

Comment on Things in General.

J. Z. Green, in The Marshville Home.

Northern farmers say that if nature had given them a world monopoly of cotton production they would have been getting twenty cents a pound for that staple all these years. With their intelligence and their capacity to maintain a business organization and mutual co-operation, they are probably not making extravagant claims when they contend that they would have been able to maintain the price of cotton at a twenty-cent average. Southern farmers once had the old organization known as the Grange, but they let it die for lack of intelligent membership. In the northern and central States the Grange has existed for forty-five years and now claims an aggregate membership of more than a million. In competition with the world in the production of grain and live stock, farmers in the grain growing section have succeeded so much better than the Southern farmers, with their monopoly of cotton production, that there is no comparison. Many of the farmers, living on rented farms in the grain growing section, succeed much better than the average Southern cotton farmer and land owner. And yet in the production and sale of their products the farmers of the grain growing section must meet world competition.

Nature has given Southern farmers an opportunity that exists nowhere else in the world except in these few Southern States. We produce something that cannot be produced economically, and only in limited quantity, except in the Southern part of the United States. This cotton product is something the world is compelled to have—something for which there is no substitute, except at high relative cost. The primary way to profit by this natural monopoly of cotton production is by negative action, by simply refusing to produce it except in limited quantities. But instead of using this great natural monopoly to build up Southern homes, Southern schools and Southern industries in such manner as to change the commercial center from New York to New Orleans, where it logically belongs, we have used it to impoverish our homes, to perpetuate the withering, blighting curse of ignorance, and to keep our Southern enterprises dependent upon Northern commercial centers for their existence. The far-reaching and disastrous effect of wasted energy and wasted effort in Southern cotton can be realized only by far-reaching analysis of cause and effect.

And I am not placing the responsibility for this almost economic error upon Southern farmers alone, for only a part of it rests with them. In fact, there are hundreds of thousands of Southern farmers who are neither remotely or directly responsible for it. I have reference here to the farmers who farm under the basic and fundamental idea of, first of all, making a living at home. Merchants and horse and mule dealers in the South, who from choice (because the profits of time business are bigger) sell stock and supplies and buggies and wagons under the iniquitous crop-lien system (that ought to have been long ago consigned to the past by the strong arm of law) come in as a big factor in the large yields of cotton and its consequent depression of prices and stagnation of business. I am not blaming them morally for doing this, for they are doing nothing more than to follow the inclination that is prompted by the element of selfishness that exists in the human race, the kind of selfish-

ness that always looks out for direct personal interests first and community interest next. We should not want to eliminate this part of human nature, for men would become indolent and improvident and inactive without it, but I am trying to point out some of the principal factors that are responsible for the poverty of the South that has resulted from producing too much cotton. When a negro buys his supplies and mules on time he must plant too much cotton and too little food products in order to meet payments. It is bad for the Southern white farmers and their families who are thus forced into competition with that sort of cotton production. In the long run, and in its broader meaning, that sort of encouraged and enforced credit business keeps the South in an unsafe financial condition and liable to reverses and panics at any time, and it also keeps this section as a whole from enjoying the benefit of the natural monopoly that would be ours if one-third the present cotton acreage were planted to food crops.

But to get back to the responsibility of the farmer who ought to have intelligence and manhood to place himself in an independent attitude—just this much in the way of direct and pertinent remarks: Of all the people in this world who should be the last to condemn the "time merchant," it is the land-owner who decides to gamble on cotton and puts up a credit supply of fertilizers to do it with. The time merchant isn't to blame for your own individual economic error. He simply supplies a demand which you create, when you go to him and ask for fertilizers or anything else on time. When you pay 10 per cent over the cash price for fertilizers, or supplies, or mules, or buggies, you make a note or account that runs about six months. Ten per cent for six months is equivalent to 20 per cent a year. What would you think of yourself as a "business farmer" if you should step out to one of your neighbors and borrow money from him at 20 per cent interest? And yet you could do that and be just as good "business farmer" as you are when you pay ten per cent above the cash price for anything you buy. If you give a note bearing six per cent interest it makes it that much worse, for the interest then looms up to a basis of something like twenty-six per cent above the cash price. That sort of reckless business transaction would, if applied to them, bring bankruptcy to the best business enterprises in this country. The commercial world considers ten per cent per annum good hire for capital—a good income on investments. When you pay the equivalent of twenty per cent interest on fertilizers and supplies bought on time you are paying twice what the commercial world considers a good income on investments. No business enterprise could exist if it had to do business on borrowed capital and pay twenty per cent interest, and the only reason the farmers, who buy on time, can manage to eke out some sort of existence under that sort of economic blunders exists in the fact that the peculiar nature of their occupation will stand more of that sort of thing than nay other. If they didn't have their gardens, truck patches, milk cows, sloop pigs, blackberry patches, etc., to come to their partial relief the "time farmers" couldn't stand it.

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