

Brazil's Secret History of Southern Hospitality



After the American Civil War, some 7,000 Confederates set sail for Brazil. Their Dixie-loving descendants are one of the world's most unique micro-cultures.

I pressed the buzzer to the gate on the crest of a steep hill and waited, not knowing who or what to expect. I hadn't written or called, and didn't really expect to find anyone home. Within seconds, though, a dapper white-haired man with black metal-frame glasses came walking down the yard's path in a chipper sort of way. He looked like Colonel Sanders's twin, but without the goatee and moustache.

After I fumbled something in Portuguese about my being an American and that I had come to write a story but wasn't sure that this was the right place, the man flashed a great big smile.

"Well, yaw cum raht in," he chirped excitedly. "I'll git mah whife, and we'll set us down and have us a rail nahce vis-i-ta-shun."

Say what?

Six months earlier, I had moved to Brazil to work as a fledgling editor for an English-language newspaper in São Paulo, a sort of *International Herald Tribune* for Latin America. One Saturday morning with nothing much to do, more out of distraction than purpose, I bought a bus ticket to a city ninety miles away called Americana. I had heard somewhere about Americana being settled by disgruntled American Confederates after their side lost the Civil War, and somehow descendants of the original settlers still lived there and still spoke the English of the American South circa 1865.

Surely, that account was more science fiction than real. It had to be. But little did I realize at the time, I had stumbled onto a yarn so fantastic and bizarre it could have been spun out of *The Twilight Zone*.

On the front porch that afternoon thirty-five years ago, facing this grinning man, what I remember most wasn't just the words that floated from his mouth, but how they sounded. As they hung in the moist air between us, nothing quite computed. The man spoke an American English that, while wholly fluent, sounded nothing like I had ever heard before. There was the cadence, a slow molasses drawl, but there was more. The words sounded like they came from deep within the bowels of Georgia, maybe just north of Macon, where the gnat line begins. But that wasn't it either. The man had a Portuguese accent, and his inflection and the words he used, how he strung them together, it sounded all wrong. His speech was wobbly and splintered, run together, so some of the words didn't make any sense. And his voice: It was scratchy, like it creaked forth from the worn and weathered horn of a hand-cranked Victrola.

What I was hearing didn't sound like it came from someone of this generation, even of this century. I was in a mild and amused state of shock, and all I remember thinking was this: Listen to how this gentleman talks because you will never hear anything like it ever again.

The man introduced himself as Jim Jones (Jones came out sounding *JOE-ness*), and as we ambled to the wisteria-covered veranda that wrapped around the house, his wife, Judith MacKnight Jones, introduced herself, and then introduced her mother, Elizabeth MacKnight, a big-boned

woman with a healthy sprig of white hair held together with a brown barrette. Mrs. MacKnight proudly told me that she was ninety-nine years old. She stopped there, waiting for my reaction, and when she got it, she grinned a toothy smile.

The three of them sat there, in white wicker chairs with a small daisy pattern on the plumped cushions, three pairs of hands folded neatly on their laps, eyes like saucers, each of them looking at me like I was from Mars.

“Yaw jus en tahm fer hour afta-noon ahced-tee pahty,” Judith said with a hiccup of a giggle, waving her right hand towards a fourth wicker chair as though the festivities could now begin.

As they stared at me, I realized that it wasn't just what came out of their mouths that made the three of them so bizarre. It struck me that Jim, Judith and Mrs. MacKnight had fair, white, almost albino complexions — totally wrong for Brazilian skin, which mostly runs from honey to ebony.

As I sat down, Judith handed me a frosted mug garnished with a sprig of mint just picked, she pointed out, from her garden *“ovah yonda.”* She smiled so warmly and was so disarming in an innocent, almost naive sort of way, that I thought somehow Judith Jones must have known me. Or must have known my family. Or, at the very least, must have known of my family. Why else would she be so welcoming to a stranger — a Yankee stranger, no less — who just happened to show up unannounced at her doorstep minutes earlier?

For the next two hours, Judith and Jim talked in the same disjointed meter about their lives and the lives of their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. She and Jim were mighty pleased that I had taken up to pay them a visitation. I got the distinct impression that they had been waiting for someone like me to come by for quite some time.

Judith told me that more than ninety Confederate descendants still lived in the area, and although none had been born in the United States and relatively few had ever visited, many spoke the same anachronistic variant of English among themselves. Their speech was a linguistic phenomenon, a language spoken nowhere else in the world but in and

around Americana, a municipality of then 120,000 residents, mostly of Italian descent, within the Brazilian state of São Paulo.

Judith, a practiced storyteller, related the Confederate colony's history as though I was the first to hear it. After the Civil War, Brazil had been as much a land of opportunity for American Southerners as the United States had been for Europeans. Instead of stomaching life under Yankee rule, as many as 7,000 Confederates opted to set sail for Brazil, a country twice the size of the U.S. at the time, and a nation where slavery was still legal. The Brazilian government, under the rule of Emperor Dom Pedro II, recruited the Confederates, taking out advertisements in U.S. newspapers and sending representatives to the American South to persuade proud Southerners to live out their dreams in Brazil.

The Brazilian government was eager to import the Confederates' cotton-growing knowledge, and in return guaranteed them arable land at twenty-two cents an acre. Most went to areas surrounding São Paulo, but others set sail to Rio de Janeiro. At least one shipload of Southerners docked in the port of Belém, set sail down the Amazon River and survived on berries and monkey meat, but perished from malaria. The only community of Confederates that survived was the group that got to the place they called Americana, which they chose because it most closely paralleled their home in Georgia.

The Jones' story *seemed* to make sense, but I knew a little about American history, and I'd never heard anything about southern migration to Brazil. No one left the United States; America was the place people came to.

My eyes must have betrayed me, because when I told Jim that I hadn't read much about this Southern Shangri-La, he looked at me kind of pitifully, then put his hands out, palms up. The reason for my ignorance, as Jim put it, was plain and simple. "*It's becuse ya his-to-ry buks don't whant ya Yan-keys ta know what hour brave Con-fed-a-rit ancestahs dahd. Dat's dah reason. Doze ah Yan-keys who wroht doze buks—dint ya know dhat, Stephen? Ain't dhat right, Ju-dith-a?*"

Judith nodded in a keeper-of-the-secrets kind of way, which demonstrated beyond any doubt that she knew everything there was to know about the Southern Migration to Brazil after the War of Northern

Aggression — from family names, to birth and death dates, to who owned which plots of land, to who slept with whom and who wasn't worth a doodly damn, as she put it. Judith and Jim and some four score more descendants scattered around these parts were keepers of a flickering flame — *flick-er-in* Jim said. "*Whe're dah ox-y-gin dat keeps dah flame fruhm goin' out,*" he said.

Judith pulled up her chair next to mine. I needed a lesson, by golly, and she was about to deliver one. Those who left the American South after the Civil War had the most to lose by staying. Among the Confederates who set sail for Brazilian shores were attorneys, architects, plantation owners, physicians and businessmen, all fine men from fine families, most of them landowners, educated at the best Southern institutes of higher learning. They owned slaves, and by God, they were good to those slaves — "*Don't go makin' out hour ancestahs to be mean, not fer one secon',*" Jim warned. "*Day treated dehm slaves as though day was fam'ly.*"

The migration to Brazil, Judith said in a voice growing more emphatic, was one of the largest exoduses in "*dah his-to-ry of dah U-ni-ted States.*"

Jim wasn't about to let his wife go on without putting in his two cents. After the War of Northern Aggression, leaving America for Brazil meant that thousands of Confederates could survive with honor, something in small supply to Southerners at the time. "*It's even in Gone Wit Dah Wind, by golly, dhat book dhat Margarit Mitchell writ about dah wahr. Didja even know dhat dah O'Hara fam'ly thought of leavin' Tara fer Brasil? It's right dhare in dhat buk o' hers. She mentions it twhice. Ju-di-tha has it insihde,*" Jim said, chin and forehead down, peering over the top of those black-frame glasses.

With Mrs. MacKnight on a swing now, Judith filled up my glass with more ice tea, which she proudly called "*sun tea, brew'd rhight here on dis ver-an-dah.*" Judith disappeared into the kitchen and reappeared with a plate of neatly cut triangles of white-bread toast with the crusts cut off and topped with whisked dabs of soft white goat cheese. As we munched on the canapés, I found myself alternatively charmed and baffled, thinking I had stumbled upon a long-lost battalion of Confederate soldiers who never quite figured out that Appomattox was more than just a town in Virginia.

We visited for another hour or so, laughing, trading stories, talking about Jimmy Carter (their idol, who in several months was to lose to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 Presidential election). When I mentioned Reagan, Jim laughed and slapped his right knee. Judith laughed too, but seemed more concerned with her mother, who by now had dozed off on the swing. Jim flung forth a string of hard-to-follow invectives, neatly wrapped up with a phrase that, if I wasn't mistaken, ended with, "*Dhat dohg don't hunt!*"

"Dog?" I asked

"*What dohg?*" Jim inquired.

"The one that don't hunt," I said.

"*Oh, dhat dohg!*" he exclaimed, pleased as punch. "*Dhat's an expreshon mah granpappy yoused to youse all dah time. Ray-gun for Pres-i-dent? What's wrong wit you A-mer-i-cans? An actah for Pres-i-dent? Now, howze an actor gonna be Pres-i-dent? Ain't dhat a good one!*" Jim shook his head, joined in by Judith who smiled as much at her husband as at the subject at hand.



Americana resident Jim Jones stands with then-Georgia Governor Jimmy

Carter alongside a commemorative monument at the Americana cemetery. Carter made the visit in 1972. Notice the Confederate insignia and names of the original ninety-four settlers of Americana etched in the based on the monument. (Photographer unknown)

When I pointed out that Reagan had been governor of California, all Jim could do was smirk, bobbing his head up and down. "*Whad whas it dhat I read 'bout Cal-e-forn-e-ah? I read it just dah othah deh. Dhat Cal-e-forn-e-ah is dah land a fruits 'n nuts? Dhat's it. Dah land a fruits 'n nuts. So, mah-be dhem Cal-e-forn-e-ahns, dhey deserve a guvnur like Ray-gun!*"

To which Jim again slapped his hand on his knee, and he and Judith broke out in a gale of laughter.

Then, as though Jim himself had been the brunt of too many jokes and wanted to lay them all to rest, he moved onto another Californian, this one, in Jim's mind, nearly as shady a character as Ronald Reagan. "*Now don't yaw go gittin' me confhused with dhat crazy Jim Jones,*" he said, referring to the cult leader who had led 1,000 followers to death in the South American nation of Guyana seven months earlier. "*I got nutin tah do whit dat fellah. Nutin. He was no relachon to mah kin. How culd he be? He was a Yan-key!*" Which led to more guffaws and general knee-slapping all around.

As the three of us recovered from Jim's latest observation, I wanted to ask him and Judith about something that had been on my mind all afternoon: Where were all the Confederates buried? There had to be a Confederate cemetery in Americana since the American Southerners had been Protestants and the Brazilians, by and large, were all Catholics. And woe be it to any Catholic who might even consider burying a Protestant in a Catholic cemetery. That just isn't done, in Brazil and in most parts of America. So where were all the Confederates buried? I asked.

In unison, Jim and Judith looked at each other, then at the same moment, they nodded their heads. Judith said we'd better hurry or we'd never be able to get to the *campo* before sundown.

By this time, Mrs. MacKnight was snoring ever so lightly, her head resting against a bolster Judith had kindly placed between the wooden

arm of the swing and a cushion. Judith gently awakened Mrs. MacKnight, and in a minute or so, she slowly rose, steadying herself precariously with a black cane in her knobby right hand, holding onto Judith's elbow for support with the other hand. "*She gits awful turd 'bout dhis time a dey,*" Judith announced to no one as the two padded side-by-side into the house.

Judith made her way back to the veranda and the three of us got into a boxy, mud-splattered white Ford, with Jim driving, Judith in the passenger seat and me in the back. Jim drove out to the city limits, then to the outskirts of a nearby town, Santa Barbara d'Oeste, and soon we were passing fields of tall, green stalks. I knew they weren't cotton, so I asked what kind of plants they were. "*Dhem dare's shu-gah cane. Dhat's what it all is fer as fahr yaw cahn see,*" Jim said, looking pleased in the rearview mirror, bobbing his head, those black-frame glasses going up and down on the bridge of his nose.

My question must have roused Judith, who started talking up a storm about when she went to the United States for the first time, and how she felt like she had just about gone to heaven. "*Dees were mah re-lay-chons, but I'd nevah met 'em before, and nevah really thought dhat I'd evah git to meet 'em, and dhere dhey we all were, all con-versin' like I 'ad just come in from dah parla to git outta dah aftahnoon sun. Mah, was it evah sum-in!*"

We talked more, our voices rising and falling as the Ford hit one pothole after another on the hot, baked brown-orange clay road under us. Jim was probably driving faster than he should have been, and as he sped to beat the sunset, little tornados of russet dust swirled up behind the car.

We took the first left, then the third right, then jogged around some more potholes. I forgot to follow the rest of the turns, but I did keep my eyes on the Ford's odometer, and after eleven miles, as the sun was about to dip below the Southern horizon, we reached our destination — a strange, forgotten cemetery.

Judith, Jim and I quickly got out and walked among the graves. The inscriptions were all in English. Many of the headstones were cracked and crooked, pushed into the ground at odd, acute angles, which with the crepuscular sun sinking fast, gave the place a Wes Craven kind of air.

As we tiptoed our way between two aboveground plots — to our right was Gibson Harris and to our left, his sister, Maglin Harris — I suddenly felt a distinct body of air descend upon us, from exactly where I wasn't certain. Abruptly the mass of air turned hot and fetid, as though the three of us had just stepped into an invisible heat box between the tombs of Gibson and Maglin Harris. It gave me goose bumps, and I found myself shivering, even though I was sweating profusely. My arms turned clammy and beads of sweat popped up on my forehead. I knew Southerners called such experiences "haints" or "hot steams," when ghosts or spirits want to make their presence known. I stopped with Jim and Judith a five full strides ahead of me, but they also must have felt the same sudden hike in temperature. And the smell — how could they not notice the smell? The odor was unmistakable — something in the very process of decaying. I didn't want to think about what it could possibly be.

Within seconds, inexplicably, the air returned to the same pleasant late-afternoon temperature and the disagreeable smell ceased. The smell of gardenias and wisteria blossoms, which had floated alongside the other graves, came back. I didn't say anything to Jim or Judith, although I knew the heavy, fetid air had hardly been the result of my imagination.

Past the Harris plots, I noticed that several graves looked as though vandals had opened the burial vaults up and ransacked them. The engravings on some of the headstones (which, Judith, said totaled 440) were so faint they were barely legible.



Headstone of one of the 440 graves at the Americana cemetery. Wheelock, born in the U.S. in 1898, was a relatively late arrival to the Confederate outpost in Brazil. (Photo courtesy Stephen G. Bloom)

Judith led us onward; she now seemed to walk with a purpose, and soon I found out why. She was headed straight for the tomb of her father — Mrs. MacKnight's husband, John Calvin MacKnight, who died in 1932. While directing her comments to nobody but the assembled beneath us, Judith knelt down, and in a way that showed she had performed the same task many times, pulled at the errant weeds crowding the edges of her father's sepulcher.

"Yes, suh," Judith said, not bothering to look up at Jim or me. *"Dhis here is mah daddy. And raht next to 'im,"* she said, gently patting the soil, *"is where mamma's gonnah be buried. And dhen Jim and I, we'll be buried raht 'ere next to 'erh. It'nt dhat right, Jim Joe-ness?"* Jim nodded in a way that was as sweet as could be considering the subject at hand.

We sauntered back towards the Ford, each of us savoring the orange-streaked twilight sky, framing what Judith and Jim surely thought had to be sacred land. This time I felt no more haints, but then again, this time we didn't pass the Harris family plots.

At the entrance to the cemetery stood a sooty and weathered obelisk with ninety-six names engraved on its base — the original Confederate families who founded the Confederate colony 111 years earlier. Judith told me that the twelve-foot tower was a scaled-down replica of the obelisk at Confederate President Jefferson Davis's boyhood home back in Todd County, Kentucky.

We started our trip back to town, the sun now fully set, and Jim driving (did he have to go so fast?) all the while talking about this and that, Judith nodding and adding a bit or two when it came to finer points of history. All of a sudden Jim must have hit a deep pothole. All of us went flying inside the car, each of us bouncing straight upward, banging our heads against the ceiling.

"Sloooow down, cowboyh'," Judith advised her husband in a mock-stern kind of way. *"We got comp'ny, Jim Joe-ness. Yo'll raht back thare?"*

I answered affirmatively, but by then I had been transported to another world, transfixed as we sped past darkened silhouettes of sugarcane plants with elephantine drooping leaves that formed a canopy over the one-lane road bumpy as a washboard.

Back at their home, when I asked Jim about whether the Confederates had picked Brazil because the nation allowed slavery (Brazil didn't emancipate slaves until 1888), Jim leaned back in his wicker chair and said *"nigrahs"* weren't the reason the Confederates chose Brazil. I may or may not have gulped at the word, but Jim promptly said, *"Yaw don't take no of-fense to dhat word, nigrah, do yawh? We don't mean notin' by sayin' nigrah. It's how mah gran pappy used to call cah-lid folk. I know yawh don't use dah word, nigrah, but yawh can't blame us, can yaw? We nevah did live in dhe U-nit-ed States, remembah."*

Jim took a look at his wristwatch, and said he'd better drive me out to the bus station or I'd never be able to catch the last bus back to São Paulo that evening. Judith appeared back on the veranda and as we

prepared to go, she kissed me on both cheeks, as sure a Brazilian send-off as it gets. "*Yaw come back here, ana-thyme yaw want,*" she said.

We soon arrived at the bus station on Avenida Antônio Lobo. Jim let the engine run as he and I both got out. We faced each other and shook hands, but that didn't seem right, so we hugged the way Brazilian men do, in an *abraço*. "*Yaw come back and see us, Don't yaw forget, yaw hear. Yaw ain't no stranga here enah more. Yaw as close as fam'ly.*"

I wasn't sure about the family part, but I didn't doubt for a second Jim's heartfelt sincerity. For a young man alternatively energized and estranged by the novelty and intensity of Brazilian life, Jim and Judith Jones (could they possibly have had more American names?) had served as impromptu guideposts to this new home I had chosen for myself. In the United States, the three of us certainly would have had little, if anything, in common. Why, then, had Jim and Judith taken me in so completely? They'd been as gracious as could possibly be, certainly more than most Americans would ever have been to a stranger who knocked on their door unannounced. Was it Southern hospitality, carried forth through generations? Or was it because my visit had allowed them to reminisce, to connect with what their ancestors once had been — Americans?

I came to realize that the reason Jim and Judith had so welcomed me — besides the fact that they were genuinely cordial and probably a touch lonely — was that, in some strange way, they needed me. They reveled in their Confederate American-ness and needed to share it whenever they had the opportunity.

In that sense, the Joneses and I were polar opposites. From the moment I had stepped off my Pan Am jet at Guarulhos Airport in São Paulo, I had tried as hard as I could to blend into Brazil. When someone on the street would ask me for the time or for directions, when a street vendor tried to sell me tube socks or a box of Omo detergent, I felt a sense of satisfaction: I hadn't been made. My attempt to blend in had succeeded.

But the Joneses *wanted* to stick out; they were proud to do so. In a land of beige, black and brown people with all shades in between, Jim and Judith prided themselves on their fair features, their white skin, their blue eyes. That they took great pains to preserve their arcane Southern

dialect was proof that they had little interest in diluting their Gone-with-the-Wind culture. On paper, Jim and Judith were 100-percent Brazilian, born and raised, but they had little interest in becoming Brazilian like everyone else.

On the other hand, I was doing my best to shelve my identity, striving to learn, live, and be subsumed into a wholly different culture. I wanted in the worst way to become a writer and I had chosen newspapers as the entry point to that profession. Even back in 1979, way before the Internet, the newspaper industry in America had begun its inexorable nosedive. When a start-up newspaper in Brazil offered me the promise of a real job, I bought myself a one-way plane ticket from New York to São Paulo, fastened my seatbelt and didn't look back. Like the Confederate expatriates before me, I had fled the country of my birth, abandoning the nation that hundreds of millions have dreamt of embracing. Like the Confederates, I had chosen to live in a foreign country, struggling to acquire a language with impossible rules of grammar and pronunciation.

Then a wild sci-fi epiphany overtook me. If I ended up staying in Brazil, living out the rest of my life here — marrying, having children, eventually dying in this new homeland of mine — could my encounter with Judith and Jim Jones somehow become a harbinger of what a stranger in a hundred years might find if he happened onto my descendants, as I had happened onto the Joneses? Could the Joneses be the equivalent of my own children or grandchildren or subsequent generations, talking to a stranger about how long, long ago, their ancestor from California had left America for the shores of vast and bountiful Brazil?

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As it turned out, I stayed in Brazil for almost three years. My initial thoughts of replicating the lives of Jim and Judith Jones and their ancestors didn't pan out. I returned to the United States for a series of newspaper jobs before turning to teaching and writing books.

Some stories stay with you, most do not. Americana has always been among my favorites. Jim and Judith Jones and the Confederate colony is a story I never forgot.

I returned to Americana three times, in 1981, 1984 and again in 2001. During my last visit, I learned that Jim had died in 1986, as had his mother-in law, Elizabeth MacKnight, at age 106. The Jones' son, whose improbable name is Allison, told me then that Judith was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He asked me not to disturb her. "Let her rest," he said.

Recently, I searched the Internet for anything on Judith Jones and the last mention I could find was from 2007, which indicated she was ninety at the time and had lost all her memory, as well as her ability to speak.

As for the community of Confederate descendants, there are few, if any, left in Americana. After six generations, they have finally been absorbed into the country to which they emigrated. There is nothing left of them, with one exception: Down a dusty road still lies the cemetery, where Jim Jones is buried next to his mother-in-law, Mrs. MacKnight.

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