



Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton
(USA, 2001, 88 minutes)

Directed by: Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson and Albert Maysles
Study Guide

Synopsis

LALEE'S KIN takes us deep into the Mississippi Delta and the intertwined lives of LaLee Wallace, a great-grandmother struggling to hold her world together in the face of dire poverty, and Reggie Barnes, superintendent of the embattled West Tallahatchie School System. The film explores the painful legacy of slavery and sharecropping in the Delta. 62-year-old LaLee Wallace is the lifeblood of this film. Matriarch to an extended family that moves in and out of her house, LaLee is a woman of contradictions and hope. "Could have been worse," she says quietly, surveying the rat- and roach-infested trailer she has been granted through a government program after her own house was condemned. Wallace grew up in a family of sharecroppers; she began picking cotton at the age of six, stopped attending school a few years later, and still cannot read. As happened throughout the South, sharecropping gave way to low-paid labor, but with the enforcement of minimum wage laws and increasing mechanization, even those jobs were hard to come by. Without education or skills, Wallace and other residents of Tallahatchie County had few options, and the poverty and hopelessness they felt was passed down to the generations that followed. The film also profiles educator Reggie Barnes, who is determined to stop this cycle. Barnes was hired as Superintendent of Schools in West Tallahatchie in an effort to get the school district off probation, where it was placed by the Mississippi Department of Education because of poor student performance on statewide standardized tests (the Iowa Test for Basic Skills, ITBS). If Barnes fails to raise the school from its current Level 1 status to a Level 2, the state of Mississippi has threatened to take over. Barnes and his faculty oppose this, fearing that administrators in far-off Jackson would not do as well in addressing the special needs of the community. "It's a different world," he says. "We get kids in kindergarten who do not know their names; we get kids in kindergarten who don't know colors; we get kids in kindergarten who have never been read to." He adds, "If we can educate the children of the illiterate parent, we stop this vicious cycle."

Themes of the film

Poverty/ Economic changes in the deep south
Slavery to sharecropping/The Mississippi Delta region

Illiteracy/School Testing Standards

Study Questions

- Why is the USA often referred to as “The richest country in the world” if extreme poverty still exists here?
- What is the “No Child Left Behind” act and how does it affect your education?

Classroom Exercises – Analyzing Census Data

- Have your students discuss the link between an individual’s education level and their future economic picture. Now map out a region of the US and look at the test scores, income level and spending per pupil. Do the test scores of a region reflect the future economic picture of that region? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Compare spending per pupil in Mississippi vs. your state; your state compared to others. What does the data mean?

Discussion Questions

- Did you find it surprising that such extreme poverty still exists in the US?
- Why were the students so invested in the outcome of the ITBS tests?
- What do you think will happen to Granny? Redman? Main?
- If you were School Superintendent Reggie Barnes, what would you do to improve student literacy and the ITBS scores without any additional funding?
- Look at Charles Dickens’ England and compare the poverty he described to what Lalee and her children experience.