

THE RURAL NEGRO AND THE SOUTH ¹

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OF the nine million Negroes, or nearly that number, in the South, about seven million are in the rural districts. They are on the farm, the plantation, and in the small town. They include 80 per cent. of the whole Negro population in the South, the great bulk of the Negro population in America, in fact. Of this seven million it is safe to say that 2,200,000 persons are actually working, either as hired hands, tenant farmers, croppers, or renters and independent owners, upon the land. This number includes women and children, for, on the farm and the plantation, the unit of labor is not the individual but the family, and in the South to-day Negro women still do a large part of the work in the fields.

¹ Adapted from "Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections," Memphis, Tenn., May, 1914, pp. 121-127.

People who live in the cotton growing States know that a very large part of the business of those states is based on the Negro and the mule.

In the South, when a planter wants to borrow money, he finds his credit at the bank is usually determined by the number of reliable Negro tenants he can control; business is based on labor. In other words, the value of the land and of all that goes with it and depends upon it, is determined very largely, more largely, perhaps, than is true of any other part of the country, by the character and quantity of the labor supply.

The two million and more Negroes who are employed in agriculture in the Southern States have in their hands, either as renters or as owners, 40 per cent. of the tillable land. Something like 100,000,000 of the 150,000,000 acres of improved land is cultivated by Negro labor, and of every eleven bales of cotton produced in the South, seven are raised by Negroes.

The Negro is here and he is likely to remain. First, because after something like three hundred years he has adapted himself to the country and the people; because experience has taught him that, on the whole, the vast majority of the Negroes are more at home and better off in the agricultural regions of the South than they are likely to be in any other part of the world; and finally because the Southern white man does not want him to go away. You may say what you please about segregation of the races, but when there is work to be done about the plantation, when it comes time to plant and pick the cotton, the white man does not want the Negro so far away that he cannot reach him by the sound of his voice.

At the present time Negroes in the rural districts represent, in some respects, the best portion of the Negro race. They are for the most part a vigorous, wholesome, simple-minded people. They are, as yet, almost untouched by the vices of city life, and still maintain, on the whole, their confidence in the good will of the white people by whom they are surrounded.

These seven million people represent, therefore, tremendous possibilities for good and for evil to themselves, and the community in which they live. From an economic view alone, this large actual and potential labor force represents a vast store of undeveloped wealth, a gold mine of productive energy, in fact.

Imported to this country at an enormous cost in suffering and in money; trained and disciplined during two hundred and fifty years of slavery, and now waiting to be developed, under the influences of free institutions, the Negro is one of the great natural resources of this southern community. This being so, the prosperity of the South is very largely bound up with the latent possibilities of the Negro. Just in proportion as he becomes an efficient farmer and a dependable laborer, just to that extent will the whole country move forward and prosperity be multiplied.

If Negro labor is to become more efficient, every effort should be made to encourage rather than to discourage the Negro in his ambition to go forward, to buy land and plant himself permanently on the soil. In the long run the planter will not suffer from the existence in his neighborhood of Negro farmers who offer an example of thrift and industry to their neighbors. For example, Macon County, in which I live, was the only one of the Black Belt counties of Alabama which showed an increase of Negro population in the decade from 1900 to 1910. The reason was that a special effort had been made in that county to improve the public schools and this brought into the county a large number of progressive farmers who were anxious to own homes in the neighborhood of a good school.

G. W. McLeod, who owns a large tract of land in Macon County, Alabama, is a good example of the white planter who treats his tenants well. Mr. McLeod believes in having a good school in the community, so he gave an acre of ground upon which the school house was built and \$100 in addition to help put up the \$700 school house. He deeded the land to a set of colored trustees. Mr. McLeod also offers annual prizes for the best kept stock, best kept houses, best cared for children, best attendance at Sunday school and church. The man or woman guilty of taking intoxicating liquors or engaging in family quarrels is not eligible to prizes and must go at the end of the year.

Mr. McLeod by this method of dealing with his tenants has little if any trouble in finding profitable tenants for his lands. Not only does he find that this policy pays in cash, but he has the satisfaction of seeing around him people who are prosperous

and contented, who are every year making progress, who are growing in intelligence, ambition and the knowledge of all those things which make life worth living.

From direct investigation I find that many valuable colored laborers leave the farm for the reason that they seldom see or handle cash. The Negro laborer likes to put his hands on real money as often as possible. In the city, while he is not so well off in the long run, as I have said, he is usually paid off in cash every Saturday night. In the country he seldom gets cash oftener than once a month, or once a year. Not a few of the best colored laborers leave the farms because of the poor houses furnished by the owners. The condition of some of the one-room cabins is miserable almost beyond description. In the towns and cities, while he may have a harder time in other respects, the colored man can usually find a reasonably comfortable house with two or three rooms.

No matter how ignorant a colored man may be himself, he almost always wants his children to have education. A very large number of colored laborers leave the farm because they can not get an education for their children. In a large section of the farming district of the South, Negro schools run only from two to five months in the year. In many cases children have to walk miles to reach these schools. The school houses are, in most cases, wretched little hovels with no light or warmth or comfort of any kind. The teacher receives perhaps not more than \$18 or \$25 a month, and as every school superintendent knows, poor pay means a poor teacher.

In saying this, I do not overlook the fact that conditions are changing for the better in all parts of the South. White people are manifesting more interest each year in the training of colored people, and what is equally important, colored people are beginning to learn to use their education in sensible ways; they are learning that it is no disgrace for an educated person to work on the farm. They are learning that education which does not somehow touch life is not education at all. More and more we are all learning that the school is not simply a place where boys and girls learn to read and cipher; but a place where they learn to live. We are all learning that education which does not somehow or other improve the farm and the home, which

does not make a return to the community in some form or other, has no justification for its existence.

The possibilities of the Negro farmer are indicated by the progress that he has made in fifty years. In 1863 there were in all the United States only a few farms owned by Negroes. They now (1910) operate in the South 890,140 farms which are 217,800 more than there were in this section in 1863.

Negro farm laborers and Negro farmers in the South now cultivate approximately 100,000,000 acres of land, of which 42,500,000 acres are under the control of Negro farmers. The increase of Negro farm owners in the past fifty years compares favorably with the increase of white farm owners. The Negroes of this country now own 20,000,000 acres or 31,000 square miles of land. If all the land they own were placed in one body, its area would be greater than that of the state of South Carolina.

The Negro has made his greatest progress in agriculture during the past ten years. From 1900 to 1910 the total value of farm property owned by the colored farmers of the South increased from \$177,404,688 to \$492,898,218, or 177 per cent.

In view of all this it seems to me that it is the part of wisdom to take hold of this problem in a broad, statesmanlike way. Instead of striving to keep the Negro down, we should devote the time and money and effort that is now used for the purpose of punishing the Negro for crimes,—committed in many instances because he has been neglected and allowed to grow up in ignorance without ambition and without hope—and use it for the purpose of making the Negro a better and more useful citizen.

READINGS IN RURAL SOCIOLOGY

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