Day After Day - March 1943

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes her tour of the South in prose which evokes the rigors of travelling by bus in wartime and her reactions to the people she meets in Florida and Alabama. Praises the work of priests and religious in Alabama. Describes the hard work and poor housing for Negroes, Southern land ownership patterns, and race relations. (DDLW #387).

The story of a journey. It was balmy and sunny as I got on the bus in Miami in the middle of February. The birds were just beginning to sing after months of silence, and the orange trees burst into blossom. There were many trees still bare, though, because it was just spring there and the buds had not started to come out on the cypress trees in the Everglade swamps where the Seminole Indians live. The bus was not crowded for it was early in the morning, still dark. We crossed the peninsula, on a smooth all day trip to Sarasota, where I was to stop over with Margaret Connolly, one of our friends from Pittsburgh who has come to Florida with her mother on account of her health. She has an apostolate there, for her tiny little house is in the midst of circus people who settle there for the winter, and many of them are former Catholics.

Tampa

As I arrived the weather broke and became cold and the one heavy cold spell that always seems to hit Florida every winter was there. In Tampa it was not so bad, but still too brisk for their heatless houses. There I was the guest of Ida Caminitti, a Hungarian, married to an Italian detective, and we had a most delightful day together. She herself runs something of a house of hospitality in her own home and exemplifies the sense of personal responsibility. It is amazing what one woman is able to do. Priests and sisters turn to her for her help in settling problems and one of the Holy Name sisters told me how when there were poor children who needed operations and other such problems they called Ida and got her advice and help. She is not a trained social worker, but she knows what to do always in an emergency. I spoke at two of the Holy Name schools, and in the afternoon at a Jesuit high school; then visited a Salesian orphanage where I was delighted to find my pastor from Mott street, New York, Fr. Trifari, about to give a retreat. I saw, too, the beginnings of a farming commune that Ida is aiming towards. She herself knows many crafts and is an able teacher and the beautiful spot she showed me where a beginning has been made will be an ideal location for a little village of farmers and craftsmen.

That night I got on the bus at nine to journey all night towards my next stop. By now it was bitter cold. The bus was jammed, people standing in the aisles. Everyone in the armed forces going on leave and all those going to visit camps,

like to travel all night to conserve some of their precious hours of leave, so the busses are always jammed. At 5 o'clock we were in Tallahassee, the capital of Florida, and it was fourteen above zero. I was chilled to the bone, but I comforted myself, in the disagreeable way humans have, by reflecting on the group at the c.o. camp at Warner, New Hampshire, where it has been sixty below zero this winter!

Waiting

The bus station was a tiny one and crowded to the doors with people waiting for busses to New Orleans, to the west coast, to the east, to Miami, to Atlanta, and points north. There were only a few benches and every bit of floor space was taken by people sitting on their suitcases. The door opened and shut and let in blasts of cold wind. The pot bellied stove roared and when the doors were not open the atmosphere was stifling. Our wait was a three-hour one and never did three hours drag so long and wearily. From five to eight most religious are making their meditations, saying their office, offering their daily Mass. The most important work of the day was being done. But everyone in that bus station was in a stupor of fatigue. Hard to say a morning prayer in a place like that.

By two in the afternoon we had arrived at Columbus, Ga., and my destination was across the river, into the State of Alabama for twenty-three miles to the Holy Trinity, the cradle of those two new religious orders founded by Father Judge, the Missionary servants of the Most Holy Trinity.

They have a Cenacle in Phoenixville, Alabama, which is what they call their houses–a school run by the sisters. The principal told me of the unorganized condition of workers in the huge mills there and in Columbus and the long hours, and less pay they were getting now. Of course, they are all working, which is more than they did during the depression, but they are still the poor, still living in bad houses, still slaves of the machine, and degraded as Pope Pius XI said, by that service to the machine. The sisters know the conditions; they teach the children of the workers.

Pilgrimage

It was good to see the first little chapel of the Missionary Servants, which is an old Negro cabin and which still is a chapel. In the crude sacristy built on like a porch Fr. Judge slept on a slab of wood. A Vincentian himself, sent to work in the South, the lay people who came to help him, were formed by him into two religious communities and have grown tremendously in the last quarter of a century. Their work is to seek out the most abandoned ones and they certainly find them in the South. They have charge of a good deal of work among the poor of the North and they must also get their support from the North for the

St. Peter Claver Negro Mission at Holy Trinity and the Cenacle at Pensacola that takes care of the fishermen where I visited three years ago.

I was reminded of my winter reading about the Fathers of the Desert as I drove out into the Alabama wilderness to reach the 2,500 acres of St. Joseph's school at Holy Trinity. The Sisters, a mile away, have 1,500 acres. They came to settle here because one of the Sisters, as a lay woman, possessed these 1,500 acres which she turned over to the community. The brothers bought the adjoining land. Nearby plantations are owned by individuals and are of 20,000 acres in extent.

Ownership

Mr. Patterson, for instance, owns 20,000 acres and each year he loses a little to the state to pay his taxes. Perhaps even some Negro family, frugal and lucky, have been able to buy. I did not see much of absentee ownership in this area. Not like Arkansas and Oklahoma where fifty to one hundred thousand acre tracts are owned by insurance companies and banks in the north. Mr. Patterson has twenty-five families farming his land and paying rent for their acreage at the rate of a bale of cotton a year. One good Negro farmer told me it took 19 acres to raise two bales of cotton. "Used to get a bale to two acres," he said, "but now what with drought and boll weevil those times are gone."

The land is exhausted, of course, and the market uncertain. But still that does not excuse the owners from allowing their tenants to live in such crowded and hideous condition.

The first family we visited comprised twenty-two people, all in two rooms. Most families number around ten or twelve and always just the two rooms, a fireplace in each room, cooking done in a fireplace from that meager flame. Over and over again that morning I saw the burnt limbs of little Negro children caused by being pushed into, or falling into, the fire.

Fr. Gilbert

Fr. Gilbert is in charge of the St. Peter Claver mission, which was built up by the labor of Fr. Celestine and the brothers of the order. Everyone in the order is taught to build and to do electrical and plumbing work so that they can build up their own missions.

Fr. Gilbert has a little Church, a School, a rectory of three rooms, the front room of which is used for catechism classes. Now they are building a dispensary and store and meeting rooms. Right now there are two sisters teaching in the school where the attendance is only for four months of the year, and then only a few days a week. If the weather is bad the pupils do not come. If there is work

to do, they are absent. Most families work from sunup to sundown from the time the ploughing begins in February.

We visited all the first day I was there. We visited the McLinden plantation too, which isn't as large as that of Patterson, but which is rich bottom land along the Chatahoochie river. McLinden, so the neighbors say, is making a fortune fattening hogs and he gets all the slop he needs from Fort Benning, which is just across the river. There are sixty families living on his rich five thousand acres and their houses were the worst of all. You could see through roofs, through cracks in the walls. The stairs up to the rickety porch were in decay, the houses sagged.

Living Conditions

One old woman, Neecy, over seventy, lived all alone in one of these one room shacks, with a leaky roof, with rheumatism so bad she could scarcely get out to cut the wood she needed to keep warm. There was nothing in the house for her [to] eat the morning we got there. Father Gilbert brought her rice and fat back. She had nursed McLinden's children, Fr. Gilbert said. Now she is going cold and hungry in her old age under his very eyes. There is worse he could do, of course. He could dispossess her. She showed me her good "kivers" that kept her warm at night she said. They were so clean, so ragged. It struck me specially, how clean most of the beds were, neatly made, blankets and even sheets spotless, in such hovels that in the north animals would not be expected to live in them.

Down the road lived Bee with nine children and no man around to support them. She was still nursing the youngest as she worked in the fields for fifty cents a day, and she was docked five cents for taking time off to nurse her baby. I can scarcely believe that myself, but I got it on good authority. (One old woman in Birmingham, who had been a slave, assured us that the first job she had as a little girl was to lie across the foot of the bed of her master and mistress and keep their feet warm. I found that hard to believe, too, but the story is indicative of the mood of the Negro.)

Race Feeling High

Race feeling is high in the south, and when articles such as this are published, we are blamed for fomenting it. People like Fr. LaFarge, who work for the Negro in the north, are blamed, too, for this growing conflict. Down around Fort Benning northerners and the army are blamed for giving the Negro high pay and "taking him out of his place." Colored women won't work for white women any more and no help is to be had in the fields, thanks to the high wages in the cities.

"We always take care of our niggers," is the expression. "They get into trouble and we get 'em out. They go to jail and we pay their fines and get 'em out. We know how to treat them and we want the northerners out of here."

And there's rumors of the Klan rising again in Alabama.

When they talk about getting "their niggers out of trouble" or paying for their operations, their "masters" fail to state that repayment is exacted to the uttermost farthing. A cow or donkey is taken in security or a family is enslaved for years. To get a man to work, often it is necessary to pay a price for him, seventy-five dollars or so, indebtedness to his former landlord.

Housing Needs

Someone once said that shoes and paint are what are needed in the south. I would say housing. Moral conditions and health conditions are bad on account of the housing.

We visited some of the families who worked hard and long and whose miserable shacks were clean as hand could make them. There was the Thornton family, for instance. Fourteen of them in two rooms. The baby was named Moses, and one of the children Roosevelt. (As I passed block after block of model housing for the Negro in all the cities of the South that I visited I, too, blessed President Roosevelt. Many a child is named after him in those houses). But there are no houses in the rural sections of the country, and where rural houses have been suggested as in Horse Creek Valley in South Carolina, the plans were for city dwellings. When criticism was made the projects were dropped.

Yes, these people work hard. When the children get to school they show themselves to be as bright as white children. In many a section they are even healthier.

Know How to Eat

Certainly, they know how to eat. They raise their half acre of cane and in September there is a fine time of syrup making and every family gets their sugar syrup for the winter. They raise corn and it is ground as they use it at a communal mill where the Brothers are. They have a few hogs for fat back, a cow perhaps if they are well off, and they raise collard greens and turnip greens. There are fresh figs growing in abundance in this section and plenty of blackberries. But, of course, no canning is done for lack of equipment and you never hear talk of drying fruit as you do in Italy. There are also pecans for food. There is good lumber, pin oak, scrub oak and pine. In spite of the poorness of the soil there is a good living for the hard working and only a few months of cold, but many months of stifling heat.

Little Ownership

But there is little ownership and the responsibility which goes with ownership. The people might as well be living like gypsies or nomads in tents, for all the comfort of the housing.

President Roosevelt has brought them schools and roads and some electrification. There's been many a WPA project and local people have been allowed two dollars a day for helpers, but have paid them one dollar and then charged fifty cents a day for transportation.

"They don't know what to do with their money when they have it," they say, referring to the Negro. "They just blow it."

Which, of course, is what our modern advertising men and newspapers, and movies, and radio, and schools have taught people to do.

After all, you can't buy a house and a few acres on fifty cents a day or two dollars a day.

(The account of this trip will be continued in the next issue.)