



COMING HOME TO COTTON  
*by Houck Medford*

A N E X H I B I T I O N C A T A L O G

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In her last breath before my mother died, she said to me “take me home!” Home for her was her birthplace, a farm in low-country South Carolina. It had been nearly 50 years since I had spent time there. There have been many changes, and in some respects—none.

Cotton is now a huge agribusiness. Story-high machinery and equipment have replaced scores of farm laborers.

Farming remains a lifestyle.

The farm family goes to church on Sunday; they have children and think about farm succession and “keeping it in the family.” They want everyone to get along.

African-Americans still provide the farm work force.

—**Houck Medford**  
*Southern Documentary Artist*



The addition of new family members can derail the best laid plans as the issue of succession confronts every farm. The marriage of Josh to the patriarch's daughter, Amanda, brings a new vision that is positioned for success.



The family home is indeed the family home. Bates grew up in this house with his two sisters and brother, just as his dad grew up in the house with his three sisters and two brothers. In earlier times, the home was the stagecoach stop between the capital Columbia (S.C.) and coastal Charleston.



## P R E F A C E

My mother was the only patient in the Intensive Care Unit of Haywood County Regional Medical Center on Wednesday evening, May 9, 2012. The nursing station was eerily quiet, absent of the usual alarms and beeping cadence of monitors. My mother's monitor screen was dark and the I.V. bag and its tubing were folded and pushed into the corner. The only light was the ceiling light over the nurse's station, which cast a diffuse glow from their observation sentry into my mom's private room. My mother's life was slipping away as her warm, still hand lay in mine. She whispered with a labored exhale, "Please take me home!"

I knew what that meant. I had heard that phrase before when her mom passed away 25 years earlier in 1987. "I am taking her home," she would tell her friends.

"Home" for her was Cameron, S.C.—a small town at the headwaters of the Four Hole Swamp—sand country! I often visited there as a child, spending more than just a few days with Grandmother Houck, "Aunt Vera", as was the local naming convention. My last extended time with Aunt Vera was as a 12 year-old in 1962. Now 50 years later I find Cameron unchanged and still a comfortable town filled with comfortable people. Cousins I ran with

then are running the family farm now. The experience of visiting them is like stepping back into an earlier life.

A few things have changed—farming, for one. The Century Farm is even more amplified in its character with bigger and more machines, but with fewer laborers; the family is bigger than life with everyone-at-the table meals; and the worn leather-bound family bible from 1883 celebrating the marriage of W.D. and Hattie Othelia Houck—the genesis of the Houck Farm—is prominently visible as a record of all good things that come to pass.

Observing this farm up-close now since 2012, I have photographed its past and future success. The farm has embraced technology and calibrated its variable inputs to competently participate in a hundred-year-old industry—cotton farming. The farm family is demonstrably devoted to each other and involved in daily operations. The employees are long-term (multigenerational). The farm has a vision for the future and is committed to serving a higher being.

That is not to say that the scene is without challenges. With the complexity of operations and presence of new family members who "married-



in" and who bring new or different ways of doing things, there remains the challenge of just getting along and moving forward. Isn't that what life is all about?

I undertook this personal project to give the Houck family a sense of where it came from and maybe a sense of where it is going. In another 100 years, I expect that there will be as much to celebrate.

— Houck Medford

The advent of "Big Ag" and large scale farming led to the development of oversized farm equipment, like this eight row John Deere 9986 Cotton Harvester which conservatively replaces 20-plus field laborers. This overwhelming scene is not out of deference to the farm kitty.



Water has always been the universal solvent and always will be. On the farm, the water truck can serve as a mixing bowl for herbicides, growth stimulators, fertilizers, and much more. Seldom a one-person job, a second set of hands comes in handy for lifting heavy ingredients.



The best investment a farmer in low country South Carolina can make is irrigation. Flooded drainage ditches assisted meagerly a half-century ago, but now, giant-sized irrigation pivots deliver thousands of gallons of water per hour per acre where and when it is needed most.



“My father worked for Mr. Bates and Mr. Bates’s dad, as my grandfather worked for Mr. Bates’s dad.” Michael is at home in the command seat of the farm’s cotton harvester—his home for October and November. His grin says it all, “it is all mine!”





The hood of the pickup truck is the most common platform where decisions are made for the daily work plan. Farms which have only a few employees do not conduct morning planning meetings.





“Mib” Mildred Houck (b, 1926) chose to move to the mountains of Western North Carolina in 1948 to create a new life with her new husband in the town where he grew up—Waynesville, N.C. As times came to pass, the venerated local funeral home transported her back home to where she first began her life—Cameron, S.C.



Oversized farm equipment brings its own oversized tires, wrenches, and need for strong backs to push and shove. Jody, the regional John Deere mechanic, struggles to return a bad wheel to the stack.







The dialect of low-country South Carolina is its own and full comprehension only comes to those who were born and grew up here. Patriarch Bates and lead man Michael are having a conversation that only they understand between them.





A requirement of large scale farming (sometimes referred to as precision farming) is the need for all inputs like fertilizer and seeds to be carefully weighed and allocated. A weighing scale for farm vehicles is indispensable and necessary for calculating productivity or yield.



Large harvest volumes generated by oversized harvesters created a need for large transport vehicles, and so the “boll buggy” was invented. The next stop for collected cotton is the staging area where it is squeezed by hydraulics into 18-wheel tractor trailer-size loaves for transport to the local cotton gin.





Farming is a way of life. Variable recreational opportunities do not abound in farming communities where there are few neighbors. A cotton field easily becomes a wonderful playground or classroom for Amanda and Corbin.





Every parent has an unexpressed or expressed vision for their children and grandchildren. For Bates, this paternal gesture is unequivocally transmitting to his grandson Corbin: “perhaps, one day this will be yours.”





Pecans, historically, have been a source of income and food to farmers in the South. Despite GPS directed tractors, combines, and cotton harvesters, the trees have earned the badge of “sacred” and many stand alone as monuments to earlier times.

Houck Medford's *Coming Home to Cotton* is a remarkable exploration of one family, broadly defined by blood kin and chosen family, as it has struggled to keep alive a century-old cotton farm in the Four Hole Swamp region of South Carolina. The cinematography is gorgeous and the story compelling. I strongly recommend it to anyone interested in South Carolina and the American South.

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The photographs captured in Houck Medford's series, *Coming Home to Cotton*, are intimate and detailed; the stories behind them are personal. This explorative body of work reflects on the importance of family, faith, and place through the lens of a contemporary Southern cotton farm. Like the fibers of a cotton boll, there is close connectivity between these people and this place, Houck Farms, that generation after generation has called home. In a broader sense, these stories connect to the extensive, rich history of farming in America.

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