

Chapter 8

Two Negroes Who Have Earned Their Way

By Ray Sprigle

This is a "tough" town in a "tough" county. We break our journey to get a couple of bottles of beer in the picturesque juke joint that Jared Buford runs down here in the Negro section for colored folk. And again, "Jared Buford" is about as far away from his real name as could well be.

Jared just took over this little beer place a few months ago. He bought it out of the profits he made on his 100 rented acres outside of town. Jared himself is a tall, powerful Negro who moves like a great cat. He was three years in the Army, two of them overseas.

There's one thing that Jared Buford would like to do. He'd like to vote. Just once. He's never voted and he's never tried to vote. And he makes it plain that as long as he lives in this county he'll never even try to vote.

"No," he explains, "nobody would 'hurt' a Negro who tried to register. They'd just pay you no never mind. You go up to the courthouse and tell the white folks you want to register. That'd be the end of it. Nobody would give you anything to register with. Come closing time you'd just have to go home."

Just Like "Figurin' "

Same way with this business of "figurin' behind The Man (the landlord)," when we get to talking about the share-croppers in the county.

"Nobody going to hurt a black share-cropper if he figures behind 'The Man' or all around 'The Man,' " insists Jared. "But if he starts fixin' to DO anything with those figures — well that might be something else."

So no Negro votes in this county and no Negro protests against the conscienceless and brazen exploitation of the share-cropper. It looks as though the white folks down here have worked out a foolproof system of "keeping the black man in his place."

In fact, Jared has arrived at that conclusion himself.

Jared's Philosophy

"Ain't no Negro in this county going to be hurt or killed as long as he keeps his place," he says. "White folks here ain't going to make trouble just for the sake of trouble like they do some places. I never had any trouble and I ain't going to have no trouble. I've got my place here and on the farm, and the white folks got their place."

"This is our life down here in our end of the town. Oh, I know you folks back in Atlanta got your theaters and night clubs, but we get along without 'em."

No, Jared isn't going to buy a new car with his profits from his cotton and his beer.

"No Negro in this territory has got a new car and they won't no Negro git a new car until every white man that wants one has it," he says.

"No sir -- no share-cropping for me," smiles Jared when I ask him about his farming operations. "If I'm going to follow a mule all day I want to see something in my hand for it when I git through."

He Pays Cash Rent

Jared rents himself a hundred good acres from a white planter and pays cash rent for it, \$12 an acre or \$1,200 for the farm. Last year he cleared \$5,280 cash on his peanuts and cotton, and recites from memory the figures to prove it, so much gross, so much for fertilizer, draft animals and half a dozen other items.

In every word and gesture it's plain that here is a black man who has worked out a way of life for himself. And it's plain, too, that the white man doesn't enter into that life. Here is a man, it seems to me, who has just cut himself off from white civilization. And is doing all right at it, too.

Over in Miller county we encounter a completely different type of Negro farmer. He's Jordan Arline -- and that's his real name. Two generations of Arlines who have owned and farmed their own land have made Arline a substantial figure in the life of the county. Arline owns 600 acres of land, having added about 200 acres to the farm left him by his father. He, like most Georgia farmers, has got away in recent years from a one crop cotton economy. He produces cotton, of course, and pecans, peanuts, sugar cane from which he manufactures his own molasses -- last year he sold a thousand gallons -- corn, hogs, turkeys, chickens, and now he's going in strong for beef cattle.

Got an Itemized Statement

He uses the sharecropper system to produce his cotton, peanuts and corn. And here again is a striking contrast between the returns a share-cropper gets when he works for a white man or a Negro.

Top sharecropper income on Arline's farm last year was \$1,514.21. His expenses for the year for "furnish," fertilizer and the like, were \$884.80. And he got an itemized statement of his account. He was good, but Arline wishes he hadn't done so well. Because with all that money he decided it was foolish to work any more. So he bought a secondhand car and took to the road. When he went he took with him 35 head of hogs he had raised with his own feed on his own time, molasses and corn.

All of which seems to lend some degree of weight to the defense of the Southern white when he's charged with ill-treating and cheating his share-croppers.

"They're shiftless and undependable," he explains. "No use tryin' to do anything for them. They'll just up and leave you any way."

He Keeps Moving on

It is true. And why not? Your Negro sharecropper is always desperately bent on "bettering himself." So he moves from plantation to plantation in the usually vain hope of finding one where he'll not be cheated. And then he finds a planter like Arline, and finds himself at the end of the season with a fortune of \$1,500 plus 35 hogs and corn to feed them! Who can blame him if he decides he'll just quit work until he goes broke and has to find himself another boss? That was just too much money for a man who never had as much as \$500 at one time in all his life before.

Last year Arline decided it was time to vote. At the county seat the white folks in friendly fashion indicated that they'd rather he'd forget the whole thing. Arline wired the governor, notified the Georgia Political and Civic League, a group of Negro leaders with headquarters in Atlanta, and went to see the United States attorney at Macon. Everything was kept on a friendly basis. Arline left the argument and contention to the lawyers. Result — Arline is registered and votes along with about 60 other Negro property owners. There was no earthquake, no stars fell and by now the white folks are pretty well reconciled to the fact that it isn't going to make much difference to them whether the Negroes vote or not.