

THE COTTON PICKER

The men and women work in the fields hoeing cotton, but when it comes to picking the entire family is kept busy, and then all the extra hands that can be obtained are put to work. And it is just that time of the year when extra hands are hard to get. The steamboats plying up and down the Mississippi River and its tributaries, which have lain idle during the summer, resume their trips, and they need roustabouts. The negro has no equal as a roustabout; therefore he commands eighty and sometimes as high as a hundred dollars a month as such. It has to be paid to him or he will go to the cotton fields, or to the sugar plantations. Cotton pickers are paid all the way from forty cents to a dollar a hundred pounds. A good picker will average one hundred and fifty to one hundred and sixty pounds a day.

When the cotton is ready for picking a cotton field presents a beautiful sight. The green stalks have turned brown, and seem to have given up all of their vitality in producing the fruit which clusters all over them. Viewed from a distance, the field looks as if there had been a gentle snow-fall. Here and there are different groups of negroes, who appear to be buried in the depths up to their armpits. A closer inspection shows them at work. The picker has slung to his shoulder a large hemp bag. It drags on the ground behind as he walks from stalk to stalk. He grasps the cotton boll with his left hand and picks the little bunch of cotton from each of its four sides, keeping this up until he has a handful; then he stoops down and puts it into the sack. He begins at the end of a row, and continues down to the other end, where he finds a large basket, into which he empties the contents of his sack. He proceeds down the next row, then back again by another row, and empties his sack into the basket. He keeps this up from daylight until it is too dark to see. Each extra hand, or each family, has one basket, and the contents of this basket are weighed and the pickers paid accordingly.

As the seed is picked with the cotton, and its weight is seventy per cent of the whole, it will be seen that comparatively little cotton is picked by one hand in a day. It is very tedious work, and the women and children are more adept at it than the big, clumsy men. In the first place, the fingers of the former are smaller, and therefore better suited to the work of picking out a small pinch of cotton from a brittle shell. Again, the women and children are possessed of more dexterity in that kind of work. As a cotton stalk averages about four feet in height, the men have to stoop over, while the women, naturally shorter, and the children have the bolls at a more convenient height.

As soon as a field has been picked the hands are started over again at the beginning for a second picking. By this time many of the immature bolls have opened, higher up on the stalk. The same programme is followed. Sometimes there is a third picking; and, if a respectable quantity of cotton shows after this, and the price of the staple makes it worth while, there is a fourth picking.



PICKING COTTON IN MISSISSIPPI



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