just like to hear, about overcoming adversity with nothing but human effort. And Tupelo is a wonderful story. It is a *wonderful* story." But what makes the story so remarkable is *how* these townsfolk went about their business: believing that they could prosper only to the extent that the least among them prospered, and that Tupelo as a whole would thrive by remaining true to itself, not by truckling to the dictates of a bottom-line economy. These are not fashionable notions at the moment. And yet, judging by the telephone calls that regularly come into Grisham's office, there is an enormous craving in the country at large for just such an example.

True, our public face these days remains self-confident: Americans feel free to lecture others around the world about the benefits of the unfettered free market and the virtues of our lean, well-muscled capitalism; even in provincial cities, far from Wall Street or Silicon Valley, men and women of affairs scarcely bother to hide the swagger in their everyday dealings; and everywhere, the emblems of self-satisfied consumption have grown commonplace, from cars that wouldn't look out of place at a monster-truck rally to wristwatches that could serve as the down payment on a home. There would appear to be no room for self-doubt in a country like this.

Yet there is. Out in the economy's slipstream, in those towns that have no pretensions beyond counting themselves decent places to live, there is a sense of vulnerability, an acute understanding that community well-being is a byprod-

# MONEY

### erything to a model of social and economic progress. By Rob Gurwitt.

uct of market forces, not their purpose. A steady employer can disappear any time some far-off executive decides to boost stock prices by cutting payroll or decamping for Mexico. Unsteady employers can shore up their health by demanding the sweetest possible terms from politicians who are too intimidated to say no. And in those towns that haven't even partaken of the current boom yet–and there are more of them than you'd think–there is a growing desperation, a fear that the main chance will pass right on by.

They do peculiar things, these towns. They pin their hopes on developers who promise to transform their empty old state mental hospital into a "Grande Resort"; they open their arms to gargantuan hog operations and their industrial-strength odors; they chase frantically after factories–chicken processors, bottom-feeding textile mills–that barely pay a living wage; they resign themselves to a future made up of things that no one else wants: PCBs, low-level radioactive waste, maximum-security prisoners. If it's a job, they figure, it's a ticket to prosperity.

Inevitably, there are people in places like this who wonder if they can't do better. Every town has them–high-minded sticklers who stand up at meetings and declare that they need employers who'll treat the community with some dignity; determined business people who see potential where everyone else sees affliction; ordinary folk who don't quite know how to express what they love about where they live, but do know that they don't want to see it compromised in the name of economic development. Every once in a while, someone like this finds his or her way to Vaughn Grisham. And if he's got the time, more often than not he'll hop on a plane and go tell them–and whoever else is willing to listen–about Tupelo.

## Provoking the Town Fathers

And so, at seven-thirty one winter morning, having filled himself on eggs, grits, and biscuits, Grisham stands up to address the assembled movers and shakers of Enterprise, Alabama. The editor of the newspaper is there; so are the mayor, a couple of city council members, a state representative, and a roomful of local business people.

Enterprise clearly has–or at least, once had–a sense of humor about itself. Smack in the middle of the chief downtown intersection stands what must be one of the oddest civic monuments in a country that doesn't exactly shy from erecting odd civic monuments: a classically elegant woman on a pedestal in the center of a small fountain, her hands thrust aloft, holding a shiny black boll weevil. "In profound appreciation of the boll weevil and what it has done as the Herald of Prosperity," reads the plaque. The monument was erected in 1919, after the boll weevil infestation forced the area's struggling farmers to renounce King Cotton and make a living from some other crop, which turned out to be peanuts. Indeed, peanuts proved to be so successful that they became a mainstay of the local economy; these days, a quarter of the country's peanut crop is grown within a seventy-five-mile radius. When, in addition, the U.S. Army put in its helicopter-training base at nearby Fort Rucker, Enterprise's future seemed assured.

It was an illusion. The military began downsizing in the 1980s, agricultural subsidies are disappearing, and a few years back, Coffee County, in which Enterprise sits, realized it had no reliable underpinnings. It set out to attract new employers, with some success: cotton is making a comeback, and poultry processors have set up shop as well. But other employers in the area, particularly in textiles and apparel, are drifting away, and there is a pervasive sense that unless Coffee County keeps scrambling, it will get left behind. "The New South meant cheap land, cheap labor, and low taxes, all of which attracted industries that are now leaving," says Mary Lee Carter, a veritable beehive of a woman who runs a regional leadership development group. To replace them, Carter and others have come to realize, the area will have to invest much more heavily in its residents. "We hear constantly from business people that our workforce is not up to speed," Carter explains. But Coffee County has a long history of fractiousness–it even has two separate county courthouses, one in Enterprise and the other in Elba, about a half hour to the west–and the area's business people, public officials, and ordinary citizens don't have much practice working in concert. They need a little goad, which is why Grisham is in town.

The morning's gathering is at a restaurant called Po' Folks, a chain that has turned down-home hospitality into kitsch, a sort of Denny's meets Li'l Abner. "This Here's the Entrance," reads a small, fake hand-carved sign by the door. "Wait Rite Cheer Fer the Seater," reads another as you step inside. In a large, crowded room in back, beefy local businessmen greet each other with the extravagant bonhomie called for at first-thing-in-the-morning events.

Once they're seated and Grisham starts speaking, though, the faces turned toward him settle into mere politeness. It is as though everyone is wondering what someone from *Mississippi* could possibly tell them about improving their lives. It is, Grisham long ago realized, an advantage to be from the state that every other state looks down upon; it means that no one in his audience need feel defensive, and it makes what he's about to tell them seem all the more impressive.

In 1940, he begins, Lee County–where Tupelo is the county seat–was pretty much the poorest county in Mississippi, which tells you something about how it ranked in the country as a whole. The average family made about six hundred dollars a year. "Now, you can do all the finagling and adjusting for inflation that you want," Grisham exclaims, "but that's poor! That's almost Bangladesh poor." Even worse, in 1936 a tornado had ripped through town, destroying forty-eight square blocks and killing some 230 people–it still ranks as the fourth deadliest tornado in U.S. history. And a year later, the town's one factory of note shut down after a bitter strike. "So here they were in 1940," Grisham says. "They were dead last in everything. They'd lost their only industry. And the enmity and hatred and division in the town were overwhelming."

But then Lee County began to turn around. To begin with, its farmers shifted out of cotton and into dairying, with such success that it became the top dairying county in the United States for five of the ten years of the 1940s. Then it began attracting industrial jobs, slowly at first but with increasing success until, in 1967, it added more industrial jobs than the other eighty-one counties in Mississippi combined. Indeed, for the last decade and a half, Lee County has regularly gained a thousand industrial jobs a year, and new investments in the hundreds of millions of dollars–an enviable record for places five and ten times its size. Unemployment is at about 3 percent. The poverty rate is 7 percent, while in the nation as a whole it's 13 percent. "They've got the best school system in the state of Mississippi," Grisham trumpets, "and while you may think that's damning with faint praise, it's a great school system. They've got a symphony, an art museum, they win the state championship in football, basketball, baseball, track, soccer, swimming. They've got the best band in Mississippi. They rarely have school dropouts. They have a medical center that *U.S. News & World Report* called one of the four top medical centers in the United States." He pauses. "They began as one of the poorest counties in the United States," he says, "and now family income exceeds that of Atlanta by a lot. By a whole lot."

No one is fidgeting any more. Grisham, who has been wandering around the room as he talks, keeping an eye on the heads that swivel to follow him, knows he has their attention. Enterprise may be hanging on, even feeling its oats in the current economy, but it's not doing *that* well. "Would you like to know how they did that?" he asks politely. "Would that be of interest to you, to know how Tupelo does this sort of thing?"

"Please," someone blurts.

Well, he says, it began with one man: George McLean, the publisher of the newspaper. There has to be someone with fire in the belly, he explains, and in Tupelo, that was George McLean.

"There was this hardware store owner," he continues, "a tough, hard-nosed businessman, who absolutely hated George McLean. Mr. McLean walked into this man's store one day in 1940, stuck out his hand and said, 'I'm George McLean of the newspaper.' The store owner said, 'I know. I want you out of my store.' McLean had backed labor in that bitter strike of '37, and this man had sided with the owners of that factory, and so he regarded George McLean as the devil incarnate.

"'I tell you, I want you out of this store!' he said. 'You've probably noticed I don't ever put any ads in your newspaper.'

"Mr. McLean said, 'I'm not here to sell any ads, I'm here to talk to you as a businessman.'

"'Hell,' the man responded, 'I don't need to talk to you as a businessman. My *granddaddy* opened this place, my daddy ran it and now I run it and you're just a *boy!*' McLean was thirty-six years old at the time. 'You can't tell me anything about business! Get out of my store, I told you that once.' And he began pushing McLean out the door." Here, Grisham rears up and starts driving at the air in front of him.

"Just as he got to the front of the door, McLean asked, 'How much did you gross last year?' Well, the store owner once told me, 'That just made me so damn mad, the idea of him asking how much I grossed, I tried to shove him right out the door and make him land on his rear end.'

"But McLean was clever. He was right at the door, getting pushed out, and he said, 'Why, you probably grossed about two thousand dollars last year.' It was a ridiculously low figure. So the man shot back, 'Hell, I grossed eight thousand dollars last year.'

"Well. George McLean had him right there. He said, 'Let me show you why you only grossed eight thousand dollars.' He was toting the 1940 census figures around, and he pulled them out. 'You only grossed eight thousand dollars because the family income in Lee County is six hundred dollars a year. When all this income is gone, they can't buy anything else. Whether they need it or not, they can't buy it, and you can't sell it. You're locked in by that low income. The only way you can ever make more money,' he said, 'is either trade the customers you've got–which you can't do–or help them raise their income.'" The store owner stopped pushing.

McLean had an idea. He had, the year before, taken it on himself to travel around the country, visiting schools of agriculture and asking them how a poor cotton county could improve its lot. Get out of cotton, he was told. Because cotton farmers only harvested one crop a year, they had to live on credit the rest of the time, and unless times were unusually good–and in the 1930s they were never good–the debts just ate farm families up. Instead, McLean was told, Lee County's farmers should move into dairying, which would give them a daily income. But to become dairy farmers, they needed more than the few scrawny milk cows they kept, and for that, they needed a high-quality stud bull; in today's terms, this could mean spending as much as $50,000. Nobody in Lee County had that kind of money. But McLean was convinced that if the people in town who weren't living entirely hand-to-mouth–the merchants and the bankers–pooled their resources, they could manage it. That was why he was out on Main Street that day provoking the physical wrath of the town fathers. He was seeing if he could raise money for a bull.

## A Town This Ugly

What McLean understood, and Grisham came to understand, is that towns don't just prosper or fade by happenstance. Their well-being is an expression of will.

This is not always obvious. Pass by a ramshackle town square, a silent factory, an empty storefront: they have the appearance of inevitability, as though they were the product of some heedless organic process. They show no traces, except to the imagination, of the squandered opportunities, the long bouts of civic bickering, the ingrained helplessness, the despairing flight of money and talent and hope, the simple, unyielding inertia that allows the places we live to fall quietly apart.

Grisham grew up in such a place. West Point, Mississippi, is mostly a dot on the map, its only notice in the broader world an article by the writer David Halberstam, who spent a little time working for its newspaper before heading off to Memphis and the true beginning of his career at the *Commercial Appeal;* he had nothing much nice to say about West Point. "It's painful," says Grisham, "but it was a town that had very little going for it."

Once, when he was a young man, Grisham was called to the hospital on behalf of a woman who was passing through on the Trailways and had taken ill. At the time, Grisham had it in mind that he was going to be a minister and was filling in that week for his own Baptist preacher, who'd gone out of town. "When I got there," he recalls, "she introduced herself and told me she was the widow of a physician, traveling through West Point on her way to Dallas, Texas. She said, 'When I got off the bus, instead of worrying about my condition, I was thinking that this is the ugliest place I've ever seen in my life.'" She had taken in the abandoned Swift packing plant, the empty, rundown Knickerbocker Building, the haggard mien of the town. And she looked at Grisham and said, "Oh God, *please* don't let me die in a town this ugly."

It wasn't the aesthetics of West Point, though, that had the deepest impact on Grisham; it was the rusting, ancestral grillwork that structured race relations in the Deep South. When he was twelve, Grisham had a newspaper route. Heading for the office one afternoon, he ran into a friend of his who was black, another paper carrier. His friend was crying because his parents were planning to visit family and had told him that if he didn't finish his paper route in time they would go ahead without him. The problem was that white kids always got their papers to deliver first; by the time Grisham's friend got his, it would be too late to finish before his parents left.

So Grisham suggested that he go in and explain the problem to the woman who handed out the stacks of papers. The boy did so, and got sent to the back of the line for his temerity. Grisham went in and gave her the same story, which got him placed second in line, behind the woman's nephew. Outside, he turned his papers over to his friend, and got back in line. When the woman figured out what had happened, she called in the owner of the newspaper to chew Grisham out. The man explained to him that although he hadn't meant harm, he'd done a terrible thing, that small things like that could lead to racial desegregation and did young Grisham want that? Grisham replied that he didn't think it was a terrible thing at all, and they fell to shouting at each other, at which point the publisher's mother came out, crying and insisting that Vaughn allow her to pray for him. His father was called in. So was the minister. Finally, in a rage, Grisham declared that he wouldn't be delivering any more papers at all. "The sheer meanness and just blind stupidity of it all overwhelmed me," he says now. "I really think that was the moment where it all became clear to me. I thought, This has got to go! You can't *have* this kind of pretentiousness and ridiculous behavior. I was stunned that adults would behave in such a low and ridiculous way."

He could have left. He had the chance. Though he had to work his way through college, and so contented himself with going to Mississippi State University, just eighteen miles from West Point, he then headed off to the Baptist theological seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, the great, progressive institution that was responsible for training many of the ministers who made up the Southern Baptist Convention. He got there, however, just a few years after a crucial event: the Convention's members, with a host of the Louisville seminary's alumni in the vanguard, had voted to urge compliance with the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education,* only to return home to find out-and-out, uncompromising defiance from their parishioners. After only a year in Louisville, it became clear that Grisham's views on race would make it hard for him to find a comfortable home. The dean arranged, instead, for Grisham to continue his studies at Harvard. Grisham would be happier up there, he suggested, his congregation up north would be happier, and certainly the congregations he would not be serving in the South would be happier. "There won't be a congregation for you down here, Grish," he said.

Then, shortly before Grisham was due to head north, his wife took ill. He got permission to put off Harvard for a year and hired on to teach a few sociology courses at Mississippi State, since he'd studied the subject a bit as an undergraduate. He found the work to his liking, and when his wife still wasn't well enough for him to leave for Harvard at the end of the year, he found an opening at Ole Miss; by the time his one-year appointment there ended four years later, the ministry had given way to sociology. "You find a lot of sociologists who are ministers gone wrong," says his second wife, Sandy, herself a sociologist (Grisham and his first wife divorced in 1979). "There is a commitment, this drive to save the world, that manifests itself through academic work rather than church work."

At the University of North Carolina, where he went to get his Ph.D., Grisham set out to write a dissertation on the criminal as an American hero; that fell through when a grant to travel to California for research dried up for lack of funds. He then settled on a biography of the towering Mississippi governor, senator, and archracist, Theodore G. Bilbo, hoping to use it to get at issues of race and society in the South. That, too, fell through, after another student violated the rules for Bilbo's archives and researchers were barred from using them. By now, Grisham had spent three years on abortive topics, so when George McLean suggested that he do his dissertation on Tupelo, Grisham agreed, even though he thought the topic was "provincial" and hardly the sort to garner him much attention. The chance to work with McLean was too good to pass up. The two had met through Harold Kaufmann, Grisham's professor and eventual mentor at Mississippi State and one of the leading lights in the field of community development. Grisham was impressed by what McLean had done in Tupelo, which even by 1960 was considered a remarkably progressive community for Mississippi. He was even more impressed by McLean himself. "He was a very charismatic man who generated strong views," he says. "You loved him or hated him, and I just loved him from the beginning. I knew this was a great man."

## Every Man Owes a Duty

In 1940, it would be fair to say, the business people of Tupelo were not of the same mind. Not only had McLean backed labor in the strike of 1937, but his ideas–especially his notion that the working people of Lee County were the key to its prosperity–seemed dangerous.

To be fair, Tupelo was not quite the wasteland of despair that Grisham sometimes likes to describe. Northeast Mississippi, where Tupelo is located, never developed the plantation class that ruled the Delta and so never developed the extremes of wealth and poverty. On its farms, everyone, white and black, was poor; in town, each was scrambling as hard as the next to make a living. There was no old money. This fostered a sense of the value of collaboration, and so, long before most other towns in the Deep South even considered the idea, Tupelo had built a paved road to help customers get in to its markets; it was the first community to get electricity from the Tennessee Valley Authority; and in the teens and twenties, its businessmen had launched a variety of cooperative enterprises that, had it not been for the Depression, might have put it on its feet. "If you go back and read the newspapers," says Jim High, a prominent Tupelo native and the grandson of one of the town's leading bankers in the early decades of the century, "you really do get this idea that these people felt they were special, that they had a mission to be better than they were." A half century before McLean even arrived on the scene, the Tupelo *Journal* had editorialized, "Every man owes a duty to the town in which he resides to advance its prosperity and to add to its advantages. . . . It is a shame for a man to use his community as a shepherd uses his sheep–merely to shear the wool."

So, beaten down as they were by the Depression, the tornado, and the strike, Tupelo's leading citizens were still open to the idea that they could do something to improve life for themselves. And in his tour of Main Street, McLean was not arguing for anything especially radical. Invest in your community rather than elsewhere, he said, but go ahead and do it out of self-interest. Help me buy a bull, and you'll see remarkable returns.

He was persuasive. With help from some local banks, a number of Tupelo's leading businessmen got the money together to buy a bull straight from the Isle of Jersey. Then, with the technical advice of a researcher in Missouri who was experimenting with artificial insemination–still a novelty at the time–they set up an operation servicing cows in the region, charging a small fee for each. The response was so positive they soon bought two more bulls, and within a few years Lee County had a large and productive dairy herd, and several million dollars were flowing into the hands of farmers who, only a short time before, had been as poor as the played-out soil they tilled. More to the point, Tupelo's merchants and bankers were watching their businesses grow exponentially. Grudgingly, Tupelo's conservative burghers began to admit that McLean might actually have something to offer them. And a few, who'd been spending time with him, began to realize that he was, in fact, a thoroughly remarkable man.

Born in 1904, he had grown up in Winona, Mississippi, in a wealthy family. This did not keep him from developing a set of political ideas that were far to the left of acceptable in Mississippi, so after graduating from Ole Miss, he left. He spent some time at Stanford getting a degree in psychology, then shifted coasts so he could study theology at Boston University. McLean's belief that you needed to meet the physical needs of your parishioners as well as their spiritual needs, however, made for an ill fit with a Presbyterian Church that had no place for radicals; even his father opposed his getting a pulpit. So he headed to the University of Chicago for another degree, this time in sociology, and not long after that was done, he returned to the South, where he took up a teaching post at a small Presbyterian school in Memphis. While there, he began organizing tenant farmers across the river in Arkansas, which led to his first lesson in the dangers of confronting outright the received order of things: the landowners got in touch with E. H. "Boss" Crump, whose political machine ran Memphis; shortly thereafter, the school's dean informed McLean that funding for his position had dried up, effective that day. At loose ends, McLean returned to Mississippi, where his cousin–who lived in Lee County–told him that the Tupelo *Journal* was up for sale. So in 1934, just shy of his thirtieth birthday, he went ahead and bought it–"a bankrupt newspaper from a bankrupt bank," as he later put it.

There has always been a degree of enlightened self-interest about McLean. His newspaper, he knew, couldn't prosper unless Tupelo and its environs prospered: it would have neither advertisers nor readers if the area's citizens were all poor, illiterate, and indifferent to their communities. Yet he was also a man driven by his ideals, who approached community development with all the religious fervor that had been denied its outlet in the ministry. "He was a plain, gray-suited Calvinist," says Joe Rutherford, a former student of Grisham's at Ole Miss who is now the editorial page editor of the *Daily Journal*. "He had opinions so strong they seemed iron-fisted. He didn't care what structures he rattled or dismantled in the process–he was no respecter of position or influence. His favorite phrase was 'Men are God's methods,' which he later amended to 'Men and women . . .' " Unadorned, plainspoken, consummately sure of himself–though when he first took over the newspaper he had its walls painted green, to remind himself that he was "green as grass" as a publisher–McLean probably made as many enemies as he did admirers over the years. "When I was president of the state chamber of commerce," remembers Jack Reed Sr., who runs the family department store on Main Street in Tupelo, as his father did before him, "someone said, 'Well, what do you do in Tupelo?' And I said, 'I raise money and I defend George McLean, and it takes all my time.'" But even those who disliked him recognized that he was rattling cages with Lee County's interests in mind.

Convinced that Tupelo would rise and fall with the rural communities surrounding it, McLean decided that the farmers and villagers in outlying Lee County and its neighbors needed organizing, though not quite in the manner he had tried in Arkansas. Instead, he and his wife, Anna Keirsey McLean, bought a film projector and rented a couple of popular movies, then lugged them from hamlet to hamlet offering to show them for free if residents would let him speak to them for a few minutes. In this fashion, he persuaded dozens of tiny communities in the region to set up what he called "rural community development councils," self-governing bodies whose purpose was to encourage citizens to cooperate in improving their lives. With a keen eye for what motivated people, McLean and the Main Street businessmen, who by now were working with him, set up a contest among the villages. Each family was awarded points, for everything from improving farming techniques to supporting their children's studies. Having one's children inoculated against disease earned points; so did perfect school attendance; so did buying new farm equipment or adopting new farming practices. And each time a family did something like this, it added to the community's score. The community with the most points at the end of the year got thousands of dollars from Tupelo's merchants, to spend on whatever community development project it wanted. By the early 1950s, anyone coming upon the area would have thought they'd left Mississippi behind and stumbled into some prosperous district in the rural Midwest.

Then there was the *Daily Journal*. "A locally owned newspaper dedicated to the service of God and mankind," ran–and still runs–the paper's motto. It was the vehicle McLean used to make his points. The front page always highlighted issues that concerned him–literacy, rural development, improving the public schools–while the usual newspaper fare of crime and misfortune got relegated to an inside page. And, long before anyone elsewhere had even thought of the term "civic journalism"–the recent movement designed to engage newspapers more closely with their communities–the *Daily Journal* became a key player in the region's affairs. When McLean decided to spend $1.5 million of his own to put teaching assistants in the early grades of the Lee County schools–a model that was eventually adopted in schools statewide–he set up an operation within the newspaper to oversee the program. When a study showed that Lee County needed space for industrial startups in order to grow and no one else stepped forward to set it up, it was the newspaper that created a subsidiary to build warehouse space and provide support to entrepreneurs. And perhaps most importantly, the newspaper helped McLean set a tone throughout the region. "That newspaper gets a lot of criticism from some quarters because it doesn't act like a normal newspaper," says Jim High. "It doesn't do investigative journalism. It doesn't do sensational journalism. It doesn't put the murder on the front page. It concentrates on things that are important to this process of building the community. And it affects the thinking of the people who read the paper; they have a whole different feeling about the society we live in because of the way the paper reports that society."

Still, perhaps McLean's single most significant accomplishment was to convince Tupelo's businessmen to dissolve the local chamber of commerce–he argued that it operated solely in the interests of a few Tupelo business people and had no credibility with most of its citizens–and to replace it with what he called the Community Development Foundation. The CDF was open to anyone who wanted to join, and it quickly became the body through which pretty much everything in Tupelo and Lee County got done for decades afterward. It steered Lee County from its mostly agricultural roots into industry in the 1950s and 1960s, and on into the service economy in the 1970s. It helped bring dozens of employers to the region and then, over the last several decades, became adept at helping them find their way through the changing national economy. It guided Tupelo's efforts to improve its schools, created a vocational education system, spun off dozens of community organizations, and pretty much built the town's medical center, which has grown to become the third largest nonmetropolitan hospital in the country. In the 1960s, it even helped build a consensus that public institutions would be desegregated calmly and without fuss–which is precisely what happened.

Most importantly, as the umbrella group that brought thousands of people together on Tupelo and Lee County's behalf, the CDF helped McLean and his allies cement in place an unusual set of economic values. Focus on creating a good community, they argued–one that treats its citizens equally, educates its children well, prepares its workers for high-skilled jobs, and ensures that they are treated fairly by their employers–and prosperity will follow, because people will want to do business in such a place. This meant, for one thing, being careful about what kind of employers set up shop in town. "Mississippi needs industry, but it needs the highest type industry, not the lowest type," McLean declared in one speech. "We do not want to be the dumping ground for labor exploiters. That type of industry will harm our people and our existing industrialists. Frankly, we do not want a manufacturer unless he has a record of fair play with his employees and is interested in paying as good wages as possible. Selling her people short is the poorest practice ever engaged in by the South." There was, to be sure, an implicit bargain with employers: McLean eventually came to oppose unions, and though he insisted he was committed to the interests of laboring men and women, it had to be on his terms; characteristically, the CDF set up an organization to intercede with companies on workers' behalf.

In exchange for discouraging unions, however, Tupelo's leaders expected something in return: that businesses contribute time, money, and energy to improving life in the region. McLean himself would sometimes pick up the phone and call corporate headquarters in some other city if the company's local management was treating employees poorly or avoiding civic involvement. Improving the schools, training high school graduates in industrial skills, building the hospital–whatever it was, McLean believed that if you benefited from what Tupelo had to offer, you owed involvement in return. "George, Jack Reed, and others established an environment where it was the *socially* expected thing to get involved," says Lewis Whitfield, until recently president of Deposit Guaranty Bank in Tupelo. "And the expectations were high, because each time they had a success, expectations for what you could accomplish rose along with it." So one-upmanship in Tupelo took a somewhat peculiar course: after the McLeans put their money into the rural Lee County schools, for instance, Whitfield and a local gas company executive, Henry Dodge, created a foundation to fund the public schools in Tupelo itself, raising over a million dollars from businesses to that end.

All of this was, needless to say, a rather unusual set of priorities to find in Mississippi. "I knew George from the years when I was a student at Ole Miss in the early 1940s," says William Winter, the state's former governor. "He would come over and speak to student groups, and the earliest understandings I had on how much we had to make up in Mississippi were partly based on listening to him about his efforts in Tupelo. There were not many progressive voices in Mississippi in the forties and fifties, and George McLean was one of the most articulate of them. He saw that we could not achieve economic parity in Mississippi with a less-than-well-educated workforce, at a time when that was almost against public policy, when much of our economic development lay in encouraging low-wage plants to come to this state."

But if McLean's approach stood out when he was alive, it is practically unheard-of today, in Mississippi or anywhere else in the United States. "There is one and only one social responsibility of business–to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits," the economist Milton Friedman once wrote, and the phrase might as well be a watchword for the 1990s. Businesses–and, increasingly, other institutions–are expected to behave in accord with the market alone, and any community that expects them to do otherwise is considered foolhardy.

But Tupelo inverted the sentiment. Embrace social responsibility, it declared. Improve the community and business will profit. The standard-bearers of this deeply subversive philosophy were not some odd claque of Mississippi liberals. They were conservative business people: bankers and furniture manufacturers and retailers, and successful ones at that. "George McLean showed me and my father and other business people the importance of commitment to community," says Jack Reed, in whose department store you can still find a rack of Boy Scout manuals–*Public Speaking, Radio, Atomic Energy.* "It became our creed, our culture, our commitment." Nor was the philosophy confined to Tupelo; the town's influence spread throughout northeast Mississippi. "It just makes sense that if the members of the community do well, you will, too," says Bobby Martin, who is president of People's Bank in Ripley, about an hour's drive northwest of Tupelo. The bank, along with Martin himself, routinely kicks in large sums to such efforts as building a new math and science center for the high school. "If this bank can put money into the community and the county's citizens get a better livelihood as a result, this bank will prosper," Martin says. "I'll die believing that philosophy."

By the time McLean himself died in 1983, what he had accomplished had won its own label in economic development circles: it was called the "Tupelo Model." Yet even then, it was more admired than copied. In practical terms, McLean's influence never really spread beyond his own corner of Mississippi. Until, that is, Vaughn Grisham decided it ought to.

## The Tupelo Model

Watching Grisham in action, it is a little hard to figure out how he does what he does. Unlike McLean, he is not in the least imposing. Modest, never less than courteous, he is of medium height with a clipped, graying mustache and an elusive quality of appraisal in the eyes that, together, give him a vague resemblance to William Faulkner. He peppers his talks with humor–"I always think that's a funny term, 'servicing,'" he'll say as he talks about the artificial insemination program. "I guess the reason is that that's what the telephone company tells me they do to me. Sometimes I get the telephone bill and I'll think, 'Yep, they serviced me again.'" And though he will introduce notions that you don't usually see outside the academic literature–bringing up the importance, say, of "human" capital, or investment in the skills and education of individuals, and of "social" capital, the institutions and informal networks that tie communities together–he has a trick of sidling up to complex political issues, as if anything other than the lightest touch will send his audience scurrying away. "George McLean used to say that the 'trickle-down theory' is a lot like getting urinated on,'" he jokes. "So what did they do in Tupelo? They raised income from the grass roots up. It was a smart way of doing it."

Yet his impact in a room can be astounding, almost electric. It's not just that you can look around and see even the most rock-ribbed members of the local chamber of commerce nodding in agreement as he talks. It's that people change their lives because of what he says.

Barry McKuin, for instance. McKuin is a financial management consultant who lives in Morrilton, Arkansas, not far from Little Rock. A few years back, McKuin was getting worried about Morrilton's future–the counties on either side were growing rapidly, while his own Conway County was moribund. So when he got a flyer for a regional economic development symposium a couple of hours away, McKuin decided to go. He almost backed out–"I was driving up there and thought to myself, 'Why in the world are you going to this? You've got a lot of other things to do.' Had I not sent in a card, I would have turned around." As it was, he listened halfheartedly to the speakers, and then joined a smaller group that happened to be led by Grisham. "Vaughn talked for probably thirty minutes, and I found myself frantically taking notes. He was saying things I'd never heard before, like that community development precedes economic development, and it all made so much sense." He returned home, called Grisham a few days later and pleaded with him to come to Morrilton, which Grisham did–driving five hours each way. The result of that visit and of later ones–once he's been somewhere, Grisham remains on call to advise communities on how they should proceed–is that McKuin has emerged as the force behind a set of community-wide efforts to build Conway County's economy.

Pretty much everywhere Grisham's been, you can find something similar. In Maine, Governor Angus King heard Grisham speak and suggested that his state needed to hear more of him; the Maine Community Foundation brought him in for a series of workshops. "The history of Maine is the history of these company towns where the companies pull out and the towns are clinically depressed for the next fifty years," says Marion Kane, the foundation's director. "They need to be more flexible, to create an entrepreneurial spirit. Well, when you bring in development models in Maine everyone says, 'Hmmph, that'll work in Connecticut, but not in Maine.' But Tupelo, the image is it's the godforsaken outback of the world. Vaughn says, 'When we did this, there were no four-lane highways, no natural amenities,' and people in Aroostook County sit up in their chairs and say 'Hmm, that didn't stop Tupelo, it shouldn't stop us.'"

In Montana, the Montana Community Foundation invited Grisham up to speak at its annual dinner. "At the time, we were grappling with the question of how do you get people in small towns working together," says the foundation's Bob Buzzas. "Well, this dinner was the worst thing you could imagine. The room was long and very narrow–so narrow the waitress had trouble getting behind you. It was early summer, and it was a hot evening, people were sweating something god-awful in there, the room air conditioner was making a racket, the kitchen was on the other side of a thin wall. I thought, 'This is horrible, there's no way this guy can speak.' But he captivated people. He was unruffled by it all, he just got people to rise above the din and focus in on what he was trying to say. He made people relax; he charmed them. And then, he had such a powerful story to tell." So powerful, in fact, that Tom Cote, a financial adviser in Scobey, Montana, who had driven three hundred miles to the dinner hoping to beg some money for a community center, instead drove home that night and set about creating a community foundation modeled on the CDF.

Part of Grisham's success stems from his manner. He is perennially one of the most popular professors on the Ole Miss campus, in large part because he both challenges his students and treats them with unusual consideration; when Vice President Al Gore called him recently to talk to him about community development, Grisham–a lifelong Democrat–politely thanked him for calling, but said that he had to get to class. He carries this style with him on the road, an obvious concern for the worries of the people he is talking to blended with an absolute conviction that they need to learn how to take care of their own. "Vaughn has this core belief that we all live in this community and all give to it–it's not a question of *should* you, but of *how much*," says Phillip Wiggins, a former student who is now a real estate investor in Dallas. "He lives that way, and he expects it of the people around him. It's not overbearing, but his feeling is that life should be played to a higher standard, and he expects it of himself and of his friends and of the people he lectures to. He has this sense that life is about community."

Even so, it is just a bit odd, when you think about it, to find a sociology professor from Mississippi roving around the country as a motivational speaker for ailing communities. Especially considering that, unlike most economic development consultants, Grisham charges a pittance for his efforts and plunges the money right into his McLean Institute for Community Development at Ole Miss, which runs leadership development programs in northeast Mississippi. His activities make more sense, though, if you remember that Grisham is, through and through, a southerner.

John Shelton Reed, the sociologist and popularizer of southern culture at the University of North Carolina, once wrote an essay in which he pondered why it was that southerners had not generally excelled as sociologists. The reason, he decided, is that the discipline of sociology puts a premium on abstraction, generalization, and theory. On the other hand, he argued, the South's cultural style is oriented toward the concrete; it expresses itself through music and food and humor and stories. In an academic field that admires complex models of human behavior, the southern sociologist's fondness for finding significance in, say, the market for vials of Elvis Presley's sweat has always been slightly suspect.

But using the trifling to broach the consequential is what makes difficult subjects accessible, and southerners have honed this to a fine art. "There is a kind of indirectness in traditional southern culture, that you don't confront things directly," says Charles Reagan Wilson, a historian and the director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. "It's because of the tensions in southern society that were always there. The whole development of southern manners was a way to oil the system to make it work. And part of that was storytelling. Storytelling fulfills a lot of functions, but that is one of the most important. It is a way indirectly to get into things, to tell a story that seems nonthreatening to make a point. Vaughn Grisham does that. He has a very strong sense of history and of passing on southern history, which is for him a kind of moral tale."

It is not hard to see why Grisham would find such value in the particular tale of Tupelo. For one thing, the specifics of his and George McLean's lives, a generation apart, bear a remarkable likeness–the failed ministry, the discovery of sociology, the determination to improve life for ordinary Mississippians. In fact, Grisham himself was so taken with the biographical parallels that when Anna Keirsey McLean once told him that George had never liked music, Grisham blurted out, "That can't be! I *love* music!"

But more important, Tupelo's is, at its heart, a very southern story, though with a twist: it gives a progressive expression to a set of rather traditional values. Some of these were personal to Grisham. "When I was twelve," he says, "my father gave me an allowance, twenty cents a week. I saved every bit of it and bought a baseball. My father looked at me and said, 'If I'd known you were going to waste the money, I wouldn't have given it to you.' I told him I thought it was my money. He said, 'If someone else gives it to you, it's theirs.' That day I went and got my job delivering newspapers. I didn't want to be beholden to anyone." Grisham's father was an autocrat; even his friends called him "Mr. Grisham." But he instilled in his son a set of values–take your fate in your own hands, work hard, treat everyone equally, take care of your own–that Vaughn Grisham found echoed in George McLean. Only McLean thought they should apply to entire communities, not just individuals.

McLean's genius went even further. He was able to take values that were more or less latent in the South, awaken them, and channel them into community development. Not the least of these was a religious sense of duty to people and to community. "Religion penetrates, it pervades, it just bathes the South," says Samuel S. Hill, perhaps the leading scholar of religion in the South and an old friend of Grisham's. In most southern churches, the sense of commitment to doing God's work–and of guilt for not living up to God's expectations–manifests itself by saving souls, or condemning drink, or fighting abortion. In Tupelo, religious duty took the form of a no-less-profound intention to manifest God's will through the community. "What this meant," says Hill, "is you're supposed to live your faith, and to be conscious of living your faith, by being alert to the conditions around you of individuals and of the whole community."

Just as strikingly, McLean showed how a very conservative strain of southern belief–resistance to capitalism's impact on community life, and to its disruption of the latticework of tradition, church, family, and community that held society together–could be reconciled with the modern economy. What with Atlanta and other southern cities turning themselves into the very symbols of American economic exuberance, it is hard to remember that, just as France fancies itself doing today, the South once asserted itself as an alternative to the social disruption caused by industrialism and the triumph of commercial values. This sentiment reached its apogee with *I'll Take My Stand,* the manifesto for southern agrarianism put together by Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, John Crowe Ransom, and other southern intellectuals in 1930. "There are a good many faults to be found with the old South," Ransom wrote in his essay, "but hardly the fault of being intemperately addicted to work and to gross material prosperity. The South never conceded that the whole duty of man was to increase material production, or that the index to the degree of his culture was the volume of his material production."

McLean certainly held no brief for the old South, and was hardly an opponent of industrialization. But he was immovable in his conviction that Tupelo would dictate the terms on which it embraced the market, not the other way around; development would serve the interests of families, churches, schools, and all the other fixtures of community life. The result, says John Shelton Reed, was that he created a sort of "domesticated capitalism" in Lee County and its environs.

Vaughn Grisham doesn't put it in those terms, but it is a hunger for something of this very nature that he is trying to satisfy. Not long ago, no less a conservative light than William Bennett, the former education secretary and author, said to the *Wall Street Journal,* "What I'm concerned about is the idolatry of the market. Unbridled capitalism . . . may not be a problem for production and for expansion of the economic pie, but it's a problem for human beings. It's a problem for . . . the realm of values and human relationships because it distorts things." There are people all over the country who worry about what the global economy will do to the places they live, who fear that it will build them up by turning them into hustling communities they don't recognize, or tear them down by robbing them of their livelihoods. In traveling from town to town, from chamber of commerce breakfast to community planning luncheon, Grisham is passing along a missive from the last place in the country anyone would expect such a thing: that communities can figure out what they want, and then organize themselves to make sure it happens.

## Giving in to Success

There is one small irony, though. Every storyteller knows that the best tales are the ones that contain some little complication at their heart; think of J. E. B. Stuart the dog and his exacting standards for a hiding place. Grisham knows this, too. Which is why it's striking, although entirely understandable, that he does not temper his stories with the most interesting thing about Tupelo: that it is no longer hewing to the model it created.

In a sense, Tupelo has given in to its own success. It is a town of only about thirty-five thousand people, but it has the feel of a much bigger place. Driving in, you're struck by the sheer bustle–trucks lumbering through, cars stacked up at lights, people flowing in and out of shopping centers. It is not a pretty city; the 1936 tornado wiped out most of its old buildings, and it has spent too much of the last half-century thinking about growth to worry much about adornment. But it *is* a vital city. During the day, its stores, factories, schools, and hospital can cause its population to triple.

Much of this is due to the work of the Community Development Foundation. Over the last few decades, under its longtime executive director, Harry Martin, the CDF has become a crack industrial developer. It has not, however, remained a *community* developer. The CDF can still gather thousands of people to its annual dinner, but they don't much talk about improving the lives of Tupelo's ordinary citizens anymore.

There are plenty of people in town who see nothing wrong with this. The corporate executives and medical administrators who have arrived in town over the last decade or so think of Tupelo as an economic development success story, not a community development success story, and the tie between the two–which the CDF embodied when McLean was alive–seems less relevant today. As long as Tupelo keeps growing and its enterprises expanding, runs the argument, everyone should be happy.

But there are others who worry that Tupelo's very success is shoving it off track. "In the old days," says Steve Mayhorn, who was the first black member of Tupelo's city council, "factories would come in and be interested in cultural things, the construction of houses, the interests of the community. I don't see that so much now. We have national firms that contribute money, but it's not the same thing. If we don't continue to do what it took us to get here, we'll end up like any other city, split, with turf wars."

In fact, there are already signs that this is happening. "We're at a crossroads," says Jim High. "As long as George McLean was around to be this benevolent dictator, we were cohesive. But now, the banks are all getting bought out or they've had to go statewide. The hospital is now regional; it's got twenty-eight family medical clinics scattered all over north Mississippi. The industries in town, the people who run them have had to pull their interests back because their businesses are demanding more of their attention. So they all focus less on community-building. We're seeing the first evidence of the results in our United Way. The United Way never failed to reach its goal until last year, and last year it didn't reach its goal by about $50,000; this year it didn't reach its goal by about $100,000. All of those top people are no longer involved in it–you know, now they send their junior execs out to the United Way because they don't have time to deal with it."

Not surprisingly, the person who is perhaps most dismayed by this turn of events is Billy Crews, a disarmingly soft-spoken former student of Grisham's, who is now the publisher of the *Daily Journal*. In the wake of the CDF's withdrawal from community affairs, the newspaper and CREATE, a community foundation that McLean set up and willed his newspaper to, have taken over the task of worrying about education, revitalizing poor neighborhoods, pushing entrepreneurship within the black community, and helping outlying counties to develop. All of these are things that Crews talks about happily, but he is also girding himself for a full-scale community discussion of what is happening, to be waged in part in the pages of his newspaper. "I don't know that there's a full understanding, and certainly not a broad understanding, that we've left the formula of our success," he says. "We continue to beat our breast about how great we are, but people forget that we have been over the last ten to fifteen years the beneficiaries of what was done ten to fifteen years before that. And what we're doing now has everything to do with what occurs ten, fifteen, and twenty years down the road. So all we're doing, as we cheerlead ourselves about how well we've done with these new industries coming into town, is really getting back to the old chamber of commerce mentality."

Back at the McLean Institute in Oxford–which is just Grisham's two-room office, piled alarmingly with books and papers and decorated solely by a portrait of Thomas Jefferson, which hangs askew on a back wall, and a faded map of Mississippi that leans against a chair–Grisham is watching all this with great interest. Over the last few years, he and Martin have had several heated discussions on the subject. "Actually, I'm surprised Harry still talks to me," Grisham says. But he is also reluctant to get too involved. That's not what he does, in the communities he's involved with. "I always feel my role is pretty small," he says. "I'm the catalyst who gets things going–it's other people who actually do things. Whether it succeeds or not really depends on them. All I can do is point them in the right direction and get them going."

Still, Grisham has an idea. "I've got some material on the old 'rural community development councils' that I'm looking over. I'd like to try to recharge that whole idea. Shreveport is doing a neighborhood revitalization program, and they want me to see if we can take the principles and use them in a small metropolitan neighborhood. Then we're going to try to do some of the same things in Maine. And then I was thinking," he says, "maybe I should go ahead and reintroduce the idea to Tupelo." ■