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PENN SCHOOL ON ST. HELENA ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA

In the light of trends in modern social experimentation Penn School on one of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina assumes a position of major importance. For the past seventy years the people of this and surrounding islands have been subject to one form of social suasion or another.

As early as the year 1862 the federal government began its first experiment in rural rehabilitation. On January 15, 1862, General Sherman applied for authority to supervise agriculture and education within the area under his jurisdiction. He wrote: "For the future maintenance of these people, some system must be established - one which will permit them to sustain themselves; but before they can be left entirely to their own government they must be trained and instructed into a knowledge of personal responsibility - which will be a matter of time. I have therefore the honor to recommend that suitable instructors be sent to them to teach them all the necessary rudiments of civilization, and secondly, that in the meantime agents properly qualified be employed and sent here to take charge of plantations and superintend the work of the blacks until they are sufficiently enlightened to think and provide for

themselves ..... I can see no other way to lay a groundwork for future usefulness with this unfortunate class of people."

As there were large quantities of contraband cotton on the islands the administration of the area was turned over to the Treasury Department before any action could be taken on General Sherman's petition to the War Department. But Secretary Chase of the Treasury had in mind a somewhat similar plan through which he hoped to determine the capabilities of the Negro.

The Treasury Department chose Edward L. Pierce, a young Boston attorney, as administrator of the experiment. After a visit to the islands he recommended that the Department reject the proposal of the cotton agents, which involved the leasing of the plantations and the people on them to the highest bidder. He proposed instead the employment of plantation supervisors who would manage the cultivation of crops but whose chief task was "to promote the moral and intellectual culture of the wards" and "to prepare them for useful and worthy citizenship." A standard wage was to be paid for labor, the amount to be determined by the profits resulting from the operation of the plantations. He proposed to pay rations plus 40 cents a day.

On March 9, 1862, Pierce took up his duties on St. Helena Island, arriving with forty-one men and twelve women as superintendents and teachers, each with a certificate of appointment from the Department of the Treasury. Out of the first fourteen of these appointed, the youngest was twenty years old, and nine were under thirty. They were for the most part well educated but lacked a knowledge of the Negro and were totally ignorant of plantation conditions.

Added to their lack of understanding was the pressing need for immediate action due to the advanced season and the antagonism of the Negroes resulting from unfair practices by the cotton agents. Against these overwhelming odds, in many instances, a superintendent and a single teacher attempted to direct the economic and cultural lives of as many as five hundred Negroes. Since emancipation had not yet been proclaimed, these people were still technically in slavery, though under federal control of the island the question of their ownership was vague.

The Negroes refused to plant cotton but were willing enough to work their own plots of corn and rice. Cotton cultivation was paid for on a wage basis and the people were not used to such a system. They had been in the habit of receiving food, clothing, implements, and seed from their owners, and little except seed was forthcoming from their new "masters." The Treasury had scant funds for these essentials and Congress was slow to act. When the money did arrive, Pierce in his effort to control the spending of his wards paid them on the average but one dollar per acre for listing, planting, and hoeing cotton. Even the most "uncivilized" of the lot realized that this was a meager return for so much work.

The final breakdown came when Major-General David Hunter ordered all able-bodied Negroes from eighteen to forty-five to appear for war service. Pierce objected but was able to do little for the people in whom he was truly interested.

In June, 1862, less than six months from its beginning, the "experiment" was taken over by the War Department. Pierce was offered a place on the staff but refused. In November the War Department divided the plantations into small plots based on the size of each family. These

plots were rented without charge unless the family refused to raise cotton, in which case they were required to pay not more than $2 per month. Paradoxically, sixty-six years later some of these same people are being paid to limit production of this commodity.

The last backward step in this early farm adjustment administration was the leasing of the plantations to private individuals. The War Department continued to exercise a certain amount of supervision over the planters to protect the people from excessive exploitation, but the "experiment," begun so nobly a little more than a year before, quietly passed from existence.

The Schools

Although education and agriculture were constantly associated in reports and plans, no effort seems to have been made to unite them in practice. Superintendents learned the rudiments of existing methods of crop production as quickly as possible, while teachers introduced the pedagogy they brought with them from the North. Orthodox education blinded them to the special needs of a people whose lives were circumscribed by the demands of planting, hoeing, and harvesting cotton, corn, and rice; whose only pleasures were praise-house meetings and periodic changes in marital status. Praise houses were encouraged and additional religious influence was introduced through the organized church to combat the evils of promiscuity. The triumvirate of school, church, and farm supervision all strove to accomplish something for the good of the people, yet, with the possible exception of a certain common interest between school and church, there was no unity of effort.

The land sales of 1863-70 absolved the government of the re-

sponsibility for the production of crops; plantation superintendents were dropped. There still remained the pressing need for cultural and religious education. Since these services were paid for by the Port Royal Relief Committee, a Philadelphia society, schools were maintained, the most notable among them the Penn School which has had a picturesque history for nearly seventy-five years.

With emancipation came county support of education. But Penn School continued as a private institution, supported by private donations and northern philanthropy, particularly the Philadelphia society. On the elementary level it operated for the benefit of the people living in the immediate neighborhood. These children undoubtedly received an education superior to that of the pupils in outlying communities, but the chief contribution of Penn was the preparation of teachers for these more remote schools. The methods adopted were those universally accepted by the best school of the north - a carefully prepared list of questions from former board examinations was used to facilitate the "cramming" of potential teachers with abstract knowledge. The result is self-evident. Curriculum development established on the sound principles of the needs of a people was subordinated to the demands of purely arbitrary criteria of what constitutes education.

Miss Towne and Miss Murray, who operated Penn School, can not be blamed for the condition which prevailed until 1905. They had no control over the requirements for qualification of teachers set up by local governments; their missionary heritage tended to throw economic responsibility to northern supporters, and the people themselves were considered to be much more capable in the operation of farms than the teachers. There was

also the gigantic task of building up literacy among the many thousand totally ignorant ex-slaves. This more than anything else tended to becloud the main issue - that of educating for making a living and for enjoying a living on the soil.

The year 1905 marks the beginning of the modern phase in the life of Penn School and of the people it serves. One day in February, 1905, Miss Rossa Cooley and Miss Grace House, imbued with the ideals set forth at Hampton, found themselves in charge of a school consisting of an old frame building built in 1862 and sixty acres of abandoned cotton land. The energy which had previously been expended in book learning - the memorizing of long lists of dates, recitations on the theory and practice of teaching, and the working of examples in cube root - was soon directed into channels more vital to the lives of the people. Abandoned cotton fields began to grow cow peas and corn; crop rotation became the school slogan. Land that begrudged more than ten bushels of corn to the acre was gradually improved to produce twenty or thirty. In late years this same land had made the remarkable total of sixty bushels.

It was no easy task, this teaching a farming people how to farm. They had tilled the soil for countless generations; what could a school add to their planting lore? In addition, schools, as they understood them, were for "book learning." The ability to read and write was felt to be the touchstone that would lift them from hovel to plantation house.

Practical subjects were introduced gradually, and the theory of farming was carefully synchronized with actual farm practice in the field. It was not enough to learn from a book that selection of seed was an important factor in the yield of the crop. These students had actually to select

the seed, test, then plant it, and eventually harvest the crop. As an object lesson to obstinate adults these experimental plots were set up along main roads leading to the school.

Shop work became as important a phase of this new school as work in the fields. To prepare the soil for planting required a plow in good repair; to harvest the crop required a wagon with four good wheels and a harness that would keep mule and conveyance together. Let it not be supposed that academic work suffered from this intrusion of practical subjects. English found its subject matter in monographs on the production of various kinds of crops, and as nice a problem in geometry as could be wished for was to be found in the fitting of spokes to a wheel.

Although the school emphasized the rotation of crops and the dangers of a one-crop system, comparatively little progress was made in supplanting cotton until the advent of the boll weevil in 1918. As long as Sea Islands had a monopoly on long staple cotton, no one was interested in anything else. With comparatively little labor a fair crop could be raised which was saleable at a premium over the rest of the market. Life was a fairly simple affair. Cotton produced enough for taxes and necessities, the woods supplied small game, and the rivers and sea teemed with sea food. Penn School's first real problem came with the boll weevil.

One can imagine the complete chaos that prevailed subsequent to the arrival of the weevil. Almost 100 per cent of the farms raised cotton as a major crop. Certainly every farmer depended upon the staple for his cash income. The complete destruction of the crop when the weevil struck brought hard times, but no one believed that cotton would not be the chief staple the next year. It took the weevil, viciously active year after year,

to prove that cotton would never again be indisputable king of southern farms.

The campaign for crop diversification conducted by Penn since the early years of the century, along with a practical course in home economics that emphasized the preservation of food stuffs, had much to do with easing the shock of the total destruction of their one money-crop. The development of the oyster canning industry furnished a cash income for many during the transition from a money to a subsistence economy.

T. J. Woofter, Jr., in writing of St. Helena Island just before the late depression, says: "There are now four distinct categories of bread-winners: first, a small group of about eighty-five families who put their major emphasis on the cultivation of the land. Even this group, however, derives almost as much of its income from outside wages as it does from cultivation of the land. This includes seven per cent of all families. Second, is a large group of about six hundred, whose attention is divided between farming and wage earning....Their outside earnings are slightly more than the proceeds from the cultivation of the soil. This includes fifty per cent of all families. Third is a group of about four hundred and fifty who place their major dependence on wages derived from work in oyster canneries or nearby truck farms. This includes thirty-seven per cent of all families. Fourth is a group of about fifty old people who.... are able to eke out an existence by gardening a little, by raising some poultry and pigs, picking up a dollar here and a dollar there..... and receiving sporadic remittances from children in the city."

Peculiarly enough, those individuals who devote the major portion

of their time to farming show the highest monetary return; those who farm for only a portion of their livelihood and depend upon seasonal labor for the remainder, expend, on the average, a larger proportion of their income for subsistence than those who farm exclusively.

The very factor that helped the people over the most trying year following the advent of the boll weevil has tended to retard agricultural rehabilitation. Oyster canning factories operate from November to April, and it is during this time that fall plowing and spring plowing take place. For this reason the farms are generally neglected, preference being given to the job offering the quickest return. It would seem then a highly questionable procedure to encourage the development of industries in a predominantly agricultural setting, for it is difficult to imagine any sort of business adjusting itself to the demands of the farm.

Penn School of 1935

The late depression shows promise of finally forcing the people into an agricultural economy. The adjustments made during the years 1920-30 have proved of little value. The one major industry (oyster canning factories) has closed down, throwing 37 per cent of all families into the relief class. The people, constituting 50 per cent of those whose outside earnings were slightly more than the produce from the soil, find themselves with insufficient food to support their families and no money to buy clothes or pay taxes. There is then a total of 87 per cent of the families on the island who are not able to support life without some outside assistance. And this amazing condition prevails in a strictly rural area of owners of land - not tenants or renters - who have been born and bred on the soil for at least ten generations.

For thirty years Penn School has urged upon these people the need for a self-sustaining economy. Approximately 1500 students have gone to the school and fourteen of the seventeen teachers at other island schools are Penn graduates. Thus, it may be supposed that one fourth the present population has been inoculated with Penn ideals through the classroom, while ninety to ninety-five per cent of all school children on the islands are receiving instruction embodying Penn School principles.

The right kind of propaganda is not the only service rendered by the school. Well equipped school shops are available to anyone. Here was seen a youngster of ten, a pair of farrier's tongs in one hand and a four-pound hammer in the other, forging a handle from half-inch bar iron. A tractor owned by the school will plow private ground for a fee payable in labor on the school farms. Six Jersey bulls are scattered throughout the various islands, all bred from the school's own herd, and available to all farmers. A cooperative society for buying and selling has been functioning for a number of years. There is even a loan association from which members can borrow from five to a hundred dollars. A school nurse takes care of minor ailments and teaches a class in midwifery, the success of which may be gauged by the fact that infant mortality on St. Helena Island is below the national average, irrespective of race. Counsel on a thousand different problems and advice on as many subjects are services performed by the school which defy measurement.

But the school has never been able to combat the trend, during prosperous times, away from the farm. Its graduates who should become the master farmers of the new generation seek employment in the cities and so leave the older and less enlightened group to perpetuate a decadent system.

The emigration of the younger adult population saps the strength of the community and decreases the birth rate. In 1900 the population was 8,819; in 1928 it had fallen to 4,785, a decrease of 54 per cent. At this rate, if selective emigration continues, there will come a time when the economically dependent will so far exceed the workers that the entire system will break. One can hardly expect this young group to remain unless (a) the school seeks to expand the cultural advantages of the islands on a more modern plane; (b) the people are taught to utilize more completely the natural resources at their disposal in order to conserve what little cash is available; (c) the useful life of the people is prolonged and a shift made in the placing of responsibility for the economic success of the family.

The elements which make up the total dissatisfactions necessary to bring about a break with the mode of living can be placed in three categories: 1) an intellectual capacity superior to the society in which one lives; 2) opportunity for greater monetary return in the outside world; 3) contact with another culture. Penn School is itself responsible for the first; it might effectively combat this situation by building up a vital organization around which its graduates could gather for mutual stimulation. The second can be met only through a growing conviction on the part of these young people that the handling of money is not the only criterion of good and full living.

Most important of all is the question of cultural contacts. The school has conducted a hands-off policy in everything except those things affecting the economic life of the people - agriculture, shop work, health, and sanitation. But the old culture of early war days still prevails. The older generation clings to its superstitions, its praise houses and its faith

in acts of a supreme being. The organized church perpetuates the primitive concepts of worship adapted by early missionaries to the needs of a backward people. Preachers in general are an uneducated and unenlightened group. It is not to be inferred that there never has been an intelligent minister on the islands, but those who come soon leave because of lack of support from the educated minority. One of the most amazing phenomena in the life of the people is the complete separation of intellectual and religious thought - technically trained college graduates pay lip service to an ignorant minister. In the face of these things, subtle influences of modern civilization are creeping in, causing an unrest hardly perceptible in the community itself, but clearly reflected in the general movement away from the islands.

The cities of Savannah and Charleston exert the greatest influence. Most of the young people use one of these two places as their "springboards" from which they take more distant jumps to New York and Atlanta. On occasion even those young people who remain on the island make trips to Savannah and are thus brought in contact with the outside world. These may lack the initiative to make a break with island life but are forever after conscious of a void in their mode of living.

A careful survey of the possibilities of utilizing the natural resources of the islands would do much to conserve wealth as well as give occupation to a large number during slack periods. A few examples will make this point clear. The vocational department of the school offers a course in shoe and harness making. Old worn-out shoes from second-hand dealers in New York supply the people with foot gear. All harnesses for the island are made from raw hides shipped to Charleston for tanning and

back again. In the first place, these hides can be tanned on the island - creating a new and very useful industry - and in the second, many hides which are now discarded might be tanned and utilized for new shoes or even put on the market for sale. Then there is the question of the best use of the land. Much is now abandoned and is growing up in slash pine. A few years of proper care would furnish an endless supply of cheap logs for a small portable mill, thus giving the people much needed lumber at practically no cost. The availability of lumber introduces another worthy enterprise - that of furniture making for home use. At present twenty-five women labor weekly piecing together quilts, the material for which comes in barrels from New York City. These are poor substitutes for hand-loomed blankets.

The weaving of cotton and woolen cloth by hand would provide labor for many old people who cannot farm efficiently. They in turn could exchange this for the surplus food stuffs grown by younger people. Second-hand clothes are obtained from the North, possibly cheaper than the actual value of any goods woven on the island, but these old people are doing nothing so their labor is worth no more than a living, which is now obtained from charity. A loom stands idle in the hall of the school.

Proponents of our modern industrial civilization will scoff at the suggestion of these archaic methods of meeting the needs of a people in the most highly industrialized nation of the world. There is but one reply: until this civilization from its bounteous wealth can supply the needs of these people who work as diligently as any others, it should be willing to permit them to learn to live without the benefits it so loudly proclaims.

The economic and cultural Utopia toward which Penn School has so diligently labored is still a dream of the distant future. One wonders why, after thirty years of effort, more has not been accomplished. And

yet one leaves the island with the firmly established conviction that the school has done everything in its power to further this end. Rather than being a fault of the school, the failure to succeed can be attributed to causes beyond its control.

Isolation and industrialism have been the chief deterrents to success. Until 1927, when a bridge was built, the islands were entirely cut off from the mainland. This retarded the infiltration of outside cultural influences to an extent hardly appreciated by a civilization familiar with the motor car. Some of these people lived within nine or ten miles of Beaufort, South Carolina, and yet had never seen a paved street, a train, nor a motion picture show - they remained in the ox cart days up to the immediate present. The marginal inhabitants who sought to adjust themselves to the requirements of the encroaching culture were eventually forced from the ranks of the old culture altogether. The resulting transition brought about factional disturbances that are present today - principally in the church.

In spite of a lack of contact with the modern world, industry has been a powerful negative influence to school policy. In the heyday of the islands, when long staple cotton brought a premium, an almost superhuman amount of persuasion was required to bring about crop diversification. After the fall of cotton, oyster canneries picked up the slack and with prosperous times, many moved to industrial areas where they were able to make enough to support themselves and their relatives on the island. With national prosperity came plenty, and a portion of this plenty overflowed to the islands. A second-hand plenty, to be sure, but old clothes and gifts from the city were enough to take the edge from initiative - life was hard but still too

easy to break century-old habits of makeshift living.

Through it all Penn School has carried on. The absence of discouragement among the faculty is worth a trip to the islands. Patience is the watchword of these teachers who have given their lives for a cause. Persistence and patience are only part of the virtues of Penn, however; there have also been realism and intelligence in trying to make the school a preparation for life and a vital force in the community.