

The Negro Farm Owner

By ALLEN B. DOGGETT, Jr.

HAMPTON INSTITUTE, Va., Feb. 27.—The Negro is fast deserting the farm for town and industrial center. Georgia, for instance, has lost one-third of her Negro farmers in the census period 1920-25, and is still losing them. One out of every six Negro tillers of the soil in South Carolina has departed for parts unknown. One out of every eight in Arkansas has gone, and in Alabama one out of ten left the plow to rust.

It is well, perhaps, that many of these men and their families have abandoned leaky shacks, small terraced farms, and the eternal debt of the tenant system. To many departure means education for their children, opportunity, escape from terrorism, security, freedom. The uphill fight to win a living from cotton in the older cotton States is slowly but surely being given up in favor of the level lands of Texas and the newer soil and machinery of Oklahoma.

The cotton lands of the Atlantic States, excepting specially favored localities, seem to be marking time before going back to brush and timber with the coming of a perfected mechanical cotton-picker, or, let us hope, rejuvenated by a radically different type of farming. North Carolina is the only eastern state, where cotton is an important crop, showing an increase in the number of Negro farmers.

The situation is alarming from the standpoint of the landlord. His labor supply is deserting him and cotton labor, unlike that in many other crops, may not yet be replaced with machinery, for the hands at picking time govern the acreage planted. It is also alarming to the thoughtful Negro men and women working toward the upbuilding of a permanent agriculture. For it is not only the tenants and croppers who have left the land.

Farm owners are deserting their homes in increasing numbers. In Georgia, of the 46,000 farmers leaving the farms during 1920-25, 4,000 were owners. Alabama has lost 2,500 farm owners, and in South Carolina 3,300 decided the game was not worth the candle. In the cotton states 23,000 home owners have gone.

The circumstances forcing those departures of farm owners seem to be many. But the immediate reason, deep-rooted as it is in traditional technique and marketing, is the low purchasing power of an acre of cotton. In 1920 it took one and a half acres of cotton in Alabama to purchase what one acre would have in North Carolina, where cotton farming is carried on in conjunction with a bread and meat and feed program.

The same condition prevailed in 1926 and to a lesser extent in the other years. Georgia cotton growers needed three acres of cotton in 1920 and three and a half in 1926 to purchase what North Carolina farmers could buy with one acre. Similar inequalities prevailed for Arkansas and South Carolina.

Country air is good, but every man who owns a farm has bills to pay. The prosperity of these States thus measured since 1920 was equal to or above that for the United States as a whole only in 1924 and 1925.

But before those Negro farmers who now have a grip on the land release their hold it may be well for them to pause and to consider their position apart from their immediate and temporary economic position and the contagion caught from the going of many of their friends.

To this end Benjamin F. Hubert, president of the Georgia Mechanical and Industrial College, has in-

augurated Negro Home Ownership Week, March 4-10, for the purpose of unitedly concentrating on the problems threatening this fundamental hold of the Negro on the economic structure.

If, during this week, through preachers, teachers, farm-and-home-demonstration agents, Joanes workers, nurses, and other public-spirited people, wavering farm owners may be induced to look at rural life not only as it is now, but as it may be made to be, a lasting benefit will come to those who like country living and who now seem to be forced out by temporary conditions.

Some of these farm owners may, during this week, catch a vision of rural life such as will turn them from an attitude of pessimism into becoming constructive workers in the upbuilding of a countryside that meets and satisfies the needs and longings of its people.