

HUMAN FACTORS IN THE SOUTH'S AGRICULTURAL READJUSTMENT

RUPERT B. VANCE*

It is a thing of marvel and hardly to be believed that the South¹ has asked that it be singled out at the hands of the federal government for the strictest legal regimentation yet imposed upon a section in our history. The great Cotton Kingdom, once most resolute about expanding cotton cultivation westward and northward on its own terms, proved equally acquiescent in the plow-up campaign of 1933 that turned under 4½ million bales on 10½ million acres. For 1934 it has asked and been granted a boon by the federal government. This boon is comprised in the declaration that every farmer engaged in the growing of cotton is engaged in interstate commerce; that in such position he is constitutionally subject to the regulations of Congress; that Congress hereby regulates by authorizing the Secretary of Agriculture to grant each cotton farmer a production quota 40 per cent below his average and to place a tax of one half the market value on all cotton produced above such quotas. This is the Bankhead Cotton Control Act, endorsed by over 75 per cent of all southern farmers questioned, sponsored in Congress by the brothers Bankhead of Alabama, granted by a dubious Congress, signed by a dubious President, accepted by a dubious Secretary of Agriculture, quoted as saying that the idea of such compulsion is "abhorrent." Much water must have flowed under the bridges, and men of the South fiercely revolved in their minds many things, for the section thus to compel compulsion from the federal powers.

I

The situation lends itself to brief summary. Wartime and post-war conditions served finally to upset whatever fluctuating balance the Cotton Belt had been able to attain between the forces of supply and world demand. The price of cotton under war demands reached a new high in 1918, but a corresponding increase in production was delayed for several years by the severe ravages of the boll weevil which in

* A.B., 1920, Henderson-Brown College; A.M., 1921, Vanderbilt University; Ph.D., 1928, University of North Carolina. Research Associate, Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina, since 1929. Associate Editor, *Social Forces*; Contributor, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, etc. Author: *Human Factors in Cotton Culture* (Chapel Hill) 1929; *Human Geography of the South* (Chapel Hill) 1933.

¹The writer concurs in the division by the Southern Regional Study of the South into the Southeast and the Southwest, consisting of Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico.

1921 was estimated to have reduced the crop by 30 per cent. After a brief post-war slump prices recovered, and the incentive to production taught new forms of weevil control. Acreage was extended in the Mississippi Valley and in the northern and western fringes furthest removed from the insect's depredations. What Georgia and Alabama lost, Texas and Oklahoma more than regained in cotton acreage and cotton bales. From 1921 to 1926 Texas placed seven million new acres in cotton cultivation while in the same period the United States' total increased from 30 million to almost 46 million cotton acres. Under the influence of high prices and subsidies, foreign production kept pace with American output so that by 1928 signs of a price break indicated that production had been pushed too far. With the emergence of world depression, consumption fell sharply, and the carry-over of the American crop increased in the period 1929-30 to 1932-33 from 5 million to 13 million bales. The effect of the downswing on the Cotton Belt was nothing less than a major disaster. From 1928-29 to 1932-33 the gross farm income from cotton and cotton seed fell from \$1,470 million to \$431 million, with the result that the average gross income per farm family engaged in cotton growing fell from \$735 to \$216. At its new low point in June, 1932, the average farm price of cotton stood at 4.6 cents per pound. Economic distress and actual misery prevailed in practically every section of the Belt, falling most heavily on tenants and croppers, many of whom, reduced below subsistence levels, were forced on public relief. The year's production added to the carry-over amounted to 26 million bales of American cotton alone, a fact which promised no rescue from the crushing burdens faced by the South.^{1a}

Such in brief is the course of events which forced the individualistic cotton farmers to the acceptance of, if not the insistence on, federal regulation. It is noteworthy that the first use of state compulsion to reduce cotton acreage was sponsored by a recent governor of Louisiana, a folk product who lives with his ear to the ground. The legislation passed by Louisiana, Texas, and South Carolina in the fall and winter of 1931-32, thwarted as it was by our peculiar federal structure, our legal and constitutional commitments, and by the folk themselves, nevertheless pointed the way to the South's demand for some form of acreage control. Once the allotment plan was agreed upon, the plow-up campaign and the 1934 acreage reduction followed as a matter of course. The Bankhead Act, so the writer feels, must be regarded largely as an attempt of the cotton grower to reach by legal means his few recalcitrant neighbors who refused to sign acreage reduction contracts for 1934.

II

The South asked for the Bankhead Act, but the South has been known to change its mind. Already southern farmers are beginning to point out flaws in the Act and its administration. It is to be expected that many counties and many farmers will decide that they have been allotted quotas far too small. One cotton farmer, for

^{1a} AGRICULTURAL ADJUSTMENT: A REPORT OF ADMINISTRATION OF THE AGRICULTURAL ADJUSTMENT ACT, MAY, 1933, TO FEBRUARY, 1934, "Cotton," c. III, pp. 19-41.

example, reports that he is allowed a base quota of 150 pounds of lint to the acre when he has never grown less than 250; another, that his quota of 30 bales is based on standard bales of 500 pounds weight although he has never ginned a bale of less than 650 pounds weight. Farmers who have consistently followed the preachments of diversification emanating from the agricultural colleges will find their five year average used against them. With a further 40 per cent reduction in cotton acreage they well may wonder whence is to come the cash to carry on their diversified farming. *The Texas Weekly* points out that here we have not a tax but a penalty—and, moreover, a penalty for producing something useful. Continues the editor:

The farmer will be compelled to pay this penalty, or he will be prevented from selling his extra bale of cotton. If he can find anybody who will conspire with him to avoid this penalty, somebody who will conspire with him to "bootleg" the extra bale, they will both get into trouble. All of that is settled. Of course putting all this into effect and getting the courts to back it up is a very different matter.²

When all these facts are admitted, one may yet be permitted to disagree with Senator Josiah W. Bailey of North Carolina when he tells the United States Senate that when the attempt is made to enforce this law the resistance of the farmers will amount to revolution. The reason for doubting the Senator's prediction may in time come to offer the severest indictment of the whole cotton adjustment program. Those whose rights are least safeguarded under the program prove to be the least articulate, least capable of effective protest, in the whole cotton system, the white and black croppers and share tenants on the region's lowest levels of living. It is they who may be expected to bear the brunt of reduced acreage in dismissals comparable to the lay-off of idle factory hands. It is they who stand to receive but a fraction of the benefit paid the landowner for retiring part of the acreage they cultivate. With but 60 per cent of average cotton production and but one-ninth of the benefits payments, the cropper must console himself with the right to use the retired land for producing feed and food supplies. Here is a problem that will give pause to many a well-wisher of the South before the readjustment program is brought to completion.

However controversial the measure may prove in the swiftly-arriving future, no one need doubt that behind the Act stand the reasons of a region. Having briefly traced the economic trends that led to agricultural adjustment in the South, the present paper proposes to depict more at length the varied and confused interplay of human and social factors such a program must encounter in its adjustment to cotton tenancy.

III

Cotton has made of the South a specialized region. Here a transplanted tropical plant finds the limits of its cultivation set on the north by the line of average summer temperature of 77 degrees; on the south, along the Gulf and Atlantic Coast, by an average rainfall limit of 10 inches or over. The Cotton Belt, extending from eastern North Carolina to western Texas, is 1,600 miles long and varies from 125 to 500

²*Texas Weekly*, April 21, 1934, 2.

miles in width, the average falling around 300 miles. In less than three per cent of the world's land areas is grown from 55 to 60 per cent of the world's annual supply of cotton. In this region over 42 per cent of the crop land is devoted to cotton and the value of cotton lint and seed is usually greater than that of all other crops combined.

The writers of the *Cotton Atlas* furnish a neat summary:

Natural and economic forces have made the South peculiarly dependent upon cotton. Cotton may be grown only under certain climatic conditions which restrict its cultivation to the southern states, whereas grain and forage crops are grown to some extent in other parts of the United States under climatic conditions as favorable or even more favorable for their production. Since cotton will grow on practically all well-drained soils, is drought resistant, and yields well on light sandy soils to which fertilizers have been applied, it is better suited to many of the soils of the South than are other staple crops. Furthermore, the South has a denser agricultural population and cheaper labor than other parts of the United States, both of which circumstances favor the production of cotton as it requires a large amount of hand labor and yields high returns per acre.³

With so great a concentration on one product it is inevitable that the element of risk should be deeply rooted in the cotton economy. To the risks of production attendant upon the vagaries of the weather and the weevil must be added another hazard just as great—the risks of the market. Wide variations in production suggest the wide variations in prices that have made cotton the humpty-dumpty of commodity crops. What economists call that “imperfectly adjusting and readjusting equation of supply and demand in a money economy” is nowhere better exemplified than in the cotton market of the world. Within the memory of many southern farmers the price of a standard 500 pound bale has varied from \$25 to \$200. The risks of the market fall with peculiar directness on cotton in that all of the crop must be sold by those who produce it. Corn, pork, beef, vegetables, the products of general farming fill the family larder regardless of price. The only value of cotton to the cotton farmer is its value in exchange, and the lower the price the greater the likelihood that the farmer will have to sell immediately all he has produced to satisfy his creditor as speedily as possible. The disaster attendant upon cotton growing is not a matter of low average price alone, it is the matter of violent fluctuations which take place within very short periods, serving to make the industry one of the most hazardous of all branches of agriculture. Here, as elsewhere in our competitive system, men striving everywhere for their own best individual interests have at times worked themselves collective ruin in the process. How this process led to the debacle of 1929-33 and the strict regimentation of AAA and the Bankhead Act we have just recounted.

IV

The Agricultural Adjustment Administration was fated to meet in the South a peculiar economy, an economy historically conditioned by the plantation. The aboli-

³ ATLAS OF AMERICAN AGRICULTURE (1918) Pt. V, §A, “Cotton,” p. 11.

tion of slavery in America, Robert E. Park suggests, was but an episode in the history of the plantation system.⁴ With its concentration of labor under skilled management, its overseers, foremen, blacksmiths, carpenters, hostellers, cooks, nurses, plowhands and hoehands, the plantation, wrote Ulrich B. Phillips, resembled nothing so much as the factory system applied to agriculture.⁵ The transition from cotton plantation to cotton tenancy was not the break with the past that is commonly supposed. The change gave the agricultural worker mobility, legal freedom of contract, and wages or a share of the crop in return for his work. The cotton laborer had acquired a free status but for a time to come no greater security nor any higher economic or social standing.

A period of readjustment, a brief hiatus in the cotton system, followed emancipation. Many Negroes expected the illusionary forty acres and a mule; some met with swindlers who took their money in return for fraudulent deeds. Much has been written, no doubt unjustly, of the Negroes' refusal to work after emancipation. The plantation had inculcated habits of industry and hard work but had linked these responses to the stimulus of personal direction and compulsion rather than to the impersonal stimulus of economic competition. Such industry was a matter of obedience rather than forethought. The plantations had been returned to the planters, and the high prices for cotton encouraged them to reestablish its culture. There was a gradual return of laborers to the plantation under the wage contract system. This system met with varying success in different localities but as a general thing it was soon abandoned. There were no banks left solvent after the war; the planters were land poor and found it almost impossible to pay a weekly or a monthly wage. Attempts to bind Negroes by contract failed, because they did not understand the nature of contracts and found it impossible to wait for long deferred wages.

The result was the development of the crop lien and share renting system. That the system was a successful adjustment for the times may be indicated by the ease with which it displaced the wage system on cotton farms. That it deserved to become a permanent arrangement is doubtful. Paying rent in a specified fraction of the crop rather than in cash makes the landlord an equal participant in the two major risks of agriculture—the risks of production and the risks of the market. With a measure of truth share renting and cotton cropping has been called "a system whereby labor is secured without wages and loans made without security."

The utter inability of tenants and croppers to finance themselves and their operations during the growing season led to the growth of country merchants. It was these supply merchants who came to furnish cotton growers on time and buy their cotton. The demand of this group for security for their loans led to passage throughout the southern states of crop lien laws by which farmers mortgage in January their as yet unplanted crops for supplies on which to live. Some conflict ensued between land-

⁴ Park, *Book Review* (1927) 33 AM. J. OF SOC. 290-1.

⁵ Phillips, *The Decadence of the Plantation System* (1910) 35 ANNALS OF AM. ACAD. OF POL. AND SOC. SCI. 37.

lord and supply merchant as to whether the crop lien should be used to secure supplies advanced by the merchant or to secure the rent to the landlord. In some cases the landlord has settled the dilemma by advancing the supplies himself either by establishing a plantation commissary or by standing good for his tenants' accounts at a local store. In either case the tenant pays high interest charges on his production and consumption credit, rates of interest shown by many studies to rank as high as 25 per cent or more. The supply merchant is engaged, no doubt, in a precarious business. Many of them have lost money, but it is true that the earliest fortunes to grow up in the South out of the dead level of poverty left by war and the decadence of the plantation were made by men who combined the functions of supply merchant and cotton buyer in the country towns. The supervision exercised by landlords and purveyors of credit continued the traditional pattern of paternalism developed under the plantation. Whipping as a form of maintaining discipline, T. J. Woolfer, Jr. points out, was continued on some plantations in the Black Belt long after emancipation.⁶ "The merchant who has a lien on the tenant's share of the crop," wrote an observer, "pays his taxes, buries his wife or child, buys him a mule if he needs one, and feeds and clothes him and his family."⁷

The internal changes in the cotton plantation after abolition completed but half the story. Not only was the plantation reorganizing; it was also breaking up. The following table is arranged to show the break-up of the old régime in the decreasing size and value of southern as compared with northern farms. In eleven southern states the average size of the farm decreased in the period 1860 to 1910 from 335.4 to 114.4 acres. Only in 1860 did southern farms exceed northern ones in value. The greatest single decrease, that from 1860 to 1870, represents largely the division of plantations into tenant holdings, listed by the Census as separate farms. Also concealed in the figures but impossible of separate presentation is the actual break-up of large holdings implicit in the ruin of the old régime.

TABLE I
COMPARATIVE SIZE AND VALUE OF SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN FARMS, 1850-1910*

CENSUS YEAR	AVERAGE ACRES OF LAND PER FARM		AVERAGE IMPROVED ACRES PER FARM		AVERAGE VALUE OF LANDS AND BUILDINGS PER FARM	
	The South	The North	The South	The North	The South	The North
1910.....	114.4	143.0	48.6	100.3	\$2,374	\$8,182
1900.....	138.2	133.2	48.1	90.9	1,251	4,190
1890.....	139.7	123.7	58.8	87.8	1,402	3,721
1880.....	153.4	114.9	56.2	76.6	1,224	3,314
1870.....	214.2	117.0	69.2	69.2	1,456	3,463
1860.....	335.4	126.4	101.3	68.3	3,455	3,180
1850.....	332.1	127.1	101.1	65.4	2,051	2,380

* 5 THIRTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES (1910) 878.

⁶ Woolfer, *NEGRO MIGRATION* (1920) 141.

⁷ Quoted by Holmes, *The Peons of the South* (1893) 4 *ANNALS OF AM. ACAD. OF POL. AND SOC. SCI.* 265-74.

The most important single change was the tremendous increase in white farmers engaged in the cultivation of cotton. As small landowners they extended cotton culture into undeveloped areas in the old eastern belt and to newer western areas in Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and lastly Oklahoma. M. B. Hammond, writing in 1897, pointed out that the elevation of the unprivileged natives of the uplands to the ranks of landowners provided a remarkable increase in the proportion of whites engaged in the cultivation of cotton.⁸ Some of the eastern uplands, already inhabited by white farmers, were opened to cotton cultivation by the introduction of commercial fertilizers. White farmers moved to such comparatively undeveloped areas as the wire grass region in South Georgia. "The earth hunger," wrote Henry W. Grady, "of the poorer classes of whites who had been unable under the slaveholding oligarchy to own land was striking. . . . Never, perhaps, was there a rural movement, accomplished without revolution or exodus, that equaled in extent or swiftness the partition of the plantations of the ex-slave holders into small farms."⁹ Conditions after the war and falling cotton prices after 1871 gave the small farmer opportunity to buy land. Private sales of land were numerous, many ruined farmers and large landholders, as Woofter points out, desiring to reduce the size of their holdings that they might cultivate more efficiently and thus salvage the remainder.¹⁰

Writing in 1881, Georgia's great publicist, Henry W. Grady, felt there was yet some hope that the South might make the transition from landlords to farm ownership.

After sixteen years of trial everything is as yet indeterminate. And whether this staple is cultivated in the South as a profit or a passion and whether it shall bring the South to independence or to beggary are matters yet to be settled. Whether its culture shall result in a host of croppers without money or credit, appealing to the granaries of the West against famine, paying toll to usurers at home, and mortgaging their crop to speculators abroad even before it is planted—a planting oligarchy of money-lenders who have usurped the land through foreclosure, and hold it by the ever-growing margin between a grasping lender and an enforced borrower—or a prosperous self-respecting race of small farmers cultivating their own lands, living upon their own resources, controlling their crops until they are sold, and independent alike of usurers and provision brokers—which of these shall be the outcome of cotton cultivation, the future must determine.¹¹

The future has decided. The white farmer's entry into the cotton system has been accomplished by increasing tenancy ratios for his as well as for the Negro group. In 1876 the United States Commissioner of Agriculture stated that nearly 40 per cent of the cotton was grown by white farmers.¹² By 1910, although Negro farmers cultivated 52 per cent of the total cotton acreage, white farmers because of larger acreage and more efficient practices produced 67 per cent of the total crop. In Texas and Oklahoma, great increases in cotton acreage, due largely to the influx of

⁸ HAMMOND, *THE COTTON INDUSTRY* (1897) 129.

⁹ Grady, *Cotton and Its Kingdom* (1881) 63 HARPER'S MAGAZINE, 721-22.

¹⁰ Woofter, *op. cit. supra* note 6, 38.

¹¹ Grady, *op. cit. supra* note 9, 719.

¹² REPORT (1876) 136, cited by Hammond, *op. cit. supra* note 8, 130.

white farmers, have been accompanied by great increases in tenancy. Not the break-up of plantations but the decadence of cattle ranches accounts for increasing tenancy in these new areas of the Southwest. Speculative methods of acquiring land made it possible for early settlers in command of capital to secure large tracts. On the change from a ranching economy the owners let parcels of these holdings to newcomers for the cultivation of cotton. As a result, Oklahoma within the short period of forty years increased her tenancy ratio from less than one to over 60 per cent.

V

Farm tenancy is thus widespread in the Cotton Belt, reaching over 60 per cent on all farms in eight cotton states. The presence of the Negro and the heritage of the plantation meet in cotton and tobacco ideal tenant crops. Higher percentages of tenancy are found in farms whose chief products are cash crops involving a relatively small investment in working capital and providing a relatively rapid turnover. Conversely, types of farming which, like fruits, livestock, and dairy products, require a large investment and a long time to realize on the investment are undertaken mostly by owners. A suggestive table published in the 1900 Census shows that crops peculiar to the South rank highest in proportion of tenancy:

TABLE II
PERCENTAGE OF TENANCY AMONG FARMERS CLASSIFIED ACCORDING TO
PRINCIPAL SOURCE OF INCOME: 1900

Principal Source of Income	Per Cent of Tenancy	Principal Source of Income	Per Cent of Tenancy	Principal Source of Income	Per Cent of Tenancy
Cotton.....	67.7	Hay and Grain....	39.3	Dairy Products...	23.3
Tobacco.....	47.9	Sugar crops.....	35.1	Live stock.....	20.3
Rice.....	45.7	Vegetables.....	30.4	Fruits.....	16.5

Not only does the South possess a greater proportion of tenancy; it possesses a different kind. Southern tenancy differs greatly from the landlord-tenant relation found in the Mid-West, the type most familiar to American students of farm life. The renting of land in the wheat or corn belts is likely to be a capitalistic enterprise in which the tenant is as good a business man, operating on as large a scale, as any landowner in the vicinity. Not so in the South of forty acres and a mule. Tenancy in the cotton and tobacco belts runs through many variations. On its lowest levels, as the late E. C. Branson was fond of pointing out, it is an expression of poverty pure and simple, open if not unashamed.

The variations within cotton tenancy baffle the stranger, puzzle the Census taker, and give rise to perplexing legal and economic questions. The economic relations of croppers, share tenants, cash tenants, and standing renters to landlords and planters are well shown in a table taken from a study of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.¹⁸

¹⁸ Boeger and Goldenweiser, *A Study of the Tenant Systems of Farming in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta*, U. S. DEPT. OF AGR. BULL. 337 (1916). Quoted by Wooster, *op. cit. supra* note 6, 72.

TABLE III

	Share Cropping (Croppers)	Share Renting (Share Tenants)	Cash Renting (Cash or standing Renters)
Landlord furnishes..	Land House or cabin Fuel Tools Work stock Feed for work stock Seed One-half of fertilizer	Land House or cabin Fuel One-fourth or one- third of fertilizer	Land House or cabin Fuel
Tenant furnishes....	Labor One-half of fertilizer	Labor Work stock Feed for work stock Tools Seed Three-fourths or two- thirds of fertilizer	Labor Work stock Feed for work stock Tools Seed Fertilizer
Landlord receives...	One-half of the crop	One-fourth or one- third of the crop	Fixed amount in cash or lint cotton
Tenant receives.....	One-half of crop	Three-fourths to two- thirds of the crop	Entire crop less fixed amount

The status, legal and economic, of croppers, renters, and share tenants is worthy of consideration. For this group the pattern ranges all the way from the landlord-tenant relationship to that of employer-employee.¹⁴ The legal relationship of tenancy exists when one person holds temporary possession of the land of another on consideration of rendering a stipulated rent to the owner. The title to the product resulting from such tenancy remains in the tenant until after harvest. The legal relationship of employer-employee exists when the employer possesses the right to select and discharge the employee and to direct what work shall be done and the way it shall be done. Having furnished no part of the capital, the employee possesses no claim upon the product beyond a laborer's lien. Throughout the South, however, the landlord lien laws enacted have provided that the landowner possesses a prior lien, whether contracted or not, on the tenant's crop covering rent, all advances of cash, supplies, and feeds, and all equipment, teams, tools, etc. furnished. The law is designed, of course, to protect the owners against dishonest tenants who might seek to evade payment of debts. The cropper is designated in some states, notably Mississippi and Tennessee, as a share tenant holding title to products of the farm. In North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, croppers are designated as employees working for a share of the crop as wages. The Georgia Supreme Court has declared that "The case of the cropper is rather a mode of paying wages than a tenancy."¹⁵ The leading North Carolina case speaks of his status as that of "a

¹⁴ Further discussion of the legal aspects of these relationships is contained in Bruton, *Cotton Acreage Reduction and the Tenant Farmer*, *infra*, at p. 283 *et seq.*

¹⁵ *Appling v. Odom*, 46 Ga. 583, 585 (1872).

servant whose wages depend upon the amount of profit."¹⁶ The cropper contract, in the absence of statutes, could be construed as a lease of both land and equipment in return for a share of the crop. For this to correspond to economic reality, however, the cropper should have at least nominal control of work stock and equipment—a condition which fails to obtain on a large number of plantations and other tenancy areas. Where the cropper is legally classed as a tenant the landlord may by a written contract avoid statutory requirements and secure title to the crop. In South Carolina and Georgia, moreover, all share tenants are legally classified as croppers and have no title to the crops they grow.¹⁷

While no attempt is made in the present paper to discuss the so-called Black Codes enacted by southern states after abolition, it can be said that South Carolina and Georgia serve as examples of states which have crystallized their legal attitudes towards tenancy on a basis of race. The assumption is that in dealing with lower-level tenants the law is dealing with Negroes as a matter of course. In such areas the problem of tenancy does not become a matter of political discussion.

Texas, characterized largely by white tenancy, serves as an example of a state in which the tenant contract has become a political issue. After 1900 the custom arose among landowners of demanding "bonus rents" in excess of the customary one-third grain and one-fourth cotton share rent. Violent antagonism led in 1910 to the organization of the Renters' Union of America, and the disturbed situation in 1914 led the Industrial Relations Commissioner of the United States Senate to investigate land problems in the region. In the same year James E. Ferguson, running on an anti-bonus program, was elected governor of Texas after a heated campaign. The following year saw the enactment of a law limiting rentals—an unprecedented experiment in state land legislation. This law made illegal the collection of over one-half all crops where the landlord furnished everything, or over the customary "third and fourth" where he furnished only the land. The penalty provided gives the tenant the right to collect by suit double the amount of rent and renders null and void the landlord's prior lien.¹⁸

VI

The cultural landscape resulting from these legal and economic arrangements has been described by Robert H. Montgomery in a series of terse phrases as the "miserable panorama of unpainted shacks, rain-gullied fields, straggling fences, rattletrap Fords, dirt, poverty, disease, drudgery, and monotony that stretches for a thousand miles across the Cotton Belt."¹⁹ These artifacts but reflect the disturbing social and economic conditions growing out of cotton tenancy. It is but obvious to point out that the South's agricultural workers: croppers, share tenants, small farmers, black

¹⁶ *Biggs v. Ferrell* 34 N. C. 1, 3 (1851); *State v. Austin*, 123 N. C. 749, 31 S. E. 731 (1898).

¹⁷ For discussion with citations to statutes and cases see Brannen, *Relation of Land Tenure to Plantation Organization*, U. S. DEPT. OF AGR. BULL. 1269 (1924) 30-31.

¹⁸ Sanders, *Farm Ownership and Tenancy in the Black Prairie of Texas*, U. S. DEPT. OF AGR. BULL. 1068 (1922) 1-2, 12-15.

¹⁹ MONTGOMERY, *THE COÖPERATIVE PATTERN IN COTTON* (1929) 351.

and white, find themselves on the lowest rung of extractive economy alongside the peasants, the fishers, the foresters of the world. This is the base line from which all other industries count their gains. At the lowest levels may be found the Chinese and Hindu peasant farmer. Moreover, these tenants and small farmers live in a credit system in which they must pay interest charges on consumer's goods of 25 per cent or more, buying what few manufactured goods they can in a high domestic market protected by tariff.

Not altogether desirable habits and attitudes peculiar to southern farmers have grown out of the conditions of tenancy and cotton culture. The first attitude may be described as the shiftless attitude of the renter toward the place on which he lives. The common complaint of landlords is of houses allowed to go to ruin, fences torn down, and land lacerated by erosion. Law gives the tenant no interest in his tenancy. A tenure of twenty years gives the renter no more right to remain than a tenure of twenty days. In this the American practice differs from the English. In addition the law gives the tenant no claim for improvements made. The tenant then does not look forward to a future but only to a present use of the farm. In self-defense his is the philosophy of get what he can while he can. To fix fences, clear land, stop gulleys from washing, to repair a shed, or shingle a roof is from his viewpoint a foolish waste of time and energy. From this attitude it may be only a step to the use of fences for firewood. Much of the shiftlessness of southern tenants, regarded in this light, is a self-defensive adjustment. "The Negro," once said a southern governor with the wasteful methods of tenant cultivation in mind, "skins the land, and the landlord skins the Negro."

Mobility furnishes a closely related trait of tenants growing out of a lack of attachment to the farms which they have cultivated. A study by the Department of Agriculture in 1922 estimated there then was a shifting of occupants on 19 per cent of all farms in the United States, 27.7 per cent of tenants and 6 per cent of owners shifting. In eight cotton states, however, 30 to 40 per cent of all farms showed a change of occupants. White croppers reported much shorter average periods of occupancy than colored croppers, ranging from a third of a year to a year and a half.²⁰ This type of mobility demands but a narrow radius, seldom leading the tenant outside the bounds of his native county. In almost any region the form of share rent, a third of corn and a fourth of cotton, set by custom, can take no adequate account of the variations which exist in the fertility of cotton-producing soils in a given area. Variations in character of landlords also exist. Having nothing to lose, the tenant is easily led to move by a desire to secure better land, or to find a more agreeable landlord. Poor housing, inferior educational facilities and health conditions may be regarded as additional factors inciting to mobility. There is always the chance that the tenant may find a better place for no greater expenditure. Let him move a number of times and mobility itself tends to become a habit; the renter has then acquired the reputation of being a shiftless, roving tenant.

²⁰ YEARBOOK, DEPT. AGR. (1923) 590.

The effect of the seasonal cycle of the cotton plant is shown in the social routine of the people. The periods of slack work come in midsummer—July and August—and in midwinter—December and January. After cotton is laid by in July and August, summer terms of school are held in many places, and rural people attend protracted revival services. One cotton planter writes of the practice. "It seems sensible to me. Cotton anyway must be grown by a series of spurts rather than by a steady daily grind." During the hot season "about the best thing for croppers to do is to quit work, visit around and attend the protracted meeting. Then if they haven't killed each other *ad interim* they are physically fit when the rush of cotton picking begins."²¹ Cotton picking mobilizes all the available cheap manual labor in the South. This unmechanized process takes the cooks, maids, roustabouts, idlers and men-of-all-work out of the southern towns, mothers out of the homes, and children out of school. In many places the country schools close until the harvest is gathered. The amount of the farmer's time required to pick an acre of cotton would, it is estimated by the Department of Agriculture, produce three acres of corn in Iowa or four acres of wheat in Kansas. H. C. Brearley found in a study of 1,601 homicides in South Carolina from 1920 to 1924 that:

months of high homicide rates concur rather closely with the seasons of little farming activity, with one peak coming during the winter vacation and the other during the midsummer lay-by and camp meeting time. Two of the three months of least homicides, May and October, are also months when farm labor is most busy.²²

Cotton impinges in yet another manner upon the habits and practices of the South. The cotton growers' flow of money income is subject to a seasonal cycle and to the cycle of cotton prices. This serves to give the cotton growers not only a shifting standard of living, but also serves to prevent them from acquiring habits of thrift. It has been shown that the average money income from cotton has ranged from \$25 to \$200 a bale and from \$10 to \$60 an acre. Without an income which can be counted upon, it is almost impossible for a family to plan and live according to a budget. The consumption of goods by the family thus tends to run in cycles corresponding to those of cotton prices rather than to be equalized over a period of years. The cotton farmer is too much given to alternate periods of splurging and deprivation.

The cotton farmer stands to make or lose his income all in one lump at one time. In the Cotton Belt luxuries are likely to be bought on the spur of the moment, during a good season in cotton, and paid for by deprivation in next year's living. Planters are apt to lament the phonographs, sewing-machines, organs, player pianos, automobiles that their tenants buy during seasons of prosperity as evidences of inherent lack of judgment and extravagance of Negroes and poor white people. The trait, however, draws an origin from the cyclical nature of cotton itself. A period of deprivation during the growing period is relieved by a supply of ready cash income

²¹ Smith, *The Cropper System*, COUNTRY GENTLEMAN (Sept. 4, 1920).

²² Brearley, *Homicides in South Carolina* (1929) 8 SOCIAL FORCES, 218.

secured practically all at one time. The income of the cotton grower has its peaks of high prices, but these peaks are not expected, they are not planned for, and they do not always serve to level up the general standard of living.

Closely connected with devotion to cotton, indeed a part of it, is the speculative attitude engendered by the fluctuations in the price of cotton. A prominent cotton factor in the Eastern Belt writes:

This attitude—a matter of degree, a degree beyond the legitimate risks of normal business—spreads itself in a thoroughgoing way and permeates the economic life of the South. Our most successful and so-called conservative business men grow up with it and are often not aware of its dangers until a crash comes. Meantime, in general, the cotton producer, lien merchant, and dealer has no other outlook, and has learned to live from year to year on the fortunes of risks over which he has absolutely no control, and upon the hazards of which he will stake his all. And when he happens to combine some other line of business with cotton, the risks he exposes himself to are in proportion.

Among the most obvious of the traits associated with cotton are the food habits of its growers. The immense amount of man labor in planting, chopping, and picking cotton comes at times which interfere with the cultivation of other southern crops. Consequently, the family on the one-horse cotton farm has been "driven by compulsion to the most efficient of all the foodstuffs that can be made to suffice."²³ Corn is suited to the southern climate, and is an efficient producer of cereal carbohydrates. A dietary survey conducted during the war found that the maize kernel constituted 23 per cent of the total food intake of Tennessee and Georgia mountaineers, 32.5 per cent of that of southern Negroes, but only 1.6 per cent of the diet of 72 northern families in comfortable circumstances.²⁴ Hogs thrive on corn and, since they complete their growth in one season, may be regarded as comparatively efficient producers of a heavy meat diet. In fact, H. P. Armsby has estimated that about 24 per cent of the energy of grain is recovered for human consumption in pork as compared with about 18 per cent in milk and 3.5 per cent in beef and mutton.²⁵ The cheaper cuts of fat pork, salt cured, become the year round staple of diet. Surveys have shown that pork often amounts to 40 per cent of the value of all articles of food consumed by southern farmers. Sorghum and sugar cane are eminently suited to growth in the southern climate and produce, without demanding too much labor, a food of high sugar content.

Thus it comes about that the Negro cropper, the white tenant, and the small cotton farmer live upon a basic diet of salt fat pork, corn bread, and molasses. This forms the "three M diet," meat, meal, and molasses, noted by Dr. Joseph Goldberger of the United States Health Service, as pellagra producing when made up in conventional proportions.²⁶ When cotton farmers purchase food, these are the articles

²³ Spillman, *Type of Agricultural Production Affecting Expenditures and Culture in SANDERSON, FARM INCOME AND FARM LIFE* (1927) c. XI, p. 194.

²⁴ *Food and the War*, U. S. FOOD ADM. (1918).

²⁵ Armsby, *Roast Pig* (1927) 46 SCIENCE 160.

²⁶ Goldberger, *Pellagra in the Mississippi Flood Area*, PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTS, Reprint, 1187 (1927) 16. See also DE KRUIF, HUNGER FIGHTERS (1928) c. XI.

of diet they purchase; first, because all three are cheap, and second, because food likes and dislikes come to be matters of habit imposed by culture. Exclusive reliance on this diet impairs health and economic efficiency, and thus may serve to cement the cotton farmer closer to his basic diet.

The southern rural attitudes toward the field labor of women and children to a great extent grow out of the seasonal demands of cotton. The unmechanized processes of chopping and picking call for a large amount of unskilled manual labor. The time element also enters. "The limiting factor," writes W. J. Spillman, "is the amount of cotton the average farm family can pick before the cotton begins to deteriorate." One small mule can easily till more cotton than the average farmer can chop and pick. It is true, then, that the most successful cotton farmer is the one who can command a large amount of human labor within his own household. "It has been said with some degree of truth," writes Alexander E. Cance, "that successful farming rests on the unpaid labor of women and children."²⁷ Of the 1,084,128 women listed in the 1920 Census of Occupations as engaged in agriculture, 80 per cent were found in the ten chief cotton states. Practically 20 per cent of all females over ten years of age living on farms in these states were listed as field laborers. Out of every hundred women field laborers, 68 were Negroes and 32 white. In a report of family labor employed per farm October 1, 1927, the South Atlantic states averaged 3.83 and the South Central 3.62 persons as compared with 1.79 for the Western states, 1.82 for North Atlantic and North Central states, and 2.51 for the United States as a whole.²⁸ Large families are an economic asset. Children thus may be said to cost the cotton farmer less and pay him more. Forced by demands of the plant and his economic needs, the one-horse cotton farmer accepts the fieldwork of his womenfolks and children as a matter of course. This attitude on the part of rural families is carried into cotton-mill villages. It is everywhere met in attempts to enforce compulsory school attendance.

VII

The inadequate adjustment of the inefficient one-horse cotton farmer group has not, until recently, operated against its survival in the succeeding generations. Exclusion from urban culture patterns has left the farmer of lower economic levels with less knowledge of contraceptive practices. For the same reasons his attitudes toward the restriction of families partake more of the old, the traditional, and the conservative. Moreover, children are less of an economic handicap in that he is not expected to do as much for them. They are more of an advantage because they furnish unpaid farm labor. After having aided in cultivating the family crop, many sons of farm renters, and of farm owners as well, enter maturity and the ranks of cotton croppers and tenants at the same time. The exhaustion of free land and the differential birth-rate in favor of the farmer, accounts in part for increasing tenancy

²⁷ *Low Standards and Production* in SANDERSON, *op. cit. supra* note 23, c. VI, p. 77.

²⁸ On farms of crop reporters see (1928) 5 CROPS AND MARKETS 362.

rates. Cotton culture, it may be said, after rendering some of its producers inefficient, makes for their survival both in the economic and biological sense. Only recently have we seen the economic attrition to which these groups are subject reflected in a falling birth rate.

As to the problem of tenancy, it seems there is no escaping the conclusion that the cotton system is over-manned, loaded down in normal times by the retainers who cling to it for a miserable sustenance. The unmechanized task of cotton picking has been the neck of the bottle, and, no doubt, the plantation manager has always hoped for cotton harvesting machinery, comparable to the wheat combine, that would enable him to dispense with many of his tenants. It can hardly be denied that the depression, the assumption of the burden of relief by the federal government, and the official enforcement of restricted production are showing Southern landlords means of relieving themselves of responsibilities of which they are glad to be rid. We may be witnessing in our own day a shift of many black and white farm workers from the status of tenants to that of casual laborers. Should the South after a period of mass displacement, mobility, swarming to towns and cities to swell relief rolls, abandon tenancy for a system of casual labor, it will be casual labor with a difference. The casuals of the Wheat Belt winter in Chicago where the problems afforded by their presence are confined to Hobohemia and the police; those of the Southwest retire to Old Mexico or the Little Mexicoes of the cities when their services are no longer in demand. The new casuals of the Cotton Belt must winter in their accustomed haunts, provided with but a meager pittance of a wage, the use of the worst tenant shacks, and what they can "pick up." From no standpoint of living standards, race relations, community conditions, or social welfare can the prospect be called inviting. The Bankhead Act may aid in solving a temporary problem of overproduction; it has no solution to offer for cotton tenancy.

We have never devoted the serious study to this problem that England gave to Irish tenancy or Denmark to her farmers, nor have we attempted to emulate their solutions. Why? Partly because we have had the idea that this is purely a problem of the Negro. This notion is no longer tenable. There are over 1,091,000 white tenants in the South to 698,000 colored tenants. And while one may not be surprised to note that over half of the Negro tenants are croppers, it is startling to learn that over one-third of the white tenants are in the same poverty-stricken class. Even more startling is the realization that from 1920 to 1930, a period of increasing difficulty in cotton production, Negro tenants in the cotton South decreased by some 2,000, while white tenants increased by more than 200,000. The ratio of ownership among both blacks and whites has decreased. It appears that while the Negro has reacted to economic distress by northward migration, the white farmer from the highlands is taking his place in the cotton economy.

While true enough, it is hardly sufficient at this late date to point out that much of this situation has resulted from the concentration of landownership in the hands

of the few and their devotion of that land to the production of staple and export crops to the exclusion of feed and food crops. Landownership itself has of late been a precarious game for the Southerner; many have been forced out by failure; and others would be content to retire on any equitable terms. Lands are never cheaper nor more difficult for tenants to buy than in depressions. Facing the area's vexing and unsolved problems of cotton and tobacco tenancy one may be inclined to wish that "forty acres and a mule" had come true. In the hands of economic realists rather than of military administrators, carpetbaggers, and spoilsmen, less lavish with human lives and more lavish with public credit, with an RFC, an HOLC, and an AAA, with adequate payments to land-poor plantation owners for a portion of their holdings, with the inclusion of the landless whites in the scheme, we might have worked out a better system than the present one, in which over 60 per cent of the farmers in eight Southern states are well-nigh homeless wanderers on the face of the earth, croppers and tenants. In moments of weakness one may indulge in his private vision of every farmer under his own vine and fig tree, tilling only the cotton or tobacco needed for cash incomes. Would "forty acres and a mule" have worked? It may be doubted. But for one I should have been willing to see the new owner forbidden for a period of years to mortgage, sell, rent, or give away his farm. Die he might, but like the Roman Sentry at Pompeii he would have died at his post. We might have thus created a peasantry in the South, but at least they would have been peasant proprietors—and that stage has not yet been attained by over half of our farm families.