

Chapter 11

A Most Successful Negro Farmer

By Ray Sprigle

Given the right kind of white neighbors, the right kind of a community, the right kind of land and a terrific capacity for hard work, once in a while a Negro can do pretty well for himself in the deep South. Witness David E. Jackson down here on the outskirts of Adel Ga., in Cook county. But remember, too, that Dave is one in a million. So far as I know he's one in ten million.

Dave Jackson owns and farms 1,000 acres of some of the best land in Georgia. He owns two blocks of business property in Adel, and a score of houses. He's a stockholder in the newly formed bank. He lives in a 10-room modern home. He runs four tractors and four big trailer trucks. He operates two big produce warehouses in Adel. He buys and sells 100,000 bushels of corn every year in addition to the thousands of bushels he raises. He ships corn as far north as Tennessee and North Carolina. Last year he shipped 15 carloads of watermelons and he can't recall how many trailer truck loads of early vegetables. He raises cotton and tobacco and hogs, 500 hogs last year, 400 this year.

Penniless 20 Years Ago

Twenty years ago he was a penniless share-cropper. He started with 27 acres of land for which he promised to pay \$1,500 when, as and if, he ever got \$1,500. He's been buying land almost every year since until he reckons his holdings at a thousand acres.

How did he do it? Many farmers have done as well in the North. But how did a Negro accomplish it in Georgia?

Well, first Dave was fortunate enough to start in an oasis of decency and tolerance in a desert of oppression and intolerance. Then Dave's generous heart probably had a lot to do with the fact that Dave is one of the best-liked men in the county.

Ever since he started with two mules and a plow, Dave has gone out of his way to help his neighbors. If a white plantation owner is caught with his cotton, or corn, or watermelon crop in danger, Dave is right there with mules, and tractors and trucks and himself and his two sons.

Favors Are Returned

And when his neighbor wants to know, "What do I owe you Dave?" Dave replies with a wave of his hand and, "Nothing at all. Some day you'll do me a favor when I need it." And they do, sheriff, county commissioners, city council, bankers, businessmen, the white plantation owners of the community.

But let nobody get the idea that there's anything typical about the career of Dave Jackson or any other successful Negro farmer in the deep South. There are only a handful like him. And he and

the others have become legends among their people. Why, clear across three states, in Mississippi, I found that Negro leaders had heard of Dave. To produce a Dave Jackson in the South you've first got to have a white community tolerant enough to sit back and let a Negro succeed. Then of course you've got to have an exceptional Negro. You've got both those conditions in Cook county.

Dave started as a share-cropper on the plantation of Wes Wells, probably the oldest white plantation owner in the community. He became a sort of general manager for Wells. With a growing family to maintain he didn't save anything. Wells urged him to buy land and go on his own. Finally he found a piece of 27 acres for which the owner wanted \$1,500.

Wells handed him \$1,500 and refused a note or mortgage. Working nights after he had finished his jobs on the Wells plantation, Dave made \$4,000 from two crops of tobacco. He paid off Wells and bought more land. He's been buying more land ever since.

Has Five Share-Croppers

And Dave Jackson has five share-croppers on his plantation, too. He doesn't provide them with "furnish" because he figures they ought to be able to raise their own keep on land he allots them. They do.

Last year he paid one cropper \$1,600 in cash. Each of the four others got better than \$1,000. The \$1,600 man made his on 12 acres, four of watermelons, four of tobacco and four of corn. The least any of his share-croppers ever made was minus \$1,400. He quit Dave after he had gone \$1,400 in the hole.

"Mistake I made," said Dave, "was to give him an \$800 secondhand Chevrolet as an advance against settlement day. I knew he was a good man and I was glad to do him a favor. That auto ruined him. He had no time for mules or tractor. He just rammed around in that auto and the weeds took over."

Others Have Done Well

There are other Negroes who have done pretty well for themselves on the land.

Over in Hancock county, near Sparta, there is A. J. Washington, for instance. He owns 500 acres and rents another 500. He uses a fallowing system so not all of his land is in cultivation in any one year. But last year he made 90 bales of cotton, a larger tonnage than any other farmer, white or black, in the county. He also operates a store in the Negro section on the edge of town. Dave had only three years of schooling in his life.

"But I'll figure with anybody, backwards or forwards," he boasts. Washington runs three sharecroppers on his land. Each of them made more than \$1,000 in cash last year. That was clear of all expenses, even their living for themselves and families.

"I give 'em figures on everything," explains Washington. "Not only that but when I go to the cotton warehouse to buy guano and fertilizer and seed I take 'em along. They hear what I pay and they see the bills. When I sell the cotton in the fall I take 'em with me to the warehouse again. They hear me dicker, they see the check I get. And right then and there I figure out their shares and write their checks."

Washington has no trouble in getting the cream of the sharecroppers in the county. Perhaps with reason, because, as he say's, he never heard of any other sharecropper in the county getting more than \$500.