

[Always Agin It]

Approximately 5,000 words

38 A SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: ALWAYS AGIN IT (See also [A Veteran Agin It?])

Date of First Writing January 24, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed J. Thomas Metz

Fictitious Name Oscar Staub

Street Address None

Place Chapin, South Carolina

Occupation Cotton Grower

Name of Writer John L. Dove

Name of Adviser State Office

“At the sound of the tone signal it will be exactly eight o'clock, Eastern Standard Time,” the radio announcer's voice boomed that bright October morning. His words came clear and sharp to all who stood and listened on the quiet street corner near the Columbia Chamber of Commerce building. The announcement stirred Oscar Staub, a short, be-whiskered, tobacco-chewing farmer from Dutch Fork, into action.

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Just as the mellow notes of the radio signal faded away, Staub pounded his heavy walking cane eight times against the concrete C10- 1/31/41 - S. C.

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pavement, and in a very harsh tone he complained to a little careworn, gingham-clad woman: "Jane, it's now eight o'clock and that farm de-mon-strator ain't showed up yet. I wish these Gov'ment agents 'ud learn to practice what they preach and cooperate sometimes with a hard workin' farmer like me who's cooperatin' in all these 'justment schemes. They say them 'justment checks have come, and I want mine, too."

With the voice of one possessing great patience and long suppressed emotion, Jane calmly answered: "Well, Oscar, you know I told you before we left home this morning that there was no need in our coming here so soon. I could have washed the dishes and churned the milk before leaving. And you could have - oh, well, I never could persuade you to do anything but work in the cotton field. You've always been in a hurry to do nothing." She turned then and pointed to the lines painted in gilt letters on the plate glass in front of her:

COUNTY AGRICULTURAL AGENT

Office Hours 8:30 to 1:00 and 2:00 to 5:00

And then she added, "It's not time for the farm agent to be in his office."

"I repeat, Jane, there's no justice in allowin' these Gov'ment agents to hold up a good hard workin' farmer like me who's tryin' to cooperate. I won't sign another dern crop 'justment agreement; for I tell you, Jane, I'm agin it." "Ginit" Staub emphasized his complaint this time with one pound of the heavy stick against the sidewalk. He then placed two rusty fingers against his tobacco stained lips and let fly a stream of ambeer that knocked a cockroach from its perch on the rim of a garbage can sitting some yards away.

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“Good morning, Mr. Staub! I hope you are feeling fine and fit this 3 morning,” spoke the polite county agent at the entrance to the building.

“How yuh,” grunted Staub. “I’ve come for my check.”

“Sorry, Mr. Staub, but yours hasn’t come in yet,” answered the county agent, as he walked into the building and to his office.

“Well, I’ll be —— !” “Bam!” came a hollow sound that drowned out the last word, as a piece off “Ginit’s” cedar stick ricocheted off the garbage can and out into the street.

“Stop it, Oscar,” Jane barked. “You’ll say and do too much t’reckley!”

“Afraid I talk too much, eh?”

“You did just then, Oscar Staub!”

“Oh, Yes?”

“Now, Oscar Staub, you’re going to listen to me for one time in your life,” Jane snapped, as she pushed back her much worn hat with a jerk. The mass of red hair on her head and the belligerent look on her face lent color to the truth and scorn her tongue poured out on Oscar’s defenseless head: “You - you’ve done nothing all these years we’ve been married but talk and grumble! You - you’d never be sensible like a real farmer and go to hear Doctor Knapp and other farm leaders tell, free of charge, of a way to run your farm! If - if you’d done that, maybe you wouldn’t now need to ask the Government to give you something for doing absolutely nothing!” Then she adjusted her hat and walked away.

Staub, the “gin it” of Dutch Fork, looked dazed and defeated. He staggered out into the street, reached down and picked up the broken bits of his walking cane, and returned to the sidewalk. He stood for a moment 4 staring blankly down at the filthy garbage can into which he had, a few moments before, sent a cockroach scurrying to cover. As he turned

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to leave, he was heard to mumble, "I have made a mess of life. I —— but Jane was right." Then he, too, walked quietly away.

Perhaps there is no one better acquainted with the Staub family than Mose Austin, an old Negro who claims to have spent his entire life on the Staub farm. Mose stated some months ago: "Mister Oscar was bawn on Friday, January 13, 1875, right here on dis ole fawm. A number of ginerations of he folks live here befo' he time. Ole Marse Isaac, he daddy, sont him to de schools dey had roun' here when Marse Oscar was a boy. Den he sont him to Leesville for a year or mo' to 'tend de 'cademy. But Mister Oscar didn' lak school, and he didn' lak de fawm. And when de war in Cuby comes along, he ups and jines de Army, and den he gone a long time."

According to Mose Austin and others in Dutch fork who knew Mr. Staub very well, he remained with the Army in Cuba until the treaty of peace with the Spanish Government was concluded in February, 1899. He was then transferred with his military outfit to the Philippine Islands, where, for a number of years, he served under General Fred Funston in quelling the Moro insurgent uprisings in the wilds and jungles of that newly acquired territory. He contracted a tropical fever in the Philippines; was kept in a government hospital at Manila until his recovery; and then, in the year 1904, he was sent back to the States and given an honorable discharge with the rank of sergeant.

What Sergeant Staub did during the four years he remained in California, or in the west, has never been explained. He, however, did meet and marry Jane Mueller in San Francisco during that time.

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"At the beginning of 1909," explained a Dutch Fork farmer and merchant who knew the Staub family, "Ginit and Mrs. Staub took up their residence at his old home. His father had died the year before, and his mother had been dead for a number of years. He was the

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lone heir to the ninety-six-acre farm and the two-story, eight-room residence thereon. At that time, the Staub farm was one of the best in the county.

“Yes,” he continued, “when Ginit took charge of the ninety-six acres and the old home, he had all that was required to give a three-horse farmer a feeling of security and independence. He was only thirty-four years old and in very good health. He had an industrious, intelligent, and ambitious little wife. He had a highly productive, well terraced, and sufficiently equipped farm. He had a comfortable home of eight large rooms, equipped with substantial old furniture. He had the best Negro help to be found in the community. And he had money with which to conduct his farming operations and some to spare for luxuries. The oak and cedar shade trees; the shrubbery, grass, and flowers; the board fences; and the orchards and vineyards were all there just as his father had left them. He was independent, indeed. And he demonstrated his independence during the years he lived and tried to farm in Dutch Fork.”

While the immediate community surrounding the old Staub home is known as White Rock, yet, much of the land is red, particularly Mr. Staub's. The soil type on his farm is known to the soil technologist as Georgeville clay. It is of a slate rock formation, gummy and sticky in wet weather and very hard in dry weather. And it is highly adapted to the growth of cotton and many other crops, when under proper care and culture. It is a soil type that erodes rapidly when under constant cultivation, unless the field terraces are properly cared for.

“And one of the first things that Oscar Staub did when he started to farming was to plow down the terraces in his fields. He said he was agin the use of such things on his place,” said the talkative Dutch Fork grocer with the sign - BROWN ARM TOBACCO - over the door to his store building. “I knew he had been a contrary sort of fellow when he was a boy, but I thought he'd overcome the habit in the Army.

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“But in spite of the fact that Ginit, as we all called Oscar, had traveled in a number of foreign lands and had come in contact with many people of different nationalities during the eleven years from home, he took up his old habit of keeping himself aloof from the most of his acquaintances and neighbors. I saw little of him, but I heard from him through Mose and Jake Austin, his Negro sharecroppers, who came often to my store for chewing tobacco for themselves and for Oscar.

“Ginit interested himself mostly with cotton growing and cotton markets. During the fall and winter months, Mose and Jake Austin would start out early in the morning to Columbia, with wagons piled high with snowy white cotton, with good, bad, and indifferent grades of bagging packed around it. But late in the afternoon, Mose and Jake would return, riding high on bales of hay and bags of corn. Ginit did plant a little corn some years, but harvested only a few nubbins. Cotton, and more cotton, was his bread wagon.” He chuckled a moment, and inquired:

“Did you know that the story of 'The Yellow Corn and a Fool,' that has gone the rounds for a number of years, came out of Dutch fork and that Oscar Staub is one of the real characters in that story? Well, it did. It got its beginning through an experience of a political-minded person from one of our adjoining counties, while he was out beating the bushes for votes in his race for election to office in that county. Not knowing that he had driven across the county line, the anxious candidate came across a farmer sweating and grumbling and hosing in a patch of yellow stunted corn just beyond an old rail fence by the roadside. The following conversation took place:

“Good morning, Sir! My name is Smith,' spoke the polite and anxious candidate.

“Howdy!' grunted Ginit Staub.

“Yo-yo-your corn looks kinder yellow,' remarked the candidate.

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"I planted yellow corn,' Ginit's tobacco filled mouth sputtered, as he went on hoeing among the little stunted cornstalks almost hidden away in the tender green crab grass.

"The polite candidate, in his amazement at the rebuff, squinted at Ginit for a moments and then said, 'Say, Mister, there's not much between you and a fool, is there?'

"Only a fence,' was Ginit's answer.

"And Oscar, Mose, and Jake continued to grow cotton, and to buy more and more corn, hay, and chewing tobacco each year. It was mainly through Mose or Jake that the neighbors learned anything concerning activity on the Staub farm. They seldom saw Ginit, but Mose and Jake came often to my store to gossip and to wisecrack with the checker players, whittlers, community politicians, and others who loafed around ny place. 'How's the boss today, Mose - Jake?' they'd inquire. And after the craving for Brown Mule had been satisfied, the two Negroes would tell of the latest happenings on the Staub farm.

"Oscar had taken no part in community activities or politics. For a number of years, however, there had been rumblings of discontent on the part 8 of a few Dutch Fork citizens concerning community improvements. They felt the county officials had neglected the community, then a part of Lexington County, in the way of road improvement and so forth. Well, we had a long rainy spell during the fall and early winter of 1911, and the roads became quagmires. So the political storm broke on all sides; and Oscar Staub, 'gin it like, sallied forth as one of the greatest rebels in the community. He was highly in favor of seceding from Lexington County, and became very active in the movement which eventually made Dutch Fork, on February 9, 1912, a part of Richland County by legislative agreement.

"It was along about this same time that we began to hear reports of the rapid invasion of the boll weevil in the western section of the cotton belt. Frank Lever, one of our Dutch Fork farmers, was in Congress. He'd been studying about the weevil situation, and, politician

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like, he wanted to do something for the farmers. So he got in with Senator Hoke Smith of Georgia, and they got through a law called the Smith-Lever Act, in 1914. Then the Government sent out Dr. S. A. Knapp and other speakers to tell the cotton farmers of the danger. But nobody but Mose and Jake Austin from the Staub farm would go to hear Dr. Knapp. Oscar, being agin it all, stayed at home and worked in his cotton fields- His fields, at the same time, had begun to show signs of sheet erosion.

“During the summer of that same year, 1914, the war in Europe broke out, and there was no market for cotton the following fall and winter, except the buy-a-bale movement. Oscar, at the time, had a big supply of the fleecy staple on hand. He had all of the new crop and some that was carried over from former years. 'White folks, de barns and de woods am full of cotton, and Mister Oscar is chawin' mo' 'bacco den he ever is chawed befo'; and us ain't 9 got a thing to buy braid wid, let 'lone 'bacco, and us can't eat cotton,' is the way old Mose Austin reported the situation on the Staub farm at my store around Christmas time of that year.

“By the spring of 1915, the panic in the business world began to abate, and the markets started to function again. The price for cotton and other farm products, however, was very low. Ginit, partly through his need for funds, but mostly through his way of acting contrary to the advice of his wife and everybody else, sold out his big supply of cotton at a loss. He and Mose and Jake, however, continued to plant cotton.

“The years passed. The World War came and went. Despite the pleadings of the Nation - 'FOOD WILL WIN THE WAR!' - they planted cotton, and cotton alone, on the Staub farm. The crop yield, however, grew less and less with each succeeding year. It was not because they planted less acreage in cotton, but it was due to an exhaustion of the fertility of the soil. The fine gray fields of Alamance silt loam, which a few years before had shown signs of sheet erosion, had now turned to red clay and were streaked with washes. In a few fields there were gullies which compelled the plowman to turn back when they cultivated the cotton. The buildings on the place had begun to leak; the door and

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window shutters had begun to fall from their hinges; the board fences hung from their moorings; and the orchards were diseased. Mrs. Staub saw to it that the lawns, flowers, and shrubbery were kept in good condition.

“It was just after the World War had ceased that Ginit Staub made the biggest mistake of his life as a cotton grower. He had produced, at great expense, quite a large supply of cotton; had held it in storage at a high cost; and had borrowed money heavily, at a high rate of interest, with which to grow more cotton. When the price for cotton reached twenty-five cents a pound, he wanted 10 thirty; and after the price of thirty was to be had, he decided that he wanted forty; and when the cotton market finally reached its height - forty-nine cents a pound - in the summer of 1920, he ordered his broker to sell out at fifty. One year later June, 1921, he was sold out on the cotton market at ten cents. He couldn't put up the margin necessary for the protection of his idol - cotton.”

Before the talkative Dutch Fork grocer could proceed further with his history of Ginit Staub, Mose and Jake Austin walked into his store.

“Mose, you black rascal,” he said, “you are the very fellow I want to see right now. I want you and Jake to tell me what's been going on over at your place. I haven't heard from you in some time.”

“Us need some 'bacco fus' thing, Mister Smith,” answered Mose, after a haw-haw.

When Mose had pinched off a big hunk of Brown Mule and placed it in his mouth, he said, “Mister Oscar, he 'bout lak as usual, 'cept he wor'ed 'bout not bein' able to git all de gewano he want to use dis year.” He began to study for a moment to refresh his memory about guano and guano hauling. Then he continued: “Jake, does you 'member de time when us had all dat cotton and cottonseeds to haul to Columby, and all dat cawn, hay, and gewano to fotch back, and it had rain' so much dat winter and spring dat de roads wan't nothin' but mud up to de axle of de waggin?”

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"I sho' does, Mose," answered Jake, after he had supplied his hungry mouth with a chew of tobacco. "And wan't de boss outdone and mad?" he added after a loud haw-haw.

"Kack, kack, kack," Mose laughed as he added another pinch of Brown Mule to the quid in his mouth, and then he continued the discussion: "Yas, suh, he 11 sho' was mad. He'd cuss de road 'thor'ties for everything he could think of, and swear he ain't go pay no mo' tax in Lexington County, 'cept he be place under de compeldation of de law. Dat was way back yonder 'bout 1911, befo' de war.

"Speakin' of de war time," he went on, "After de war gits over and de sojers come home, hit look lak ever'thing go wrong on de place. Mister Oscar, he had helt and helt all our cotton till de price go down to nuttin' in 1921, and then he sell. Half de time, dat year, all on de place went hongry. So I say one day to Jake, 'Jake, dis ain't gwine do; us'll have to plant some peas lak dat man from 'way out yonder - Doctor Kinhap, I believe dat he name - egvised de farmers to do. Miss Jane, she say she want us to plant peas. But Mister Oscar say, 'un-uh', he don't want nothin' but cotton planted on de place; dat he in debt and hafter raise cotton to git de money to pay wid. So when dat win' begin to blow all dem thunder clouds out de wes', 'long 'bout July, I tole Jake hit a bad sign. Sho' nuff dar did come trouble, 'long 'bout Augus' and September. De boll weevil come des lak dat doctor man from 'way out yonder say he'd come." After Mose had unloaded an accumulation of ambeer from his big black mouth, he opened wide the same, clapped his horny hands, let go a long guffaw, and then finished his narrative: "And, bless yo' life, dat bug sho' romped on things dat fall."

"Romped on things is correct, Mose," agreed the grocer. "So great was the destruction that heavy losses were sustained by business men as well as by farmers in this part of the country. Many suffered bankruptcy, and a financial panic among the local crop-lending agencies was the result. Banks required mortgages on real estate in placing further loans among farmers. This ruling caused a big cut in the acreage planted in cotton in 1922, and

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the years that 12 followed. But I don't believe Mose and Jake and their boss did much toward cutting cotton acreage." He then looked at Mose and awaited his answer.

"Mi-Mi-Miss Jane, she tried to git him to plant sumpin' in place of cotton, but he say, 'un - uh, des lak dat time she want him to plant peas. And one day he went down to Columby and gived a mortgage on de place and bought mo' gewano dan ebber befo'. When me and Jake was haulin' hit home, I say to Jake one day, 'Jake, dis gewano don't smell lak hit grow cotton on dat lan' up home.' Anyway, Mister Oscar had us haul it out and put hit down in de fields and plant cotton on hit. De cotton come up and started to growin', and, suh, befo' de middle of May I looks down one day and sees de boll weevil settin' up dere in de top of dem little cotton stalks waitin' for de squares to fo'm. So all dat gewano us hauled and put down in 1922 made nuttin' but a crop of boll weevils. And de very same thing happen agin de nex' year.' Mose walked to the door, spat, and announced, "Well, white folks, I reckon me and Jake will hadder be gittin' 'long back to dat ole red field over yonder and try to git some of dem gullies filled up so us can plow cross 'em," and they departed.

"Old Mose Austin has a splendid memory," the grocer remarked, "and I am sure he has stated the facts. Ginit Staub accepts no one's advice in regard to his method of farming - not even in the face of danger. After the great damage done by the boll weevil in 1921, the Columbia bankers, merchants, and other business man acting as a unit - the Chamber of Commerce - became interested in securing expert advice for the farmers of the county under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. Money, office space, and equipment were provided in order to get the best talent possible for weevil control, soil conservation, and farm management in general.

"In 1922, Needham Winters - a shrewd, quick-witted, rangy fellow from 13 Texas A. and M. College - was appointed farm demonstration agent for Richland County. He came to my place one day soon after his appointment and suggested a plan for the organization of a sort of forum club for the farmers in the community. I favored the idea, and, after Winters and I had discussed the plan with a few of the leading farmers, it later resulted in our

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getting a good active farm organization. We named it The Dutch Fork Farm Improvement Association. One of our main objects was to get hold of farmers, like Ginit Staub, in the community and put them to practicing, if possible, some of Dr. S. A. Knapp's philosophy.

“County Agent Winters, at my suggestion, took a whole day off from his many official duties and went to see Staub on his farm. Despite the rebuffs from Ginit, the audacious Texan 'stuck to his guns' and spent the day following up the soil-robbing cotton planter over his place. Winters met Ginit's rebuffs with the suggestions: 'Old man, you need some terraces in this field; plant some cowpeas; this fence needs mending; prune and spray those fruit trees; you've got to dust this cotton with calcium arsenate, if you expect to produce cotton. It was, however, only after Winters had made Ginit the promise that he would be made a director in The Dutch Fork Farm Improvement Association that he'd agree to join and attend the meetings.

“For the regular monthly meeting of our farm organization, on July 1, 1922, County Agent Winters had a number of speakers from Clemson College and elsewhere for the meeting. He had evidently forgotten about Staub and the promise. Well, the house was full and the meeting was under way that night, when, quite unexpectedly to everybody present, in stalked 'Director' Staub, muddy shoes, walking stick, and all. He didn't stop walking until he had found a seat near the speaker's stand. Winters' face beamed with the pride of a hunter who'd killed a bear. Dr. Vernon of the Tri-State Tobacco Grower's Cooperative Association 14 had just begun to outline a plan for a cooperative market in Columbia - a curb market - when Staub came. The crowd began to giggle. After a while, it began to appear there would be a general outburst of laughter and disorder in the room. Winters, sensing the situation, whispered something in Dr. Vernon's ear. The little doctor smiled, nodded, and then sat down.

“Bam, bam, bam!” The pocket knife in Winters' hand sounded on the teacher's desk in the room, and then Winters announced: 'The meeting will please come to order! Before Dr.

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Vernon resumes his discussion, we will hear from one of the officers of our club - Director Staub!

“Well, sir, without preliminary ado, old Ginit ambled across the room to a broken windowpane and squirted, with the accuracy of a marksman firing on a bull's-eye, a stream of ambeer through it. He then unloaded his advice into the anxious ears of his listeners:

“There's been too much advice 'round here of late 'bout how to farm, and not 'nough hones'-to-goodness work in the fields. Hal Raleigh, the hoss doctor, was over at my place the other day and tol' me that the farm de-mon-strator was doin' nothin' but goin' 'round over the county and a-makin' fun of my ole pore lan'. And he says to me, “Oscar, if I was in your place I'd go down to one of them dern meetin's they're havin' down at the schoolhouse and lay in a complaint agin that fellah Winters.” And old Dock writ out me a petition to present to yuh. So, as a member and officer of this club, my fellah farmers, I've come to ask yuh to sign this petition.' He then took from his pocket a folded paper - the petition - addressed to The Honorable Board of County Commissioners, asking that the services of County Agent Winters be discontinued, on the complaint that the said Winters had meddled into the business of the farmers of Richland County.

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“While Ginit didn't succeed in ousting Winters as county agent, he did succeed in becoming quite well known after that meeting, for the interest he took in the political issues of the time and for his discrimination in his choice of a candidate for public office. It was his habit, or affliction, to be more often interested in the defeat of some public official than in the election of any one in particular. He opposed all local movements looking toward community improvements. He just had to be in opposition to his neighbors - always agin it.

“Well, it so happened,” the grocer continued, “that the years 1923-1930 were favorable in varying degrees for the cotton growers. The market for cotton went up with markets for other commodities, and for stocks and bonds, during that period. They managed somehow

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to grow cotton on the Staub farm, and Ginit would hold it for a better price. He was never able, however, to sell on the peaks in the market. It was his luck to unload at the bottom pretty nearly every time he sold. At any rate, the last big sale of cotton made by him was in the summer of 1931, at six cents a pound. Ginit then, to use one of old Mose Austin's phrases, 'went broke as a convict.'"

Through the help of the Veterans' Bureau, the Seed Loan, and other New Deal agencies, Mr. Staub was enabled to live and to farm on for a few more years at the old Staub place, as the Dutch Forkers were now referring to the soil impoverished farm. He unwillingly - agin-it-like to the end - became, as he thought, a cooperator with the county agricultural agent in the program of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. When 1935 came, however, it was found that Mr. Staub had not complied with the terms of the Bankhead Amendment to the AAA Act. So there could be no check for him. And thus it was that, on that October morning, he was compelled to stand by the garbage can - the one 16 from which he so expertly sprayed the cockroach and had struck with his walking cane - and admit that Jane was right; that he'd made a mess of life.

Two weeks after Mr. Staub's demonstration in front of the county agent's office, the little gingham-dressed woman he had called Jane decided that she had seen enough of boll weevils, cotton fields, gullies, and failure. She, therefore, bundled her few belongings and boarded a Southern Railway train and was carried back to live again among cooperators in her native California. Even though Mr. Staub was now the recipient of a substantial veteran's pension, he could no longer be independent. He followed Jane.

Soon after Mr. and Mrs. Staub left for California, the old Staub farm fell into the possession of a large holding company. The writer had an occasion to visit the place some months ago. And what a spectacle! The dilapidated residence was there, together with a few tumble-down buildings once used for barns. The board fences were no longer in evidence; and where there was once a well-kept orchard, only a few diseased and dead trees remained. Along the former fence rows, and in the weeds and briar-grown fertile spots in

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low places, there was growing an abundance of escaped peach seedlings, planted there by the eroding soil. The red fields and gullies were veritable sore eyes on the landscape. The only human inhabitants found on the abandoned farm were a grayhaired Negro, of unmixed blood, and his wife. They lived in the Staub home, and he claimed to be employed as a sort of caretaker for the place. He was Mose Austin. Despite the sixty-five years he claimed for his age, he was still alert in mind and body, and still used Brown Mule - his favorite brand of chewing tobacco. He was in a reminiscent mood when found sitting on the rickety porch facing the east. As he gazed across the red fields and gullies in the direction of Congaree River, he had much to tell in connection with his life 17 on the Staub farm.

“No, suh,” he began, “dis place ain't what hit used to be when Marster Isaac, who wuz Mister Oscar's father, lef' hit nigh on to thirty year ago. Hit was at dat time cawnsidered de finest place in de Dush Fo'k. But now when I sets here and looks 'cross at dese here gullies, weeds, and briars, and to dat muddy water in de ribber, I says to myself, 'Mose, dat muddy water am de blood of dis lan'.”

While Mose Austin had much to tell concerning the Staub farm, he spoke with a feeling when he mentioned the failure made by the late owner. It was with profound regret that he saw the place pass out of the hands of a family he had known for so many years. “I sho' hated to see Miss Jane and Mister Oscar give up de place and go to de Wes' ”, is the way he put it. The faithful Negro had spent his life on the place. He loved it and all the memories connected with it. He realized, however, that its present condition was due to the handiwork of a veteran soil robber, who was always agin it.

MCB