

COTTON PATCH LIFE IN TENNESSEE

By CLIFTON JOHNSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

IT was only a short distance from Memphis, yet the region was almost as raw and rustic as if there had not been a large town within a hundred miles. To be sure, great fields of corn and cotton were everywhere, but I did not have to go far to strike the forest, and only a few decades have passed since the woodland was nearly omnipresent. The trees that once abounded on the cleared fields have been laid low to make fence rails and railroad ties and to supply fuel for the old wood-burning locomotives. Much of what was cut was ruthlessly wasted or sold for a song. "If the timber was standing now that was hyar twenty years ago," said one man, "we'd all make our fortunes handling it. Why, I've chopped down a coon tree and let it lie and rot, that'd be worth forty dollars to-day."

Blacks were decidedly more numerous than whites in this region, and the country was dotted over with their cabins. Many of the huts were made of logs, and they were all primitive, and often so rudely constructed and so open to the onsets of the storms, you wondered how they could be used for dwellings. Some of the old lanes along which these homes were scattered, were very wild and picturesque, full of stumps, with occasional large trees, while along the fences grew briars and bushes. Frequently they were hardly more than a cart-track wide and were so rough and rutted as to be practically impassible for a Christian vehicle. In explanation of the badness of these byways, I was told that only negroes lived near them and that, therefore, the local authorities never troubled themselves to "work the roads." "Dey think anything will do fo' colored folks," was one negro's comment.

Good cotton land rented for five dollars an acre. Cotton was the principal crop, but considerable corn was raised and more or less potatoes and peas. In good weather the fields are busy from dawn till dusk with men, women and children intent on earning the money to pay the rent and provide a liv-

ing for themselves. They begin to put in the cotton seed when the scrub hickory buds; and a white man informed me the negroes depended so much on nature to thus indicate the proper time that, "if the scrub hickory didn't never bud they wouldn't never expect to plant."

A month later the cotton is ready for its first "chopping"—that is, hoeing. They start picking in September, and money is then more plentiful than at any other season. Most of the negroes, besides attending to their own crops, do a good deal of picking for the whites, the pay being from fifty to seventy-five cents a hundred. The day's labor begins as soon as the dew dries—about nine—and ends a half-hour before sunset. "It's fun to anyone to pick cotton," one old woman said to me. "I've picked over two hundred in a day many a time and nursed my baby and milked my cow and cooked dinner for me an' my ole man an' three children. De men de bes' pickers. Some of 'em certainly can snatch it. De women gits tired in de back, an' de men dey hol' out longer. When dere's a prize offered, I seen men pick much as four hundred pounds er dis yere big boll cotton in one day."

The fields are at their whitest just after the first frosts, for then all the bolls open and the cotton patches look as if there had been a fall of snow. The frost also loosens the cotton and makes picking easy. The work goes on for many weeks and there is some desultory gleaning all through the winter.

One famous cotton picker is "Uncle Henry," reputed to be over a hundred years old. He never cuts his finger nails, because he wants them to grow long so he can have their aid in getting the cotton quickly out of the bolls. I called on him, and as I approached the house I heard him singing a curious negro hymn:

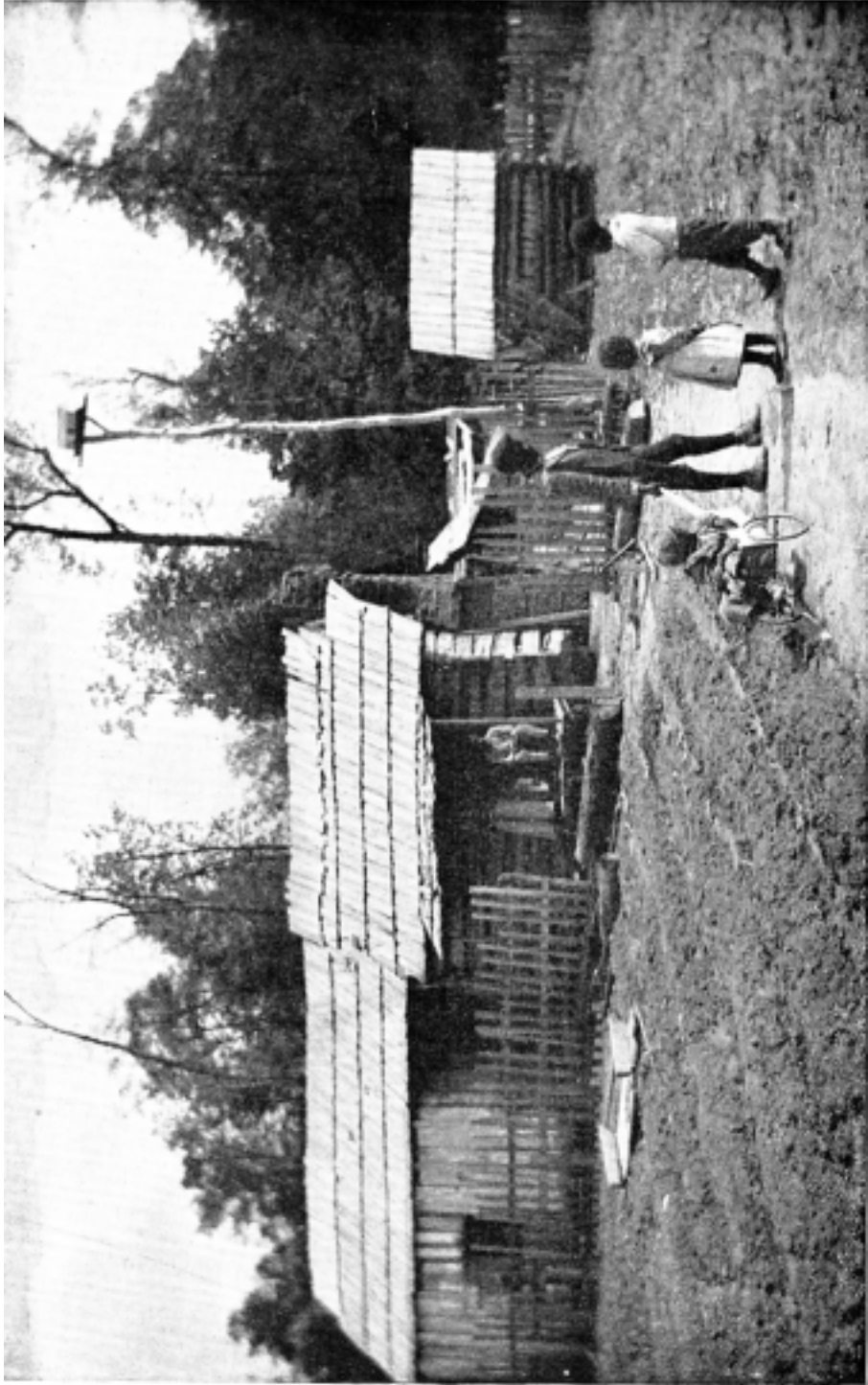
"A gospel hook got a-hung to my heart,
Eli shoutin' in de heaven, 'Good Lord!
Good Lord! Good Lord!
Eli shoutin' in de heaven, 'Good Lord!'"



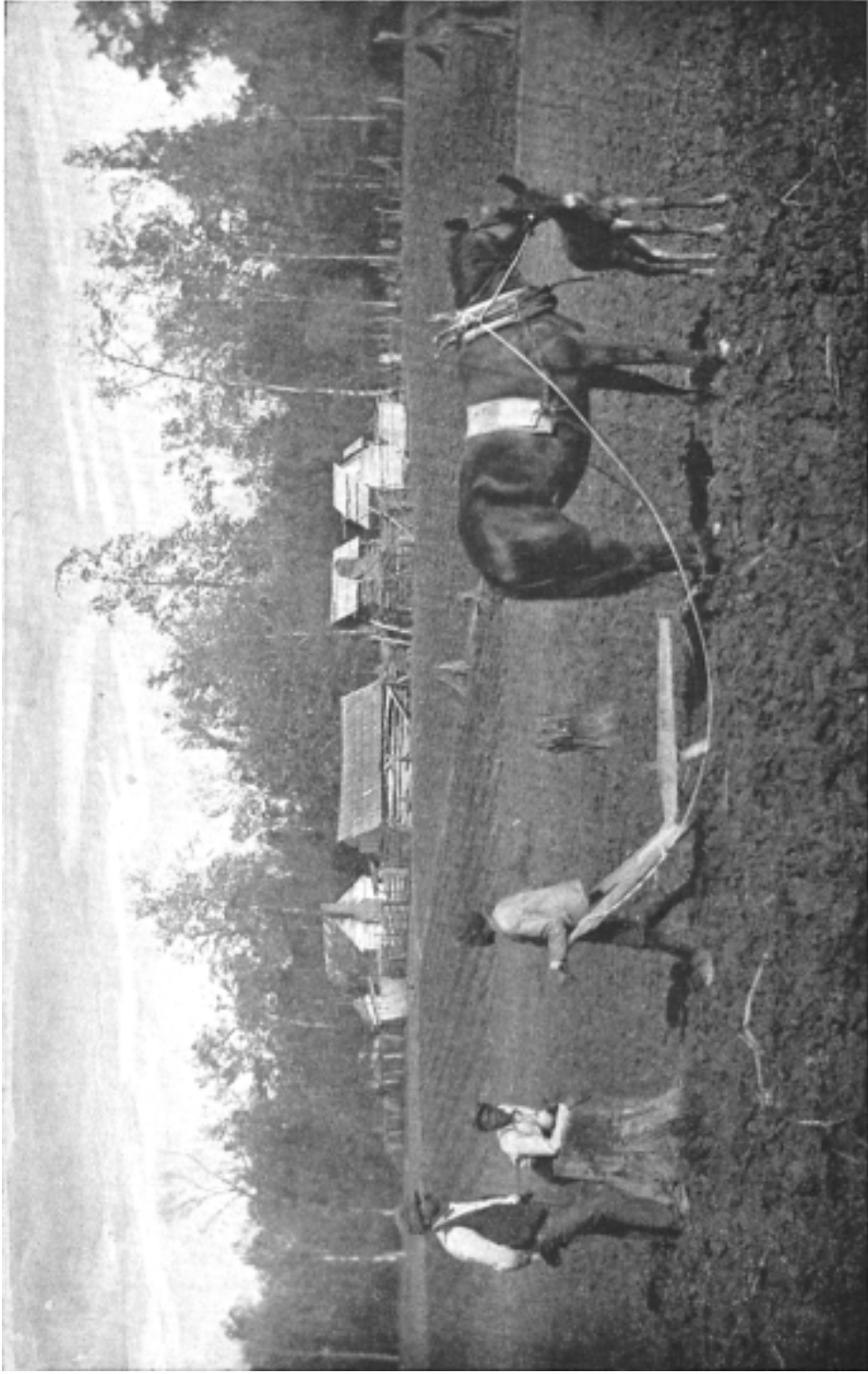
Contented little pickaninnies.



Waiting for the old oaken bucket.



The home of a negro cotton farmer.



Preparing the ground for the cotton seed.

His home was at the edge of the woods, a whitewashed log dwelling with a huddle of little outbuildings and fenced enclosures roundabout. Uncle Henry was sitting by the kitchen fire entertaining several grandchildren. The grizzled old negro looked to be about four score, but he had no doubt he was entitled to thirty years more, and he said there were lots of colored people one hundred and twenty and one hundred and twenty-five years of age. He remembered distinctly the "falling of the stars" in 1833, and any negro whose memory has that span is a patriarch of his race. Aside from the war, that is the greatest event of modern times in the chronicles of the colored folk.

"I was about ten years old, I reckon," said Uncle Henry, "and I was out playin' hide an' coop wid a parcel er white boys, an' we thought it was a snowstorm at de start. Den, fust news I know, my mammy an' m'jssis was a-hollerin' an' cryin, 'Lord have mercy! Lord have mercy!' an' sayin' it was de end er de worl'."

"It appear like ev'y star in de elements was a-fallin'. Some try to cotch 'em in der hats, but de stars go out befo' dey git to de groun'. Dey lit up de whole earth, an' as dey fall dey made a sissin' soun' like de soun' er draps er water throwed on a hot skillet. My oldes' brudder, he'd been out 'mongst de gals dat night, an' he was on his journey home when he heard de roarin' er de stars a-fallin, an' he thought de whole elements was burnin', an' de judgment come. He reckoned his time was out, an' he got down den an' dar on his knees, an' he prayed, 'O Lord, come quickly, come quickly, I greatly need yo'!'"

"Dem dat hadn't never prayed in der lives prayed a li'l' bit dat night, an' I hear tell er one man—an' he was a ve'y ole man too—he ain' been use to prayin', an' he try to say de Lord's prayer; but when he git to, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,' he got kind er mixed an' he say instead, 'Lord, kick 'em as dey come!' Yas, it scare us all, an' in about two weeks ev'y-body, white an' black, got religion. Dar was mo' religion dan enough."

Uncle Henry's wife had joined the group around the fireplace. "De greates' fright of my life," she remarked, "was endurin' de war. We had a battle near whar I lived. Oh, my Lord, how dey fought! We'd hear de guns a-firin' fast as dey could pop, an'

once in a while a big cannon would bang. De Southern soldiers were marchin' past, back an' forth, an' dey go all through people's fields. Lord 'a' mercy! dey'd throw down fences dat was in der way an' make a big dusty road right through de green fields. Den de Northern soldiers come, thousands an' millions of 'em, I reckon, an' dey took all our horses an' mules' an' all de hams out er our smokehouses. Nex' thing dey gather up all de darkies from ev'ywhar an' set 'em workin' on der forts."

"I holped de Republican Party build dem breastworks," declared Uncle Henry. "Dat de fust work I done fo' de Republican Party. It didn't take long to run de Rebs out from aroun' hyar. De cars kep' comin' all de time loaded inside an' outside wid Republican Party soldiers, an' in der uniforms dey look jus' like bluebirds. Some colored men jine de Republican Party army an' went to fight, an' dey want me to go too; but I'd got a wife an' I didn't want to be separate from her an' perhaps never see her again, an' I didn't know whether de North gwine beat. If de Republican Party git licked I better not be too mix up in de rum-pus. If she win I be free whether I fight or not."

When I left Uncle Henry, one of his grandsons became my guide on the uncertain paths that linked cabin to cabin and connected them with the village.

The labor of the families who depended on the cotton patches for a living did not seem to me to yield very satisfactory returns. After paying the rent and the necessary expenses, little is left. Few are able to attain a safe prosperity, and poverty stalks along behind most, ever threatening to drag them off their little holdings. Such conditions were often revealed to me by my chance acquaintances. For instance, I one day stopped a negro who was driving a farm cart through the spring mud of the highway, and asked directions. While we were talking a colored woman came plodding along and spoke to the man. "Hit been a long time since I seen you, Brother Bealy," said she. "How yo' gittin' on?"

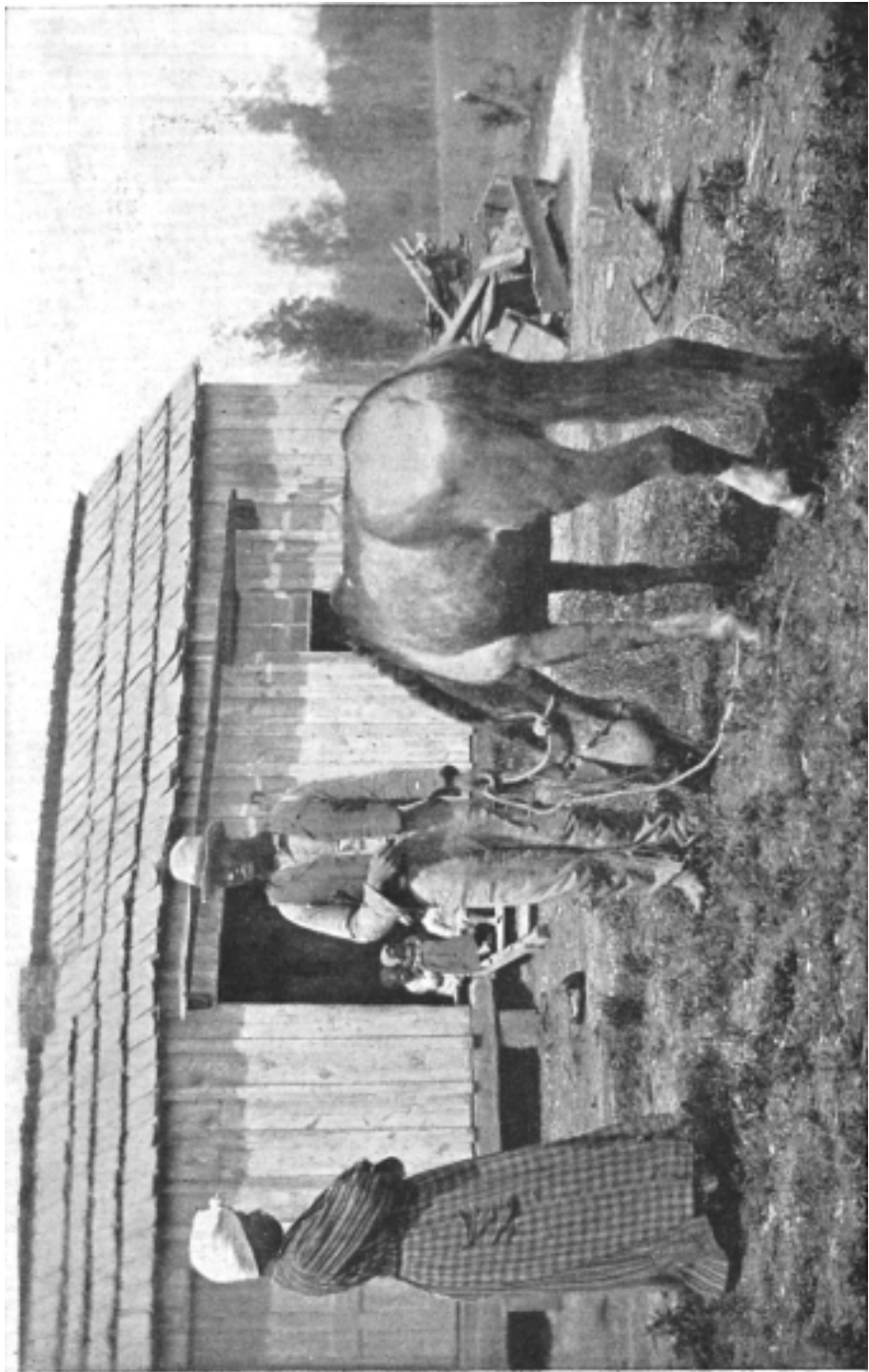
"Well," he replied, "I had a hard time dis las' winter wid de rheumatism, but hit done let up on me some now."

"Yo' luck sholy have been bad, Brother Bealy," said the woman sympathetically.

"I certain have met some heavy ole jars,



A 'possum hunt in prospect.



An easy day at home.



A friendly exchange of gossip.

Sister Larkin," he admitted. "Las' year de secon' time I 'done been sol' out on account er mortgage. Hit quite a th'ow-back for me. I got six chillun an' a wife—an' wid all dem a-swingin' on top er me, hit no easy matter to git along."

"Yes, to take keer er yo' fambly, yo' oblige to hit hard an' often," was the woman's comment; "but if yo' keep up heart, de Lord, He boun' to pull yo' through."

The man removed his hat and rubbed his head thoughtfully. "I'm gwine to stick to my work long as I kin move," he said, "and I'm gwine pay all my honest debts from a nickel up. God knows I am."

He gathered up his reins, preparing to drive on. "What yo' hear from yo' son in Texas, Sister Larkins?" he asked.

"I plumb worried about him," she replied. "De las' news I heard he got de terrified fever."

They discussed this typhoid (?) fever and then the man resumed his journey. I went on in company with the woman. She called my attention to the poor repair of the fences along the way and told me about "a no-fence law" passed a few years before, which obliged everyone to keep his stock from running loose. Previously the crops had to be kept fenced, and the cattle and hogs were turned loose and went where they chose and "pretty nigh picked up their own livin'." But this wicked and incomprehensible law made it necessary to take care of them and feed them, and that didn't pay. In concluding her explanations the woman philosophized thus:

"Times have been; times will be; times wear out same like ev'rything else. De ways dey use to do ain' like de ways dey do now. Dese days, if yo' doan take keer er yo' cattle dey're ketched, an' yo' have to pay three or fo' dollars to git 'em ag'in."

Plainly the black cotton-workers had their troubles, but they had their pleasures too, and one of the chief of these was a debating society. This met every Saturday night in a spare room of a certain log cabin. The apartment was fitted up with a few benches and some boards laid on blocks, and it was pretty sure to be packed full. The discussions were very earnest and aroused much interest.

"Las' Saturday," said one of my informants, "de question was, 'Which is de bes'

beneficial—education or money?' Three fought fo' education and three fought fo' money, and education whooped. Anudder time we debate, 'Which has de deepes' ef-fec' on a person's min', what he see or what he hear?' Nex' time de question gwine be, 'Which done de mos' fo' de people—war or de ministry?'"

The negroes found delight in exercising their intellects at the debating society; but in the case of the whites nothing appealed quite so strongly as the pleasure of satiating their stomachs at a barbecue. "Our barbecues are the biggest thing yet," I was told. "In August or September we have a neighborhood barbecue, and we have 'em at election speakin's and Sunday-school picnics. When I was a boy we always had one on the Fourth of July. Everybody was bound to get done cultivating his corn and cotton by then so as to be ready to celebrate. Yes, you'd drive your mule till it didn't have any tail, to get done before the Fourth."

"The way we fix for a barbecue is to begin to get ready the day befo'. The meat is roastin' all night. We have plenty of different kinds—shoat, calf, kid and goat, and we roast 'em whole. A trench is dug and oak-bark coals put in. Then sticks are laid across for the shoat and other creatures to rest on. Some white man has this in charge, but the niggers keep the fires goin' an' do the basting and the rough work. The next day everybody comes: There's a detail to do the carving, and we all step up and get what we want and go and set down by some tree to eat it. Of course there's potatoes and corn-meal light-bread and pickles and cake, and there's ice cream, and there's pure, genuine coffee that the old ladies make in abundance. Then there's fried chicken if anyone is fastidious enough to want it; and some enterprising fellow is likely to bring a dozen bottles of beer and invite his special friends out to his buggy to drink it. But the best thing to my thinkin' is the shoat. A man hasn't got any part in the resurrection until he's eaten barbecued shoat."

The narrator's enthusiasm was quite superlative, and I have no doubt that the barbecues for the whites, and the debating society for the blacks, do much to brighten an otherwise rather sober existence.