Behind
the
cane
curtain

GROWER: ‘We’ve done our best’ on housing

By PATSY SONE

The Enterprise Plantation home of William S. Patton Jr.

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owners who still had outhouses for their workers.

“IT’S AN ECONOMIC thing, more than anything else, I imagine,” he figured. “There’s just not that much money to be made in the sugar business. Like this year, I think most of the mills are going to lose money. I know we are.”

“But isn’t sugar the second leading agricultural product in the state?” I asked and he said it was and then I asked, if it’s such a big product, why is it such a losing one.

“It’s not always a losing one. Some years are much less worse than others.”

He sat there waiting for my next question, and I brought up January and February and what the workers had said about there being no work.

“WELL, ON ACCOUNT of the weather, but there is work, especially this year. All the fields are cut up, in bad shape. We really need to get them out, to work but it’s difficult... because they have some money and they’re going to take their time getting to work until they really need it,” he insisted.

“But if there’s no work or if the weather’s too bad to work, they don’t get paid, do they?” I asked.

And he said “no,” but insisted again, “My goodness, there will be more work than we can do in January.”

“But this is not typical, is it?” I asked, and he said “not entirely,” and then I continued, “because I have seen pay stubs like from last year with maybe thirty-one hours for two weeks.”

He looked straight at me, and asked, “You’ve seen those?”

“Pay stubs,” I repeated. “I mean a record that they’ve worked that many hours. Now would you say that’s the workers’ fault or the fault that there’s no work or the fault of the weather?”

“Well, I would say both,” he answered. “The weather, the fault of the worker and sometimes the owner.”

Patout offered to take me to see some of the houses where his workers live, and then kept on talking as we headed for the carport.

“On this place, there are some families that fathers and grandfathers farmed the place before them, and I feel very close to them,” he said. “But I get awfully angry at them sometimes because of the things they do. They’ll buy an old car, wreck it, buy another one, continue in debt with automobiles and nothing in the house for them or their children.

“That’s the bad part. They should be taught responsibility, some way or another. I don’t know how. It would be very difficult, I would imagine, generations, it would take.”

HE OPENED the kitchen door and yelled out to a black boy, raking up the yard: “Woodrow, go clean out the back seat of my car... get the dust out the back seat.”

I asked if he could see any difference in the young workers and the old ones and he answered, “They’re not as good as the old ones. The attitude’s not there. I mean, the attitude is so different.”

“How?”

“They just don’t want to work.”

Getting into his dusty blue Falcon, parked behind his son’s white sports car and another green automobile in the carport, I asked him about the workers being afraid of the growers.

“What do you mean by fear of the growers?” he asked.

“Well, if I say anything, if I complain, the grower or the owner or the bossman or whoever will get mad and put me out of the house. Do you think that’s true?” I asked.

“That’s ridiculous,” he mumbled, backing out and heading toward the living quarters.

“What about repairing rotten porches and things like that?” I asked him, and he insisted, “We get to them when we can. Sometimes within two days after it’s reported, sometimes three weeks, four weeks, six weeks.”

He pulled up in front of two small brick houses and took me inside one that was paneled and had a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen with a stainless steel sink and cabinets and a bath.

In the bath, the black woman who lived there reminded Patout the lavatory was pulling away and the wall was rotten and he promised he’d look into it.

“How long has that been that way?” I asked her.

“More’n a year,” she answered.

OUTSIDE, PATOUT pointed out an old house and said it had a bath and that he thought the brick-papered one across the road, where an old man in a plaid shirt, khaki pants and suspenders was sitting on the porch eating crackers dipped in milk, did too.

“Let’s find out,” I suggested.

As we walked toward the house, Patout called out “You got a bath, don’t you, Serge,” and the old man, milk and crackers dripping down his chin, called back, “Naw, Sir, Mister Bill, we got no bath.”

“That other old house?” Patout asked him, and he said “Yes, Sir.”

Back in the car, we passed a couple more brick houses and some old ones like Serge’s and a concrete building Patout called “the shack,” where black field workers from the cotton country live four to a room during grinding.

THERE ARE TEN rooms... and a nice tile floor, insulated, central heat,” he said.

I asked if some of the old houses might go back far as slavery, and he speculated they might. “We acquired this property in eighteen-twenty-five, and we went through the Civil War. I have records showing how much sugar we made and all that sort of thing. I think our office dates that far back.”

Before I left, I asked Patout what he thought about the workers organizing.

“It would be nothing but trouble,” he insisted as we pulled into the drive, next to a florist’s truck that had come with boxes of flowers, stacked up by the back door, for the tea. “Anytime you fool with organized labor, you have nothing but trouble.”