



Salter:Book Festival success was typical day at Mississippi Capitol

Sid Salter 5:52 p.m. CDT August 26, 2015



(Photo: Special to The Clarion-Ledger)

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The inaugural Mississippi Book Festival was an unqualified success — one that surpassed the rudimentary shade tree estimates of just how many Mississippians would sacrifice an extremely hot Saturday to attend an outdoor festival for the purpose of celebrating reading, writing and the state's impressive literary accomplishments of past and current authors.

As it turned out, more than 3,000 people braved the summer sun and sweltering heat outside the Mississippi Capitol and crowded conditions that produced standing-room-only crowds for seminars inside the building — and the event got off to a marvelous start.

The star power of having the festival opened by Mississippi author John Grisham and the state's political leadership helped draw a crowd, but the event quickly took on a peculiarly Mississippi tone.

The pre-event entertainment was provided by the massive Jackson State University "Sonic Boom of the South" marching band complete with dancers and a dominant percussion section. That action took place on the south steps of the Capitol and in front of the Women of the Confederacy monument dedicated in 1912 to the to honor the wives, daughters, sisters and mothers of Confederate soldiers.

Hanging around the general area of that monument were a couple of apparent devotees of the Confederate battle flag in general and the current Mississippi state flag in particular. In the days prior to the festival, Grisham had led a coalition of Mississippians in placing full-page newspaper ads urging the adoption of a new state flag design that deleted Confederate vestiges.

And while the scene had the potential to resemble the final scene of the film version of Grisham's first novel, "A Time to Kill," the event's decorum was never impacted in the least by all those potentially discordant elements. The band pulsed and grooved, the flaggers flagged, Grisham was eloquent and the politicians were mercifully brief and focused.

In other words, it was a typical Mississippi affair — full of pageantry, sweat, color, and the occasional twinge of danger and doubt. The names of Mississippi's literary giants — William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Willie Morris, Richard Wright, Grisham and so many others — were invoked.

And the works of so many contemporary Mississippi authors — Michael Kardos, Michael Vinson Williams, Ralph Eubanks, Aram Goudsouzian, Michael Farris Smith, Lisa Howorth, Billy Watkins and so many others — were celebrated.

Grisham delighted the crowd by sharing his memories of his days as a back-bench state representative from DeSoto County toiling in anonymity at the Capitol with neither power nor influence — and using his spare time there to write much of the prose of his

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Aug 26, 2015

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first two novels. The story was funny but funnier still to those of us who remember the truth in it.

One favorite moment of the festival came not during the organized programs but in a chance encounter on the second floor of the Capitol with an old and respected friend. State Rep. Percy Watson — the distinguished legislator from Hattiesburg and a Phi Beta Kappa key holder to boot — has served the people of Mississippi in the Legislature since 1980.

He was a trailblazer among African-American lawmakers to rise to hold substantial committee chairmanships — chairing both the House Judiciary A and the powerful House Ways and Means Committee. Rep. Watson's tenure coincided with my days writing about the Legislature.

"I've never seen anything quite like this here," Watson told me, clearly impressed and pleased at the festival's turnout. Rep. Watson was right. People of all races and political affiliations were filling the Capitol together and doing so with joy and peace in their hearts.

Here's hoping the inaugural Mississippi Book Festival is the first of many such events.

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