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**“FROM THE PINEY WOODS OF TEXAS:
A SMALL FARMER’S IMPROBABLE VOICE”**

by J. Armand Lanier

In 1887, Joseph Benjamin Lanier, an East Texas backwoods farmer, achieved his dream of authorship. His book, *A Guide to the Southern Farmer, or How to Beat the Caterpillar*, was published that year despite remarkable odds. Of elementary education, poor, and with little distinction beyond his immediate farm community, Lanier conceived his treatise while plowing and working his fields located in the great timberlands of Jasper County, Texas, in what is now the Big Thicket’s northern reach.

So far as is known, this book received no recognition in agricultural or literary circles. Few copies were sold. Most ended up as “gifts” in the hands of friends and relatives.¹ The author’s fond goal of saving “millions of dollars, not only to the southern states and the United States, but to the whole world,” was never realized. These shortfalls notwithstanding, Lanier’s *Guide* is historically relevant in its transmission of a compendium of Southern, small-farm heritage. Included in its range of topics are the culture of cotton, corn, sugarcane, potatoes, oats, tobacco, and other crops; the care and treatment of livestock; how children should be raised; how to get rid of bedbugs and the itch; the treatment of croup and corns on the toes; and a sprinkling of down-home philosophy.

Born June 17, 1847, near Shellman, Georgia, Lanier removed to Jasper County with his family in 1859 where he farmed and kept small stores for most of his life. In his late thirties, Lanier experienced a driving need for authorship, but major academic and financial obstacles awaited him. Nevertheless, by bartering eighty-seven acres of land for rhetorical assistance from Eddie Pibus Huffman, a country schoolmaster and farmer, he completed his private publication.

Insomuch as one’s *modus operandi* is influenced by cultural milieu, it is well to note that Lanier’s farm community was settled largely by immigrants of Anglo Saxon stock from the South Atlantic states. And Jasper County, though geographically in Texas, was culturally Deep South and Bible Belt. From this context one can better appreciate the author’s Puritanism and religious bent.

Profoundly reverent, a Methodist, and of simple, evangelical faith, Lanier eschewed liquor, tobacco, coffee, tea, and swearing; he wore no jewelry; and he once walked fifteen miles rather than ride the train on Sunday. Finally, he ascribed to his “kind Parent” the motivation for all his significant achievements in life, including his book’s publication.

What follows are excerpts from *A Guide to the Southern Farmer*. I have exercised considerable license in the ordering of chapters but have not altered the spelling, grammar, or style.

J. Armand Lanier lives in Austin, Texas.

Preface

“The chief object aimed at in this book is to teach farming by theory. . . . Providence nearly always sends us sufficient seasons to make the important or most necessary crops if we know when to plant and how to cultivate. . . . [The author] will also prove that only a certain quantity of plowing is necessary to make crops, and that any more is injurious. . . . Many farmers pray for rain, when if their crops had have been correctly cultivated rain would have been injurious. . . .

Chapter 1 Cotton Culture

“. . . Many farmers have depended on their cotton crops to buy everything they used. Even the most luxurious crops have been neglected for it; in short, cotton was almost worshiped, as is the almighty dollar. This, of course, was imprudent. . . . Farmers should first secure a provisional crop, and cotton next. Then, no doubt, for the many sins that cotton has caused, in the way of speculation, theft, etc., our Maker has sent the caterpillar to destroy it.² But when . . . attacked by diseases, and pestilences, and reform, we are provided with curatives and preventatives. So it is with the caterpillar; they may be annihilated, and a full crop of cotton made by the first of September, in as simple way as planting at a certain time, and cultivating in a certain way. The caterpillar has never been known to destroy the cotton crop before the first of September, except in 1867—then they ate the crop in July and August. . . .

“. . . [T]o be sure of good crops we should have good land, good team, and good tools to work with. The following plows are required: a turn plow, a sweep, a solid shovel (some call them round points, or straight shovels), a scooter, or bull-tongue. Cotton should never be planted on the same land for more than two years in succession; the land should be changed to something else, and a change every year would be better. If planted on corn land, it is best to . . . chop the cornstalks in short pieces, instead of burning them. The land will not bake or run together so bad; in fact the more litter . . . of any kind on the land the better, so it is not too long or large to interfere with the plow, or tear up the cotton in chopping out to a stand.

Chapter II How to Plant Cotton, and When to Plant It

“After the land has been cleaned up, it should be laid off deep, in three-and-a-half foot rows, with a scooter plow, then take a turn plow and bed up, plow deep, the deeper the better. One of the greatest secrets of making any kind of crop is to plow deep as long as it can be done without . . . breaking the roots of the plant. . . . If the land is very turfy and cloddy it should be pulverized. . . . After the land has been bedded up, it is best to have a rain to settle it before beginning to plant. Then if we have a planter, it may be used with a careful hand, holding it straight on the ridge or row. If planted with a plow, open on the top of the ridge or row very lightly with a small scooter, or bull-tongue, and cover with a board or harrow. Two horses and three hands

may plant from eight to ten acres per day in this way.

“Cotton is different from some other crops; the rows should be as close, and the stalks as thick in the drill, as it can conveniently be worked. Then no matter how wet . . . dry, how rich, nor how poor the land, three and a half feet is the proper width for the rows.

“Commence planting cotton on the sixth of April, finish planting on that day if possible, but never plant earlier, unless the land is manured with horse-stable manure, or some other warming fertilizer. Cotton may be planted any time in May, and even the first of June, and good crops made, if seasonable and the worms do not injure it. But commence planting the sixth of April, and finish by the tenth, for a sure crop. The old way of planting cotton is to crowd it on poor land, and give distance on rich land. Most every planter thinks unless his cotton has distance every way on rich land, the bottom and middle crop will rot. This is a grand mistake; the thicker it is the better it opens, the quicker it takes the strength of the land, and the quicker it matures and gets out of the way of the worms. When cotton is crowded, it doesn't grow so fast, nor make as large a stalk. For this reason there is not so much sap, and at a certain age the bottom leaves will turn yellow and drop off, giving air and sun sufficient to open matured bolls. The sooner cotton seed, or any other kind of seed, gets out of the ground, the healthier and thriftier it is. Though it is necessary to cover some seed deep, that are planted in the fall or winter, to prevent severe freezes from killing the roots of the plant. Then the shallower cotton seed are covered the surer of a stand, and the better. Careful hands generally plant from one to one and a half bushels of seed per acre, though more or less may be planted, and no harm done.

Chapter III

How Cotton should Be Cultivated

“After your cotton comes up, and has three or four leaves on it, you may then bar it off with a good turn plow; a steel plow is best for clay or sticky lands. Bar close, but shallow, to prevent falling down. In barring be sure and let the dirt lap well in the middle, or between the rows, so as to cover up all vegetation. After this has been done, chop out to a stand, leaving it straight in the drill, and one stalk in a place, from ten to fifteen inches apart. After chopping out, take a small sweep, run round and dirt it; either a solid or buzzard-wing sweep will do.

“Cotton may be run round and dirted immediately after being chopped out; but should not stand longer than five or six days without it. . . . If the land is strong, and there is much rain, the crop should be worked faster than poor land with little rain. It is best to always have a rain between plowings. Crops do much better plowed when there is a season in the ground. But never plow immediately after a heavy rain. . . .

“After your cotton has been run round with a small sweep, let it stand from nine to fifteen days, then go over with a hoe, if necessary, taking out the scattering weeds, if any. Then take a long, solid shovel and run round it again,

dirting nicely. The shovel should be six and a half or seven inches wide. . . .

“. . . [A] crop should be plowed deep all the time, except the last plowing. At that time there is no way of plowing deep without cutting the roots of the plant, and causing serious injury. Then shallow plowing is very necessary, the last plowing in any crop except a vine crop.

“After your cotton has been run round with a solid shovel, let it stand from nine to fifteen days; this forces the side, or fiber roots deep in the ground, causing them to go below the shovel furrows, to cross into the middle of the row. Then, plow out the middles deep with a turn plow, running close enough to shovel furrow to dirt the cotton a little again, if necessary. This leaves your cotton with a deep and thorough plowing, and no roots cut.

Chapter IV

“. . . After your middles have been thoroughly plowed out with a turn plow, let your cotton stand from nine to fifteen days, then take a sixteen or eighteen-inch sweep, and run round again *very lightly*. This will dirt the cotton and fill the water-furrow or middle. Then let stand, run round from nine to fifteen days, or until it rains. Then sweep out the middle lightly. One furrow with a large sweep will generally do the work. This is all the plowing necessary to make a cotton crop; any more is injurious. . . . There is also many that think cotton sheds worse by having narrow rows, and leaving thick in the drill, but this is a mistake. . . . [C]rowding the plant forces it to maturity, after it has put on all the fruit the land is capable of supporting. Another advantage is, by having cotton thick it shades the ground quicker, and checks vegetation and as there is not so much fruit to the stalk it is not so apt to break or fall down. And though cotton may appear to shed worse when thick, yet it will hold and mature all the land is capable of bearing. And as the caterpillar can only subsist on the tenderest food when young, there will not be so many tender buds for them to grow . . . on. No matter how you plant and cultivate cotton, some of its fruit will drop off. But two stalks will take the strength of the land quicker than one. And when the sap in the stalk is sufficiently checked with age and maturity, the blooms will make open cotton in six or seven weeks. Some farmers top their cotton, but it is seldom necessary to top cotton if planted and cultivated by theory. If your cotton is in a thrifty, growing state the first of September, then to take out three or four inches of the bud, may mature a few more bolls. But it should never be topped earlier than from the first to the tenth of September. . . .

Chapter V

When and How Cotton Should Be Gathered and Housed

“As soon as hands can pick fifty pounds of cotton per day, they should commence and keep picking until it all opens. Good hands may pick from one hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty pounds of clean cotton per day. If picked when wet, or even damp, it should be dried in the sun before bulking away. If picked out early and bulked away dry, and allowed to remain for several weeks—as the cranium affords oil for the hair—so the oil of the seed

seems to evaporate into the lint, making it much heavier and may be better. . . . By following the above directions of gathering and housing, three pounds of seed cotton will make one of lint, and probably more.

Chapter XXIX

How to Raise, Gentle, and Train Horses

“. . . We should commence to rub and handle colts from the time they are a day or two old until they are large enough to ride. Rub them all over once or twice a day with the hand, tickling them under the lower jaw and about the throat, and as soon as old enough, learn them to eat out of your hand, and calling them by some name. When quite young, or at a few months old, bridle them and learn them to lead, but they should never be led too far at a time. But bridle often and do not keep it on long enough to worry them, and when the bridle is taken off they should not be frightened by striking at them, as it will learn them to be hard to catch. . . . It is best to break a colt about the lot or pasture where it is used to staying. When they get large enough to ride, the bridle and saddle should be put on them cautiously, then lead them a while after their mother or some gentle horse that they have been running with. After the colt gets used to the saddle, someone may hold it until the rider gets up, holding it by the bits of the bridle. Then it should be led again until it gets used to carrying its rider. After it gets to following good the leader may gradually fall behind. After riding a half hour or so, the rider should then dismount as cautiously as possible and take the saddle and bridle off with equal caution so as not to frighten the colt. This process should be repeated several times before he is rode by himself. Ride often but not too long at a time (say two or three times a day), as the colt may become jaded and contrary. After dismounting always pet the colt a little by rubbing and tickling it under the neck and calling it by name, etc. If it should become necessary to hitch or tie a colt it should always be done with a rope or something it can not break. After it becomes gentle, then the bridle will do to tie with. Never whip or even scold a horse for being frightened, but treat them as you would a child. You may shame or rather encourage them by talking and calling them by name, and they will eventually become ashamed, apparently, to scare.

Chapter XXX

“It is a great satisfaction to have horses broke gentle and trained to pull heavy draughts, but to do this requires judgment and patience. Kind treatment is the first thing. Let the horse believe that you are his protector. . . . It has a good effect to act with apparent unconcern; whistling, singing, etc., while handling or training an unbroke horse. . . . Never overload a team of any kind, for nothing is more aggravating than a balky team. As a rule, the remedy for breaking one from balking is as bad as the disease. If you have a horse that pulls a little way and stops, or is inclined to balk, always say, “Ho!” just before he stops of his own accord. Then get out and go to his head, and shake and work at the collar and harness. This makes him believe there is something that causes him to stop, or that his driver thinks so. Then no matter if he only pulls three steps at a time, continue the above process as long as he is inclined to

stop, and it will generally do more good than whipping, and the horse will become a good puller. . . .

“. . . Never cluck to horses with a load, as it inclines to fret them. A good word to use when we want to start a team is “Hape!” in a low, calm voice. And if we get in a tight place and want to excite our team, holloa “Hop!” in a loud, sharp voice. To cluck to horses will do while driving in a buggy when we want them to trot, but not while in a loaded wagon. These are the rules that I have always followed in managing stock and have never had a horse to jump with me in breaking them to the saddle nor to balk in harness. . . .

“. . . [I]t is more necessary to be particular in selecting good and well made stallions, than the males of most any of our domestic animals; and for this reason it is more necessary to be good judges of horses. . . . Then in saving a stallion or selecting a good horse, the following marks are necessary, to wit: First: He should be large. Second: He should have a short back. Third: He should be broad across the loins, or from hip to hip. Fourth: He should have long hams. Fifth: He should have a broad and deep chest and breast. Sixth: He should have a large foot; and Seventh: He should have a Roman nose. Eighth: He should have a full convex eye. A stallion with these marks will do to breed from.

Chapter XXXII Hooks and Lampas

“If horses are used very hard and fed on dry food for a long time without change, they sometimes lose their appetite and become weak, stumble with their hind feet, their eyes run water, etc. Then a great many people say they have the hooks, and use the cruel remedy of cutting great flakes of flesh out of the corners of their eyes. And if a horse’s upper gums swell so that it is difficult for him to bite corn, it is commonly called lampas, and the common remedy among quacks is to heat an iron and burn them out. But this is very cruel. All that is necessary for hooks or lampas, the horse should have plenty of green food with their corn or oats, with a level table-spoonful of salt once a day; and with sufficient rest and good treatment the horse will soon recover.

Chapter XXXIV Blind Stagers, Chokes, Etc.

“When horses have blind stagers they appear perfectly blind and crazy. They will run against anything, fall on their heads, etc., and at times appear to be sound asleep. As soon as they are taken with this disease, first, bleed in the mouth, as directed in preceding chapter, then cord and bleed in the neck. . . .

“If horses are allowed to get very hungry, then given dry fodder or hay, it is not uncommon for them to get choked on account of greediness, or putting more in their mouth than they can swallow. . . . [T]hey may often be relieved by running and jumping them over logs, etc. But if this should fail, cord and bleed freely in the neck. In severe cases it is sometimes necessary to bleed until they fall. This will always give relief if done in time.

"Horses should be regularly watered and fed, and salted at least twice a week; or if a lump of rock salt is laid by them so that they can lick at their leisure, it would no doubt be better.

Chapter XXVII **How Children Should Be Raised—** **What They Should Be Taught, Etc.**

"The whole human family originated . . . from Adam and Eve, and since the Creation they have been divided into three classes: the white, black, and red. The most enlightened of us consider some one of these classes heathen; and there may be some difference in the blood or stock of the different classes of people . . . but no doubt there is more in the raising and training than any thing else. . . . After children are old enough the most important thing to teach is morality and Christianity, and to reverence the teachings of the Scriptures—teach them there is a God, and without him they can do nothing. . . .

"Children should never be scolded unless they necessarily deserve it, and by all means never whip one as long as it can be avoided. . . . [K]ind talk with good advice, while their hearts are young and tender, will do more good than all the whipping and scolding. . . . Using profane language and even by-words, and vulgar remarks . . . are bad and unnecessary examples.

". . . Parents should never try to teach their children something that they do not practice themselves; but should always lead the way by setting good examples. If Noah had not have entered the ark first in all probability his family would not. Children should be taught industry and economy. It is very essential first, to accumulate or make; and it is equally essential to take care of what is made. . . . [T]hey should be raised to have confidence in themselves by allowing them to consider themselves as good as any one, and at the same time they should always extend the necessary courtesy to every one that respect themselves. . . . I maintain that two gentlemen never quarrel and fight. In case a misunderstanding should occur between two gentlemen they always meet and understand each other before getting angry. One at least is apt to be in fault, and should apologize to the other, thus settling without having any difficulty. . . . Some people seem to take a pleasure in making game of poor and ignorant persons, simply because they are poor and ignorant. This is very wrong; no matter how poor and ignorant either white or black, the necessary courtesy should always be extended to them.

Chapter XXVIII

"Young men should be discreet in all their practices, and remember that virtue alone is happiness. Troubles and pestilences are brought on by violating the commandments. . . . God intended that virtue should be practiced among men as well as women. In the eyes of the world men practice things and it passes almost unnoticed, when if women are guilty of the same acts they would be disgraced and ruined forever. . . . [L]et your actions be such as will enable you to say: I will do right and fear not; I will live like a man, so that I may die like a man.

Chapter XL General Remarks

"I look upon the use of tobacco with the greatest horror, and had nearly as soon be an opium eater as to use it. There is said to be seventy different diseases caused from the use of it. Of course this may be exaggeration, but remember our saliva is intended to moisten the food of the stomach, and the tobacco user is constantly spitting or throwing off the saliva. . . . The whole system becomes poisoned from the use of it. . . . Incurable sores, such as cancers, etc., no doubt they generally originate from the use of tobacco. It is perfectly natural for the flesh to heal if the system is healthy, and tobacco poisons the whole system. For this reason if I were to cure a cancer, or an old sore of any kind, the first thing I would require of the patient would be to quit the use of tobacco. . . . It is not only throwing money away . . . but no doubt it . . . will shorten our lives at least twenty years. . . .

Chapter XLI

"As I have already advised the men in regard to their imprudence, I feel that I would hardly be doing my duty without mentioning a few things . . . detrimental to the general health and prosperity of women. This is vanity, fashion, and extravagance generally. . . . Any one may dress fine and . . . yet be very economical. They may also be very stylish and yet possessed with very little vanity; but to lace so that it is difficult to breath, and to wear a dress with a yard or two dragging on the ground is all vanity and extravagance. . . . Any one can scarcely make or have so much but what they can spend or get rid of. Many desolate and dilapidated homes have been made on account of extravagance. . . .

"Any thing once well done is worth several times half done. . . . [I]t is plain that any one may not only be extravagant in having a surplus, and breaking and throwing away, but even in their work. . . .

Chapter XLIII Household Recipes, Etc.

For Burns and Scalds

"There is said to be nothing more soothing than the white of an egg, which may be poured over the wound. The egg is also considered one of the best remedies for dysentery, beaten up lightly with or without sugar and swallowed at one gulp. . . .

Itch

"Itch is supposed by some to be nothing more than a blood disease, but it is an ugly, filthy insect. . . . These insects, like body lice, and mange on hogs, are generally caused from actual filth, such as using bed clothes too long without washing, sunning, or changing. After the disease makes its appearance, first wash with tobacco tea and salt dissolved in it, then after drying off, grease thoroughly with sulphur and lard. Repeat the application three or four times, keeping the same clothes on several days after greasing.

Then wash off clean and change both wearing and bed clothes. Three drachms of tobacco, or one twentieth of a quarter pound of plug, three or four tablespoonfuls of salt to a gallon of water is the proportion to use for the wash. . . .

For Bed-Bugs

“Bed-bugs, like some other insects, may be avoided by good house-keeping and cleanliness in general. . . . Should these insects become troublesome take down the bedsteads and carry them out in the yard, and undo every screw, and scrape and brush out every crevice about them. Then take one pint of spirits of turpentine, one ounce of corrosive sublimate, one ounce of gum camphor, put in a bottle and shake up well, put on with a mop early in the spring, and it will not fail to destroy them, neither will it destroy furniture. If . . . well put on one application will last at least twelve months or longer. . . .

“ . . . To make a good fertilizer build a pen out of rails . . . and throw in two loads of pine straw and oak leaves, then throw on top . . . a half bushel of salt and a bushel of lime, then throw in a load of cow-pen, horse-stable manure, or cotton seed. . . . If the manure or cotton seed cannot be had, use muck from a creek or river bottom, or a pond, which is a good substitute. Continue the process of the leaves, pine straw, salt, lime, and manure until the pen is filled. . . .

“It is said tie a fresh onion around the neck and bruise it to make its odor thorough and you secure sound sleep from its nightly inhalation. . . .

“ . . . Boys should be taught while young to have every respect for the female sex, especially for ladies. They should never speak slightly of them in the least; always be ready and willing to assist them in any way. . . . When walking with a lady on the streets the lady should always be on the safest side. . . . [O]n railroad cars the ladies should always have the most comfortable seats. Old age should always be respected, and young people should never talk while older ones are talking; and they should never sit while older ones are standing. . . .

“Where there are both boys and girls in a family let it be early understood that there is a certain amount of deference due the girls from the boys. This has a refining influence upon the boys. It is necessary to teach the boys that they are the natural protectors of their sisters. . . .

“Politeness costs us nothing, and there is nothing . . . more becoming in employers than to be polite and agreeable with their servants or hirelings. In fact there can be no true gentleman unless he is polite and has the proper respect for others' feelings. . . .

“ . . . No one should ever think they are too wicked to get forgiveness, and should never think it is too late to do good. In company and among strangers and acquaintances, endeavor to learn something from all. Be swift to hear, but be cautious of your tongue lest you betray your ignorance and perhaps offend some of those who are present, too. Be not frightened or provoked at opinions differing from your own.

A Prayer for the Young and Old

“. . . Then, kind Parent. . . Teach me what to do and how to do, and when to do in every thing that is pleasing in thy sight. Send us such seasons as will be beneficial to our crops, our health, and our general welfare. Then, heavenly Parent, when thou hast done with us here on earth let us rest, for Christ's sake. Amen.”

Lanier's book is an exceptional document because of the limiting circumstances surrounding its publication, and because it depicts the farm methods of a generally silent population—the small Southern farmer. It presents a range of farm practices from folk remedies to soil conservation. The author's advocacy for crop rotation, diversification, and the use of manures and humus, for example, has been viewed as advanced for the small farmer of that day.¹ His recommendation of bloodletting for the treatment of “Blind Stagers” in horses, however, contrasts with his admonition to “never whip nor scold a horse for being frightened, but treat them as you would a child. . . . Let the horse believe you are his protector.”

To relate Lanier's proffered practices without due reference to his moral and religious values would be to serve the whole man poorly. He espoused asceticism and a Puritanical morality. As related above, these principles and the Protestant ethic permeated his style of living: witness his attitudes toward tobacco (which he refused to sell in his small store), the Sabbath, profanity, and his advocacy of self-control, self-denial, simplicity of dress, and the moral value of work. But there was also a softer side to his practices, as seen in his ideas about child rearing, human relations, and the handling of horses.

Many years ago, a great niece of Lanier's related to me how, as children, she and her siblings thought “Uncle Joe” too good to die: rather, “he would be lifted up like Elijah.” And there is evidence that he, himself, believed he would be “translated.” Nevertheless, on December 22, 1916, at his son's residence in Newton, Texas, Joseph B. Lanier left this life through the medium of mundane pneumonia.

NOTES

¹A recent search via the Interlibrary Loan Office and OCLC for Lanier's book: Joseph Benjamin Lanier, *A Guide to the Southern Farmer, or How to Beat the Caterpillar* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House, 1887), has revealed but two cataloged copies; one each at the Texas State Archives Commission in Austin and the University of Georgia Library in Athens. The first of these is “non-circulating;” the accessibility of the latter is unknown. Earlier searches of the *National Union Catalogue* and the *National Agricultural Library Catalogue* found no listing of this volume.

²Supportive of Lanier's concern for the “caterpillar” problem is the finding that twenty percent of the cotton crop in Jasper county, Texas, was destroyed by worms in 1887-1888, according to L.L. Foster in *First Annual Report of the Agricultural Bureau of the Department of Agriculture, Insurance, Statistics, and History, 1887-1888* (Austin, 1889), p. 117.

³In a letter to J. Armand Lanier dated September 18, 1967, L. Vaughn and Cloe Smith of Garner, Texas, tendered a detailed review of the field crops section of Lanier's *Guide*. That they were qualified for such an evaluation follows from their combined experience of more than fifty years as small farmers in north central Texas, dating from the first decade of the twentieth century. It is largely the Smiths' impressions that the compiler has drawn upon for current assessment of Lanier's “theories.”