

## TUPELO, MISSISSIPPI

### Capitalism and Community Life

“My main story is about a small-town’s need to buy a big stud bull,” says Vaughn Grisham, Professor of Sociology at the University of Mississippi and Director of The McLean Institute For Economic Development in Oxford. Grisham is a self-defined “shy person” who nonetheless believes so strongly in a form of community development he calls “domesticated capitalism” that he has become a nationally sought-after public speaker. Grisham sees his mission as “making real and vivid and bringing home to people the power of social capital.”

At the end of the 1930’s, Tupelo, Mississippi, was a dying cotton town, the home of an unknown five-year old boy named Elvis Presley, and one of the poorest counties in Mississippi. The Tupelo Story is about how a local progressive thinker and newspaper owner named George McLean started a development program that turned his town into a thriving and prosperous community that was the top dairy county in the United States for half the decade of the 1940’s. “That didn’t happen by trickle-down,” says Grisham, “it came about through trickle-up. McLean used to say that trickle-down economics is a lot like getting urinated on. George began by convincing Tupelo businessmen to help invest in the community purchase of the costly high-quality stud bull that launched the local dairy industry. ‘Listen,’ said McLean to a particularly resistant hardware store owner, ‘you may not like me, but you need me. You took in \$6,000 last year. You’ll never make more than that until you help increase the amount of money your customers make, and the average family income in this county is only \$600 a year.’ McLean believed that our social fabric and our economic fabric are pretty tightly interwoven. If we care enough to look for it, we can always find a thread that binds us. And, if you look at it, to say that we have an obligation to help each other out is actually a traditional American, and very pragmatic, point of view.”

While he spends a good deal of time and energy telling the continuing story of Tupelo, Grisham believes that “the next break-through in social and economic development will not be in Tupelo. It will be somewhere else – and I’m looking for where that will be. But I do know that Tupelo will still be the model. Though the details will vary, community development will still hinge on several principles: community growth begins with individual growth; local people must address local problems; successful development begins with small tangible goals – pick the low-hanging fruit first; team-building (and its accompanying personal commitment) are essential; and the real task for leaders is to be social architects who build human infrastructure.”

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