



At this hunt club, hunting is just one dreamy suggestion.

*Article by Aida Rogers
Photos by Lynne Branham*

Anyone bemoaning the disappearance of the rural South needs to spend some time at Hatiola. Here in northern Barnwell County, a Jim Harrison painting comes to life. All the requisites are here: cotton fields and woods, an unpainted house on a dirt road. There's a porch for sitting, and sheds for cooking. And on the first Saturday in November, about 200 people gather for a chicken bog dinner, some hillbilly music, and the annual grinding of sugar cane. The fact that syrup is rarely made from it doesn't matter. It's the gathering that does.

"We're entering the high social season at Hatiola," observes Andy Riley, an advertising copywriter in Columbia. Riley, 62, is a long-time member of the Hatiola Hunt Club, a group of 20-some men who don't much hunt. This crowd is less about guns and game and more about friends and family, and honoring the way their ancestors lived not too long ago.

"It grounds us," Riley upholds. "It takes us back to where we need to be and the things that are



Hatiola

important, and it's for the kids, the traditions we've passed on. It's life before air-conditioning."

"Although we do like our air-conditioning," asserts member Bill Todd, a Columbia lawyer. Todd, like Riley, says watching sugar cane squeezed through an old-fashioned press is fun for all ages. Besides showing younger generations how syrup once was made, it allows the members' children, many from cities, a chance to play with children from the country. Hannah Flowers, 14, of Blackville has been coming with her father Tommy since she was 7 months old. Together they make sure the Percheron horse is carefully hitched to circle the press to produce sweet liquid from the cane. After dinner, they'll take guests for a wagon ride in the fields.

"A social club with a hunting problem" is a common description for the group. Two weeks after the cane squeezing comes the infamous Hatiola Weekend, in which about 75 men cook a hog. At Hatiola Weekend—"no 'grils' allowed," jokes Todd—some



THIS PHOTO COURTESY STAN WOODWARD



By hand and horse, sugar cane is prepared and ground each November at Hatiola. The family event is one of many frequent eating-meetings at the Barnwell County farm retreat. Above: 99-year-old Morris Peeples is the official giver of thanks before meals.





Robert Turnbull, founder of the feast and “hunt master.” The Drovers Old Time Medicine Show, an upstate bluegrass band, provides entertainment.

come and go in the same day, and others spend the night—in cots, bunks, on floors, even dining room tables. Members meet again New Year’s Eve for another cooking party, and serve a traditional New Year’s Day meal of barbeque, black-eyed peas and collards. There’s a fish fry in March, and scattered weekends of members coming together for repairs, a little hunting, a lot of cooking, and plenty of chat.

“There are all kinds of hunt clubs. This hunt club is not a democracy. It’s a benevolent dictatorship, with the emphasis on ‘benevolent,’ ” says member Jim Quinn of Columbia. That dictator is Robert Turnbull, a Columbia lawyer who inherited Hatiola from his mother’s side of the family. He formed the Hatiola Hunt Club in 1991 and named himself hunt master, happily acknowledging that he hadn’t hunted in years. Many members are long-time friends who’d joined him on fishing retreats here with a men’s group from St. John’s Episcopal Church in Columbia. Forming the club was Turnbull’s “Tom Sawyer deal” of getting friends to help maintain the



house, built in stages after the Civil War, between 1865 and 1870.

Those friends have helped with carpentry, wiring, plumbing and plowing. Insulation has been added, windows replaced, the porch redone and a shower installed. Will they paint the outside? “Uh, no,” Turnbull responds. “Remember where you are,” he adds, using a favorite Hatiola expression. In other words, Hatiola wouldn’t be Hatiola if it got too prettied up.

“Nobody living knows the derivation of the word,” Turnbull, 62, says about Hatiola, located down a dirt road named Cornelia Ann. The name runs through generations of his family, and handwritten notes his great-grandfather



wrote his great-grandmother “Nelie” in 1876, when they were courting, are framed on a wall inside. Sherman’s army had come through a decade earlier, burning the home Turnbull’s ancestors were building. They rebuilt while living in a slave cabin.

From the 1920s until the early 1960s, sharecroppers inhabited the house. Today, 99-year-old Morris Peeples and his wife Faye live in a modest home nearby; he and his ancestors worked the cotton fields years ago. An emeritus member of the club, Peeples still hoes his garden and famously offers a long, impassioned blessing before the meals at Hatiola.

Stan Woodward, a southern folklife documentary maker in Greenville, discovered Peeples while researching barbecue traditions. As he came to know

Peeples, he came to know Turnbull and their abiding affection for each other and Hatiola. Woodward’s documentary, *The Morris Chronicle*, examines Peeples’ old-style cooking technique as well as the loving, respectful relationships he has with Turnbull—whom he taught to drive—and other members of the club.

The interdependence of blacks and whites and of both on the land and water (the Edisto River is near) might be Hatiola’s legacy. “We breathe life into the apparitions and dreams of our ancestors,” member Ted Hayne wrote in “The Hatiola Doctrine,” which also is framed and hanging on a wall. Three non-members want their ashes to be spread here, Turnbull says. The Drovers Old Time Medicine Show, the Pickens County bluegrass band



Jean Doster, left, and Nell Barr, both of West Columbia, enjoy the concert at Hatiola.

that plays during the cane squeezing, even wrote a song about it:

*The place looks the same as it did back then,
When it escaped the wrath of Sherman and his men
On his march to sea,
God said "Let Hatiola be!"*

And so it is. Turnbull points to the peeling paint in the kitchen and chuckles about using duct tape to keep the rats out. When the Drovers play, guests sit outside on furniture with the stuffing coming out. But Hatiola was never a grand plantation, Turnbull says, just a "working farm" his family ran. They weren't rich, at least in terms of money.

Still, the intangible rewards are immeasurable. "I guess the bottom line is our love for one another," Turnbull says. "The thing that means so much to me is that it's being used and loved and appreciated by so many people."

Andy Riley, the Columbia copywriter, may have

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described it best in a watercolor he painted for Turn-

bull. The main house is in the background, with the sugar cane press in front. The title? "Hatiola: Sugar for the Soul." ❖

Lynne Branham is a photographer in White Oak.

For information about Stan Woodward's DVD, *The Morris Chronicle*, visit www.stanwoodward.com.

