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A Note on Negro Labor

Alfred Holt Stone

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A Note On Negro Labor.

My dear Kelsey:-

As I recall it, I promised to send you some observations on negro labor for a forthcoming issue of the Annals, - the time limit being somewhere near February first. It is somewhat singular that my time has been so fully occupied with transactions with negro labor during the past three months that I have had no opportunity to discuss the subject on paper. If this "Note", and it is meant to be no more than that, reaches you in time, and can be utilized in any way, you are more than welcome to it. If it is too late, or is not available, you are at liberty to chuck it into the waste basket.

During the fifteen years in which I have been planting cotton I have never known as much agitation of the general subject of the negro on the plantation as there has been this winter. This is due to the disastrous situation in Louisiana and South Mississippi, brought about by the destructive ravages of the boll weevil in 1908. The appearance of this pest in this territory, and its final crossing of the Mississippi, have ~~disappeared~~ ^{served} to turn practical attention to ~~the~~ a consideration of the character of labor which would have to be relied upon to meet its attacks. Negro labor is still identified with cotton production, and whatever concerns the latter, affects the former also. The boll weevil is the greatest enemy which has yet appeared in the history of cotton. In my judgment it will create conditions which will form a supreme test of the capacity and efficiency of negro labor in the field of Southern agriculture. This note can do no more than offer a glance at some of these conditions and at some of the characteristics of the labor in question.

A Note on Negro Labor.

The Ontario,
Washington, D.C.
Jany. 29/09.

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Opinions differ as to just when, and to just what extent, the Mexican boll weevil destroyed the cotton growing industry of Mexico. It seems impossible to measure accurately the various factors involved, but certainly the industry itself now is of small importance. In some districts cotton planting was abandoned as early as 1843,--because, it is claimed, of the ravages of the weevil. But we cannot get much light from Mexico. Their conditions and ours are ~~inn~~^{so} different, and the general progress of agricultural science has been so great in the past few years, that comparisons are almost worthless. We must look to Texas. And even here it is easy to be misled. Our people are deriving consolation from the fact that, despite the weevil, Texas continues to make large crops of cotton,--crops which are in fact, on the whole, increasing in size. This optimism ignores certain important considerations.

In the first place, Texas offers the largest area in the South of ⁱ prairie cotton. A prairie ~~country~~ has an immense advantage over a timbered country, because of the habits of the weevil. It goes into winter quarters after it has nothing left to prey upon. One of the means of fighting it is ~~in~~ the destruction of cotton stalks, grass, weeds and other hibernating places. The ~~more~~ greater the number of weevils which stand the winter, the greater the first attack in the spring and the more rapid the multiplication of the insects during the growing season. Obviously, timber regions offer much better hibernating quarters than the open prairie. Other natural conditions in favor of Texas are the heavier rainfall during the growing season with us, and the necessity for a more expensive and slower method of cultivation, owing to a rapid and excessive growth of grass. The most important difference of all, however, is that of labor.

With all our discussion of the economics of Southern labor, we have never ascertained the respective parts played by white and negro

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labor in cotton production. We have been content to accept the heavy tradition that all cotton was produced by the negro, handed down to us from ante-bellum times. This was not true before the war, and it is not true to-day. More, -it is to-day a ridiculous proposition. It is probable that considerably more than fifty per cent. of the crop is now grown by white labor. It is in Texas that we have witnessed the greatest increase in production since 1860. That state alone made probably one-third of the American crop in 1908, -though the figures are not yet available. And it is in Texas that the white grower has secured ~~through~~ his greatest hold upon the industry. Another factor is the tremendous increase of the white farming population of Texas in recent years. In other words, in attempting to measure the ability of Texas to combat the weevil, by the amount of cotton grown in the state, we are confronted with the questions, How much of the cotton increase is due to white labor ^{per se?} and How much of it is due to a positive increase in the number of persons, mainly white, engaged in cotton growing? Even to attempt to answer these questions a more or less elaborate argument would be required; and because of insufficient data, the great area involved and the presence of complicating factors, the results would be inconclusive and unsatisfactory. The general Texas situation is mentioned here to suggest that while cotton unquestionably can be grown under boll weevil conditions, that fact in Texas ~~by~~ does not mean, necessarily, that it can be grown with equal success under boll weevil conditions elsewhere.

One feature incidental ~~to~~ to cotton growing under these adverse conditions is, however, uniform. Wherever the weevil appears he creates the necessity for a revolution in the entire economy of cotton production. This is true in Texas, Louisiana and Southwest Mississippi, and it will prove true of the rest of the cotton belt. Old methods have to be abandoned, old customs modified or given up, an end put to plantation in-

dulgences and practices handed down ~~from xantism~~ as a heritage of the business. The measure of the negro's ability to grow cotton under the conditions likely to confront him in the territory East of the Mississippi, will be his adaptability to these changes and his capacity to become part of this industrial revolution. It is this which challenges the attention of those interested, whether academically or practically, in negro labor. Under ordinary conditions cotton is cultivated in a slipshod manner, receiving probably not more than half the intelligent assistance which it needs and to which it is entitled. It leads a precarious existence, from the preparation of the soil to the gathering of the crop. It is planted at various dates, from April first to May, -and sometimes as late as the middle of ~~May~~ the latter month, or even the first of June. It is given its own time in which to grow and mature, and in many alluvial districts the time required is such that the crop is ^{fully} not gathered until the end of the winter, or the beginning of the spring following that in which it is planted.

The business relations between negro cotton growers and the white land owner or merchant have been in harmony with the methods which have characterized the cultivating of the soil. It has been an effort on the part of each to get all he could out of the other, with scant regard to the ultimate real good of either. The net result is the impoverishment of the soil, the pauperizing of the labor and frequently the bankrupting of the landlord or merchant. It has been a "skin game", all around. It is probably not possible to distribute the responsibility for this state of affairs. The cupidity of the white man is a trait as old as the race, while certain characteristics of the negro masses seem at times to render the situation hopeless. Under the new order, the white man has in his greater intelligence and keener appreciation of the necessity of

mending his ways, an advantage over the negro. The masses of the latter are handicapped by a concentration of thought upon immediate desires, with a contemptuous disregard of either future good or future evil.

Under boll weevil conditions the cotton grower is brought for the first time face to face with a real struggle ~~wik~~ for survival. It has been too easy to live heretofore. That fact has been the greatest curse of the cotton section. It has undoubtedly contributed to certain habits of thriftlessness which militate ~~the~~ against the negro masses, and is at the bottom of their independence of the necessity of constant employment and steady labor. Whether or not the severer conditions of the immediate future will at once remedy these defects, is an open question, but ~~I~~ it is my judgment that they will make for greater stability and ultimately for greater economic efficiency and dependability. But there must be radical changes before this is possible. Not only will there be demanded an amount of labor which will make former cotton cultivation seem the child's play which it really has been, but there must be developed an ability to provide for ^{one} ~~himself~~, to live otherwise than in a state of daily dependence upon the white man, which hitherto the cotton-growing mass of negroes has not shown. The only possibility of making cotton then will be by compelling its ^{early} maturity, both by seed selection and cultivation, and "living" will become a matter of ^{the} raising [^] by each individual negro laborer of a large proportion of the things for which he has been accustomed to call on his white merchant or landlord.

For a number of years I have studied negro labor in certain portions of the cotton belt. My conclusion has been that the greatest hindrance to real economic progress on the part of this class of negroes is a definite habit of shifting their abodes, of aimlessly moving to and

fro, ~~xxxx~~ from one cotton growing season to another. For fifty-eight days this winter I devoted all my time to talking to negroes who were leaving me, and to those who were coming in to take their places. Not in all my experience have I seen anything to equal the "moving" which went on in our territory between October and January. In riding six miles along a public road one day, I counted thirty-six wagon loads of household effects, the owners seated on top, shifting from various plantations to various other plantations. Yet we had no boll weevil. We had simply made an early crop, and with ^{the negroes} nothing to attach ~~them~~ to the places on which they had lived for the season, they had a longer ^{than usual} period in which to travel about and find new homes, and more of them took advantage of it. During the same time there was an exodus of negroes from the boll weevil districts of Louisiana and Southwest Mississippi. They poured into the Yazoo Mississippi Delta region by hundreds. We have more labor than we have had at any time since the war. But of what permanent value is ^{that} ~~is~~ it to ~~the~~ ^{the} section? They ~~deserted~~ fled from Louisiana like rats from ~~the~~ a sinking ship; what warrant have we to imagine that they will ~~not~~ similarly desert us when we are attacked, -- and resume the childish effort to find a country ^{will} in which the weevil ~~does~~ not come, -- where conditions have not changed, -- where cotton growing remains the same old process, and where ^{"living"} ~~life~~ is still the easy thing it has always been.

I have before me a number of letters and reports on negro labor and the bollweevil. They are from all parts of Texas and from the infected region of Louisiana. Some are confidential, several are from government experts employed in the Department of Agriculture, many are published in newspapers. The lesson which they all seek to impress on the Southern cotton grower in regions as yet not attacked, is harder and more intelligent work, greater diversification and more "living at

home." They differ as to their views on negro labor, as a factor in the approaching contest. One high authority, who is not a Southern man, tells the writer of this note that the one thing which stands out most prominently in the Texas situation, is "the tremendous premium which the boll weevil has put upon white labor." Another of equal standing says that personally he would as soon depend upon ~~the~~ negro labor as white. One of the closest observers at present engaged in growing cotton, a man born in the North but of many years residence in the South, in a personal letter, writes ^{of Louisiana conditions:} "With all that we will do, the incapacity of many negroes for raising cotton under boll weevil conditions, ^{-except as day laborers-} is a demonstrated fact. When they once become day laborers they will drift even more than ever, and I predict that the census of 1920 will show the largest increase of negro population in the North, yet shown by any census. Nothing is so magnificently dramatic as a proof of the repeated assertion that the white man was the South, as this flight of the negro in the face of the boll weevil. The white man, whether a land owner or not, stands like a rock, and his resolutions rises with the difficulties to be faced. Only those who see the great conflict will be able to describe it. I wish we had a Kipling." In this conflict of testimony we may read ^{the} a suggestion of a possible change in the economic status of the plantation negro of the ~~KKKKK~~ cotton belt, but at least a decade, possibly two, will be required for its development.

I have sometimes had occasion to use an old plantation saying, to the effect that "The negro is what the white man makes him." I shall not argue the entire accuracy of the expression, but it is certain that the white man cannot escape responsibility for his part in shaping ^{the} negro's economic habits and character. This is particularly true of the white man of the Southern plantation, who is in closer touch with negro labor than is any other white class in America. Even if it may be difficult to make

a "good negro" of a bad one, it is both easy and common for white men to spoil good ones. In the present condition of the plantation negroes of the cotton states, we have a situation which is in part the inevitable result of a thoroughly vicious economic system, and in part attributable to what seem to be the mere or less fixed characteristics of this class of labor. The sum total presents a combination which is fraught with large possibilities of disaster to both the white man and the negro, - now that both are confronted with the gravest danger which has ever menaced the industry of cotton growing. As between the negro who will leave a good home and an honest landlord, ~~taxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ on the specious promise of a landlord who is notoriously dishonest in his dealings with his labor, and the white land owner and employer of this character, - there should be little question as to which is the greater evil in the community. It is human nature for a planter who gives his negro labor^{ers} a square deal, to become disgusted when they leave him because of the bait offered by an unscrupulous neighbor. But the sharp practice of the white man is more to be condemned than the stupidity of the negro who is humbugged by him. But the granting of this does not help matters in the least. It does not alter in one single particular the fact that ^{cotton growers} those ~~men~~ who are trying to be honest with their negro labor, and who are trying to encourage them to become self-sustaining and thrifty, are handicapped in their efforts by the characteristics and conduct of the very people whom they would help. It is a serious question whether in the black cotton belt honesty is at all the best policy. It is too often true that in transactions with plantation negroes it is at a decided discount.

The advent of the boll weevil means that both the negro and the white man must change, - or go to the wall. The unbusinesslike methods

of the latter in dealing with the former must cease. There must be an end to the granting of absurd credit, the advancing of money on ridiculous demands, just because it is the custom of the community, the offering of unfair or dishonest inducements to labor in order to secure it ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ from another plantation or community. These methods cannot continue after the appearance of a pest which can reduce the crop of a plantation from 1700 bales in one year to 210 in another. By the same token, the negro must raise vegetables, instead of weeds, in his garden; he must discontinue senseless demands upon his merchant or planter for things which he does not need, to be paid for out of a crop which may never be gathered; he must learn to provide for himself, at least between the time when one crop is gathered and another pitched, - instead of going to the commissary fifty-two weeks in the year. He must do these things, - or another class of labor will be found which will. The negro is no more immune to the operation of elementary economic laws than is the white man.

There are in the South to-day three ~~XXXX~~ classes of agricultural negroes. They represent three fairly distinct ~~XXXXXX~~ stages in a process of economic growth. At the bottom of the group is the day laborer. The next class is the share tenant or renter on the plantation. These are under the supervision of the owner or his representative, - in many cases as much so as is the wage hand. The renter, generally, represents a group somewhat in advance of the share-hand. He has usually accumulated such personal property as livestock and farming implements, while these things are provided for the share tenant by the planter. The highest class is composed of negro owners of land and of those who are renters of detached farms, - looking out for themselves and operating independently of white supervision, - or practically so. The progress of these groups, the emerging of the higher from the lower, marks the pro-

gress of the agricultural negro in the South. This is the true test of progress,--rather than the ^{mere} increase of property by these in the highest group. On the other hand, a falling back ~~fr~~ of land^downers or independent renters into the class of supervised plantation negroes, or of the ~~intermittent~~ higher classes of the latter into that of day laborers, means a loss of ground by the agricultural negro as a whole. It is predicted by some that the boll weevil will create conditions which the independent renter cannot meet, and that the ranks of the wage earner will be augmented by negroes from both the higher groups. It is on the ~~other~~ hand predicted by some that increased severity of conditions will only serve to stimulate the negro of all these groups, and that the economic revolution which is impending throughout the cotton South will help the ~~the~~ negro no less than the white man. I venture nothing in the field of prophecy, one way or the other. But I am vitally concerned in the outcome, and shall observe the approaching contest with anxious interest. When the issue has been determined, I shall have something more to say on the subject of negro agricultural labor.

Just before I wrote the preceding page I received a note from Professor Johnson, asking for my paper on "Family budgets of negroes in the Delta region." I am afraid that he will be very much disappointed in the above; but inasmuch as it is in line with what I promised you, I shall put the blame on you. In order to expedite matters, I shall send him a carbon copy of this, and assure him that he and your good self are at perfect liberty to do with it as you please. If you use it at all, please give it an obscure place, and let it appear simply as a Note,--instead of a "paper."

With best regards,

Sincerely yours,