Plantation Tokens

Early in this century, many South Louisiana farmers could ruefully say, "Money comes but once a year."

That was when planters depended on sugarcane as their annual cash crop.

Actually it was the well-to-do plantation owners who saw the piles of greenbacks sugarcane brought in. Laborers and field hands were more familiar with a private system of coinage.

Since their work continued unremittingly through the daylight hours, they took their relaxation after nightfall by congregating with friends at the plantation store. There they also exchanged special tokens for food and goods they needed—such as salt meat, rice, red beans, lengths of cotton for new clothes. Almost every plantation had its own coinage. Though no longer used along the bayou, some of these tokens still exist, much battered by the years. Some are saved as curious souvenirs of the past. Occasionally one may be dug up in a field where a forgotten store once stood.

"How much brass you drawing tonight?" was a popular greeting on the plantations.

The "brass" came in small denominations, five cents, 10 cents, 50 or 60 cents, the latter representing a day's pay in the last century. The cane grower would credit each laborer's pay and make a settlement in cash when the sugar had been sold after the grinding season. But who could wait three months for money? Day-to-day needs were taken care of by tokens advanced against cash earned. Most plantations maintained their own stores.

They also ran boardinghouses for the extra workers who came from distant places to "make a winter," and for these people there were meal tokens.

Cash, so it was said, was as scarce as cream cheese.

There is a story told to show how unfamiliar the plantation people were with real currency:

A hurricane came along and lifted the roof off the big house. The plantation owner found his office flooded and his box of money an unhappy wad of soaked bills. There was only one thing to do.

He had his money spread out on the levee with a boy to watch it. The wind ruffled the bills, and young Henry weighted them down with handfuls of pecans.

At sunset the planter came to get his fortune, now nice and dry.

"You have any trouble?" he asked Henry.

"All day!" said Henry, "Everybody come along and grabbed. All day!"

"They grabbed the money?"

"Nobody care about this paper. But you should see how they go after my pecans!"

Submitted by Alex Melancon

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