

[George and Bessie Derrick]

26003

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George and Bessie Derrick (Negro)

Maryland Avenue

Plant City, Florida

Tenant Farmer

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George and Bessie Derrick are tenant farmers. The 3-acre farm they rent from E.J. Marshall, overseer for the Swift Company. is on the left side of Maryland [?] it enters the Negro section of Plant City, Florida.

I could see them working their land as I approached, but I had to walk a quarter-mile through rows of strawberries and across ditches before I reached them. The fields all around were filled with workers, some picking strawberries and others planting new crops.

George, wearing an old slouch hat tipped to the side of his head, and clean khaki pants, was pushing a hand plow. His wife, Bessie, a stout jolly, dark-skinned woman, with short black pig tails protruding from under a large straw hat, leaned on a rake and wiped her forehead with a handkerchief. George paused to shake hands and Bessie apologized for being dirty when I greeted her.

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Their daughter Bernice came across the field, and Bessie, explaining that it was near quitting time and they were trying to get the rows ready to plant tomatoes, said to her, "Take the gentlemen up to the house. Bernice, and we'll see him when we come up. What'd you plan for supper?"

"I haven't thought about it," Bernice said.

"Suppose you kill that big white chicken, cook some tomatoes and some cornbread or biscuits, and a little rice."

Bernice and I left them working and went up to the house, a plain weather-boarded place with a running vine growing on one end of the front 2 porch and a few colorful flowers in pots at the other end. In the yard there were four little outhouses built of cypress.

Then George and Bessie came in from the field. George brought a pail of water from the pump, which stands in the [middle?] of the garden between his house and the house next door. Bessie took off her straw hat saying she was tired, and went to bathe her hands and face in the water George had poured into the galvanized basin.

I asked George if he would show me the house before he told me about himself. He [assented?] and we stepped from the front porch into a bedroom. A large double bed stood in one corner, a cot in another. There were three trunks placed at [intervals?] against the wall, and an old Victrola near the door was covered with a cloth. There was an old-fashioned dresser loaded with toilet articles and trinkets.

In the other bedroom there was also a double bed and a single one. Clothes were hanging on nails driven into the wall. A cloth stretched across the corner of the room served as a clothes closet. The [unsoiled?] walls had been washed with green [calsonine?] which was flaking off, leaving unsightly looking spots. An old Singer sewing-machine near the door was covered with a cloth. The rooms were clean and the beds neatly made.

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In the back a narrow kitchen extended across the [breadth?] of the house. On the wall several insurance policies were tacked up, and Bernice, who was cooking supper, said, "We carry plenty of insurance, that's the only way we can look out for sick days. Poor people like us can't give anything. If it wasn't for street policies I don't know what we would do."

In the kitchen is a large wood stove, a pile of wood beside it, a 3 refrigerator, two tables, and a board nailed against the wall, used as a washstand. One wash pan hang from a nail, another was on the [stand?]. In the corner against the wall hand pots and pans. At the south end of the kitchen there was a cardboard box used for wall covering.

Outside, beside the house, washtubs were balanced on a [crude?] bench.

"We have no bathroom so we use these tubs; our outhouse is about 50 yards away from the house, too. We would like to have a better one. If it was my property I would have one built by the government."

He made himself comfortable on an old trunk next to one of the outhouses and be [in?] to tell me his family history. Bessie seated herself on a box near the door and listened while Bernice cooked supper.

"I was born in Kingston, [Jamaica?], April 4, 1886. My parents were Daniel and Nancy Derrick. He is dead but my mother still lives in Kingston. She has never been to this country. I lived in the Islands until I was 15 years old. Then I came to the States, landing in New York City. Later I came south to Georgia, where I got work at a sawmill in a place called Haywood, [8?] miles from Waycross, Georgia.

It took me a long time to get on to this country's customs. I was so used to the ways we had in Kingston. Here you have to live to yourself. I understand it is better now. You know I've been here a long time. When I first came to Georgia, I had a hard time. Folks thought

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I was a “[?]” from South Carolina, but soon they learned me, I just worked hard and did my work well, and I got along.

I knew how to farm before I came to the States. We do lots of farming in Jamaica. The climate is a little warmer there than you will find here. In some sections where it is higher, it is cooler. I like 4 Florida on account of its warm climate. It was a little cold for me in Georgia, but my wife likes it there.

“In [1936?], I moved my family to Plant City, Florida. Bernice who is 23 years old; George Jr., who is [21?], and Albert were all born in Georgia. Elizabeth, who is only six, was born here in Plant City.

“I attended school in the West Indies at Kingston, going as far as the 4th grade, but I've picked up a great deal since I've been in the States. I tried to keep my children in school. They went as far as the 7th grade here in Plant City. I realize now the advantage of having an education. It is something everyone should have, especially where you have to buy and sell things. You got to figure behind folks now of days. I missed my chance when I came over here; I had to work cause I didn't have anyone to help me.

“My wife, she went as far as the [8th?] grade. If I had a better education I don't think I would be renting just a few acres of land, and / living in someone's else house. No, I can hardly take care of my family; now, what would I look like with an automobile? The best I can do is to keep some food on the table. If we have a good season we live nicely, if not, we [fare?] pretty hard.

“When I came to this place it was all growed up in weeds and [?] and myself got right down to business and started to clean it up. All the outhouses I built myself. The wood did not cost me very much. The boards are the ends of the timber out at the sawmill, and the bark is still on them. A little rough, but it was the best I could do.

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"I wouldn't do anything else these hard times but farm. I try to keep something growing on my 3 acres all the times. One thing, you can 5 sell anything you raise in this section. After I get through with strawberries I hope to have tomatoes coming on. I expect to plant some pepper also. Yes, I raise cucumbers, beans, cabbages, and [?].

"During the summer I grow collard greens, okra, mustards, sweet potatoes, and many more things needed for the home. Did you see them fine onions near the pig pen when you came in? Some are large as a golf ball. I expect to get more hogs after we kill the one in the back yard.

"I made a mistake by putting too much fertilizer on my strawberries. I burned some of them out. They are coming along nicely now, since we have had a little rain. I expect to pick some of them tomorrow. Berries are low today in prices. The folks said they only get [3?]¢ a pint today. They made go up. You can see for yourself there is plenty of land around here to farm on.

"If I didn't raise some vegetables on this place I couldn't made a go of it. With the help of Albert and what little I make off of these 3 acres I clear sometimes about \$100. I have to pay Mr. Marshall \$45 a year for the land. I pay him along so it won't be so hard on me at the end of the year. He is very nice to us. In fact I think all of the tenants like him. My fertilizer costs me round \$35 a year. Sometime I am able to get credit. The strawberry plants cost me \$20.50, but next year I hope to raise my own plants, I believe I can come out better.

"When I was in Georgia working at the sawmill camp I would make from \$7 to \$10 a week. I did better than that when I first came to 6 Florida. I worked up until 1934 for the [Heintoah's?] farming. I made \$1.25 a day. George Jr., does better, he makes \$1.50 a day. I fully believe I am better off farming."

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Bessie said, "I love to farm. I can stay out there in the field all day long. We are lucky to have our land clear; it took some work to do it, too. We have to put fertilizer to it if we want to push our crops fast. After all you get out of work what you put into it. That's why we work so hard on this little place. No, sir there is not a lazy bone in my body. You saw that fat hog out there in the pen, well, we'll soon kill it and smoke the meat down. That beats going to the store for everything you want. We keep him in that small pen to keep him fat. If he had larger space he would be thin from rutting so much. My daddy taught me how to raise hogs back in Georgia. Some people think they have to have a whole field for them to run in, and bless goodness they'll eat up all the slop you'll carry them. They're like people: the more they run the more they eat.

"They tell me down on the [East?] Coast they do not have to use fertilizer to make crops grow, but I believe I would rather be on this side." George interrupted.

After a short pause he said: "Did I tell you that Albert is in the CCC Camp at Olustee, Florida? He's been there since 1935 and is very good about having part of his pay sent home every month. George Jr., was in the camp too, but he works on the big McIntosh farm now."

George Jr., a much larger man than his father, came in just then and it was evident that he had overheard the latter part of our conversation, for he said: "I was in camp in Sarasota first, but I was transferred to the camp at Olustee. I stayed there nearly two years and liked it. I took on weight while I was there. I weigh [185?] pounds now and I'm 6 feet tall."

His manner toward his parents shows that he is devoted to them, and the family as a whole is [congenial?], although the [father?] is inclined to be more serious than the rest and his slightly English ascent is more noticeable.

Bernice, in a neat flowered gingham, came to the door several times for a breath of air. [?] from bending over the hot wood-stove, perspiration stood on her forehead and upper lip.

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Once she joined the conservation: "I don't like to work on the farm. I was raised on one of them and that may be the cause of my dislike. Only yesterday I picked strawberries, and just look at my hands. It makes you back sore when you first start, too.

"I've only been home two weeks and I intend to stay several weeks longer. I've been working in Waycross, Georgia, at the Universal Steam Laundry. [I can?] do most any kind of work, like running an elevator, pastry cook, housemaid, and laundry work.

"I like working in a larger place. I don't like [Plant?] City, it's too dead for me, there's no place to go. Whenever we want to see a good picture we get some of our boy friends to take us to [Lakeland?]. I don't think I will marry soon, that sort of runs in my family."

George said: "It's time for you to marry."

"Not me. I like my good clothes and my own money. If you're 8 married sometimes you don't have nice things. There are a few nice boys in this place. Sometimes one will come around to sit and look at me."

As she turned to her cooking, Elizabeth, the 6-year-old, came running around the house. She had on a red and black gingham dress, sandals on her feet, and a straw hat on her head. She stood for a moment eyeing me, then said in a horse voice: "I've got a cold." Bernice came out and sent her to the store; there was a moment of quiet as we watched her run down the road then Bessie said:

"I knew lots of people that you know in Waycross. I use to go there every week end to do our buying. We would go to the colored drug store owned by Dr. Harris. He had a dry-goods department next door to his place. I bought all of my gingham from them. They were nice people, and Dr. Harris' wife was so jolly. We use to have nice times in Georgia; I like it up there."

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A little girl came into the yard and stopped in front of Bessie saying "Mama want to know if you goin to church tonight."

"Tell your mother I'll be ready as soon as I eat my supper." Bessie answered.

"I thought you were so tired," George said slyly.

"You are never too tired to serve God," Bessie said with dignity. "When the Spirit hits you, you forget all about you tiredness. We have a good time and sometimes worship until eleven o'clock. We [sanctified?] folks serve God all the time."

"We all, except George Jr., and Bernice, belong to the church of 9 God, the Holiness Church," George said, "Bernice is a member of the Missionary Baptist Church."

"I don't belong to any church," George Jr., said, "I may join some day, but not the [Sanctified?] Church." He laughed and looked affectionately toward Bessie, who bridled a little and answered quickly, "Its just as good as any."

"You have to shout too much in [?] church," George explained and they all laughed good-naturedly at Bessie who [smiled?] unwillingly.

The children tried to persuade their mother to stay at home and rest but she refused, put on her hat, and [when?] her fried came by, left with her.

After Bessie left, Bernice called the rest of the family in to supper. The table, with its red cloth was in the kitchen. The only light came from [a?] lamp with smoke-blackened chimney that was placed at one end of the table.

Bernice, wiping perspiration from her forehead throughout the blessing, asked devoutly: "Lord give us food and strength and make us thankful for our daily [bread?]. Amen."

Elizabeth said, Hurry up an help me, please, I'm hungry."

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Bernice talked while she heaped the plates with the chicken, rice, gravy, [tomatoes?] and brown biscuits. We like most anything to eat. Since I am chief cook and bottle washer I try to have good meals for the family. They are good and hungry when the come in.

“We naturally eat lots of vegetables. In on of the out-houses we have shelves filled with canned goods put up by mother. She canned them 10 in the big pot near the corner of the house. Tomatoes, corn, okra, English peas, peaches, orange marmalade, strawberries, cabbages, beans and pickles. They keep find if you know how to properly can them. Did you notice the hills in the yard when you came in? We have sweet potatoes in one of them and in the other we have [sugarcane?]. We keep them covered over to keep the bugs from them.”

“All of us have good health,” George said between mouthfuls, “we never had a doctor. When the kids were born we had midwives to [?]. There are plenty of things growing out there in the field that will cure anything. Back in my country we used lots of herb medicine. I believe we know more about herbs than the folks over here. We didn't know about the kind of medicine that they use here in this country.

“We keep healthy because we have plenty of good food. We like chicken and eat plenty of them. Sometimes we get two dozen eggs a day when they lay.” He rose from the table, “Come out and I'll show you where I keep them.”

Next to the large shed used to store the canned goods is an open shed for the packing and crating of strawberries. Besides this shed are two chicken yards, in one of which were Leghorns and White Rocks.

“The chickens are of good breed,” George told me, “but we have that other wire enclosure to keep them housed up because they fight so.”

“Does George help you with any of the work around here?” I asked.

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“My son don't like to work around the home, and as soon as night comes he makes for one of them [jocks?] up town. We have plenty of them in this place. Life here is sort of wild, but the people all seem to 11 get along.

“It's too bad because during this time of the year it is hard to get help. Even the little tots are in the field trying to make money. A white man from the East Coast, owns the land next to the field where I was working this afternoon, and he helps me sometimes. He's setting out cucumbers and since I help him now and then, he returns the favor.

“People that can afford it go to Tampa and Lakeland to do their buying on Saturday nights, they're as thick as bees. Folks comes from all around here to town. I don't like to go shopping but somebody has to go and bring the stuff back.”

“What do you do for recreation, George?”

“I hang around the house when I've finished my day's work. In fact you will feel like hanging around after you've put in a day's work in the field. I hardly to any place. Several times last summer I went to see a baseball game. Folks like baseball around here. Plant City boys usually have a good team. That's the biggest fun they have down here.”

“Do you vote George? What do you think of the present administration anyway.” I asked as I rose to go.

“We sir, I have never voted in this country. I do believe in the form of government we have now. The different things they have to help the people is good. Like the Relief, that Social Security, and that late one that pays you when you can't work. But that don't touch us farmers. I don't think I'll ever vote, I just don't understand politics.”

I took my leave and George and Elizabeth walked to the car with me.

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“Come any time, glad to have you,” were his parting words.