

Sustaining A Rural Black Farming Community in the South

A Portrait of Brooks Farm, Mississippi

The rural South has long been, for Blacks especially, a place characterized by declining agricultural opportunities, diminishing numbers of land owners, limited education and employment, few government services, continuous outmigration, and persistent poverty for many who remain. Nevertheless, not all communities suffering from these conditions have abandoned hope. Some have drawn on the strength of their own traditional institutions to sustain and even rebuild community life. Members of the Brooks Farm community, in the face of declining population and resources, have continued to provide services from within the community. At the same time, they have learned new ways to organize to secure services the community cannot provide for itself.

Blacks have a long history of struggle and survival. To cope, Blacks have developed, in the words of Cornel West, “cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities . . . ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love, and care, discipline and excellence” (p. 15). In Brooks Farm, a Black farming community in the Mississippi Delta, those “cultural structures” and “ways of life and struggle” have translated into the leadership and community commitment identified by sociologists and rural development professionals as critical to building sustainable communities. Out of the traditional institutions of the Brooks Farm community—families, churches, schools, civic organizations, and small businesses—has come a variety of grass-roots strategies for supporting individual and community well-being.

Based primarily on a series of oral interviews with current and former residents of Brooks Farm (see box for discussion of data sources), this article describes some of the

Valerie Grim is associate professor of Afro-American Studies, Indiana University, and is currently visiting associate professor of History and interim director of the African American Studies Program, Iowa State University. Anne B. W. Effland is a social science analyst in the Market and Trade Economics Division, Economic Research Service. The article is based on interviews by Grim, a native of Brooks Farm, with members of the Brooks Farm community.

ways in which the strength of these institutions has helped the community face change. Although these institutions have themselves changed over time, they continue to define the community’s approach to providing its members with the resources and support they need to cope with such challenges as the decline of agricultural employment, outmigration, and a changing family structure in Brooks Farm and surrounding communities.

Origins of the Brooks Farm Community Are Unique

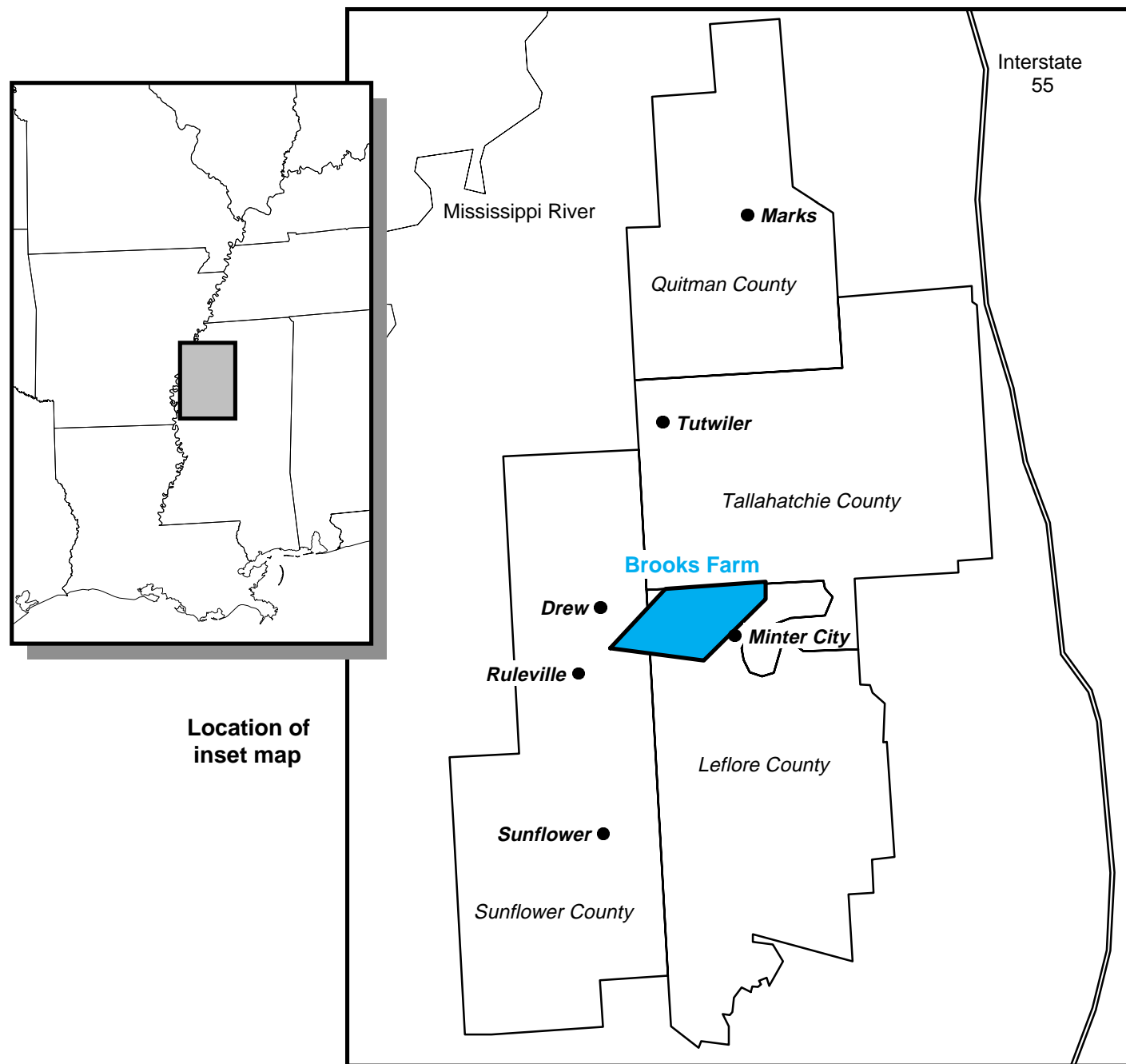
Brooks Farm is a Black rural community located in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta in Sunflower County, Mississippi, near the small town of Drew (fig. 1). Brooks Farm’s origins and development as an independent Black farming community are unique in the Delta. Begun as a White-owned plantation in the 1920’s, its founder, Palmer H. Brooks, intended from the beginning to build the plantation into a community of independent Black farmers. The original settlers, about 60 Black families, worked as day laborers or tenant farmers on the land or as skilled craftsmen in the plantation businesses owned by Brooks and other investors. The first 10 families became landowners in 1945 with the purchase of 40- to 80-acre farms.

More farm purchases followed in the next few decades, while other Black residents eventually established independent businesses such as cotton gins, mills, wholesale

Figure 1

Location of Brooks Farm community

The Brooks Farm community encompasses 4,000 acres of farmland in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta region of Mississippi



Source: Economic Research Service, USDA.

supply operations, and lodging houses. Thus, Brooks Farm, surrounded by hundreds of White-owned plantations, developed as an independent community of Blacks in control of their own economic and social development. The more common pattern of Black settlement, either widely dispersed as sharecroppers on White-owned land,

or concentrated in segregated neighborhoods within larger mixed-race towns working for White employers, did not lead to the kind of community self-direction experienced in Brooks Farm.

Brooks Farm Developed Strong Institutions During Its Early Years

While the origins of Brooks Farm's institutions are unique, its institutions themselves—the family, schools and churches, and civic groups—are not. The same techniques of adaptation and survival have been used to sustain community in the Black sections of other Delta towns. With the migration of rural Blacks to urban neighborhoods, these same institutions have been central to efforts to sustain community in dramatically different settings. In Brooks Farm, as in other Black communities, these institutions together constructed a community of shared values and provided a safety net that supported community members in need.

During the 1950's and 1960's, the Brooks Farm community consisted of about 175 families. Nuclear families formed the core of the community. Most families were large, averaging eight children, close-knit, and generally economically self-sufficient, providing all the labor to meet their own household needs and to run their farming and other businesses.

Despite such self-sufficiency, however, family and community ties in the small community were closely intertwined. Kinship had an extended meaning in Brooks Farm, where the "kinship network" included not only nuclear and extended families, but also other community members. People in Brooks Farm expected each other, family or not, to contribute when the need arose. Family life, in turn, sustained this community ethic, by teaching children the values of cooperation, honesty, respect, trust, love, and hard work.

Families worked cooperatively as well, to build the institutions that drew the families of the community together. Founder P. H. Brooks built one school and one church when he established the community in 1923, but by 1947, Brooks Farm residents had added three schools and eight churches.

Both churches and schools explicitly encouraged community participation. Church teachings included civic responsibility, leadership, community development, and adult literacy. Specific lessons focused on community responsibility for road improvement and community beautification, as well as the importance of choosing effective spokespersons for the community. Schools emphasized basic instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics. Following the ideas of Booker T. Washington and others on teaching literacy and skills for economic independence to sustain self-sufficient, independent Black communities within the larger American society, the schools also taught practical work skills including homemaking, agriculture, trades, and household and mechanical repairs.

Brooks Farm families have invested to an unusually high degree in the higher education of their children, sending nearly 100 children to college over the years. The investment has paid off, literally, through the contributions of these children, many of whom have migrated to well-paid jobs in urban areas, to their own families, and to the local churches to support educational and social programs.

By the 1940's, Brooks Farm residents embraced such national fraternal orders as the Masons and Order of the Eastern Star, offering experiences in leadership and connections to other communities. Local clubs, the Brooks Farm Homemakers Club for women, the Farmers' Club for men, and the 4-H Club for children, also became important in the community around the same time. During the peak years of the community, 1940-60, the women's club averaged 120 members, the men's club about 75, and 4-H in the hundreds.

Brooks Farm Is Smaller and Less Dependent on Agriculture in the 1990's

As the structure of agriculture has changed in the last 50 years, so has the structure and landscape of Brooks Farm community. As elsewhere in the Delta, the number of farms, especially those owned by Blacks, has dramatically declined and those that remain are considerably larger than the 40 to 80 acres with which Brooks Farms' operators began. As opportunities for employment in cities have multiplied, and opportunities for employment on farms have shrunk in the face of modern agricultural technologies, large numbers of Delta residents, particularly Blacks, have migrated away from their home communities.

Outmigration from Brooks Farm has been the rule since the community's founding during the 1920's, when the first major Black northward migration was in full swing. However, during those early years, as some residents left, others arrived from nearby communities, usually within about a 60-mile radius. New arrivals were drawn to Brooks Farm by family connections and by the economic opportunity and social independence of the new community. Not until the 1960's did outmigration surpass immigration, beginning the population decline common to most Black communities in the South.

Outmigration has stressed Brooks Farm by enticing many of the skilled and likely leaders of the community to leave for urban centers. Nearly all of the community's college graduates have left for careers in other places. And as the population has declined, the community's ability to sustain or create economic opportunity for others who might wish to remain has been weakened.

The number of families in Brooks Farm has dwindled to 41, who now have smaller households, fewer than half (41 percent) are headed by a married couple. The average

number of children per family is still relatively high (3-5), but most of these children are grown and have left Brooks Farm. The majority of children still living in Brooks Farm reside in households headed by never-married single parents, who are the youngest group of household heads, ranging in age from 20 to 40. In contrast, married couples ranged in age from 21 to 80.

Of the 63 current adult residents of Brooks Farm, only 20 are employed. The remainder, primarily retired elderly and young single mothers, survive on a combination of pensions, personal savings and assets (including rental income from land, primarily to cover property taxes), and government transfer payments.

Only nine households continue to be supported primarily by farming. Of those nine, most grow cotton and soybeans, but about half have diversified their operations, adding vegetable, hog, and catfish production. Farm sizes range from 150 to 400 acres, consolidated both by purchase of farms from families no longer in the community and by rental of land from retired community members and from absent community members not willing to permanently part with family land. In some cases, these landowners plan to retire to their family land in Brooks Farm. About half of the full-time farmers in Brooks Farm have participated regularly in Federal farm programs since the 1960's.

Eleven other households are supported by a combination of part-time farming and off-farm jobs. Brooks Farm residents work in State government, the State prison, insurance sales, public school teaching, auto mechanics, welding, factories, seasonal day labor, and as self-employed business people in trucking, retail, and personal services.

Families with earned income, both farm and nonfarm, estimate their average annual incomes at around \$25,000, although farm income can vary dramatically from year to year. In the last few years, several of these families have had negative farm income and survived through savings, loans, and the assistance of absent family members. Those families receiving government income assistance payments, who may also do occasional part-time work or receive assistance from family members, estimate their average annual incomes at about \$5,000.

Educational levels varied among Brooks Farm households. Among the households headed by never-married women, fewer than half completed high school and none attended college. All had become mothers as teenagers. Of the households headed by never-married men, half did not finish high school and had only intermittent employment. The other never-married men had completed either high school or college and held full-time jobs. Among all households with earned income, 35 percent had complet-

ed college and an additional 9 percent had attended at least 2 years. An additional 35 percent had completed high school, and only 22 percent had 8 years of schooling or less.

Community Institutions, Though Fewer, Have Adapted to Change

As the community has faced economic and demographic change, the community's institutions have changed as well, adapting both to the reality of a smaller number of residents and to a demanding set of new challenges. Desegregation and consolidation have closed the schools in Brooks Farm, the number of churches has dwindled to two, and the only remaining civic organization is a much smaller women's club. At the same time, the large families available to meet each other's needs have disappeared with the outmigration that followed the decline of self-sufficient family farms. The current institutions of Brooks Farm, though fewer and smaller, have become more focused on providing the personal and economic support systems formerly provided by these extended families. These remaining institutions of Brooks Farm have also reoriented their vision of service to include a more explicit reaching out to nearby communities, sharing the strength of their surviving community with nonresidents who are in need of such support.

The Merry Grove and East Mount Olive Baptist churches and the Brooks Farm Women's Club continue to meet some of the same needs as they did in the past. The churches continue to advocate civic responsibility, leadership, and adult literacy. The women's club continues to emphasize dissemination of information on health care, food and nutrition, and child-rearing. Yet new social and economic conditions have brought all three groups together to support programs and services aimed primarily at the elderly, young children, teenagers, and the poor, whose needs the current family structure can no longer meet effectively.

Caring for the Elderly and Poor. The community of Brooks Farm has always looked after the elderly with its own resources. At one time a traditional family responsibility, the daily care of aging parents fell to others in the community as adult children began to migrate to cities. Most of the elderly cannot afford home care and even when they can, few home care workers want to drive into the countryside. In some instances, children of the elderly will hire someone in the community to look after their parents until they have recovered; in other cases young women in the community take on the responsibility themselves, communicating regularly with absent family members. These women make frequent visits to the homes of the elderly, perform domestic chores to make the elders comfortable, monitor their health, make arrangements to get them to the doctor when necessary, and make sure

their prescriptions are filled. When elderly residents have to be hospitalized, these young women visit and often stay overnight, then stay with the elderly patients in their homes after they are discharged. Women in the community rotate their schedules to assure continuous service for the elderly needing such attention.

Through the organized efforts of the women of the community churches, elderly community members also receive daily hot meals—"hot plates" filled with meat, vegetables, bread, and dessert and delivered to their homes. In the past, 25 to 30 elderly Brooks Farm residents received these meals. Today, only about 5 or 6 elderly women in Brooks Farm receive this service, still organized by the women of Brooks Farm's remaining churches. Now, however, these church women serve an additional 10 to 15 elderly women in nearby communities.

As members of a traditional farming community, the members of the Brooks Farm Women's Club often look to their own family operations to provide for the needy in their community. Many of these women and their families continue to tend large gardens and raise extra livestock to provide fresh produce and meat to the elderly and poor in Brooks Farm and surrounding communities. Club members deliver these items directly to the elderly, while inviting young families to the gardens to gather produce according to their needs.

Both Merry Grove and East Mount Olive churches also maintain food banks, from which church members deliver to the elderly and young single mothers in surrounding communities. Merry Grove hosts Sunday dinners to help feed the elderly and children from the nearby towns, whom they believe may not be eating properly, and support thrift shops and clothing banks that provide inexpensive used clothing for families with little income.

Caring for Young Children. Just as the community cares for its elderly members when they are in need, those older community members—retired parents, grandparents, and others—make themselves available to young mothers for child care. The lack of adequate, affordable day care continues to interfere with employment for many young mothers in the rural South. Although Brooks Farm is no longer home to many young children, parents from surrounding communities look to older Brooks Farm residents for such services. These elderly women may help support themselves by charging to care for children not of their own families, but the fees are low—usually \$25-\$50 per week.

The church also functions periodically as a babysitting facility, especially on weekends, although this practice was more common in the past when Brooks Farm had many more families. Children are brought to the church

on Saturday and the elderly women in the community, typically called the mothers, care for the children for much of the day, giving the parents some time away from child-care responsibilities.

Caring for Teenagers. Adults in the Brooks Farm community have become concerned about violence, drug use, gang participation, homicide, and theft by young Black men, which have risen to the highest level ever in the Delta. Community members believe these problems stem from unstable families, poor education, and lack of preparation for employment. To address these problems, men of Brooks Farm, especially those who are active in Merry Grove Baptist Church, have created a mentoring program. They identify young men from small Delta communities—Marks, Drew, Ruleville, Minter City, Tutwiler, and others—who have no fathers in their lives and who tend to get in trouble. Pairing themselves with two or more such preteen and teenage boys, the men offer support and guidance through discussions that focus on education, job preparation, morality, sex, disease, and fatherhood, as well as avoiding drug use and gang participation.

The pairs arrange activities—Saturday outings at the bowling lanes, basketball teams, picnics, and holiday dinners at the rural churches—as a way of placing the young men in a different environment, hoping to expose them to different modes of behavior. Monday nights are defined as the "spiritual" night when the pairs meet at church to engage in prayer, as well as an "open rap" about their feelings and situations that they confront daily. The men believe they are having some success, as the number of boys who want to be involved in the program continues to increase.

Teenage pregnancies in the Delta are also at their highest level ever. Members of the Brooks Farm community, in conjunction with members of the Merry Grove Missionary Baptist Church, have taken on the task of mentoring teenage mothers from surrounding communities to help them understand how to care for themselves and their children. Through the women's club, the girls are taught about proper food and nutrition, health care, child development, and nurturing skills.

Some of the club women are also concerned that girls continue their own education and learn to value education for their children. Book discussions with these teenage mothers have been added to the mentoring program, to encourage them to read so that they will encourage their children to read and value learning. Familiarly called the Women's Reading Group, the leaders of this group ultimately hope to show teenage mothers how to make the transition from public assistance to employment to provide for their children.

Two women of the Brooks Farm Women's Club have also invested in a domestic cleaning business. The idea is to build a clientele in the nearby community of Drew and establish a stable business that can offer jobs to teenagers. While the business is in its infancy, the women believe in its potential and are committed to making it work, in part as an example to young teenage mothers of how to create opportunities for themselves.

Supplementing the efforts of the community's churches and women's club, economically successful individuals and families in the community have made efforts, not always successful, to address the need for jobs for young people in nearby towns who face severely limited employment opportunities. Few factories hire teenagers. There are no fast food restaurants, malls or department stores, no gas stations or mechanic shops. The only place for most to find work is on the farms. Farmers from the Brooks Farm community try to offer day labor to young people in nearby towns. Most cannot pay more than minimum wage, but they also help the workers save money by providing their lunch. Although the farmers of Brooks Farm cannot hire a large number of people, they believe that providing employment to at least a few individuals has prevented some from being hungry.

Teenagers have yet to take advantage of offers to try their hand at farming on their own. Farmers are willing to let teenagers rent, at a very small fee, plots of land to raise produce which they can sell to individuals and grocers. The farmers are willing to spend the time teaching them how to plant, cultivate, harvest, and market their produce. The churches have agreed to allow their grounds to be used on Saturdays as a market place. The churches will help the teenagers fill orders and will participate in the delivery, as long as the young people are willing to work. Other farmers are willing to help young people invest in raising hogs for the market. They need the help, because most of their own children have migrated, and they have the desire to pass on the love of farming and working on the land. Much to the disappointment of these farmers, however, despite the opportunities for earning fairly good returns over a summer of farming, most teenagers from nearby towns have shown little interest in learning agriculture.

To bring jobs to Brooks Farm and surrounding communities on a larger scale than most Brooks Farm individuals or families can attempt, successful farmer Edward Scott built the first Black-owned catfish farm and processing plant. Reacting to employment discrimination against poor rural Blacks at local factories, Scott established his catfish operation as a way of helping to alleviate some of the economic devastation he saw among his rural neighbors. He has employed over 50 people, adults and teenagers, in his plant, and he continues to distribute fish nationwide.

Brooks Farm Organized to Secure Needed Government Service

Sustaining Brooks Farm has sometimes required learning how to secure outside support to help with needed improvements which are too expensive for individuals or community groups to provide. The traditional institutions of Brooks Farm, particularly the churches, have always emphasized the importance of community development and promoting effective leadership to ensure the community's success. As members of an unincorporated community, without its own government, Brooks Farm residents have found it necessary to approach their county government to obtain the infrastructure development they believe is necessary for the well-being of their community.

Brooks Farm residents joined with other nearby communities in a petition campaign for a public water system in 1994. The joint effort was crafted and led by Robert Lindsey, a former school principal and current member of the Leflore County Board of Education, who recognized both a widespread need in the area and the greater likelihood for success from a coordinated approach.

Members of the communities wrote letters and made phone calls to county government offices to request help in developing a public water system. The county government initially ignored the requests. Public protests, however, secured the cooperation of county government in certifying the need for such a system, allowing Lindsey and a group of community leaders to win a \$1.3-million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to install a rural water system. Community leaders employed the same methods to secure a sewer system and trash removal services, and they are currently working to secure improved road access for their community.

An earlier experience in organized community political action had brought the Head Start program to nearby Ruleville in 1965. Members of the Brooks Farm community worked closely with well-known grassroots civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer and others in petitioning Congress to fund the program. Part of the Federal War on Poverty, the Head Start program provided education and early intervention for disadvantaged preschool children to help them be prepared to learn effectively when they reached elementary school age. Brooks Farm sent more than 25 children to the Ruleville center in 1965, where they joined about 200 other 3- to 6-year-olds from Drew, Ruleville, Sunflower, and rural areas throughout surrounding Leflore and Sunflower counties. Brooks Farm now sends only two to three preschoolers to the current center in Minter City, a small town in Leflore County, although as many as seven children may attend in the next 2-3 years.

Head Start established a stronger connection between Brooks Farm and the nearby communities and surrounding rural areas and brought a greater understanding of how a community can work collectively to bring about change. To ensure that the Head Start program survived, parents in Brooks Farm, Drew, and Ruleville regularly held fundraisers and donated food, school supplies, and equipment to upgrade the facility. Because Brooks Farm children had to travel 5-7 miles to attend the center, Brooks Farm families worked with Head Start administrators to arrange for free transportation. As a result, the Head Start program paid local community members to provide the needed rides, simultaneously resolving the needs of parents and contributing employment to the community.

Hope for the Future in Brooks Farm Lies with Expanding Community, Returning Outmigrants

The community service commitments of the churches and the experiences gained by community members through campaigns to secure infrastructure improvements and economic development have led many Brooks Farm residents to an enlarged vision of community. Many believe their community's future lies partly in redefining community to include not only Brooks Farm but surrounding small communities and rural areas. That connection occasionally brings new permanent residents to Brooks Farm, although most often new residents are joining extended family members already in the community.

But the community's greatest hope for the future is focused on the permanent return of former community members. Most of Brooks Farm's outmigrants continue to identify themselves with the community and its remaining institutions, particularly church and family. They return regularly for reunions and help support relatives in Brooks Farm by sending money home when needed. Their continuing commitment to sustaining Brooks Farm as a place to come home to has, over the years, supported continued land ownership and farming in Brooks Farm, and has led to the influx of new ideas, new money, and new energy for community development, especially in the 1990's.

As the generations born in the 1950's and 1960's reach middle age, they have begun to consider ways to reconnect more directly with their home community. A group of former community members has plans to build a retirement center and health facility in the community, both to provide for current community members who may wish to remain in Brooks Farm as they retire and for return migrants who wish to spend their later years in the place they still consider home. Other former community members have already returned home, using money they have saved from years of working at good jobs in the cities to buy land, start small businesses, and help revitalize their

childhood community. One couple brought back to Brooks Farm the wealth they accumulated through a successful business, built a home on repurchased family land, and started a successful tailoring shop in town. Others have returned to become farmers again, carrying on the family tradition and supporting their aging parents.

Permanent return migration remains an occasional event, but outmigrants home for reunions often inquire about purchasing land and have shown a rising interest in community investments, suggesting that larger numbers of return migrants may be likely in the not-too-distant future. The pattern of return is slow, generally reflecting a preparation for retirement. The potential effect on the community's economic and social future may be dramatic, however. The accumulated urban earnings these outmigrants will bring with them, even in the form of pensions, should help the Brooks Farm economy, even providing additional employment and business opportunities for younger families with children. Their broad range of career and civic experiences may also strengthen the community's capacity to take advantage of economic development opportunities, both government and private.

Will Brooks Farm's Traditional Institutions Be Enough To Sustain It?

Evaluating the contribution of Brooks Farm's institutions to its long-term survival as a community is not easy. The community has suffered the same loss of working age population and loss of economic base as other rural communities, both in the South and in other parts of the Nation. Although the future looks more promising, it is not certain that outmigrants will return in numbers that will revitalize the economy, or that they will be able to support the kinds of jobs needed to keep young and middle-aged adults in the community.

Moreover, a relatively small group of Brooks Farm residents who have adequate incomes have been able to provide for most of the unmet needs of the high percentage of elderly and poor young families in their own community and at the same time reach out to those groups in nearby communities as individuals and through their churches and women's club. Some fear the effects of welfare reform may tax their capacity to meet such needs, as church contributions and business incomes dwindle in the face of lost government transfer payments to members and customers and the scale of unmet needs increases.

Yet, the residents of Brooks Farm remain positive. Relying on the community's experience in securing grants for infrastructure development, the churches plan to find grants to help them meet the anticipated need for assistance for the poor and young children. Individuals continue to work on economic development strategies, investing their own funds to provide jobs for the unem-

ployed. Brooks Farm residents do not behave as though they believe their community has no future. They continue to look ahead and search for solutions, committed to the idea that Brooks Farm, with its unique history, will endure.

This commitment to continuing effort and investment may be what defines the contribution of the community's institutions to its sustainability. Whether such a contribution will be enough to assure the community's survival remains to be seen. And whether such a model, if ultimately successful, might also work in other communities will likely depend on the unique patterns of their own traditional institutions.

For Further Reading . . .

James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, New York: Oxford, 1992.

Valerie Grim, "Connecting the Rural with the Urban: Migration of Black Families from the Brooks Farm Community to Selected Midwestern Cities, 1950-1992," *Monographs of the Black Heartland Project*. African-American Studies Division, Washington Univ., St. Louis, forthcoming.

Valerie Grim, "From Plantation to Society: P.H. Brooks and the Establishment of an African American Community in the Rural South, 1920-1950," *Locus: An Historical Journal of Regional Perspectives on National Topics*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Fall 1994, pp. 1-31.

Valerie Grim, "The Impact of Mechanized Farming on Black Farm Families in the Rural South: A Study of Life in the Brooks Farm Community, 1940-1970," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 68, No. 2, Spring 1994, pp. 169-84.

Valerie Grim, "'Tryin' to Make Ends Meet': African American Women's Work in Brooks Farm, 1920-1970," *Unrelated Kin: Race and Gender in Women's Personal Narratives*, edited by Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis and Michele Foster, New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 124-140.

Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, New York: Knopf, 1991.

Thomas A. Lyson and William W. Falk, eds., *Forgotten Places: Uneven Development in Rural America*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993.

A Note on Sources and Methodology

This article draws on a group of 50 personal and telephone interviews with current and former residents of Brooks Farm. Since 1986, Grim, a native of Brooks Farm, has been recording open-ended conversations with community members to support research on the Brooks Farm community as a case study of the history and development of conditions for rural Blacks in the Mississippi Delta. The interviews combine prepared questions with an openness to direction by the interviewees. Prepared questions focus on gathering objective data on the subjects and their household and family members, as well as recollections of specific community events, institutions, and traditions. The open-ended nature of the interview process allows these prepared questions to lead to spontaneous discussions of other events and topics of interest to community members, including attitudes toward the community and its traditions, assessments of the role various events, institutions, and traditions play in the community's past and present, and expectations for the community's future.

Information gathered through the interview process is corroborated by comparing responses among interviewees, and by research in the records of public and private institutions, including governments, schools, churches, businesses, civic organizations, and households.

Much current research on community sustainability has been focused on identifying indicators by which to measure a community's ability to cope well with change and survive, with the ultimate goal of determining how best to support community efforts to sustain themselves. The methodology employed in this article plays a role in reaching that goal. By allowing a broad range of community members to identify the key strengths of their community, we gain an expanded local perspective on the formula for sustainability. Moreover, individual community "portraits" highlight the diversity of local needs and abilities, reminding us of the need to wed the particularities of individual places with the regional and national context afforded by other, more aggregated studies.

Carol Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*, New York: Basic Books, 1996.

Cornel West, *Race Matters*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.