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Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s

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Race, Class and Culture Collide

The historian Pete Daniel recounted in his book, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*, the events that shaped the New South when race, class and culture collided. The South’s cultural landscape shifted drastically during the 1950s due to the use of chemicals and the mechanization of agriculture; the popularity of NASCAR racing and rock ’n’ roll music; the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the civil rights movement. This historical account covers the tumultuous period in southern history which began after World War II and culminated in the civil rights movement triumphs of the 1960s.

The first section of the book, “The Postwar Landscape”, detailed the rise of agribusiness which displaced millions of farm laborers and tenant farmers. Many rural towns disappeared as people moved to the cities to find work. This migration escalated the conflict over segregation. Whites of all classes resisted change of any kind regarding the mixing of the races; they clung to the antiquated thinking of the past. Daniel also related in this section how the Bureaucracy that controlled agriculture operated with disturbing machinations. Federal bureaucrats continued to promote the use of DDT to control pests even though there were numerous reports of poisoned livestock and wildlife in areas sprayed with the pesticide.

Daniel continues with the story of how “Low Culture” spread throughout the South and later the nation. One of the highlights of the working class’s “lowdown culture” was stock car racing which evolved from the days when most of the drivers were involved in the illegal liquor hauling business into a professional sport. However, southern music, especially rock ‘n’ roll, with its roots in the rural South became the driving force that broke the color line. Black and white musicians collaborated on songs that both black and white teens enjoyed. Rock ‘n’ roll revolutionized the music industry with artists such as Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Otis Redding and B.B. King. Sam Phillips produced a major portion of the hit songs of that era in his Sun Studio in Memphis, Tennessee. Rock ‘n’ roll caused a cultural shift that influenced the way southerners as well as other Americans dressed, spoke, danced and socialized.

In the last section, “Fatal Divisions,” Daniel recounted the horrific as well as the courageous acts that constituted the conflict between segregationists and integrationists. The middle-class and elite whites feared they would lose their superior status if Blacks were given full equal rights. The Citizen Councils and the Ku Klux Klan fought vehemently to preserve the old order with tactics which resembled those used in Nazi Germany by the Gestapo. The Blacks fought back, no longer willing to wait for change. They challenged racial injustice with lunch counter sit-ins and endured harassment during the integration of the schools. The civil rights movement led to the passage of laws which would end segregation in the 1960s.

Daniel argued that there were many lost opportunities or “lost revolutions” during this time in the South’s history that could have brought change more quickly. Politicians, clergy and the press backed down out of fear of reprisals from the segregationists instead of standing up for racial justice. If the South had not been so preoccupied with its racial struggles it could have progressed at a faster pace.