

Life Histories

Walter Rowland - Arkansas
June, 1939

Ain't Got No Screens

They were seated on the front porch of a three-room, unpainted shack. She, a portly Negress, was comfortably anchored in a swing behind a veil of honeysuckle vines. He was draped languidly about a tilted, cane-bottom chair, one leg of which was perilously near a gaping hole in the floor.

"Come in, suh," he unwrapped himself from his chair, and hastily brought another, which he placed safely away from the hole. "Dat noon breeze comes thoo hyar. Hit's fine, too, dese hot days.

"No, suh, I ain' been to de fiel' dis mornin', jus' puckerin' aroun' de house a bit; hit's mos' too wet to work in de fiel'-- little mo' rain and dey won't be no cotton, though they ain' been near de rain we had de year of de Big Flood--

"What year was de Big Flood, honey? It was de yeah after we come up fum Mississippi-- must've been twenty-seb'm. And rain! Dey wuz fifteen families on ouah place; de landlord got his stuff out to high land, and he never left nothin' to hep us git out cepn' two ole pieces of wagins and a no 'count team of mules dat would'n pull more'n fo' men.

"Time hit come my turn, water wuz up to de wagin bed, and I couldn' see de road, though I knowed whare it was; but you know, long's I been on de farm I cain't drive a team tell yet, and I got 'em too fur to one side 'tween two dreens, en de wagin tumbled over in de deep water, en we lost practick'ly all we 'cumulated, furniture en all.

"I give up de bottoms den; hit's better land, but I got to be where I kin

git out when I wants to git out.

"You say dis land look like bottom land to you? Co'se hit's black and strong and level, but hit's a heap higher dan de bottoms, I tell you!

"How do we farm? Well, dey's sev'ul diff'unt ways. Dare is de cash rentuh, but we has always sharecropped, on a third and a four-- he furnish de house en de land en credicks you enough to live on, en den you settles at de end of de year. In de cotton we gives him a fourth, in de cawn he gits a third-- ain' dat right, honey?" he asked his wife. "Anyhow, when you raise four bales of cotton de landlord gits one en you git three, and if you raise three wagon loads of cawn he gits de first one en you git the other two.

"Landlord's got a store on de place, en he 'low you so much a week on de books-- dey wuz four in my family and he did'n 'low us but a twenty-four poun' sack of flouah, en a twenty-four poun' sack of meal, en eight poun's of lard, en maybe a bar of soap. Ef you got molasses you didn' git no sugah, en ef you got bakin' powdah you didn' git no sody-- Meat? Whooo! We didn' git no meat, but we'd ketch a mess of fish now en den, en de nex' year we had ouah own meat.

"De landlord wouldn' give us no land foh a garden, er no wire to fence it, ef we could of got some land. He ain' like Mistuh Blakely down de road. Mistuh Blakely give his 'croppers land foh a garden, en if dey use it he doan charge 'em no rent, but ef dey doan' use it he makes 'em pay rent on it, eight dollars an acre-- but we had to plant cotton right up to de do'.

"Tolbert, dat's my oldes'-- hard out sometimes drivin' tractor-- he got six bits a day foh workin' fum kin to cain't, fum sunup to sundown. He got a dollah a day foh a while, but den dey put him back on six-bits. No, suh, when it rain en he cain' work he doan' git no six-bits foh dat day. Tolbert he kin do anything to a tractor, he kin take one down and put it back up, en he kin tell jus' by listening what's wrong with one; learned it all jus' by studyin'

a 'struction book. No, suh, you see, dey doan' use no colored mechanics hyar in Holly Grove, en I guess he woan' never git nothin' but six-bits a day. Yas, suh, I guess he could go off somewhare, but I doan' speck he will--

"We misses screens de mos' aroun' dis place, pesky flies and mosquitoes is so bad. I said sump'n about it to Mr. Roper early dis spring, but I guess he forgot-- or mebbe he ain' forgot, he jus' doan' want us to have no screens. Jus' like I wanted a patch of sorghum, make me some 'lasses with, but he say hit sour the land. What he mean was, hit sour dat ninety cents a bucket he gits for Steamboat.

"Most of us is credick men-- you gives a dime foh a nickel box of matches, and a dime foh a nickel bah of soap-- mebbe two foh fifteen, en you kin git flouah en meal in town foh about half whut it cost you out'n the comm'sary. We-el, yas, suh, I meant de cash price in town, dey ain' no credick in town, less'n yo' landlord stand good, en den dey marks you up en he git a percent off'n you. Sometimes where dey ain' no sto' on the plantation all de landlords goes in and buys stock in de sto' in town, en hit's jus' de same.

"De landlord is landlord, de politicians is landlord, de judge is landlord, de shurf is landlord, ever'body is landlord, en we ain' got nothin'!

"You take de acre p'duction checks de gov'munt gives for not planting cotton: Fust dey wuz made out so's we couldn' git 'em thout de landlord-- dey wuz even sent to him-- en he mark 'em up en mark 'em down, en mark you up in de comm'sary en mark you down, en den we didn' git no checks, we jus' signed en git whut he say we had comin'. En de landlord think he ought to have all the acre p'duction checks, cause it his land, en we oughtn' to git nothin', but de Tenant Farmers Union put up a kick, en now dey send us de checks-- ef we evah git anoth'un. Who gives de checks out? I doan' know who, jus' de gov'munt. But dey comes thoo de county board, en dey is all landlords--

"I thinks mebbe nex' year I'll git a place on Sebastian McGehee's farm-- he's a colored man-- en he's mo' apt to treat me right, en den I kin have a garden, en a patch o' peanuts, en some Arsh 'taters, en some sweet 'taters; en Sebastian got screens on all his houses. I'd lots ruther work for a colored landlord than a white man one.

"I had a old Hudson Super Six two years ago, but hit tuck so much gas, en I spent all mah cash money en they come and tuck hit back foh de payments. I mos' gin'ally clears about seventy-five dollahs. Sometimes I doan', though; sometimes I comes out in de hole. But I'm goin' to move nex' year again; ef I doan' git on Sebastian's place, I'm goin' to git on somebody else's. Sho' ain' goin' to stay hyar no longer, ain' got no screens.