

COUNTRY LIFE IN THE COTTON BELT

By LEON VANDERVORT

TO speak of country life in the cotton belt is almost a redundancy, for there is practically no city life in that region. The fact is not greatly to be wondered at, for the perpendicular summer sunrays would render an inland metropolis about as desirable for residence as the engine room of a steamer, while the country offers not only all of comfort that there is in the way of breeze and shade, but has offered the most lucrative invest-

ments. Mississippi, the very heart of the cotton belt, is practically a state without cities. Its plantations are uniformly from one thousand acres in extent to several times that size. Very many of its people—the backbone of the population, indeed—are of Virginia origin, and have in their veins the blood of the cavaliers. In a way the cotton belt life was the successor to plantation life on the tobacco lands of the Old Dominion.



The Old "Mammy" at Home.

But the Virginia country life underwent decided modifications in its new surroundings. The temperate climate of the James, which encouraged for chasing and hard riding, gave way to the semi-tropical heat along the Big Black and the Yazoo, which soon induced men to ride forth on summer days with reins in one hand and umbrella in the other—and an umbrella-shaded pot-hunt is something inconceivable. So the country life which grew up with the opening of the new country adapted itself to new conditions. I doubt not that the early country gentlemen of Mississippi longed many and many a day for the old order of things. But there was money to be made in cotton, and where there is money to be made men will soon make surroundings endurable.

The planter found that outdoor work in mid-summer was well-nigh impossible for white men; so he rode about his place for an hour or two, morning and evening, and had an overseer installed to keep his negroes at work. He found that the planter who is forced to keep his walk within the speed of a very moderate stroll and ride with an umbrella could not drink so much brandy as his ever-active Virginian ancestor; and heavy drinking became the skeleton in many a plantation closet. Likewise the colonial mansion adapted itself to its new environment by leaving off one story and appearing as a low building whose rooms were all on the ground floor, for ground-floor rooms with attics above are cooler at night. Shade proved a blessing in the way of lessening the heat, so groves of red cedar soon attained a good size, and avenues of dense-leaved water oaks laid out by amateur landscape artists half hid the home from view, giving an added density to the shade and a fresh coolness to the breeze. Now and again the native oak trees, whose ages ran into centuries, were left, and with their long beards of Spanish moss added to the tropical effect. The water from cool wells and springs of the Blue Ridge region gave place to cisterns, now built above the ground, shaded by trees and emptied by pipe and faucet, again made underneath the surface and walled with brick.

Large and square were the rooms within, and huge brick fire-places insured against the cold season. Almost as important as the rooms themselves were the wide

verandas with their square white pillars. Here on summer afternoons a breeze was never wanting, and here a good part of the less active plantation life was spent.

Cotton being the one crop raised, the planter had much to do with the outside world, for his supplies must all come from the cities. His flour, corn-meal, bacon, and well-nigh all his provisions came from farther north. Hence there are none of the picturesque grist mills which one finds to the North and East, and very few of the spinning wheels and similar remains of the old order. Nearest to these are the old mill where cane was ground in the process of making syrup—an important article of negro diet—and now and then the relics of an ancient cotton gin. Now and then, too, along the bank of some steep banked, muddy stream we find where once a landing was made by steamers which in pre-railroad days came for the cotton output.

Since one hundred slaves to a plantation was no great number, one realizes that the plantation household was a large one; yet unlike that of Virginia, which was largely able to live within itself, the *familia* of a cotton farm knew practically nothing but cotton raising. Men and women slaves alike went into the field to plant and hoe, "cultivate" and pick. On many a plantation the old slave "quarters" still stand, a little row of one-story cabins, each with its chimney of sticks, so strangely out of proportion to the cabin itself as to give the impression that it was the fundamental portion of the building, and the cabin a mere lean-to.

The recreations of the planter, like his more serious matters, adapted themselves to his surroundings. Fox hunting was too energetic for the climate, but hunting with dog and gun gave a different sort of sport. Quail were, and are still, exceedingly numerous, so it came about that where the Virginian had raised hounds the Mississippian bred bird dogs, and instead of delighting in the chase he became an enthusiast on the subject of field trials. Sometimes he raised deer-dogs and shot deer, which they followed through cane-brake and forest. When the deer disappeared from his own neighborhood he followed them on occasional short hunting trips to the brakes of Louisiana or the forests of Alabama. He engaged in shoot-

ing-matches with the rifle, went fishing for bass—which he called trout—and now and then went “shining” alligators at night, or followed the dogs and negroes through field and forest on a nocturnal hunt for 'coon and 'possum.

The women of the family had their own recreations, and none that I have seen surpassed that of flower raising. In a climate of such warmth and a region whose soil is rich, alluvial flowers of almost a hot-house delicacy will grow out of doors. Flower gardens fenced in with cypress pickets, surrounded by groves of oak and cedar, watered when the rain-fall was insufficient from a sprinkling pot in the hands of a servant, became the subject of many a strenuous though friendly rivalry. Roses of rare beauty and wondrous variety vied with the great flowers of neighboring magnolias; the flower of the China-berry appeared, and from the garden its tree was moved to the lawn to add fragrance to the existing shade. When visitors came as likely as not they were ushered into the garden, seated beneath the trees,

and refreshed with milk or wine and cake, while the breeze brought coolness and came scented with odors of a hundred kinds of roses. In the cedar branches above sang the mocking bird, while from bush and tree and fence came the brilliant flashes of tanager and cardinal.

Visiting and entertaining partook of the same general scale which characterized them in the Old Dominion. A call began in the cool of the morning, and the guests departed with the shades of night. A visit began at any time and lasted for weeks. Hospitality was the commonest of virtues and guest the most sacred of words. Besides the visiting from house to house there were picnics, when the half a dozen families comprising an extended neighborhood gathered in some oak or magnolia grove on the border of some artificial lake to spend the day in eating, drinking, dancing or chatting.

It is hard to conceive the change that came when war broke out and hostile armies struggled over these plantations. Rude indeed was the awakening when this



The Old Cane Mill.



From Plantation to Railroad.

Acadian life gave way to one of blood and battle. But with the passing of war and of the succeeding years—the years which mellowed the harsh points and reduced suffering and sorrow to romance—a new glamour attached itself to these old homes. One old plantation house I know, still stands white and beautiful on the top of a live-oak-covered ridge; the trees in its grove still show the ugly marks of minnie balls, a patch in the western wall covers the rent made by one of Pember-ton's shells, and out on the veranda are the scars of bullets.

But poverty followed in the wake of war, and most of the old-time grandeur was gone. The planter must give the farm more personal attention, for overseers are expensive luxuries. There came to be less visiting, less entertaining and more work at overseeing tenants and devising means to make the new régime one of profit. One other favorite feature of aristocratic Mississippi life also fell into disuse. This was the summer outing upon the Gulf. One who walks or rides or sails along the coast of the Southern Gulf will find all the way from Louisiana to Florida old cot-

tages and bath-houses, gardens and live-oak groves which date back to early antebellum days. Here the élite of the cotton belt came in summer days. Here the Gulf breezes fanned them at night and the Gulf waves made a wondrously fine bathing place for morning and evening hours. Here, too, are half-forgotten tales of games of cards in which the price of a cotton-crop or of a plantation was an all-too-frequent stake. But war left too little money for such delights, and the cottages passed largely into the possession of city men.

Now it is no infrequent thing to see the owner of a great plantation riding about in the heat of a mid-summer day, giving directions to his tenants, preserved from sunstroke by the umbrella overhead—and this in the season when he was once resting on the coast.

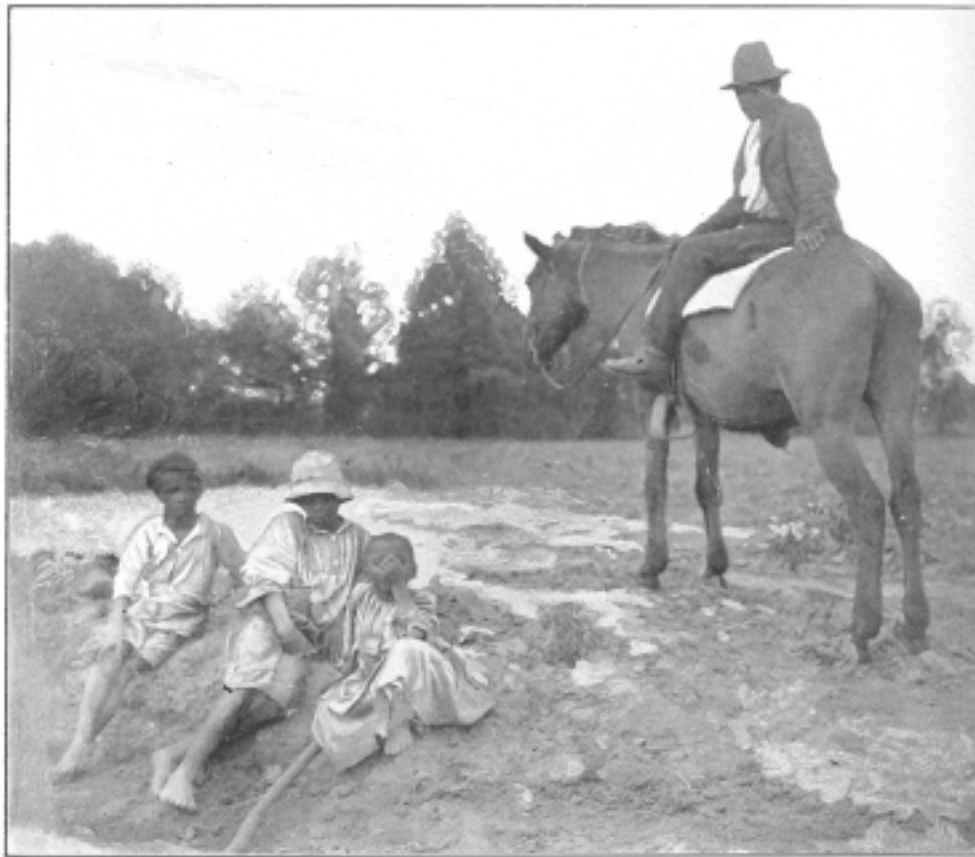
About the house, likewise, matters have taken on a new aspect. Hired servants are less easy to train and much harder to keep than were slaves in the old régime, so the mistress of the home has less leisure than of old. She makes fewer calls, seldom goes visiting, and has forsaken en-

tirely her morning and evening rides. She drives, or is driven, instead, and finds life full of seriousness. Her flower garden is still a source of pride. Her roses are more numerous than ever, while the red cedars and water oaks about the border have attained a size that suggests something of patriarchal age. I remember especially one such garden. It is the beauty spot of a two-thousand-acre plantation. The house was burned in war time, and the debts which came with abolition have kept the owner from rebuilding. Now a cottage—almost a cabin—is the family residence. Yet the oak grove through which winds an old drive-way would do justice to the grounds of a palace.

Little has been done in the cotton belt toward the making of modern country places for the pleasure of their possession. Tradition, the tradition of cotton raising, prevents.

One such, however, is well under way, made by Mr. W. E. Waring, of Birmingham. Mr. Waring has introduced the principle of crop rotation, and thus saves his land from the impoverishment that attends the exclusive raising of cotton. Fine stock, too, is proving successful, and greatly simplifies the problem of fertilization. As an experiment he has introduced Angora goats, which seem to thrive in the climate, and promise to furnish a very satisfactory income.

While the Waring farm is not more than two thousand acres in extent and has been laid out on a scale of much less expense than many a northern country place, it still has some points of pure adornment that the millionaire might envy. Quails fairly swarm in the wood-lots. Turkeys are to be found a few miles away; and pheasants of the English and Mongolian types, which he introduced some years ago.



Noontime in the Spring Cotton Field.

have proven a decided success. The salvation of cotton-belt country life is in the making of such estates as this. The old order must go to decay in time through the wearing out of the soil. But when others have caught the spirit of Mr. Waring and applied to Southern farming the principles which make modern agriculture remunerative, we may look for a new country life in the Old South.



"The old slave quarters still stand, a little row of one-story cabins, each with its chimney of sticks."