

Chapter 14

Feudalism Lives on In the Delta

By Ray Sprigle

Black of the rich earth and green of the springing cotton plants stretch from horizon to horizon. This is the fabulous Mississippi Delta, last outpost of feudalism in America. Here is land more fertile than any other in the world. Here close to half a million Negroes toil from childhood to the grave in the service of King Cotton, from sunup to sundown if they share-crop, from 6 to 6 if they work by the day.

Here are feudal baronies that run from 5,000 to 20,000 acres, where as many as 6,000 sharecropper families, wives and children, parents and grandparents follow the one mule plow and the chopping hoe all their lives.

On these tight little Delta principalities "The Man" (the landlord), is the middle justice, the high and the low. Mississippi law stops dead in its tracks at their boundaries. No sheriff, no peace officer takes a man, black or white off these acres until "The Man" tells him he may

Briefed On Tactics

Back in Jackson, the night before we started our expedition into the Delta, half a dozen Negro leaders briefed us on tactics, strategy and general behavior for our Delta tour as if we had been going into an occupied country to join the Underground.

"Don't talk to share-croppers either at work or along the roads." "Don't argue if a 'rider' stops you and asks questions." ("Riders," by the way, are the mounted patrols that plantation owners maintain as field foremen and general overseers. Mounted field foremen frequently are trusted Negroes. Overseers are white.)

In any event - whether because of the briefing or because our smiling brown faces aroused no suspicions - nothing happened.

We did stop one woman sharecropper near Scott, Miss., on the vast Delta Pine Land Company holdings. All we wanted was to find out where we were. The woman regarded us suspiciously and then started to give us road directions. Suddenly she broke off, slipped down the road embankment and disappeared.

Woman Scared Away

We found out why when we heard a horn honk behind us. We had blocked the narrow road when we stopped and a Mississippi car with a couple of white men in it had pulled up behind us. That's what had scared the woman away. I didn't feel so good myself. But when we pulled out of the way the car rattled on.

All the Negro leaders I encountered insisted that Negro life in the Delta was not far past the days of slavery. I couldn't agree with them. In the first place, the Negro share-cropper or field hand can pull up stakes and leave whenever he wishes. No longer do deputy sheriffs pursue fleeing sharecroppers and drag them back to the plow and hoe to work out their debts. The Federal Government broke that up 10 years ago. But the Negroes still take no chances. I talked with one share-cropper who was getting ready to leave. He'd gotten his parents away on a "visit." He was planning to send his children away in a few days. A relative had sent him tickets to Chicago.

Leave Quietly at Night

"Best way is to just leave quiet at night," he confided. "That way there just can't be any trouble."

Delta Negroes are undoubtedly cheated out of their eyeteeth by "The Man" but certainly not to the extent that their brethren in Georgia are. None of them ever sees a statement of the prices brought by their cotton or of supplies they have bought from the huge commissaries maintained by the plantation owners. But there are few of them who get less than \$500 cash at settlement time in the fall. And that's good compared with Georgia. For one thing, the cheating is more honest here. It's accepted Delta custom that the Negro gets about four cents less a pound for his cotton than "The Man" sells it for - all the Negroes I talked to assured me.

Normally, life flows peacefully and uneventfully for the Delta Negro.

Seldom, almost never, does the Delta break into the headlines of the nation with the sensational lynchings and wanton Negro murders that spatter the bloody record of Georgia and South Carolina. Your Delta Negro seldom has any trouble with his white folks. Or if he does, neither the trouble nor the Negro lasts very long.

Iron-Clad Despotism

Reason is that the Delta Negro lives under an iron-clad despotism so ruthless and so efficient that your ordinary share-cropper and field hand seldom comes in contact with it. In the Delta, the Negro not only "knows his place" but he keeps it faithfully from childhood to old age. Or he never lives to reach old age. It's seldom that the white folks have to kill a Delta Negro. But when they do it's done quietly and expeditiously. And there are no "political and civic" leagues as in Georgia to start raising hell about it, either. Even the remarkably efficient and almost omnipresent NAACP functions limpingly in Mississippi. The white folks see to that.

Typical of Delta Negro killings was one that a group of Negro friends in one of the little Delta towns told me of. A Negro undertaker happened to be calling on a Negro share-cropper to collect a small balance on a bill. A "rider," gun-hung like a one-man army, came galloping up. In the friendliest tone imaginable he called out:

"Jim, I just had to kill that brother of your down near his place. Better see to getting his body out of there" - and galloped off again.

No Fuss, No Question

The undertaker, right on the scene, go the body. Next day the Negro minister preached the funeral sermon. They put the dead man in the ground and that was that. No fuss, no questions.

No Negro votes in the Delta. In all Mississippi with its more than a million Negroes, not more than 10,000 vote and those only in the larger cities where selected handfuls of Negro leaders are permitted to go through the motions of voting. But Mississippi, like Georgia a few years ago, is having Supreme Court trouble when the folks try to kill a Negro by "due process" with a rigged jury.

So just recently the county officials of one of the Delta counties called in a Negro friend of mine.

"Asa, we've got to make new arrangements," they told him. "We want about six Negroes we can trust. We'll let 'em register and vote so we can put 'em on the jury list.

"Supreme Court's held up hangin' of a nigger down below Jackson because no Negroes were called for jury duty. We got to see that that can't happen here."

Who said Mississippi white folks wouldn't let Negroes vote?