

# THE GOOD OL' BOYS OF BRAZIL

Welcome to the *really* Deep South.

An hour out of busy São Paulo, hidden in a maze of eucalyptus trees and sugar cane, residents of Vila Americana have gathered for a picnic. It is a festive affair, an annual gathering of the families to eat and play and share old stories.

Nearby, the children have found a novel playground, an ancient cemetery of gray tombstones under boughs of yellow almander blossoms. As the young ones chase each other merrily across the remains of their ancestors, the teen-agers stroll between the neatly lined graves, pausing to stare reverently up at an imposing white obelisk that displays the names of the little settlement's long-dead pioneers: Bookwalter, Buchanan, McNabb, Meriwether, Peacock, Pettigrew, Webster, Wade. Not a Portuguese surname in the bunch. At the bottom of the obelisk, there is something else: The defiant stars and bars of the Old Confederacy.

The tombstones do not speak of Indians or tropical disease — once the normal harbingers of death in the Brazilian countryside. Instead, they whisper of a lost society in a land far, far away. The Old South.

From the tombstone of Roberto Stell Steagall, born in Brazil Sept. 3, 1899; died, Jan. 31, 1985:

*Once a rebel, twice a rebel and forever a rebel!*

Finally, the teen-agers tire of this reverie and, in their hand-me-down gray Confederate uniforms and frilly hoop skirts, dash back to the Picnic of the American Descendants, an annual gathering of descendants of 4,000 Confederate veterans who fled the ruins of the American South after the Civil War, then tried to resurrect their old home in the Brazilian outback, complete with slaves and cotton plantations.

"A lot of people think it's eerie to have a party next to a graveyard," says silver-haired Anna Lucina Carr in a molasses-slow Southern drawl as she nibbles daintily at a leg of fried chicken. "But I don't think so. This is where our past is buried. It's fitting that we should have the party here."

As the aroma of fried chicken wafts across the picnic grounds, Hilton Seawright, a young fair-haired Brazilian, tells how his great-grandmother survived Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's infamous march through Georgia, leaving a trail of bodies and a swath of scorched earth from Atlanta to Savannah. Her secret: She hid in the basement.

There are also stories about Bony McAlpine, a firebrand of a lad turned away by Confederate

recruiters because he was a mere 16 years old. Like so many caught up in the religious fervor of the "war between brothers," Bony found another recruiting station, lied about his age and joined the Blue and Gray. He survived America's bloodiest war only to die homesick in Brazil.

The children of this unique little patch of Brazil, like their parents before them, are full of such stories. The Yankees are always the bad guys, the troops of Gen. Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson the good guys. In their eyes, the Old South is the cultured South of chivalry and elegant manners, the romanticized South of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.

To keep the memories alive for future generations and hold tight to a sense of community, descendants gather each November outside the little town of Santa Barbara D'Oeste to raise the Confederate flag and make a pilgrimage to their ancestors' graves. To remember.

"This grave here belongs to my grandfather," says Anna Lucina Carr. "He was from Ohio — a Northerner! There was such a scandal when he married my grandmother. The community never really accepted him. All that distance and time away from the war, he was still the enemy in their eyes."

## The Feverish Quest for White Gold

Before the Civil War, long before the age of cheap, mass-produced synthetic fibers, the worldwide demand for cotton reached fever pitch. Across the American South, white men with grubstakes bought slaves, cleared swamps and canebrakes, and battled bears, poisonous snakes and yellow fever. Those who survived that first encounter with the swamps and muggy heat began planting cotton.

The sandy loam and clay soils were fertile. Slaves were plentiful. With enough slaves and enough land, a frugal manager could rapidly become a millionaire. As the money poured in, the planter class imported the best architects and artisans of Europe to erect stately mansions on the mud streets of frontier settlements. For example, the brawling river port of Natchez, Miss., once known for its raucous Natchez-Under-The-Hill barrooms on the banks of the

Mississippi River, became overnight one of the richest cities in the world, known as much for its burgeoning culture as for its cotton.

The Civil War ended all that. After five years of brutal fighting, the South lay in ruins. Most of its men were dead or mangled. In Mississippi, one-fifth of the entire state budget was used to purchase artificial limbs for Confederate veterans. A vengeful North imposed Reconstruction, and freed slaves, many of whom could not read or write, were elected to run the towns, counties and states of Dixie. Carpetbaggers and military governors enforced laws and passed tough new property taxes.

Factories collapsed beneath mountains of rust. Weeds choked the cotton. Paint peeled from the empty mansions.

In every disaster, there are opportunists, people who look for gain in the ruin of others. Such a man was Dom Pedro II, emperor of Brazil. Dom Pedro had dreams of making Brazil a world player in the cotton markets. He also had an enormous nation in need of development. He saw in the tattered remnants of the South a huge supply of adventurers — men and women who knew what it was like to carve a fortune from utter wilderness, who might help further his dream of turning Brazil into a world power.

After the war, Dom Pedro's agents combed the beaten Confederacy, offering free land in undeveloped areas of Brazil. Other land was available, at 22 cents an acre with 15 years to pay. The emperor's men circulated pamphlets entitled *Brazil, Home For Southerners*, which predicted the immigrants would need "30 minutes" to adapt to the tropical climate.

Dom Pedro craftily advised the ex-Confederates that slavery was still sanctioned in his country.

More than 4,000 Southerners took the bait. Just as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid would set forth for Bolivia and Hitler's advisers would flee to Argentina, expatriate Southerners headed for Brazil to create a New South.

The first group of 140 emigrants set sail for Rio de Janeiro from Galveston, Texas, in 1866 on a rented ship, according to *Soldier Rest*, a history of the immigration written in Portuguese by Judith MacKnight Jones, granddaughter of a Confederate veteran, who has made it her life's mission to preserve the history of Confederates in exile.

Early in the trip, a violent storm battered the boat

BY VICTORIA GRIFFITH

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and giant waves washed over its decks. A Confederate who had had his leg amputated in Galveston and was traveling in a hammock, had to have four men hold him steady to keep him from being slammed against the walls of the passenger compartment.

In Havana, the captain of the ship tried to extort false landing duties from the voyagers. Having just fought for five years against nearly impossible odds, the Confederates were not intimidated.

"My brother knew that our captain . . . was . . . out for a share of the fees," wrote one passenger. "My brother told him frankly that if he persisted, he would be summarily executed. The captain received the news philosophically and, after a brief discussion with the other passengers, promised to behave throughout the rest of the trip."

Two months after departing Havana, they spotted land. The discovery caused the captain a great deal of consternation, since, according to his calculations, the ship should have been in open sea. They drifted along the coast until they saw a village, then dispatched a landing party to ask where they were.

The men quickly returned with the news: They were on the northern coast of Haiti.

Haiti! How did they end up there? The captain, after a lengthy consultation of his charts and navigation equipment, came up with a surprising answer: The metal in the women's hoop skirts had distorted the compass readings and sent the ship off course. The captain ordered the ladies to throw the offending garments overboard. The ladies made the sacrifice reluctantly.

## Old Times There Are Not Forgotten

By early afternoon, the party of the American Descendants was in full swing. A half dozen families entered the picnic area in horse-drawn buggies, led by hired hands from their farms. A few of the men wore Stetson hats, in memory of their Texan ancestors. Dixie roared forth from monstrous black loudspeakers as Brazilian Southern belles descended from the carts. The guests whistled and sang along: *Oh I wish I was in the land of cotton. Old times there are not forgotten. Look away, look away, look away, Dixieland . . .*

As if to show there were no hard feelings, the band also played *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Later, as the crowd watched in reverent silence, the men raised the Confederate flag. With the stars and bars flapping in the breeze, flanked by Brazilian flags, women in hoop skirts and young men in Confederate uniforms posed for family pictures. Younger members of the group swung into a vigorous square dance. Miniature Confederate flags adorned bumper stickers of Jeeps and pickup trucks, reminiscent of the omnipresent "Fergit Hell!" bumper stickers that still litter the American South.

"Americana was not the only colony settled by U.S. immigrants," Judith MacKnight Jones explained as she presided over the picnic, begun in the early 1900s before Brazilian television began to accelerate the inevitable assimilation of the descendants of the Southerners into the local culture. "But this is the only community that preserved the old traditions."

In 1866, the first Americans were met by the emperor himself when they landed in Rio. But as the novelty of their new land wore off, the settlers were shocked at the difficulty of life on the Brazilian frontier. Much of the land was in undeveloped areas with soil so poor and so shallow that its nutrients were destroyed with one crop. Many were given land in the Amazon, where it was impossible to get supplies. Thus, the first few years were heart-breaking and often deadly. A young American girl, Belona Smith, later wrote an account of her time in Iguape, on the Atlantic coast south of São Paulo.

"Our first contact with the migrant ants was a shock," she wrote. "These ants marched in columns about six feet wide, a black wave and ready to destroy anything in their way. All they left of a baby bird was his bones. If they came at night, our only defense was to light a fire and patiently wait until they left. We learned that, if we stayed quiet, they didn't bite us."

As time went on, she wrote, "no one had shoes any more and . . . we were forced to go barefoot or use crude leather sandals." Eventually, Belona Smith's family gave up and quit their little colony. "We were the last to leave. The Bowsens, the Tavers, everyone else already had gone."

They began the arduous trek over the mountains to São Paulo on foot. "The boys carried my mother over the hardest parts, and the others managed the best they could . . . On the way, we passed by the Cook family's camp . . . Their baby was dying and they buried him there."

In time, 80 percent of the immigrants returned to the United States. In one typical colony along the Amazon, malaria ravished the populace, leading U.S. Secretary of State Hamilton Fish to send Naval ships to pick up survivors at the mouth of the river.

For years, tattered stragglers turned up in odd places. An American dentist was captured by Indians in the Amazon and held for two years. A Confederate scion of an old Richmond family became a mercenary, joined the Brazilian army to fight Paraguay, then switched sides because the Paraguayans offered more money. He was captured by his former allies and met his death before a firing squad in some lonely town square. Several years ago, newspapers were full of reports about a missionary on swampy Marajo Island in the Amazon finding ceramic mugs with the stars and bars woven into their motifs. He traced the pottery back to a cluster of subsistence farmers. They had

American surnames and could understand a little English, but could not speak it.

## Gone With the Wind

Of the eight original settlements, one survived: the little village of Southerners at Santa Barbara D'Oeste, near Americana, a textile town of more than 200,000 that took its name from the American descendants. They managed so well that today, even though most of the descendants speak Portuguese, it is still possible to hear English spoken with a Southern drawl.

"My grandmother missed the U.S., but she was always surrounded by her American friends," explained Anna Carr. "We grew up speaking English in the house, and I spoke English with my children. That's why we still have Southern accents five generations later."

Judith Jones suggested that English was also preserved out of pride. "The Portuguese we learned around here is not a high-class Portuguese, whereas our English was very refined," she said. "That's why a lot of immigrants preferred to speak English."

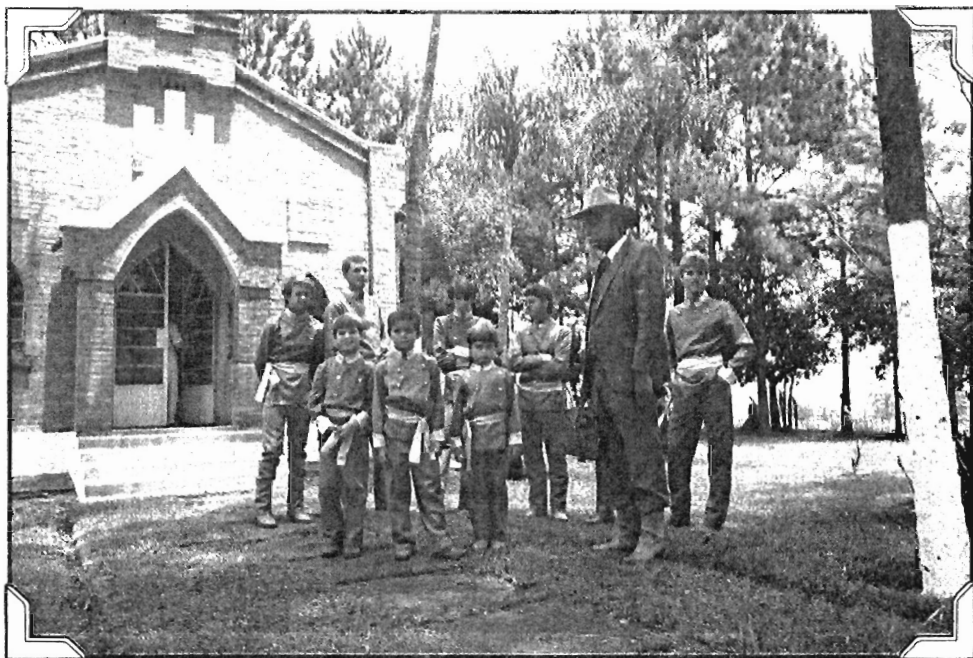
That wistful attachment to lost "gentility" was a powerful force. "The Southern families came to Brazil in the hope of rediscovering the life Miss Mitchell described so beautifully in her novel," said Jones.

Never mind that *Gone With the Wind* accurately described a society that existed only in the author's mind. The Confederates did their best to reinvent the Old South of myth. They bought slaves, planted cotton, imported ministers, doctors and teachers from the U.S., and taught their slaves English.

At first the Southerners had trouble coping with the new language. Jones and her friends tell how Wilber MacKnight, son of an immigrant and Jones' ancestor, purchased a Negro slave in the 1870s with whom he communicated mostly through sign language. One day, when he refused to follow orders, Wilber tied him to a post to whip him. The man angry began swearing at Wilber in Portuguese. Wilber thought the slave was begging for forgiveness and set him free, much to the amusement of friends who understood Portuguese.

To preserve their own culture, the settlers relied on a form of segregation. They forbade their sons and daughters to marry outside the community. But early on they met with resistance from youngsters charmed by the natives. Wilber MacKnight fell in love at an early age with a pretty girl who lived on his father's plantation, the daughter of Italian immigrants. After courting her for a short time, according to Jones, he announced his intention to marry her.

His parents' reaction was violent: "Marry an Italian? Never!" screamed his father, and Wilber was promptly packed off to stay with American relatives in Campinas. A few years later, in 1874, Wilber succumbed to parental pressures and married the



*Right: Children in Confederate uniforms gather near a tiny chapel an hour out of São Paulo to hear tales of their ancestors, Confederate veterans who fled to Brazil after the Civil War. Below: Two young women dressed as Southern belles stroll between the neatly lined graves of Confederate soldiers, their wives and their children.*



"girl next door," 16-year-old Mary Caroline Perkins.

After the tremendous expense of the trip, few ex-Confederates had enough money left to purchase many slaves in Brazil. Most, however, managed to buy one or two to help with the heavy chores. The Americans — people accustomed to having slaves do their bidding without question — also found that Brazilian Negroes, many of whom had already learned some Portuguese, were not like American blacks.

The Southerners arrived just as Brazil's anti-slavery movement was gaining momentum. The prospect of freedom understandably made the Negro workers rebellious, and the Confederate immigrants wrote many letters home to relatives and friends, complaining about their slaves' behavior.

Slavery was not banned in Brazil until 1888, but owner-slave tensions began to bubble over as early as 1873. It was then, as local history has it, that Colonel Thompson Oliver, dressed in his Sunday best, was riding his horse to church. As it was a beautiful spring day, he took the longer route past the fields he had planted. He spotted a slave stealing his sweet potatoes. The colonel indignantly reprimanded the Negro, and the slave responded by killing his master with one swoop of a machete.

The incident unnerved the American community, and the men reacted with a uniquely Old South form of justice: a lynching. The Negro was found hanging from a tree on Colonel Oliver's farm.

#### An Obsession With the Past

The Confederates who settled in Brazil represented one of two rare mass emigrations from America, both triggered by the collapse of slavery. In the other, thousands of freed slaves returned to Africa and colonized Liberia. In American schools, students are often told of the exodus to Liberia, but almost never told of the Confederate exodus to South America. It has become a brief footnote to American history, one of little consequence.

But in Americana, the Confederate descendants have become a point of some local pride. Americana has erected a museum to house early artifacts and Confederate paraphernalia. The museum, which draws 10,000 visitors a year, tells tourists how the Southerners introduced the first plow, first harrow, first pecans and first public schools to Brazil. It is full of Civil War pistols, old clothes, Confederate money, family Bibles, antique furniture and farm tools. Every year, schoolchildren are told of the Confederates and their contributions, and hundreds are bused to the museum to see for themselves.

They learn that former American President Jimmy Carter's wife, Rosalynn, has a great uncle buried in the Confederate graveyard. The Carters paid a visit to the American descendants on a trip to Brazil when Jimmy Carter was governor of Georgia.



**Judith MacKnight Jones has made it her life's mission to preserve the history of the Confederates in exile.**

The museum is the fruition of one of Judith Jones' dreams, a sort of official blessing for her mission to keep the past alive. For 30 years, she has researched the immigrants' history and pried artifacts out of families leaving the area. She filled two dusty sheds behind her farm house with patchwork quilts, cotton scales, old Imperial Brazilian passports, and letters and photos, many of which wound up in the museum.

Relations with native Brazilians have not always been good. In the early days, inevitably, there was friction.

The Southerners were all Protestants — Baptists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians. When Colonel Oliver's wife died in Santa Barbara D'Oeste soon after the group's arrival, the Catholic priests refused to let her be buried in their cemetery. The Americans were forced to set aside their own burial ground, the place where the descendants still lay their kin. Over the years, as children married across religious and racial lines, the tension gradually dissipated.

But there are still embarrassing references to Southern racism, references that still heat the blood of people proud of their heritage and all too familiar with their ancestors' foibles. Members of the community chafed over a recent article in *Veja*, a Brazilian magazine, which noted that their ancestors "fought against slave liberation" in the United States. It called

them "racists by tradition" who wrote home to their friends "complaining that in Brazil, Negroes did not obey whites."

Jones, like the others, betrays just the hint of a smile when she is asked if she condones the slavery practiced by her ancestors. She has heard the question too many times before.

No, she says, she does not advocate slavery. That was something her ancestors believed in, not she. But she cannot refrain from adding that the North's hands were not entirely clean, either.

"The Northerners wanted to create their own kind of slavery — worse in a way, because workers in the factories were not taken care of if they got sick. They were left to fend for themselves," she said.

#### A Lost Cause

With each passing year, it becomes more and more obvious that the dream of re-creating the Old South in Brazil was a lost cause from the start. The rule against intermarriage is long gone. Cotton has succumbed to native insects and given way to sugar cane. English is on the wane. The descendants are becoming rapidly assimilated.

Most of the accents at the November picnic were Portuguese, not Old South. And most of those who do speak English speak it as a second language.

Late afternoon, the Picnic of the American Descendants was nearing an end. The girls took turns in the tiny chapel changing from hoop skirts back to jeans. The fried chicken had been reduced to bones, and women were beginning to clean up the yard.

Young Susan Lee Vaughn Mello, more reluctant than her friends to give up her hoop skirt, took a final stroll through the graveyard and began to talk about how nice it was to recall the old days. But they are just that: the *old* days. The slavery, the attempts to preserve English, the effort to keep children from marrying outside the community — these are problems for others to fret over, not Susan Mello.

She dates a Brazilian boy, a Catholic. "My boyfriend has no American blood at all," she said in Portuguese, twirling her parasol. "I'm half-Italian myself; just my mother was a U.S. descendant. In fact, I hardly speak any English at all — just what I learned in school."

As Susan passed her ancestors' graves, watching her hoop skirt billow in the wind, she summed up her feelings: "It's fun to dress up and everything, but I feel just as Brazilian as everyone else."

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