

## ***Ellore: A Vision of the Day After Peak Oil***

*By Susannah Eanes*

One weekend last fall I was honored to be asked to help out at the annual Archaeology Society of South Carolina Field Days, held at Santee State Park, near the I-95 exit. This is an assemblage not only of archaeologists, scientists, and researchers, but also of modern-day primitive practitioners who demonstrate the very life skills the scientists write about, the researchers explore, and evidence of which the archaeologists dig up and catalogue right there in front of you. It is a unique event where children and their parents and other visitors can literally help to dig up, screen and examine point flakes and bits of pottery on one side of the park, and a short distance away, actually view and take part in the making of such objects along with a skilled demonstrator. There were also stations with crayons and coloring books, a video tent (showing excavations around the state and interviews with those involved), a gaming area where one can learn to toss spears and blow darts with the best of them, as well as opportunities to buy books, tee shirts, mugs, research papers, and also to sign up to attend one of the excellent university programs, volunteer opportunities, and other events this state has to offer in the field of self-examination of our own origins. The organization is duly supported and populated by its share of wealthy patrons predominantly residing on the coast, whose agenda of course includes environmental activism and historic preservation, worthy causes all. Fascinating, especially when you consider the outsider's view of our measly Carolina existence, as evidenced by stereotypical presentations of the southern lifestyle on television and in the news media. I'll refrain from listing current examples of such uneducated, ethnocentric idiocy (I'm sure you can find plenty yourself, should you really need to), but I am actually a bit grateful for a recent slap in the face from someone I'd otherwise considered pretty knowledgeable on the subject of the down sliding of development trends into the murky waters of greed, deceit and overall tackiness.

Sometimes we all need a wake-up call.

Last year I felt inclined to start a blog, but without a clear focus as to what I would write about. Up to now that blog, simply entitled "*a bit of earth*," has showcased my expressed desire to talk about America's changing land use patterns, but with no clear purpose or direction as to how to talk about them. However, after the aforementioned slap, and the run of the weekend's experiences, I think I've figured it out.

As a career land use planner, it has been my habit for at least the past 15 years to mentally analyze every settlement, small town, or rural habitat I've come across. As I approach such an area, I look for evidence of the inhabitants in such visible cues as signage, pedestrian paths, and architecture. Sometimes I can see obvious caretaking such as fresh paint, colorfully vegetated vistas, and numerous happy, or at least contentedly pre-occupied, people. Sometimes the evidence is not so obvious.

On the way home after the last evening of Archaeology Field Weekend, my husband, the archaeologist, took me through a by-way he said he'd long wanted to show me. It was the tiny town of Ellore, "where agriculture is alive and well in South

Carolina, thank you.” According to him the downtown used to be a desolate, angry place with only one claim to fame: Duke’s Barbecue. He was devastated to discover that Duke’s has been replaced by a Chinese take-out place. I was delighted to discover that the visual evidence supports the conclusion that it is recently a recipient of federal Main Street improvement program funding. A planted median divides Main Street, and sidewalks and seating follow either side. Even at the relatively late hour there were plenty of people out, all walking about with apparent errands on their minds. From the visual evidence, the predominant income level seemed to be less than 20K per year, and probably averaged about half of that. Also, I saw few white faces. Several folks hung about the doorways of this or that eatery or bar, talking together or not, but none of the angry desolation he’d described from driving thru in former years was at all visible. We drove up and down the main quarter, and then retraced our steps back to the intersection with our homeward road. From the clever look on his face, my husband seemed to be holding some happy bit of news to himself –and then he pointed out his secret: there, around the corner about a block off of Main Street, was a small converted wooden livery stable, the words, “Ellore Farm Museum” painted neatly beside the door in big red letters. So the people were smart, too, and proud of who and what they are. This was all very gratifying.

We drove north the short distance out of town, the landscaped yards bordering graceful, slightly shabby early-19th century edifices of the old money-wealth now occupied by silent, single daughters or perhaps a similarly small remnant of the family. None seemed empty yet. Here and there were a very few new brick homes in the populist architecture that claims its roots in sprawlvisions. At least here, scattered among the older abodes they didn’t seem quite so slick and ugly as they usually do to my mind, but maybe that was the fault of the waning light. As I looked ahead and beyond the yards, there seemed to be a ghostly glow surrounding this north end of town. Hubby started pointing, “Look, look…” and lo and behold, I then beheld the source of this town’s continued existence: exorbitant, expansive, effusively verdant fields of cotton. The scent of defoliant teased our nostrils and we slowed to watch the harvester crawling among the plants, to count the truckloads of what had already been baled, to smile at the workers waving and directing each other there under the rising moon.

A field of mature cotton in moonlight is an awesome thing; its beauty literally takes your breath away. It looks like a coverlet of snowy ermine interspersed with intricate blackwork and bordered and interlaced with the tracery of thick rows of dark trees. The plants follow the curvature of the earth, and are rimmed and intersected by undisturbed areas which follow the local hydrography. While the rows can stretch for what seem like miles, they are carefully planted only in the adaptable soils, common sense prevailing and avoiding the myriad streams and wetlands that embroider and criss-cross like unto a quilt. While we can regret the fact that the fields are not planted (yet) organically, the fact is that it is still quite labor-intensive, although not nearly so much as even twenty years ago. Many south Carolinians –black and white –even my age (mid-forties) have told me that they remember earning money in their teenage years picking cotton. We are grateful for the fact that crop rotation and no-till methods prevail, and we know that after the harvest, the dross will be sown in peanuts or soybeans, followed by

corn or perhaps rye or winter wheat, and the cycle will continue at least into the foreseeable future, as long as people wear clothes, use hospitals, and write on paper.

So. What will we do when the oil runs out? We will adapt, and move on. As humans, that is what we do –best, I might add. Here in the hinterlands, far from the rot and waste of the urban landscape, little will change. It is what is, and will be. As I said, not too long ago harvesting and planting was done by hand. It is still in recent memory.

Work, in the end, is a prayer, or so says the eastern mystic, Baha' u'llah. I think this is an apt observation. Prayer goes a long way in negating the need for therapy. Work negates the need for expensive exercise programs. Books, conversation, handwork, and games all negate the need for television and other forms of electronic stimulation. The occupations of our minds and hands from previous days indicate that we already know this. We look forward to celebrating the fruits of honest labors: the candles that our friends made of deer tallow and beeswax light our path, we keep clean with the soap that we barter for sewing with other friends and neighbors, woolen garments ranging from the decades-old lovelies Jason brought back from Ireland to the scarves, shawls and caps amazingly crafted by Rachael from her own drop-spindle and knitting needles. Too, the doe in the freezer will be (among other things) Christmas dinner, through the winter we will dine on the turkeys from our woods and the chickens from the lower pasture, the pecans from the grove, jam from the grapes from the arbor, fat Carolina road-stand peaches canned along with sweet memories from warmer days, sauce from the tomatoes that still abound in the greenhouse. Rosemary, oregano, mint, and thyme hang drying in the herbary. From our field-roving hens we still collect at least a few eggs every other day, even as the days grow shorter and darker. Winter sets in, and our activities lessen. It is time for rest, relaxation, contemplation, the enjoyment of the fruits of warm weather labors, and we will reflect and write about whatever comes to mind, as we await the turning of the seasons and the arrival of spring, when the cycle begins all over again.

So I think henceforth, my blog will catalog evidence of the fact that we are already ready for the future. In fact, we welcome it. We are thankful for what federal and private funds enable small localities to spruce up their appearance, but by and large, I see no evidence that any of these places are dependent upon the hand-outs, or upon the oil economy. They have a vitality complete unto themselves. Many are too poor to have partaken of the glut of wealth from the past two decades. And still they flourish, in the simple, honest, and steadfast ways evidenced by time to be most enduring. Fruit of the earth and the work of human hands. I see it much too often, and so instead of bemoaning the twilight of a bloated existence, I am singing and dancing. I am praising it to the skies, and my children and friends with me. Amen.

Even so come, Lord Jesus.