

THE "BIG HOUSE" ON A COTTON PLANTATION



Photographed by J. L. Schaub, LaGrange, Ga.

MAKING COTTON PAY

THE STORY OF A PROGRESSIVE COTTON PLANTER—INDUCING
SHIFTLESS NEGROES TO WORK EFFICIENTLY—GROWING SUB-
SIDIARY CROPS—RICH OPPORTUNITIES FOUND IN GROWING
COTTON ACCORDING TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY METHODS

BY

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COTTON has again become king. The cotton-fields of the world will not supply this year cotton enough to meet even last year's rate of consumption. And under pressure of the growing demand—and waked to effort by soaring prices—the South has roused itself to industrial activity unprecedented since the war.

Modern methods are supplanting the shiftless systems of agriculture that rose on the ruins of slavery. At first, planters rented thirty-acre "one-horse" farms to the Negroes. Merchants supplied rations of meal and pork, month by month, during the spring and summer, waiting until autumn for payment. Both landlord and merchant were obliged to inspect each debtor-tenant's crop to prevent neglect, and for their risk and trouble charged two or three prices for the land or

groceries. The average Negro's unfitness for independent production made this system bad. With no working capital, with the most primitive implements and methods, and with no love of work, the Negro tenant-farmer has remained in debt from one year's end to another, and well-nigh hopeless.

Often the landlord has supplied not only the land and cabin, but also a mule, implements, seed, and fertilizer, and a little supervision as well, and received in return half the crop. In some cases the Negro supplies a part of the farm equipment and pays only one third of the crop. Administered by absentee landlords, this system is as bad as the other. A Negro of my acquaintance had agreed to pay a third of his cotton and corn crops to his landlord. When the season had passed and inquiry was made



HANDLING AN UNCOMPRESSED COTTON BALE



Photographed by Tress'ar, Montgomery, Ala.

THE CLUSTERED CABINS OF THE NEGRO LABORERS

why he had brought no corn for rent, he explained:

"Well, you see, boss," said he, "'twuz dis way. I tuk'n heaped all dat cawn crap on de groun', an' I wuz gwine tuh haul two loads to my crib an' den one load to yourn, an' two loads to my crib agin an' one to yourn. I hauled dem fust two loads all right, but dey wuzn't no third one fo' yo' rent." It required the services of the sheriff to collect from him.

Thousands of white farmers were also producing cotton; and as the population multiplied and the use of commercial fertilizers was extended the output of cotton was increased until during the nineties the market

was over-supplied. The price of cotton fell to where it would no longer yield profit. There were hard times in the Cotton Belt. Race-friction increased, and crime was more than usually prevalent.

But the hard times brought their own cure. Labor was cheap. Accordingly, cotton mills and other factories were built and immense numbers of white families left the cotton-fields. The cotton output has been lessened in the last few years, and the price has so risen that the industry is now one of the most profitable in America. The prosperity has brought a demand for an improved system of production which is beginning to



THE LABOR PROBLEM IS TO INDUCE THE NEGROES TO DESIRE A BETTER STANDARD OF LIVING.



A PLOW-GANG BREAKING OUT THE COTTON FIELD IN THE SPRING



THESE ARE THE LABORERS AND THE COTTON-PICKERS AT HOME

be met. For men of initiative and ability are "going into cotton."

The story of Mr. J. W. Young, who lives near Prattville, Alabama, is perhaps the best example to be found of this twentieth-century movement.

Five years ago Mr. Young, deciding that selling ginnery outfits could no longer be

the career of a typical Southerner, bought a select piece of land, contracted with satisfactory laborers, and on a small scale began cotton-planting. His farmer neighbors thought he was buying his land too dear, and that he was too liberal in his labor contracts and too reckless in his investments in patent plows and harrows, fancy cottonseed,



A MAMMY AT WORK BREAKING UP THE CLODS FOR PLANTING

Photographed by Tresslar, Montgomery, Ala.



Photographed by George Stark
SMALL CHILDREN PICKING COTTON

high-priced mules, and new Negro houses. The average man, indeed, by following Mr. Young's plan of large preliminary outlay, might speedily have come to grief in that conservative region. But Walton Young was the exceptional man.

He had not only vim and courage, but knowledge, and tact, and common sense. From thorough observation he had learned the things which should be known about the Negro, the mule, the land, and the staple.

He won the confidence and admiration of his laborers. He indulged them in small things and always saw to their comfort, but made them work from earliest dawn to evening twilight, always under his own alert, intelligent, and kindly direction. A considerate employer, he was their master none the less. He saw personally to the feeding and housing of his mules, watched carefully the special qualities of his soil, and made judicious experiments in the treatment of his cotton plants. His very first crop was a "bumper." It opened the eyes of his neighbors to what they also might be doing.

Cotton was low, but Mr. Young sold his crop at the current rate, and bought more land, on credit, at still higher prices. The second year he sold another large crop at a rather low price, and bought more land and mules, built more Negro cabins, and contracted with more laborers. In the third year the crop was heavier than ever, but the price still low. In the fourth year the seasons were bad, and the crop only half its usual size, but the prices much improved. Finally, in 1903, the crop was not far below the average size,



Photographed by George Stark
EVEN THREE-YEAR-OLD PICKANINNIES DO THEIR SHARE AT THE PICKING SEASON



Photographed by George Stark

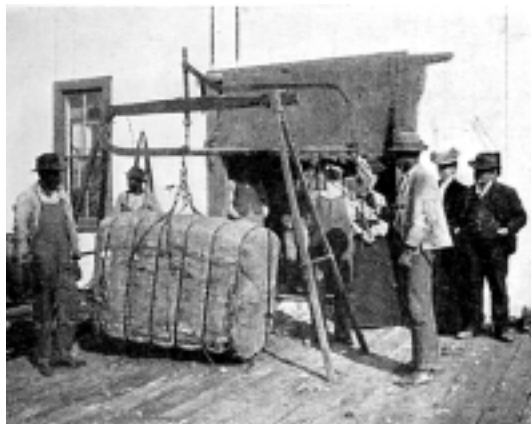
AN OLD MAMMY WHO HAS JUST BEEN PAID FOR HER WEEK'S PICKING



Photographed by George Stark

“WEIGHING UP” AT SUNDOWN

Each picker receives 30 or 40 cents for each 100 pounds



AS SOON AS A BALE IS GINNED IT IS WEIGHED, NUMBERED, AND MARKED WITH THE OWNER'S INITIALS



UNLOADING BALES AT THE COMPRESS

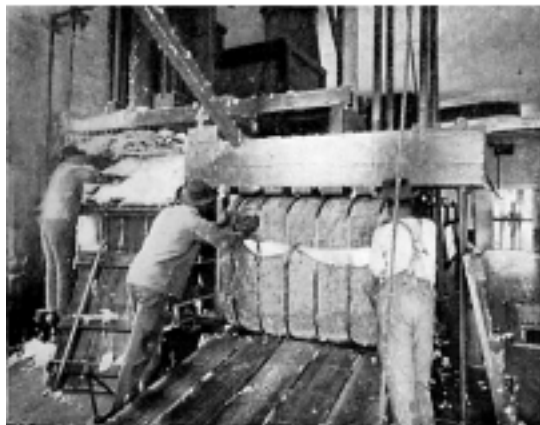
while the prices ranged between the very high figures of nine and sixteen cents a pound. This, of course, meant a very comfortable profit.

Mr. Young was producing crops of two or three times the value of the land on which they were grown. By 1901 the land adjacent to his estate was run up to a prohibitive price. A tract which had been valued at \$2.50 an acre in 1890 and at \$7.50 in 1898 was now held for \$30 and \$35. Mr. Young declined to buy at those prices, but for the past two years has been renting a tract at \$2.00 and \$2.50 an acre.

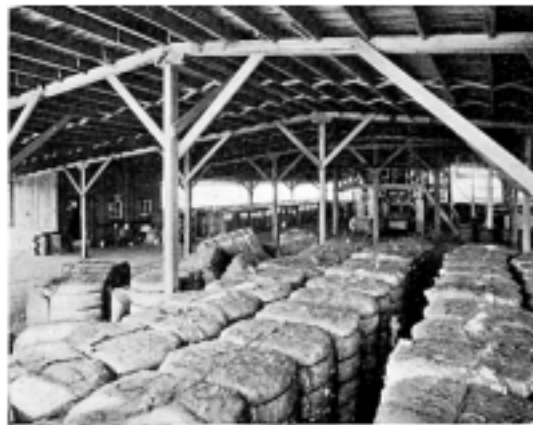
His plantation now embraces 450 acres of fine plateau land, of which all but a small pasture of twelve acres is under cultivation. He has no woodland and no waste land. In 1903 there were 334 acres devoted to cotton,

producing, in spite of bad seasons, 215 pounds to the acre. At an average price of 12 cents per pound the crop was sold at \$8,600. As a by-product, 62½ tons of cottonseed were sold for \$859, which will pay for two-thirds of the fertilizer for next year's crop and still leave enough seed on hand for the new season's planting. His net cash profit, aside from the interest on the capital employed was about \$2,500 a year from the cotton crop alone. This, in addition to all the table supplies, meat, eggs, meal, fruit, melons, and vegetables, is no contemptible income, especially in a region where for forty years the people have barely been able to keep body and soul together.

The lands of this plantation, lying high and dry, are not well suited for corn. Accordingly, Mr. Young devotes a relatively small acreage to it and buys his grain from the West. But he has a plan to annex a district



BALING AND PRESSING THE COTTON



A VIEW OF THE COMPRESS

in the "creek bottoms" a mile away, where with proper attention 50 or 75 bushels of corn may be produced to the acre. A few-score acres of that land in corn will render him independent of the West except for a portion of his pork supply.

The 100 acres of upland corn last year yielded less than 2,000 bushels; the oat crop from 40 acres was 1,000 bushels; the wheat



Photographed by George Stark
AN OLD FIELD-HAND

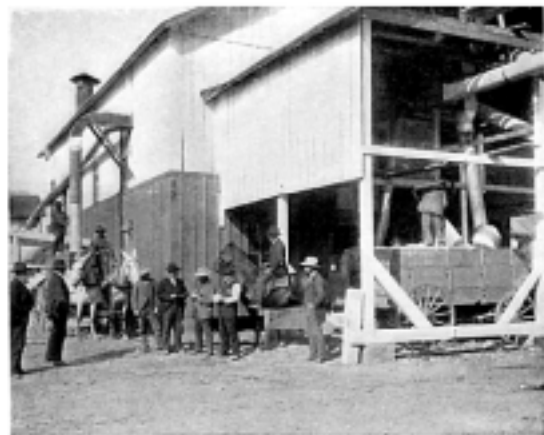
was spoiled by rust; and a large acreage in peas (planted where other crops had already been made earlier in the season), was a failure because of a long drought in the summer. The two acres of peanuts gave a good yield of hay, and much additional hay was cut from the terrace-balks and the pea-fields. The peach-orchard of 1,200 trees, covering 10 acres, is still too young to bear fruit plentifully. A good crop of peas is usually



Photographed by George Stark
BALES READY FOR SHIPMENT TO MEMPHIS BY RIVER STEAMER

grown between the peach-tree rows. Watermelons and cantaloups are raised only for home supply, but sweet potatoes are sold in considerable quantities.

Most of the modern planters like Mr. Young grow subsidiary crops like this to absorb labor which would otherwise be idle at certain seasons or to utilize land otherwise valueless. One raises "razorback" hogs in a great river swamp where he cuts and hauls out timber in the winter. Another keeps a herd of blooded milch and beef cattle. A third has a water-power grist-mill, and uses part of his stream in summer to irrigate a market garden. A fourth devotes his spare time to strawberries, and a fifth has developed an extensive scuppernong vineyard which furnishes great quantities of white wine and vinegar. In recent years thousands have



Photographed by George Stark
COTTON-BUYERS DOING BUSINESS
The cotton here is being drawn from the wagon by suction

planted peach orchards, intending to supply fruit to the northern market, or in some instances to convert the peaches into canned goods or brandy. Mr. Young last year made an experiment with snap-beans and green peas. From six acres devoted to these crops he cleared \$150, in spite of bad weather. Cotton was planted between the rows before the peas and beans were gathered, and yielded an unusual fruitage there because of the heavy fertilization which had already been more than paid for by the fancy crops. Next season he intends to plant ten acres in each of these crops, and expects to clear above \$500 net profit from them.

Mr. Young has worked out his own system of handling labor. Of the plows upon his "fifteen-horse plantation," six are operated by hands working for wages and nine by "croppers" who work on shares. These croppers are practically hired laborers in a profit-sharing system. The planter furnishes the land, house, implements, and blacksmithing, the mule and its feed, and half the seed and fertilizer for the crop. He receives half the crop and pays half the marketing expenses. The cropper furnishes all the labor and pays for half the seed and fertilizer required for the thirty acres allotted to him. He is authorized to draw rations each month, which are charged to him at fair prices, with the planter standing security for the debt. Should his crop need extra labor, it is hired at his expense. The accounts are very carefully kept, and at the end of the farming year half the proceeds of the crop from his land, less the amount already drawn in advance, is paid in cash to each cropper.

To each of his hired plowmen Mr. Young gives a cabin upon the place and wages of \$8 to \$10 a month, according to contract. Women are hired by the day at 40 cents. All the laborers buy their own rations. These laborers cultivate 180 of the 450 acres, nearly always working in squads. In the winter and early spring the whole plowing force of the plantation works in one squad until all the land is broken up and the cotton crop planted. First a heavy, three-horse disc turn-plow cuts a broad, deep furrow, rolling the soil off to one side. Just behind follows a one-horse subsoil plow, with a long, narrow tongue, breaking the earth deep below the surface and preventing any "hard-pan" from forming that year. Then follows

a second turn-plow, cutting another furrow, from which it throws the soil into the furrow of the first two plows, leaving a broad trough for the subsoiler behind—and so on.

Seed and fertilizer are placed by squads of laborers. As soon as the crop is planted the croppers withdraw to their several allotments and begin cultivating, while the hired hands continue to work in a plow-squad and a hoe-squad, each with a foreman who receives an extra wage for setting a lively pace and keeping the working-chant from dragging too slowly. As soon as the cotton plants appear above ground they must be chopped and plowed, and plowed and hoed and plowed again. From March to the first or the middle of July there is little time for rest in fair weather on the plantation. Six one-horse shallow-going plows are moving in a group in the middle of the plantation, with a dozen women and boys chopping and singing near by. Two or three children "tote" water from the spring. Every one is busy, though no one is in haste save the planter, who is now explaining the management of a balky mule, now directing the "thinning out" of a few more cotton stalks, and now trudging away across the shimmering fields to visit in turn each of the croppers and the hoe-hands.

At length the crop is "laid by," and the laborers flock from the farms to celebrate the Fourth of July and to get religion anew at the church revivals and camp-meetings. Now watermelons and peaches are ripe, and chickens just at frying size. With no more odd jobs till fodder-pulling and cotton-picking time, the darkies have their season of joy.

With the middle of August in ordinary years the cotton-bolls begin to open, and the fields must be picked again and again until the crop is gathered. The plantation force is never sufficient for the cotton-picking. Outside labor is usually to be had at the rate of 30 or 40 cents per hundred-weight picked, a rate which yields expert pickers from \$1.00 to \$1.60 a day. The hired hands are put upon a stint in cotton-picking season, and besides their wages receive the prevailing rate for all cotton picked beyond their stint of, say, 150 pounds per day. When working in this way the Negroes are so industrious that the planter may safely take a vacation every day, being careful only to be on hand when the baskets of cotton are weighed.

At Christmas-tide the fields are brown and bare, but the labor of breaking up the soil has already begun for the next year's crop. The darkies cannot remember that in February the ground is always water-soaked, and thus they cannot see the use of this heavy work so long before planting. The planter, therefore, finds in this season his chief labor difficulty, for the Negroes dislike to work in cold weather, and the mules sympathize with the Negroes.

In winter most of the Negroes show their shortcomings. Negro laborers are good, bad, and indifferent—mostly indifferent. Under Mr. Young's direction and inspiration the indifferent ones do good work, but they will not keep at it longer than they have to. At the end of each year there is a migration of croppers. Those who have earned a surplus are disposed to move to town and live in idleness till the surplus is gone, and those who are in debt to the planter decamp by night with their few possessions, or find some other planter needing laborers who will pay the debt for them and charge it to next year's account. The removal of many is prompted by pure shiftlessness. "Giving notice" is almost unknown.

One day last summer, meeting upon the road a former tenant, Mr. Young inquired of him why he had left the plantation.

"Well, you see, boss," the darky replied, "you rings dat bell o' yourn whut sez 'go to wuk' too soon in de mawnin'; an' de mule whut leads yo' plow-gang steps too lively fuh dis yeh nigger to keep up wid him. I jes' 'cided dat I cud git cawn-bred 'n' side-meat 'nuf to do me widout wukkin' so ha'd.

"Yas, suh," he continued, "yo' crappers sho' do come out ahaid at de een' o' de yeah, but dat wouldn't do me no good, kase whut a nigger lak me don' need fuh bred 'n' meat he sho' is gwi' spen' fuh likker an' dat sawt o' foolishness. You sho' is de right sawt o' boss fuh dese yeh vig'rous niggers, but I ain't dat kin'."

Yet the planter who enjoys a reputation for success, if he can use some tact, is rarely short-handed. There are nearly always many families who are seeking a chance to better their livelihood by working under a capable manager. The chief trouble is in the necessity of educating a new set of laborers each year in the use of modern implements and in the practice of steady habits.

Not one man, but scores—perhaps many hundreds—in the South are using the methods which Mr. Young is following. And these men are educating the Negroes into habits of industry and reliability—slowly but surely.

At the end of January, 1903, long before planting time, Mr. Young sold most of his anticipated crop for delivery in October at 13 cents a pound. Cotton producers on a small scale are excluded from such opportunities to take advantage of future markets.

The numberless opportunities for enterprise which the progressive planters may develop for their own and their neighbors' advantage throughout the Cotton Belt are typified by a piece of road-making between Prattville and the Young plantation. That road runs up hill and down and then crosses a broad plain. The hills are of clay, the plain a sand-bed. In wet seasons the road across the hills was formerly the deepest mud; in dry weather the sand-bed was a severe strain upon heavily-laden teams. Mr. Young explored and found a bed of pure clay and another of coarse gravel. He set his plantation force paving a short stretch of roadway with a mixture from the two beds, and invited the town and county authorities to test it. Some came in dry weather and found no dust, others in rain and found no mud. They tested it with wheels and with hoofs, and even with plows, and found it good. "But," said they, "we have no public funds for road-building."

Nothing daunted, Mr. Young circulated a subscription list, with himself as the leading subscriber, and brought the town to agree to assume half the expense. The planters and farmers who were to benefit from the road arranged to carry the other half by furnishing teams and laborers. The road, as now completed, is among the best rural highways in the Cotton Belt, a region notorious for its bad roads. The trip from the plantation to town now requires from a third to a half of the time formerly needed. The weight of the loads drawn can be made much greater, and the damage to running-gear is many times less.

Every progressive planter, by setting an attractive example and by doing a sort of social settlement work in molding the Negroes into a greater fitness for membership in a complex civilization, is doing his part to build up a prosperous South. It is cotton that provides the incentive.