The South Is Different

The South is diverse, yet thanks to the Supreme Court it is once more the “Solid South.” It is changing, yet its traditions will save it from the drab conformity dictated by Madison Avenue.

The South is different. That is why it is so fascinating to people who live in other regions of America.

Visitors to the South are, depending on their point of view, amazed, amused, entranced or enraged by the South’s differences. But for every author of a condemnatory article, the South has a thousand friends who are just crazy about Dixie.

Every spring, when the first wisteria begins to spill over old brick walls, the South’s friends cross the Potomac. They come to view the South’s camellias and azaleas, walk through the Southern pineywoods, ride on flatboats through the South’s swamps, tour Southern “shrines” and historic houses, drive along moss-hung Southern roads, peep into Southern gardens, eat Southern hominy and grits, shrimp and shad and oysters, rice and gravy, crabs and baked breads. These friends enjoy and admire Southern houses, highways, flowers, smiles and victuals. If they dislike Southern politics, they clearly do not deem politics the most important thing in life.

Yes, they are all crazy about the South—the rich New Yorkers, the honeymooners from Illinois and the elderly couples from Massachusetts. There is no evidence that they believe the literary and political legend of the South as a land of morons, lynchers, rapists, nightriders and servant-whippers.

Southerners know that people read in the newsmagazines and the paperback books that they are psychologically stunted and spiritually impoverished. But they don’t get too excited. They know that millions of Northern tourists see the falsity of the myth and the scare articles when they travel south in the springtime.

The rich, differentiating vitality of the South cannot be enclosed in a single definition. Therein lies much of the trouble the South has in getting itself across to the rest of the nation. It is also why the best way to counter the effect of the headlines is to invite a Northern friend to visit, go to church with the family, drink whisky on the piazza, talk to the Negroes who drive the tractors across the big fields, and fish in the surf off the magnificent beaches along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. That is the best of all possible ways to make a Northerner understand that the South isn’t a chapter from a novel by Erskine Caldwell.

Essential Conservatism

The South today is as much a land of Cadillacs, waterskiers, air-conditioning and split-level houses as it is a land of cotton and tobacco, sawmills, bourbon and drizzling voices. But the South is still very different, and the gap isn’t closing between the sections. It has, to be sure, changed in the last twenty years. For that matter, the South of 1938 was very different from the South of 1918. There’s always been change, and more rapid change than you think. Yet the essential Southerness has remained.

The South has a sort of built-in power brake, which is a most effective piece of historical equipment. It has an essential conservatism, which has kept it from skidding into some very unhappy patterns, enthusiasms and crazes. The prosperity-worship of the nineteen-twenties that made many sections of the country abandon old standards of decent behavior came too late for most of the South. By the time many Southerners realized that a “brave new world” was aborning, the crash came and destroyed the modernist, materialist shibboleths. And when the depression set in and gave the country a severe shock, the South didn’t find the shock so terrific. After all, poverty had been a continuing condition south of the Mason-Dixon line for decades. Many Northern youths were so shocked that they turned to radical political movements; Southerners of the rising generation had had the experience of troubled times that enabled them to understand events and take them in stride. And so it was that the South, unlike the North, produced no crop of radicals in those bitter years.

Josephine Pinckney, the Southern novelist, wrote about the generation of Southerners that matured in the late nineteen-twenties and early thirties. Her words still apply:

They share with the rest of American youth the advantages of the new education, freedom of movement, and frankness of speech, and it is certain that a fairly large number has managed to preserve a good taste, a feeling for courtesy that checks extravagance along these lines. The thoughtful ones see which way they are headed and are prepared to stem the flood.

Since World War II, the South has gained new economic security. But it has done so without notable sacrifice of its traditions of independence and humane living, personalness and non-conformism. Factories have been mechanized but not the people.

Of course, the tempo of Southern life has speeded up in the nineteen-forties and fifties. Southerners who have matured in the last fifteen years have behind them the same national experiences of war and boom that Americans in other regions also share. But the North has changed too. If the South has become a little less personal, the North has become vastly more impersonal. If the South now includes suburbia, the North includes a rapidly-expanding utopia.