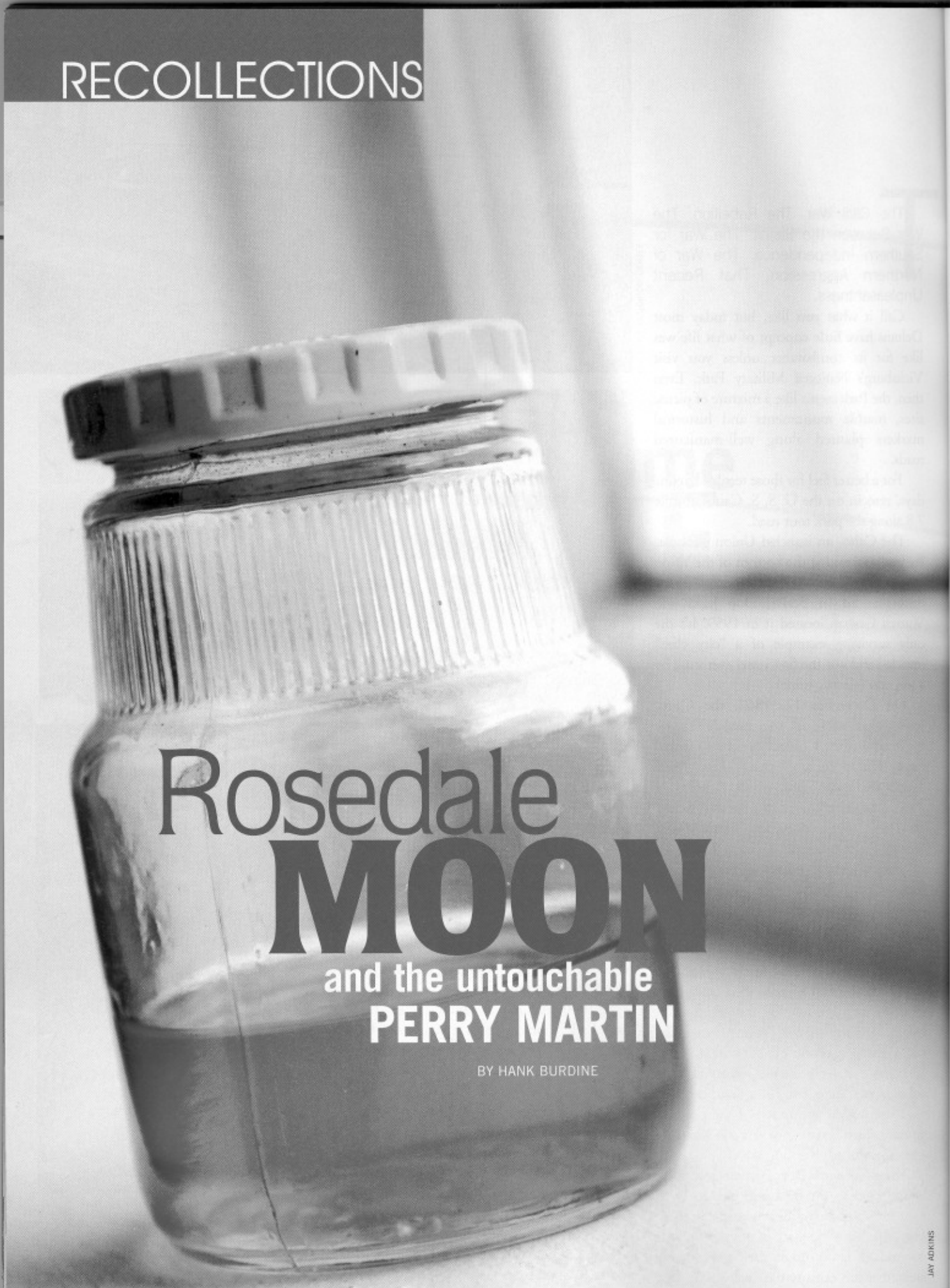


Rosedale MOON and the untouchable PERRY MARTIN

BY HANK BURDINE

JAY ADKINS

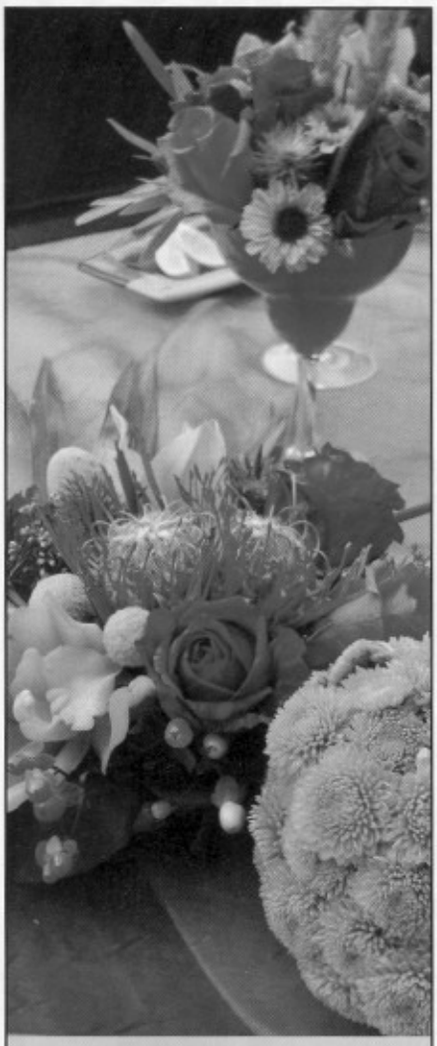
Al Capone considered Perry Martin's moonshine the best there was. He sent specially designated boxcars with armed guards down from Chicago to load cases upon cases of what was known as PM. To those who remember it, PM was arguably the best moonshine in the country.

In any speakeasy in Chicago, New York, ittsburgh or New Orleans, all you had to do as ask for "PM" and you were given the nest moonshine whiskey there ever was, raight from Rosedale, Mississippi. There e heirloom bottles today that are passed own from generation to generation, with a p taken on special occasions. Judge Bard elden from Hollywood, Mississippi, recalls is father telling him, "Each month, you ould set your watch by the arrival of a long ack Twin Six Packard limousine with District of Columbia plates headed south on d Highway 61. Later that afternoon, it ould make its return trip to Washington, .C., through Hollywood, loaded, with its ar fenders low to the ground. Franklin D. oosevelt was the President back then."

During the days of Prohibition, oonshine was made in back country stills over the South. Federal revenuers were pt busy locating and busting up illegal iiskey stills and carting off those that got ught to jail. Even though Perry Martin om Rosedale was fined a few times, it is ubtful he ever went to jail for making oonshine. It was illegal to make whiskey thin the city limits of Rosedale, those iits extending across the levee and to the er. The offense carried a $100 fine. Perry artin paid his fine in advance each year on nuary 1. Mr. Charlie Capps, who was riff of Bolivar County during the last rs of Perry Martin's life, recalls, "I would eive a gallon of PM each year around ristmas, and I never even met Mr. rtin."

Bolivar County had never offered a anty on finding and destroying

ry Martin on his houseboat, as photographed *The Delta Review* September/October 1965 ue in "Rosedale on the River." Printed by mission.



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moonshine stills. "The only trouble with local law is them drinking up my whiskey," a retired moonshiner told William Sullivan in *Perry Martin, Mississippi Moonshine*. During Prohibition, the local lawman was viewed as a defender from the federal revenuer who was "a foreigner messing in what was not his business!" One Rosedale law officer offers, "We were all in moonshine back then, either making it, selling it or drinking it." Charlie Crawford, at one time the town marshall of Rosedale said, "Perry Martin had a reputation for being dangerous, but he was the most honest man I ever knew. He tended to his own business, left everybody else's alone. Perry Martin's business was on the river side of the levee, and except to get a haircut or to vote, he stayed away from Rosedale, on his side of the levee." A former chief of police of Rosedale adds, "Perry Martin wasn't bothered by the law because he was as good a man as he was a moonshiner."

Martin was the son of a wealthy rice farmer and had been educated for the ministry. As a young man he was involved in state and local Arkansas politics. In 1920 he left the rice farm with his wife and two children and settled on Big Island, a 121,000-acre wilderness area across from Rosedale at the confluence of the White, Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. He went into the timber and logging business. Big Island was reported to be the "largest whiskey producing area in the United States." Earl Drury, a retired moonshiner from Big Island that served 12 years as Rosedale's Constable, said that when he sat in front of his still on Big Island he could see an additional 21 stills in operation. When asked if life was dangerous on Big Island, Drury recalled, "There was plenty of law and order on Big Island. Simply, if there was an argument, somebody got killed." According to Drury, the main law enforcement figure on Big Island was Perry Martin himself. The sheriff of Desha County, Arkansas, had sworn him in as a deputy and he wore the badge with pride.

Not many people bothered Perry Martin because he had the reputation of being a violent man. This was possibly untrue unless he was provoked. One hot summer night he was guarding a raft of his own logs tied up on the river awaiting a boat to pick them up. Five men came up with guns and tried to steal the logs. A gun battle ensued and Perry Martin killed all five of the robbers. He turned himself in to the sheriff's office and was acquitted for "simply protecting his own property." It is also believed that he killed his own stepson during an altercation. According to Henry McCaslin, Perry Martin and his stepson were in a rowboat in the river and the stepson started rocking the boat, either to try to throw him out of the boat or to just scare him. "Perry Martin pulled his pistol and shot him because he could not swim."

Melvin Martin, Perry Martin's grandson, states, "My grandaddy was a very educated man. He was an ordained minister, a self-made man, and he was as good as gold. But if you crossed him, he would kill you."

> "That whiskey Grandaddy made was as good, if not better, than Crown Royal. It would go down real smooth and then there would be a real good fire."

After killing a man for stealing his hog and only serving one year of a 10-year sentence, Perry Martin gave up logging and went into the moonshine business. He moved to the east side of the river in 1929 and lived on the banks of the Mississippi in a fairly ornate old wooden houseboat set up on blocks in a grove of cypress trees. In 1950, Perry Martin bought his wife Lou a house at the foot of the levee in a place called "the pasture." He spent the first night in the new house with his wife and became ill and was not able to sleep. He never stayed another night on the dry side of the levee. Yet each day he could be seen walking across the levee to have lunch with his wife. He slept on his houseboat every night to be close to his stills. Perry Martin's houseboat had electricity but no air conditioning and possibly no running water. But when his grandkids walked to the picture show in Rosedale on Saturday afternoon, they were flush with cash. Bill Parker recalls, "My daddy would give each of us 25 cents, which was enough for admission, popcorn and a Coke. Whenever Melvin and James Perry showed up, each of those boys had 2 or 3 dollars in their pockets."

Will Gourlay remembers that as a boy growing up in Rosedale, camping and hunting on the river, he would see him

often. "Mr. Perry was a tall and slender man. He walked slowly and he talked slowly, making sure you heard and understood everything he was telling you. He drove an old green Jeep pickup truck and you never knew where you might see him along the river. He had stills all over those woods."

According to Martin's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Myron Martin, "one of the most frightening things about him was that you never heard him in the woods until he was face to face with you."

Bill Parker says that according to Alfred Welsan, "each time you went out to the houseboat to buy a gallon of moonshine, Perry Martin would have you come in the kitchen where he would pour you half of an iced tea glass of PM. You were expected to drink it right then and there to ensure its quality. With the heat of summer, and no air moving at all in that sweltering houseboat, after you drank your sample and paid for your gallon, it was all you could do to make it back up to the top of the levee!" One imbiber recalled PM as "so smooth, but so strong, it would make a little rabbit walk right up and spit in a bulldog's face."

The whiskey did not have the crystal-clear appearance of most moonshine, otherwise known as white lightning, because it was aged in oak barrels giving it a deep amber color and wonderful tannin flavor, much like good bonded Kentucky bourbon. There were wooden kegs of PM buried all over the woods, their secret whereabouts known only to Perry Martin. Melvin Martin recalls, "That whiskey Grandaddy made was as good, if not better, than Crown Royal. It would go down real smooth and then there would be a real good fire." According to William Sullivan, "People who weren't even whiskey drinkers drank PM when they could."

Many moonshine stills operated out of the dense and almost impenetrable Arkansas River bottoms across the Mississippi. Even today, Big Island is a virtual wilderness area with several possible sightings of the illusive Ivory Billed Woodpecker being reported. Unless you were a river rat or a moonshiner, you didn't venture into that area for pleasure. And if you were a government man, looking to bust up moonshine stills, sometimes you didn't come back out. In 1928 Federal revenuers raided Big Island using a gunboat and hauled in about 200 area moonshiners. Captain George Reid of the Brent Towing Company remembered in 1951 helping out the Federal Barge Line when a tow ran

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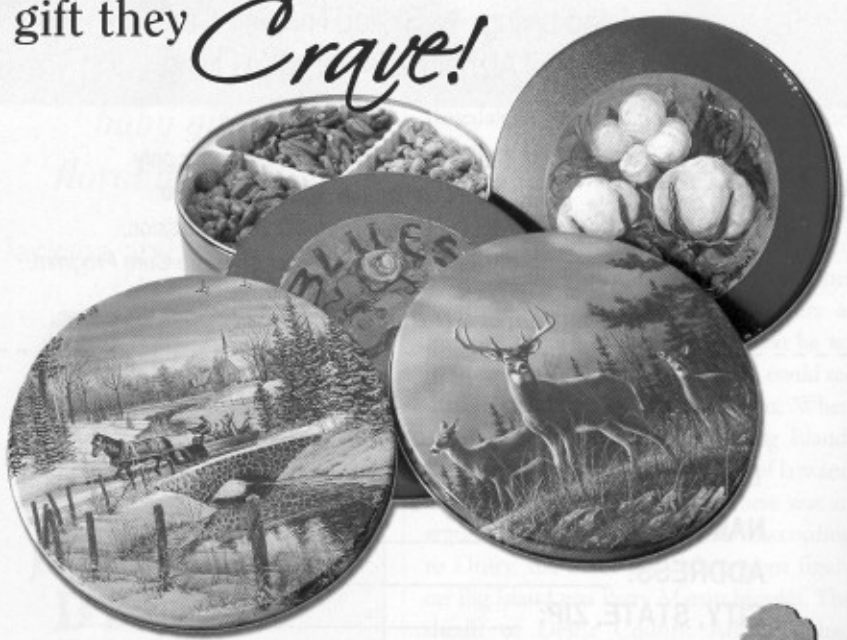
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aground on Concordia Bend right across the river from Big Island. Federal Barge was wholly owned by the U.S. Government and a full barge of sugar with government seals on the covers was tied up on the Big Island side of the river in order for the towboats to free the other barges aground on the sandbar. When the government boat returned to the sugar barge to put it back in the tow, the barge was almost completely unloaded by the moonshiners on Big Island! Locked hatches and U.S. Government seals meant nothing to those men.

Perry Martin operated out of his own territory on the Mississippi side of the big river. According to Mrs. Myron Martin, "Those were Perry Martin's woods. Nobody came out there that didn't have business there." He paid whatever Mississippi black market tax he was supposed to and nobody bothered him much. It is a fact that during Prohibition, every four years surrounding the gubernatorial inaugural week, a Mississippi state highway patrol double escort could be seen coming down the levee, surrounding a truck, loaded to the gills with moonshine and being driven by Myron Martin, turning south on Highway 1 heading to Jackson.

There were several reasons for the quality of Perry Martin's whiskey. Using the basic Kentucky recipe, one part corn to one part sugar, he adjusted and blended rye malt in with the corn. He got his water right out of the Mississippi River. His stills were pristine and immaculate with the bright copper works glistening in the sunlight filtering through the tall oak trees. He always made small batches and cooked it very slowly. Yet according to some, the most important thing was the use of white oak barrels that "rocked gently under willow trees by the ebb and flow of the Mississippi River along its banks."

At 90 years old, Perry Martin made his last batch of whiskey. He had just built a brand new still and run off his first batch when he was raided and his still destroyed. In a moment of frustration he got out of the business that had made him famous all over the country. Grandson Melvin Martin was with him that day, "I helped him make his last batch of whiskey. It was a beautiful still and when they chopped it up, well, it just broke his heart. He told the revenuers he would never build another still and never make anymore whiskey. They believed him and just gave him a fine. He was too old to go to jail." He suffered a stroke the following

year and died on September 9, 1968.

Perry Martin has been remembered as a good man, often giving his money away freely to those in need. He raised a little girl who had been abandoned on a shanty boat and sent her to college. He reared another young man outside of his family that continues to live in Rosedale. He entertained visitors, customers and politicians alike, often telling humorous stories. One such story was about a revenuer that destroyed his still with an ax and poured the broken bottles of moonshine over his slick bald head as he claimed it helped his hair grow. Perry Martin knew better. "He just wanted the chance to drink the whiskey that dripped off his pointed nose and onto his long outstretched tongue!"

Martin did not fit the local vernacular of a "river rat," according to William Alexander Percy in *Lanterns on the Levee*, "illiterate, suspicious, mean, clannish, blonde and usually ugly." Perry Martin was well educated, honest, proud, generous, self-confident, self made and independent. He may have spurned genteel society, yet he demanded its respect. He has been recorded in history as the most famous moonshiner in Mississippi, and very possibly, of all times. DM

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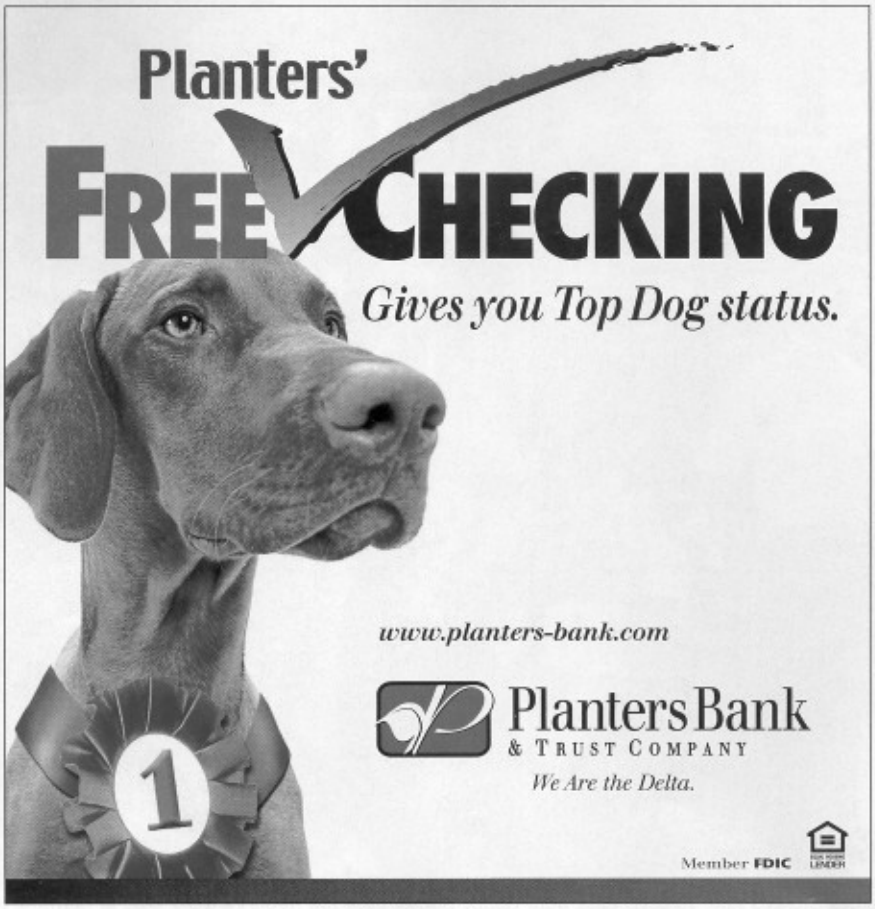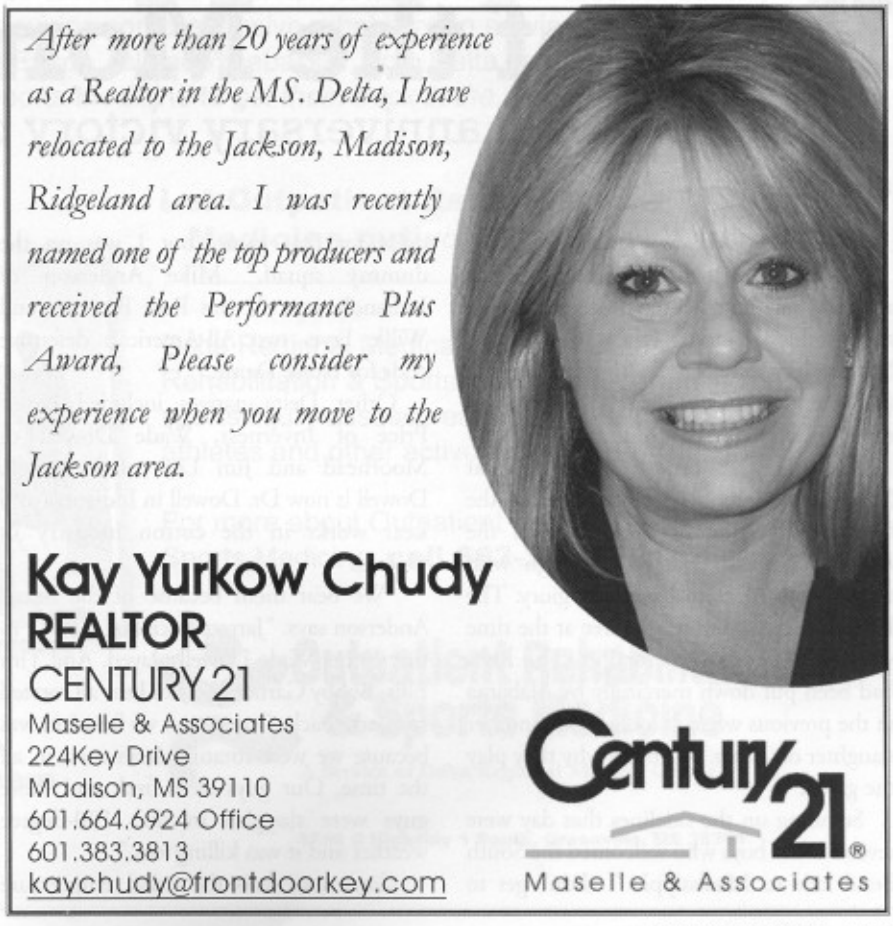
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