



**Clifford Blake, Sr.**

**Cotton Compress Caller and Storyteller**

Clifford Blake's experience with the cotton press began in 1927, two years after his father's death. Blake wanted to help his mother rear the family and keep his sisters from "having to rock white folks' babies." Mr. Mack Hyams offered him a job "totin' dinners" for the workers at the American Compress Company. While working at this job, Mr. Blake frequently used the line, "Cornbread for your husband, and biscuits for your man," which would later become the title of his album. This phrase is common to many blues phrases, as it relates to food and infidelity.

Blake began working at the American Compress Company at a young age "calling the press." Cotton was loosely wrapped into 500-pound bales which were then hauled to "presses" and compressed into concrete-like blocks roughly a quarter the original size. According to Blake, "calling the press" made the men work faster. He said, "You press fifty bales more an hour when you[re] calling the press."

Blake relied on a call and response pattern, sometimes "hollering" a spiritual and at other times a blues lyric. Blake would keep everyone on task by hollering out specific orders. For example, he would first tell the leverman "Let her fall, let her fall." Then he would tell the men to hurry up and bring the compressed bale up and kick it out of the machine. Even his line "sun is almost down, sun is almost down, Captain" shows how Blake worked to constantly hurry the press workers.

Besides keeping the men in line, Blake was also a boilerman. His job at the cotton press almost became fatal on February 14, 1967, when he lost his footing while riding the press, and the machine crushed his leg. Even though this ended his career, Blake believed that God gave him the power to call the press, as he said, "God gave me a gift...to make it."

Blake is well known for his field hollers and folk tales, and he has participated in many festivals, sharing his stories and songs. He was in the 1984 World's Fair and the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival. The Louisiana Folklife Center recorded Blake calling the cotton press and produced an album entitled, *Cornbread for Your Husband, Biscuits for Your Man*.

The album includes titles such as “Brer Rabbit and the Babies,” “A Cardcutter and a Hoodoo,” and “You Groan to Fool the Devil.” Because of his talent and the preservation of his culture, Blake was inducted in the Louisiana Folklife Center’s Hall of Master Folk Artist in 1981.

Researched and rewritten by Samantha Sullivan.

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