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Charles C. Benton

## Oak Alley

On the Mississippi River just north of New Orleans lies an extraordinary place. Rounding a corner on the Woot River Road you encounter an alley of live oaks planted around 1690 by an anonymous French settler. Today it is as though a sorcerer gathered the most ancient trees in the Louisiana countryside and aligned them in twin rows eighty feet apart, their intertwining limbs forming an immense canopy that shelters the grassy field below. This leafy tunnel runs three hundred yards from the river's levee to Bon Séjour, a Louisiana Classic-style plantation house built in 1832 to replace the original settler's cottage. The building, sited snugly to the earth, its lines softened by shaded verandas, provides a subtle counterpoint to the arboreal splendor of the oaks.

Many visitors to Oak Alley sit below the oaks to share a small meal feeling, I imagine, like the relaxed subjects of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Oak Alley comforts their senses in many ways. The air carries the delta's heady per-



fume of five parts blossom and one part decay. The bird songs and the whisper of leaves serenade the ears. The grass field provides a soft carpet; gentle breezes cool the skin. The great trees provide a sea of shade protecting everything — you, the immense lawn, the veranda, the house interior — from Louisiana's relentless sun. And this shading produces the light and shadow that mesmerize at Oak Alley.

The nineteenth-century Georgian poet Sidney Lanier described the light in a similar oak grove as “Beautiful glooms, soft dusks in the noonday fire.”<sup>1</sup> A hundred years later the light below several

acres of living canopy remains every bit as alluring. At Oak Alley each leaf, each blade of grass, is a spectral filter, transmitting and reflecting the green wavelengths to produce a diffuse, lush, almost ethereal ambient light. Small gaps between leaves cast countless penumbræ — tiny, soft-edged patches of luminance falling vaguely between sun and shadow — to provide a subtle overlay of dappled light.

Occasionally there are larger openings in the canopy. Here, if thunderclouds permit, coherent sunbeams provide bright shafts of light as benign reminders of the forces that rail beyond. The bal-

ance of diffuse light, dapple and sunlight is delightfully animated by movements of sun, patterns of cloud and the fluttering of a million leaves. All in all the effect is breathtaking. As the day winds down, shadows lengthen until the sun finally slips below the oaks, flooding the alley in a brief display of subdued golden light. Even as dusk gathers strength and the oaks fade into night, the memory of this light makes Oak Alley a difficult place to leave. ●

### Note

1. Excerpt quoted in Wayne Andrews, *The Pride of the South* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 110.

Photo by Charles C. Benton.