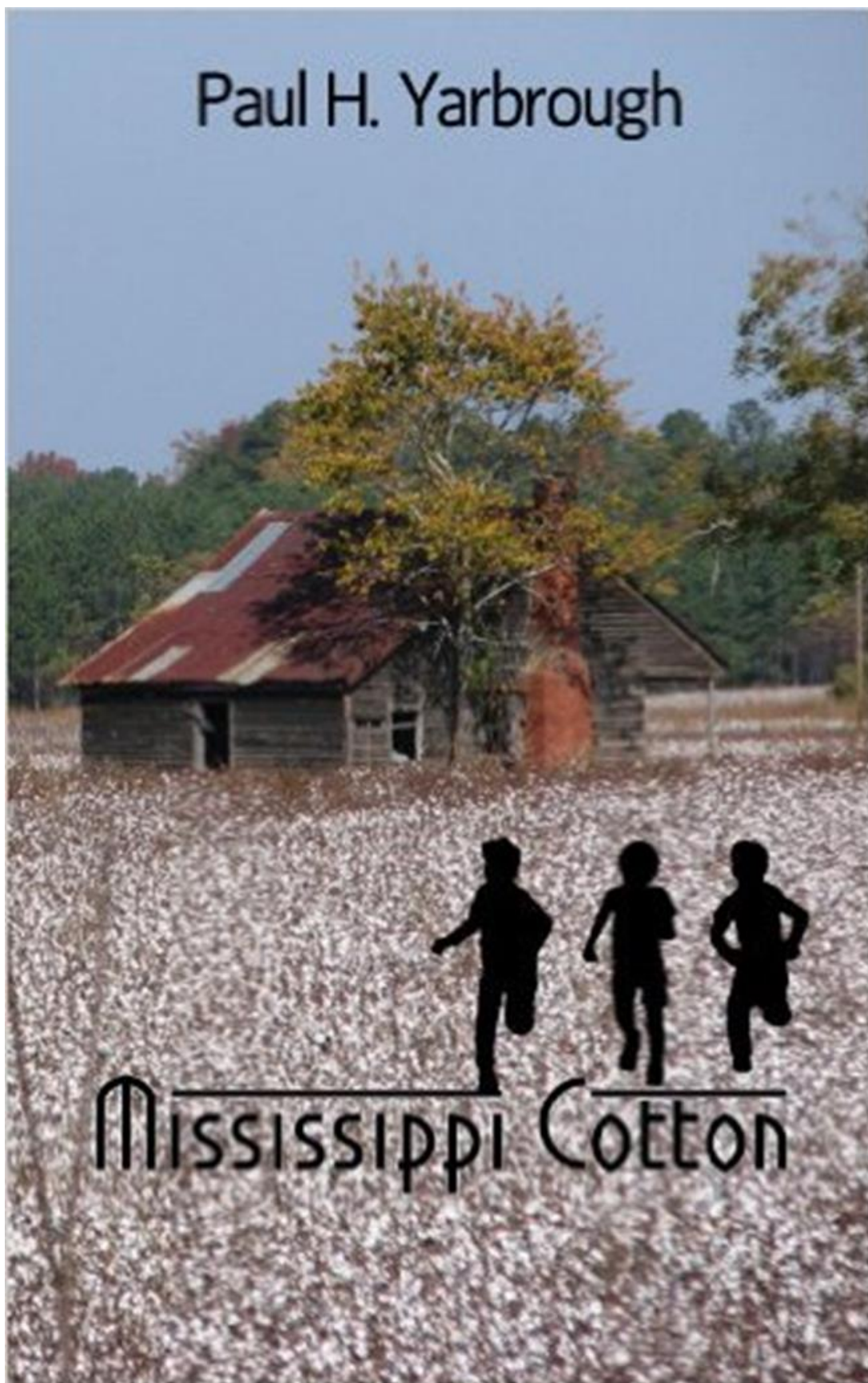


Paul H. Yarbrough



Mississippi Cotton

From *Mississippi Cotton*

Flora, Mississippi was the first stop, but I didn't count it as a real stop because no one actually got off. There were only a couple of passengers getting on at the bus stop, which was just a grocery store with a Trailways sign stuck on it.

Some seedy-looking man got on and sat across the aisle. He wore a straw Stetson and a blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled up above his elbows. He wadded his sport coat up and put it behind his head for a pillow. The shirt was too small for his fat stomach, and you could see his undershirt between the buttons which were stretching his shirt open between them. He had a tattoo of an eagle on his arm and underneath it was written, YEAH BOY. It didn't look like he had shaved in a while, and I would make a guess that he was about fifty or sixty. A pretty old guy anyway.

But the bad thing was, the thing that I had been most afraid of, was that some old lady with straw-looking hair got on, and stopped next to my seat. After staring at my sandwich bag for about five minutes, she said, "Anybody settin' here, Hon'?"

I started to say something smart like, "Oh yeah, a little bitty guy is in that sack." I didn't though. The FBI might find out that I had smarted off. There'd be a black mark on my conduct, plus the wrath of my mother and daddy if they found out.

"No, ma'am."

She sat down. Fortunately, I was able to swoop up my bag before she made mush out of it.

"Well now, that feels better," she said. "I feel like I been on my feet forever and ever." She plopped a big round-ish bag down in her lap.

I couldn't tell if it was a huge purse or a clothes bag of some kind, but it had a bunch of stuff in it, and it was really round and big, like she had her own toilet in it or something. She hugged it like it was a prize she had won. "Well, now I guess we're gonna be fellow travelers for a while," she said. She smiled yellow.

"Yes, ma'am, I guess so." I didn't know what that meant for sure. I heard my daddy talk a lot about communists and their fellow travelers, so maybe she thought I was some kind of a communist or something.

"And where're you goin' this fine day?"

"Cotton City."

"You got family there?"

"Hope you ain't kin to that dead guy they found in the river," blurted the man with the Yeah Boy tattoo.

"Dead guy? In the river?" My lips almost quivered when I said it.

Her glare brought him up without a word. "Now you just keep your mouth shut. This young

gentleman don't need your comments. Now go ahead, young man." Yeah Boy frowned and slumped more in his seat.

"Yes, ma'am. I have a bunch of cousins up there. None of my parents or grand people or regular family though. They're mostly all in Jackson. Except for a' uncle in Meridian."

I hated talking to grownups. I never knew the right thing to say to them. She was kind of beat-up looking, and her hair was scraggly, and she had on about a hundred pounds of rouge, like she'd been smacked with a ripe pomegranate on each cheek. It made her yellow teeth look more yellow. It was hard enough to talk to regular grownups like teachers or baseball coaches, or even Sunday School teachers, but old ones that were, as my daddy would say, 'haggard -looking,' were even harder to talk to for some reason.

"Oh, why cousins are regular family, too," she said. "Jus' a bit more distant."

"Yes, ma'am, that's right. They live way up in Cotton City." "No, no," she said. "I meant distant, like they don't have as strong a blood tie as yo' momma and daddy and such."

"Yes, ma'am, I guess."

She pulled out some little papers and some kind of little pouch from her bag. I didn't know what she was doing until she started sprinkling tobacco onto some little papers. What they called 'the makings' was what she had. I had seen it in a Red Ryder picture show. This bad guy was always asking somebody for the makings so he could have a cigarette.

She drew the length of the paper across her lips, rolled it into a cigarette, then poked it into her mouth. "Well, my young fellow traveler, I don't suppose you have a match do you?" She smiled, as if she didn't really expect me to have one.

"No, ma'am." It did sound kind of funny asking me, and I laughed a little. That brought on another yellow smile.

She rooted around some more in her bag, pushing and twisting whatever was in there, so she could find some matches. She finally found a pack, pulled one out and struck it. She leaned against the headrest and sucked on the wrinkled-looking cigarette, then exhaled a cloud of smoke through her mouth and nostrils, her eyes closed. I waved my hand at the cloud of smoke.