Rural School Exploration
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The rural school exploration has already made one thing perfectly clear: sound education cannot grow in an unwholesome setting of farm life and rural economy. For the poorer whites and almost all the rural Negroes farm conditions in the South have been atrocious for generations. This situation, always bad, has been greatly aggravated by the depression and the crop reduction program.

The masses of rural workers in the South have never been farmers in any proper sense of the word. Two million families - eight and a half million persons - are merely attached to the soil as tenants or share croppers or otherwise dependent upon owners and bosses. This huge population includes three million Negroes - three fourths of all the colored farm population of the South - and nearly twice as great a number - five and a half million - of white workers.

The plantation system, which enslaved the Negroes before the Civil War, has continued to exploit both Negroes and the poorer whites ever since. Virtual peonage, which shows itself to some extent in the tobacco and sugar plantations, spreads like an evil poison over the whole of the great cotton industry. King Cotton has ruled the South for generations not as a benevolent despot but as a ruthless tyrant ravaging the lives of the peons and blighting the economy of the region.

The system is too well known to need detailed description. The owner works his land, whether it be a small farm or a huge plantation, by dependents who are variously known as tenants or share croppers. "Tenant"

is a general term which may be applied to all these dependents who live and work on other people's land and who repay the owner in kind through the crops grown. "Croppers" are a special subdivision of tenants at the very bottom of the scale to whom are furnished not only land and the shacks they live in but also the mules and other farming equipment including seed, and even their current food - pantry supplies - chiefly salt meat, corn bread, and molasses. The owner is entitled to a share - usually one half - of the produce in return for use of the land, and in addition must be repaid for his advances to the tenant family by part or all of that share of the cash crop which nominally belongs to the worker. The figures given in this bulletin do not include "renters," who pay for the use of the land on a fixed basis estimated in cash. Renters are, as a class, in a much more independent position.

According to the extensive studies of Dr. Rupert P. Vance, over seventy per cent of all farms in the South are worked by share tenants - that is, by persons who turn over to the land-owner a large part of the crops they raise. More than one third of the white tenant families throughout the South are "croppers" - that is, persons without farm animals or tools of their own; over half of the Negro tenants are in this lowest category. These workers and their families are in subjection to the owner, or in large plantations to his representatives or "bosses." The tenants have few rights and few interests in the plantation; the croppers still less. They take whatever "furnishings" in farm equipment and food the owner doles out to them; they grow what crops the owner directs; they accept his accounting of their financial obligations; they may be thrown off at his whim; they live under the orders of the owner or the boss.

The system even under fair management makes the tenants and their

families dependents rather than farmers. In actual practice the owner often insists that all furnishings be purchased at his store - at fancy prices plus exorbitant interest. The tenants are kept in constant debt by high charges and easy manipulation of accounts. These debts together with the pressure of traditional social custom render the workers bound to the soil and to the system. The insistence over huge areas of the South that payments be made in the single crop, cotton, is often carried to such an extreme that the tenant families grow not one item of any other produce, not even vegetables or any kind of fruits for their own tables, let alone chickens or cows which might so easily add to their proper nourishment. Thus in the midst of abundant land, farm workers have not been able to provide any of their own subsistence but have had to buy for cash or credit such meager and ill-balanced food and supplies as they obtain.

The system not only despoils the workers; it has proved ruinous as well to the owners and to the whole southern economy. The owner suffers almost as much as the tenants from the sloppy system of finance and production. Absence of subsistence crops means huge expenditures for food supplies that might just as well be grown on the spot. Devotion to a single crop has left the South at the mercy of fluctuations in the price of one commodity. In years of low cotton, farm mortgages are foreclosed, banks fail, the whole financial structure of the region totters. Cotton farming, southern style, in spite of crass exploitation of the laborers, is a colossal failure; it keeps a fertile and potentially rich region at the bottom of the economic scale.

Farm Economics Perverted by Race Feeling

The system, bad in itself, is made abominable by the racial situation. Although there are five and a half million white people in this

near peonage, the system takes its tone from the relationship of "boss and nigger." The rural Negro during slavery and since emancipation has no rights which the white man need respect or does respect. The set pattern both of race relations and of farm relations is that of masters and serfs. Because of his economic condition and because of his race, color, and previous condition of servitude, the Negro is helpless before the white master. Every kind of exploitation and abuse is permitted because of caste prejudice. The poor white connives in this abuse of the Negro; in fact, he is the chief protagonist of it.

This "boss and nigger" tradition, which has added gross corruption and cruelty to an economic order bad enough in itself, has carried over to treatment of the white tenants and croppers. Yet it has been impossible to bring about any change even to get the poor white workers to make a stand, since any movement for reform was immediately confused with the race issue. The white farm workers have fastened the chains of peonage upon themselves because of their blind prejudice against the Negro. The white peons have never realized - and the owners have been careful to see that they should never be allowed to realize - that the cause of white and colored peons is identical. "Divide and rule" is the slogan of the bosses of the southern land system quite as much as it was of the Hapsburgs. And in the South, race prejudice is an ever easy means of keeping the white peons divided against their colored fellow sufferers. Because of their insistence upon the degrading of three million Negro tenants, five and a half million white farm workers continue to keep themselves in slavery.

No Education for Peons

Servile dependents are in no position to plan or carry through any programs of real education for themselves and their children. Here

lies the basic trouble with rural schools in the South, for white as well as for colored. Peons have neither ability to conduct schools nor incentive to become educated. The great bulk of the rural population of the South is unable to plan its own life. The rural masses are bossed and controlled; they must take what is given them and do as they are told. Education does not improve the quality of mere mule-like labor. And what is the use of learning to laborers if there is no possibility of their improving their condition?

However monotonous it becomes, it must be reiterated that this situation applies to whites quite as much as to Negroes. We must realize that the farm system, and the school problems which grow from it, are not questions of race. The white voters must understand that the system affects them quite as disastrously as it does the Negroes and that the results enslave far greater numbers of whites than of colored. A united front between common sufferers of both races must be established in farm reorganization and in school planning. Race feeling one way or the other has no place in such movements. Maybe the friends of Negro education have been as much to blame as the Negro haters in centering efforts for schools and social change upon a single race. At any rate henceforth southern statesmen and friends of the South will do well to cease emphasizing race in plans and actions that look toward a new farm order and a fresh school program.

In spite of the perfectly clear inability of a servile and dependent population to organize schools or to benefit from education, the rural South has plodded along doggedly in the effort to build up a public school system. This is a tribute to the devotion of the American people to education, though it is a pitiful example of our naive faith that schools of any sort and in any situation may be relied upon somehow to transform

life. The public school system is one of the real accomplishments of America; it is the bulwark of such democracy as we have attained. But if the schools are to accomplish the great task we rightfully expect of them, their programs must be adapted to the needs of the various groups they serve and they must grow in a setting which is not completely stultifying. In the rural South the tenancy system checks that free growth of individuals which free schools in a democracy are intended to develop. The only opportunity for children whose talents have blossomed and matured in the rural schools is to escape to the cities. In rural areas we have to a large extent educated children so that they might escape their environment, not so that they might become a useful part of it. If the sons or daughters of a rural peon - white or colored - are simply to continue in peonage, they neither need nor can benefit by education. Southern rural schools therefore must either continue to educate children to flee from country life, thus draining the rural communities of what little ambition and initiative they now have, or else the rural environment must be transformed so that it can offer a decent life to educated young people.

Study of Southern Farm Economics

With this southern farm system clearly in mind, several persons concerned with this set of problems have been trying to bring about not only changes in the schools but sweeping reorganization of the whole farm order. Here are the steps already taken and the prospects immediately ahead. They are recorded in this Rural School Journal because anything accomplished will bear directly upon the possibilities for a sound program of rural education, also because the efforts are being made in part as a result of the rural school explorations and by the very people who have been most active in the Council on Rural Education.

A Commission of Three, consisting of W. W. Alexander, Charles S. Johnson, and Edwin R. Embree, has for the past year been working on problems of the Negro in the emergency and the recovery, administering a special grant from one of the New York foundations. One of the major efforts of this Commission was to explore the southern farm problem. Studies, starting from interest in the plight of the rural Negroes, led directly into the general questions of tenancy and land ownership regardless of race.

From these studies, which were carried on under the immediate direction of Dr. Johnson, it becomes clear that the depression brought southern agriculture very near to complete collapse and that the A.A.A. program, necessary and useful as it was to farm economy as a whole, has made the plight of the tenant still more desperate. Pegging the cotton price and payments for crop reduction, while saving the land-owner, have decimated the ranks of the tenant-croppers. Owners found naturally that they did not need so many worker-families on the reduced acreage. Furthermore, with cash in hand, they began to hire labor simply for the active months and to discontinue the system of supplies to tenants throughout the year. The result was that tens of thousands of families both white and colored, who heretofore had been getting a living, however meager, were thrown off the plantations and onto relief. These families will probably never be taken back as tenants, since the owners have found a new and cheaper way of working their cotton through temporary hiring of cheap labor during the active work seasons, some three or four months a year. The movement away from dependent living on farms into the ranks of casual labor and relief has already involved probably three hundred thousand to four hundred thousand families and is steadily continuing. Of course it will not wipe out all or probably even a majority of the tenants and

croppers. But it may easily run to six hundred thousand families in the southern states or to about thirty per cent of this dependent farm population.

This depopulation of the farms seems to be affecting white and colored about equally. In many cases the Negro is being dropped more ruthlessly, in accordance with the time-honored custom of giving Negroes least consideration in any situation. But in other instances whites are being put off and only Negroes retained, on the ground that Negro tenants can be more easily handled and exploited in spite of any regulations which the federal government may try to lay down.

Well, no one has any tears to shed at the break-down of the vicious system of farm tenantry and crop sharing. But the last condition of these poor farm dependents is even worse than the first. They are now completely cut off from any means of livelihood. Unless the government is willing to give relief indefinitely, it is hard to see where the thing will end - though it is easy enough to see where the individual families will end, namely, in starvation.

Unfortunately, because of the old race bugaboo, the South is peculiarly incapable of handling problems of disrupted economic systems and floating populations of casual workers. Great bands of Negroes, unattached to the soil, unaccountable to regular bosses, are a new and unmanageable problem. These Negro hordes, competing with poor whites for such casual labor as appears, competing with whites for relief while it lasts, possibly raiding fields or stores if they begin to starve - all this may easily lead to hysteria, terrorizing, lynchings, and race riots of unprecedented scope and violence.

As a result of the convincing mass of information produced by

these studies, the Commission of Three met in Atlanta immediately following the sessions of the Council on Rural Education, together with Frank Tannenbaum who had been analyzing the reports, and James Simon who had been facing the farm problems as they affect the schools. Agreement was reached on a definite plan of action to be urged upon the government for financing a huge program of distributing small farms to former tenants and croppers and so at one fell swoop: (a) begin to substitute ownership for the former tenancy system and (b) turn back the tide of rural relief dependents onto self-sufficiency on their own farms.

The persons immediately concerned with the project have spent most of January and February in conferences with students of southern agriculture and in presenting the proposals to federal officials including Secretary Wallace and the important officers of his Department of Agriculture, Senator Bankhead and other political leaders, representatives of the Department of the Interior and officials of the Home Owners Loan Corporation, and Mr. Harry Hopkins and members of his Relief Administration. The response has been unanimously and enthusiastically favorable. It looks altogether likely that effective plans will be undertaken by the federal government promptly and on a wide scale.

Forty Acres and a Mule

Here is the proposal in briefest outline. It is essentially an attempt to carry out the old slogan "forty acres and a mule" for every farm family, plus some new homes and barns to be financed as a part of the program of work relief, plus active service agencies to guide and aid the new homesteaders in every possible way.

The plan as at present outlined is for the government (through

some special agency set up for that purpose) to buy up huge acreages of farm lands now in the hands of insurance companies, land banks, and others, and to distribute this land in small plots of minimum size required to support farm families, probably twenty to forty acres in the cotton area. The land may be allocated to the new owners either on long leases or through contracts of sale on long time payment under easy terms. The aim is to give the new farmers a sense of ownership or stability on the given plot and to prevent them from selling or mortgaging the holdings or otherwise alienating their new birthright.

Service agencies are suggested to supervise, guide, and aid the homesteaders. These service agencies should not only give expert counsel, but also provide seed, fertilizer, and even certain of the current supplies which were heretofore furnished by the plantation owner. In certain instances the service agencies will have to finance buildings and farm animals, but these capital investments should be held to the very minimum so that the homesteaders will not start with too burdensome a debt. It is believed that the project can succeed on a large scale only if the capital investment (including land and whatever buildings, repairs, and animals are required) does not exceed one thousand dollars to fifteen hundred dollars per unit.

Right along with this general wide-scale distribution of lands, experiments should be conducted in unified and carefully directed types of communities, such as (a) cooperative farm colonies, (b) communities with highly developed self-contained services in schools, health facilities, movies, stores, community incubators and breeding stock, etc., etc., (c) communities of the European type with homes and public services concentrated into villages and with farm lands on the outskirts.

It is expected that the initial financing will come through the FERA or through the new four billion dollar fund requested by the President for public works. Meanwhile plans are being made to request a special appropriation from Congress to finance homesteading on small farms, the new funds to be administered by a special bureau of the Department of Agriculture.

The Rehomesteading Project is intended to establish in farm ownership a huge number of families heretofore excluded from ownership and now being cut off even from tenancy or crop-sharing arrangements. To this end the provisions and stipulations must be few and simple.

Success will depend largely on the low cost of the capital investment to each homesteader and on the resourcefulness and helpfulness of the service agencies in supplying central services, carrying the families until the first crops are in, and guiding the homesteaders both as individuals and as communities. Schools, health facilities, and other public services will continue to be furnished by the state, county, and district authorities as at present, but the service agencies probably can do much to improve or make more effective these services in the new communities of homesteaders.

It is of course not to be supposed that this scheme of land distribution, even if carried out wisely and on a wide scale, will solve all the problems of the rural South. There remain such tough ills as (a) large stretches of worn-out soil, (b) the long tradition of concentration on the single cash crop, cotton, the world market for which has fallen off sharply, (c) the vicious and enervating prejudice between the races which beclouds issues and makes almost impossible any concerted program of recovery and progress, (d) the traditions of dependence and the general

shiftlessness and incompetence of the workers, both white and colored, who make up the large marginal farm population. But reorganization of the farm system is basic to reform in other matters. A group of independent farmers working together under competent leadership can begin to plan their lives as well as their economy. Under such a system rural schools may become a creative force.