SOME PROBLEMS OF THE SOUTHERN HILL COUNTRY.

A Land of Wonderful Possibilities for the Stockman, Fruit Grower and General Farmer—Some of the Special Needs of This Section and Some of the Problems It Has to Solve.

By E. E. Miller.

IT HAS LONG been the habit of a certain class of writers to speak of the whole mountain section of the South as a land of darkness "and where the light is as darkness," and to describe the Southern Appalachian region as a country of poverty, ignorance and lawlessness. We of the South who are familiar with the beautiful hill country know how utterly misleading and how absolutely unjust such a characterization is. But the fact remains that there really exist over large areas of this section conditions which are as bad as the worst of those painted by the writers who lump the three or four million inhabitants together as "poor mountain whites."

In dealing with this section it must be remembered that before anything like an accurate survey of the field can be made, the division between the agricultural sections, — those parts which constitute one of the finest live stock, dairy and fruit-growing districts in America,—and the parts which are too rough and sterile or too isolated for successful farming, must be clearly drawn. The existence of the poverty, ignorance and degradation which justify the uncomplimentary appellations of tourists who visit this section, is due in great measure to the fact that so many people are trying to make a living by farming on lands which are plainly unsuited to crop growing.

Up in the mountain coves and high on little benches and nooks on the slopes of the mountains will be found, here and there, little one- or two-room cabins and little three- or four-acre patches of cleared land, by courtesy called farms. Many people in these more remote districts measure the distance to their neighbors by miles and they can get to school or church only by spending nearly or quite a half-day in the journey. They have no roads worthy of the name. Many of them have no work stock at all, and the living which they can get from their little patches of cleared ground, with the primitive methods which they must use, is necessarily a very scanty one.

These conditions are not the prevailing ones in the mountain section, but it would be folly to deny that they exist to an altogether too great extent. And the great problem in many cases is simply the removal of the people who live in these isolated sections to localities where they will have some chance to come into contact with their fellow-men and to engage in more profitable work.

The problems over the greater part of our mountain section, however, are far different. Usually all that is needed to bring prosperity and to make the country one of the most desirable in which to live, is the improvement of the natural advantages of the section and the adoption of the methods used to the particular conditions prevailing here.

I.

One of the first great needs of practically this whole section is better roads; and the making of good roads in this hill country is necessarily a harder problem than in more level sections.

The old mountain trail which follows the rocky bed of some stream must be superseded by a road over which it is safe to drive a wagon or buggy. And in the less rugged sections more attention must be paid to grades and drainage, and the roads taught to wind around the hills instead of climbing over them. There are thousands of places in this region where little valleys of exceeding fertility need only a good outlet to market to change them from almost valueless wastes into wonderfully profitable and decidedly high-priced farming lands. The farmer, even if he markets his crops—as most mountain farmers should—in the form of live stock, is not likely to care to live where it takes him a half or a whole day to get to town and where he must travel over rough roads for many miles before he can reach a railroad.

The building of railroads through this section is another phase of this work of putting these isolated sections in touch with the great world, and should be encouraged by every possible means. The man who lives twenty-five or thirty miles from a railroad is at a tremendous disadvantage in many respects and especially so when the roads along which he must travel and over which his goods must be hauled are badly located, badly graded, and badly kept up.

II.

The first great work, then, in the redemption of the mountain districts is the establishment of means of communication with the outside world; the redemption of the districts suited to agriculture from the loneliness and inaccessibility which now hinder their progress. The railroad, the highway and the telephone line are factors in this work, the value of which can not be over-estimated.

Many sections of the hill country are, of course, wonderfully rich in mineral resources, but the development of these resources must, in most cases, be brought about chiefly by men or companies who have large sums at their disposal. Wherever enough of any mineral is found to justify its development the railroad will eventually go, and there will follow in its wake the usual result of industrial development. But this is clearly outside our line, and is in every case a local rather than a general problem.

Of even greater importance than the minerals stored in these hills are the forests that grow on them, and next to education, the first great problem of all the Southern Appalachian region, extending from Maryland to Alabama, is the preservation of the forests and the conservation of the soil and water-power to which forest preservation is so necessary. There are millions of acres of land in this mountain region which should be left in forests through all the ages to come. There are many thousands of acres now cleared which should be reforested as soon as it can possibly be done. We are hoping, of course, that the proposed Appalachian Forest Reserve will yet be established and that the National Government will exercise control over a large part of this mountain country. The establishment of State forest reserves is a work the beginning of which is only a question of time. While practically no attention has been given this matter by the Southern States as yet, it is inconceivable that they can much longer afford to neglect the splendid opportunities of work offers, or that they will much longer endure the danger from flood and drouth which continued forest destruction has already brought, and will bring in an increasing degree in the future.

III.

Of equal importance, however, with these National and State forest reservations is the preservation of the forests and the conservation of the timber supply by the owners of these mountain lands. The big lumber companies are just beginning to learn that the policy of cutting every tree of merchantable size on a piece of land and then permitting fire to destroy the undergrowth and burn off the forest covering, is a policy at once foolish and criminal. They are beginning to see that if there is not to be a timber famine, these lands, which are so much better adapted to the growing of timber than to that of any other crop, must be made to produce this crop to which they are so well suited, year after year, and that the lumbermen who leave the land they have worked in such condition that it will be unproductive for decades to come are as foolish as the farmer who permits his fields to wash away. The man, too, who is a farmer rather than a lumberman, but who has lands that are better adapted to growing timber than to growing field crops, will also come to realize that he owes a duty to these lands as much to those which he cultivates and that it is as unwise for him to destroy by fire or indiscriminate cutting the timber crop on these lands as it would be for him to turn stock into his grain fields.

In this connection comes also the matter of State forest supervisors to prevent forest fires. Perhaps forest fires do no greater damage in the mountain sections than in other wooded regions, and the need of finding a way to prevent and control these fires is common to the whole South. It is certain that there is no adequate appreciation of the great damage done by forest fires, not only to the forests themselves, but also to the soil, to say nothing of the destruction of fences and buildings and the danger, oftentimes, to human life. By destroying the forest cover, these fires rob the soil of the humus that should be returned to it, and prepare the way for erosion. Even greater than the damage done to the growing timber, in many cases, too, is that done by the destruction of the future forests. In addition to the great educational work that must be done among farmers, lumbermen and all citizens who have any interest in forest preservation, it is just as well to recognize the fact that the failure of Southern States to maintain any efficient system of forest protection is costing us many millions of dollars each year—just how many we have no means of estimating. Most States have a corps of game wardens to protect the game; but because the forests are mostly "private property," the owners—or those not owners—are allowed to turn fires loose in them almost without let or hindrance,

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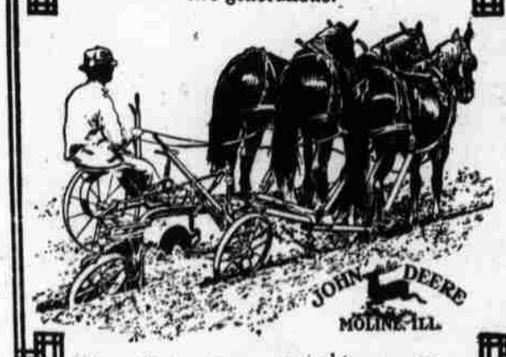

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