

Chapter 6

Beginning a Trip Into The Rack Country

By Ray Sprigle

Under a blazing Georgia sun we begin our journey of 3,400 miles through the black South. Cotton is greening the blood-red soil of the endless fields. It's cotton chopping time, when the cotton plants must be thinned out. Family by family the Negro share-croppers are in the fields, children of seven or eight and grandmothers and grandfathers who totter when they walk but still are able to swing a hoe.

Not all of the women are in the fields, though. This is Monday, wash day in the South as in the North. All along the highway and the little side roads the iron kettles are steaming over fires in the yards — dirty clothes boiling clean.

We stop off for a drink of water and a bite of corn pone in the kitchen of Hannah Ingram. Hannah is one of the hundreds of Negro homesteaders on the Flint River project in Macon county. It's a tract of some 12,000 acres bought by the federal government eight years ago and divided into tracts running from 50 to 200 acres. These were parcelled out to Negro share-croppers who could make a small down payment. They've got 40 years to pay out.

Hannah Keeps Going

Hannah Ingram is somebody. She and her husband were coming along fine, working from sunup to sundown, each of them behind a mule and plow, when Henry Ingram went down with a paralytic stroke four years ago. He hasn't walked or used his arms since. He can't talk. But Hannah kept the mules and the plows going. Two years she raised a crop. Then she played out. But the Ingrams are still going strong. Between them they had the land in such good shape that they were able to rent it for enough to feed them and make the required quarterly payments. Come 30 years and they'll own their own land -- as Hannah smiling said, "Down here or up there."

Nothing would do but we must sit down and share supper greens and a slab of corn pone and plain water from the pump outside. Hannah was really hurt when I wanted to leave some money. I wonder what she thought when she picked up my plate after we'd gone. Bet that's the first time corn pone sold for a dollar a slice in Macon county, Georgia.

This Flint River project is just a drop in an ocean, a bright clear drop in a dark and bitter ocean. A couple of hundred Negroes have quit their noisome, windowless share-croppers' shanties to come out here to neat, substantial five-room houses, a well, a barn and a smoke house with each. Each house had its quota of solid plain furniture when the government sold it to the cropper.

Half Me Making Good

Young John Robinson is principal of the excellent school that boasts eight teachers. He judges that about half of the dwellers on the project are making good. One man paid out in four years instead of 40. The other half are just holding their own or falling back. Only a handful picked up and quit.

This Flint River project is fine but it would take 10,000 such projects to make even a dent in the evil share-cropping system.

By now I was getting pretty hungry. We'd had nothing to eat all day except Hannah Ingram's corn pone. It was getting on toward seven, too, and what about a lodging for the night? Not a word from my mentor and companion except, "If we can make Americus tonight we'll have a place to stay." And what, I wondered, if we don't make Americus?

But at long last we roll into Americus. And then I get another installment of the facts of life when you're black and in the South.

We present ourselves at a fine, beautifully furnished home and are received with a welcome that warms your heart. In an hour we are making away with a bountiful meal. A comfortable room is awaiting us. So I learn how Negroes travel in the South. Only in the larger Southern cities are there hotels for them. Since I wanted to live my life as a Negro in the little towns and in the plantation country I didn't get to stop in any of the big towns. But my friends tell me that life is pretty rugged in most Negro hotels.

Travelers Are Guests

So in every Southern town there are doctors, lawyers, undertakers, insurance men, who maintain open house for Negroes who are traveling. It's a kind of reciprocal affair. When they travel, they are guests at the homes of friends whom they have sheltered. There is no question of payment but it is etiquette when leaving in the morning to press upon your hostess a contribution for her church or missionary society. Or if she's an ardent member of the NAACP, then a donation to that organization. Through the years, this system of Negro travel in the South must add a good many thousands to the treasuries of Negro churches and other organizations.

As always, when Negroes gather in the South there is one thing they always talk about — the relations between the races — what are the white folks going to do next? And why not? That one thing overshadows all else in the life of the black man.

Here in Sumter county the white man has bowed his back and set himself to roll back the rising tide of franchise that is sweeping Georgia. The courthouse gang has "purged" the registration lists of 800 names of Negro voters. A bare 80 are left.

Defense Fund Raised

So the Negro leaders of the community -- the men and women I'm talking about tonight -- raised a defense fund of \$600 to take the matter to the courts. They hired a lawyer and paid him \$100. He made one trip to the courthouse. The committee hasn't seen him since. But the "word went

out" —that's the expression when the white folks grapevine their warnings — that Sumter county Negroes had better drop their plans for a court fight.

It was effective too. The \$600 war chest was quietly returned to the contributors and there'll be no fight to restore the purged names to the registration lists. A teacher in the Negro schools who had headed up the NAACP branch in Americus was called in and told to quit teaching or quit the national Negro organization. She quit her job. Maybe the Supreme Court did outlaw the white primary, but the white folks of Sumter county have overruled the high tribunal. And as between the Supreme Court of the United States and the white folks, Sumter county Negroes are in no doubt as to which to obey.

They'll live longer that way.