

# Vine-Covered Chimney Serves as Reminder of Pre-Civil War Cotton Gin

By BILL FOREMAN

A VINE-COVERED chimney surrounded by weeds and undergrowth, just a few yards off U. S. Highway 61 north of Vicksburg, stands as a lonely remnant of a cotton gin built before the Civil War and the center of once-thriving Blakely Plantation.

But the grandson of the original builder has painstakingly reassembled the heart of the gin plant to preserve this bit of history. D. C. Blake of Redwood, Miss., spent more than five years in a labor of love, restoring the gin's steam engine.

This remarkable craftsman, with the help of his three sons, has done his grandfather, Benson Blake, proud. The shiny engine holds an honored place in a small building that had to be erected especially to house it on historic Blakely Plantation.

The Cotton Gin & Oil Mill Press learned about the Blakely gin from Warren Garner, director of USDA's Cotton Ginning Research Laboratory at Stoneville, Miss. D. C. Blake had sent photos and a description of the gin engine to the lab for its files, along with an invitation to stop by Redwood and see it.

Warren forwarded photos and correspondence to Don Swanson, editor of the Cotton Gin & Oil Mill Press, with a suggestion that he "sic Bill Foreman on the story." That's how I happened to be in the general store in Redwood in the middle of the morning on the last day of May, inquiring how to get to the Blake place.

"It's just over the hill toward Vicksburg - on the left with two mail boxes and a sign that says 'Private Drive'".

I missed the turn the first time but spied it the second time around. A left turn off two-

lane Highway 61 took me up a narrow, winding, tree-shadowed road to the top of a hill covered with live oaks well over a century old. I turned left to a huge, rambling, two-story home with a veranda overflowing with colorful flower boxes and plants. At least five dogs gave me a noisy welcome.

The owner, Mrs. Jim (Mary Blake) Gorman, politely explained that I had come to the wrong place. Her brother, D. C. Blake, lives in the house on the other side of the live oak grove and not in the original plantation home.

Bradley Blake greeted me at the D. C. Blake home and said his father was in the shop. D. C. and the two other sons, Danny and Henry, joined us shortly afterward and I had my first look at the gin engine —

D. C. Blake — called "Carmichael" by his friends, "Mike" by his wife, and "Pappy" by his boys — filled me in on the details.

"The Blakely cotton gin steam engine was partly restored as of June, 1978. It has a 10-inch bore and 25-inch stroke. The slide valve is as long as the cylinder. The valve rod is made thin to flex just outside the stuffing gland.

"Its flywheel is a one-piece casting, eight feet in diameter with a rim 15 inches wide. A number of major parts are missing — along with the all-important nameplate. We badly need authentic information on the manufacturer and on the missing parts."

Benson Blake's diary indicates he was in the ginning business as early as Nov. 11, 1841, when he "sold Whatley 226 yards of

baggin, 640 lbs. of rope, one bundle of twine at Vicksburg prices as of this date."

Eight years later, on Aug. 30, 1849, he noted that "the gin is running."

He had "finished picking cotton on the fifteenth" but was still ginning, according to a Jan. 24, 1853 entry.

Construction of a new gin apparently began in the spring of 1853 with "about 45,000 bricks made." They were hauling sand and lime for the gin house and "ready to lay off foundation" by June 13.

By Christmas Day, the new gin, boiler and engine were up. "The machinery all at the spot, the brick work nearly all done. The frame not half up."

Lumber was sawed from logs cut on the place and sawmilling was delayed early in 1854. This held up construction and the gin house had not been completed by cotton picking time in September. Benson Blake finally recorded on Oct. 20, however, that "my gin is running and doing well."

"Benson Blake owned three cotton plantations, one of which was Blakely," D. C. Blake continued.

"It appears that the gin he was building in 1853 was the third one to be in Blakely. In his diary of 1844 and afterwards he often mentions the gin field and the old gin field in the same sentence. It's not clear whether the engine was new or from his old gin.

"The last time the gin ran was perhaps 1915. When it was being torn down in 1940, my father, D. W. Blake, loaned the engine to Mr. Charles A. Bennett, who at that time headed ginning research at Stoneville. Mr. Bennett put the engine on display and it remained in Stoneville until it was returned to me in 1974."

When I was invited to visit their shop nearby, I was impressed by the array of fine woodworking equipment. A beautiful walnut table top, about four by eight feet, was in the finishing stages. The younger Blakes explained that a cousin publishes a magazine for woodcraftsman. It features articles and pictures of hand-crafted furniture and reproductions of unusual items.

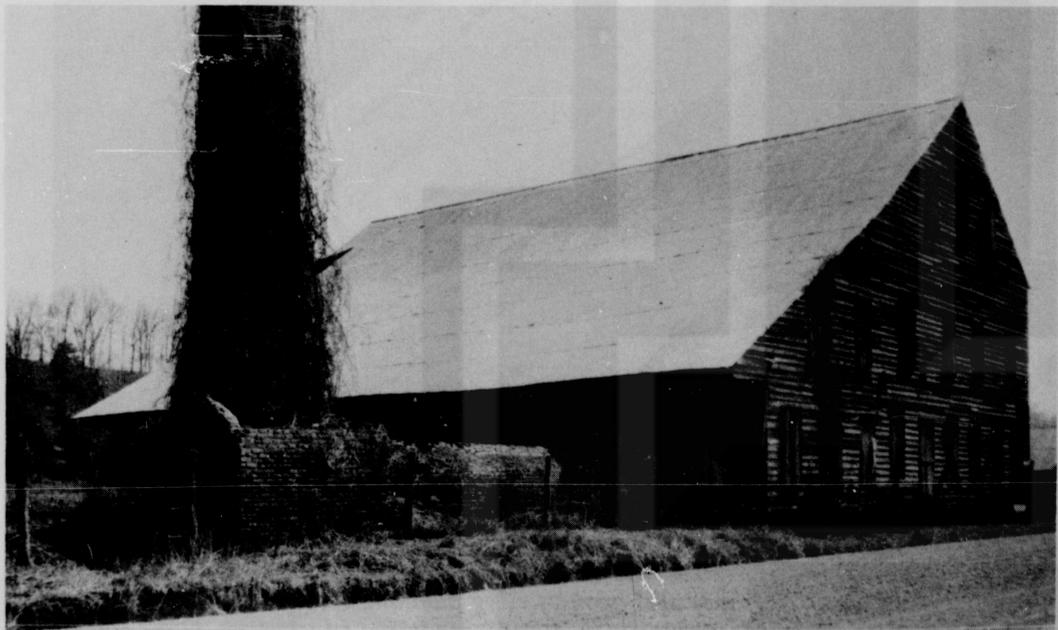
The cousin and the Blakes research old magazines and books to find examples of rare old pieces. Then, the Blakes are commissioned to reproduce these works of art, photograph them, and prepare articles used in the magazine, "Handy Andy."

"Where do you find walnut like this?" I inquired.

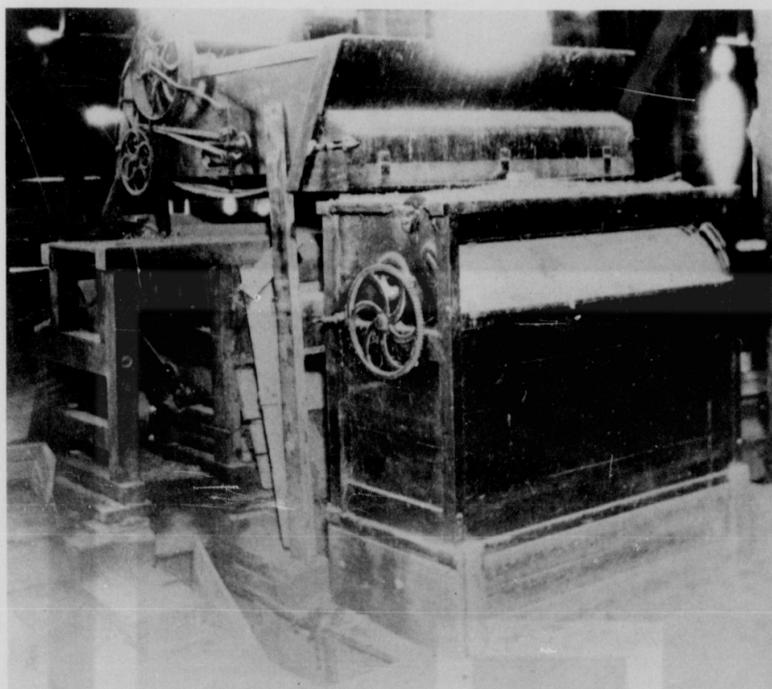
"Oh, it comes off the place. That's where we get nearly all of our wood," was the reply.

That prompted a short walk to the "peckerwood" sawmill in a thicket a couple of hundred yards away. The gasoline engine was started and an ash log was converted into lumber destined for the log home being built on the place.

The rambling D. C. Blake home, built in 1938, is a showplace for numerous tables, chairs, and other pieces of fine furniture exquisitely fashioned by D. C. Blake.



*HISTORIC old cotton gin building at Blakely Plantation north of Vicksburg, Miss. The gin last operated in 1915 and was dismantled in 1940. History indicates that three gins were built on the plantation by the Blake family — one in 1854. Cotton had been ginned on the spot near the Yazoo River since about 1840. General Sherman seized the gin during the War Between the States in 1863. Tenants' cotton storage bins were on the top floor, the second floor was the gin floor, and underneath at the ground level were the sweeps turned by mules to provide power for compressing the bale.*



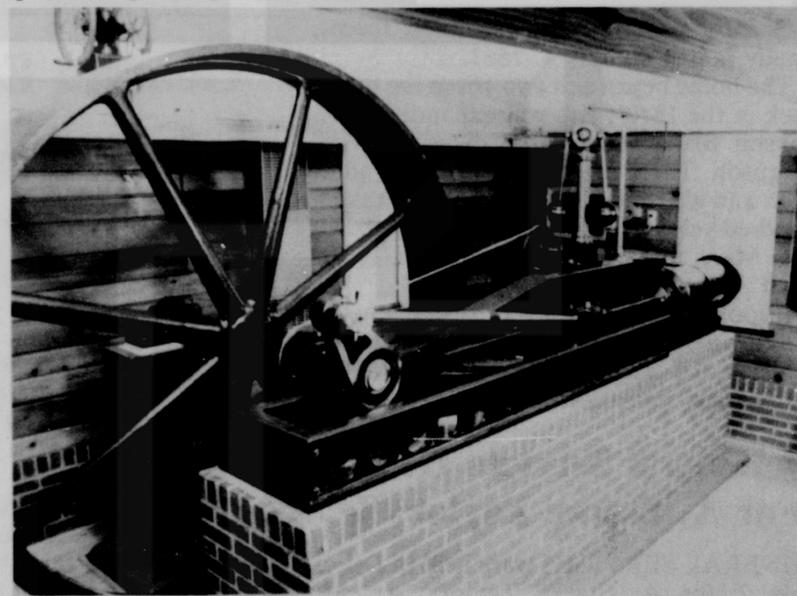
*GIN STAND of the old Blakely Plantation cotton gin.*



*COTTON was dumped by hand from the floor above into this press box of the Blakely Plantation Gin. Mules hitched to sweeps provided power for pressing the ginned cotton into bales.*



*CANNON balls once littered the fields of Blakely Plantation when Union forces besieged nearby Vicksburg in 1863.*

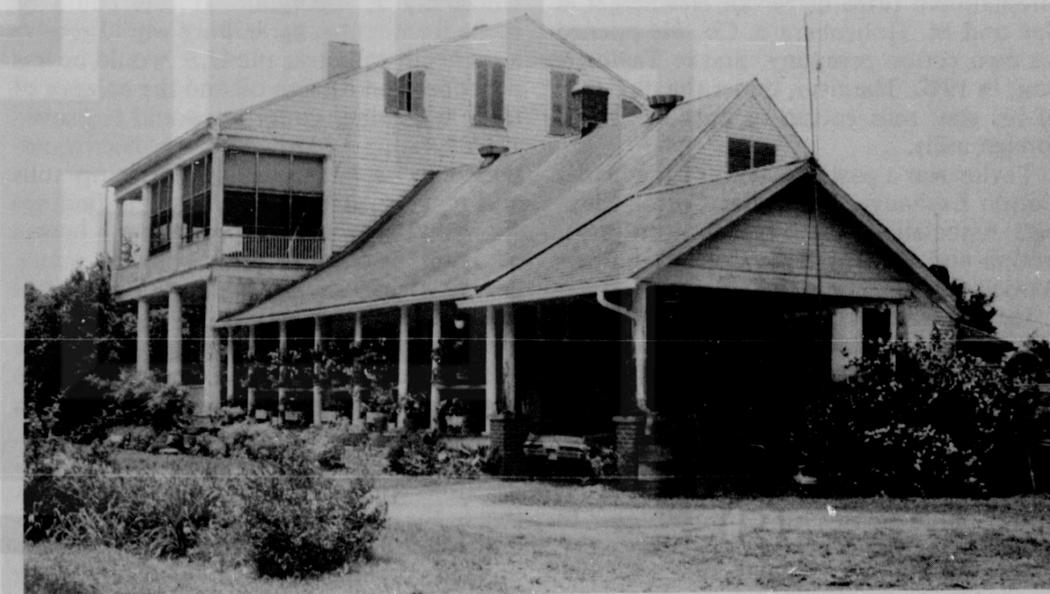


*PARTIAL restoration of the steam engine from the Blakely Plantation cotton gin took more than five years. A special house was built for it near the D. C. Blake home at Redwood, north of Vicksburg, Miss.*

But the real surprise was in the large bedroom where Mrs. Blake had installed a small Kelsey hand-operated printing press and fonts of type. Fran explained that she is going to publish a book, setting the type by hand and transcribing a diary written by "Mike's grandmother, Mary Savage Conner, at the age of 11. The diary had been buried when Union troops invaded the area. It was dug up along with other valuables after the Civil War. It's hard to believe that the precise handwriting on the faded yellow pages was that of a little girl.

Before heading on down the road to Vicksburg, I stopped for another look at the historic big house, seat of Blakely Plantation and now occupied by Jim and Mary (Blake) Gorman.

Cannon balls, stacked in a pyramid under a live oak tree in front of the home, came from Blakely Plantation fields. They are a reminder of the savage struggle that took place about eight miles away when



*BLAKELY Plantation home is occupied today by James and Mary (Blake) Gorman. It began as a two-room log home in the 1840's and a portion of it was built with slave labor.*



*BLAKES still live on Blakely Plantation. They partially restored the steam engine that powered the gin built by Benson Blake in 1854. Some parts are missing, however, as is the nameplate which would give a clue to the manufacturer. Left to right are Bradley C. Blake, Daniel W. Blake, D. C. Blake, and Henry L. Blake. They live at Redwood on U. S. Highway 61, a few miles north of Vicksburg. D. C. Blake is a grandson of Benson Blake.*



*DIARY of D. C. Blake's grandmother is being transcribed by Fran Blake, his wife. She is hand setting the type and printing pages for the book on a hand-powered printing press.*

Vicksburg was besieged by Union forces, finally falling on July 4, 1863.

The home began as a two-room log house back in the 1840's and was expanded when Benson Blake married the owner, a Mrs. Ferguson. There have been numerous additions and alterations during the more than a hundred years it has stood on the site. D. C. and Mary lived there during their childhood.

It looks like Blakes will be occupying the top of the hill at Blakely for some years to come; but it doesn't look like they will be ginning any more cotton.

### **Funeral Services Held For A. Starke Taylor, Sr.**

FUNERAL SERVICES were held in Dallas July 7 for A. Starke Taylor, Sr., 89, founder of the international cotton firm of Starke Taylor & Son.

A native of Tennessee, Taylor moved to Dallas in 1922 and became a partner in the international firms of Silvan Newberger & Son and M. Hohenberg & Co. He opened his own cotton company, Starke Taylor & Son, in 1942. The firm, under the direction of his son, sells cotton to both U.S. and foreign mills.

Taylor was a past president of the Dallas Cotton Exchange, the Dallas Cotton Shippers Association, the Texas Cotton Association and the American Cotton Shippers Association.

He also was a former director of the New York Cotton Exchange and a director in the National Cotton Council, and was a member of the Liverpool Cotton Exchange, the Western Cotton Shippers Association and the Lubbock Cotton Exchange.

In 1950, he served as chairman of an advisory committee on international trade to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Survivors include his wife, Veryl Taylor; two sons, A. Starke Taylor Jr. and Miles Cary Taylor; and a daughter, Evelyn Taylor.

### **Georgia Extension Service Engineer Says Gasohol Will Not Help in Long Run**

MANY AMERICANS are pushing for the use of alcohol as a fuel, but a Georgia Extension Service engineer says that the practice is not a long-run solution. He says that while alcohol can be made from crops, it requires a great deal of energy to produce and is not a practical alternative to gasoline.

After studying the use of alcohol as a fuel, Georgia Extension Service engineer Cecil Hammond said that the idea of producing a fuel from crops is not a long-run solution.

"The good part is that alcohol is made from crops which are a renewable resource produced with less and abandoned energy from the sun," said Hammond of the University of Georgia. "It could be made from crops, but it would be too dependent on foreign oil and the balance of trade with other countries would be upset."

He also noted that certain crops may make the use of alcohol as a fuel more practical. For example, corn would be located near a power plant, and the factory rejecting low temperature heat. Cooking and distillation could be done with the plant's wasted energy.

Another alternative would be to use waste wood, corn stalks or other residue.

There is also the idea of using solar energy to grow, cook and distill, Hammond continued. "While this is a noble theory, it would require costly solar collectors," he said.

"I do see potential in making gasohol from alternate crops, such as sugar cane and wheat, which are better suited to the production of alcohol," he added.

However, this concept is in an early stage.

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SOMETHING NEW ON THE GREEN CARD

NOTICE TO ALL COTTON PRODUCERS:

THE MUNDAY CLASSING OFFICE WILL RECORD CLASSIFICATION INFORMATION IN NUMERICAL CODE THIS SEASON AS ILLUSTRATED BELOW:

Form CN-117 U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
CONSUMER AND MARKETING SERVICE  
COTTON CLASSIFICATION MEMORANDUM Form 1

MU 72 5413 *John Brown*  
Gin Bale No. \_\_\_\_\_ (Grower's Name)  
Whse. Bale No. \_\_\_\_\_ WEINERT GIN  
BOX 485, WEINERT, TEXAS

Date *Sep. 16, 1967*

MID LT SP	15/16	Reduced from	A/C or Remarks
Grade	Staple		

*35*  
Mike

SEP 20 1967 MUNDAY CLASS *C. D. Peebles*  
Chairman, Board of Cotton Examiners.

*OLD METHOD*

Form CN-117 U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
CONSUMER AND MARKETING SERVICE  
COTTON CLASSIFICATION MEMORANDUM Form 1

51025 3015 *John Brown*  
Gin Bale No. \_\_\_\_\_ (Grower's Name)  
Whse. Bale No. \_\_\_\_\_ GOREE PRODUCERS COOP  
GOREE, TEXAS

Date *Sep 16, 1967*

32	30	Reduced from	A/C or Remarks
Grade	Staple		

*35*  
Mike

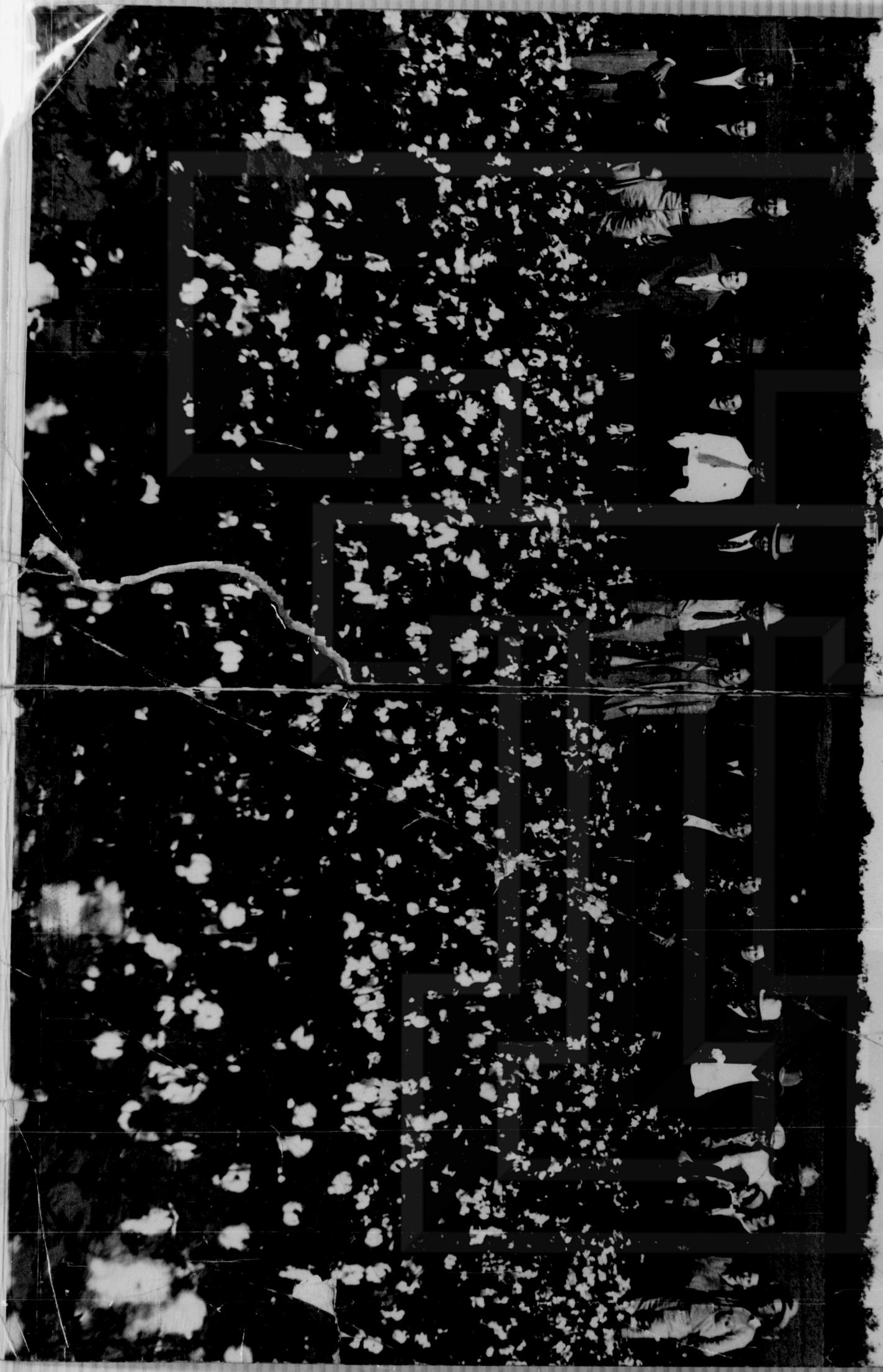
SEP 20 1967 MUNDAY CLASS *C. D. Peebles*  
Chairman, Board of Cotton Examiners.

*NEW METHOD*

SEE REVERSE SIDE FOR CODES

CODES FOR GRADES AND STAPLES

<u>GRADE NAMES</u>	<u>CODE</u>	<u>STAPLE LENGTH</u>	<u>CODE</u>
Strict Good Middling	01	Below 13/16"	24
Good Middling	11	13/16"	26
Strict Middling	21	7/8"	28
Middling Plus	30	29/32"	29
Middling	31	15/16"	30
Strict Low Middling Plus	40	31/32"	31
Strict Low Middling	41	1"	32
Low Middling Plus	50	1-1/32"	33
Low Middling	51	1-1/16"	34
Strict Good Ordinary Plus	60	1-3/32"	35
Strict Good Ordinary	61	1-1/8"	36
Good Ordinary Plus	70	1-5/32"	37
Good Ordinary	71	1-3/16"	38
		1-7/32"	39
Good Middling Light Spotted	12	1-1/4"	40
Strict Middling Light Spotted	22	1-9/32"	41
Middling Light Spotted	32	1-5/16"	42
Strict Low Middling Light Spotted	42	1-11/32"	43
Low Middling Light Spotted	52	1-3/8"	44
		1-13/32"	45
Good Middling Spotted	13	1-7/16"	46
Strict Middling Spotted	23	1-15/32"	47
Middling Spotted	33	1-1/2"	48
Strict Low Middling Spotted	43		
Low Middling Spotted	53		
Good Middling Tinged	14		
Strict Middling Tinged	24		
Middling Tinged	34		
Strict Low Middling Tinged	44		
Low Middling Tinged	54		
Good Middling Yellow Stained	15		
Strict Middling Yellow Stained	25		
Middling Yellow Stained	35		
Good Middling Light Gray	16		
Strict Middling Light Gray	26		
Middling Light Gray	36		
Strict Low Middling Light Gray	46		
Good Middling Gray	17		
Strict Middling Gray	27		
Middling Gray	37		
Strict Low Middling Gray	47		
Below Good Ordinary	81		
Below Low Middling Light Spotted	82		
Below Low Middling Spotted	83		
Below Low Middling Tinged	84		
Below Middling Yellow Stained	85		
Below Strict Low Middling Gray	87		



Some years ago in the late Forties on the Butler farms in Stonewall County, Mr. John Behringer farmed the land. It was then owned by the Grissom's of Abilene.

He had a good crop of cotton one year and had some people from Rule out for a picture. The Lisle Gin was ginning the cotton and Edgar Ellis was classing it. Several girls and Jigg Westbrook was working with him and so this picture. (The Classing office was over Westbrook Drug Store.) L to R: Jiggs Westbrook, Cotton classing girl, John Behringer, Cotton classing girl, Dr. J. C. Davis, Cotton classing girl, Estep Coach at Rule School, Edgar Ellis, Jess Place, Jr., Carroll Turner, Jack Bradford, Banker (unknown), Mrs. J. A. Lisle, Ginner, Mrs. John Behringer, W. R. Cole, Mr. Kittley, City Marshall, the others people lived on the farm and worked for Mr. Behringer.

## Growing Old When

**Your Growing Older When:**  
Taken from the Midland Reporter Telegram

.. Your growing older when Everything hurts and what doesn't hurt doesn't work.

The gleam in your eyes is from the sun hitting your bifocals

You feel like the night before, and you haven't been anywhere

Your little black book contains only names ending in M.D.

You get winded playing chess.

Your children begin to look middle aged.

You finally reach the top of the ladder, and find it leaning against the wrong wall.

You begin to outlive enthusiasm.

You decide to procrastinate but then never get around to it.

Your mind makes contracts your body can't meet.

A dripping faucet causes an uncontrollable bladder urge.

You know all the answers, but nobody asks the questions.

You look forward to a dull evening.

You walk with your head held high trying to get used to your bifocals.

Your favorite part of the newspaper is 25 years ago today.

You turn out the light for economic reasons rather than romantic reasons.

You sit in a rocking chair and can't get it going.

Your knees buckle and your belt won't.

You regret all those mistakes resisting temptation.

You're 17 around the neck, 42 around the waist, and 96 around the golf course

You stop looking forward to your next birthday

After painting the town red, you have to take a long rest before applying the second coat.

Dialing long distance wears you out.

You're startled the first time you are addressed as old timer.

You remember today, that yesterday was your wedding anniversary.

You just can't stand people who are intolerant.

The best part of your day is over when your alarm clock goes off.

You burn the midnight oil after 9 p.m.

Your back goes out more than you do.

A fortune teller offers to read your face.

Your pacemaker makes the garage door go up when you watch a pretty girl go by.

The little gray haired lady you help across the street is your wife.

You get your exercise acting as pallbearer for your friends who exercise.

You get too much room in the house and not enough in the medicine cabinet.

You sink your teeth in a steak and they stay there.



ABILENE, TEXAS, SUNDAY MORNING, JANUARY 11, 1976

## Ginning Not Profession She Picked

By BEV MORGAN  
Staff Writer

**RULE** — Although she's a working woman, a staunch sports fan and "the boss" over several men, she has a difficult time relating to the onslaught of the women's movement.

That's not because she's against equal rights, she's simply worked as long and as hard as most men ever do.

Mrs. Ola Mae Lisle, 74, has owned and headed up the operation of the Lisle Cotton Gin here for nearly 50 years.

"I've never had to fire a man, had very little disagreement with them. If a woman stays in her place and does a good job, why, men really respect her," she smiled.

**Mrs. Lisle didn't** plan on being the "boss woman" when she married her husband, the late James Lisle in 1919. But he was killed in 1927, leaving her with four children who ranged in age from six months to six years.

She held onto the gin, even though she

knew very little about the business.

Then the Depression hit. "We just had to cut down and make do. We didn't let any debts build up. I had to do a lot of outside work (besides running the gin), like feeding hens, gardening and canning."

As the children grew older, they began helping out at the gin. In fact, her son, James, and his wife and her daughter, Mrs. L. W. Pickard, still work at the gin. "If it wasn't for my children, I couldn't have made it," she said.

**The word "retire"** doesn't have much meaning to Mrs. Lisle. Asked who's next in line to take over the gin, she laughed and said, "I hope nobody." Then her daughter Mrs. Pinkard, stepped in her office and said, "We aren't going to let her retire, you know."

Mrs. Lisle has watched the cotton industry change from hand-picked fields to the modern machine-run operation. When she and her husband ran their first gin in Benjamin in 1919, the price of cotton was about five cents a pound.

They then moved to Rule in 1921, where they rebuilt a gin that had burned down. Cotton prices were rising then. This year it's priced between 43 cents and 51 cents, depending on its quality.

**Mrs. Lisle expects** the cotton industry to pick up steadily in the next few years because the now unstable oil business is knocking out a lot of synthetic fabric production.

Besides that, she said people are realizing the real value of cotton fabric. "It's cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. It just feels better to wear," she said.

Mrs. Lisle feels very close to the cotton industry. She even knows by the feel of unrefined cotton just what its quality is.

"I have worked very hard, but I enjoy it," she smiled. "I've always been so busy I haven't had time to wonder if I ever wanted anything else. I've given it (the gin) all I've got."

But she does find some spare time.

That's used to go to football, track, basketball and other sports games that her seven grandsons play in. In 1974 she averaged five games a week and this past fall, about three.

**The people of Rule** appreciate Mrs. Lisle's involvement in school sports. In fact, in 1974, she was awarded a plaque in recognition of her continual support of the Rule Bobcat's athletic teams.

She also received a plaque in 1965, naming her as Future Farmers of America Honorary Chapter Farmer, from the school's agriculture department.

In 1967, she was named the Outstanding Woman of the Year by the local Chamber of Commerce.

What else does she do? Well, if you're interested in the history of Rule, its people and its growth, she can tell you. She does not claim to be the town historian but she has compiled several scrapbooks of historical moments in Rule dating back scores of years.



*Raw product . . .*

After the cotton arrives at her gin, Ola Mae Lisle inspects the raw product. She can judge

cotton quality by the feel. (Staff Photos by Don Blakey)



**DON BLAKLEY**  
...color photo winner



Beverly Morgan

OLA MAE LISLE AND JAMES LISLE  
INTERVIEWED BY BEVERLY MORGAN AND  
DON BLAKLEY FROM ABILENE REPORTER  
NEWS, JANUARY 8, 1976