

# THE SOUTH'S GREATEST ENEMY?

THE COTTON BOLL WEEVIL AND ITS LOST REVOLUTION, 1892-1930

by

JAMES CONRAD GIESEN

(Under the Direction of JAMES C. COBB)

## ABSTRACT

When the cotton boll weevil crossed the Mexican border into Texas around 1892 and began a slow march across the Cotton Belt, many predicted that the pest would destroy the plantation South, whose economy and society rested on the production of cotton. As the pest began devouring the staple and moving through the region, land owners, tenants, politicians, and extension agents continued to paint the pest as a direct threat to their livelihoods. Despite the fear that gripped the South, by the time the weevil made its way to the Atlantic Ocean, the pest had made no major, lasting effect on the economic, social, or environmental structures of the region. This dissertation examines how individuals and communities in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia reacted to the arrival of the pest, and how in each place forces acted to use the boll weevil to advance their own purposes. Instead of blaming antiquated credit systems, Jim Crow racial codes, and poor agricultural practices, contemporaries and scholars alike used the boll weevil as a material scapegoat for enduring poverty in the rural South, as well as changes to the land and society that had little to do with the pest's arrival.

INDEX WORDS: boll weevil, cotton, agriculture, diversification, American South, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia

THE SOUTH'S GREATEST ENEMY? THE COTTON BOLL WEEVIL  
AND ITS LOST REVOLUTION, 1892-1930

by

JAMES CONRAD GIESEN

B.A., DePauw University, 1995

M.A., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1998

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2004

© 2004

James Conrad Giesen

All Rights Reserved

THE SOUTH'S GREATEST ENEMY? THE COTTON BOLL WEEVIL  
AND ITS LOST REVOLUTION, 1892-1930

by

JAMES CONRAD GIESEN

Major Professor: James C. Cobb

Committee: Kathleen Clark  
Bryant Simon  
Paul Sutter

Electronic Version Approved:  
Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2004

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The seed of this project was planted in the spring of 1994 in an undergraduate seminar with John Dittmer at DePauw University. I owe my primary thanks to him, who not only first drew my attention to the southern rural experience before the New Deal, but who introduced me to the idea that historical questions were, well, important. He has guided my efforts in one way or another since my undergraduate days and I can only hope that my own work as a scholar and teacher will live up in a small way to the magnificent model that he has set.

I returned to the boll weevil in the fall of 1996, as a first-year M.A. student at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. One morning, while brainstorming about seminar paper topics at work as a research assistant in a dank, yellow-painted basement room in McIver Hall, I turned to the only bona fide historian around, Chuck Holden, and asked him if he thought the boll weevil was a good topic. Unfortunately he said it was. He was the first person to encourage me to pursue this project and he's been the sounding board for my ideas every step of the way since. In addition to reading drafts of nearly everything I've written about the pest, he even traveled with me to Enterprise, Alabama to see the statue. Apart from the boll weevil and southern history, Chuck has helped me sort out many topics, including but not limited to: The Flatlanders, Hofstra's chances of a March run, and mule eating.

Dozens of other people made my time at UNCG intellectually exciting and, in the end, incredibly valuable to this dissertation. Bill Link encouraged this topic from the beginning and offered important insights at its crucial early stage. Bill Blair, Steven Lawson, Loren Schweninger, and Lisa Tolbert enriched my graduate experience in Greensboro in a variety of ways and to them I owe a great debt. Robert Shelton and Denise Kohn fed me for two Thanksgivings and dozens of meals in between and generally made life better for me in North Carolina.

When I finally arrived in Athens, I moved into a “rustic” shotgun house next to the world’s second-greatest restaurant. Dexter Weaver, of Weaver D’s Delicious Fine Foods, and his staff, proved to be great neighbors. I learned from my first morning, however, that having your bed pushed up against an open window *maybe* ten feet from a chicken-fryer exhaust fan might bring with it a set of problems. Four greasy years later I was better, and at least ten pounds heavier, for the experience. Though this dissertation may not be, as Weaver D. says, “Automatic For the People,” his slogan has become a worthy goal.

My academic home in Athens has become an equally fulfilling place, thanks to a great mix of professors and graduate students. There is no more important person in LeConte Hall than Laurie Kane, who keeps everything running. As Robert Pratt’s student and teaching assistant, I learned a great deal not only about history, but about how to organize a classroom and how to mix seriousness with humor. Kathleen Clark served on my dissertation committee and offered very important questions and insights

at the end of this process. Paul Sutter has opened the door of his office and his home to graduate students like me and we are all better for it. He has quickly become a very important part of the History Department and undoubtedly a crucial member of my committee. He has always made himself available to answer my often obtuse questions and has given this dissertation a very careful and critical read. Bryant Simon lived around the corner from us for the two years I spent actually writing this manuscript and, as a result, heard more about the boll weevil than he wanted to. But he never grew tired of my nagging and prodding and this dissertation is the direct result of questions and comments he offered in our yards and on the sidewalks between, usually with his kids perched atop or hanging from at least one of us. Bryant, Ann Marie Reardon, Benjamin Simon, and Eli Simon made life in Athens a great joy. They fed us, kept us laughing, found us housing, employed us, and just brought us in. We can never repay that debt.

James Cobb directed this dissertation in every sense of the word. His own scholarship has long served as a model for my own and as this manuscript took form, his comments constantly pushed me in new and better directions. He offered encouragement at precisely the moment I needed it, and criticism where I most needed it. During the last few months it must have seemed to him like reading and editing my dissertation was all he was doing, and I truly appreciate his work.

There are too many graduate students who have impacted my thinking and ultimately made this a better dissertation to name them all. But a couple deserve to be

mentioned. Tammy Ingram is a rare person (thankfully). She is almost as smart and funny as she thinks she is, but she is always exciting to be around (though she is around an awful lot). Alex. Macaulay has taught me as much as anyone—and that’s about the greatest praise I can offer. His humor and intellect know no bounds. Eleanor, Eliza, Lee, and Alex. have made my time in Georgia more fun and more rewarding than they can ever know. I miss their presence in Athens every day. Carl Burkart, John Walker Davis, Jen Gross, Mark Huddle, and Travis Rose all deserve their own sentences. John Hayes, Ivy Holliman, Ichihiro Miyata, and Bert Way read and commented on my dissertation proposal and helped me to rethink some of my silliest assumptions.

I also acknowledge the wonderful help of the staffs at the libraries and archives I visited to research this work. Mattie Sink at Mississippi State and Dwayne Cox at Auburn deserve special mention for going out of their way to help me find materials (and Dwayne for buying me lunch). Bill Marshall at the University of Kentucky provided me special access to a dusty group of store records even before he became my father-in-law. The Reference and Interlibrary Loan Departments at the University of Georgia consistently answered my queries and tracked down material crucial to this dissertation. I thank them all.

I also need to mention some other people who don’t fit nicely into the chronology of my academic career. These are folks who probably don’t think they’ve impacted the pages that follow, but who have undoubtedly left their mark on how I think about the



human issues central to this dissertation: Kristin Earhart, Beth Kilkelly, Jason Kreag, Cynthia Nearman, Brant Rumble, Matt Simpson, Megan Simpson, Jason Small, John Strange, Chris Thomas, Tommy Wagstaff, Kevin Waltman, and Kevin Wertz. I also need to thank The Star Room Boys and The Drive-by Truckers.

My parents are happy that I'm finishing. Barb and Phil Giesen have remained my biggest supporters through it all. My dad sprang into action as an editor as well, reading this entire draft and providing snide comments in the margins of nearly every page. Betty Giesen and Katie Giesen remain my heroes, as they always have been. The depth of Bill, Jan, and Jennie Marshall's commitment to making their newest family member feel at home never ceases to amaze me.

Finally, I owe a pretty big debt to my absolute favorite historian: Anne Marshall. I never would have made it to this stage without her and I certainly would never have wanted to. She inspires me every day, and the things I have learned from her would fill ten dissertations.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xii
INTRODUCTION	
“THE BOLL WEEVIL BROUGHT RUIN, AN END TO EVERY HOPE” .....	1
CHAPTER	
1 MYTH MAKING ON THE COTTON FRONTIER: THE BOLL WEEVIL ENTERS TEXAS .....	13
2 CULTURES OF RESISTANCE IN TEXAS AND LOUISIANA: TENANTS MAKE SENSE OF THE BOLL WEEVIL .....	68
3 “MAP MAKER, TROUBLEMAKER, HISTORY MAKER”: THE BOLL WEEVIL THREATENS THE DELTA .....	100
4 DELTA SOLUTIONS BIG AND SMALL .....	160
5 “THE HERALD OF PROSPERITY”: THE BOLL WEEVIL AND THE PROMISE OF DIVERSIFICATION IN SOUTHEASTERN ALABAMA.....	216
6 “YOU WILL BE POOR AND IGNORANT AND YOUR CHILDREN WILL BE THE SAME”: THE FAILURE OF DIVERSIFICATION IN ALABAMA .....	266
7 POSTSCRIPT TO PEASANTRY: THE BOLL WEEVIL IN GEORGIA .....	306

CONCLUSION

THE BOLL WEEVIL'S LOST REVOLUTION..... 366

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 379

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 5.1: Cotton, Tenancy and Race in Southeastern Alabama, 1910 .....	224
Table 5.2: Diversification Figures, Coffee County, Alabama, 1909-1919 .....	255
Table 5.3: Demographics of Coffee County, Alabama 1900-1919.....	260
Table 6.1: Farming sectors as percentage of the value of all farm production, southeast Alabama, 1929 .....	270
Table 6.2: Testing the Prosperity Thesis, Coffee County, Alabama, 1900-1930 .....	272
Table 6.3: Potential Value of Cotton versus Peanuts, Coffee County, Alabama.....	281
Table 8.1: Cotton acreage by state, 1899-1929.....	374

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: Adult Weevil magnified 140 times.....	18
Figure 1.2: Boll Weevil Grub magnified about 200 times.....	21
Figure 1.3: Annual percentage cotton crop loss from boll weevil in Texas, 1910-1930 .	67
Figure 2.1: Walter Porter and Unnamed Tenant.....	97
Figure 3.1: Texas Boll Weevil Map, 1903. ....	124
Figure 3.2: Map of Boll Weevil Spread, 1910 .....	125
Figure 3.3: Map of Boll Weevil Spread, 1922 .....	126
Figure 4.1: Spread of Boll Weevil through Mississippi.....	164
Figure 5.1: Southeastern Alabama .....	221
Figure 5.2: “Mr. T. M. Campbell, Field Agent”.....	243
Figure 5.3: Boll Weevil Monument, Enterprise, Alabama, date unknown .....	263
Figure 6.1: Coffee County, Alabama cotton and peanut acreage, 1909-1929.....	269
Figure 6.2: Annual percentage cotton loss from boll weevil in Alabama, 1910-1930 ...	277
Figure 6.3: Alabama cotton price, cents per pound, 1910-1930 .....	278
Figure 6.4: Hill’s Mixture Label .....	291
Figure 7.1: Cotton acreage and bale production (x1,000) in Georgia, 1900-1930 .....	310
Figure 7.2: Percentage crop loss from boll weevil in Georgia, 1915-1930.....	313
Figure 7.3: Georgia cotton prices, cents per pound, 1910-1930.....	314
Figure 7.4: Georgia State College of Agriculture Bulletin Number 112.....	321

Figure 7.5: White owners and tenants and black owners and tenants in Georgia, 1900-  
1950 ..... 342

## INTRODUCTION

### “THE BOLL WEEVIL BROUGHT RUIN, AN END TO EVERY HOPE”

Throughout the American South, the boll weevil is synonymous with devastation and destruction. Its legend has been created from many sources: family tales of tall cotton fields and deserted patches of earth; statues and museums across the South honoring the boll weevil and its victim; the fiction and poetry of the region’s greatest writers—including William Faulkner, Sterling Brown, and Jean Toomer—which glorify and mythologize the weevil; and the songs of Charley Patton, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly and others that tell of the insect.

Scholars have added to the myth of the weevil. Historians cite the pest as the cause of the Great Migration, the slayer of cotton farming across the South, and the sole destroyer of the last bastions of antebellum cotton society. These were stories that began even as the boll weevil was still making its move through the region. “Mortgages on old plantations foreclosed,” entomologist Leland Howard wrote in 1931, “negro labor fled before the weevil’s advance; wealthy families were reduced to comparative poverty; banks failed; planters and

speculators committed suicide.” Others have written that “This evil little weevil literally ate farmers out of house and home,” and that “the boll weevil eliminated cotton as a viable crop.” But, as often as not, these stories were based on rumor and impressionistic appraisals, rather than fact. The boll weevil has become a powerful explanation for the destruction of a southern way of life, but it is a myth created and retold in order to obscure the deeper reasons for the demise of cotton culture in much of the South.<sup>1</sup>

Legend has it that the boll weevil marched from Mexico into Texas in 1892 and uniformly and summarily destroyed all cotton in its path as it swept across the South. In truth, however, when it reached the South Carolina coast in 1921, southerners were actually growing more cotton than when it set out, and even in years when the boll weevil was most destructive, there was often an increase in the region’s overall cotton production. At the macro level, the boll weevil had relatively little effect on southern society. It did not spawn the Great Migration, break white landowners’ grip on rural society, or destroy southern cotton farming. Instead, the boll weevil created local crises to which individual people responded in various, meaningful ways. Some of the responses led to lasting changes; others did not. My dissertation will examine these local stories.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leland O. Howard, *The Insect Menace* (New York: The Century Company, 1931), 316. William Lincoln Giles, “Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970.” in Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed., *A History of Mississippi*, vol. II (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973): 177-211. Snow, J.W. “Radiation, Insects and Eradication in North America: An Overview from Screwworm to Bullworm” in *Modern Insect Control: Nuclear Techniques and Biotechnology* (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1988), 11.



I will argue that although the boll weevil had surprisingly little impact on the agriculture, environment, economy, and society of the South overall, at the local level the insect created brief, unique opportunities for drastic changes in the rural way of life. The boll weevil brought hope to some landowners, proponents of diversification, and even landless tenant farmers, each of whom saw the weevils as potentially bringing positive change to their lives. There were, indeed, moments when the boll weevil created “middle ground.” Formerly powerless groups briefly found themselves with access to resources they had been traditionally denied. In the end, however, the same powerful interests that had ruled the rural South since the Civil War learned to both control the boll weevil and constrict the new economic and cultural space that the pest had created. Victory over the boll weevil was never inevitable, however, and the ability of large landowners to check its threat and maintain social and economic order despite the insect’s powerful disruptive potential is an important, untold aspect of southern history.

One reason that many people are quick to use the boll weevil as an explanation of change in southern history is that, at first glance, the insect should have destroyed the cotton-centered southern way of life. The pest’s history ought to be a declension narrative. Before the invasion, the South was overwhelmingly dependent on cotton and the tenant labor that guaranteed its production. Southern landowners had established not only an agricultural

system that relied on the land's production of cotton, but an entire society that rested on the success of the staple. Regardless of what New South boosters said, the year-to-year success of the region was still wedded to the health of the cotton crop and the prices it could bring in an expanding, international market.

Beyond planters and their labor, merchants, bankers, industrialists, and most other southerners knew that cotton determined their economic livelihood.

Southerners met each other on the street not with "hello" but with "how's crops?"

People who were doing well in any aspect of life were "in tall cotton." The relevance of any pertinent issue was questioned with the phrase, "What's that got to do with the price of cotton?" Southerners white and black realized the enormity of the danger posed by the boll weevil; it was a threat not only to southern cotton, but also to the economic, social, and political systems that rested on it.

The approach of the weevil, then, created a rare historical situation.

People recognized and feared an environmental disaster and braced themselves for the social and economic tragedy that seemed certain. But unlike a hurricane or flood, the boll weevil posed no quick threat or surprise attack, nor did it create the urgent drama of a river cresting over a levee. No one woke up to find his or her cotton fields stripped bare by the boll weevil. The insect's slow, unfolding invasion offered its own kind of drama, one that gave southerners enough time to think about what they were going to do. This process of preparing for the

weevil's destruction revealed what was important to southerners and the extent to which they would consider restructuring their environment, society, and economy. It is telling, for example, that in spite of both the weevil's threat and the time most southerners had to prepare, few planters seriously considered the option of not growing cotton at all. Instead, they realigned their relationships with tenants, merchants, banks, nature, and the state, but continued to plant cotton.

Although the result of the boll weevil's slow trek was not utter agricultural devastation, that explanation has proven comforting to many. The myth has been powerful because of its simplicity. "To the luckless legions of farmers in its ravaging eastward path through Louisiana and Mississippi and Alabama," one scholar claimed, "the weevil brought ruin, an end to every hope."<sup>2</sup> The demise of the plantation South was not, as the boll weevil legend explains, the fault of a brutal labor system, undemocratic politics, larger economic trends, mechanization, or stultifying economic practices. Instead it was the result of a tiny uncontrollable insect. This was a natural disaster, the story goes, not the consequence of human failure or mendacity. The boll weevil has been an ideal scapegoat. Southerners across socio-economic lines nurtured this story and it became part of southern culture. Children learned about the boll weevil's destruction and for many it fit into a larger narrative about the South's history of defeat and bad luck. The epic battle with the boll weevil became a new kind of

---

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Elliott, *George Washington Carver: The Man Who Overcame* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 151.

“lost cause.” Northerners, if they heard of the bug at all, lumped the pest in with yellow fever, scurvy, soil erosion and the other “natural” epidemics that seemed to find their home in the slow-moving, backward American South. This misperception of the boll weevil has aided a misperception of the larger region and its history.

This dissertation situates the boll weevil’s journey across the South in the context of its fields and towns, resisting the broad regionalization which has marked most of portrayals of the pest. Not only was the pest a different kind of threat on the East Texas Plains than in the Mississippi Delta, but it was a threat for different groups of people in different places. In other words, people’s experiences differed wildly according to their place within southern social structures and environments. It is from the perspective of local communities that the full range of effects created by the boll weevil are revealed. In accordance with a local perspective, this dissertation focuses on four specific sub-regions: East Texas, the Mississippi Delta, Southeastern Alabama and Black Belt Georgia. In each of these places, planters, government agents, tenant farmers and businesspeople prepared for the pest and reacted to it in myriad ways. While some planters worked to hush news of the weevil’s spread hoping to avoid a panic among their workers, some tenants saw the weevil as a potentially democratic force. While the insect wiped out many small landowners, it forced others to switch crops and allowed them to make a living growing peanuts or

raising hogs. In addition, the boll weevil's threat led to the creation of an entire class of agricultural educators who would have a lasting impact on southern farming and education. The pest forced merchants, bankers and others tangentially involved in cotton farming to rethink their relationships to the plant's production. In each locale, a variety of factors, environmental, political, and economic to name only three, influenced the impact of the boll weevil on each society.

As the weevil spread eastward across the Cotton Belt, it moved against history. Cotton production had started on the nation's eastern coast in the seventeenth century and gradually spread to the west as cotton farmers exhausted their soil and watched it wash away. By the late-nineteenth century, the Cotton Belt extended from Virginia all the way to Texas, but not every inch of southern soil was equally eager to push up a cotton plant. As a result, the boll weevil's appearance in the newer cotton regions of Texas meant a threat to a growing industry; by the time the pest reached Georgia it was just another reason, along with worn-out soils and changing labor conditions, for farmers to give up the cotton ghost. Each stop along the pest's path meant a different level of defense for the cotton of each area. And of course there were larger forces at work in the economy. Cotton production grew and spread from 1890 to 1930, and abrupt changes in worldwide demands for the staple jolted farmers in different ways at the local level.

In Texas, the boll weevil did not bring chaos to the fields because the region was already in a state of disorder in the 1890s. Cotton was a new and expanding industry in the Lone Star State; production of the staple brought thousands of new citizens onto farms. A booster mentality reigned as land prices climbed higher and farmers devoted more acreage to cotton. When the weevil first appeared in Texas, state officials balked at dealing with the pest on its own and courted federal help. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) sent people and money into the state and eventually scored a great public relations coup by claiming to have beaten back the boll weevil by engineering a new form of farmer education in the process, the cooperative demonstration method. The Department's Seaman Knapp became a hero. Despite the stories of the insect closing banks, crushing land prices, and pushing farmers to commit suicide—stories perpetuated by the very educators and politicians who claimed they had the answer to beat the bug—cotton production in the state grew consistently from 1890 to 1930.

This is the story of the pest's invasion of Texas as told from the courthouses, state houses, and plantation houses, but the people fighting the actual battle with the boll weevil in the fields saw things differently. The popular boll weevil legend, and the fame it brought to state and federal farm researchers, ignored the men and women who actually worked the fields. Sharecroppers, renters, and day laborers had no control over the federal aid being offered

landowners, and as white Texas farm owners chatted with the all-white extension agent force, the majority Mexican and African American tenants had little control over exactly how their cotton was produced. Unable to approach agents on their own, tenants had no choice but to leave the day-to-day farming decisions that affected their crop to the landowners. As a result, workers were constantly on the move, trying to stay one step ahead of the boll weevil. They found three basic options for dealing with the pest: moving, quitting, or adapting. Many found other work or moved to the east to stay ahead of the pests. Those who stayed built a social environment that meant to bring order to the uncontrollability of their work lives. Not surprisingly, the songs and stories that evolved in these communities told of the boll weevil's ability to vex even the white landowner and to stay constantly on the move. Like the weevil they sang about, workers were "just lookin' for a home."

The experiences of Texas cotton growers meant very little to the farmers of the Mississippi Delta. The myth of the weevil's destruction reached that alluvial region long before the pest itself, and the white elite struggled to control information about the pest. Even considering the damage that the weevil promised to inflict on the whole of Delta society, the region's commitment to cotton was so absolute that a move away from the fleece was never an option. Landowners attempted to control not only what laborers heard about the approaching pest, but even what research state and federal scientists conducted.

Their efforts failed to abate the fear, however, and land prices dropped as the weevil approached. As a result, there was a chance for African American sharecroppers to take advantage of the boll-weevil-induced fear and rent land previously closed off to them, gaining a few years of much cherished independence from strict oversight. Despite these pockets of tenant success, the boll weevil eventually abetted the region's white elite in their effort to constrict sharecropper space. The boll weevil did not turn out to be a liberator. Instead of overturning cotton and the social system that rested on it, it more often squelched the promise that the land had held for thousands of the landless laborers. Some plantations, like the British-owned Delta and Pine Land Company, grew to unprecedented sizes and used their resources and vast labor forces to engineer new ways to battle the boll weevil and to consequently defeat tenants' dreams of economic independence.

Unlike the newly-cleared rich soil of the Mississippi Delta, when the boll weevil arrived in southeastern Alabama, the pest found land worn out from a generation of cotton farming. Local researchers, including George Washington Carver stationed at Tuskegee Institute, encouraged area farmers to diversify from cotton into peanuts and hogs. And unlike in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, many listened. Some landowners even made a quick fortune in peanuts. In 1918, the "citizens" of Enterprise, Alabama even erected a statue to the boll weevil to commemorate the pest's arrival, which, as their legend told,



convinced area farmers to move from cotton to peanuts. Yet almost before the veil was lifted from the weevil statue, area farmers recognized skyrocketing demand for the old crop and returned their peanut fields to long, straight rows of cotton. In a few places peanuts and hogs held on as suitable, money-making alternatives to the crop, but in most of the region farmers continued to plant the white fleece, unconvinced by the boll weevil's plea for diversification.

Hidden in this story of limited diversification success is the region's rural black population. Not only was southeastern Alabama home to Tuskegee Institute, but the state's white agricultural college, Auburn University, was located there as well. Despite the proximity to the two institutions, both strong advocates of crop diversification, the vast majority of rural farmers in the area failed to heed the advice of their neighboring experts. The region offers a telling lesson in the failures of diversification. Today, the boll weevil statue stands amid enduring rural poverty, a silent reminder of the road not taken.

In Georgia, the boll weevil's actual meaning is closer to the myths told about it. The pest entered the state as the death knell was already sounding for cotton growing, at least on any land but the most suitable. Reformers, however, made the pest a scapegoat for the failure of cotton culture in Georgia. The boll weevil did indeed destroy large amounts of cotton in the state, but the handwriting had already been on the wall for cotton farmers. Thousands of acres of former cotton land became forests, pastures, and gullies, and millions of

Georgians left the state for industrializing southern and northern cities as, but not necessarily because, the boll weevil entered the state.

Though the narrative that follows sweeps over large expanses of time and space, the beat at the heart of the story is local and focused on the movement of the boll weevil and the people that stirred around it. A close, local examination of the boll weevil's march across the South reveals more than just the broad story of the insect's invasion. My aim is to slow down the commonly told tale of the South's change from rural to urban, from benighted worn-out countryside to air-conditioned steel and glass kingdom, from "old" to "new." Scholars have explained the shift from the sharecropper's rural South, mired in poverty and backwards agricultural practices, to a modern, mechanized, commercial region where farming mattered relatively little, by pointing to the weevil's devastation. Although the boll weevil was certainly a crucial component in that transition, this dissertation argues that it was but one instrument in a concert of forces that moved and changed the rural South.

CHAPTER 1  
MYTH MAKING ON THE COTTON FRONTIER:  
THE BOLL WEEVIL ENTERS TEXAS

In early 1903, farmers in Terrell, Texas were nervous about the slowly spreading boll weevil. The town's business leaders called a meeting of the county's most influential farmers and invited noted farm educator Seaman Knapp to address the gathering. The old professor tried to allay the farmers' fear of the encroaching pest, but at the conclusion of his remarks, a man sitting in the back of the room rose to his feet and informed his fellow farmers that the boll weevil was an indestructible foe. The pest "was proof against everything that had been tried." Only a few days earlier, he had captured a few live weevils and put them in a jar of "ninety-five per cent pure alcohol." Four hours later he poured out the jar and the bugs emerged alive, "only staggering drunk." Dumbfounded, the farmer collected the inebriated insects, "sealed them in a tin can, threw them into a brush heap and set it on fire." A few minutes later, he watched as "the solder melted and the red-hot weevils flew out and set the barn on fire." The story could

not have been true, but it speaks to the power and potential destructiveness not of the encroaching boll weevil, but of fear of the pest.<sup>1</sup>

By 1903, the boll weevil had been present in Texas for only ten years, but apocryphal stories of the pest's formidable strength and assured destruction of cotton life were everywhere. As Knapp traveled East Texas that year, he talked to farmers, bankers, and merchants about the boll weevil's advance, and surveyed the devastation first-hand. He later recalled, "I saw hundreds of farms lying out; I saw a wretched people facing starvation; I saw whole towns deserted; I saw hundreds of farmers walk up and draw government rations, which were given to them to keep them from want." The boll weevil had destroyed the cotton way of life in Texas.<sup>2</sup>

Or had it? There can be no doubt that the boll weevil hit Texas hard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It destroyed cotton in the thousands of tons. The pest disrupted the lives of tenant farmers and landowners, hurt railroads, merchants, and banks, and became the obsession of state politicians. However, in spite of this evidence of the boll weevil's

---

<sup>1</sup> Seaman A. Knapp, "An Address at the Anti-Boll Weevil Conference for the Southeastern States" (Atlanta, GA, 1910), 6, as quoted in Joseph Cannon Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp: Schoolmaster of American Agriculture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 169-171. Writer Harris Dickson retold an almost identical story in his 1937 book *Story of King Cotton*: "One farmer sprang up at a scare meeting and shouted, 'Tain't no sense tryin' to fight that devil. I corked up a lot of 'em in pure alcohol and kept 'em for two hours. they come out staggering drunk, and with a mighty good appetite. Then I sealed 'em in a tin can an' throwed 'em in the fire. When the can melted, them red-hot bugs flew out and burnt my barn." Dickson, *The Story of King Cotton* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1937). 97.

<sup>2</sup> Knapp, "Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work and Its Results" (Richmond, VA, 1906), in Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 169.

destructiveness, Texas actually expanded its cotton production during this period. Perhaps even more surprising, cotton growers barely altered their farming methods and actually *increased* the amount of land they devoted to cotton. This seeming paradox of the vast destruction of Texas cotton and the persistence and extension of cotton production in the state suggests not simply a popular and scholarly misunderstanding of the boll weevil's history in the state, but it points to the nascent development of a lasting myth about the pest and its destructiveness.

The farmer's mythical anecdote of boll weevils surviving without air, withstanding poison, and flying through fire cannot be true, but was it simply a humorous tall tale told to lighten an otherwise serious meeting? Were Knapp's observations of "a wretched people facing starvation" accurate, or did he embellish the picture of a plagued land? Each of these accounts, in their own way, speaks to the power of the boll weevil's threat to farm life but each also misrepresents the reality of the insect's invasion. Contrary to these two perceptions, the weevil did not destroy an ages-old cotton culture in East Texas. From 1892 to 1915, the state would not only survive the pest's initial invasion; it grew into the nation's greatest producer of cotton during this period. There is no evidence of whole towns being abandoned or of "wretched people facing starvation." The myths told by educators, farmers, and politicians exaggerated

the truth of the boll weevil's spread through Texas and as a result, the image of the insect's power swelled as it moved.<sup>3</sup>

The fiction of the boll weevil stories born in Texas grew from the bona fide threat the pest posed to cotton culture. In the 1890s, cotton was just becoming king in East Texas, and as a result the insect threatened not only the crop, but the political, social, and economic fabric of the community. Cotton, itself new to much of eastern and southern Texas, brought disruption to the region to which the boll weevil only added. For Texans on cotton's frontier, it was not just another plant. The staple brought with it new landowners, many from around the world. It also brought a new labor system, one that pushed together poor whites, African Americans, and Mexicans. Cotton production was also predicated on a complex credit system that linked poor, landless farmers to international industries through a web of merchants, banks, railroads and cotton factors. The evolution of cotton as a way of life, a development that in itself invited the boll weevil, brought upheaval to the region. For many landowners, politicians, and laborers, the pest became a scapegoat for the disorder brought by the complex culture of cotton production that was indeed revolutionizing their lives. As a result, Texas farm owners, laborers, businesspeople, and state and federal agricultural educators, created distinctly different meanings of the boll weevil threat, even as it first crossed the state.

---

<sup>3</sup> Knapp, "An Address at the Anti-Boll Weevil Conference for the Southeastern States" (Atlanta, GA, 1910), 6, in Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 169-171.

Landowners saw the boll weevil as a danger serious enough to deserve massive government intervention. For scientists and farm educators, the insect's spread meant an increase in their business and many intentionally contributed to the image of the boll weevil as a threat that they were uniquely prepared to meet. The men and women of Texas who performed the back-breaking labor in the cotton fields, disproportionately non-white and all poor, saw the boll weevil as yet another threat to their livelihoods, one more force for movement in their already unstable lives. These workers created their own myths which identified the pest as both a harbinger of loss and hope.

Somewhere in these legends was buried the boll weevil itself, a pest which had the power to destroy the whole of cotton society simply because of its natural reliance on the cotton plant. The boll weevil's unassuming appearance does not hint at the profound threat it poses to a stand of cotton. According to writer Harris Dickson, the insect "resembles a meditative baby elephant, barring a tail." Agricultural historian Samuel Lee Evans describes the pest as a "small, black, clumsy, long-snouted humped-back, comical appearing insect." Boll weevils are small, about a quarter-inch long, with roughly one-third of their body comprised of a trunk-like proboscis. They have round, reddish brown or gray bodies, and bulging black eyes. Spurs on the joints of the weevil's front legs are one of a few marks that distinguish it from other beetles. (See Figure 1.1)<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Knapp, "Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work and Its Results" (Richmond, VA, 1906), 10, in Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 169. Dickson, *The Story of King Cotton*, 93. Samuel Lee Evans, "Texas Agriculture, 1880-1930," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, 1960), 59. Thomas F. Leigh, Steven H. Roach, and Theo F. Watson, "Biology and Ecology of Important Insect and Mite



Figure 1.1: "Adult Weevil magnified 140 times."<sup>5</sup>

---

Pests of Cotton," in *Cotton Insects and Mites: Characterization and Management*, eds. Edgar G. King, Jacob R. Phillips and Randy J. Coleman (Memphis: The Cotton Foundation Publisher, 1996), 18.

<sup>5</sup> "Adult Weevil magnified 140 times," Carter D. Poland Photograph Collection, Record Group 268, Auburn University Special Collections and Archives. Image accessed via World Wide Web on October 8, 2004, at <http://www.lib.auburn.edu/archive/find-aid/268.htm>; Internet. hereafter Poland Photograph Collection.



The weevil's effectiveness as a cotton destroyer comes not only from its dependence on the plant throughout its entire life cycle, but because its body, especially the long, curved snout, allows it to destroy cotton efficiently. In spring, as farmers plant cottonseed and the first signs of the plant begin to emerge from the ground, boll weevils are hibernating. As the cotton plant grows, and the weather warms, usually around the first of June, boll weevils wake from hibernation. Before the plants develop flowers, weevils feed on its terminals and leaves. As the cotton fruits in late spring, and buds or squares emerge, weevils begin to gouge out small holes in the square with their long snouts and feed on the inside of the flower. This will often destroy the square, forcing it to turn color and fall from the plant. At this point in the season, females begin to produce eggs and search for places to deposit them.<sup>6</sup>

By far the most injurious interaction between weevil and plant occurs as females deposit eggs in the growing squares of the cotton plant. Females crawl or fly to the individual squares, puncture the square (or boll, though they prefer the earlier square stage) with their snout and then usually deposit one egg per square. An individual insect may not, however, determine whether a square already contains an egg, so in highly infested areas some squares or bolls will receive more than one egg. When the female deposits her eggs she seals the puncture in the square with a "frass plug," which is basically a yellow waxy substance. The eggs hatch inside the square, and the shell of the enclosed bud

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Pfadt, ed., *Fundamentals of Applied Entomology*, third ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, Inc., 1978), 383, 386. Thomas F. Leigh, Steven H. Roach, and Theo F. Watson, "Biology and Ecology of Important Insect and Mite Pests of Cotton," 18-19.

protects it from the sun, wind, rain, or pesticides dusted on the outside of the plant. Once the eggs hatch into grubs, they feed on the growing cotton fiber within the square itself and after only a few days have cleaned out the square and coated its inside walls with excrement. A week to twelve days later, the damage to the square will be so severe that it detaches from the cotton plant and falls to the ground. In some cases the larva's destruction of the inside of the square will only cause the flower to stop growing, harden and dry out, but remain attached to the plant. In either case, the cotton plant has lost its ability to produce healthy white blossoms. In those squares that do drop, the larvae pupate, a stage that lasts from three to six days, after which the now adult boll weevil cuts its way out of the fallen square and begins the cycle off feeding and reproducing all over again. (See Figure 1.2).<sup>7</sup>

This consistent ability to reproduce rapidly is the principal factor that allowed the pest to quickly devastate cotton. Heavy rains in the spring allowed the weevil to reproduce more quickly than dry weather, which generally checked the pest's advance. Levels of damage in the spring can be light and frequently cotton produces a healthy bottom crop, but weevils destroy the top crop that grows later in the season. Over the course of the summer, weevils' presence usually increases, as they gain numerical strength and as the plants grow and produce more food for the pests. The first generation of female weevils that emerge from hibernation can only produce one-hundred or fewer eggs, though

---

<sup>7</sup> John M. Munro, *Cotton* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Longman Scientific and Technical, 1987), 151



Figure 1.2: "Boll Weevil Grub magnified about 200 times."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> "Boll Weevil Grub magnified about 200 times," Poland Photograph Collection.

later in the season subsequent generations of females produce three-hundred or more. Healthy females produce five to six eggs per day. Depending on the latitude, two to seven generations of weevils will reproduce in one growing season. This means that a single pair of boll weevils can account for well over a quarter-*million* offspring during one growing season. It was this incredible rate of reproduction that allowed the weevil to devastate a crop and quickly advance to a new field.

The relatively small size of southern cotton farms also aided in the pest's dispersal. The brush and undergrowth that bordered most fields were ideal hibernations spots for the pests, which meant that a relatively high number of the insects survived winter. Weevils traveled across the South at a rate of forty to one-hundred and sixty-miles in a single summer, depending on the conditions. The weevil traveled from southern Texas twelve hundred miles to the South Carolina coast and the Atlantic Ocean in only twenty-two years.<sup>9</sup>

In late fall, weevils begin to search for hibernation sites. They will continue to eat cotton plants that are not plowed under at this stage, and if they find some nourishment this late in the season, they are more likely to survive hibernation. Boll weevils hibernate during the winter in any place that they can find protection. This is often in foliage or litter in the cotton fields, or in high grass

---

<sup>9</sup> J.R. Bradley, Jr. "Major Developments in Management of Insect and Mite Pests in Cotton," in *Cotton Insects and Mites: Characterization and Management*, eds. Edgar G. King, Jacob R. Phillips and Randy J. Coleman, 1-2. May R. Barenbaum, *Ninety-nine More Maggots, Mites, and Munchers*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 34-37. John Douglas Helms, "Just Looking for a Home: The Cotton Boll Weevil and the South" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Florida State University, 1977), 7. Pfadt, *Fundamentals of Applied Entomology*, 381, 383. W.B. Mercier and H.E. Savely, *The Knapp Method of Growing Cotton* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 108.

along fence rows, at the edge of out buildings, or in the Spanish moss hanging from a nearby tree or in woods. Spring brings those insects that survived hibernation back out, and a whole new crop of nearby cotton plants find itself under attack.

Boll weevil ecology was unknown to the Texans who first noticed the strange pest devouring their crop. In the late-nineteenth century, the border between Texas and Mexico was a contested, diverse, and sometimes chaotic land. Though the Rio Grande River marked a natural border between the countries, it hardly constrained a flow of people, ideas, and culture, which moved freely between the two countries. Americans and Mexicans crossed the border regularly and repeatedly, for an infinite number of reasons. Many took only their ability to work the farms on each side of the border. The borderland attracted gamblers, land speculators, and people on the run. Between the Mexican War and the American Civil War (1845-1861), both Mexican *peones*, escaping from debt peonage in the cotton regions of northern Mexico, and runaway American slaves in search of a remote, safe place, sought the shelter of the border region. By the 1890s, a new trade in agricultural goods had sprung up over the border. Mexican cotton poured into Texas in carts and rail cars, headed for the gins and cottonseed oil mills of Texas.

It may have been aboard a car load of Mexican seed cotton that the first few boll weevils entered the United States. Or perhaps they crossed the border in the mattress of a migrant cotton picker. No one can say positively how the

creature entered the state, nor can we be sure exactly when it happened.

Though scientists later speculated that it first appeared in Texas around 1892, individual farmers may have fought the pest for years earlier on their own.

Migrant farmers may have recognized the pest from the fields of northern Mexico or confused it with one of South Texas's many other cotton insect enemies.<sup>10</sup>

It was not until 1894, when Charles H. DeRyee, a druggist from Corpus Christi, sent a package to the Commissioner of Agriculture in Washington, D.C., including a letter and a few dead insects, that the boll weevil caught the attention of anyone outside of south Texas. It is unlikely DeRyee was the first Texan to take notice of the "new" pest, but his was certainly the first successful attempt to garner the attention of the USDA. In his letter, DeRyee advised that the "cotton in this section has been very much damaged and in some cases almost entirely destroyed by a peculiar weevil or bug which by some means destroys the squares and small bolls." The letter touched off a surprising amount of activity within the USDA. Leland O. Howard, official entomologist for the department, examined but could not identify the samples. He passed the specimens on to other insect experts both inside and outside the USDA. When several renowned American entomologists failed to identify the bug, a sample was finally sent to Paris, France, where the entomologist August Salle identified the insect as *Anthonomus grandis*, the cotton boll weevil.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 77.

<sup>11</sup> C.H. DeRyee to the Commissioner of Agriculture, October 3, 1894, as quoted in Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 3-4.

Salle based his identification on Swedish entomologist C.H. Boheman's classification of the insect made fifty years earlier. In the mid-nineteenth century, Boheman had examined boll weevils collected near Vera Cruz, Mexico. He recorded few details about the weevil aside from its appearance. No one seems to have tracked the insect's movement during the mid-nineteenth century until a German scientist noted its presence in Cuba. Later in the century, British entomologist Edward Palmer, working for the USDA and Howard University, traveled throughout Mexico and Central America observing insect life. He recorded the ravages of a "small, dark-colored weevil" on cotton near Monclova, Mexico, a city not far from the Texas border. In the early 1860s, weevil infestations had grown so extreme in parts of northern Mexico, that farmers abandoned cotton altogether. Palmer reported his findings to the USDA, which demonstrated no concern for the insect, probably because it still remained a long distance from the American cotton belt. Until the 1880s, there was little cotton farmed in south Texas, which meant the Mexican and American cotton districts were unconnected. The weevil crept unnoticed by American officials from the infested fields of Monclova nearer the Texas border, just as the Lone Star State was catching cotton fever. Texans planted cotton closer and closer to the border, however, bringing the American cotton belt ever closer to Mexico and the boll weevil.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> W.H. Johnson, *Cotton and Its Production* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926), 473. Evans, "Texas Agriculture, 1880-1930," 60. Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 4.

If, as some have suggested, it was a railcar of Mexican cotton that carried the first boll weevils into the U.S., it would be a cruel irony. It was the push of railroads into south Texas in the 1880s that had stimulated cotton production in the region in the first place. Prior to the Civil War, farming in southern and western Texas was limited to cattle raising. Landowners grew some crops for local sale, but many areas were too remote to profitably transport produce or other goods to markets. Those who planted cotton shipped the staple overland in ox carts, which proved too expensive for most farmers. As a result, they turned to cattle, which grazed on prairies and made their own way to market. Cowboys drove herds north on the famed cattle trails to the Midwest or east to New Orleans, the nearest major cattle center. Countless head of cattle were lost along the way in the swamps of southern Louisiana. With the arrival of the railroads, however, farmers in southern Texas could produce cotton, a more profitable commodity than steers, and easily ship the staple to market by rail. While the cattle market had connected south Texas via the old cattle trails to the Midwest and West, railroads linked Texas to the Southeast, and in turn to that region's cotton shipping centers. Farmers who had grown the white staple in the region prior to the railroad's arrival paid twenty cents per ton-mile to ship cotton in carts, but trains shipped much faster for only one-cent per ton-mile. South Texas farmers did not have to move cotton very far, either, with the emergence of Galveston as a major rail-to-sea port. The push of the roads into new areas of



Texas not only transformed local economies and market connections, but it fostered a cultural clash as well.<sup>13</sup>

The railroad not only took cotton out of south Texas; it brought people in. New lines connected remote parts of the state to over-farmed sections of the South and Midwest. Rail agents spread flyers throughout the Mississippi Valley, advertising rich farmland for sale in southern and central Texas. The railroads organized special trains to bring prospective land buyers into the region to examine available farmland. Drove of men and women, young families, entrepreneurs and speculators fled the worn out soil of Georgia and South Carolina to the east and Missouri, Indiana and Illinois to the north, crowded trains bound for Texas. The immigrants acquired parcels of land and planted cotton. One observer called it the “the largest migration of human beings that has ever taken place [and] the first that has taken place in Pullman cars.” As the people

---

<sup>13</sup> Galveston was by far the most common destination for Texas cotton. The port shipped almost two-million bales per year from 1900-1903. For the importance and symbolism of the railroad in the New South period, see Edward Ayers, *Promise of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Texas’s state entomologist supported the idea that the weevil came to Texas with a load of unginced Mexican cotton. E. Dwight Sanderson, “The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil,” Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, Entomological Department, Circular No. 1, (February 15, 1903). John Solomon Otto, *Southern Agriculture During the Civil War Era, 1860-1880* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 16, 86. Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 4. John S. Spratt, *The Road To Spindletop: Economic Change in Texas, 1875-1901* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1955), 62. Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 172. Earle B. Young, *Galveston and the Great West* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 62. John Hyde, *Wages of Farm Labor in the United States: Results of Eleven Statistical Investigations, 1866-1899* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Division of Statistics, 1901), 26-7.

flooded in, the railroads continued to lay track into the hinterlands. Towns sprang up along the rails overnight.<sup>14</sup>

In the late 1880s, Mexican and Anglo landowners began producing cotton along the coastal region and in the Blackland Prairies in the central part of the state. To the east, Texans planted cotton anywhere and everywhere, along rivers, in high, flat lands and in bottomlands. “Wherever its seed would germinate,” Texas historian John Spratt explained, “cotton was planted.” In 1879, Texans had produced 805,000 bales of cotton on 2.17 million acres. Twenty years later, cotton output tripled, as Texas farmers planted nearly seven million acres and produced 2.5 million bales of the fleece. Texas increased its production at the expense of the rest of the South. Over the same period every southern state other than Texas and Oklahoma actually decreased their contribution to cotton production belt-wide. Cotton prices throughout the 1890s remained constant in Texas, even as the supply increased. By the turn of the century, Texas led all southern states in both cotton acreage and production.<sup>15</sup>

This increase in cotton growth did not occur without fostering natural enemies. The boll weevil’s arrival in the 1890s was not the first unwanted

---

<sup>14</sup> Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 108, 91. Otto, *Southern Agriculture During the Civil War Era*, 86. Frank Putnam, “Texas in Transition,” *Collier’s Magazine*, January 2, 1910, 15, as quoted in Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 108-9. Spratt, *The Road To Spindletop*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 681, 683. John S. Spratt, “The Cotton Miner, 1865-1910,” *American Quarterly* 4, number 3 (Autumn, 1952): 214. Evans, “Texas Agriculture, 1880-1930,” 3a. James Paul Matthai, “An Atlas of Cotton Production in the Southern United States: 1840-1960” (Ed.D., Dissertation, Columbia University, 1962), 47-48. Cotton was earning around seven cents per pound throughout the 1890s and early twentieth century. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1895* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), 542. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1905* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906), 713.

intrusion to Texas cotton farms. First, farmers had to fight Johnson Grass, dubbed by one observer the “unconquerable weed.” The thick grass grew quickly and was hard to remove. Local legend had it that Johnson Grass grew two inches “each time it thundered.” The insect pest that Texas farmers most worried about before the boll weevil’s arrival was the boll worm. This insect fed on the outside of the plant’s bolls, squares and leaves, so it could damage a large amount of cotton. But it could also be poisoned easily. In addition to boll worms, there were over one hundred other species of insect in the region that attacked the valuable plant. Despite these constant environmental threats, the subject of landowners’ most common complaint was not bugs, weeds or weather, but people.<sup>16</sup>

Grass could be tamed and boll worms killed, but it took hands to do the work. Labor shortages plagued cotton production in South Texas. In planters’ search for a steady supply of workers, they turned to both a new supply source and a new labor system; the region’s turn to cotton meant a concurrent turn to tenancy. Workers moved into south and east Texas with relative ease and were integral to the region’s development as cotton country. In the 1880s railroad companies recruited and used Mexican labor to build much of the region’s rail system, and many of these laborers subsequently moved into cotton production. Fortunately for planters, the labor system of northern Mexico allowed for the migration of farm workers at various times in the year. Beginning in the 1880s,

---

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers’ Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1966). 197. Evans, “Texas Agriculture, 1880-1930,” 53, 89. Pfadt, *Fundamentals of Applied Entomology*, 369.

many Mexicans made their way to the increasing number of cotton fields of Texas, at least during the labor-intensive late fall, when cotton needed picking. As production of the staple spread, however, landowners found it increasingly difficult to secure sufficient labor. As a result, planters, many of whom were new migrants to the region themselves, attempted to attract Mexican labor from both the cotton regions of Mexico and from Texas ranches. Ranchers near the border reported that as cotton cultivation spread to the areas of central Texas, much of the Mexican labor they had relied on for decades dashed for the higher wages of cotton country. Many laborers walked or rode burros and, according to one Anglo rancher, "went as far as Guadalupe and Austin and the Sabine River and never returned." This new labor demand, coupled with the general shortage of sufficient hands, convinced owners to make labor arrangements that would both attract workers and, once employed, discourage them from leaving.<sup>17</sup>

With tenancy came a division of society that fell along labor lines; those who owned land sought the most dependable labor at the lowest price, while landless laborers sought the safest place to make the most money. The tenant-landowner relationship would be the basis of any cotton society's mercantile and credit systems, and it was also a relationship that the arrival of the boll weevil

---

<sup>17</sup> There is, of course, some irony in stating that Mexicans had long been a part of the farm life of Texas. In the seventy-five years prior to the boll weevil's entry, the region had, in fact, *been* Mexico, independent Texas, and part of the United States. Paul S. Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier: Nueces County, Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 100-102. Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 3, 5. Henry E. Cross and James A. Sandos, *Across the Border: Rural Development in Mexico and Recent Migration to the United States* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, 1981), 4-5. Evans, "Texas Agriculture, 1880-1930," 39-40. Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 77, 91.

would disrupt in important and telling ways. Out of this division between landowner and laborer separate and distinct stories of the boll weevil emerged.

Many observers of the Texas cotton scene in the early twentieth century saw the rise of Mexican cotton labor as the root of a variety of problems, not least of which was the introduction of the boll weevil into the state. Several politicians and scholars relied on their own racist perceptions of Mexicans as “dirty” to speculate that a laborer migrating from the weevil-infested fields of Mexico to work the new cotton lands of Texas “brought the boll weevil with him in the dirty straw of a mattress” or “brought them across the Rio Grande in filthy bed clothes.” Despite the not-so-hidden sentiment about Mexican workers’ cleanliness embedded in these remarks, the pest indeed may have been unknowingly carried across by one of the thousands of migrant cotton pickers who crisscrossed the border during the late summer and fall. In fact, the earliest government workers in the area found that many Mexican farmers knew the boll weevil by the Spanish word “picudo,” apparently referring to its proboscis. This suggests not only Mexicans’ familiarity with the insect, but that they may have coined the term in northern Mexico and brought not only the word, but the bugs themselves into Texas.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> James E. Boyle, *Cotton and the New Orleans Cotton Exchange: A Century of Commercial Evolution* (Garden City, NY: Country Life Press, 1934), 143. Dickson, *The Story of King Cotton*, 91. Rupert B. Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 89. It is also interesting to note that Texans seldom referred to the boll weevil without adding the word “Mexican” before it. In the earliest records of Texas legislators, newspapers or scientists referring to the pest, writers always placed that place name modifier before the insect.

As Texans put new land into production and bargained with laborers employed to work the fields, the federal government continued its research into south Texas's newest cotton pest. In 1894, the department had sent word back to Charles DeRyee, the Corpus Christi druggist who first alerted Washington officials to the presence of the insect, identifying the boll weevil and warning the businessman of the "imminent danger that it may spread into other portions of the cotton belt." Though the letter stopped short of predicting *how* the USDA would stop the pest, most Texans believed federal help was on its way. Leland Howard, head of the department's Entomology Division, realized however just how unprepared his agency was to confront this bug. Howard's realization went beyond simply knowing that an effective fight against the weevil would mean moving scientists and resources to the region to investigate first hand and that his division had few resources at its disposal. He also recognized that this insect menace was serious enough that it actually might earn his department funding, not only for the "short term" of the boll weevil fight, but permanently. If the boll weevil was made to seem a mortal enemy of the southern economy, state and federal funding would pour in. By portraying the boll weevil as a direct economic threat to the entire nation, agricultural educators and legislators at both the state and federal levels began to hype the threat, even as they began fighting it.<sup>19</sup>

Despite its limited resources, the federal government had since 1854 studied various insect outbreaks across the country. Prior to the Civil War,

---

<sup>19</sup> Acting Secretary to C. H. DeRyee, October 26, 1894, as quoted in Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 5.

southern Congressmen had rejected the creation of a federal agriculture department, arguing that farm concerns were local and should be handled by the states. As a result, several northeastern and midwestern states created agricultural education institutions without federal aid. Despite southerners' claims that they objected to a federal department of agriculture on philosophical and not practical grounds, no southern state (with the exception of border state Maryland) built their own schools of agriculture in the antebellum period.<sup>20</sup>

The South's secession in 1861 produced a flurry of Congressional activity concerning agriculture. Without southern representation to object, legislators passed laws to both bolster federal agricultural resources and to help states establish their own farm services. In 1862, Congress granted department status to the USDA. That same year Justin Morrill, a House Republican from Vermont pushed a bill to federally fund state agricultural colleges. In July 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed the resulting Morrill Land Grant College Act into law. The Act gave thirty thousand acres of federal land to a state for each of its Congressional representatives for the establishment of an agricultural college. The Act funded the founding of these schools with profits from the sale of other federally owned public lands, but provided no annual financial support. As a result, many state

---

<sup>20</sup> Michigan, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Iowa had created state agricultural schools by the Civil War. R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* revised ed. (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2002), 189. Wayne Rasmussen, ed., *Readings in the History of American Agriculture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), 109 (from Rasmussen's introductory text).

schools initially founded under the 1862 Act languished without federal support.<sup>21</sup>

After the Civil War, many states, including those of the former Confederacy, took advantage of the available land through the building of A&M institutions was generally quite slow. Not only was there a shortage of expert faculty, but schools had a hard time attracting students. Most young rural dwellers believed they could learn all they needed to about farming from their families, then move to an available plot of land to start their own farms. As agricultural historian R. Douglas Hurt pointed out, not only did “few sons and daughters of farmers” enroll in agricultural schools, but “those who attended seldom returned to the farm.”<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, as states struggled to build effective institutions of agricultural learning, the USDA increased its national exposure by fighting three highly publicized insect battles across the country. First, the U.S. Entomological Commission, initially formed in 1877 as an agency independent of the USDA, responded to a large-scale migration to the Midwest of the Rocky Mountain locust. This pest seemingly had no plant preference, eating “every vegetable, every weed and blade of grass.” The commission studied the grasshopper and published a five-volume report on the pest. In 1868, the second important insect fight came in response to the accidental importation from Australia to California

---

<sup>21</sup> Morrill Act, July 2, 1862, ch. 130, 12 Stat. 503, 7 U.S.C. 301 et seq. See also Otto, *Southern Agriculture During the Civil War Era*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> “A&M” is the common term for an Agricultural and Mechanical college. Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 193.



of a small citrus scale. The USDA sent entomological experts to the West Coast, and later to Australia to investigate the pest. The 1880s spread of Texas Cattle Fever became the third infamous federal insect battle. Ticks spread this deadly cattle disease, which quickly migrated as stock marched on long drives from ranches to markets. Though none of these efforts left a permanent institutional mark on the federal government's ability to fight insect pests, they did establish a precedent for the allocation of federal resources to address regional farming troubles. In 1889, Congress, in response to the USDA's increased exposure from these cases, elevated the department to cabinet-level status. Entomological research was still a small part of the department's overall budget and program, but the division had established the precedent of researching pest outbreaks in the field.<sup>23</sup>

As the USDA fought insect pests across the country, individual states continued to slowly develop their own farm research capabilities. In 1887 Congress boosted state efforts with the Hatch Act. This bill made provided states annual federal money to establish research farms on which state-employed scientists could experiment with seed, fertilizer and cultivation methods. These experiment farms, though not legally tied to the state land-grant schools established under the Morrill Act, eventually fell under the control of the A&M colleges in most states. Texas, for instance, used Hatch Act funds to establish an experiment station on the campus of Texas A&M in Bryan. The

---

<sup>23</sup> H.E. Evans, *Life on a Little Known Planet* (New York: Dutton, 1966), 196. Pfadt, *Fundamentals of Applied Entomology*, 9. Rasmussen, *Readings in the History of American Agriculture*, 136. Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 190.

growing number of specialized farming faculty at land grant schools and their students now had both the money with which to conduct experiments on a variety of farm issues and sufficient land on which to do research. The Hatch Act thus marked the real beginning of cooperation between federal and states agricultural educators and researchers, though it is important to recognize that the Hatch Act had no direct bearing on the work or funding of the USDA.<sup>24</sup>

The final piece of nineteenth century legislation that would bear directly on states' abilities to fight the boll weevil was the Second Morrill Act. Passed in 1890, it made two important and long lasting contributions to agricultural education. First, the Act promised annual funding for state land grant schools created by the first Morrill Act. Congress promised \$15,000 to each state agricultural college, beginning in 1890 and increasing annually. Second, the legislation earmarked funds specifically for historically black agricultural schools. There had been no segregated black facilities in the South in 1862 when the First Morrill Act was passed, and as a result nothing in the law made mention of separate funding. The 1890 Act not only reserved funds for black agricultural education, but it made discrimination against black land grant schools illegal. The law made no claims that black students must be admitted to the federally supported "white" state land grant schools, however, and as a result, all southern states that had not previously created segregated black schools did so under the Second Morrill Act. As segregated A&M institutions, they met the same fate that

---

<sup>24</sup> Agricultural Experiment Station, The A&M College of Texas, Bulletin no. 1 (1888), 3. Pfadt, *Fundamentals of Applied Entomology*, 20.

most other separate black educational institutions did in the post-war South: decay and neglect. Nonetheless, these historically black schools played an important local role for black farmers fighting the boll weevil in the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these consistent increases in federal and state funding for farm education, few changes could have been detected in the average southern farm in the second-half of the nineteenth century. The failure of this initial movement to modernize and diversify farms fell along two broad lines. First, there was little consistency in the ideology of “modern farming.” Those who called for a modernization of the southern farm, an odd lot including formally trained educators, rural-based politicians, newspaper editors and other New South boosters, called on farmers at once to both increase their production of cotton and concurrently to diversify into other crops. To many, a modern farm was an industrialized one, geared for efficient production on a massive scale. For others modernizing meant abandonment of the one-crop system that had held most southern farmers in a precarious state of near-poverty year after year. In addition, these critics paid little attention to the main reason farmers planted cotton every year: they could not afford not to. The crushing weight of capitalism and its problem child, the crop-lien credit system (a longer description of which follows in chapter two), tied farmers to crops that they could turn into cash at the end of the season. No farms were truly “self-sufficient”; farmers needed money

---

<sup>25</sup> These segregated African American schools are known today as “1890 institutions.”

for tools, fertilizer, and seed that they could not make themselves. Cash was scarce, however. Credit trickled down from New York City to southern merchants, banks and planters, who in turn passed it on to tenants. Credit tied the merchant to the farmer, and since cotton was the way to make any farm pay in cash, these debts forced farmers to grow cotton again and again. These forces brought riches to many merchants and some planters, but bound millions of farmers to a cyclical life of credit, debt and poverty.<sup>26</sup>

The second problem with the movement to modernize southern farms was in the pedagogy of rural education. In the late nineteenth century, there was no effective means of teaching farmers how to employ new agricultural methods. Researchers' discoveries concerning seed selection, soil nutrition, and pesticides were worthless if yeomen farmers never learned and applied them. The principal difficulty in translating findings from the research farm to the average cotton field was a cultural distance between educators and farmers. Scientists saw cotton growers as simple, uneducated, and unwilling to learn; farmers saw educators as elitist agents of an intrusive government. At the turn of the century, many college-trained researchers saw southern yeomen as historian John D. Hicks did in 1931. The "ignorance of the southern farmer," Hicks wrote, "was indeed so

---

<sup>26</sup> As mentioned, a longer discussion of the crop lien system, the connection between cotton farmers and international market forces, and the labor system follows in chapter two. There is a vast literature on the development of the sharecropping system after the Civil War, the evolution of the global cotton economy and its effect on southern farmers, though very little of it takes into account disruptive forces like the boll weevil. See Harold Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing & Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), Woodman, *New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

complete that most of the propaganda for diversification, so common in the South from Granger times on, was utterly unintelligible to him, if it reached him at all, and doubtless he would have been incapable of acting on such advice even if he had known what it was all about.”<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, farmers’ perception of educators, a group that included anyone who believed science could improve the time-tested techniques they had learned from family and neighbors, was just as negative. One scholar has described farmers’ “frequent attitude of suspicion and often outright hostility toward ‘the government’ run by Yankees up North.” Some of this skepticism was certainly fair. Leafing through the early bulletins of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, for example, it is clear why no average farmer could have benefited from the information offered by the state’s farm experts. The reports are filled with technical charts and graphs, references to chemical compounds and formulas that only trained agriculturalists could have comprehended. At the turn of the century, despite increased federal and state funding for research and teaching in Texas and across the South, very little practical knowledge had made its way to farms.<sup>28</sup>

When the boll weevil crossed the border into Texas around 1892, agents of the USDA and the Texas extension service saw the pest’s invasion as a chance to fix these problems with farmer education. In 1894, soon after DeRyee

---

<sup>27</sup> John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 47, as quoted in Spratt, *Road To Spindletop*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 207. For an example of an early, confusing bulletin sent to farmers, see Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, “Sundry Brief Articles,” Bulletin no. 37 (December, 1895).

had sent his plea to the USDA, Leland O. Howard, chief entomologist for the USDA, dispatched Tyler Townsend to south Texas to investigate claims of widespread boll weevil damage. Townsend, a department entomologist stationed in Las Cruces, New Mexico, had recently returned to the United States from a research trip in northern Mexico to study cotton insect pests. He arrived in Eagle Pass, Texas, a border town southwest of San Antonio, in late 1894 and began talking to local farmers. From Eagle Pass, he traveled east to Corpus Christi and Brownsville, where locals told him that the weevil had been present for at least a decade. Townsend remained in the area for about a month, talking to landowners, measuring the decline in the cotton crop, and observing the life cycle and habits of the weevil itself. In December, he returned to New Mexico and prepared his report.<sup>29</sup>

Although he only spent a month in Texas, Townsend's findings became the foundation of the USDA's advice to farmers across the entire South for nearly two decades. The basis of Townsend's report was a careful study of the weevil's behavior, life cycle, and anatomy. His recommendations were two-fold. First, he advised farmers whose fields were already infested with the pest to apply either of two poisons, Paris Green or London Purple. These insecticides had been used by the USDA on nearly every insect pest that had appeared across the country. In addition to being expensive, the poisons tended to kill the plant along with the insect if not applied carefully.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 9-12.

<sup>30</sup> Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 9-12. E. Dwight Sanderson, "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," Texas Agricultural Experiment Stations, Entomological Department, Circular No. 1,

The second and more durable of Townsend's recommendations is what came to be known as the "cultural method." For farmers not already beset by boll weevils, Townsend suggested farmers perform a variety of tasks during the cultivation of the plant that would limit the weevil's damage. Farmers could beat the boll weevil by planting an early crop—in essence getting the cotton themselves before the boll weevils could get to it. This meant preparing the soil before planting, using plenty of fertilizer and, most importantly, selecting a cottonseed known to mature quickly. Once the plant grew and bolls appeared, if weevils began attacking them Townsend recommended farmers collect the individual infested squares and burn them before the larvae inside could hatch. The cultural method also called for the destruction of cotton stalks at the end of the season, just as soon as the plant had been harvested in the fall. This would limit the places where weevils could hibernate during the winter, thus reducing the number alive the following spring. Townsend's 1895 recommendations became not only part of the USDA's preferred manner of fighting the weevil, but Texas's state experts began recommending it in their own literature.<sup>31</sup>

Townsend had a separate set of recommendations for Texans not directly involved in cotton planting. In early 1895, with the pest still confined to southern Texas, Townsend recommended the state ban cotton growing on a belt of land

---

(February 15, 1903). Leland O. Howard, *The Insect Menace* (New York: The Century Company, 1931) 315.

<sup>31</sup> Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 9-12. E. Dwight Sanderson, "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," Texas Agricultural Experiment Stations, Entomological Department, Circular No. 1, (February 15, 1903). Leland O. Howard, *The Insect Menace* (New York: The Century Company, 1931) 315.

separating the infected and as yet untouched areas. Cotton was not the sole crop in the weevil territory and a cotton ban would not end farming altogether.<sup>32</sup> Townsend knew that once the boll weevil spread to the more densely-planted cotton areas, there would be little chance for a quarantine since those areas were more dependent on the crop. Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Charles W. Dabney visited Texas and became convinced of the importance of Townsend's ban recommendation. He conferred with the governor and legislative representatives in an attempt to implement the cotton ban. With the pest still relegated to a small portion of the state, and with no detailed plan to destroy the pest once it had been cordoned off, Dabney and Townsend had a hard sell. Legislators balked at the notion of telling certain constituents what they could and could not grow. As the 1895 growing season came to a close, the legislature refused to act and the boll weevil advanced. Had the plan been enacted it might have stopped the boll weevil momentarily, but the insect surely would have migrated to the rest of the cotton belt by some means, either under its own power or otherwise.<sup>33</sup>

With the rejection of the Townsend plan, Dabney and other USDA officials learned two important lessons. First, there could be no effective fight against the

---

<sup>32</sup> The southern tip of Texas was primarily devoted to fruit growing and livestock grazing.

<sup>33</sup> There would be several suggestions made to enact similar cotton-free zones during the first decade of the pest's spread across the South. Hunter and the USDA would eventually decide against supporting any of these proposals because they were each deemed unfeasible for both entomological and non-entomological reasons. Not only were they expensive, the bans would have been impossible to enforce. The pests could travel on their own (it would be hard to police borders for individual weevils) or be shipped unintentionally along with dozens of agricultural products. Getting different communities and states to agree on the place and timing of the belts would also prove to be an obstacle impossible to surmount. Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 56-57.



boll weevil that did not have the support and cooperation of local political leaders. Second, policy makers and business leaders must be made to realize the enormity of the boll weevil's threat. Without an understanding of how the pest could devastate their cotton-based economic and social systems, agricultural educators would not receive the necessary financial and social support they needed to fight the weevil.<sup>34</sup>

To that end, the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station (TAES) made a loud call for increased funding and support in their 1895 annual report. In it, Professor J.H. Connell, Texas's state horticulturalist, detailed Dabney's visit and recalled the assistant secretary's demand that Connell himself lead the state's fight against the boll weevil. Connell was the sole researcher in both the horticulture and entomology divisions of the TAES, in addition to his responsibilities as a professor at Texas A&M. "Consequently," he wrote, "no more additional work could possibly be undertaken without cutting down the work more or increasing the force." The boll weevil had put Connell at the center of the state's cotton defense, but the researcher did not have the resources to lead the fight. His call for more money and people was loud and clear, but it is uncertain who was listening.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of 1895, nothing tangible had come from the fight against the boll weevil and it was unclear who would rise to the challenge. Despite the

---

<sup>34</sup> *Eighth Annual Report of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1895*, (College Station, TX: Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, 1896). Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 9-14, 18.

<sup>35</sup> *Eighth Annual Report of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1895*, 756-7.

localized devastation, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture J. Sterling Morton reported in the department's 1895 *Yearbook* that the USDA had sent an agent to Texas to study the pest, but that "it is now hoped that the early fears as to the possible spread of the species throughout the entire cotton belt of the United States will not be realized, and that a tolerably efficient remedy for the prevention of the spread of the insect in south Texas has already been ascertained." There is no evidence to suggest Morton's optimism was anything more than wishful thinking. In fact, the very same year, the TAES published a much more pessimistic account of the weevil's advance. "During the year a new insect enemy to cotton has become prominent," wrote Connell in his 1895 annual report, "It appears that this insect will soon spread all over the entire State." Unlike Morton, Connell offered no evidence to suggest a remedy had already been ascertained.<sup>36</sup>

By cotton planting time in 1896, the weevil was as far north as San Antonio. Early that year, an unlikely voice in favor of government intervention emerged on the floor of the U.S. Senate. On February 17, Newton C. Blanchard waved a collection of papers in front of his fellow lawmakers. "I hold in my hand certain letters," the Louisiana senator told his colleagues, "which called to my attention... a new enemy of the cotton plant that has appeared during the past season in southern and western Texas." Blanchard's pronouncement was the first public mention of the boll weevil in Congress. The Senator asked his colleagues for a hundred-thousand dollar appropriation "for investigating the

---

<sup>36</sup> J. Sterling Morton, "Report of the Secretary," *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1895* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), 51. *Eighth Annual Report of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1895*, 756-7.

spread and devastation of the cotton-boll weevil... and for experiments looking to its destruction and eradication.” The proposal was referred to the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. As Blanchard spoke, the boll weevil was still over 125 miles from the border of his home state, having only moved roughly that same distance in four years. His concern was not for the cotton of East Texas however, but the million-dollar cotton marketing industry of New Orleans. The letters Blanchard waved on the Senate floor were not from desperate cotton-raising constituents who feared the advance of the cotton-killer into their fields, but rather from Texas who had farmers originally written to the president of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange. The president of the Exchange had in turn forwarded the letters to Blanchard.<sup>37</sup>

With a mix of foresight and rhetorical savvy, the Senator warned his colleagues that “if unarrested the weevil will rapidly increase and extend its ravages in new directions, so that in time the entire cotton belt will be... affected.” Blanchard portrayed the boll weevil as more than just a localized scourge; it was a foreign invader that warranted a federal response. “The Mexican weevil, while as yet confined to a portion of Texas, is actually a menace to the entire cotton belt,” Blanchard warned, arguing that because of its possible spread to other cotton states “it is considered that the matter is a fit subject for national legislation.” His Senate colleagues were unmoved. At the close of the 1896 session, Blanchard’s bill was dead.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Congress, Senate, Senator Blanchard of Louisiana, 54<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (February 17, 1896): 1782-1783.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the failure of Congress to appropriate specific moneys to fight the pest, the USDA continued to put its best face on the weevil's slow, steady advance. In its 1898 *Yearbook*, new Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson reported that his department:

has developed a new and important spring remedy against this insect, and this, together with earlier results achieved by this Division, have now put Texas cotton planters into possession of a knowledge of how to economically keep their fields free from this injurious species, which was recently thought to threaten the destruction of the entire crop of the State.

Wilson did not identify exactly what this new "spring method" entailed and he stopped short of arguing that Texas farmers were employing this new method. Wilson's suggestion is telling, not of the progress of the USDA's efforts, but of its failures. Despite the Texas legislature's refusal to enact the cotton-growing ban Townsend had recommended, and despite the continued advance of the boll weevil, no one less authoritative than the Secretary of Agriculture himself was saying basically there was no need for alarm.<sup>39</sup>

The statistics suggest a bleaker picture. By 1901, the weevil was in Waco and Palestine; two years later it was as far east as Nacogdoches, all the way to the Red River in the north, and past Dallas to the west. By 1903, when the weevil first entered Louisiana, it had infested five million of Texas' seven million acres of cotton land. The numbers were scary; in one year the weevil had destroyed nearly 300,000 bales of the staple, worth close to \$15 million. As new immigrants to Texas continued to buy up land and devote it to the crop,

---

<sup>39</sup> James Wilson, "Report of the Secretary," *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1898* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), 9-62.

increasing the production of cotton in the non-infested areas of Texas, the counties where the boll weevil was present suffered twenty-five percent to seventy-five percent losses. Despite federal and state investigations of the pest, Townsend's report and recommendations to farmers, and the state and national debates over appropriations, the boll weevil kept moving and it continued to destroy cotton. Extension agents and cotton farmers in the infested areas knew they needed not only resources (both financial and human), but a successful means for transferring Townsend's battle plan to the people in the fields who could enact it.<sup>40</sup>

Into this void stepped Seaman Asahel Knapp. Though scholars have attributed nothing short of a farming revolution to this "Schoolmaster of American Agriculture," our "greatest agricultural statesmen," his popular and scholarly image has been distorted by the context in which he rose to fame: the boll weevil's spread through Texas and Louisiana. Legend (and some historical scholarship) would have it that Knapp all but single-handedly beat the boll weevil in Texas and devised there a unique and effective program for convincing farmers to engage in modern, scientific methods. To one observer singing his praise in the late 1920s, Knapp was a "venerable but dynamic seer [who] threw back the invasion of the cotton boll weevil...by strategy as far-reaching and magnificent in its conception as that of the immortal Foch at the first battle of the

---

<sup>40</sup> D.F. Houston, "Cotton and the General Agricultural Outlook" *Publications of the American Economic Association*, 3rd Series, Vol. 5, No. 1, Papers and Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting. Part I. New Orleans, LA., December 29-31, 1903. (Feb., 1904), 114-116.

Marne.” To another, his fight against the pest was the “greatest single piece of constructive educational work in this or in any age.”<sup>41</sup>

These claims that Knapp beat the weevil in Texas are untrue; by the time of his death in 1911, the cotton pest had advanced on its march across the South into Alabama, unmoved by Knapp’s fight against it. This reality did not stop another to claim in 1929 that “no other two men” than Knapp and Booker T. Washington “have done more for the Negro in the lower South since Emancipation.” Perhaps the greatest praise was heaped on Knapp by Jackson Davis, an extension worker in Virginia, who claimed “There was a man sent from God, whose name was Seaman A. Knapp.”<sup>42</sup>

Most of these glowing comments came from agricultural extension agents, the very group who benefited most from Knapp’s career. In reality, after an adult life characterized by mixed results as a farmer and teacher, in weevil-threatened Texas Knapp stumbled upon a safe and effective means to demonstrate new farming methods to landowners. Upon close examination, however, Knapp did not pioneer the demonstration method alone, nor were his initial successes made in the presence of the boll weevil. However, the perception that he battled the boll weevil and was victorious drove his fame in the twentieth century. This misperception, that farmers under his counsel made a bumper crop while the

---

<sup>41</sup> Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*. Jackson Davis, “An Experiment in Agricultural Education,” in “Silver Anniversary Cooperative Demonstration Work, 1903-1928,” Proceedings of the Anniversary Meeting Held at Houston, Texas, February 5-7, 1929 (College Station, TX: Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas), 38, hereafter “Silver Anniversary Proceedings.” Charles Brough, “The American Farmer and Agriculture of the Future,” in “Silver Anniversary Proceedings,” 54. Walter Hines Page, as quoted by Jackson Davis, “Silver Anniversary Proceedings,” 38.

<sup>42</sup> R.R. Moton, “Extension Work and the Negro,” in “Silver Anniversary Proceedings,” 51. Davis, “An Experiment in Agricultural Education,” in “Silver Anniversary Proceedings,” 38.

weevil destroyed the surrounding cotton, put Knapp on the front page of hundreds of southern newspapers and made the old professor a mainstay on the lecture circuit.<sup>43</sup>

Before becoming the celebrated hero of planters, politicians, and businessmen, Seaman Knapp was a carpetbagger. Born in rural New York in 1833, Knapp moved to Iowa after, as principal of a girls' secondary school in Vermont, he was injured on the school's playground. After failing at sheep raising in Iowa, Knapp tried his hand as a Methodist minister and school superintendent before becoming a professor of agriculture at the Iowa State College in 1879. The Hawkeye State had been the first to build a Morrill Act land grant college, which had opened its doors in Ames only ten years prior to hiring Knapp. In addition to teaching husbandry, Knapp became a leader of the state cattle breeding association and editor of the *Western Stock Journal and Farmer*. Though his personal background was limited, he embraced the growing movement for scientific farming.<sup>44</sup>

After five years in Ames, Knapp left in search of a more lucrative position in the private sector. Alongside hundreds of other educated northerners, he moved south in search of a way to transfer his talent as an agricultural expert into

---

<sup>43</sup> For the common portrayal of Knapp as heroic inventor of the demonstration system, see Oscar B. Martin, *The Demonstration Work: Dr. Seaman A. Knapp's Contribution to Civilization* (Boston: The Stratford Company, 1926), W. Rodney Cline, "Seaman Asahel Knapp, 1833-1911," *Louisiana History* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1970): 333-340. Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp, passim*. Williamson, *Origin and Growth of Agricultural Extension in Louisiana, 1860-1948: How it Opened the Road for Progress in Better Farming and Rural Living* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, Division of Agricultural Extension, 1951). Charles B. Knapp, "Applying Seaman Knapp's Ideals in the New Millennium," November 16, 1997, speech to the Annual Meeting of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

<sup>44</sup> Cline, "Seaman Asahel Knapp, 1833-1911," 333-4. Martin, *The Demonstration Work*, 2.

private business. The land speculation prevalent in Texas when the boll weevil crossed the border took place simultaneously in other “underdeveloped” parts of the South. Railroads pushed into the hinterlands of Louisiana, as they had Texas, and midwestern settlers briskly gobbled up land. The North American Land and Timber Company had acquired nearly 1.5 million acres of soggy Louisiana marsh, which most farmers did not consider arable, and the company was looking for someone with rural credentials to convince immigrant farmers that they could in fact make a crop on the wet land. Japbez Bunting Watkins, a man Knapp had known in Ames who represented the English investors who owned the timber company, asked Knapp to serve as its assistant manager. He agreed and moved his family to Lake Charles. Knapp quickly involved himself not only in farmer relations, but in mortgage operations and a host of endeavors independent from the firm. He was soon knee-deep in timber land speculation, and the operations of twelve large rice farms, sawmills and sugar producers.<sup>45</sup>

Though Knapp’s official concern was making the soggy land profitable for his company, from 1891 to 1903 he became the leading advocate of rice culture in southwestern Louisiana and a major player in the agricultural transformation of the region. Not only did he convince farmers to buy the wet lands and to grow rice, but he also pushed for the use of new technologies, including powerful planters, harvesters, threshers, and pumps that could raise and lower the water level of rice paddies. Knapp parlayed his interest in rice production into a vast

---

<sup>45</sup> Cline, “Seaman Asahel Knapp, 1833-1911,” 334-5. Williamson, *Origin and Growth*, 42, 44. Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 119.



business. Along with several partners, he built rice mills, founded a Lake Charles bank, organized the Rice Association of America and created and edited *The Rice Journal and Gulf Coast Farmer*. His focus was seldom on improving the lot of the small Louisiana rice farmer, however. At the heart of his operations was an interest in making rice production big business in Louisiana. As a result, rice growers themselves never heralded Knapp or his accomplishments nearly to the extent of railroads, merchants, banks and politicians.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1902 the USDA recognized Knapp's ability to move seamlessly between farmers and the business sector and contacted the former professor about a job promoting southern agriculture. At the time, Knapp was on the verge of retirement, already, in C. Vann Woodward's words, a "grizzled Victorian of seventy with white muttonchop whiskers, piercing eyes, and indomitable energy." The department recognized Knapp's record of convincing both investors and farmers that rice could be profitably produced on land previously thought worthless, and it hoped Knapp could help in the boll weevil fight as well. The department needed a representative to convince cotton farmers to follow Townsend's cultural recommendations. Knapp accepted the department's challenge and began working with the department to establish farms on which to demonstrate the cultural method.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> In fact, Louisiana had become the nation's leading rice producer after Knapp's first five years in the state. Cline, "Seaman Asahel Knapp," 336-8. Williamson, *Origin and Growth*, 49. Martin, *The Demonstration Work*, 8-10. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 119.

<sup>47</sup> Williamson, *Origin and Growth*, 45. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 409.

Knapp did not actually invent the demonstration system of rural education most associate with him. Previously, state agents had asked farmers to visit state-owned research farms, which for most meant a long trip across the state, or educators settled for mailing printed bulletins to rural people. In the late nineteenth century, however, state agents began making efforts to physically take their recommendations to farmers. One such method was the demonstration farm. In 1889, Dr. Beverly T. Galloway began demonstrating the latest farm techniques for farmers on their own land. Galloway was on to the idea that convincing one farmer in a central location to change what he or she grew and how they grew it might influence area farmers to adopt the same practices. Centrally located demonstration farms would also mean that men and women would not have to travel to remote government plots to see the latest fertilizers, newest crops, or latest tools. Knapp joined Galloway and other federal farm agents in 1902 and began building demonstration farms in several areas.<sup>48</sup>

At the start of Knapp's work, there was no set demonstration agreement. Agents made a variety of arrangements with local farmers to establish demonstration farms on their land. Under most agreements, landowners gave up a section of land, their buildings, and their tools to the USDA for one year; in return, the department paid the production costs of labor and supplies (seed, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.). At the end of the season, the crops were divided equally between the owner and the USDA. In some cases the landowners were

---

<sup>48</sup> Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 145-6.

guaranteed a profit based on the average yield of the surrounding county.

Though this technique was successful in influencing individual landowners of the benefits of modern farming practices, it failed to exert much influence on neighboring farmers. To be effective in educating larger numbers of farmers, this method still asked people to visit and observe the USDA's methods on a nearby farm; most were unwilling to take time away from their own land to observe a model farm.<sup>49</sup>

Even for those who would visit the farms, adopting the department's recommendations was risky. Selecting a new kind of seed, rotating land in a new fashion, or even planting new crops was an expensive gamble, and those whose profits were not guaranteed by the USDA could not be made to place that bet. In addition, much of the soil and seed improvements Knapp prescribed would take several seasons to show their benefit, though arrangements with farmers were limited to a single season. Galloway and Knapp tried to convince demonstrators to sign on for several years, but most refused. Since the demonstration technique could not be effective under these short lease agreements, the results after a single year were seldom significant enough to persuade farmers that these new methods were superior. Most farmers remained disinterested.

Despite Knapp's failure to actually convince farmers to adopt the USDA's recommendations, southern newspapers publicized his work, and it caught the attention not of farmers, but of merchants, railroads, and other business people.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 147.

Most recognized that as the boll weevil proceeded, all business in a small town in cotton country was threatened. They also knew that local farmers would need to be persuaded to follow to the department's advice. From across Texas and Louisiana, local business leaders began contacting Knapp and Galloway, asking to have a demonstration farm established in their towns.

In 1903, a group of business people in Terrell, Texas contacted Knapp about setting up a demonstration farm. Because Terrell was a fair distance from the Louisiana demonstrators Knapp was already committed to working with, and he feared spreading his operations too thinly over a great area, he declined. Soon after, Knapp received a second letter from Terrell, this one from an agent of the Texas Midland Railroad. Terrell was the home of Edward H. R. Green, owner of the rail line, and a famously wealthy Texan. The son of a railroad tycoon father and a "parsimonious heiress" mother, Green had apparently arrived in Terrell unannounced in 1882, walked into the local bank and deposited a quarter-million dollars in cash. By the time he left the bank that morning he had been placed on the bank's board and made a Texas "Colonel." Green purchased land in the area and developed and managed the Texas Midland Railroad, which quickly became an important link between the increasingly dense cotton hinterlands and the state's shipping centers.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Rasmussen, *Readings in the History of American Agriculture*, 178-9. Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 149-152. "Green, Edward Howland Robinson," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, Internet, <<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/GG/fgr33.html>> Accessed July 24, 2003. "Texas Midland Railroad." *The Handbook of Texas Online*. <<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/TT/eqt22.html>> Accessed July 24, 2003.

The railroad's letter to Knapp set it itself apart from others requests not only because of the famous connections of the line's owner. The agent assured Knapp that a local group, calling itself the Terrell Farmer's Institute, was willing to raise money to guarantee a local demonstrator against loss. This was a new twist in the demonstration arrangement, which had traditionally relied on USDA funds to guarantee demonstrators. Knapp had been reluctant to accept Terrell's invitation because of his commitments in Louisiana, but the promise of the Farmer's Institute covering the bulk of the cost of the farm made the proposal worth looking into.<sup>51</sup>

Galloway and Knapp traveled to the east Texas town and found it in a state of panic. The boll weevil was due in Kaufman County the following year, and farmers had heard horrific tales of the devastation it caused in the cotton fields to the south. The educators agreed to talk to a meeting of concerned citizens and to examine the prospects of a demonstration farm in Terrell. On February 25, 1903, they arrived at the town's Odd Fellows Hall for their first meeting, surprised to find the room overflowing with people. As Knapp stepped to the dais, a farmer shouted to him from the crowd, asking what solutions for the weevil he had brought them. "Not a thing," Knapp countered. He did not have a magic solution to stop the insect, he explained, but he did have a plan of self-help to improve their farms. "Any scheme of relief that is not based on self help is like sending a man to hold up a sick calf," he told the group, "after a while they

---

<sup>51</sup> Rasmussen, *Readings in the History of American Agriculture*, 178-9. Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 149-152.

both get tired and fall down together.” He lectured the audience on a broad range of methods they could employ to increase productivity on their farms: careful selection of improved seed, soil rotation, improvement of underused lands, and a steady application of approved fertilizers. Surprisingly, he made no specific mention of a course of action to thwart the boll weevil.<sup>52</sup>

After the meeting, Knapp pressed the leaders of the Farmer’s Institute on their promise to fund the demonstration farm. Within a half-hour the group had collected \$415 to guarantee a demonstrator against loss. Impressed, Knapp agreed to stay overnight and to visit potential demonstration farms the following morning. He must have been encouraged by the interest shown in Terrell, even though it was principally expressed by business leaders, not farmers. Knapp must also have realized that the impetus for the farm seemed to spring not from a concern for farm improvements, but from unmitigated fear of the boll weevil. Whatever the reason, Knapp recognized that with a cash outlay from townspeople and a motivation to learn, the atmosphere in Terrell stood in stark contrast to the flagging demonstration spirit in Louisiana.<sup>53</sup>

The next morning, Knapp and members of the Farmer’s Institute visited several farmers who had volunteered to serve as demonstrators. Eventually the group selected the farm of Walter Porter, despite the fact that it was three miles from Terrell, which Knapp considered a drawback because farmers and townspeople would most likely not travel on foot to observe the farm’s progress.

---

<sup>52</sup> Jack Stoltz, “The Porter Demonstration Farm,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 1992 30(1): 16. Davis, in “Silver Anniversary Proceedings,” 39, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Stoltz, “The Porter Demonstration Farm,” 17.

Knapp established an executive committee consisting of farmers and business owners to oversee the actual application of his recommendations on the farm. This farming-by-committee approach took into account the reluctance of many individuals to actually practice Knapp's recommendations to the letter. On February 25, 1903, the agreement was formalized and signed. Porter, the committee agreed, could keep any and all profits he made on the farm and the committee would compensate Porter at the end of the season if he lost money implementing Knapp's advice. The crucial difference between the Terrell farm and Knapp's previous demonstration efforts was this guarantee by the local business community against any loss suffered by Porter. The USDA was not required any initial outlay of money. Perhaps more importantly, it assured farmers that the entire town was geared up to help them beat the weevil.<sup>54</sup>

As per Knapp's instructions, Porter devoted seventy acres to the demonstration, planting thirty-seven in cotton, twenty-four in corn and the remainder in a variety of vegetables and ground cover. The cotton was divided into nine plots, on which Porter systematically experimented with a variety of seeds, fertilizers, and soil types. The corn crop took a beating from an unusually wet season; wind and rain reduced the yield more than fifty-percent. But the cotton flourished. As expected, the insect did march into Kaufman County that year; however, it never made it to Porter's cotton fields. Despite the hysteria surrounding its invasion of nearby fields, the pest never bothered Porter's cotton

---

<sup>54</sup> The Porter farm was technically owned by Walter Porter's elderly father, J.B. Porter. Stoltz, "The Porter Demonstration Farm," 17. Williamson, *Origin and Growth*, 49-51. Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 152-5.

in 1904. At the end of the season, while many neighboring farmers directly to the west and south had lost huge portions of their crop to the weevil, Porter revealed that his experimental cotton had been wildly successful. One plot yielded over 325 pounds of cotton lint per acre, nearly twice the amount of the acreage farmed traditionally. His experimental plots earned Porter seven-hundred dollars more than his other land. The combination of a bumper cotton crop and the *assumption* that it was made in the presence of the boll weevil combined to create the immediate and widespread legend that Knapp and Porter had beaten the boll weevil with this demonstration method.<sup>55</sup>

The influence of this relatively small experiment farm almost cannot be overstated. Despite the reality that the farm made its profits under relatively good conditions, not while under attack from the weevil, across the South people latched onto the notion not only that a boll weevil remedy had been discovered, but that a new system for teaching rural southern farmers how to pull themselves out of a cycle of poverty had been hatched out on Walter Porter's seventy acres.

Word of Porter's perceived success against the pest spread fast—faster, in fact, than the weevil itself. Southern newspapers spread the word all over the South. Knapp, for his part, naturally encouraged the perception that the farm had been a wild success; he knew that if rural southerners believed he held the key to profitable farming in the face of the boll weevil, they would listen to whatever it was he had to tell them. Consequently, Knapp began receiving countless

---

<sup>55</sup> Soil nutrition variables were based on the crop that had been planted on each plot of land in the previous years. Williamson, *Origin and Growth*, 49-51. Stoltz, "The Porter Demonstration Farm," 18. Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 152-5.



invitations for speaking engagements all over the region, especially from areas just ahead of the boll weevil swarm. Officials with the USDA were impressed as well. At the end of the season, Secretary of Agriculture Wilson traveled to Terrell to investigate the farm and discuss with Knapp the application of this new demonstration method on a large scale. Wilson and Knapp agreed that the demonstration was ideal because it required no outlay of funding from the USDA, only a guarantee against loss raised by the local business community. The government, therefore only had to fund agents' salaries and transportation costs. Immediately, Wilson worked with southern politicians to take advantage of the Porter Farm's celebrity by energetically lobbying Congress to appropriate funds to spread the demonstration method across the South.<sup>56</sup>

Boll weevil damage in Texas had been devastating, proponents argued, but now there was an effective method to teach farmers how to fight the pest. As southern representatives demanded Congressional funding to build demonstration farms, many representatives outside of the region painted the weevil as a strictly southern problem unworthy of federal support. The debate over funding to fight the weevil exemplifies not only the legacy of sectional division within the federal legislature, it underscores the failure of many outside the South to comprehend just how complete a threat the pest was to southern society. In the course of this debate, many southern politicians and agents of the USDA helped to play up the destructive image of the pest. Absent from the

---

<sup>56</sup> Williamson, *Origin and Growth*, 49-51.

debate on either side was the issue was the South's unwavering commitment to cotton itself. At the heart of this debate over federal funding was the threat of the weevil; was it a local or a federal issue?

In December 1903, only weeks after Porter had harvested the cotton on his demonstration farm, Texas representatives testified to the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture as to the gloomy conditions of cotton growing in their state. George Burgess pointed to a fifty-percent crop loss in his home county of Gonzales for the 1902 season. Scott Field of Robertson County claimed tenants on his plantation had picked 1,700 bales in 1901 but managed a paltry 103 bales the following year. USDA officials echoed these laments, reporting that the boll weevil had accounted for a fifteen-million dollar loss in cotton production from the previous year. Leland Howard, Bureau Chief of Entomology, testified before the committee, bringing with him a two-foot long papier-mâché model of a boll weevil. When called to testify, Howard unloaded the gigantic bug from a dry goods box and placed it on the table. "Captain Lamb of Virginia," Howard recalled, "turned with amazement to Congressman Burleson of Texas... and said, 'My God, Burleson, is it as big as that?'"<sup>57</sup>

As the proceedings continued, many non-southern committee members sympathized with the economic losses but questioned whether the issue warranted federal legislation. The irony that recent proponents of southern states' rights were now suddenly calling on the government for help was not lost

---

<sup>57</sup> Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture on Bills Having for Their Object the Eradication of the Cotton-Boll Weevil and Other Insects and Diseases Injurious to Cotton, Congress, House, 58<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup>, sess., 1904: 9, 35. Howard, *The Insect Menace*, 68-9.

on several northern Republicans. When Iowa Republican Gilbert Haugen pointed out the southerners' ideological contradiction, Congressman Field admitted "the time was when a southern member would hesitate to go to the Government asking relief, even though the damage was exceedingly great." He seemed to brush off a century of southern ideology by stating plainly, "times have changed, and we have modified our views." Non-southerners on the committee stood fast in their claim that the boll weevil did not represent a threat to the nation, however, and that any agricultural legislation that affected one part of the country should affect the rest equally. This northern contingent modified the bill under review to include funding for the investigation and eradication of foot and mouth disease, which primarily afflicted the dairy cattle of the Northeast and Midwest. In late December, the committee recommended an appropriation of \$250,000 to the USDA specifically for the fight against the boll weevil, with any left over money to be spent eradicating foot and mouth disease.<sup>58</sup>

After getting out of committee, the bill met stiff opposition on the House floor. Generally, debate over the bill fell along regional and political fault lines. "This is a bill of great importance, not alone to Texas, but to all States engaged in the production of cotton," Representative Burleson said to begin the House debate. Painstakingly describing the boll weevil's assault on Texas cotton, then explaining the speed at which the weevil was traveling towards the rest of the cotton belt, Burgess attempted to reduce the perception of the boll weevil as

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 36. Congress, House, Representative Hemenway of Indiana, 58<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (January 7, 1904) : 543-544.

merely a regional problem. As he explained that this \$250,000 appropriation was only half the amount recommended by the Secretary of Agriculture after a visit to Texas, Frederick H. Gillett, a Massachusetts Republican interrupted. "I should like the gentleman to state whether Texas has made any appropriation for the extermination of this pest" Gillett asked. Gillett was upset at what he perceived was a lack of a significant effort by the Texas legislature to fight the weevil.

Applying "the old adage 'God helps those who help themselves'," he offered an interesting comparison. "I do not wish to disparage or depreciate in the least the danger or destructiveness of this insect from Mexico," he continued, "Yet...I think it wise we should consider that this is not the only pest of that description." Gillett then launched into an discussion of the "extraordinary history" of the gypsy moth and the "national evil" of its infestation of Massachusetts' trees. He suggested federal legislation to deal with the moth, but his larger rhetorical point was that Massachusetts had been fighting the moth without federal help. The moth, Gillett argued, was more deserving of federal attention than the boll weevil because it attacked "everything that is green," unlike "this specialist from Mexico" which attacks only one particular plant. Surprisingly absent from the discussion was any talk of Gillett's state's own reliance on the health of southern cotton.

Mills in the northeast were still the principal consumers of the southern staple.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Gillett's comments spoke to the heart of the local/national debate: "I suppose that what will govern Congress in appropriating against any such a pest is whether it is a local or a national calamity." "I suggest," he quickly added "that it is going to be very hard ever to draw that line." Congress, House, Representative Gillett of Massachusetts, 58<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (January 8, 1904) : 569, 570. Congress, House, Representative Burleson of Texas, 58<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (January 8, 1904) : 569-572.

Arkansas Democrat Joseph Taylor Robinson spoke next and attacked Gillett's amendment. Pointing to Gillett's support the previous year of federal funding solely for foot and mouth disease, Robinson said "I am unable to see, sir, any difference in the principle involved in this instance and [the foot and mouth disease] bill... passed... in 1903." "Massachusetts," Robinson added "and every other state in the Union are directly interested in this legislation." Summing up the argument of those in favor of the boll weevil appropriation, Robinson said

If something is not done by this Congress looking toward the destruction of the cotton-boll weevil and toward preventing it from extending its operations; inestimable harm will result... for we believe that this bill is not local or will it peculiarly benefit Texas.

After Robinson, Representative James Slayden, another Democrat Texan, repeated the supporters' arguments. He then produced two letters from cotton farmers and two from railroad managers decrying the cotton losses caused by the boll weevil. This evidence, combining the interests of farmers and railroads, coupled with the repeated testimony of southern representatives finally proved persuasive. On January 13, 1904, the Senate passed a bill appropriating \$250,000 to the USDA to fight the boll weevil; the bill contained a clause directing any excess funds to the eradication of foot and mouth disease in cattle. President Roosevelt signed the bill two days later and the funds were made immediately available.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Congress, House, Representative Robinson of Arkansas, 58<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (January 8, 1904) : 572; Congress, House, Representative Slayden of Texas, 58<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (January 8, 1904) : 572-3.

With the news of Congress's action, Knapp immediately established a base of operations in Houston and began hiring agents to found demonstration farms across Texas. He assigned each man a territory within the infested region and charged him (all of Knapp's original farm demonstration agents were men) with establishing at least one demonstration farm in each county within boll weevil territory. Just as its proponents and critics alike had claimed it would be, this demonstration effort was immediate federal work at the local level.

Almost overnight, young white men with college educations and federal paychecks boarded trains into the hinterland to press the flesh in rural stations and to knock on farmhouse doors. Agents offered help to the most prominent farmers first, hoping to secure their cooperation and to establish a demonstration farm on their land. Most of their early efforts were geared toward these demonstrators, trying to make sure that each volunteer followed the department's advice precisely. People who visited the demonstration farms and promised to put the government's recommendations to work on their own land were considered "cooperators," but agents rarely had the time to visit or aid these men and women directly. In addition to the demonstration work, agents spoke to crowds assembled in churches and halls, on farms and in the courthouse. Anyone was a potential audience for their message of beating the boll weevil with early planting, selective seed use, and reducing cotton acreage.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Helms, "Just Looking for a Home," 168.

Two things emerged from the passage of this federal boll weevil bill in 1904 and the subsequent creation of a massive network of local demonstration farms. First, the boll weevil fundamentally shifted the way agricultural knowledge was disseminated. Taking scientific farming to the farmers was a reflection not only of a new system of teaching, but of a new form of knowledge. The relationship between the government and the farmer would never be the same. Agents now had a federal mandate to take agricultural education to the fields. Farmers who had never traveled to state experiment farms or attended lectures by farm experts could now find advice in their own counties. The teaching method that Knapp's contemporaries associated with the old professor fundamentally changed how farm knowledge moved to the rural areas. The boll weevil threat, however, more imagined than real on the first Porter demonstration farm, would finally convince some southern cotton farmers to listen to what the government had to say.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the boll weevil's notoriety increased as the result of the demonstration system. Agents intentionally heightened the drama of the invasion to use it as a tool to reach rural landowners. These educated, motivated representatives of the USDA were determined to make the boll weevil a cause célèbre. With enough public attention focused on this threat to the South's agricultural economy, these men and women hoped to reinvent and reinvigorate farmer education. Not only would state governments reengineer their relationship with federal authority, as money,

people, and resources flooded into weevil-infested areas, but individual farmers' relationship with the state would be forever changed as well. The boll weevil held the key, they believed to continued financial and institutional support for their work.

All of these efforts to teach farmers how to fight the boll weevil would not, ironically, halt the weevil's spread. As Figure 1.3 shows, the pest's damage increased over the period. In fact, the state's response to the boll weevil threat in Texas, its portrayal of the boll weevil as nothing less than a direct threat to the South's way of life, created popular hysteria rather than a practical solution. These professors, scientists and researchers did not believe that the boll weevil would end the South's dependence on cotton—*that* scenario would have meant a complete social, economic, and agricultural revolution—but that it would attract enough attention so as to increase the funding and profile of their efforts.



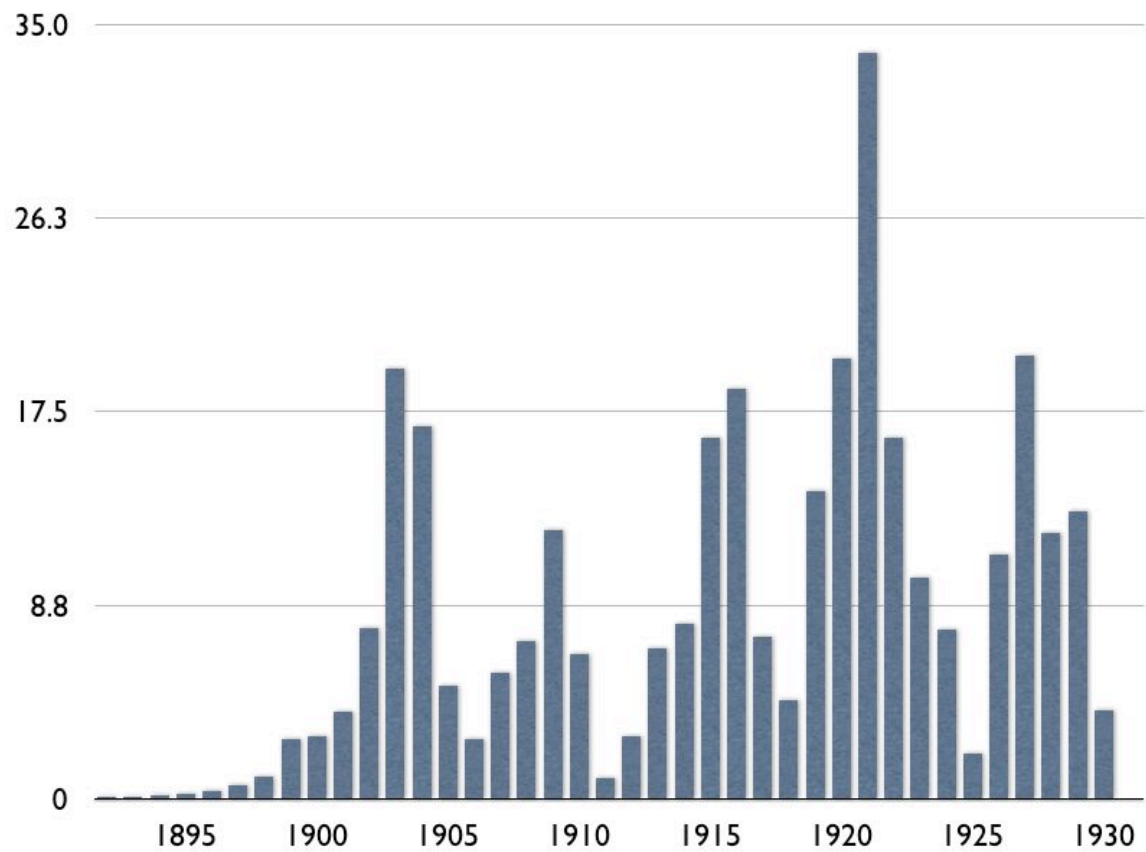


Figure 1.3: Annual percentage cotton crop loss from boll weevil in Texas, 1910-1930<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Willard A. Dickerson et al., eds., *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999*, The Cotton Foundation Reference Book Series, No. 6 (Memphis: Cotton Foundation Publisher, 2001), 601, 604.

CHAPTER 2  
CULTURES OF RESISTANCE IN TEXAS AND LOUISIANA:  
TENANTS MAKE SENSE OF THE BOLL WEEVIL

Few of the South's five hundred-thousand tenant farmers noticed Congressional passage of the 1903 boll weevil bill. Though the success of the South's economy rested on the willing and coerced participation of men and women to farm land they did not own, tenants were, at least on the surface, absent from the public debate over the bill and the larger conversation about the boll weevil. As state legislatures and Congress wrestled with policies to aid landowners fighting the pest locally, policy makers and government agents who controlled the weevil war rarely addressed the people who would actually conduct the boll weevil fight. When the experts and lawmakers did mention labor, it was simply to deride it, to name it as yet an additional hindrance in the battle to thwart the advancing bug.

In 1903, William C. Stubbs, a longtime advocate of farm education in Louisiana, reflected on the demonstration bill's passage at a meeting of the American Economic Association. "We are going to fight the weevil heartily," Stubbs promised the economists, "We are going to fight it on the lines of the railroads and streams, to keep it out of Louisiana." He saw only one obstacle to

that goal: Louisiana's majority African American workforce. "One of the speakers said the 60 per cent of the cotton growers [in Texas] are white men, while in Louisiana 60 per cent are negroes." Black laborers, in Stubbs' estimation, were the key problem in both implementing the demonstration system and stopping the boll weevil. For Stubbs and men like him across the weevil-inflicted territory, tenant farmers were the elephant in the room no one was talking about—everyone saw and recognized that something had to be done about tenancy if true agricultural change would be brought to the South, but very few were willing to address the issue as part of the boll weevil problem.<sup>1</sup>

Though few of the decisions made in state capitols or the halls of the USDA in Washington reflected the reality of the tenant problem in the South, these landless farmers were never immune to the policies' effects. The boll weevil made the already narrow options tenants had for climbing out of poverty even more slim. Government agents could help their cause, but it was out of tenants' hands to employ that aid. Beyond the undemocratic aspect of lawmakers deciding on issues that directly affected tenants' work without tenants' participation in the decision, the enacting of the policies on the ground directly affected tenants' own already unpredictable bottom lines. Extension agents might have practical advice for farmers about how to limit the boll weevil's effects, but it was up to landowners, not tenants, to decide whether or not to listen. For sharecroppers, renters, and wage laborers, the choices of seed, the

---

<sup>1</sup> George K. Holmes, "Cotton and the General Agricultural Outlook--Discussion" *Publications of the American Economic Association*, 3rd Series, Vol. 5, No. 1, Papers and Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting. Part I. New Orleans, LA., December 29-31, 1903. (Feb., 1904), 128.

timing of planting, and the application of fertilizers meant the difference between finishing the season with a profit or a loss, and these were decisions almost always made by the landowner or manager, rather than the tenant. Even after the passage of the 1903 bill, tenants were closed off from the space of demonstration farms; they could not seek out the advice of the demonstration agent, nor could they ask that their own patch of land serve as a demonstration farm.

Excluded from the formal debate and day-to-day farming decisions, tenants found themselves with limited options for dealing with the boll weevil's advance. Tenants' choices boiled down to three: moving, quitting, or adjusting. Far from exclusive choices, many tenants chose some combination of the three, or tried one then another. Many farmers moved ahead of the boll weevil's advance, but then stayed and adjusted to farming under the boll weevil in a new location. Others quit farming for a season or two and began again later. And though tenants may not have seen their options in such stark terms, these three choices provide a good framework for an analysis of how the boll weevil effected tenants' decisions about how and where to work and live.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> These choices are adapted from the ideas explored in Peter Coclanis and Bryant Simon, "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: African American Strategies for Day-to-Day Existence/Resistance in the Early-Twentieth-Century Rural South," in R. Douglas Hurt, ed. *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003):189-209. In it, the authors use the work of Albert O. Hirschman to explain that rural African Americans in the early twentieth century had three limited responses to poverty: exit, voice, and loyalty. I see tenant farmers' possible reactions to the boll weevil as different in important ways, however. In brief, I discount the "loyalty" option and divide the "exit" strategy into two categories, an exit from farming and a geographic exit. See also Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Before understanding exactly how tenants reacted to the boll weevil, it is important to understand exactly who they were, where they came from, and how they lived. The demographics of tenancy paint a complex picture of the intertwining factors of nationality, race, and class. In the cotton-dense Blacklands region of Texas in 1900, 60 percent of farmers were tenants. That figure rose slowly but steadily over the next thirty years. Much of this labor was Mexican. From 1890 to 1910, the number of Texas residents who were of Mexican descent doubled, the majority of whom were landless farmers. The level of tenancy for black Texans was equally high. At the turn of the century, 63 percent of African Americans in the state worked in agriculture; 69 percent of these were tenants. Only 31 percent of black farmers in Texas owned their own land. By comparison, half of the state's white farmers owned the land they worked.<sup>3</sup>

Tenancy rates and wages changed as the region became more directly tied to the cotton economy. In 1890, as cotton fever spread, and the labor supply dried up, Texas agricultural workers were earning \$13.30 per month, with board, according to the USDA's Division of Statistics; this was almost one dollar more than the national average. By the end of the decade, however, Texas's farm workers earned less money (\$12.94) and had slipped a dollar below the national average. On the surface this loss of wages suggests a rise in the labor supply,

---

<sup>3</sup> Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, 7-8. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 42. Alwyn Barr, *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995*. 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 88-89.

but the reality was a bit more complex. Compared to the wage averages of other states in the cotton belt, Texas landowners still paid the best wages in the South. In Georgia, for instance, farm workers earned only \$8.05 per month in 1899, slightly more than *half* the national wage average of \$14.07. While California farm labor was earning \$25.64 per month with board that year, the average of the southern cotton belt states was a paltry \$9.45. When broken down by race (as complicated, inconsistent and, in hindsight, ridiculous, as the USDA's methods were) the picture is even bleaker. Black Texans earned, on average, three dollars less than their white counterparts. Black farm workers in Texas did however make more money than they would have in the cotton fields of any other southern state.<sup>4</sup>

In the fields of Texas, these wage statistics meant little to landowners and tenants trying to bargain for work. In fact, the relationship between owners and workers was both complicated and malleable. Worker-owner relationships on the farm shifted according to time and place. The very nature of the mythic “agricultural ladder”—the notion that a tenant could “climb” from wage earner to sharecropper to renter—was built around race. And in late-nineteenth century Texas, tenancy meant a new mix of people working in new ways. Sociologist Paul S. Taylor understated his observation that the “deep-seated cleavages of

---

<sup>4</sup> The Division of Statistics figured these averages monthly, despite the fact that for most of the southern farm labor working under non-fixed wage systems; workers did not get paid each month. As for the Division's breakdown of race, it is unclear if Mexican workers were considered “colored” in Texas, though they were considered so in New Mexico and Arizona. Hyde, *Wages of Farm Labor in the United States*, 11.

race and class” in southeast Texas were “often curiously aligned.” Neil Foley put it more pointedly:

Throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, black/white east Texas and Mexican south Texas were converging on each other, as Mexicans gradually moved north and southern whites and blacks pushed west on the rich prairies of central Texas.

The result, Foley argues, was a clash of race and culture unique to this time and place. But this collision of African Americans, Anglos and Mexicans in Texas coincided with the entry of the boll weevil, producing not only a fusion of race, class and culture, but a profound disruption of the labor system as well.<sup>5</sup>

As Texans discovered, cotton production demanded the presence of women and men willing to perform difficult, redundant work in the fields. Who performed this work was the result of stark class divisions, but it had genuine racial implications as well. Foley makes the argument, in fact, that an individual’s place in the larger cotton economy could affect how the rest of society saw him/her racially: “In culturally crisscrossed central Texas, overlapping economic systems and racial hierarchies enable us to examine how systems of domination and subordination were structured through processes of racialization and white racial construction.” In other words, how a person related to the production of cotton could help to decide more than just how much credit they had at the store or cash at the end of the season.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier*, 278. Foley, *The White Scourge*, 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 9.

Race and labor were categories determined by each other, but constantly shifting. Rental and tenant agreements were molded to fit Texas's racial landscape and labor needs. As a result, some white landowners intentionally hired only Mexican tenants because, the owners believed, they worked harder for less pay. One grower told a researcher at the turn of the century, "the Mexicans are the only class of labor we can handle. The others won't do this work; the white pickers want screens and ice-water. To white pickers I say, 'If you will accept the houses we have for the Mexicans, you can work.'" White pickers' demands often left them farther and farther from the richest lands. As a result, the levels of tenancy among Mexicans soared as cotton pushed into Texas. In 1850, for instance, prior to the cotton boom, the Mexican rural population in southern Texas was nearly equally divided between landowners, skilled workers and unskilled workers. In 1900, Mexican landowners' share fell to 16 percent of the rural population.<sup>7</sup>

As tenancy rates increased, so too did violence. Black Texans who found at the end of a successful season that they had enough capital to buy a mule or plow, or in some instances, land on which to farm for themselves, faced not only

---

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier*, 300. Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 73. One irony of southern farm life was that cotton pickers were divided in physically, socially, and economically from those that did not have to pick cotton, yet they were so closely connected to the livelihood of the region that landowners were obsessed by them. There was a stigma attached to anyone who picked cotton in the South, albeit for the vast majority of rural dwellers, white, black or Mexican, everyone picked cotton when it was time. Adding the boll weevil to the equation in the 1890s further complicated the already uneven race and class landscape. For evidence of the stigma attached to whites picking cotton, see Evans, "Texas Agriculture," 42.



the threat of the boll weevil, but the more serious plague of white racial violence. Whitecapping rose in Texas as the boll weevil spread. Night-riding whites harassed, threatened, and attacked many black landowners. Though it is hard to know the exact correlation between the boll weevil and violence, it makes sense that as many whites faced the insect pest, yet another threat to their economic livelihood and independence, and as poor tenants constantly looked for a better arrangement, that many whites turned to violence against African Americans who had gained independence and success.<sup>8</sup>

Even in the flush times before the boll weevil arrived in an area, life for cotton pickers was violent. A young cotton weigher told one Texas scholar, "If niggers or Mexicans get smart-alecky with you, you have just got to knock them

---

<sup>8</sup> Evans, "Texas Agriculture," 320-1. Many landowners, black, white and Mexican, joined formal political movements. Farmers had embraced the Alliance Movement, Populism and later Progressivism in part because they believed that political action could ease the burden of tenancy and credit. The Alliance Movement was born of these fundamental problems in tenancy. Instead of operating as single producers trying to market their crops individually, the Alliance encouraged farmers to work together. By storing and selling their crops collectively, farmers could avoid dumping their crops on the market at the end of the season when prices were their lowest. The Alliance Movement gained ground in cotton country and farmers established hundreds of cooperatives across the region. For a short time, small and mid-sized landowners and some tenants basked in the promise of a collective marketing effort. They would soon come to understand, however, that the problems that plagued farmers individually would collect, along with their cotton, in mass. Despite a thin, long-term influence on policy reform, small Texas farmers never successfully challenged the deep-rooted economic systems that came along with cotton. Each of these political movements suffered from the same problems that vexed southern society broadly, especially racism. Lawrence Goodwyn's study of the Populist movement in East Texas at this time uncovers the lengths that integrated political groups had to go to just to meet together. Populists had to meet at night if black farm workers were to attend because the workers couldn't get away from the cotton during the day (depending on the time of the season). Several scholars of the development of these political movements in Texas attribute tenant farmers' interest in formal politics to the boll weevil's making it increasingly difficult to improve their economic position. Green, "Tenant Farmer Discontent and Socialist Protest in Texas, 1901-1917," 134-5. Fite, "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview," 11. Lawrence C. Goodwyn, "Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study." *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 1453. Green, "Tenant Farmer Discontent and Socialist Protest in Texas, 1901-1917," 134-5.

down and they will stay in their place.” Taylor reported in his study of Nueces County, Texas, a “foreman of a Mexican track gang used to beat the mean ones with a shovel and make them work.” Taylor attributed this white violence against Mexican workers to white Texans simply being accustomed to treating black workers brutally. One farmer told Taylor that if he encountered Mexicans who refused to work, the best thing to do was not to beat them but to let them go try to find work someplace else. And many did.<sup>9</sup>

Though much has been made of peonage in the historiography of the New South, there is a plethora of evidence that suggests a great deal of movement of farm laborers, especially around the advancing boll weevil swarm. Thousands of migrants hopped a train or walked away in the dead of night and headed to untouched cotton lands to the east. For tenants, often the first answer to the boll weevil’s invasion was to move. There are as many explanations of migration as there are individual migrants, though this kind of labor-related migration certainly had its roots in the pre-Civil War South. In the antebellum period, moving from one place to another and from kind of work to another was not only a right for free African Americans, however limited by white control, it was a symbol of this limited freedom. During Reconstruction, then, it makes sense that African Americans tested their new freedom by traveling long distances, sometimes moving to relocate permanently and sometimes simply moving for a given time

---

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *American-Mexican Frontier*, 133-4.

and returning home. When the boll weevil came, tenants received little help from the government, found no formal political outlets and were accustomed to geographic mobility. As a result, tenants pushed away from the infested areas. Most tenants who chose to move traveled either west, to the newest cotton lands on the dry prairies where the boll weevil was limited by the weather, or to the east and north, to cotton country ahead of the boll weevil throng. Migration was not only an escape from the insecurity of farming with the boll weevil, it was also a move towards something, a different, if not better arrangement with a different landlord, possibility better land, another job opportunity, or family.<sup>10</sup>

Landowners' dependence on labor and the tenants' willingness to move as the boll weevil spread, gave these migrations a profound importance. Even the smallest landowners relied on extra-familial labor to plant, chop and pick cotton. As a result, in places where labor was in demand, tenants' own willingness to work constituted a fair amount of power. Whereas landowners were chained to their own farms and to the merchants and banks in their area as the weevil moved in, landless farmers could often move in search of a better deal. This reality pressured landowners to find ways to guarantee a labor force sufficient to work their cotton.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay, and E.M. Beck. "Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930." *American Sociological Review* 57, issue 1 (February, 1992): 103. Theodore Kornweibel, Jr. "An Economic Profile of Black Life in the Twenties," *Journal of Black Studies* 6, issue 4 (June, 1976): 307. See also Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: The Unfinished Revolution, passim*. It must be noted here that migration to Texas still exceeded emigration from the state.

<sup>11</sup> There is a vast literature on Postbellum southern labor and migration. See for instance, Edward Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), William Cohen, *At Freedom's*

The lengths to which owners would go to attract and keep labor reflects the level of power that tenants possessed. Landowners fought out-migration of cotton laborers with a variety of physical, economic, and cultural weapons. In addition to outright physical violence, many landholders constrained workers with labor contracts that all but guaranteed recurring debt. Others offered benefits of sorts for laborers who stayed at the same place year after year. One Texas planter admitted to a Congressional committee that after spending significant amounts of money to secure a Mexican labor force, he would go as far as to “borrow” workers’ shoes and clothing at night. “It was necessary to not let the Mexicans leave,” the planter said. John Parker, a powerful Louisiana landowner and politician, used another tactic. Courting hard-working white immigrants to replace the predominantly black labor force, Parker claimed that “No Southern state offers greater opportunities to the prospective farmer” than Louisiana, “and our people will gladly welcome a thrifty, energetic class of *white* people.” White landowners’ obsession with replacing the tenants, but not the tenant system, is a telling insight to their resentment of the limited power of landless farmers.<sup>12</sup>

---

*Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), Roger L Ransom, and Richard Sutch. *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Imported Pauper Labor and Serfdom in America*, 67th Cong., 1st sess., April 15, 1921, 9, as quoted in Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 11. John M. Parker to O. Doederlein, June 21, 1909, John Milliken Parker Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Box 3, folder 33. Italics mine.

One reason why landowners were weary of the power that tenants held as a result of their ability to move, was that when tenants were successful, they often left, creating a labor shortage for the owner. The case of one Louisiana tenant farmer explains how the boll weevil itself could bring change to the conditions of the farm, which in turn could allow for tenants even more power within their relationship to the landowner. At the turn of the century, B.B. Sochon was a tenant barely getting by on land owned by Louis Stelly. Sochon and his family were undoubtedly in debt, and like thousands of other tenants in the state, he probably agreed to stay with Stelly for another year to try to square his balance. The local demonstration agent, L.E. Perrin, knew that both Sochon and Stelly were struggling to grow sufficient amounts of cotton, but Stelly had refused Perrin's aid on a number of occasions and the agent knew that he could not help Sochon directly. "We had great difficulty getting the farmers to plant less [sic.] acres in cotton and give it the necessary attention," the agent recalled. Even as the first few weevils appeared in late 1905, farmers continued to devote most of their acreage to the staple. "They thought that they could chase weevils and pick squares on their ordinary acreage," Perrin remembered, "They all had to take their medicine at the first attempt." Over time, the boll weevil made converts out of some farmers, including Stelly.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> L.E. Perrin, "Cooperative Demonstration Days," in "Silver Anniversary Proceedings," 81. The phrase "pick squares" refers to the method sometimes advanced in the early years by state experts of walking through the cotton row by row and picking up any squares that had been punctured by a boll weevil and fallen to the ground. Weevil eggs hatched from the squares and farmers believed that they could reduce the number of the insect by collecting and burning these

In 1907, boll weevils battered Stelly's crop, and the farmer barely broke even. The following year he agreed to work with Perrin as a demonstrator. Stelly advised Perrin on how much of his land to devote to cotton, and how much to leave to corn and other crops. He directed Perrin to use a certain kind of cottonseed and told the farmer when to apply fertilizer. Perrin, in turn, passed this information onto his tenant, Sochon. Throughout the season, the farmers worked according to Perrin's instructions. By fall they had made a bumper cotton crop. Sochon made twenty-three bales on land where he had previously made only eleven. He sold the cotton for enough money to pay his debts and still pocket a profit of \$1100.<sup>14</sup>

The day Sochon settled, he quit cotton farming. Not only had Sochon decided to leave Stelly's farm, but he and his wife abandoned farming altogether. Sochon "decided to go merchandising," Perrin reported. Sochon told the agent "he was through eating boll weevil pie." Many tenants had had their fill of boll weevil pie. As his experience elucidates, Sochon found success because of Stelly's decision to seek Perrin's help. Had the landowner not chosen to work with the agent, the tenant's end-of-year receipt would certainly have been less, if positive at all.<sup>15</sup>

---

squares before they hatched. The laborious work was rarely worth the effort, since a few missed squares could mean the birth of thousands of weevils by the end of the season.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Perrin, "Cooperative Demonstration Days," in "Silver Anniversary Proceedings," 78. It is hard to verify the validity of the story. There is no B.B. Sochon in St. Landry Parish listed in either the 1900 or 1910 census. This neither precludes the possibility that he worked for Stelly in 1908 nor proves that Perrin's story of Sochon moving after the season is true. There were two different heads of household listed in the parish for Louis D. Stelly listed as farmers, though neither had

Left out of these decisions about how to farm in the presence of the boll weevil, yet performing most of the labor themselves, some tenants quit the business altogether. It is impossible to say just how many tenant farmers quit the fields and began work in some other profession. Though anecdotal, stories like Sochon's are not rare. There were jobs available in rural towns, and landless farmers sought them out. Gins, warehouses and stores all needed laborers, and the promise of a steady wage, even if only for a part time position, was attractive to tenants who risked debt each year with a cotton crop.

It is not easy to determine exactly how many landless tenants quit farming as the boll weevil moved in, but figures suggest it was not a small number. Though Sochon quit farming altogether, there is also some evidence that the boll weevil actually aided tenants' access to land ownership. Though from 1890 to 1910 the overall percentage of farms operated by tenants across Texas rose, there is evidence that in local areas where the boll weevil made cotton growing all but impossible, land prices dropped and tenants had greater access to ownership. Geographer James Fisher found that "Negro [land] acquisition was easier where land of lower value was available, or where the production system showed signs of deterioration."<sup>16</sup>

---

any non-family farm labor living with him. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900* (Washington, D.C.: 1902). U.S. Department of Commerce, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910* (Washington, D.C.: 1912).

<sup>16</sup> Later in this article, Fisher inexplicably contradicts this idea, arguing that the boll weevil and lower cotton prices discouraged black farm ownership in the 1920s. He uses these two factors to explain the leveling off of black land ownership rates. The boll weevil is not, however, a separate factor than those that he identifies earlier as deteriorating production. James S. Fisher, "Negro

A snapshot of the 1910 season, when the boll weevil was barely making waves in Mississippi but was heavily infested in Texas and Louisiana, shows that black landownership in the South was actually highest within those states heavy with the boll weevil. In Texas, over 30 percent of black farm operators owned the land they farmed. As you move east through the Cotton Belt, the numbers slowly decline. Nineteen percent of black farmers in Louisiana owned their land, 15 percent in Mississippi and Alabama and less than 13 percent in Georgia. In fact, black farmers in Texas owned more land after the boll weevil had made its way through the state than before. Though these numbers suggest then that the boll weevil opened up the possibility of land ownership by tenants in Texas, the figures cannot be conclusive. The boll weevil was a problem of local importance; its damage was specific to time and place. Decennial census figures paint with too broad strokes to identify exactly how the pest opened up (or closed) the exit option for tenants in Texas. There can be no doubt however that the boll weevil was a disruptive enough factor in Texas cotton culture that it encouraged tenant movement either away from farming or simply to another geographic location.<sup>17</sup>

In the late 1910s, some claimed that the spread of the boll weevil in Texas's Brazos and Trinity River Valleys created such a flood of small farmers leaving Texas for the Oklahoma Territory that it resulted in Oklahoma statehood.

---

Farm Ownership in the South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 63, issue 4 (December, 1973): 483, 485.

<sup>17</sup> Though black farmers in Texas owned more land after the boll weevil than before, as a percentage of all farmers in the state, they remained constant. Thirteenth Census, Agriculture, Volume 7, 619.



“These little beetles drove thousands of farmers from Texas into Oklahoma and increased the population,” one extension agent claimed, “which gave her statehood.” Like the soldiers of “Bowie, Fannin and Sam Houston,” these farmers battled the boll weevil “as a skirmish line [which] kept fighting the advancing guard.” “With our breasts to the enemy we were forced down through the Brazos bottoms, across the great black, waxy belt of Central Texas, the wooded hills and valleys of east Texas and Louisiana,” G.W. Orms told an audience, “until we came with our back to the Mississippi River, our faces to the enemies, and we had boll weevils in our hair.” Despite the armies of farmers on the move, the majority of tenants stayed within the boll weevil territory and tried to adapt to the new conditions the pest created.<sup>18</sup>

Texas and Louisiana landowners also tried in a variety of ways to control those tenants who remained. Planters’ ability to attract and keep a suitable labor force was not limited to violence and economic force, however. Many landholders attempted to hold workers by catering to their perceived social needs. Tenant communities, especially on the larger southern farms, were known by both owners and workers as having lively social atmospheres. Recognizing this, owners allowed, and in some cases aided, the creation of workers’ recreational space in the hope that it might control their labor. Despite

---

<sup>18</sup> Oscar B. Martin, *The Demonstration Work* (Boston: The Stratford Company, 1921), 212-213.

these efforts, it remained a space that, if not ruled by tenants, was one that they openly contested.

Landowners for their part encouraged a certain amount of partying and lawlessness among laborers. One white planter told sociologist Paul Taylor “there are some strays—Negro and Mexican—who gamble the Mexicans out of their earnings. There are some prostitutes. Some say [the laborers] stay better if you allow [prostitutes].” These interlopers also tended to keep workers poor, which their bosses knew would force them to work in order to earn back their wages. “Gamblers and prostitutes come and get places and pretend to pick,” a landowner reported, “It is better for the farm in one sense, because [laborers] work better when they have no money.” A different planter explained that the “the way to keep Negro labor is to let them have women and shoot craps.” “They would rather gamble than anything, have home brew, and dance,” Taylor was told.<sup>19</sup>

Landowners also found that they could manipulate workers’ tenure by manipulating their access to this cultural recreation. “The love of the Mexicans for dancing was frequently indulged by farmers,” Taylor states, “who often provided lumber for construction of dance platforms.” One large grower told Taylor, “If the Mexicans get restless, and want to leave before the cotton is picked, I tell them we are going to have a *baile* in two weeks, and give them colored soda, etc.”

---

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *American-Mexican Frontier*, 133. Coclanis and Simon, “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty,” 205.

Despite the conclusion of some historians that the parties, dances and other cultural expression by workers was “a space that whites barely touched,” landowners clearly had the means to open, limit or close that space.<sup>20</sup>

The parties and performances that sociologists like Taylor saw as a wild atmosphere of sex, cards, and drinking, tenants understood as more constructive, even political, social spaces. Workers let loose for sure, but on one level the impetus and outcomes of these social occasions was a grappling for power. Workers and owners *together* created this social space, but it was the tenants who in the end drew strength from it.

Out of this environment of celebration and recreation, came a unique music, which was both fostered by and reflective of tenants’ relationship to the land and their cotton-dependent livelihood. Landowners may have believed they successfully constricted tenant movement by throwing a party, but the content of the songs that tenants performed and heard railed against the structure of control that landowners established. From stages and porches, or in the fields themselves, women and men sang to audiences songs that drew from their own familial, spiritual, and work lives. From a distance, landowners peeked in on these performances thinking that the dances and singing would drain the workers of money and desires to flee, rather than give them feelings of strength and community.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

From the tenants' perspective, however, the songs spoke to the reality of their lives in the cotton fields. Many of the songs were loaded with tenants' views on the cotton culture in which they lived and worked, and as a result, within them there is a degree of political and social power. In this case, James Scott's "hidden transcripts of resistance" turn out not to have been well hidden at all. Songs like "Corrido de Texas" (Ballad of Texas), recorded by Taylor in the early twentieth century, reflected and recorded tenants' own dependence on moving and their understanding of the larger processes at work in their lives. In Spanish the balladeer sang:

Goodbye, state of Texas,  
with all your growing crops;  
I am leaving your fields  
so I won't have to pick cotton.

These trains of the T & P<sup>21</sup>  
that cross Louisiana  
carry the Mexican  
to the state of Indiana

Goodbye, Fort Worth and Dallas,  
cities without a lake;  
we'll see each other when I return  
from Indiana and Chicago.<sup>22</sup>

Songs like these reflect not only workers' attachment to the cotton crop, and their understanding of the nationwide system of labor in which they operated; they also reflect tenants' appreciation of the power of their own movement. The "Corrido de Texas" is at its heart an assertion of workers' control over their own

---

<sup>21</sup> Texas and Pacific Railroad.

<sup>22</sup> Paul S. Taylor "Corrido de Texas," in Mody C. Boatright, Wilson M. Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, eds., *Texas Folk and Folklore* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1954), 157-8.

fate—it reflects discontent about the physical work of cotton picking and the knowledge that there were better jobs elsewhere. The final verse also demonstrates the reality that migration was seldom final for tenants. In the end, the singer admits they may make it as far as Chicago, but that they will undoubtedly return.

It was a result of tenants' own migration, reflected in these songs, that stories about the boll weevil that evolved in East Texas did not stay there. There was a cycle of song creation and movement at work. Musicians created stories about the pest and set them to music, playing them publicly for cotton workers. Workers and musicians both moved, taking the songs about the boll weevil with them to a new place, where the reality of the pest's effects were different. The songs were reborn, replayed, and eventually reached new audiences and the cycle repeated. Each boll weevil song became part not only of cotton laborer's memories as they moved, but of professional musicians' repertoire as well. As a result, audiences far from weevil-infested cotton heard the musical news of the pest.

The spread of the boll weevil song from Texas was due not only to a migrant cotton tenant workforce but to a vibrant musical community as well. Several of the twentieth century's most important American musicians were in fact raised in Texas and Louisiana as the boll weevil pushed through. The "Father of Ragtime," Scott Joplin, was born on a rural cotton farm in northeast

Texas around 1868. His family, like so many other migrant laborers, moved to Texarkana once the railroad had been built there, and Joplin developed an interest in music. As he grew, Joplin cut his musical teeth in the fraternal halls and social clubs of Texarkana, where he probably learned and played songs about the boll weevil. Rural African Americans who would ride into Texarkana monthly to buy necessities and socialize often attended the dances at which Joplin played. There was a great deal of cultural exchange as city and rural people talked, played, and danced and Joplin undoubtedly encountered the boll weevil stories and perhaps heard a song or two about the pest. By his twentieth birthday Joplin himself packed up his arsenal of songs and developing talent and hit the road, spreading the songs he knew to the West, first, and then eventually up the Mississippi River to St. Louis.<sup>23</sup>

Not far from Joplin's birthplace, Blind Lemon Jefferson was born in 1893. Blind at birth, Jefferson began playing guitar as a young boy, but by his early twenties he was making a living as a musician on the streets of Dallas. Around the same time Huddie Ledbetter, later known worldwide as Leadbelly, was born in the borderland region between Louisiana and Texas. By the time he was old enough to play guitar, he was rambling around his hometown playing on the street, at house parties, and in clubs listening to the stories and songs of workers

---

<sup>23</sup> James Haskins with Kathleen Benson, *Scott Joplin* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1978), 33, 58-62. Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2-6.

escaping from work in weevil-plagued fields. By the time he left Moorinsport, Louisiana in 1906, he had learned “Boll Weevil” from his Uncle Terrell, who lived in west Texas. Leadbelly took that song and dozens of others with him as he traveled to Shreveport and later Dallas. There, he hooked up with Jefferson and a third bluesman, Josh White. The three taught each other songs they had picked up and in turn played all over town. They eventually became an important blues triumvirate, traveling independently on from Dallas all over the world, spreading not just their unique sound but also the ever-changing story of the boll weevil.<sup>24</sup>

So what were the songs that these musicians heard, sang, and spread throughout the South? Was the boll weevil a mere character in a larger story or did the pest come to represent something deeper to these rural people? Workers who heard and sang these boll weevil songs found in the cotton pest a kindred spirit. The narrators of these songs saw the pest’s invasion and slow, unpredictable spread as a frenetic movement not unlike their own. Themes of migration and longing for better work are prevalent in the collection of boll weevil songs that sprang up in the infested territory almost as soon as the pest began destroying south Texas cotton.

In the version Gates Thomas first heard in the 1890s shortly after the weevil’s arrival in South Texas, the singer opens with a comment on the pest

---

<sup>24</sup> Barr, *Black Texans*, 97. Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, 69. Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 42, 52

itself. Echoing the observation Charles DeRyee made in his 1903 letter the USDA, the tenant sang of the pest:

The first time I seen him he wuz settin' on a square;  
Well, the next time I seen him he wuz a-crawlin' everywhere,  
Just a-huntin' him a home, Babe, just a-huntin' a home.<sup>25</sup>

The pest's ability to multiply, seemingly right before the farmer's eyes, was impressive, but the pest's motive for reproducing and wandering ("he wuz crawlin' everywhere") suggests the more important point. The boll weevil was on the move not simply to destroy cotton but to find a home. Common to almost every version of the boll weevil song recorded (either in text or audio) from 1906 to the present is the boll weevil's concentration on the home. In almost every song the insect is finding a home in a cotton field, invading someone's home, forcing someone from a home, or most commonly "just lookin' for a home."

Some versions of the song offer a detailed explanation of where the insect had been and where it was headed:

The boll weevil is a little black bug  
Came from Mexico they say,  
All the way to Texas  
Just a-lookin' for a place to stay  
Just a-lookin' for a home, just a-lookin' for a home.<sup>26</sup>

Whether or not the songs explained where the weevil had been, most name precisely what home it was in search of, namely "yours." "Have you heard the lates', the lates' all yo' own?" a black sharecropper sang for Thomas in 1906,

<sup>25</sup> Thomas, "South Texas Negro Work Songs," 173.

<sup>26</sup> "Boll Weevil Song" cited as "Traditional" in Hazel Arnett, *I Hear America Singing!: Great Folk Songs From the Revolution to Rock* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 140-141. Similar version is Eddie Cochran's, "Boll Weevil Song" and others.



“It’s all about them weevils gonna make yo’ fa’am [farm] their home.” In these versions the weevil was more than just a fleeting danger; it was a threat to the very livelihood of the tenant farmer.<sup>27</sup>

By 1906, the version Thomas heard had changed, reflecting the various strategies of farmers’ ongoing fight against the pest. The new version referred to the pest’s ability to beat any farmer’s strategy to kill it. Poison, weather,

heat—nothing could stop the weevil and its search for a home:

So they took the little boll-weevil and put him on the ice.  
He sez to the farmers, “I say, but ain’t this nice!  
But it ain’t my home, though; no, it ain’t my home.”

Then he took the little boll-weevil and put him in hot sand.  
He sez to the farmers, “Will, and I’ll stand it like a man,  
Though it ain’t my home, Baby; no, it ain’t my home.”<sup>28</sup>

This story, which Thomas heard sung by black sharecroppers in East Texas shares the imagery and narrative of the mythical tale Seaman Knapp heard an old farmer tell when he first visited the same weevil-plagued area in 1903. That farmer had tried poisoning, drowning and burning the pest, which refused to perish. In the sharecropper’s song, the boll weevil is again all-powerful and this time can speak, telling the farmer that indeed, he can survive the burning sand “like a man.”

---

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted here that Gates Thomas’ own interpretations of these songs, and the people singing them, were informed by his own negative impression of black tenant farmers. Thomas classified the boll weevil song as a “work-song” (as opposed to “the spiritual [or] the controversial... ‘shout,’ song”). These work songs were “a product of economic and labor conditions,” found in their “most authentic state among the ‘lusty, phallic, Adamic’ Negroes of South Texas, shiftless and shifting day laborers and small croppers who follow Lady Luck, Aphrodite, and John Barleycorn.” Gates Thomas, “South Texas Negro Work Songs.” In *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society* 5 (1926): 155, 173.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

Leadbelly's version of the "The Boll Weevil," recorded when the singer was on death row in Louisiana in the early 1930s, also painted the pest as a kind of trickster. After singing verses about the pest's ability to defy ice and heat, the narrator admits that, in the end, it is he—the sharecropper—and not the landowner who will suffer. Once the insect has beaten back the narrator's attempts to destroy it, the farmer must take the lone bale he has made into the merchant to settle his debts:

Now the farmer, he said to the merchant,  
 "I never made but one bale, before I'll let you have that last one,  
 I will suffer and die in jail,  
 I will have a home, I will have a home."

The cropper has faced certain debt for another year, and realizing that, instead of settling with the merchant for a paltry amount, he will commit some act that will land him in lockup, possibly something as simple as bankruptcy or perhaps something more violent. Even in jail the laborer will, like the boll weevil, have a home.<sup>29</sup>

As the speaker runs through different options for dealing with the pest's destruction, in the final verse he settles on the most realistic:

If anyone should ask you children, who made up this song?  
 Tell 'em this is Huddie Ledbetter,  
 He's done been here and gone,  
 He's looking for a home, he's looking for a home.

---

<sup>29</sup> Leadbelly, "Boll Weevil," Library of Congress Recordings (LC 273-A-1 and LC 135-A), audio recording.

Like the boll weevil, ever moving in search of more cotton, laborers migrated from one landlord arrangement to another, in search of a place with economic opportunity and social independence.<sup>30</sup>

These songs were certainly powerful statements about how tenants felt about the boll weevil, and they reflect the options that they faced when the pest threatened their livelihoods. In the end, however, the social power of these songs never amounted to tangible improvements in tenants' lives. At most, the songs must have proved a psychological salve rather than a material or political one.

As landless tenants traveled ahead of the boll weevil swarm along with songs about the pest, the women and men who remained in the Texas and Louisiana had to find a practical way to fight the insect. In 1903, as extension agents fanned out across the infected territory, they had federal and state backers but little practical advice that could actually help farmers stop the weevil's destruction. Despite the rosy predictions of state and federal agriculture secretaries about stopping the pest's movement, the boll weevil destroyed an increasing amount of the state's cotton. In 1904, Texas growers in the southern prairies lost an estimated \$50 million. States to the east of the weevil's advance began to take notice of these horrifying stories of cotton disaster. As yet uninfected states made moves to protect their own fields from the accidental

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

importation of the insect. In 1904, Georgia's State Board of Entomology outlawed the shipment of "loose and baled moss and of cotton pickers' sacks, as well as of cotton-seed, seed-cotton, cotton-seed hulls, cotton lint, hay, straw and oats, from points in the State of Texas and Louisiana," unless shipments carried the seal of a state or federal entomologist guaranteeing that the shipments originated in a place where the boll weevil was not present.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, in the already infested region, each year the bug reemerged from hibernation looking for cotton, and extension agents tried to convince farmers to follow their advice. The extension system established in Terrell by Knapp and Porter did not prove to be the answer to modernizing Texas and Louisiana farms or to stopping the weevil, at least in the short term. E.H.R. Green, the wealthy owner of the railroad in Terrell who had wooed Seaman Knapp to town in 1903, had been so impressed with the agent's heralded ability to fight the weevil that he bought 302-acres the following year and began a large-scale cotton breeding program. Following the USDA's latest advice to the letter, Green was intent on building a model modern farm. As it turned out, however, Green's experimental cottons were no match for the weevil. After losing his engineered cotton to the pest for three straight years, Green abandoned cotton

---

<sup>31</sup> Matthai, "Atlas of Cotton Production," 49. Georgia State Board of Entomology, "Regulations of the Georgia State Board of Entomology, Relative to the Quarantine Against the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," December 24, 1904, in Duggar Family Papers, box 7, folder 80, Auburn University Special Collections.

altogether, and retooled the farm to breed exotic flowers. A short time later, in the words of one historian, “his grand experiment was abandoned.”<sup>32</sup>

Though some modern operations failed, cotton continued to expand in Texas. Southerners latched onto stories of rich powerful men being brought to their knees by a tiny bug, however, which overshadowed the much more common and tragic story of tenant farmers sinking deeper into poverty because of the pest. Despite tenants’ own efforts to make their own story heard, politicians, newspapers and educational institutions ignored them.

No single piece of evidence demonstrates the absence of tenants from the public boll weevil fight than a black and white photograph found hidden away in a 1929 pamphlet. That year, a dozen or so state and federal extension agents met in Houston to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Porter demonstration farm. Speakers eulogized Seaman Knapp and his pioneering work in Terrell and heaped praise on Walter Porter and his neighbors who had created an effective demonstration method. Texas A&M published the speeches in a slim pamphlet to celebrate the Silver Anniversary of demonstration work. The volume is a revealing document of the celebration of demonstration work as the savior of the common farmer. One image in the collection particularly sticks out. On page forty, wholly out of context in the middle of the recollections of Virginia agent Jackson Davis, is a photograph that communicates more than the sum of words

---

<sup>32</sup> Stoltz, “The Porter Demonstration Farm.” 19.

in the entire collection (See Figure 2.1). In the foreground of the image is Walter Porter, operator of Knapp's first demonstration farm. Standing with hands on hips in a clean white shirt and Stetson hat, he appears quite old. To Porter's right is a slightly older African American man wearing overalls and an anxious expression. There is a dog at his feet. The caption underneath describes the older man only as "the old negro helper who worked the 100 acre field that constituted the first demonstration." The caption does not name him. The text of Davis's speech makes no mention of him. In fact, there is no specific mention of this man in the entire pamphlet, or in *any* published contemporary or historical account of the Porter demonstration farm.<sup>33</sup>

Though contemporary chroniclers and historians have written at great length, and mistakenly, of Porter's farm as the first successful battleground in the boll weevil war, no one mentions the man who seems to have actually made the historic fight. History has not recorded the tenant's fate nor even simply his name. For all that historians have written about Seaman Knapp, the Porter Family and their farm, we know nothing about the tenant who actually executed Knapp's recommendations out on the experimental plot. We do not know the specifics of his relationship with Walter Porter, whether he worked the land alone,

---

<sup>33</sup> Davis, "An Experiment in Agricultural Education," in "Silver Anniversary Collection," 40. The author has made a search in the secondary literature on Knapp and the Terrell farm and found no mention of the tenant. I have not examined Knapp's papers, housed for the most part at McNeese State University and the National Archives.

## Walter C. Porter: First Farmer Demonstrator



Figure 2.1: Walter Porter and Unnamed Tenant. The original caption reads "Walter C. Porter and the old negro helper who worked the 100 acre field that constituted the first demonstration and which averaged between \$7 and \$8 per acre more than the community average that year."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> "Silver Anniversary Collection," 40.

whether he was from the area or a recent migrant. He may have owned or rented land in addition to the plot he worked for Porter. And what of his fate after 1903? He may have bought his own land or quit farming altogether after his success on Porter's farm, and only returned for the anniversary photograph. He may have remained on the Porter farm after 1903, eking out a living as a sharecropper or wage hand his entire life.

Manuscript sources do little to fill in the picture. According to the 1900 census, Walter Porter and his wife Bessie lived with their three children; there were no others living on his land. By 1910, Bessie had given birth to five more children, and the Porters had hired two servants, a "Mulatto" cook named Sarah Hamilton and March Wilson, a black twenty-year-old "hired man" who performed "general farm" labor. The census lists Wilson as "working on [his] own account," a classification that suggests Wilson was a tenant on the Porter farm. It is impossible, however, to know from these records whether the March Wilson listed in 1910 was in fact the tenant on the celebrated demonstration farm in 1903. Whether it is March Wilson in the 1929 photograph or not, no sources are available to reveal his identity, the arrangement with Porter, or his relationship to the historic Terrell farm. The tenant's role was unappreciated by his contemporaries and has gone unrecorded by historians.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900* (Washington, D.C.: 1902). U.S. Department of Commerce, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910* (Washington, D.C.: 1912).



As the mystery of the photograph reveals, from 1892 to 1908, as the boll weevil made its initial move from the Mexican border to the Mississippi River, the most visible public debate over the weevil was relegated to money for research and education. There was a more hidden conversation about the pest, however. In fields, on porches, and at parties, tenants told their own stories about how to combat the creature and admired the pest's ability to stymie white landowners as they could never do. When these solutions proved ineffective, laborers moved. As the center of southern cotton production moved westward across the region in the twentieth century, many workers moved in the opposite direction, staying just ahead of the boll weevil, which had its eyes on Mississippi.

## CHAPTER 3

## “MAP MAKER, TROUBLEMAKER, HISTORY MAKER”:

## THE BOLL WEEVIL THREATENS THE DELTA

When the Southern Railway’s “Special Agricultural Train” pulled into tiny Belzoni, Mississippi on March 10, 1909, two hundred people were gathered to welcome it. Down the track in the town of Richey, over a hundred farmers came in from the countryside to meet the train, despite the fact that the settlement’s population was only thirty. Later that day the train stopped in Swift, a place so small that news reporters were not sure if it was called Swiftwater or simply Swift. Confusion over its name stemmed from the fact that it had a train stop, but no depot, bank or post office. Despite the diminutive town’s limits, three-hundred people greeted the special train. At stops in the little villages of Arcola and Hollandale, one hundred and fifty tenant farmers and small landowners showed up. The crowds in each of these towns were less interested in the train itself than its passengers, the state’s top farm experts. Rural Mississippians were anxious to hear their plans for combating the slowly approaching boll weevil.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> New Orleans *Picayune*, March 11, 1909. Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, March 3, 1909, 5. Dunbar Rowland, *Mississippi: Comprising Sketches of Counties, Towns, Events, Institutions, and Persons, Arranged in Cyclopedic Form*, vol. I (Atlanta: Southern Historical Publishing Association, 1907), 127, 229, 761, 874.

Aboard the train were professors from Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College (Mississippi A&M), scientists representing the USDA and Mississippi's Department of Agriculture (MDA), and the of editors several farm newspapers. These men rode through the Mississippi countryside on the eve of the boll weevil's entry into the Delta doling out advice. They talked to farmers about crop diversification, hog raising, applying fertilizer to corn crops, and the benefits of home canning, but the subject that brought thousands of people in from their farms to crowd onto train platforms was the impending arrival of the boll weevil. As local anxieties over the encroaching pest grew, trains like this became common in Mississippi . A few weeks earlier the Illinois Central had sent a similar train, dubbed the "Boll Weevil Special," through the Delta, loaded with many of the same experts to warn farmers of the potential damage of the insect invasion.<sup>2</sup>

The level of interest in the crowds that met the Southern Railway train in these rural towns impressed both the experts on board and the region's newspapers sent to cover the tour. After the locomotive's first day of stops, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported "several hundred farmers" had been "anxious to learn" from the "experts." The *New Orleans Daily-Picayune* described "planters in the great Delta counties... eager to learn of advanced farming." The experts themselves deemed the first two legs of the three-day tour

---

<sup>2</sup> "Land and Industrial Agent" to R.V. Taylor, March 29, 1909, John Milliken Parker Papers (hereafter Parker Papers), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Box 2, folder 27.

wildly successful. The size of the audiences, even in the region's smallest towns, had exceeded even their own expectations.<sup>3</sup>

On the final day of the train's tour, however, things changed. On the morning of March 11, it made the first stop of the day in Greenwood, the second largest city in the Delta. Greenwood was the Leflore County seat and home to nearly six-thousand people. When the train pulled into town, however, the professors and agriculturalists on board were shocked to find the station empty. As the passengers disembarked in search of the throngs that had met their previous stops, a small group of men approached. After a brief meeting with a handful of Greenwood planters and businessmen, the professors, scientists, and editors hurried back into the cars and the train fired back up and moved down the track out of town.<sup>4</sup>

Where were the crowds of farmers anxious to find out about the boll weevil? What explains the Greenwood group's unwillingness to allow the experts to speak? The answers to these questions lie in the complex relationship between the town's business interests, the extension services, planters, and labor. The catalyst, however, was the boll weevil itself. Still physically miles from the Delta's cotton lands, the pest was in the forefront of the minds of those in power there. The group of men who met the train had in fact gone to great

---

<sup>3</sup> "Farmers Train Drawing Well" *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 9, 1909, p.7. *Birmingham Age-Herald*, March 9, 1909, clipping, in Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 25. *New Orleans Picayune*, March 10, 1909, clipping, in Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>4</sup> Rowland, Dunbar. *Mississippi: Comprising Sketches of Counties, Towns, Events, Institutions, and Persons, Arranged in Cyclopedic Form*, vol. I (Atlanta: Southern Historical Publishing Association, 1907), 803. "Land and Industrial Agent" to R.V. Taylor, March 29, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 27.

lengths to ensure that not only would no crowd be assembled to meet the train, but that not a word about the boll weevil would be uttered. The group had suppressed word of the train's program leading up to its tour—they had torn down all advertising posted by the Southern Railway in and around Greenwood—and refused to allow the train's experts to speak. Much to the chagrin of the farm educators, the planters and merchants of this Delta city conspired to put a lid on any discussion of the approaching pest. A railroad agent later recalled that despite the huge crowds that met the train in the region's rural sections, "about Greenwood and Greenville," the anti-education sentiment "seems to be crystallized." Explaining the events on the rail platform that morning, the agent wrote that planters "view with much concern any discussion or agitation of the boll weevil menace." "The Greenwood people had reached the conclusion that our train was *featuring*" the boll weevil, and as a result, the group "suppressed our advertising and kept all reference to the meeting out of the local papers." The business owners "fear[ed] dire consequences" if the experts were allowed to speak.<sup>5</sup>

As this story of collusion and suppression demonstrates, in the face of the boll weevil threat, the future of the Delta was up for grabs. Planters across the region worked to insure that their own grip on Delta society—everything from ownership and control of farm land, to the movement of people, credit and knowledge—would not be stilted by the cotton pest. The region's tenants

---

<sup>5</sup> "Land and Industrial Agent" to R.V. Taylor, March 29, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 27.

recognized that the boll weevil was a threat to this planter hegemony and were, to a limited degree, encouraged by the instability the pest promised to bring. Many looked to use the pest's presence as a chance to improve their social and economic livelihoods by seizing access to lands made worthless by the pest, by retooling their contracts with landowners, or by moving in search of a better deal. Extension agents used the boll weevil to get a foothold in the Delta from which to teach the modern, diversified farm techniques to which so many farmers outside the region had been receptive to.

The insect's threat to each of these groups was profound, and on the eve of the weevil's arrival all three groups—planters, tenants, and experts—competed to use the boll weevil for their own advantage. It was the planters, however, who found ways to close out the possibilities for transformation that both rural educators and tenants had hoped the pest's arrival would generate. Planters worked to maintain control of the Delta not by controlling the pest itself, but by managing the rise of the extension service, by tightening their grip on labor, and by trying to manage information and knowledge about the boll weevil. Planters' maintenance of power in the face of this threat was not a foregone conclusion—as the events in Greenwood suggest—but in the end, they were successful.

The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is the football-shaped swath of land that begins at the Mississippi-Tennessee border on the north, and runs south to Vicksburg, Mississippi. To the east the border is the Yazoo River, to the west,

the Mississippi River. Though the region is defined geographically by the rivers that lend it its name, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is not a proper river delta at all, but rather the confluence of the two rivers. It was the region's connection to these important waterways that initially gave the Delta its link to the world and hastened its twentieth century rise as a cotton kingdom. In fact, fewer than fifty years prior to the boll weevil's arrival in the Delta, there were only a scattering of settlements in the region and a small population; the bulk of the land was uninhabitable swamp. In 1860, only 10 percent of the Delta was cleared. Civil War soldiers found upon their return in 1865 that a few of the small Delta towns built prior to war had simply disappeared. Clarksdale, one the region's biggest and most important towns, did not even have a formal street layout until 1868. Though desolate, the land was not vacant. In addition to the panthers, bears, and other wild animals that roamed the marshy region, huge bottomland hardwood trees still covered most potential cotton fields. The landscape would require tremendous labor before it could become ideal for cotton.<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1800s, despite the impediments of flooding, disease, beasts, and vegetation, people began clearing and draining the land to prepare it for cotton. Adventurous capitalists bought up huge tracts of Delta land, gambling that it could be made clear, free of trees and standing water, and tillable. It was a

---

<sup>6</sup> Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), vii. John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 98. William Lincoln Giles, "Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970." in Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed., *A History of Mississippi*, vol. II (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973): 183.

significant risk, but the payoff, they believed, could be enormous because of what lay under the pioneers' feet. The rivers that formed the edges of the Delta's boundaries had flooded thousands of times over millennia, leaving behind a nutrient-rich soil unlike any other in North America. Topsoil, that crucial layer of bacteria and minerals that fuels any vegetation for its growth, was (and remains) a key to all agricultural pursuits. Historian Steven Stoll has written that "soil is a bank account for fertility that farmers draw upon, and the balance is always low." Not in the Delta. Flood after flood had made the region's topsoil unbelievably deep, and by extension the land was amazingly fertile. "The river left gold in the Delta," wrote John Barry, "elsewhere one measures the thickness of good topsoil in inches. Here good lush soil measures tens of feet thick." It was a great place to grow cotton.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Delta held great promise for rich white southerners, enterprising young Yankees, international corporations, and thousands of landless African Americans who moved there in order to improve their lot. The Delta was a place of opportunity for rich and poor alike; the rich could carve out even greater fortunes while the poor hoped to find a place where their own labor could allow them to climb out of poverty, to own land and to find a fairer, more just, and independent social life. A few of these developers had their hopes for the Delta fulfilled. For a far greater number, however, the environment,

---

<sup>7</sup> Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 19. Barry, *Rising Tide*, 97.



the financial costs, and the remoteness proved too much. Most men and women with dreams of Delta fortunes headed home after a few years, broke and beaten.

The transformation of the Delta from “wild” swamp to cotton kingdom even opened brief moments of hope and promise for some landless African Americans. The same environmental realities that made Delta life so expensive and the work so arduous, created an unquenchable thirst for workers. This meant plenty of opportunities for black farmers willing to perform the back breaking work of digging drainage ditches, clearing trees and pulling stumps. The desire for labor, however, did not even guarantee a wage in the Delta, where landowners constantly retooled credit and hiring arrangements to keep workers in dismal poverty. Despite the hope offered by the region, for landless farmers the Delta became the land of the blues.<sup>8</sup>

Will Dockery’s plantation was a home to the blues, but he was not singing any mournful ballads. In the 1880s, with a thousand-dollar gift from his father Dockery left his family in Memphis and moved to the Delta in search of a plantation. He bought land east of Cleveland and courted labor to help him clear the trees and brush. Removing the stumps and cane proved too tough for many of his neighbors, and Dockery soon found people willing to exchange their land for livestock and guns. As his holdings grew, Dockery found life in the Delta was no pastoral wonderland; most planters’ families lived in Memphis and rarely ventured onto the family plantations. Dockery’s son, Joe Rice Dockery, recalled

---

<sup>8</sup> Cobb makes this point about the failure of the promise of the Delta producing the blues in *Most Southern Place on Earth*. See also John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 3.

growing up in the city and traveling south to the Delta only for Christmas, vacations, or to “hunt frogs.” His father, meanwhile, acquired and cleared more land. By the mid-1890s, the Dockery Plantation employed hundreds of wage laborers, sharecroppers, clerks and storekeepers. He had built a house, cotton gin, store, and dozens of cabins and outbuildings. By the time the boll weevil arrived in 1909, the Dockery conglomerate even printed its own money to pay its workers. By the 1920s his farm was known in certain circles around the country as the birthplace of the Delta Blues sound. A handful of the most influential blues musicians called Dockery’s plantation home.<sup>9</sup>

Capitalist adventurers like Dockery attempted to create in the late-nineteenth-century Delta a modern world with up-to-date business and accounting practices, directly connected to the global cotton economy, but fashioned with the appearance of a mythical antebellum tradition. James C.

Cobb describes the spirit of men like Dockery:

Fancying themselves heirs to an aristocratic antebellum tradition, this cadre of white leaders sought to create through an ironic combination of economic modernization and racial subjugation a prosperous and politically insulated cotton kingdom where the Delta planter’s longstanding obsession with unfettered wealth and power could be transformed from Old South fantasy to New South reality.

Despite their intentions, these white leaders had various degrees of success at mixing the Old South ideal with the modern, industrializing New South.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 79. Joe Rice Dockery, typed transcript of interview by John Jones, December 13, 1979, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. J. William Harris, *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont, and Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>10</sup> Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 97. The best monograph on the Delta is James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. Cobb’s chapters dealing with the building of plantations and the rise of planter power are

What Delta landowners were unwaveringly good at, however, was growing cotton, and they did so by not only making the plant grow, but by engineering an entire society that revolved around the staple. This started with the railroads. Though a rudimentary rail system first allowed Deltans to ship cotton to regional markets in the 1880s, the system was inefficient. Planters like Dockery, John M. Parker and LeRoy Percy helped subsidize the development of branch lines and were rewarded in turn with stops at each of their plantations and gins.

In addition to developing a personal stake in rail expansion, Delta planters worked to convince bankers across the country to invest in more rail lines. The initial successes of the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railway's (LNO&T) line through the Delta brought competition, and soon Deltans had a choice when shipping cotton out of the region. The powerful Illinois Central railroad bought out the LNO&T in 1892 and renamed it the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad (YMVR). Under the control of the Illinois Central, the YMVR continued to lay track. The primary factor in deciding where the track traveled was not the location of population centers, but of plantations. Whole towns, in fact, picked up and moved to be adjacent to the rail lines that connected gins, planters, and steamboats with the main north-south and east-west rail arteries. Because of the amount of cotton shipped from the Delta, the YMVR quickly became the most profitable segment of the Illinois Central's vast rail network. By the turn of the

---

especially thoughtful. Robert L. Brandfon's concise *Cotton Kingdom of the New South: A History of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta From Reconstruction to the Twentieth Century* remains an important study of the rise of the large plantations and railroads. See also John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

century, seed cotton could be loaded onto a train at a remote plantation, transported to a nearby gin, stripped of seeds, carried by rail through Greenville and soon be in the port of New Orleans ready for the mills of the world. By 1900, this connection to national and international markets truly made cotton king of the Delta.<sup>11</sup>

It was no accident that the evolution of the railroads corresponded to the rise of the planter class. In the early twentieth century these large-scale farmers continued to buy more Delta land and increase their production year after year. As they did, they became more involved in the larger economic and social environment of the region. Many served on the boards of railroads or banks and developed personal relationships with the heads of companies based all over the country. Some oversaw vast credit networks that linked money in a New York bank down to a sharecropper's tab at the plantation store. Railroads were not only in the transportation business, either; they owned entire plantations and were knee-deep in federal, state and local politics. As a result, the lines between planters, shippers, bankers, and industrialists blurred as cotton became increasingly profitable. At root, the reason for this economic incest was cotton. The combination of the soil's nutrition and the efficiency of plantation operations made the Delta the center of U.S. cotton production.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 81. Harris, *Deep Souths*, 44-45. For a complete discussion of the expansion of railroads in the Delta, see Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 80; Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, especially chapter 4; and Willis, *Forgotten Time*.

<sup>12</sup> Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, 91-92.

The people of the region were obsessed with the plant. "Cotton is something more than a crop or an industry," wrote an observer in the *New York Times*, "it is a dynastic system, with a set of laws and standards always under assault and peculiarly resistant to change. It is map maker, troublemaker, history maker." The region committed to cotton to the exclusion of all else. There was no promising industry in the Delta that fell outside the purview of its production.

"Cotton is more than a crop in the Delta," wrote planter and writer David Cohn, it is a form of mysticism. It is a religion and a way of life. Cotton is omnipresent here as a god is omnipresent. It is as omnipotent as a god is omnipotent, giving life and taking life away. Here the industrial revolution is an academic adumbration dimly heard, an alien device scarcely comprehended.

Despite Cohn's catchy prose, the industrial revolution actually had made waves in the Delta; the cotton plantations themselves were industrial marvels operating with modern methods of accounting, organization, and labor control. Industrial processes were put in place to maximize cotton production. The successful implementation of these industrial methods to the plantation relied on two factors, the principle keys to the Delta's development as an industrial farming region: credit and labor.<sup>13</sup>

The physical problems of land development made it hard for planters to secure sufficient labor. In addition to these environmental challenges, planters needed a way to attract a large labor force, money to pay laborers once they arrived, and some mixture of threat and reward in order to retain them. Out of

---

<sup>13</sup> Anne O'Hare McCormick, as quoted in David L. Cohn, *The Mississippi Delta and the World: The Memoirs of David L. Cohn*, James C. Cobb, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 61. David L. Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), 41.

the necessity of maintaining a workforce sufficient to clear the land and crop the fields, landlords and tenants developed and revised new, flexible and constantly changing systems of tenancy. The main form of tenancy that bound laborers and planters was sharecropping. Though there were local variations even within this classification, tenancy basically meant that landowners supplied tools, seed and land to workers, who gave a portion of the crop raised to the landowner at the end of season. The landowner then took a greater share based on the amount of supplies and other goods that the tenant had purchased during the year.

Though the system certainly benefited planters, tenants did not find it completely objectionable. Savvy sharecroppers realized that if their share of the crop was sufficient, the landlord was honest, and his or her credit terms not too outrageous, that it was quite possible to show a profit at the end of the season. Most laborers, as a result of this system, tried to work the most productive land under the most equitable terms. This brought thousands of laborers to the Delta, who thought that the rich soil would allow them to clear the most cotton at the end of the season. The reality of working in the Delta, however, was seldom as promising as sharecroppers hoped.

This pull of laborers was only one force bringing people into the Delta; many were also “pushed” from the worn out cotton lands of the southeastern states and from the boll weevil infested fields of Texas and Louisiana. *The Progressive Farmer* reported in 1900 that Georgia landowners faced a severe labor shortage “owing to the fact that the negroes in large numbers are leaving

for Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, where there is said to be a big demand for negro labor.” By the turn of the century, the Delta possessed the highest concentration of black labor in the US. By 1913, 88 percent of rural dwellers in the Delta were black, over 95 percent of tenants were black, and nearly 95 percent of black farmers were tenants. In the Delta, unlike in any other region its size in the South, tenancy almost without exception meant blackness and blackness meant tenancy. The region was home to a fully articulated form of racial capitalism where the system of labor control was a system of racial control.<sup>14</sup>

But the racial separation (and segregation) of farm labor did not mean that labor conditions in the Delta were completely determined by white landowners. Tenants had weapons of resistance at their disposal, most importantly movement. The constant need for labor forced landowners, merchants and others to be innovative with credit and profit sharing plans. The relationship between cotton and credit was a chicken and egg phenomenon: the more cotton that planters wanted to grow, the more credit they required, forcing them to plant more and more cotton. This spiraling reliance on the fleece affected not only those at the “top” of the Delta’s economic system, but those at the “bottom” as well. Planters needed more labor to cultivate more cotton. The result was a

---

<sup>14</sup> “Labor Famine in Georgia,” *The Progressive Farmer* (Raleigh edition), January 16, 1900, p.3. Robert L. Brandfon, “The End of Immigration to the Cotton Fields,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 50, No. 4. (March, 1964), 592. E.A. Boeger and E.A. Goldenweiser, “A Study of the Tenant Systems of Farming in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta,” United States Department of Agriculture, Bulletin No. 337, January 13, 1916 (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1916), 3. Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, 56.

cornucopia of credit arrangements between workers, landowners, banks, merchants, buyers and factors, all geared towards getting cotton into the ground and its blossom to the gins of the South and the mills of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Delta planters' obsession with the control of cotton land, and their corresponding fixation on labor, placed landowners at the heart of Delta society. The commitment to cotton held the entire society in its grasp. "The cotton culture," wrote David Cohn, "claimed us for its children" and produced a society that was an "ancient tragedy, not of our making through which every one of us, white and Negro, endured—no matter what his pretensions—in an estate half-slave and half-free." Cotton divided Delta society between those who owned the land and those who worked it. In Cohn's words, the Delta was a place landowners and tenants lived and worked together "in the strangest mass relationship of men on this continent." "Within America and yet withdrawn from it," Cohn wrote, white and black Deltans "painfully tried to work out their single destiny together."<sup>16</sup>

Not all powerful white Mississippians put the mutual dependence of whites and African Americans in such promising terms. The powerful planter and politician Walter Sillers wrote to a friend in 1907, on the verge of the weevil's arrival in the Delta, "I am too busy to write long letters these days what with

---

<sup>15</sup> Writing on the evolution of the crop lien law and the evolution of the sharecropping system is well-known. See Harold Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing & Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), Woodman, *New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Cohn, *The Mississippi Delta and the World*, 1, 5.



niggers and cotton, and 'future cotton,' and law and niggers and mules, and the Lord only knows, I am kept too busy to eat or sleep much either."<sup>17</sup>

Sillers and Cohn were right to worry about cotton and labor, especially considering that the plant's biggest enemy was slowly headed their way. The boll weevil was more than just a threat to Delta cotton; it was a danger to planter power and to the very fabric of social and economic relationships in the region. The boll weevil might as well have been a devourer of paper money, or credit, or tenant contracts as of the cotton plant. As the pest stalked eastward the people of the Delta, each in their own way, tried to imagine solutions to the problem that fit within their preconceived systems of social, economic and agricultural power.

David Cohn once wrote that "disturbing ideas crawl like flies around the screen of the Delta. They rarely penetrate. It is only when the price of cotton is affected that the Delta takes cognizance of the outside world." Although he was not, Cohn easily could have been talking about the boll weevil. His allusion to insects swarming around the edges of his region is an apt description of the Delta in 1907. The boll weevil had moved from Mexico to Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana. Late that year, word was that the weevil had crossed into southern Mississippi and was moving north towards the cotton-fixated Delta. This news of the boll weevil's arrival in the Magnolia State was certainly a disturbing one, and as Cohn suggests, it was information that would affect the price of cotton and much more.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Walter Sillers, Sr., to P.M. Burrill, December 31, 1907, Walter Sillers, Sr. Papers (hereafter Sillers Papers), Delta State University Archives, folder 19A.

<sup>18</sup> Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised*, 41.

The people of the Mississippi Delta knew the boll weevil was coming, and despite the stories of devastated cotton fields in Texas and Louisiana, Delta farmers were unsure of the pest's potential effect on their land. Many predicted utter devastation. As early as 1903, Delta newspapers published horrifying accounts of boll-weevil-plagued Texas. "A Boerne, Texas, correspondent," wrote the Gloster, Mississippi *Herald*, "writes instructively of the Mexican boll weevil...a tough elusive little insect, hiding beneath the boll shuck, secure from poisoning powders, sprays, etc., which prove effective against the boll worm." In Memphis, the *Commercial Appeal* gloomily reported in early 1906 that the boll weevil was advancing quickly through the cotton South, "leaving ruin and disasters in its path." The Greenwood *Commonwealth*, claimed that in Louisiana, "boll weevils increased...and cultivation has stopped." A month later the paper reported, "The boll weevil has spread over the entire state and is destroying practically all of the cotton forming now." Another Delta paper echoed the concern, citing reports from Texas that "weevils are numerous in timbered sections" and in Louisiana, "complaints of the boll weevil are numerous and serious." By late 1908, the papers reported on the advancing boll weevil in nearly every issue; on October 30, 1908, for example, the Greenwood *Commonwealth* published three separate articles concerned with the boll weevil.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Gloster (MS) *Herald*, October 23, 1903, p. 4. "Fund to Fight Boll Weevil," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 6, 1909, 3. "The Cotton Crop is Doing Well," Greenwood *Commonwealth*, August 7, 1908. Greenwood *Commonwealth*, July 9, 1909. Greenwood *Commonwealth*, October 30, 1908.

Despite these dire reports, many editors gave voice to a different outlook: blind optimism. The *Commonwealth* predicted that after the hot summer of 1909, “there is no possibility that there be many weevils left next year.” The Woodville *Republican* assured its readers that harmless cocklebur weevils, not cotton boll weevils, were the pests about to enter the Delta. Other news accounts expressed a strong faith in science to kill the boll weevil before it reached the Delta. Though the Gloster *Herald* admitted “the boll weevil seems a difficult subject and a serious menance [sic.],” the paper predicted the problem pest would “be circumscribed by science before he travels further westward.” The concern about the insect’s advance was enough for the paper, however, to implore Deltans not to import any seed or cotton from the weevil-infested territory.<sup>20</sup>

Though some readers might have been assuaged by these optimistic reports, Delta planters knew better. Instead, they relied on a network of personal connections linking them both to fellow planters and to officials within the state and federal governments for accurate predictions about the weevil’s power and

---

<sup>20</sup> “The Hot Weather Burns Boll Weevils,” Greenwood *Commonwealth*, August 27, 1909. “Supposed Boll Weevils,” Woodville *Republican*, reprinted in Greenwood *Commonwealth*, February 19, 1909. Gloster (MS) *Herald*, October 23, 1903, 4. These expressions of hope that a solution for the boll weevil would be discovered before the pest advanced to the Delta were nothing new. The USDA and state agricultural agencies were never afraid of claiming that there was a solution just ahead. President Theodore Roosevelt had even told Congress during the 1904 State of the Union address that “in Guatemala [the weevil was] being kept in check by an ant, which has been brought to our cotton fields for observation. It is hoped that it may serve a good purpose.” Theodore Roosevelt, Fourth Annual Message to Congress, December 6, 1904. The Gloster *Herald*’s insistence that farmers not import seeds to the Delta from the infested territory echoed a cry going out across the as-yet-infected regions of the South. The Georgia Agricultural Commissioner had in fact enacted a ban against Texas and Louisiana “cotton, cotton seed, hulls, corn, hay or other farm products” in which weevils might hide away, and be mistakenly introduced to his state.

probable route. To that end, Percy Burrill, a young, newly married cotton planter in search of information about the approaching pest turned not to a state farm expert or the USDA for advice, but to a widely respected, older neighbor, fellow planter Walter Sillers. Burrill was just starting out on his own as a small planter, but saw in Sillers the archetype Delta planter who could advise him on a host of issues, none more important than the boll weevil. Sillers was a lawyer and a planter, owning one thousand acres of land in Bolivar County. Burrill's letters to the elder planter reveal that the anxiety created by the pest was not limited to concerns about the cotton, but about the local economy, personal financial issues and familial relations:

Now what is your opinion about the "boll weevil" it has got me rather nervous. Are you going to hold over and what will be the result of it in the Delta? Would the land be valuable for anything else except cotton? If I were single I would say let her go and take chances but now I doubtful [sic.] as if it would be right and it might be better for me to call in some of my loans... and invest elsewhere as a lead anchor to weather the "weevil" storm and I just wish you would let me have your frank views on the subject. I can't see how a pest can wipe out entirely a section of country and render it absolutely worthless forever but of course I can't honorably take too many chances and I want to do what is right. I know of course that it will be a year or two before the weevil hits us and either proves or disapproves the [illegible] frost line theory but I want to take all due precautions that I can especially that I now have a wife on my hands.

Sillers was optimistic about the pest in his replies, assuring his friend on one occasion that "cotton is going up again and everything prosperous here." By 1908, however, still two full years before the insect's arrival in the Delta, Sillers was almost nostalgic for a pre-boll weevil life that had not yet even disappeared. "Cotton farming is a safe and pleasant way of making a living," he wrote to Burrill,

“and if the boll weevil don’t put us out, I will after awhile... devote more time to cotton, birds, ducks, and things.”<sup>21</sup>

While writing each other to stay abreast of the boll weevil’s location and condition, planters were also working to insure to entities outside the Delta that they would survive the pest’s onslaught. Even in flush years, planters were in constant contact with creditors, buyers, and shippers across the country and in Europe. David Cohn remembered that when the first bale of ginned cotton appeared in Greenville each fall, cotton brokers raced to their telegraphs to find out the latest cotton prices from New Orleans and Liverpool. While planters worked their private channels of communication to gather information about the pest, national and international factors also had their eye on the imminent invasion. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported that “banking houses have been advancing many millions of dollars yearly in the section affected by the boll weevil and are said to have become restive as to the future.” Banks feared that merchants and farmers in the boll weevil territory would not be able to repay loans. The banks “want to know if there is any likelihood of increased yields being made in these parts of the country where the weevil has already made its appearance,” the paper reported to Delta readers, “and if precautionary steps will be taken in the section that is almost sure to be visited this year.” The sum of

---

<sup>21</sup> Percy Burrill to Walter Sillers, Sr., no date (probably January, 1909), Sillers Papers, folder 19A. Walter Sillers, Sr., to P.M. Burrill, November 30, 1907, Sillers Papers, folder 19A. Walter Sillers, Sr., to P.M. Burrill, November 3, 1908, Sillers Papers, folder 19A.

this interest from important factors outside Mississippi added to the pressures and fears that many farmers already felt about the encroaching weevil.<sup>22</sup>

As national and international concerns turned their attention to the pest's arrival in the cotton heartland, Delta planters cautiously turned to the government agents who had been studying the advancing bug. The relationship between planters and farm educators had always been a tenuous one, and as the incident in Greenwood elucidates, their differing visions of the ideal Delta plantation would come to a head on the eve of the boll weevil's invasion. The disagreement was marked by a confrontation of ideas, of visions of what the boll weevil would mean for cotton farming in the Delta.

For the state-employed agricultural educators, the coming of the pest meant the opportunity to once and for all convince the cotton-obsessed farmers of the South to diversify their crops. Towards that end, the majority of the MDA's literature published in the pre-weevil era concerned itself not with practical methods for fighting the boll weevil, but with pleas for modernization and diversification. For agents and educators, the boll weevil hammered home the lesson that the mono-crop system was unhealthy for landowners, tenants, business people and the land itself. These educators were not alone in their work. W.W. Finley, president of the Southern Railway Company, committed his railroad to helping the extension service teach farmers to plant different crops. In addition to teaching farmers "the best methods of growing cotton in the weevil

---

<sup>22</sup> Cohn, *The Mississippi Delta and the World*, 65. "Fund to Fight Boll Weevil" *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 6, 1909, p.3.

infected localities,” the railroad worked to “make the farmers of the South better acquainted with the agricultural possibilities of their representative localities, and to encourage diversified agriculture and especially stock raising and fruit and vegetable growing.” Of course, the railroad was not dependent on cotton; it could charge the same for a ton of asparagus as for a ton of cotton just as long as they continued to have something that needed moving across the country.<sup>23</sup>

For planters, however, the boll weevil was not a reason to diversify, but a motivation to make their plantations more efficient in the production of more cotton. If the pest was going to reduce yields, many figured they should plant more cotton to make up for the pest’s losses. Large Delta farmers knew that they could ask of the soil things that planters in the rest of the South could not. The thickness of the topsoil provided what they believed was an infinite reservoir of nutrients that could be moved from the earth into cotton. Planters sought from agents practical advice in seed selection, planting instructions, and insecticides, but refused to hear talk of decreasing the amount of land devoted to cotton. Landowners looked for ways to confront the insect both directly, with new methods of planting and cultivation, and indirectly, with new forms of labor and credit relationships.

At the heart of the tension between planters and agricultural experts was planters’ fear that the boll weevil would ruin their ability to make cotton in the

---

<sup>23</sup> W.W. Finley to John M. Parker, March 27, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 26. For a history of railroads’ involvement in early farmer education, see Roy V. Scott, “American Railroads and Agricultural Extension, 1900-1914: A Study in Railway Developmental Techniques,” *The Business History Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring, 1965): 74-98.

Delta. Without cotton, their economic livelihood as well as their identity would be destroyed, and the economic and social fiefdoms over which they presided would crumble. As a result, on the eve of the pest's entry in to their region, planters and their allies exercised their control of not only the insect, but the economy and society that swirled around cotton. For starters, planters worked to control both the physical growth of the extension service—where the research was done, how it was performed, and who did it—as well as the actual information about the boll weevil that these researchers and educators disseminated. Secondly, planters tried to control the boll weevil threat by controlling labor. By attempting to limit what tenant farmers knew about the insect, landowners hoped to avoid a mass-exodus of labor. Ironically, as planters were using the boll weevil as an excuse to further tighten the screws on workers by limiting what they knew about the pest, they were also using the weevil's arrival as an excuse to examine alternatives to the very labor system over which they obsessed.

Planters cautiously turned to the extension service. Though by the time the pest reached Mississippi federal and state agricultural scientists had been working on the boll weevil problem for nearly fifteen years, the advice they offered still contained major contradictions. Farmers who paid close attention to the reports of state and federal agents might find themselves misinformed. In addition to a rift that had developed between Knapp's local agents and the USDA's top entomologists, both state and federal farm agencies had been unsuccessful in calming farmers' fears of the imminent weevil invasion.



The most common misunderstanding among Mississippi farmers was that the pest's destruction of southern cotton was complete. Many believed that as time passed, the boll weevil marched consistently and uniformly, destroying entire fields of cotton as it moved. The source of this confusion was a series of misleading maps published by the USDA and MDA. These images showed geographically where the boll weevil had progressed over time. (See Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3.) The USDA and MDA originally prepared these maps for bulletins and other publications, but newspapers across the country reproduced them, and millions of readers gained a false impression of the pest as a result. These maps created the image that the boll weevil had completely covered the areas within the boundary of each year, when in fact, the map showed only the farthest extent of the boll weevil's movement at the close of a season. The maps also underplayed the pest's movement *within* an infected territory. However, to an observer in Mississippi in 1908, for example, the map shows the coming of the insect as a massive, linear wave, giving the indication that the only factor in the pest's spread was time. These maps, coupled with the anxious newspaper editorials and glorified reports from the infected areas, created a fear in Mississippi farmers that worked in opposition to the prescriptive advice of agricultural educators.

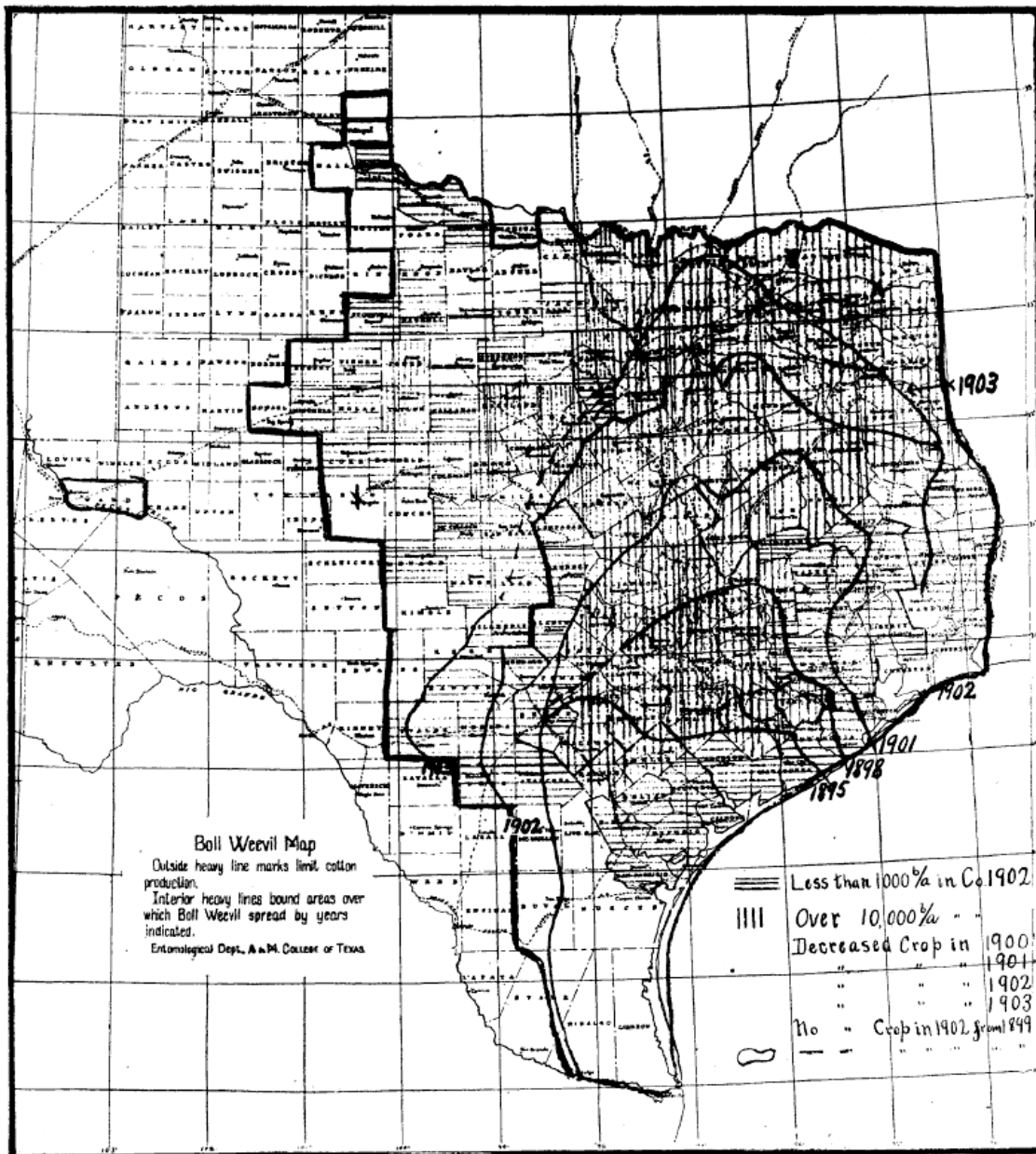


Figure 3.1: Texas Boll Weevil Map, 1903.

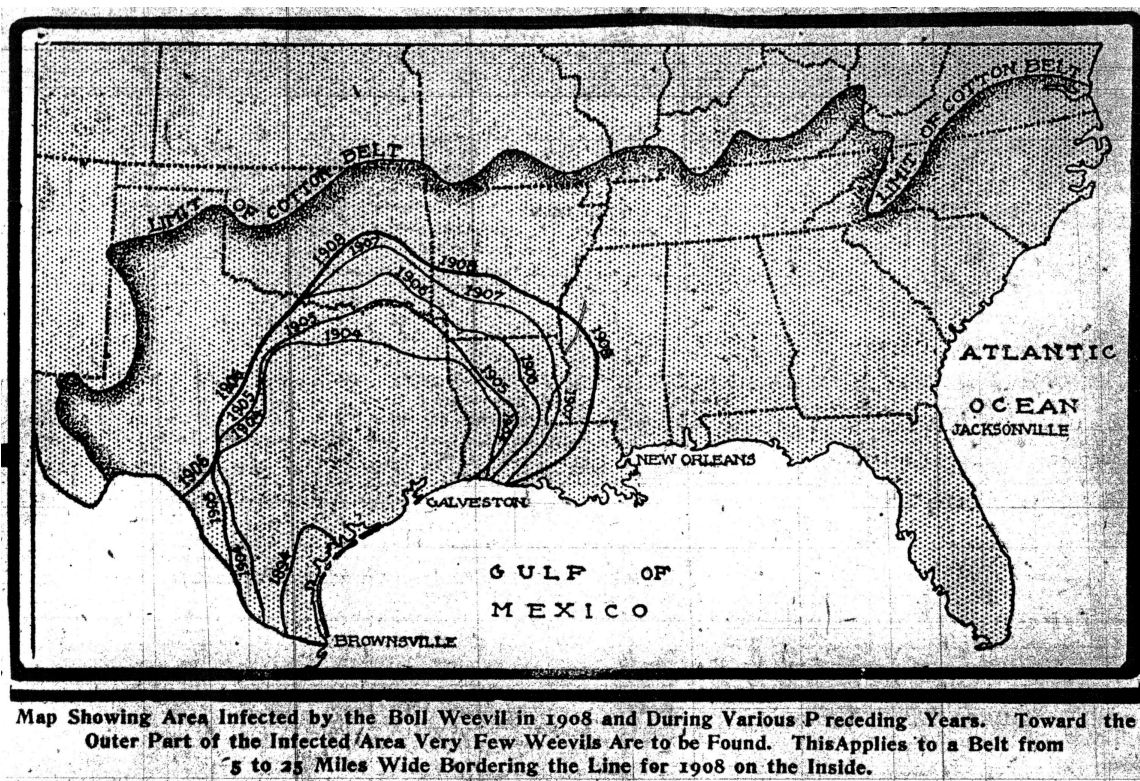


Figure 3.2: Map of Boll Weevil Spread, 1910.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, January 9, 1910, V, p. 13.

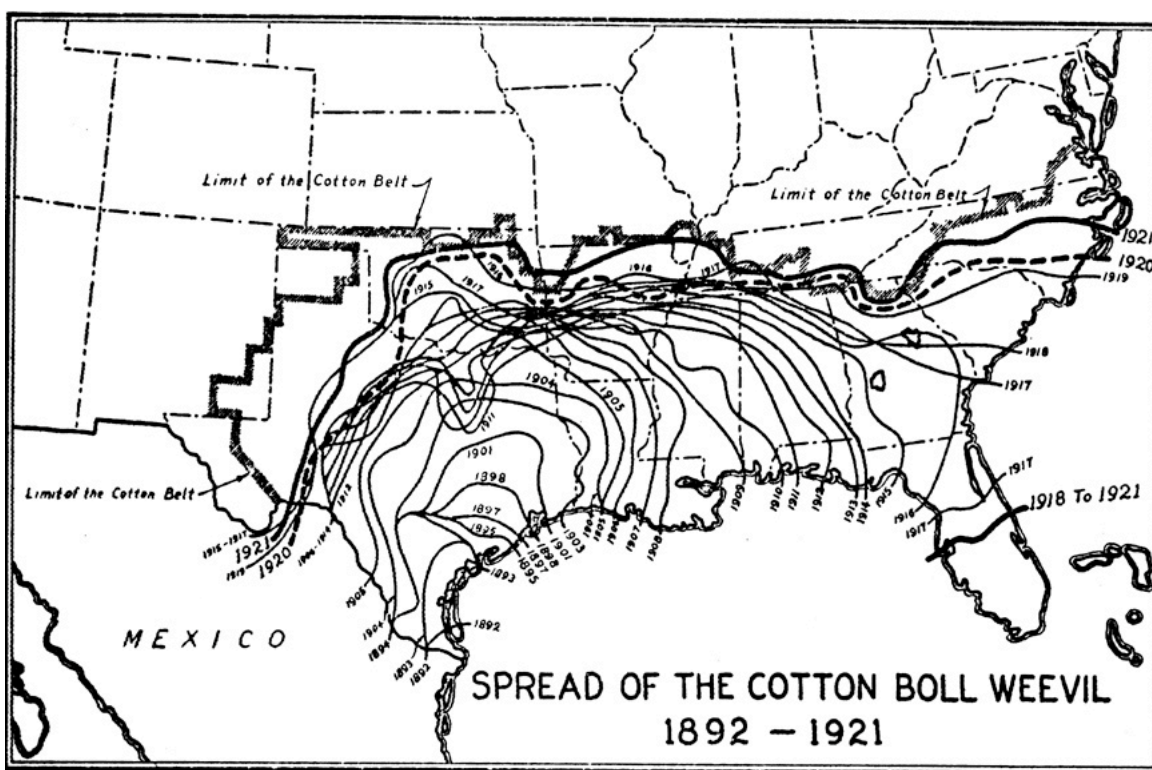


Figure 3.3: Map of Boll Weevil Spread, 1922.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1921* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), 350.

The maps were not the only source of confusion. In the early 1900s the USDA published several conflicting reports about the success of the boll weevil fight in Texas. Though scientists had made bumper crops of cotton on certain demonstration farms in Texas for consecutive years, the USDA was cautious in heralding these successes. In the department's 1906 *Yearbook*, entomologist W.D. Hunter warned that these bumper crops had been the result of weather conditions favorable to the plant and unfavorable to the pest (wet seasons were good for weevils, and the successful crops had been made during dry years). These large yields, Hunter argued "have given the erroneous impression of the prospects" of future demonstration work during wetter years. Downplaying the department's own successes, Hunter referred readers to the map of the pest's spread, suggesting that the wetter, alluvial areas of the Mississippi Delta might be the weevil's promised land. Delta planters who paid close attention to the USDA's work found themselves in the middle of an exchange of conflicting information, which again added to their insecurity and fear.<sup>26</sup>

At the state level, the MDA and the Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service (MAES) published dozens of bulletins that addressed an array of topics prior to the boll weevil invasion, including publication about cotton pests, but ignored the boll weevil specifically until early 1906. The department finally made mention of the pest that year, noting that the bug, along with six other insects, was "liable to be introduced into Mississippi" during that year's season. "It is

---

<sup>26</sup> W.D. Hunter, "Some Recent Studies of the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," United States Department of Agriculture Yearbook of Agriculture for 1906 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), 313.

probable that every one in the State has heard of the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," the bulletin admitted, but noted that few Mississippians could recognize it. The pamphlet included three photographs of weevils in various stages of development and a detailed physical description. The department admitted that the pest "will eventually reach our cotton fields," but encouraged farmers to "do all in our power to retard its coming as long as we can."<sup>27</sup>

In late 1907, when USDA entomologist Walter Hunter found the first weevil in Mississippi six miles south of Vicksburg, the state's battle against the pest changed. The MAES began publishing concise Entomological Press Circulars to broadcast the latest information about the pests' location to both farmers and newspapers. The following year W.L. Hutchinson, director of the state's experiment station in Starkville at Mississippi A&M, authored a bulletin assuring farmers that "the boll weevil does not prevent the growing of good crops of cotton." Despite the slow but steady spread of the pest through the state, Hutchinson was upbeat. He recommended farmers chose a balanced approach to fighting the pest:

success depends essentially on good tillage, proper fertilization, the planting of good seed of a good early variety of cotton as soon as weather conditions are favorable; and, properly cleaning up the farm of hibernating places for the weevils during the winter months.

Hutchinson's plan was basically the same "cultural method" first prescribed by the USDA ten years earlier. Though he could not offer anything new, or specifically geared to Mississippi farmers, the experiment farm director did warn

---

<sup>27</sup> "Insects and Diseases Liable to be Introduced into Mississippi," Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 96, February, 1906.

readers to be prepared. Hutchinson rallied farmers to be ready for the boll weevil, “let him find the farmer ready for him, and his first injuries will neither be so great nor so easy.”<sup>28</sup>

Bulletins sent to farmers or handed to them at meetings were not the only way agricultural educators like Hutchinson were working to prepare Deltans for the coming of the weevil. Mississippi had begun building experiment stations as early as the 1880s, but they languished from underfunding. Experts from Mississippi A&M and Alcorn A&M researched cotton and other crops on these farms, but until 1897 did not receive enough funding to travel the state and teach farmers what they had learned. That year, the state granted five-hundred dollars for agents to travel; in 1900 the state allocated three-thousand dollars to fund local Farmers’ Institutes. By 1906, the MDA and MAES had already established a tradition of localized farmer education through these events. There were over one-hundred institutes held throughout the state in 1906, with a total attendance of nearly twenty-thousand. That year both the Illinois Central and the YMVR worked alongside the state agents to furnish the special educational trains mentioned above.<sup>29</sup>

Though the state had certainly responded to the pest’s invasion with a variety of programs directed to aid its farmers, the people of the Delta were not moved. Despite the coordinated efforts of research and teaching, Delta planters

---

<sup>28</sup> R.W. Harned, “Boll Weevil in Mississippi, 1909,” Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 139, March, 1910. Giles, “Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970,” 191. W.L. Hutchinson, “Cotton Culture in Mississippi (In areas infested with the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil.)” Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 117, December, 1908.

<sup>29</sup> Giles, “Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970,” 188-189.

did not consider themselves adequately prepared for the weevil. For large landowners already used to having a say in the region's political, economic and social life, the coming of the boll weevil introduced yet another factor that they sought to control. There was too much at stake to leave the research to the state's experts on distant research farms. Landowners recognized that the Delta stood apart from the rest of the state—indeed the rest of the South—in a variety of ways, including soil type, dependence on tenancy, and commitment to cotton.

Unwilling to wait for the government to formulate a specific Delta plan, powerful planters took the extension service into their grip. In 1904, Alfred Holt Stone, a prominent, well-connected planter (and active historian), raised fifteen thousand dollars from private sources to purchase land for an experiment station in the Delta. Devoted solely to cotton, the two-hundred acre farm was located in Stoneville, a town located just east of Greenville on Deer Creek named after the planter himself. After securing the land, Stone and his colleagues turned to the legislature, successfully lobbying for funding to staff the research station. The MDA hired Jesse W. Fox, a recent graduate of Mississippi A&M, to direct the new Delta Experiment Station. Fox took over a land in disrepair, and consequently spent his first few years (still prior to the weevil's arrival) improving the farm while still commuting back and forth from Starkville because there was no house on the property. By the time the pest arrived on the Stoneville farm in late 1909, Fox had built the farm into one of the South's leading research sites,



focusing research specifically on plant spacing and developing early-maturing varieties of cotton.<sup>30</sup>

Though the establishment of a research farm nearby placated the long-term research concerns of planters, it did not address the immediate problem of the boll weevil. Unwilling to wait for Professor Fox's experiments to uncover an effective boll weevil strategy, large landholders organized their own tightly controlled system for educating the men of their class. As early as 1908, the Greenwood Business League developed a program of boll weevil education that stood apart from state efforts. In August, the League organized a night of lectures on "all subjects of interest to Delta planters." Fox, along with E.R. Lloyd, also of the Delta Branch Experiment Station in Stoneville, spoke to the planters about the boll weevil and other farm topics and answer planters' questions.<sup>31</sup>

Though the Greenwood *Commonwealth* reported on the lectures, attendance had been strictly invitation only. Far from a public venue, the league had sent announcements only to a small, hand-selected group of planters in and around Greenwood. In October, F.W. Sterling, secretary of the league, sent a list of these planters to the USDA, asking that the department send any and all material relating to the boll weevil to these large landholders. Clearly there was an attempt here to educate, but to rigorously limit access to knowledge about the

---

<sup>30</sup> Giles, "Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970," 191-192. J.W. Fox, "Report of Work at the Delta Station for 1906," Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 106, January, 1907. Greenville *Times*, July 24, 1909. Greenville *Times*, July 17, 1909. See also LeRoy Percy to Bolton Smith, December 31, 1908, in Percy Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi (hereafter Percy Papers), box 4, folder 5. The successes of Fox and his staff, and the their close connection to Delta planters, will be taken up in the next chapter.

<sup>31</sup> "Lectures to Farmers," Greenwood *Commonwealth*, August 14, 1908.

pest. These efforts were more symbolic than practical, however. Any farmer in the state could write to the USDA and request the same information that the league was giving to planters, although the region's elite may have asked certain questions of Fox and Lloyd at the private meeting that they would not have asked in public, especially questions concerning labor management.<sup>32</sup>

Creating the new Delta Experiment Station and holding private meetings with experts still did not satisfy the region's planters. Convinced that the USDA and MDA did not understand their concerns, which planters saw as unique to their location, some of the region's biggest growers embarked on their own course of research. In the fall of 1910, Alfred Stone, the planter integral in the founding of the Delta research station, and his neighbor, planter Julian Fort, made a fifteen-day trip through the infested territories of Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. The men rode from town to town speaking with "planters, managers, and negro tenants, merchants, cotton factors, bankers" and others. The point of the trip, the planters argued, was "for our own guidance in framing a policy for our planting operations when the long threatened boll weevil invasion shall have become a reality." Upon their return, Stone and Fort wrote up their conclusions, and the First National Bank of Greenville offered to fund the paper's publication and distribution. The result was a thirty-three-page report with the authoritative title "The Truth About the Boll Weevil."<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. "Literature on the Boll Weevil" Greenwood *Commonwealth*, October 30, 1908.

<sup>33</sup> Alfred H. Stone and Julian H. Fort, "The Truth About the Boll Weevil" (Greenville, Mississippi: The First National Bank, 1911), 3.

The pamphlet made no attempt to condense current research findings. In fact, the authors' distrust of USDA and MDA publications was implicit in the booklet itself. Stone and Fort opened their report with a blasting critique of the USDA's work to date, citing the "confusing, contradictory and hence frequently misleading character of the discussions." Stone and Fort argued that the extension services overstated the pest's wholesale ability to destroy cotton cultivation once and for all, and that these predictions that the pest will "break up the plantation system....and bring everything to the level of the small farm, with cotton as a surplus crop" are "still no more than predictions." Cotton could be grown profitably in the presence of the boll weevil, the pamphlet argued, if certain preparations were made.<sup>34</sup>

Stone and Fort not surprisingly drew the conclusion that the Delta could be saved from the weevil by its geographic location and the presence of its powerful planter class. The authors argued that the region was environmentally unique; it was unlike any that the pest had yet entered and this gave cause to believe that the Delta might be immune to the pest's destruction. The more important factor, Stone and Fort argued, was that in the places where the boll weevil had done its greatest damage there had been an absence of a powerful planter class. Stone and Fort bemoaned the panic of planters and merchants in other localities. Elites in Texas and Louisiana had assumed the invasion meant "an inevitable and hopeless economic wreck." Panic, they argued, had left even

---

<sup>34</sup> Stone and Fort, "The Truth About the Boll Weevil," 3.

the biggest farmers unwilling to even attempt to make cotton in the presence of the bug. In Louisiana, the authors “saw abandoned property, with idle gins and empty cabins.” These places suffered from the “disadvantage” of having smaller farms and a diminished planter presence in comparison to the Delta. They criticized the failure of local leaders to “allay fright, quiet labor and instill confidence,” or to “stand up and make a fight.” That, Stone and Fort assured their readers, would not be a problem in their Delta.<sup>35</sup>

Only incidentally did the report address practical techniques of fighting the boll weevil. There was no discussion of crop spacing, pesticides or fertilizers. And though Stone and Fort assured their readers that diversification was a plausible solution for other parts of the South, there was “danger” in applying that advice to the Delta. The authors reluctantly encouraged farmers to plant crops other than cotton, but only on “surplus land.” The pamphlet stood in direct opposition to the advice being given concurrently by most farm educators across the South. Instead of advising farmers to plant other cash crops and home supplies (fruits, vegetable, food for animals) as the federal and state agents recommended, Fort and Stone put the emphasis on cotton, and relied on the land and the ingenuity of their class to overcome the insect pest. Planters who would be most successful against the boll weevil, the authors argued seemingly without a sense of irony, would be those who “stuck to the crop with which they

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 7, 9, 21.

were accustomed to grow,” despite the arrival of a creature whose life literally depended on the destruction of that crop.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, Stone and Fort encouraged planters to plant *more* land with cotton and to limit the crop only when laborers could cultivate no more. “We did not talk to a planter who failed to dwell on the fact that his damage was in proportion to his ability to hold and take care of his labor,” they wrote. Don’t panic, the planters are in control, the pamphlet advised, but hold on to your tenants. “We cannot make cotton without labor,” the planters realized, “and we cannot hold our labor if we pursue the suicidal policy of not only becoming frightened ourselves, but of showing our fright to our negroes.” Paying attention to the fear, or in the authors’ words the “bugaboo aspects of the boll weevil problem,” was just as important as the insect itself. “Our conduct” the planters warned other large landowners, “will be reflected in that of our labor.”<sup>37</sup>

Stone and Fort’s “The Truth About the Boll Weevil,” like the Greenwood Business League’s invitation-only meeting of planters in 1908 and the local research performed at the state-owned farm in Stoneville, were markedly different investigations of the boll weevil problem than most. These were *private* spaces of education. Lectures open to the public, like those delivered by the state experts on the Southern’s special agricultural train, were *public* spectacles. In the private meetings and publications, planters and business leaders could control both the subject matter discussed and its audience. Even according to

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 30, 31.

the strict social codes of the Jim Crow Delta, however, planters could not completely bar sharecroppers from the public spaces. Even if, literally, black sharecroppers were not allowed to stand near the lectures and be in the crowd proper, there is nothing to suggest that African Americans did not still hear, either first- of second-hand, the information presented in public arenas.

Planters wanted to shape not only the content of the anti-boll-weevil message but the method of its delivery as well. It was a question then, not only of what educators were saying about boll weevil control, but who would get to hear (or read) the message. M.V. Richards, a representative of the Southern Railway Company, which had sponsored the 1909 educational train, wrote that “planters at some points are making every effort to avoid prominence being given to the [boll weevil] question.” Planters feared “their labor may be kept from the false ideas and impressions which the ignorant easily gather.” The extension educators aboard the train knew of planters’ concerns about migrating labor. Richards recalled that “the speakers suggested that the boll weevil question be kept in the background as much as possible.” Though Richards claimed that during the train tour the speakers made only “scant reference” to the pest and that any mention of the weevil was “calculated to reassure and not unduly alarm,” planters still worried about the effect of boll weevil talk, no matter how practical, on labor.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> John G. Jones of the Illinois Central Railroad wrote to LeRoy Percy in 1908, also fearful of the spread of pessimistic news of the boll weevil by his railroad’s own educational train, the “Boll Weevil Special.” He wrote to Percy that he “cannot concur in the opinion of the government experts that our country is ‘going to the bad’ on account of the Boll weevil [sic.], and am anxious to secure from you and other representative planters in the delta an expression of your

The planters' obsession with labor was not unfounded. Newspapers had covered a remarkable, and from the planters' perspective positive, trend in the three years leading up to the weevil's 1910 entry into the Delta: ahead of the encroaching pest, thousands of cotton workers had moved into the Delta in an effort to escape the weevil's damage. One Greenville paper identified an "EXODUS OF NEGROES" from the boll weevil territory. In southern Mississippi, where the pest was causing significant damage, "the negroes refuse to listen to the appeals of the planters," and as a result "2,000 negroes have moved...into the delta. [sic.]" The Greenwood *Commonwealth* offered its own "Advice to Negro Tenants" already in the Delta: "Stay right where you are." The paper predicted just what planters feared most, that the boll weevil had pushed workers into the region, and it would soon push them out. When the weevil finally arrived in the Delta, the paper predicted, "many no account, trifling niggers...will have to hike it, but the country will better off without them."<sup>39</sup>

The racism embodied in these reports reflected the opinion of most Delta planters, and is echoed in the papers' analysis of what this labor migration would mean to the Delta. Newspapers and landowners alike questioned the capacity of black sharecroppers to understand the reality of the boll weevil threat.

Sharecroppers simply could not be taught, their thinking went, that the pest could

---

sentiments to be embodied in a pamphlet to be distributed on this trip. It is my opinion that we should take as optimistic a view as possible of this matter, at the same time appreciating the necessity of taking such steps as may be necessary to guard against the advent of the boll weevil. As I feel you you [sic.] have given this matter considerable thought, I hope you will kindly favor me with an expression of your views." John G. Jones to LeRoy Percy, December 1, 1908, in Percy Papers, box 4, folder 5.

<sup>39</sup> Greenville *Times*, December 19, 1909. "Advice to Negro Tenants" Greenwood *Commonwealth*, November 6, 1908.

be managed and that cotton could be grown in its presence. “The average negro has never done anything in his life but raise cotton, and under favorable conditions he is good for that, but for nothing else worth mentioning,” wrote the *Greenville Daily Times*, “but he balks at the boll weevil.” “It is something [the sharecropper] cannot understand” the paper explained, “he simply knows that cotton will not mature where the boll weevil exists, and he is running away from him.” Though many planters agreed with this sentiment, most also believed that even in flush times education of rural black Mississippians, even if relegated to the topic of the boll weevil, was dangerous. If black laborers were educated, planters believed, they would bolt.<sup>40</sup>

Though planters were concerned with formal systems of black education, they also must have realized that the Delta’s tenant workforce already knew of the potential dangers of the boll weevil. The fact that labor had flooded into the Delta ahead of the boll weevil swarm was evidence in itself that sharecroppers recognized and understood the pest’s threat. In addition to the stories individuals moving into Mississippi from the infested fields to the west must have told Delta sharecroppers, songs about the weevil were by 1908 common in the repertoires of the area’s blues musicians. Despite planters’ attempts to shut down discussion of the insect, tenants knew that if they stayed ahead of the bug, their chances of making a larger share of the crop were significantly enhanced. As a result, there was constant labor movement ahead of the boll weevil swarm. If the

---

<sup>40</sup> *Greenville (MS) Daily Times*, December 19, 1909, page 4. Giles, “Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970,” 198.



planters' attempts to manage the information that tenants received about the pest had been successful, they would not have had to worry so much about the constant movement. Sharecroppers, however, had been successful gathering and communicating their own information about the pest—that very fact is evidenced by planters' continued obsession with tying the labor force down.

Even while planters continued their campaign of information control, they examined labor alternatives. Louisiana native and politician John Milliken Parker, saw the arrival of the boll weevil to his Mississippi plantation as an opportunity to solve these labor problems. With the boll weevil encroaching on the Delta, Parker sought nothing short of a revolution in the way that southern planters used their labor. "In my personal judgment," Parker wrote in 1909, "the time now is ripe for us to get to work earnestly and actively to do what we can to change the existing order and conditions, and to bring to this country a class of people who shall be both owners and residents." For Parker, the boll weevil offered a chance to "awaken" southern farmers from "their shiftlessness," to make them aware of "the vast possibilities which our soil and our climate offer." The spread of the boll weevil, Parker claimed, would force the southern cotton grower to "practice that rigid economy which is going to be necessary to their welfare and to our prosperity." Parker's call was not one for the education of the rural masses in diversified farming, which might lead to self-sufficiency, but rather to teach small landowners and tenants to produce cotton more efficiently. "Our plans are very clear and very simple," Parker wrote to Senator Thomas P. Gore

of Oklahoma, “with the probable approach of the boll weevil, which seems to continue its march to the East,” it is “necessary now to exploit our vast possibilities, and to impress upon our agricultural people especially the necessity for that wise management and close economy which is essential to the prosperity of any nation.”<sup>41</sup>

To that end, Parker took a leadership role in the fledgling Southern Commercial Congress (SCC), a group of powerful southern planters and industrialists claiming to seek “A Greater Nation Through a Greater South.” By raising one million dollars, the SCC hoped to erect a building in Washington, D.C. where southern interests could be organized and effectively lobby the federal government for legislation favorable to the region. In Parker’s words, “intelligent propaganda will revolutionize the South and make it one of the most prosperous and busy sections of this great country.” The group’s rhetoric embodied the paternalistic impulse to uplift rural people, with an eye towards the eventual economic advantage of planters’ own class. Small landowners and tenants were indeed “shiftless,” Parker and his compatriots argued, but with proper rural education they could be made more productive players in the international cotton market, all the while bringing them into a world that planters could more closely control.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> John M. Parker to Charles Scott , April 23, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 3, folder 30. John M. Parker to W.W. Finley, March 24, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 26. John M. Parker to Hon. T.P. Gore, March 24, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 26.

<sup>42</sup>G. Grosvenor Dawe to John M. Parker, March 24, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 26. John M. Parker to G.W. Simmons, March 25, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 26.

The boll weevil threat made this the perfect time to foster a revolution in the rural southern labor supply. If rural workers did not respond to education, Parker and his colleagues believed, southern cotton workers could be swapped for new ones. If the uplift of the masses failed, the SCC proposed the importation of a labor force that would better listen to and follow their advice, a crucial component of the plantation system when the boll weevil made farming itself more complicated. If “our own people,” Parker wrote, could not be taught to employ “their own resources and [to handle] them with energy and economy,” then the South should turn to immigrants from both inside and outside the US.<sup>43</sup>

Thus in 1909, as fear of an impending boll weevil onslaught intensified, Parker hatched a scheme for replacing the largely black Delta labor force with new more “desirable,” “white” immigrants. Parker, along with Percy and Charles Scott, another powerful Delta planter, first invited the railroads to cooperate in their attempt to court a new labor supply. The Illinois Central began distributing free passes to farmers in the Midwest to travel to the Delta, hoping that the visitors would stay and work as sharecroppers. Parker and his neighbors also sought to take advantage of the massive influx of European immigrants moving into northeastern cities. Delta leaders were picky, however, seeking to attract to the South cotton laborers only from “those foreign countries whose immigrants we desire.” “The greatest possible menace to the South” was not the boll weevil,

---

<sup>43</sup> John M. Parker to G.W. Simmons, March 25, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 2, folder 26.

but “the danger of having dumped on our fertile soil many of that class of low grade immigrants from the old world, which can never be tolerated in America.”<sup>44</sup>

Labor importation schemes had a long history in the Delta. Percy and Scott had actually gone to Europe and encouraged Italian farmers to move to the Delta in the 1890s and again in 1907. When the Italians arrived, most complained that credit was too expensive and the work was unrewarding. Planters too began complaining about the Italian workers as much as they had about the black workforce. Sillers whined that “[Charles] Scott brought these damned Dagoes here” and that Sillers might just sell his plantation “to the ‘Dagos’ and go to Italy” himself. In addition to discrimination, Italians faced the same constricting system of credit and debt that all Delta tenants confronted (a system that in itself did not change simply because the demographics of the workforce were different). As if tenancy and racism were not enough, white Mississippians relied on violence to keep “uncontrollable” Italian laborers inside planters’ tightly prescribed social behavior boundaries. Italians, nor immigrants from any other country, would replace the black labor force of the Delta, whether the boll weevil destroyed cotton production in the region or not. Planters’ real hope for these labor schemes was that they would produce a supply of workers that would, from their view, be docile workaholics. As John Barry explained, if the importation of Italian labor proved successful “then the Delta would hum like

---

<sup>44</sup> John M. Parker to General Rufus N. Rhodes , May 11, 1909, Parker Papers, Box 3, folder 31.

the vast factory [Percy] envisaged, and the labor problem would disappear. So would the Negro problem.”<sup>45</sup>

With the appearance of the boll weevil however, some planters believed the labor problem might solve itself. Writing in 1908, LeRoy Percy argued that nothing should be done to limit the fear of the boll weevil among planters. “Nothing is to be gained by minimizing the damage which will in all probability be done by the weevil in the Delta.” Planters had failed to prepare for the pest and the surplus of farmers working on credit, combined with a labor shortage would destroy their way of life. Percy saw the boll weevil’s disruption as offering a window for modernization.<sup>46</sup>

Percy’s pessimism about the current system stemmed from his belief that under most sharecropping arrangements, workers had too much independence from white instruction. In Percy’s view, the boll weevil would decimate Delta cotton as a result of what amounted to flawed credit arrangements. “Without question the weevil will bring with him disaster and pecuniary loss, due to the unprepared condition of the Delta,” Percy wrote. “It is not prepared now for the weevil, and will not be when it reaches here...principally due to the fact that the present economic conditions in the Delta are fundamentally wrong.” “Credit has

---

<sup>45</sup> Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 109-110. Barry, *Rising Tide*, 110-112. Walter Sillers, Sr., to P.M. Burrill, November 3, 1908, Sillers Papers, folder 19A. Walter Sillers, Sr., to P.M. Burrill, December 14, 1913, Sillers Papers, folder 19A. Whites lynched groups of Italians in New Orleans and nearby Hahnville, Louisiana in 1891 and 1892, and in the Delta towns of Tallulah, Louisiana and Greenville, Mississippi in 1899 and 1901 respectively. See also Lewis Baker, *The Percys of Mississippi: Politics and Literature in the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1983), 29-31.

<sup>46</sup> LeRoy Percy to John G. Jones, December 3, 1908, in Percy Papers, box 4, folder 5.

been the curse of this section," he wrote, mainly because of its effect on black labor:

It has permitted and attempted to engage in large planting operations men without any experience, ability and pecuniary resources. More than all other causes combined, easy credit has brought about the demoralization and deterioration in the negro labor of the country. Under the careless cultivation and demoralized labor conditions flowing from the easy credit system, the Delta today, with the richest land in the world, is not producing as much cotton per acre as the poor lands of Georgia, and no more than the boll weevil stricken lands of Texas.

Controlling the labor supply was always a concern for landowning Deltans, but with the approach of the boll weevil it became a more pressing concern than at any point since Reconstruction.<sup>47</sup>

The problem in 1909, even as Parker and other planters were making incredible arrangements with foreign laborers, was the boll weevil. Most landowners turned their attention away from importing labor to maintaining the workforce that was already there. Indeed, the boll weevil fundamentally disrupted the labor supply throughout the South and planters knew that controlling the labor force meant controlling what workers heard about the boll weevil. Despite Percy's prediction, when the boll weevil finally did arrive in the Delta in late 1909, cotton production did not come to a sudden halt and the thousands of tenant farmers in the Delta did not pack up and leave.

Like most economic and social relationships in the South during the Jim Crow Era, tenant-labor relationships were in a large part about race. As noted earlier, almost nine out of ten rural Deltans were tenant farmers and 95 percent

---

<sup>47</sup> LeRoy Percy to John G. Jones, December 3, 1908, in Percy Papers, box 4, folder 5.

of those tenants were African American. Landless laborers were expected to behave in ways prescribed by these numbers, by the imagined racial superiority of the white Deltans in control of the region, and by the very real command of the large landowners over the work and social lives of tenant farmers. Planters expected tenants to behave as they wished, and labored under the delusion that tenants almost always complied with their wishes. Cohn wrote that “The Negro, for his part, must work out his destiny within a framework created and ordained for him by the white man. He must be all things to all people, an actor who never steps out of character.” In reality, however, tenant farmers rarely read from the script written by white elites, and perhaps paradoxically, the threat of the boll weevil’s damage created moments of real economic and social opportunity for tenant farmers at the bottom of the region’s economic structure. This insect threat to cotton challenged both landowner and white racial supremacy.<sup>48</sup>

The relationship between white social domination and landholder economic power was one of mutual support and reinforcement. Extension agents were no direct help to tenants. The literature of the rural education movement downplayed the importance of tenant labor to agriculture in general, and condescended to tenants themselves. In fact, extension agents saw tenants not as potential students, but as potential problems. Planters agreed. Despite the claims by men like Parker that the “most representative white citizens are doing all they can to assist in making better agriculturalists of our colored

---

<sup>48</sup> Boeger and Goldenweiser, “A Study of the Tenant Systems of Farming in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta,” 3.

population,” landowners rarely did anything to aid in the education of their labor. Planters knew that it was only in their interest to have tenants become better farmers if it meant better cotton farmers. Many planters, along with extension agents, however, felt black tenants were simply incapable of learning the most modern cotton farming techniques. The MAES went so far as to proclaim that though new machines had been invented to spread poisons and fertilizer, they became “unreliable when placed in the hands of ignorant and careless workmen.” This sentiment echoed throughout the literature of agricultural education, and it fed landowners’ own feelings about the shiftlessness and inability of workers.<sup>49</sup>

As the Italian importation scheme suggests, LeRoy Percy certainly had his own set of issues with labor, but as the boll weevil began its destruction of Delta cotton, the lawyer-planter seemed to have learned a lesson. One episode in particular, explained in an extended correspondence between Percy and a client, provides a telling story of “middle ground” for tenants. Within a racist and economically oppressive situation, this particular incident explicates how the boll weevil offered hope and chance for some sharecroppers.

In October, 1908, Percy found himself paying attention, as he did in the fall of most seasons, to emigrating tenants. Of particular concern was L.A. Saunders, a white renter who had skipped town for Arkansas. Saunders was not the typical emigrant, however. He had rented an entire plantation from Johanna

---

<sup>49</sup> John M. Parker to Dr. A.D. Melvin, July 11, 1913 in Parker Papers, Box 4, folder 45. “Cotton Worm,” Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 3, May 20, 1888.



Reiser, a widowed client of Percy who lived in New York City. Late in the 1908 season, Saunders ran off and Reiser wrote Percy asking for his help. Percy told the widow that it would be easy to sue Saunders for the rent due, but that it would be much harder to actually collect. No one was quite sure where Saunders had gone. The still bigger problem for Reiser, Percy explained, was “endeavoring to secure a tenant in his stead.”<sup>50</sup>

Reiser was in trouble. Percy assured the widow that finding a tenant to rent the land at this late stage in the season would be impossible and that her prospects for renting or even selling the land the following year were slim. “The outlook is intensely depressing,” Percy wrote, “there is great alarm felt about the approach of the boll weevil, so great that it is practically impossible to make a sale or lease of property in this section. It is estimated that the weevil will be here and do considerable damage probably next year, and great damage after that.” The boll weevil was disrupting the demand for, and prices of, land. Percy wrote the owner of the plantation neighboring Reiser’s, asking if he might rent the land, but was rejected. This nearby planter also believed that farming more land during the weevil’s invasion was no advantage.<sup>51</sup>

Out on Reiser’s plantation, the sharecroppers that had contracted with Saunders realized they were in trouble too, and tried to engineer a way to take advantage of the situation within the limited realms of power open to landless

---

<sup>50</sup> LeRoy Percy to Johanna Reiser, October 19, 1908, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 2. William Harris’s excellent and important *Deep Souths* details some of this exchange of letters. The author researched the Percy Papers prior to reading Harris’s account.

<sup>51</sup> LeRoy Percy to Johanna Reiser, October 19, 1908, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 2.

black Mississippians. They, like Reiser, had no recourse against Saunders, and were unsure of their future. They did know, however, that Percy was representing Reiser, and so a couple of the tenants rode into Greenville and knocked on the door of Percy's office. They informed the lawyer that they were under no compulsion to stay on Reiser's land, and that if there was no one to furnish seed and supplies to them for the following season, that they would leave that fall for a different arrangement somewhere else. Tenants were almost never in the position to make demands or threats of landowners (or their powerful representatives) and this was no exception, but these tenants were at the very least expressing a simple fact: they would take their labor elsewhere if the situation was not soon resolved.<sup>52</sup>

In New York, Reiser, after receiving Percy's dire appraisal of the situation, asked her lawyer to take over the land himself, as a favor to her. "You ask that I take hold of the property as if it were my own," Percy responded, "this, of course, would involve a very considerable outlay, with the result doubtful." If the land was his, he assured her, he would have already hired a manager, and secured and furnished labor, but that this expenditure was risky with the boll weevil's arrival. Percy had his own land to worry about and doubted that anyone else would take over his client's farm. "The apprehension regarding the boll-weevil [sic.] is so great that no one will undertake to handle the property," he wrote. But perhaps in light of his recent visitors there was one solution.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> LeRoy Percy to Johanna Reiser, December 31, 1908, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 2.

Percy suggested taking advantage of the one group in the Delta who would jump at the opportunity to rent her land: the sharecroppers already living there. "There are some negroes upon the place that have been apparently good tenants, and hate to leave," Percy wrote Reiser, "and I am satisfied that a lease of the land can be made to some of them." Percy suggested renting the land "at almost any price to any any [sic.] negroes who are able to secure advances." If these tenants could find financial backing from a merchant for seed and supplies, any rent that they could pay Reiser at the end of the season would be profit, certainly more money than what they would most likely get from the delinquent Saunders.<sup>54</sup>

The problem with this plan, however, gets to the heart of the South's credit dilemma brought by the boll weevil. Just as no person with sufficient capital would rent the land because of the pest, merchants were extremely cautious about advancing credit to farmers attempting to make a crop in the presence of the bug. If the farm lay fallow for the year, however, the land would suffer even greater damage, making it still more difficult the following season to find a renter.

Percy suggested a way around this conundrum. "If you were in a position to advance these negroes in cash, through the Bank here, as much as fifty cents per acre per month," he wrote, "I expect that all of them who have not left the place could be kept on it." Passing the financial risk for the crop onto Reiser, Percy was attempting to limit the influence of the Greenville community's fear of

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

renting directly to black farmers and of its reticence to extend credit in the face of the advancing insect. Percy admitted to Reiser that “it is a dangerous thing, situated as you are, to make these advances, but the alternative, provided you have the money with which to make it, is worse.” If she let the land lay fallow for the year, the natural depreciation of the fields, Percy argued, would mean a drastic depreciation in the land’s value. He wrote that he could “do nothing for the negroes, and there is no doubt about the fact that it would be rather a risk for anybody to advance them.” He admitted finally that, in all likelihood, “little or none of [the land] will be cultivated” in 1909.<sup>55</sup>

A gap in this exchange of letters between January and November, 1909, leaves the fate of the land during that season unknown, but it offers a point at which it may be instructive to analyze why this exchange is so revealing. Percy, one of the South’s most powerful men, a personal friend of Theodore Roosevelt, was dealing with an absentee landlord based hundreds of miles from her Mississippi plantation, and he was trying to convince her to use her own personal wealth as a kind of credit buffer against the fear of the boll weevil. This case is by no means typical, but the length that everyone involved had to go to even attempt a labor-landowner contract that broke from the norm, to rent the land directly to the black sharecroppers already living on Reiser’s plantation, underscores both the power of people’s fear of the boll weevil and the basic unwillingness of creditors and landowners to give tenants the opportunity to gain

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. LeRoy Percy to Sophie Reiser, January 26, 1909, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 3.

economic freedom. It seems from the extant exchange of letters that prior to the 1909 season these extraordinary forces were overcome, but Percy and Reiser had not finally settled their problems with labor, the boll weevil, and the land once and for all.

Letters from November, 1909 and after suggest not only that Reiser was successful in renting her land directly to the laborers the previous season, but that the sharecroppers-turned-renters grew a bumper crop. That fall Reiser made a trip to Greenville to check on her plantation and oversee some general improvements to the property. While there, Percy sent her "some blank rental contracts and rent notes," along with an instruction that she fill out the contracts with the tenants and distribute the documents among them. After making the arrangements, Reiser returned north, and the tenants were left to farm the land in the 1910 season as they could. Percy makes no mention in this exchange of ever going to see the tenants or instructing them in any way. In fact, when he reported to Reiser in June, 1910, he seemed surprised to admit that, "the crops are in very good shape." He based this conclusion on the account of one of the tenants, "the old negro who is sort of the head of affairs," who had stopped into Percy's office to let him know the condition of the cotton. The tenant, who Percy described only as the man wearing a "long plat of hair across his forehead," assured the lawyer that all but seventy acres of the plantation were planted in

cotton and that its condition was excellent. "The old negro seemed to be sincerely pleased with himself," Percy wrote.<sup>56</sup>

Though no records exist showing how much money each tenant cleared at the end of the season, it is apparent that all but one made enough to pay Reiser the rent she was due. Percy's firm wrote to Will Howe, a renter on Reiser's farm, in November that he was "the only renter on Mrs. Reiser's place who has not paid up and I do not intend to let you off with any of the rent. If the rest can pay you certainly can." The evidence that sharecroppers had a second successful year now in the presence of the boll weevil says a couple things about the opportunity and risk that arrived with the pest. First, the tenants had raised two successful crops, the second despite the struggles on neighboring plantations with the weevil. Secondly, despite this success, the tenants' material conditions had not improved. It is also important to note here that, despite the reduced price and the two years of profit by most of the renters on Reiser's property, the tenants were still in no position to purchase the land. The incremental advances up the farm labor ladder that the renters made still offered no security. Only landownership could provide that safety net, and the men and women on Reiser's land had little hope of raising enough capital or acquiring the necessary loan to purchase the land they had saved.<sup>57</sup>

From the tenants' perspective, the boll weevil had presented a rare opportunity. The freedom to farm without white landowner direction meant

---

<sup>56</sup> LeRoy Percy to Johanna Reiser, November 24, 1909, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 4.  
LeRoy Percy to Johanna Reiser, June 1, 1910, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 5.

<sup>57</sup> William Percy to Will Howe, November 7, 1910, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 6.

environmental, economic, and social freedom rolled into one. It meant independence, or at least a kind of localized independence. This chance at moving up the agricultural labor ladder from sharecropper to renter would last, the correspondence suggests, for at least one more year.

Despite the success of the renters, Reiser still looked to sell the land during the 1910 season. At this point, LeRoy Percy was joined in his practice by his son William Alexander Percy, who wrote to Reiser that there was little hope of selling her property that fall. "The boll weevil is expected in small quantities this years in Washington county [sic.]," the younger Percy wrote in 1910. "All of the planters," he claimed, were "very blue" and "disconsolate." Land prices in the Delta had plummeted as the pest crept into the region. LeRoy himself had turned down the purchase of a large plantation that his firm had managed "because of the approaching boll weevil." The plantation eventually sold, William Percy told Reiser, at a "ridiculous low price." Unable to sell her land, Reiser returned to the business of absentee landlord.<sup>58</sup>

In fact, in 1911, despite the black renters' two years of success, the Percys still recommended that Reiser find "a responsible white tenant" to take over management of the plantation for 1911. "You have every right to be pleased with your experiment this year," William wrote, "but I am free to confess that I never expected you to collect one-half cent rent due." Despite the African Americans' achievements, if she continued to rent to the black tenants, they

---

<sup>58</sup> William A. Percy to Johanna Reiser, July 15, 1910, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 5.

would undoubtedly still need a white person to advise them, to manage the land, and to oversee their efforts. "As long as negro tenants occupy the place, without making repeated trips to the plantation itself, which we cannot do," the younger Percy warned, "it is quite impossible for us to adequately protect your interest." Reiser was not convinced. She realized that her advisors' suggestion came with both cost and risk. A white renter would demand more of Reiser as a landlord than a black tenant. Even if she could find a white renter, which she doubted, "he would require repairs which I do not care to make and the result would be, I would lose my present colored tenants, and the white man would never turn up." The delinquent Saunders, it seems, had indirectly taught her a lesson. "About my experience of a white man honestly?" she explained, "well no colored man could or would have cheated a widow worse than I have been taken advantage of." Reiser appreciated that the sharecroppers-turned-renters had stayed with her land and made a successful crop; she declared "I will again rent to colored tenants."<sup>59</sup>

The tenants themselves had circumscribed the Percys in their own communication, writing instead directly to Reiser and making arrangements for the upcoming season. "They all write they will be glad to stay at the same rate [of] \$5.00 per acre," Reiser wrote Percy, "each tenant is his own boss on his own land for which they pay rent. You please tell them so also." Reiser stood by the men and women living on her plantation. The abandonment of the land by the

---

<sup>59</sup> William Percy to Johanna Reiser, November 10, 1910, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 6. Johanna Reiser to William Percy, October 14, 1910, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 5.



white renter along with the fear generated by the boll weevil had, for a brief moment, overcome the economic and cultural power of the tenant system.<sup>60</sup>

As the Percys continued to try to find possible buyers for the Reiser place, the land was filled with black renters, anxious to work for a landlord that would never visit and give them no unwanted advice. By January 1911, the tone of the Percys' letters to Reiser began to change, suggesting that they were learning something from this experiment in plantation management. The younger Percy reported to Reiser that "your place is now all rented, and as far as looks go the tenants seem capable and well to do." The correspondence trails off in the spring of 1911 and there is no record of the fate of Reiser's renters that year. It is clear, however, from the exchange that the boll weevil had a great influence, if only for a moment, on the financial prospects and social freedom of a group of black Delta tenants. Though admittedly rare, this example offers a glimpse of the power of the boll weevil threat to the Delta at large and to planters in particular. Though generally the arrival of the boll weevil meant landowners tightened their control over labor, in cases such as this, their fear of putting in a cotton crop opened up space for tenants to seize increased control over their work lives.<sup>61</sup>

The result for people like the Percys was a degree of surprise. Though planters had been obsessed with the labor force in the Delta, constantly deriding their poorer neighbors while simultaneously feeling that they were themselves proper paternalists helping out this "shiftless" workforce, the success of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Johanna Reiser to William Percy, October 14, 1910, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 5.

<sup>61</sup> William Percy to Johanna Reiser, December 31, 1910, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 7.

renters on Reiser's farm opened their eyes to alternative notions. As the tenants planted the crop in March 1911, the younger Percy wrote to Reiser admitting that the boll weevil and this group of black tenants had taught him something. "The experience has been an excellent one in human nature," he wrote, "and has given me considerable insight into the methods and characters of the darkies."<sup>62</sup>

On the surface, Percy's admission that he learned something about rural African Americans during this experiment is loaded with the racism, paternalism and condescension that was at the root of white-black relationships in the Delta. Though he admits to have gained "considerable insight," the language suggests that his feelings about black farmers' capabilities would not be overcome by simply being personally involved with them, no matter the outcome. This experiment was the exception that proves the rule, Percy seems to have been suggesting; in general, black Mississippians were incapable of learning to fight the boll weevil without white supervision. But on a deeper level, it is important to recognize just what Percy is admitting to. The demeaning language aside, the boll weevil had indirectly taught a lesson about the capabilities of the black tenants to one of the South's most powerful families, and it was a lesson that the Percys at least admitted to have learned. It remained to be seen, of course, just how lasting this lesson would be.

The Delta's planter class was not the only group weighing in on the issue of educating rural African Americans about the boll weevil. In 1911, under a

---

<sup>62</sup> William Percy to Johanna Reiser, March 14, 1911, in Percy Papers, box 21, folder 7.

headline blaring “Negroes Can Do It,” the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* made a plea for rural black agricultural education. Despite the claims that “scientific farming cannot be done with negroes,” the paper claimed that “a negro usually does what he is told to do.” It would be easy, the paper argued, to teach the latest methods of fighting the boll weevil to black tenants in the Delta. The paper’s call to make a formal, permanent connection between rural extension efforts and tenants, those men and women who actually performed most of the hands-on farming in the Delta, fell on deaf ears. This failure of planters, who had clearly demonstrated their power over state and federal farm entities in the Delta, to allow educators to work directly with black tenants to learn about better ways of farming had not arisen out of planter disinterest. To the contrary, planters worked very hard to make sure that tenants in the Delta knew very little about the boll weevil as it approached and learned nothing about how to combat it on their own.<sup>63</sup>

The boll weevil had disturbed Delta society even before it reached the alluvial region merely by its profound threat. During these years, planters, tenants, and scientists jockeyed for power as the pest approached. The boll weevil was a force these groups tried to direct in their own way, and it was never a foregone conclusion which of these groups would do the reckoning. State and federal agents tried to dovetail their recommendations for the unique environmental, social and economic conditions of the Delta. From demonstration

---

<sup>63</sup> “Farmers Will Employ Boll Weevil Experts,” Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, July 27, 1911, p.4.

farms, lecture halls and train stations, these educators preached diversification—less reliance on king cotton—for some audiences and taught industrialized cotton production to others. In so doing, they tried to avoid stepping on the toes of those that wielded power in the Delta, the planters and merchants. These elite men and women were also working to grapple with the changes the boll weevil would bring. Concerned first and foremost with securing their labor force, planters tried with some success to control the movement of the extension agents, of information about the weevil, and of the pest itself. The boll weevil exacerbated planters' misconceptions of labor already held. In controlling these things, planters believed, they could control their labor and insure the future of Delta cotton.

For tenants, the boll weevil had already proven its power. It was the pest that had pushed many Delta sharecroppers off cotton fields in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Arkansas—many knew first-hand the destruction the tiny bug could cause. In the Delta they found a community of black labor like nowhere else, and as the boll weevil approached and destroyed its first cotton bolls there, labor continued to move around within the region. But from 1908 to 1912, during the weevil's initial foray into northwest Mississippi, there was no mass exodus of labor from the Delta. We cannot conclude, however, that this meant a victory for the planter class. By 1913, the boll weevil had been present in the southern Delta for three years, but still had not yet reached the Tennessee border to the

north. It was the decade that followed this initial foray through the region that would decide the fate of planters and laborers.

## CHAPTER 4

### DELTA SOLUTIONS BIG AND SMALL

The four Englishmen had not dressed for the Delta weather. Standing at the bottom of a specially-dug pit on the east bank of the Mississippi River in the spring of 1911, they were ostensibly on an outing to hunt geese. They stood sweating under the mean Mississippi sun. They had taken off their jackets and unbuttoned their shirts. One local woman who observed the scene said later, “you could see their wool underwear. And they were just dying of heat and they looked like four bums.” These “bums” comprised the board of directors of one of the largest mill conglomerates in the world, the Fine Cotton Spinners and Doublers’ Association of Manchester. They had come to the Delta in search of cotton land, to ensure their supply of the staple to their European mills. Their trip to the Delta corresponded with the arrival of another visitor, the cotton boll weevil.<sup>1</sup>

Following their trip to Mississippi, the four Englishmen bought the land on which they had sweated and hunted. After a series of end-runs around state law, they formed what was at one time the single largest cotton plantation on Earth.

---

<sup>1</sup> Getze, Francis, oral history transcript, Delta and Pine Land Company Records, Special Collections, Mississippi State University (hereafter DPLC Papers), Series XVI: Oral History, folder 17. Hobson, “Delta & Pine Land Co.,” January 22, 1937, in DPLC Papers, Series IX: “The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company,” box 27, 7.

The Delta and Pine Land Company (DPLC), as it would eventually be known, farmed cotton on a massive scale and employed dozens of the South's top farm scientists, hundreds of white managers, and thousands of black field workers. Its presence in the Delta was impossible to miss in the early twentieth century and its legacy is hard to ignore. It remains to this day one of the South's biggest and most influential agribusinesses. DPLC's fight against the boll weevil has everything to do with this unmistakable historical legacy and its status today. In 1911, the Delta saw the formation, almost simultaneously, of the world's largest cotton farm and the arrival of its greatest insect enemy.

The Fine Spinners were not ignorant of the coming of the boll weevil or of the local predictions that it would end cotton production in the Delta, but these forecasts did not sway the company. With its sheer size and vast capital resources, the Spinners believed they could buy up a huge tract of cheap land—fear of the encroaching weevil had depressed land prices—and guarantee themselves a never ending supply of long-staple Mississippi cotton. They envisioned a Mississippi colony, an industrial farm producing cotton on a massive, automated scale. The boll weevil trampled this dream. But the pest also encouraged the creation of an alternative vision for DPLC, a farm that made its money both in cotton sales and in selling its own weevil-beating resources. After luring the region's top scientists away from the public sector and spending millions of dollars on research, the company developed weevil-resistant strands

of cotton and new methods of insecticide application. It would make its name in southern agriculture by not only making enormous crops of cotton but by literally selling its ability to resist the boll weevil.

Despite the modern industrialized farm's ability to fight the insect pest on a scale and with weapons unlike any other in the South, their operation still relied on the tenant system to carry out the work of cotton growing. Sharecroppers at DPLC found themselves part of a corporate order lacking most of the traditional trappings of post-bellum plantation paternalism. DPLC managers controlled every aspect of laborers' work lives and attempted to control even their social and personal spaces as well. Croppers lost the independence they had relished on other farms and assumed a new kind of corporate control over their lives. From the tenants' perspective, everything from the increased regimentation of their day-to-day work lives to periodic exposures to experimental chemical insecticides, made them a kind of old world relic amidst a futuristic agribusiness.

Within this radical and contradictory sharecropper experience, black Mississippians sought their own modern solutions to life in the cotton fields. Thousands simply moved on from Mississippi, as so many had from the weevil-infested fields of Texas and Louisiana. But this time many left the rural South altogether for the promise of the industrialized North. Others expressed their discontent by making and consuming their own boll weevil stories. As DPLC built its modern operation, the first recordings of black Mississippians singing songs



about the boll weevil made their way into the jukeboxes and dance halls of the nation. And though the power of this cultural expression is limited, the legacy of this sound has proven quite durable. More Americans today know Howlin' Wolf than know the Delta and Pine Land Company.

As the front edge of the boll weevil wave slowly moved through the Delta, planters and sharecroppers alike paid close attention to its exact location. The pest could travel quickly through areas where cotton was sparse, but slowed where the plant was most dense. Though the weevil had raced from the southern edge of the Mississippi-Louisiana border north to Vicksburg, it slowed precipitously when it reached the cotton-rich Delta. It had made Vicksburg at the end of 1908, but only crept north the following season. As the accompanying MAES map shows, the pest spread quickly north along the river, but slouched through the most densely planted inland counties. (See Figure 4.1)

In March, 1909, planter Walter Sillers thought he knew exactly what the boll weevil would mean for the Delta, despite the fact that the pest had not yet made its way onto his land. In a letter to a friend, Sillers concluded that “the boll weevil devil, like all other devils, dont [sic.] seem to be as black as he is painted.” His conclusion was premature. As the insect made its presence known, Sillers’s rosy predictions grew dark. Two farm scientists, writing in 1913, concurred:

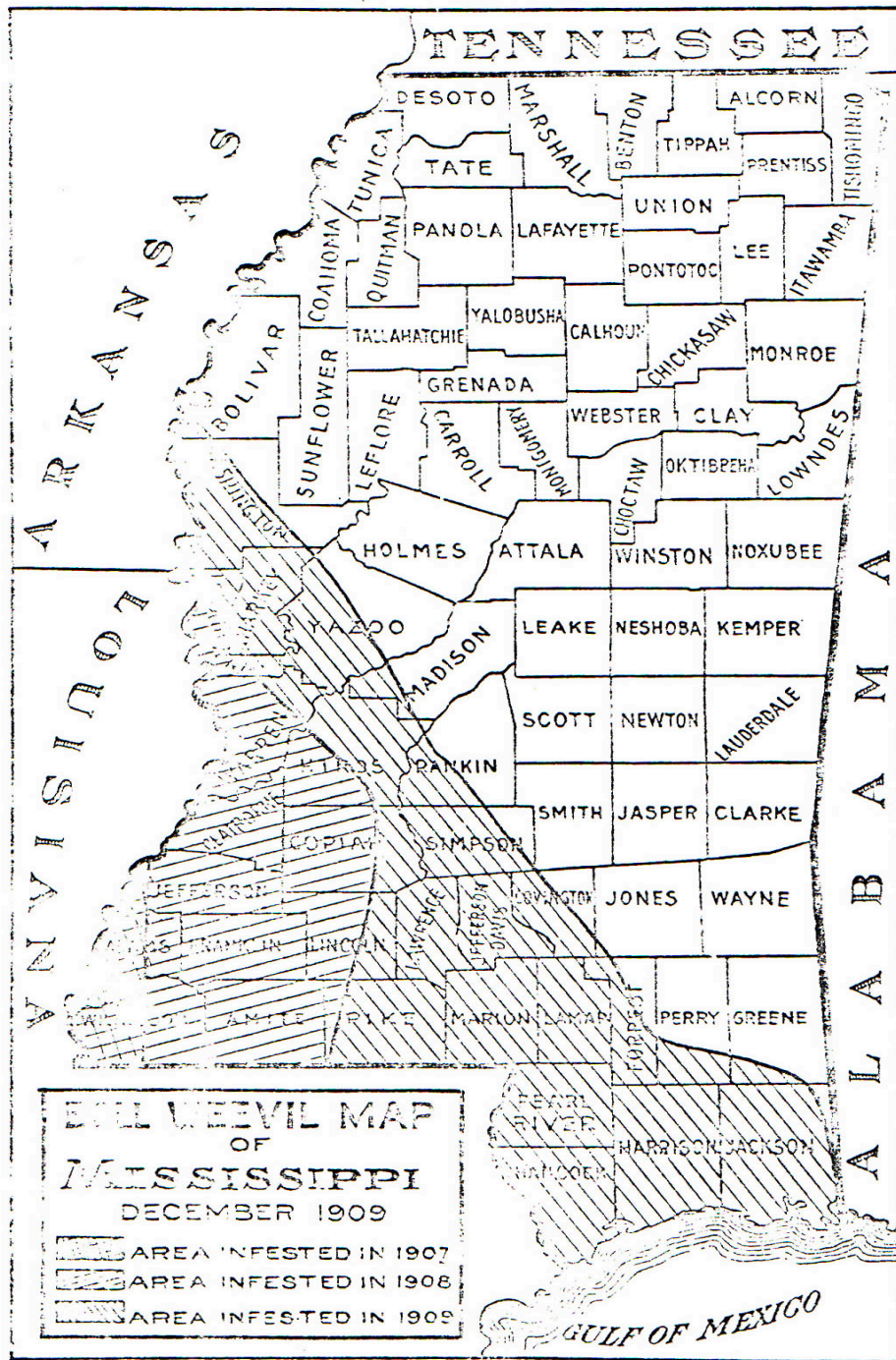


Figure 4.1: Spread of Boll Weevil through Mississippi.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> R.W. Harned, "Boll Weevil in Mississippi, 1909," MAES Bulletin, No. 139, March, 1910, p. 12.

It is utterly impossible for the farmer to make a crop of cotton with the boll weevil present under the old system of farming... [which] has been materially changed in every section where the weevil has yet appeared. The people have been forced to abandon the all-cotton system and to adopt the method that will enable them to produce all of the home supplies.

Though the authors promised that limited cotton production could be continued if it were part of a diversified, modern farm, they claimed that industrial production in a mono-crop system was impossible. Like Sillers' prediction that the pest was no devil, these scientists' forecast was way off the mark. Their pessimism reflected the myth of the boll weevil's destructive power, which had spread from Texas and Louisiana faster than the pest itself. Despite the stories of utter chaos and devastation, cotton had not been abandoned in Texas or Louisiana.<sup>3</sup>

The main reason that farmers across the South continued to plant cotton even as the boll weevil marched was steadily high cotton prices. Especially in the Delta, the lure of high cotton prices proved more powerful than even the most calamitous predictions of crop loss. As a result of the combination of a worldwide cotton shortage and rising prices in the early twentieth century, many of the world's mills began to rethink their access to the staple. The Delta's rich soil and

---

<sup>3</sup> Walter Sillers, Sr., to P.M. Burrill, March 22, 1909, in Sillers Papers, folder 19A. W.B. Mercier and H.E. Savely, *The Knapp Method of Growing Cotton* (Garden City and New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 116. Cotton prices climbed steadily in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The agricultural South as a whole was still rebuilding its lands from the damage of the Civil War. And though many foreign mills, cut off from American cotton in wartime, had turned to the growing markets of India and Egypt, there was still not enough competition to sway southerners from putting more land into cotton production. Not only was the supply limited, but British mills faced expanding competition from other countries in Europe, as well as Japan and the United States for the raw material. As more and more spindles were put into production around the world, the demand and price of cotton at the turn of the century soared. Despite the region's growth, at the turn of the century the Delta could only claim that thirty-percent of its land was in production. The role of cotton prices in the boll weevil's history is explored in detail in subsequent chapters. Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 100. Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, 117-118.

its room for expansion of cotton production, made the region a prime area for international investment. Despite the connections of Delta planters and politicians to powerful factors in the world cotton market, it was a local Mississippi scientist who first gave the Fine Spinners the idea of investing in Delta land.<sup>4</sup>

In 1910, Jesse W. Fox, the newly appointed director of the Delta Experiment Station in Stoneville, traveled to Brussels, Belgium to deliver a paper on “The Causes of the Present Shortage of American Cotton and the Means to Adopt to Prevent a Recurrence.” He argued that the limits of American cotton production had not been reached, that in fact there were broad expanses of rich Mississippi land still available for planting. His talk caught the attention of the Fine Spinners and Doublers’ Company. This consortium of English mills asked Fox about the availability of land near his Stoneville base, and told the scientist that if the company purchased Mississippi land, it was contingent on his managing their local operation.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Cotton prices climbed steadily in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The agricultural South as a whole was still rebuilding its lands from the damage of the Civil War. And though many foreign mills, cut off from American cotton in wartime, had turned to the growing markets of India and Egypt, there was still not enough competition to sway southerners from putting more land into cotton production. Not only was the supply limited, but British mills faced expanding competition from other countries in Europe, as well as Japan and the United States for the raw material. As more and more spindles were put into production around the world, the demand and price of cotton at the turn of the century soared. Despite the region’s growth, at the turn of the century the Delta could only claim that thirty-percent of its land was in production. Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 100. Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, 117-118.

<sup>5</sup> Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, 127-128. Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton’s Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 24.

Fox returned to the United States and resumed his experiments. The professor was in no position to involve himself in a land deal with a gigantic English company like the Spinners, but he may have mentioned his meeting with the mill to Charles Scott, an active, powerful planter. Scott, like most large landowners in the region, was not merely a planter; he was a banker, a real estate developer and a politician. Scott had in fact played such a major role in the early development of railroads in the Delta that he grew to become a personal confidant of Illinois Central president Stuyvesant Fish. His own eleven-thousand-acre plantation had a stop on the Central's line marked simply "Scott."<sup>6</sup>

Scott was a savvy investor and planter, and the threat of the boll weevil to his rural kingdom shaped his business strategy during the first few years of the pest's presence. In 1910, the first year of the weevil's appearance on his Rosedale plantation, he recognized a remarkable drop in land prices. Just as this decrease in land values had made it impossible for Johanna Reiser to unload her plantation the same year, Scott recognized that the boll weevil panic was creating a major economic opportunity. Though most planters embraced a wait-and-see attitude when it came to the boll weevil (holding land they might otherwise consider selling and refraining from buying any new land), Scott took a gamble. Area land prices had plummeted as the result of experts' predictions that the weevil would end cotton production in the Delta, and Scott sought to take

---

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate*, 25.

advantage of the depressed prices. In 1910 he exercised an option to buy twenty-one-thousand acres adjacent to his already vast property. He had quickly doubled his land holdings at a price he considered a value. Scott now had to decide whether to manage the vast land as a single plantation, growing cotton even in the face of the boll weevil threat, or finding someone to buy the entire lot. Scott probably knew that by buying relatively inexpensive land, he could sell the one large tract to an interested buyer from outside the region. He may have in fact known for certain from Jesse Fox that the Fine Spinners were interested in purchasing a large Mississippi plantation.

At this point, Scott enlisted the help of Lant K. Salsbury. Salsbury was a young northern entrepreneur, a stark contrast to Scott, the archetype Old South planter-aristocrat (who had, in fact, ridden alongside Nathan Bedford Forrest as a young man during the Civil War). A Michigan native, Salsbury earned a law degree from the University of Michigan before working a stint as a lawyer in Grand Rapids, where he became involved in the purchase and sale of timber forests. Recognizing the demise of the timber industry in the Great Lakes Region, he moved south at the turn of the century hoping to make his fortune in another extractive industry. Salsbury settled in Memphis and began managing a plantation in the northern tip of the Delta, south of the city. Salsbury was new to the South and had a vision of extracting its natural resources and using his northern connections and capital to buy and sell southern cotton and timber land.

Scott embraced this outsider in an attempt to gird his own fortune and interests against the boll weevil threat.<sup>7</sup>

Salsbury assured Scott that, despite the boll weevil, he could sell the planter's vast Mississippi lands at a substantial profit. With his connections and salesmanship, Salsbury, in fact, had designs on the land himself, though it is unclear if he made that known to Scott. In either case, Salsbury joined with seven investors and purchased Scott's thirty-three-thousand-acre tract overlapping Bolivar and Washington Counties for an undisclosed sum. Salsbury believed Scott's asking price was low, even considering the threat of the weevil, and attempted to turn right around and sell the land at a profit. Aware that no one in Mississippi, or perhaps the entire cotton South, would purchase the land knowing of the approaching pest, he returned north, hoping to find a buyer. Finding no one in the Midwest or Northeast interested, Salsbury took his sales pitch to England. He met there with representatives of the Fine Spinners who had remembered Jesse Fox's promises of productivity in the alluvial Delta. They agreed to make a trip to Mississippi to see the land in person.

The Fine Spinners had been worried for decades about their supply of cotton. As a result, the mill owners looked for a way to streamline their supply chain from the cotton fields to their fifty English mills. The Spinners were looking to guarantee their own access to raw materials and to limit the influence of

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 24.

speculators along the supply chain who were gouging the mills with high price markups. A group from the company traveled to the Delta in 1910, where Salsbury and his partners took the over-dressed Englishmen on that hot goose hunt. Deltans took a keen interest in the foreigners' visit. "It is also rumored that the gentlemen who visited the property are interested in the cotton industry in England," the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* reported, "if this proves to be a fact, such a purchase will have the effect of turning the eyes of capitalists to the delta [sic.] country."<sup>8</sup>

In the papers alongside news of the Englishmen's visit, appeared stories of the boll weevil's arrival in the Delta. Newspapers, banks, mills and merchants both nationally and internationally had been keeping an eye on the advancing bug, and the Fine Spinners must have been paying attention as well. But the presence of the bug had made the land cheaper, and in their view it must have been a price that the company believed made it worth the risk of buying cotton land on the weevil frontier. Despite the threat, in April 1911 the Fine Spinners agreed to purchase the land for \$3 million. Herbert Lee, the only member of the Fine Spinners' board to object to the deal later quipped, "they dug some goose pits and we fell into them."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Hobson, "Delta & Pine Land Co.," in DPLC Papers, Series IX: "The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company," box 27, 6. Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, 119. "English Negotiate for Land in Delta," Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1911, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Hobson, "Delta & Pine Land Co.," in DPLC Papers, Series IX: "The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company," box 27, 7. Before the deal could be finalized, however, Salsbury and the Fine Spinners had to find a way around an old Mississippi state law that forbade non-United States citizens from owning land in the state. As a result, Salsbury put together a complicated deal involving a holding company, the division of the lands into different plantations and the purchase



Delta newspapers heralded the land sale as the arrival of a progressive business interest in the Delta. The *Commercial Appeal* reported on the DPLC's goal to build an entirely self-sufficient industrial farm. "The company intends to use improved methods of cultivation and to employ for this purpose an expert man as general superintendent," the paper wrote. DPLC indeed planned to build its own cottonseed mill, several gins and compresses. "Every modern method known in the cultivation of cotton will be put in practice," the paper reported. This localized, condensed organization, the *Commercial Appeal* promised, will make the plantation remarkably efficient, producing "up to a bale and a half or two bales to the acre."<sup>10</sup>

DPLC took immediate possession of the land and assumed control over the buildings and materials on it, including the 1911 crop. The Fine Spinners hired Salsbury to manage the company, who oversaw the plantation's vast holdings from his office in Memphis. Behind a desk one hundred and forty miles from the cotton fields he managed, Salsbury must have recognized that he had a large task in front of him. Not only did DPLC own the equivalent of sixty square

---

of a separate business charter. As a result, the Fine Spinners ended up owning the Mississippi Delta Planting Company, which leased the land in two pieces, the Triumph Plantation Company and the Lake Vista Plantation Company. Later, the group purchased the charter to the Delta & Pine Land Company, which had been granted prior to the 1890 Mississippi Constitution which had outlawed foreign land ownership, allowing the Fine Spinners to grandfather their way past more recent regulations on businesses, giving the "new" corporation immense power to organize the land and its holding in a number of ways. The Mississippi Delta Planting Company purchased the DPLC charter in 1919. Since there were no major changes in ownership that came with the charter purchase, for simplicity I refer to the company as DPLC even prior to the 1919 official moniker change. Harris, *Deep Souths*, 122. Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> "Three Million is Invested in Delta" Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, May 18, 1911, p. 1.

miles of cotton land, a scale on which no one in the United States had ever tried to grow cotton, but the boll weevil was knocking on the Delta's door. Salsbury knew his limited experience running a plantation left him unequipped to manage the day-to-day farming decisions of this mega-plantation. As a result, during the first few months at his new post Salsbury made the first in a string of moves to use the land's size and the parent company's deep pockets to lure some of the most knowledgeable farm experts in the South. Salsbury contacted Jesse Fox, the original director of the Delta Branch Experiment Station who had himself been hand-picked three years earlier by Alfred Holt Stone to run the Stoneville research farm. Salsbury asked Fox to move from his work on the state-owned farm, where his responsibilities were research and public teaching, to DPLC, a private company whose primary interest was profit.<sup>11</sup>

Fox did not take his decision to move lightly. He had been a pioneer of cotton research in the Delta since 1904 when the state, with the help of local planters, founded the Stoneville farm. In a short time, he had made remarkable improvements to the farm's 250 acres. Despite the rough condition of the Stoneville land, by 1906 he had managed to bring 210 acres under cultivation and started a series of experiments that by 1911 had already influenced the way many Delta farmers planted cotton. Fox tested various commercially available

---

<sup>11</sup> Harris, *Deep Souths*, 122. Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate*, 24. Mrs. Early C. Ewing, "The Delta and Pine Land Company," in *History of Bolivar County, Mississippi*, Wirt A. Williams, ed. (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1976), 250. In 1910, Fox had been appointed director of the MAES and was based in Starkville, though he continued to oversee the research and education projects in the Delta. Giles, "Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970," 192.

cottonseeds, investigating each variety and publishing his findings. Building on the work of the USDA in Texas and Louisiana, Fox attempted to identify those seed types that matured earliest, thereby limiting the amount of damage the boll weevil could do in the late summer and fall, and to combine these varieties in an attempt to breed new strains of cotton that took advantage of the best aspects of each type. Fox also researched immediately practicable aspects of raising cotton in the Delta, including the timing of first planting, row width and distance between rows, soil preparation, cultivation, and fertilizers. He quickly built the Stoneville farm into one of the state's most productive branches and made a name for himself by presenting his research findings across the state and around the world. In addition to his work on the farm, Fox had been a staunch supporter of public education. He had taken his findings to the farmers of the Delta—in fact, he was on board the Southern Railway's educational train that planters and merchants refused to allow to make their presentation in Greenwood in 1909. Two years later Fox was considering joining forces with the modern, industrial planter group—the very people that had denied his right to address the community two years earlier.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> J.W. Fox, "Report of Work at the Delta Station for 1906," Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 106, January, 1907. New Orleans *Daily-Picayune*, March 11, 1909. Early C. Ewing, Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi. See also Eugene B. Ferris, "Early Recollections of the Mississippi A. & M. College," unpublished manuscript, Ferris Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, box 7, folder 111, p. 8.

The crux of Fox's decision of whether to leave the public sector for DPLC lay in the ideological problems of cotton farmer education. The Delta's commitment to cotton was more than simply an economic or agricultural decision to plant the staple; it was an ideology. Cotton was literally woven into the fabric of the Delta culture. As David Cohn explained, even the word "planter" was "rich with connotations." "It was a link to the antebellum past, reminiscent of the dream, if not always the reality, of what had been," Cohn continued, "under these circumstances arguments for diversification were little effective. They left men's *hearts* untouched." In other words, even if educators like Fox could convince Delta planters that there was more money to be made in, say, asparagus, planters would object on the simple grounds that "asparagus is not cotton."<sup>13</sup>

Planters' resistance to and control of Fox's extension work, he realized, was as much cultural as economic. Despite his work in Stoneville on alternatives to cotton, the farm's location within the Delta and the power that area planters had over his work, relegated Fox to spending the bulk of his time and resources with cotton. As he explained in his 1908 report on the work of the Delta Station, "the important relation that cotton bears to Delta farming can hardly be overestimated... it is the greatest staple money crop that can be grown in any section of our country." But the region's commitment to the staple, Fox realized, was a dangerous thing, for it "has led to our one crop system, which, of course, is

---

<sup>13</sup> J.W. Fox, "Report of the Work at the Delta Station for 1907-8," Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 119, March, 1909 [date on first page is misprinted as 1907].

wrong both in principle and practice.” But what more could he say? Pushing for diversification in the Delta certainly would have been in the general public’s best interest, but not that of the planters who had hired him, bought and built his research station and were constantly looking over his shoulder at his experiments. Fox must have felt that he needed to walk a thin line in his dealings with the public and the planters. As a result, he had encouraged planters to make their farms self-sustaining first, then to plant whatever land was left in cotton, rather than promoting a plan of outright diversification. “We do not advocate the exclusion of cotton from our cropping system,” he assured readers of his 1908 report. “[N]or do we fear that any one thing, nor a combination of circumstances, will ever cause [cotton] to become an unprofitable crop.” Fox weighed his options: continuing his work as a public servant, despite the constraints placed upon him as a voice for diversification, or joining the very forces that worked against his public research.<sup>14</sup>

Fox chose DPLC. In 1912, he moved from Stoneville to DPLC’s headquarters in nearby Scott and became the company’s first general manager with a salary of \$7,500 per year. He immediately began to guide the massive company through a period of rapid hiring and administered the purchase of fertilizer, tools and mules. He broke the massive thirty-thousand-acre plantation into sub-farms and hired managers to oversee each section. He also began the

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

search for the huge workforce needed both to put in the 1912 crop and to bring as much land as possible under cultivation. Over the first few years the Fine Spinners dumped an additional \$1.5 million into their Mississippi project.<sup>15</sup>

A number of setbacks struck DPLC in their first three seasons. In 1912, there was major flooding throughout the Mississippi River Valley. A levee gave way north of Scott, flooding fields and destroying the bulk of the company's crops. The following spring, with water still sitting stagnant on most of the land, Salsbury ordered laborers to plant whatever land was above water. One resident described how "the men swam the mules across the bayous and planted the high spots." Despite these efforts, repairs to the levee were unfinished when water rose again in 1913, busting through the bank and washing out the skimpy crop that workers had managed to plant.<sup>16</sup>

In 1914 there were no floods, but boll weevils made their first major appearance at DPLC. The pest increased in numbers consistently throughout the season before building to an enormous population by fall. Weevils destroyed the bulk of DPLC's cotton. Despite the sums of money and vast resources poured into the operation, DPLC had managed only meager crops in its first two

---

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Robert W. Harrison, *Alluvial Empire* (Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1961), 129. Mrs. Early C. Ewing, "The Delta and Pine Land Company," 250. Ewing, "History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967," n.d., DPLC Papers, 8. Floods and levee construction have their own sordid history in the Delta, and many of the issues pertinent to the advancing boll weevil were being sorted out by the region's people before and after the cotton pest's arrival. Floods were an environmental force that would also summon federal workers to the region.

seasons. As historian Lawrence Nelson has written of the early years at DPLC, “the big plantation with the big plan produced a pathetically tiny crop.”<sup>17</sup>

During the early years, boll weevils shaped just about every decision DPLC made. The Spinners had bought the vast Mississippi acreage to produce long-staple Egyptian cotton. Apparently encouraged by Fox’s Brussels paper delivered years earlier, the company seemed to believe that Egyptian cotton could be grown in the Delta, and indeed in some spots along the river farmers had been successful in growing long-staple varieties. The boll weevil made this impossible, however. The longer fibers took a full season to develop and the arrival of the weevil had in essence shortened the season by several weeks. Long-staple cotton bolls were only beginning to form at the point of the summer when the weevils were reaching full strength. DPLC tried an experiment with the plant in 1911, but “grew ten feet tall and produced not a bloom.” Even long-staple American Upland cotton, a different species of cotton plant than the Egyptian, failed to bloom until very late in the season. By that time, boll weevils would devour these long-staple plants.<sup>18</sup>

Fox and Salsbury broke the news to their bosses: the new land would not produce the cotton they desired. The Fine Spinners were more than let down in their cotton preference; long-staple cottons were in fact the only kind of cotton

---

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, *King Cotton’s Advocate*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> A.C. Wild to G. Patterson, December 22, 1965, in Early C. Ewing, “History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967,” n.d., DPLC Papers, 7. Early C. Ewing, “History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967,” n.d., DPLC Papers, 7.

that their mills could spin. By 1913, only the second full season of DPLC's existence, it was clear that the boll weevil had put an end to the Fine Spinners' dream of an unending supply of cotton for their mills. In fact, no Mississippi cotton made by DPLC *ever* made its way to the Fine Spinners' English mills.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these setbacks, the English company did not immediately pull up stakes from the Delta. In fact, the company's earliest leaders recognized that the insect's presence offered an opportunity for DPLC to remake itself not as a supplier of Egyptian cotton to English mills, but as a supplier of boll weevil solutions and other agricultural remedies to southern farmers. This transformation did not happen overnight. At first, DPLC simply began selling their short-staple American cotton on the open market, but soon Fox and Salsbury realized that, with DPLC's size and access to capital investment, the plantation was uniquely suited to develop new ways to fight the boll weevil. Partly out of the necessity to make their operation profitable by finding a way to grow cotton in the pest's presence, DPLC's managers sought new techniques for cotton growing. Not only did the company have the advantages necessary to develop ways to grow more cotton than its neighbors, it could attempt to sell these resources and methods to other farmers panicked by the prospects of cotton farming under boll weevil conditions.

---

<sup>19</sup> Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South*, 129. Vernon Bellhouse, "Delta & Pine Land Company," September 30, 1948, in DPLC Papers Series IX: "The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company," box 27.



DPLC's main weapon was science. Rather than devoting every inch of its land, both the good and poor fields, to cotton production, as its planter neighbors did, DPLC devoted significant lands to research and experimentation. Beating the boll weevil meant having the bolls picked in late-summer. Deltans knew that the soil and temperature of their region continued to be a favorable factor in cotton production; if the fertile ground could push out a crop early enough in the season, it could be picked and the stalks destroyed before weevils appeared in massive numbers. The key was developing a quickly-growing plant. One DPLC researcher remembered that in the early years, the pest "would just, more or less, go unchecked until the population became so big that they just ate everything in sight." Despite two decades of exploration by southern scientists, the anti-weevil work had produced no magical solution. The cultural method prescribed by the USDA in Texas as early as 1894 still formed the basis of farmers' techniques for limiting boll weevil damage. DPLC's managers realized that there were other potential solutions: plant breeding and poisons.<sup>20</sup>

The company's scientific strategy hinged on its ability to attract more experts in cotton breeding. In 1915, Fox enlisted the help of Early C. Ewing. Ewing, like Fox himself, had been educated and trained by the State of Mississippi, and had started his career with the state extension service. He too turned away from his public educator role with the state and moved to Scott to

---

<sup>20</sup> Early C. Ewing, Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, MS, p. 3.

work for DPLC. Ewing had begun plant breeding work at the Starkville research station in 1910 after receiving a graduate degree from Cornell a year earlier. While at Cornell, Ewing had worked with a pioneer in the field of plant breeding and was on the forefront of putting these new theories to practice with cotton. He ended his brief stint with the MAES when DPLC came calling, mainly because “I could be happier and could accomplish more in a commercial environment than in an institution.” His reasons were not “overly altruistic,” he admitted, “I thought I might improve my financial status.” Still, Ewing would say later that DPLC’s job offer was “a long shot gamble for me and certainly for the company.”<sup>21</sup>

Fox had courted Ewing to DPLC chiefly due to his expertise with plant breeding, but when Ewing arrived in Scott he recognized that the plantation was a long way from being ready to conduct any major plant breeding research. Ewing was surprised at the “primitive conditions” and relatively unorganized state of DPLC’s operations. It was remote, he later remembered, connected to Greenville only by an unpaved road that was treacherous after a good rain. Once he made it to DPLC he found a sprawling plantation with a great number of buildings, but no electricity.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Finding Aid, DPLC Papers, n.d. Early C. Ewing Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi . Ewing, “History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967,” n.d., DPLC Papers, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 14. Early C. Ewing Sr., oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 16. Ewing, “History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967,” n.d., DPLC Papers, 12-13.

Despite the “rough and crude” conditions, Ewing began developing a plant breeding research plan. He toiled with cottonseed varieties with the hope of developing the longest short-staple cotton possible that would fully develop early enough in the season to limit the effect of the weevil. He began selecting and breeding together the fastest-growing and most productive short-staple varieties, but the process was not as simple as producing a plant that matured quickly. New breeds also had to produce the long, strong fiber, which the mills demanded. “Where the boll weevil is a constant menace,” Ewing recalled, “productiveness, earliness and disease resistance” were the most important factors.<sup>23</sup>

Ewing had a head start in this important research. In his final days with the MAES research station in Stoneville, he had traveled to Texas to investigate early-maturing cotton in use in that state’s battle against the boll weevil. Ewing was encouraged by a hybrid seed being grown called Express. The Express seed was developed by plant scientists in Texas from the Bohemian Big Boll variety, and was still not commercially available to farmers. In fact, local researchers in Texas had decided that Express was unfit for the soil of the Black Land Prairies and discarded the bulk of the seed, but not before Ewing got his hands on a bushel of it. He brought the Express seed back to Starkville and conducted a field test in 1911. The seed beat all competitors in both earliness

---

<sup>23</sup> Annual Report of the Experimental Department, Mississippi Delta Planting Company, April 7, 1916, in DPLC Papers, Series V: Early C. Ewing, Sr. Papers, box 32, folder v-a1.

and productiveness, asserting itself as the premier cotton variety for the boll-weevil-plagued Delta. Despite the success of Express seed, the station's report for 1912 noted that Mississippi farmers would have a hard time finding the seed for their own use: "Unfortunately there are no seed [sic.] available of the 'Express' cotton, the variety that took first place, but the Delta Station and others will likely have a few seed for distribution in another year or two."<sup>24</sup>

Not all farmers, as it turned out, would have to wait that long. Early Ewing had taken with him an ample supply of Express seed when he moved from Starkville to Scott. Though even the Delta's large planters had no access to Express, Ewing had made sure that DPLC would have an immediate supply. He later referred to his taking the seed from the public farm to the DPLC simply as "fortunate," but it would prove to have multi-million dollar ramifications.<sup>25</sup>

Ewing's bushel of Express formed the basis of cotton breeding experiments at the company for the next fifty years. Ewing and Fox bred Express with other varieties, building on its positive characteristics. Soon DPLC not only planted Express seed its offspring for its own cotton production, but it sold the seed to planters across the South. "These varieties went into production

---

<sup>24</sup> Ewing, "History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967," n.d., DPLC Papers, 13-15. G.B. Walker, "Report of Work at the Delta Branch Experiment Station For 1911," Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin, No. 157, February, 1912.

<sup>25</sup> Annual Report of the Experimental Department, Mississippi Delta Planting Company, April 7, 1916, in DPLC Papers, Series V: Early C. Ewing, Sr. Papers, box 32, folder v-a1. See also "Recent Cotton Experiments," Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin, No. 155, December, 1911; and Ewing, Early C., Jr. "The Cotton Research Program of the Delta & Pine Land Co.," September 27, 1960, in DPLC Papers, Series IX: "The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company," box 27.

at once,” Ewing wrote later, “and with a few others have since served as foundation material for the breeding of several prominent kinds which are the mainstay of the cotton industry in the South today.” Ewing’s son, who also became a researcher at DPLC, explained the value of his father’s work with Express in even grander terms: “If it hadn’t been for that early variety of cotton called Express that he brought in here, why [DPLC] would have been out of cotton production.”<sup>26</sup>

For the first few years, Express derivatives were enormously popular with farmers and over time seed sales of the weevil-resistant varieties proved to be more important to the company than sales of the plantation’s lint cotton. By the 1950s, the value of the seed DPLC produced almost matched the value of the lint it sold in any given year. DPLC’s biggest seller in the twentieth century was the Deltapine variety, a direct descendant of the bushel of Express Ewing had brought with him from Mississippi A&M, netting the company millions of dollars in sales. Even in years when low prices limited the values of the farm’s cotton production, it found a market for early-maturing cottonseed varieties in the thousands of farmers around the South battling the boll weevil. This enabled DPLC to in essence hedge its bet against the boll weevil by taking advantage of the pest itself.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Early C. Ewing, Jr., oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 15.

<sup>27</sup> Mrs. Early C. Ewing, “The Delta and Pine Land Company,” 251.

Along with its breeding work, DPLC pioneered other new strategies in the boll weevil fight. Poisoning had not been a fundamental weapon in the insect fight since the pest's discovery in Texas. In 1894 the USDA had recognized that Paris Green, a potent copper arsenic compound, could kill as much as thirty-percent of a weevil population, but the costs and difficulty associated with its application precluded the department from recommending its use. Still the possibility of a poison solution for the boll weevil was very attractive to Delta planters and farm researchers alike, for both practical and psychological reasons. As opposed to the cultural method of boll weevil control, which involved year-round work of improving all aspects of cotton farming from soil preparation through cultivation and harvest, a poison could simply be purchased and applied, yielding immediate, visible results. In addition to the ease that poison might bring to the boll weevil battle, many farmers saw it as a more modern solution than the cultural method. Those planters who already employed modern accounting practices and industrial labor supervision embraced poisons as the extension of up-to-date farm management.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the high cost of Paris Green, there were major problems with its application. One Mississippi cotton farmer remembered how tenants would apply Paris Green. "They went through the field," he wrote, "and had a long pole

---

<sup>28</sup> Helms, "Just Lookin' for a Home: The Cotton Boll Weevil and the South," 95. Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6. Shirley A. Briggs and Staff of Rachel Carson Council, *Basic Guide to Pesticides: Their Characteristics and Hazards* (Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1992), 60.

across the mule's neck with a sack of the arsenic on each end and they'd go along and shake it and they'd go down the middles of the cotton, you see, and in that way they dusted two rows at a time." Farmers could only hope the dust settled onto the plant buds and that weevils would ingest the poison as they bore into plant. More often than not, however, the majority of the Paris Green would fall straight to the ground, or get blown away in a breeze. Even in the best conditions, there were questions about Paris Green's effectiveness. There was no doubt that it would kill the pests, but if applied too heavily, it damaged the plant and reduced yield to a greater degree than weevils would have on their own. With costs prohibitively high for all but the most wealthy planters, Paris Green was not an option for most farmers. Still, throughout the South thousands, including researchers at DPLC, tried to make Paris Green the answer to the boll weevil invasion.<sup>29</sup>

Some farmers experimented with poison on their own, but the high costs and low return left even the largest planters looking for an alternative. In 1909, farmers' prayers for a more effective poison were answered. That year, Wilmon Newell of the Louisiana Crop Pest Commission published the results of an experiment he conducted using powdered lead arsenate for boll weevil control. Newell found that the poison killed the weevils without damaging the cotton. Word spread quickly around the South. In the Delta, the *Greenville Daily Times*

---

<sup>29</sup> Brodie S. Crump, transcript of interview by Lelia Clark Wynn, June 1, 1977, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi, p. 18.

hastily reported that “recent experiments with a new kind of poison” indicate that boll weevil “control may be obtained.” Fox and Ewing read the reports as well and recognized that the problem of applying the poison, the major shortcoming of Paris Green, was still an issue with powdered lead arsenate. Newell’s successful experiments had been conducted by spreading the poison by hand—forcing it into each infected square with a “dust gun.” It was impractical from a labor and cost standpoint to think that DPLC (or any other farm operation, small or large) would be able to apply the poison efficiently or effectively in that manner. Again, despite the impracticality of lead arsenate’s widespread application, research continued. Though newspapers had portrayed the poison as the savior of cotton, farmers and educators recognized that the development of new application techniques would have to catch up with the progress on the chemical poison front.<sup>30</sup>

Fox and Ewing understood that DPLC’s industrial organization might allow the company to serve at the forefront of these efforts to develop new application methods. In 1915, Ewing rode through the Delta interviewing farmers who had

---

<sup>30</sup> Greenville *Daily Times*, January 9, 1910. Ewing, “History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967,” n.d., DPLC Papers, 10. Officials with the USDA in Washington reacted with skepticism to Newell’s findings. The department understood the difficulties with application and continued to put the focus of farmer education on the cultural method rather than on poison. The USDA was eventually swayed from this stance first by the entry of other government agencies into the boll weevil fight and later by the development of more economical and efficient insecticide sprayers. The former came as the result of WWI. When the war was over, many of the strategies developed by the military to fight human enemies was put to use against the boll weevil and other insects. The Chemical Warfare Service spearheaded tests of chemicals against the boll weevil but made little ground. As historian Edmund Russell has explained, the War Department played a major role in the battle against insect enemies on the home front. See Russell, *War and Nature*. Russell also notes that the poisonous gasses used in battle during WWI had no effect on the boll weevil. Russell, *War and Nature*, 64-65.



begun using lead arsenate. Bert Coad, a USDA researcher based across the Mississippi River from Scott in Tallulah, Louisiana, had also performed successful experiments with lead arsenate on a large scale. Ewing crossed the river to witness Coad's work first-hand, and it was clear to him that lead arsenate was effective against the weevil. Ewing was convinced that with DPLC's size and resources, it could afford to research a solution to the application problem. In the spring of 1916, the plantation performed its first field tests on lead arsenate, as well as a similar compound, calcium arsenate, which had proven even more effective against the weevil. In 1917, Coad dispensed two of his federal researchers to DPLC so that the company could direct more extensive tests over even larger areas. Coad recognized that the government's research could benefit from DPLC's size and labor force; DPLC, on the other hand, was happy to have what amounted to federally-funded researchers working on its land.<sup>31</sup>

Coad and his assistants began developing simple mechanized solutions for the application problem. During the first experimental season, laborers applied pesticides by hand. A tenant would walk down a row and spray each plant individually with the poison. As with Coad's experiments in Louisiana, this method proved effective on experimental plots, but was far too time consuming

---

<sup>31</sup> Early C. Ewing, "Cotton in the Mid-South: Highlights of Agricultural History in the Central Belt," in DPLC Papers, n.d., Ewing, , "History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967," n.d., DPLC Papers, 10, 11.

and labor intensive to be put to use on all of DPLC's thousands of acres. Plus, the spray guns broke constantly. For the 1917 tests, men rode mules up and down the rows, but still sprayed each plant one-by-one as they rode. Even with these advances, farmers still had problems getting the poison to stick to the plants. As a result, they began spraying at night; the dew acted as a glue to adhere the powder to the cotton. "We done it at night," one manager recalled, "sometime you'd go until about eight o'clock in the morning."<sup>32</sup>

In 1918, Ewing mounted a new dusting machine on a two-wheel cart, which mules pulled down the rows. Ernest Haywood, one of DPLC's early managers, described how the carts worked: "we had a little old motor up there we would crank it and we had a hopper and we'd put dust [poison] in the hopper. We... set the gage and... hitch a mule and you run them things all over the place and then we had carbide lights and you charge that thing up." These machines were powered by the traction of the cart as it moved through the field. A fan would blow the dust from the platform onto the plants as it passed. Even this solution had its problems. The poison usually settled onto the ground rather than the plants and if there was any breeze at all, the poison was impossible to direct. By 1920, DPLC was poisoning all of its cotton by machine, but problems

---

<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Early C. Ewing, "The Delta and Pine Land Company," 250. R.M. (Dick) Holman, oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 27.

persisted. Despite the company's ability to pay for the poison, the plantation's fight to stop weevil damage with poison was wasteful and inefficient.<sup>33</sup>

The solution to DPLC's poison application problem would come from above. Shortly after WWI, the USDA began funding experiments on aerial application of poisons at the Delta Research Station in Tallulah. Bert Coad, the station's chief scientist, found that by toting finely powdered calcium arsenate in a hopper underneath an airplane, pilots could swoop down over a cotton field, flying sometimes fewer than ten feet above the crop, pull a lever releasing the poison, and spread the insecticide onto the cotton. The force of the plane's movement blew the dust onto the plant with greater strength than could be achieved at the field level. The Army Air Service eventually contributed surplus WWI planes to the cause and the first experiments in air crop dusting cotton were born.<sup>34</sup>

Not surprisingly, the first private farm on which Coad conducted aerial crop dusting experiments was DPLC. Coad recognized that the company's long, uninterrupted fields would be a perfect place to experiment with aerial pesticide application. "Everybody laughed at the idea [of crop dusting by airplane] and

---

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Haywood, oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 22. Ewing, "History of the Delta and Pine Land Company, 1911-1967," n.d., DPLC Papers, 12. Early C. Ewing, Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi, p.4.

<sup>34</sup> W. David Lewis and Wesley Phillips Newton, *Delta: The History of an Airline* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 10-12. The first successful crop dusting experiments were made in Ohio. Concurrent to Coad's work in Louisiana was a large-scale dusting experiment on fruit trees with planes based in Macon, Georgia. Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 63.

scorned it at first” Coad recalled, “but our old friends at Scott still stood behind me.” DPLC recognized that if Coad’s scheme was possible, it would make poisoning the boll weevils more effective and efficient. In the early 1920s there were still risks and high costs associated with crop dusting, but the promise of a quick and effective means of poisoning boll weevils was too attractive for DPLC not to explore.<sup>35</sup>

In 1926, Coad announced that the first public demonstration of boll weevil dusting by plane would be conducted in Scott, on DPLC’s land. The prospect of using airplanes to poison weevils was odd enough to attract the attention of farmers from across Mississippi. “All through the night people were arriving in Scott from as far away as Memphis” to witness the morning demonstration, Coad remembered. The pilots, sent over from the Army Air Service station, had been “a little too well entertained the previous evening” and looked to Coad to be “very groggy” when they climbed into the dusters. With the crowds amassed waiting to witness the spectacle of crop dusting, however, nothing was going to derail the performance, no matter the health of the pilots. Despite the pilots’ hangovers, Coad loaded the planes’ hoppers with calcium arsenate and soon they were skimming across DPLC’s fields followed by a cloud a white powder. The demonstration went off without a hitch. Fox and Ewing were so impressed with the early experiments that they pledged the company’s continued financial

---

<sup>35</sup> Lewis and Newton, *Delta*, 12-13. Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 63. B.R. Coad to George Patterson, January 5, 1966, in DPLC Papers, Series IX,.

support, and promised to hire any company that would offer effective crop dusting services.<sup>36</sup>

It did not take long for a fledging dusting operation to answer DPLC's offer. Collette E. Woolman, an agent with the Louisiana extension service had observed Coad's experiments since the early 1920s. Woolman, not unlike Fox and Ewing, decided to leave his position with the government sector to help a private company sell a strategy for beating the boll weevil. His knowledge of farming combined with an infectious personality made him the ideal spokesman for crop dusting. He joined the Huff Daland Dusters company and moved its base of operations from Georgia to Monroe, Louisiana, to be nearer Coad's experiments. In 1928, the company had such success in aerial boll weevil control that the dusting division separated from its parent company to become Delta Air Service. The company began dusting cotton throughout the region, but its main client was DPLC. By the early 1930s, Delta Air billed DPLC as much as \$11,000 per month for its dusting services. Even as the pesticide of choice changed from the 1920s on, airplanes still proved to be the most effective means for accurately spreading poison on cotton. Eventually, Delta Air developed a passenger service in addition to its dusting operation and became one of the biggest airlines in the world.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> B.R. Coad to George Patterson, January 5, 1966, in DPLC Papers, Series IX.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis and Newton, *Delta*, 10-12, 39. Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 63.

Whether poisoning for the boll weevil with a handheld spray gun, a machine in the field, or an airplane, pesticides fell on more than just the cotton plant. Though the barnstorming duster pilots were known for their ability to skirt the tree lines in order to spray poison into the farthest corners of a field, they usually applied those skills to guaranteeing full coverage, not to avoiding the buildings that dotted the landscape. In fact, DPLC was a prime experimental plot because of its long, wide fields which allowed planes to spread poison in extended rows without frequent turns. The sharecropping cabins located in the middle of the fields were of no concern to the pilots, nor to DPLC's managers. Bert Coad admitted that "cabins frequently were subjected to a cloud of dust," but, he argued, "the poison...is so thin...that the portion drifting to any other point does not settle in injurious quantities."<sup>38</sup>

The use of sharecroppers in spreading boll weevil poison and the disregard for their safety during aerial spray runs, exemplifies the overall treatment that laborers received at DPLC. One manager, Dick Holman, told an interviewer that spreading the arsenical compounds could be dangerous for wildlife and the boll weevil, but refused to admit that it had an effect on humans. "You used to kill all the cows and deer and everything else," with the poison, Holman argued, but sharecroppers "would stay out of the way of it." Unless of course, they ate it—a story many landowners commonly told as a way of

---

<sup>38</sup> B.R. Coad, "Dusting Cotton From Airplanes," USDA Bulletin no. 1204 (GPO 1924), 23-24, 36.

explaining that the poison was safe. When applying the pesticides, Holman admitted, “them niggers run across a watermelon patch, he would stop there and eat them watermelons just like he was eating at the house. He never did pay no attention to that poison. And I’ve never heard of anyone getting hurt yet.” Others told stories of farmers mistaking the powdered poison for flour and baking it as bread. Early Ewing Jr. assured an interviewer in 1974 that calcium arsenate “wasn’t too toxic, unless you made biscuits out of it, which some wives did, on a few occasions. And so it wasn’t too toxic to the people that use it, like modern-day insecticides are.”<sup>39</sup>

Today’s scientists disagree. Experts now recognize both the dangers of immediate exposure to calcium arsenate and the long-term effects, but the discovery of risks to humans was not a twentieth century revelation. As early as the 1890s there was great debate in the international medical community over the health risks of arsenic. Today, calcium arsenate, an inorganic chemical compound, is classified as a medium to “very high risk” poison for oral exposure and medium risk for dermal contact; unprotected long-term exposure to this persistent compound produces a surfeit of health problems. DPLC’s workers had no protection from the poison. In fact, after a night spent dusting by mule, workers went home covered in the dust from head to tow. Subjected to these chemicals day and night, tenants experienced a range of immediate ailments,

---

<sup>39</sup> R.M. (Dick) Holman, oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 27. Early Ewing Jr., oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 15.

including gastrointestinal pain, diarrhea, irritability, headache, drowsiness, confusion, vomiting, and toxic psychosis. The effects of long-term exposure, which include a range of diseases from dermatological conditions to a host of cancers, have gone unrecorded. And though DPLC made much of the presence of a company doctor in Scott, the relative powerlessness of black sharecroppers over the medical treatment they received and the presumed unwillingness of DPLC doctors to point to poisons as the cause of worker's sickness, conspired to make the doctor's existence all but meaningless. If sick, tenants had to first approach the unit managers to get permission to make an appointment with the company physician. Managers regularly denied these requests. In addition, trips to the company doctor were not free; tenants signed over cotton slips to the physician to pay for his service, promising a portion of the cropper's cotton at the end of the season. Many tenants simply refused to pay to see the doctor no matter how bad they felt.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the most telling aspect of DPLC's boll weevil poisoning program was that the bulk of the costs of the insecticides were actually passed onto sharecroppers themselves. DPLC bought enormous quantities of the poisons at wholesale costs, then charged each tenant half the cost of the insecticide based on the cropper's acreage. The company of course did not allow tenants to forego buying the poison, and before the evolution of aerial application, the

---

<sup>40</sup> Ewing, Early C. Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi, p.7, 21.



responsibility of paying for and applying it fell on the croppers. Even once the company was paying Delta Air to dust the fields, the cost was passed onto the tenants based on their individual acreage. This policy is indicative of DPLC's position as both a modern corporation employing the latest advances that science and technology had to offer, on one hand, and its having to operate with the cooperation of a vast human workforce on the other.<sup>41</sup>

For all the new technologies that DPLC's size and capital originated, the mega-plantation could not reinvent the basic manner of seed planting, weed chopping, and cotton picking. At least until the late 1930s these tasks depended on people, not machines. For the first thirty-odd years of the twentieth century, despite DPLC's focus on science and mechanization, the single factor on which cotton cultivation most depended was human labor. Like many large plantations in the South, DPLC had a foot in two separate worlds, one modern and one traditional. The company's dependence on the overwhelmingly black workforce frustrated its managers. Jesse Fox, DPLC's superintendent, summed up his feelings about labor when he told his managers his basic theory of cotton planting: "well gentlemen, I just want to tell, it takes niggers and mules to make cotton." Dick Holman, a longtime manager of DPLC, echoed this recollection.

---

<sup>41</sup> Untitled manuscript, October 28, 1943, in DPLC Papers, Series IX: "The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company," box 27; Nelson, 97.

Holman reduced DPLC's size and resources to a simple observation that the plantation's success rested on "a good many mules and... worlds of niggers."<sup>42</sup>

The boll weevil certainly threatened Fox and Holman's understanding of cotton farming. The pest clearly made planters' simple belief that the deep Delta topsoil and seemingly inexhaustible supply of labor were sufficient to guarantee a good crop appear extremely shortsighted. When the boll weevil first appeared and then continued to appear season after season, seed programs and pesticides became relatively more important to producing a crop. But none of these developments lessened DPLC's dependence on human labor. In fact, the development of new farming techniques forced DPLC managers to pay even more attention to the way tenants planted, fertilized, applied poison and picked the cotton crop.

The evolved, modernized system of sharecropping was the ideal system for DPLC to keep watch over tenant activity, to strictly control the manner in which they farmed, and to pass some of the risk of the cotton planting under boll weevil conditions on to the workforce. Fox, Ewing and the other managers had developed a rather complicated method for farming and cultivation, which necessitated a system where laborers would carry out their plans to the letter. The boll weevil made the details of the day to day work in the fields more important. Fox dictated how the soil was to be prepared, the timing of planting,

---

<sup>42</sup> Bostick, Cornelius, oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 5. R.M. (Dick) Holman, oral history transcript, DPLC Papers, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 27.

the spacing of plants, and timing of chopping, poisoning and picking. From the company's point of view, sharecropping not only gave managers strict control over tenants' work, but it allowed the tenants a share in the profit of a successful crop, while putting an equal amount of risk on the tenants. Even in seasons when weather or the boll weevil shortened production, the company could hedge its stake with tenants' own investments. Croppers provided labor, but also consumed goods in DPLC stores. As a body of historical work suggests, sharecropping on large plantations was a system that produced profits for the landowners in a variety of ways. One study of Delta farming conducted in 1916 found that sharecropping all but guaranteed Delta planters a return on their labor investment of between six and eighteen percent. From the company's perspective, farming in the presence of the boll weevil could not only be a manageable endeavor, but a profitable one. DPLC padded their investment in labor and cotton with their sales of seed and the profits generated by tenants' accounts in the company stores.<sup>43</sup>

From the tenants' perspective, working for the country's largest cotton plantation had advantages over smaller operations. Hundreds of sharecropping families had moved north from the boll weevil infested territories into the Delta about the time DPLC was building its workforce. The company also sent

---

<sup>43</sup> Boeger and Goldenweiser, "A Study of the Tenant Systems of Farming in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta," 15. John Charles Willis, "On the New South Frontier: Life in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, 1865-1920," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1991), 356-7.

recruiters into the boll weevil territories. Lillie Belle Parker, recalled that in 1914 her parents, then living in Magee, Mississippi, met “a man going around getting labor for the Delta Pine Land.” “And, he told my daddy that they was giving them a house, residence, furniture in the house and giving them a mule to work the place and that’s why he was up here,” Parker told an interviewer. For sharecroppers like the Parker Family, life at DPLC offered hope. The company’s size suggested to many tenants that it would be a stable place to live and work. The promises of housing, medical attention, and community fostered the dream that they might work for a few years and make enough money to buy their own land. As a result, thousands of croppers moved to Scott in search of work; tens of thousands of laborers would eventually call DPLC home. Early Ewing told his son that “every Negro and white man in the Delta at one time or another had worked for Delta and Pine Land Company.”<sup>44</sup>

The hope that DPLC, and the Delta as a whole, offered black Mississippians in search of work and community was fleeting. Though industrial planters adapted to the boll weevil, passing on much of the increased work created by the pest onto the tenants, and in some cases even profiting from the pest’s spread, sharecroppers usually felt only increased pressure and decreased hope as the weevil invaded their cotton. The boll weevil slowly shut the door on

---

<sup>44</sup> Minor S. Gray, “A Short History of Delta and Pine Land Company,” unpublished manuscript, n.d., in DPLC Papers, Series IX: “The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company,” box 27. p. 5. Ewing, Early C. Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi, p.26.

the dreams of Delta tenants, as DPLC ratcheted tighter its management and supervision of its employees' work and social lives.

Sharecroppers on DPLC's sixteen sub-plantations woke six days a week before daylight to the ringing of the company bell. Each of the firm's sixteen farms were further divided into units, each unit having its own set of barns storing mules, tools, feed, seed and other supplies. After breakfast, prepared mostly by women and eaten in workers' company-owned cabins, croppers walked to the unit barn to pick up their mules and, depending on the time of the season, walked out into their plots and began cultivating, planting, chopping or picking. Women and children worked in the fields at various points in the season, but their labor was most important during chopping (late spring) and picking time (late summer). On average, each family worked ten acres of cotton for each male head of household and an additional five acres for each able-bodied person in the family.<sup>45</sup>

At its height, in the early 1920s, there were 1,400 sharecropper families living and working at DPLC, though the conditions of their employment—and labor's effect on DPLC's bottom line—were never static. Tenants had accounts at the company store, where they charged food, clothing, farming supplies, toys and other things. The company added significant interest to each purchase and tenants would settle at the end of the season on the account. Despite the

---

<sup>45</sup> Minor S. Gray, "A Short History of Delta and Pine Land Company," unpublished manuscript, n.d., in DPLC Papers, Series IX: "The History of the Delta and Pine Land Company," box 27., 6.

common assumption that sharecroppers always came out further in debt at the end of the season than when they began, most plantation records suggest that only in dire times did the majority of tenants end a year in debt.

Depending on several factors, including most importantly the size of the tenant's harvest and the price he or she could get for their cotton, tenants finished most seasons ahead. In years of heavy boll weevil infestation, tenants bore the brunt of the costs for pesticides, fertilizers, and additional labor, and stood to suffer the most if the crop was diminished. In years when the insects destroyed the crop despite tenants' application of poison, the tenants paid for the poison with the scant cotton that the boll weevil left. As a result, even in years when the boll weevil population was high, DPLC could be assured of more action at the company store. Of course, the plantation had to bear the wholesale cost of fertilizer and pesticide and hope that farmers made a sufficient crop at the end of the season to pay back what they had used; but in years where tenants were successful, DPLC not only realized profit on the cotton itself, but on the supplies that they made tenants use to make the crop in the first place. Fledgling business magazine *Fortune*, which usually focused on northern industry, even remarked on DPLC's capacity to extract every cent of profit from the land and its workers. The magazine applauded then company president Oscar Johnston's

“maximum expertness in cotton management,” and called the firm’s gross earnings “freakish.”<sup>46</sup>

DPLC’s strict administration of the workers’ lives, the company’s control of where tenants lived, and how and when they farmed, was guided by DPLC’s exacting management style. But it was girded by white racism. In one sense, the record of racism left by the company’s managers was typical of white Mississippians in the era of Jim Crow, but in the context of the company’s efforts to build a model industrial agriculture, the comments take on a class and labor component. “A nigger ain’t got no class,” claimed one former DPLC manager years after his retirement. “They don’t care how you dress them up. No matter how you dress them up he’s still going to be a nigger.” For the white workers at DPLC, blackness and sharecropping were one and the same. In fact, the paternalism of big Delta plantations like the Percy’s and Scott’s was lost at DPLC.<sup>47</sup>

If the racism was ratcheted up at this industrial farm, but so too was the daily resistance of labor to that racism. Though the paternalism that characterized most large Delta plantations was certainly little better for black sharecroppers, DPLC’s brand of industrial management created a kind of racial supremacy with fewer of the personal relationships between laborers and owners that developed on smaller plantations. Despite the racism at the heart of Delta

---

<sup>46</sup> “Biggest Cotton Plantation,” *Fortune* 15, no. 3 (March, 1937): 125, 126.

<sup>47</sup> R.M. (Dick) Holman, oral history transcript, DPLC Records, Series XVI: Oral History, folder 27.

society, or perhaps in conjunction with it, white landowners and managers were forced to rely on black labor, and this dependence gave the workers a modicum of control over their conditions. Landowners and managers simply could not control every aspect of black farm life. Planters' obsession with labor is evidence of the limited power workers had over their bosses. In short, planters needed to obsess about labor; they threw tenants parties, extorted and lynched them because workers needed to be controlled. Without these constraints (and to a degree even with the planters' oppression in effect), tenants were active and constantly moving. Like the boll weevil, workers were in constant motion.

As in Texas and Louisiana, the social lives of Delta cotton workers directly related to the ever-changing status of their field work. Perhaps the most important way the workers resisted the stricture of farm life was through this complex social life. Sharecroppers went out, socialized and spent money to exercise a modicum of control over the drudgery of their work lives. How tenants spent money, worshipped, traveled, sang, and let off steam is a direct reflection on the effect of the boll weevil on Delta cotton culture. The blues, especially the dozens of songs directly and tangentially about the boll weevil itself, serves as a historical record of the boll weevil's invasion of the Delta and a statement to the failure of a region's promise. This musical form is inseparable from the work and social lives of black tenants in the Delta and explains something about how sharecroppers felt about the pest, landowners and their hope of a better life.



Black tenants gathered together in both public and private celebrations, but white Mississippians were often transfixed by those events that occurred in plain view. After payday in the fall, for instance, car dealers from as far away as Memphis would descend on Scott in a caravan of old jalopies, eager to sell them to the newly flush sharecroppers. Bluesman David “Honeyboy” Edwards recalled that the croppers who could not afford cars with their end-of-season earnings could easily borrow cash from the plantation store, thus “hooking them for next year.” Early Ewing, Jr. remembered that on pay day “Scott would be full of these old second hand cars that they would be selling to these tenants on settlement day.” The appearance of these junky old cars at DPLC suggests that something deeper than crass consumption was going on. As Ted Ownby suggests in his work on consumption in Mississippi in this period, buying cars was a way for sharecroppers to ensure their own geographic mobility, but it was also a very public expression of their status. The boll weevil might have cut their crop, and by extension tied a tenant to DPLC for another year, but with a car, a family could at the very least drive into Greenville on a Saturday night to socialize, or to a nearby plantation to catch up with friends and family.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the season, nearly every Saturday, dozens of sharecroppers from DPLC would ride in cars or wagons to town. Ewing recalled that a few

---

<sup>48</sup> David Honeyboy Edwards, *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing: The Life and Times of Delta Bluesman Honeyboy Edwards* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1997), 19-20. Early C. Ewing, Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi, p. 22. Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty & Culture, 1830-1998*.

sharecroppers often had a little cash at the end of the week from “non-cotton related work they might have done,” and they ventured into town to be entertained. “They had tent picture shows and things like that,” Ewing remembered, “I know they used to have... a minstrel show. Brer Rabbit Minstrel Show and Silas Green used to come through here... when people had a little money.” Most of the entertainment enjoyed by sharecroppers was not of the traditional tent show variety, however. Tenants did not need to venture into towns to find entertainment.<sup>49</sup>

The social life of black farm laborers at DPLC did not begin or end according to the season, or even the time of day. It was in this social space, all but closed off to white farm managers and landowners, that sharecroppers heard, honed, re-worked and re-played boll weevil songs. Many of the tunes that would eventually make their way into the international blues canon, began as work songs sung by women and men in the fields of the Delta. Singing while planting, chopping or picking was a way of both ordering their labor experience, but also of simply communicating with fellow workers within earshot. The songs that arose in this space were the reflections of sharecroppers on the boll weevil and the world that the bug was invading.

In the “jooks, honky-tonks, and after-hours joints” where musicians often performed these boll weevil songs, one scholar of African American dance has

---

<sup>49</sup> Early C. Ewing, Jr., transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, June 5 1978, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, MS., p. 22.

argued, adult sharecroppers engaged in a variety of activities, mostly of the “quasilegal” kind. Gambling and bootlegging accompanied the music and dancing. Sharecroppers spread information about the location of a jook or the timing of a house party only by word of mouth, to avoid white harassment, though it is clear from the records left by plantation bosses that they were well aware of at least a fair amount of this socializing.<sup>50</sup>

In this environment bluesmen became an important part of the entire community’s social life. The performances were common enough that certain talented musicians could make a living outside of the cotton fields by moving from one party to the next, though they never strayed too far from the rural cotton communities that formed the base of their audience. Despite the fact that, as one white manager of blues musicians claimed “Every singer I’ve ever ran across, he is not a worker,” the bluesmen became *representations* of the cotton laborers themselves. As James C. Cobb argues, a traveling musician was “a key figure, symbolic of a communal culture... [who] entertained his audiences by expressing deeply felt, shared emotions in a manner that made him more than an entertainer.” And though many of the songs expressed universal themes of love and loss, those about the boll weevil were anchored in the specifics of that time and place. Audiences applauded, nodded and shouted in agreement when the singer struck a familiar chord, as the boll weevil song did. Perhaps no single

---

<sup>50</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 76, 84.

bluesman in the Delta got more people yelling and hips shaking than Charley Patton, the man who would take his own vision of the boll weevil's southern journey to the national and international stage.<sup>51</sup>

In 1928, Charley Patton was trying to play his guitar more and work in the cotton fields less. His family had moved around Mississippi during his childhood, working as sharecroppers. Around the turn of the century, the Pattons had moved north to the Delta, and settled on the Dockery plantation just east of Cleveland. Bill Patton, Charley's father, sharecropped for three years until he had saved enough money to buy land near Renova, an all-African-American community where he built and ran a general store. Charley stayed behind, where he began life as a bluesman.<sup>52</sup>

Patton had probably begun playing music prior to his arrival in the Delta, but his musical interest flourished at Dockery. He played with and learned from other tenants like Toby Bonds and Henry Sloan. Charley would also work some in the fields, though he tried to avoid it. Though the details of his career are sketchy, Patton must have begun playing professionally around 1907, just as fear of the encroaching boll weevil reached a fevered pitch.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Henry C. Speir interview by Gayle Dean Wardlow on "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton," Revenant Album No. 212. 7 compact disc boxed set, 2001. Interview in Jackson, MS, May 18, 1968., James C. Cobb "The Blues Is a Lowdown Shakin' Chill" in *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 103.

<sup>52</sup> David Evans, "Charley Patton: The Conscience of the Delta" essay in liner notes of *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*, Revenant Album No. 212. 7 compact disc boxed set, 2001, 10.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 12, 13, 15.

By 1928, Patton had earned the reputation as the best and most active blues singer in the Delta. He played at parties throughout the cotton territory for whites as well as blacks. Perhaps he felt he had reached the peak of his local fame when he boarded a train in 1928 for Jackson. He had heard from another musician that there was a man there, H.C. Speir, a squat, white, cigar smoking drug store owner, who recorded singers in a makeshift studio above his pharmacy. Patton found Speir, played a few songs for him and was soon standing in front of a microphone in Speir's studio recording his first tracks. Speir must have like what he heard because a few months later he drove up Highway 61 into the Delta with a primitive recording contraption in his car trunk, looking to record Patton again. He found the bluesman in a cabin and made more records. This session would change the rural black Mississippian's life forever. Only one month later, Patton found himself hundreds of miles from Dockery, laying down his first track for Paramount Records: "Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues."<sup>54</sup>

The recording, released by Paramount later that year for nationwide distribution, was the first widely disseminated commercial recording of a boll weevil song. Its effect was great. The record found an audience throughout the South, but it also found its way into jukeboxes and record collections across the country. People who had already experienced the boll weevil's damage first

---

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* (Newton, New Jersey: Rock Chapel Press, 1988), 11-13, 280. Henry C. Speir interview by Gayle Dean Wardlow on "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton," Revenant Album No. 212. 7 compact disc boxed set, 2001. Interview in Jackson, MS, May 18, 1968.

hand identified with the singer's plight, while those who lived far from cotton fields learned of the seriousness of the tiny insect's spread. But more than simply a cultural artifact of the human-pest interaction, Patton's "Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues" is an entrée into the world of sharecropping in the Mississippi Delta. It is a song about mobility, cultural space, economic opportunity in the face of the insect threat, and white peoples' commitment to a race-based labor system wedded to the constricting arrangements of tenant farming.

People who played the record on home phonographs, listened in a juke joint or club, or live from Patton himself, heard a halting, cryptic song that for many must have been confusing. To a listener today, it can be almost unintelligible. First, one must spend a lot of time with the song to understand the words.<sup>55</sup> The recording is rough and crackly and Patton's voice pierces through the static with a low-pitched throaty roar. Understanding his voice is not all the fault of the primitive recording; Patton was never known for his vocal clarity. In the 1920s, bluesman Son House heard Patton play on and around the Dockery plantation several times and remembered that "a lot of Charley's words... you can be sitting right under him [and] you can't hardly understand him." Booker Miller, another blues singer, remembered that Patton had a "growl in his voice" which made it hard to understand.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> There is a long and interesting story of the song's lyrical interpretation that has only been perpetuated with the presence of the Internet.

<sup>56</sup> John Fahey, *Charley Patton* (London: November Books, 1970), 66. Booker Miller, interviewed by Gayle Dean Wardlow, 1968, pt. 4 on "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton," Revenant Album No. 212. 7 compact disc boxed set, 2001.

Once a listener becomes accustomed to the recording and the voice, the story Patton tells still does not immediately make sense. Sometimes he sends clues as to who is speaking, with lines that begin “farmer said” or “boll weevil said,” but in many of the stanzas he switches from the voice of one character to another without warning. The result is that even the trained ear is not always sure who is speaking to whom. Over a single-chord guitar line that provides at once a low rhythm and a high, almost squealing jingle, Patton begins singing “There's a little boll weevil, see him movin' in the air, Lordy / You can plant your cotton and you won't get a half-a-cent, Lordy.” Listeners heard a voice, in the words of novelist Tom Piazza, “flaring up and dying down like a kitchen match.”<sup>57</sup> Without altering the phrasing or tone of his giant voice, Patton creates two characters, a farmer and a boll weevil, having a conversation. “Boll weevil, boll weevil, where's your native home?” the farmer asks. “A-Louisiana r-an' Texas is a-where I's bred an' born,” the pest responds. But the boll weevil was on the move. “Boll weevil lef' Texas,” the farmer explains to the listener, “he biddin' me farewell.” Then a plainly spoken question for the pest: “Where you goin' now?” The weevil boasts “I'm going down to Mississippi gonna give Louisiana hell, Lordy!” Patton's role then switches to narrator, explaining that the “Boll weevil told his wife, I believe I may go north.” The threat, or promise, of a move north is too much for Patton's narrator to bear. After a few pointed plucks of a high note

---

<sup>57</sup> Tom Piazza, *Blues and Trouble: Five Stories* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1996), 190.

on his guitar, he delivers a slow, un-sung, haunting promise: “I won’t tell nobody.”<sup>58</sup>

This secretive promise hints that there is more going on in this song than a boll weevil eating some cotton. The confusion over who is speaking, the constant shift of the narrator, is not the result of sloppy singing or storytelling—it is quite intentional. This deliberate misdirection blurs not only the line between farmer and pest, but between singer and subject as well. The song can take on a different meaning, then, if we think of the pest character not only as the boll weevil but also as the landless tenant farmer. If it is a sharecropper telling his wife “I believe I may go north,” then the secrecy that Patton promises with his line “I won’t tell nobody” takes on a whole new gravity. Patton’s character’s threat to move, or even simply his allusion to the boll weevil’s own frenetic migration was a sentiment at the heart of tenant farmers’ lives. The speaker’s whispered threat to move north spoke to a long history of movement of laborers into, within and from the Delta as well as to an oppressive and violent tradition of landowners attempting to restrict that movement. Though Patton’s version does not contain the line “just lookin’ for a home,” common to nearly all published and recorded songs about the pest, there is no doubt that the insect and farmer he describes are searching for a better life somewhere else.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Charley Patton, “Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues” Paramount 12805.

<sup>59</sup> The recording itself, as well as the lyrics, are draped in ambiguity and secrecy. Its first recorded incarnation—that 1929 Paramount 78-RPM record—was not initially even attributed to Patton. The company marketed it as the work of “The Masked Marvel.” Advertisements featured a sketch of a man in a black jacket and bow tie, wearing an eye mask apparently to protect his



In 1909, on the eve of the weevil's entry into the Delta, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* wrote that cotton "is today the appropriate setting and background of the most industrious and best contented portion of the negro population of the United States." By the time the cotton pest had been in the region's fields for a few years this could no longer be said. Beginning slowly and sporadically in the first two decades of the twentieth century, black outmigration from rural Mississippi eventually became a massive movement of people to the North. This common historical portrayal of the Great Migration as a steady move of thousands of African Americans toward freedom tells an incomplete story, as recent scholarship suggests. World War I did create enticing jobs in the North and the boll weevil certainly made life more difficult for tenant farmers, but there was seldom a single reason for people leaving the rural South; there were as many reasons for leaving as the number of people who left.<sup>60</sup>

One untold aspect of the Great Migration is that prior to WW II, the exodus from the Delta did not mean a net loss of African American population in the

---

identity. The accompanying caption asked "Guess Who He Is?" Paramount released other recordings of the song at the same time, which they correctly attributed to Patton; the creation of his masked alter ego was simply a marketing ploy. To add even more confusion to the mix, Paramount released a small quantity of the recordings correctly attributing the song to Patton. Nevertheless, it adds to the mystique of a song that is confusing enough on its own. Liner notes of *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*, Revenant Album No. 212. Seven-compact-disc set, 2001. Appendix 1: Thematic Catalogue of the Recorded Music of Charley Patton, 94.

<sup>60</sup> "The Story of King Cotton" *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 10, 1909, IV, 1. Quantifying this movement and trying to analyze the boll weevil's effect upon it is a difficult task. Out-migration was not a steady stream, people moved individually and in groups, at various times during the year and often moved first to a local town before venturing out of state. It is therefore not only hard to come up with raw numbers of people who moved, but it is nearly impossible to pinpoint a single reason for why people left. Economic historian Robert Higgs studied the boll weevil's effect on outmigration and determined that the pest had no perceivable impact on labor movement. As I will address in chapter seven, Higgs' study has several problems.

region. As J. William Harris points out, black laborers left northwestern Mississippi in substantial numbers from 1920 to 1925, but the overall rural black population did not drop at an equal rate. From 1926 through 1930, the total number of black sharecroppers in the Delta *increased* to its highest level ever: 77,000 tenants. The promise of the Delta that had attracted landless laborers from the turn of the century did not dissolve by the first World War. In fact, in the 1920s, farm conditions in much of the South east of the Mississippi River were deteriorating, but the Delta remained an attractive place for resettlement. In the 1910s and 1920s the weevil spread east to the older lands of the Cotton Belt and laborers there looked west, as well as north, for places to resettle. Tenants in Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia saw Mississippi as an attractive place to settle until the onset of the Great Depression.<sup>61</sup>

Part of the misunderstanding of the Great Migration is due to historians' buying into the mythological power of the boll weevil. The idea that farmers were powerless over the pest and that it destroyed everything in its path contributed to the notion that when the insect arrived sharecroppers had no work to do, faced poverty and fled. Not only have historians miscalculated the relationship between the boll weevil and migration, but white Mississippians at the time tended to cite the pest as the reason for laborers leaving. Many chose to point to this non-human factor for worker discontent rather than those factors that the

---

<sup>61</sup> Harris, *Deep Souths*, 244.

landowners themselves had created. In fact, white farmers seemed genuinely shocked as laborers left. They used violence and peonage to fight that migration, and continued to argue that they had been *abandoned* by “their” workforce long after the migration slowed. As one Greenville businessman recalled, some scholars believed the adoption of mechanized farm equipment in the 1930s and 1940s had forced black labor from the fields. He argued instead that the machines replaced, rather than displaced, workers. By the time tractors arrived, black workers were “already gone... And you couldn’t stop them from leaving.” Which is not to say that whites did not try to stop to stem the tide.<sup>62</sup>

The legacy of the boll weevil goes beyond migration and mechanization. The insect fundamentally changed the way that farmers thought of their work. The weevil made cotton farming more difficult for everyone. Before the weevil came to the Delta, large planters acquired land and labor and the soil did the rest. Historian William Lincoln Giles correctly points out that in the late nineteenth century, “Large farming operations differed from small ones only in having more hands, more hoes, and more mules.” That this was no longer true by the second decade of the twentieth century may be explained in some measure to the arrival of the boll weevil. In fighting the cotton pest, landholders tried to use their social, cultural and economic power to foster public and private

---

<sup>62</sup> Jere B. Nash, transcript of interview by Roberta Miller, May 31, 1977, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi

research on ways to combat the menace. In DPLC's case, it was not simply bigger than the average plantation; it was fundamentally different.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, the pest aided the development of the the industrial plantation in the region. When the insect's threat lowered land prices, capitalists swooped in and bought enormous farms. DPLC struggled with the pest for years, but had the resources to develop new ways of fighting it, thus guaranteeing its own profitability by selling weevil-beating seeds to the rest of the South. The company's success did not happen overnight, but the weevil's long-term presence drove its experiments. Between 1911 and 1927, in fact, the company paid its investors a dividend only once. Then the 1927 Mississippi River flood, the worst of the twentieth century, took more than three thousand acres out of production and cost the plantation an estimated \$500,000. During the Depression the company began to consistently turn a profit, thanks in part to DPLC's arrangement with President Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Act . By the mid-1930s the company sold more of its quick-maturing, boll weevil beating varieties of cottonseed than any other firm in the world.<sup>64</sup>

This shift to larger, industrially organized farming is important, but until the widespread use of tractors in the mid-1930s, there was no upheaval of basic social and economic power. White landowners still ruled, and the cotton workforce was overwhelmingly black and poor. Tenants' hopes for the Delta had

---

<sup>63</sup> Giles, "Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970." 181.

<sup>64</sup> "Biggest Cotton Plantation," *Fortune* 15, no. 3 (March, 1937): 130-131.

been dashed by cotton, and the boll weevil surely did not resurrect them. The pest disrupted planter hegemony only briefly. Despite the instance of the croppers on Johanna Reiser's plantation becoming renters because of the pest, generally the arrival of the boll weevil meant increased landowner control and scrutiny of workers' personal and work lives. The new methods and tools for planting, fertilizing, and picking engineered by private and public researchers meant managers paid closer attention to how laborers worked. The blues culture that came out of the Delta when the boll weevil entered was important, not only because of its power to enrich black life, but because of its record of the day-to-day horrors of it. As the weevil was "just lookin' for a home," workers in the Delta were looking for their own salvation.

## CHAPTER 5

“THE HERALD OF PROSPERITY”: THE BOLL WEEVIL AND THE PROMISE  
OF DIVERSIFICATION IN SOUTHEASTERN ALABAMA

In January, 1910, as the first few boll weevils crossed the Mississippi border into Alabama’s southwest corner, the *New York Times* published a lengthy article about the pest’s trek and the South’s unsuccessful efforts to stop it. Reiterating the by now well-known and largely untrue story of the weevil’s all-encompassing destructiveness, the *Times* claimed there was simply no way to beat the bug. The weevil was “an illustration of the immutable forces of nature,” according to the paper, “and the futility of man’s feeble efforts against a force of the sort.” There were no poisons that could stop the pest, no effective natural enemies. “Where the weevil comes, he stays,” the *Times* maintained, “what the weevil gets he holds.”<sup>1</sup>

Articles like these not only perpetuated the myth of the weevil’s sweeping, comprehensive devastation, but concurrently endorsed its mythical solution: diversification could save the South. The only way to stop the bug, the *Times* explained, was to take away its sole source of food. Diversifying from

---

<sup>1</sup> “Why the Deadly Boll Weevil, Bringing Revolution With Him, Is Called the ‘Prosperity Bug’,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1910, part 5, p. 13.

cotton into other crops would limit the pest's damage and improve the lot of southern farmers big and small. Planters had talked of diversification for generations, but each spring devoted more and more acreage to the white staple. Landowners simply did not believe that there was money in other crops. "Cotton is gold," the *Times* noted, "It is actual money." Most were willing to gamble on the staple, even if weevils devoured a significant portion of it, because farmers knew that what fleece the pest did not destroy could instantly be turned to cash.<sup>2</sup>

The *Times* was not completely pessimistic, however. The newspaper maintained that despite their widespread, long-term commitment to cotton, southerners' sentiment against planting beans or vegetables and raising stock was actually waning. "The Deadly Boll Weevil" was sweeping through the South, the *Times* declared, "Bringing Revolution With Him." Some farmers were even calling it the "Prosperity Bug." The tiny insect was accomplishing what generations of modern voices could not, diversifying the cotton fields of Alabama. The paper envisioned a hypothetical landowner, who, within the weevil's sights, would cut his cotton acreage by a third, plant more oats in the spring, and more corn, cow peas and pumpkins in the summer. "He gets hogs and cattle to raise and breed," the paper imagined, producing on his own land "chickens and eggs and meat and meal and molasses." Farmers would never need to rely on

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

merchants or banks again, growing cotton only on excess land. “What cotton he gathers after his wrestle with the boll weevil is clean, clear profit.” No longer buying his meat from Chicago, flour from Minneapolis and nails from Pittsburgh, “He is as nearly an absolutely independent man as it is possible to be.” The boll weevil would teach southern farmers once and for all that dependence on cotton was suicide. Diversification would end rural poverty across the South.<sup>3</sup>

But this New York dream had little grounding in Alabama reality. From the point when the boll weevil crossed the Mexican border around 1892 to the publication of the *Times* article in 1910, it had traveled more than eight hundred miles and destroyed 1.6 million bales of cotton, worth an estimated \$107 million. Yet, in spite of these figures, southern farmers were not abandoning the plant en masse. In parts of the South, farmers were actually *expanding* the amount of land devoted to cotton. Despite the substantive damage caused by the weevil from 1892 to 1910, Texas had doubled its cotton acreage.<sup>4</sup> Though Louisiana and Mississippi saw modest drops in cotton acreage statewide after the weevil’s initial invasion, areas within these states increased their commitment to the staple. Amazingly, planters in the Mississippi Delta had increased both cotton acreage and cotton yield during the first decade of the weevil’s presence.

Farmers were actually planting more cotton and getting more lint from each plant

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Part of the explanation for Texas’s expansion of cotton acreage is that the boll weevil did not thrive in the dry fields of central and western Texas. As a result, farmers there expanded the cotton growing belt west, towards these weevil-resistant climates.



than ever before. In 1910, the pest stood on the Alabama border, as farmers, business people, and government experts wondered what changes the pest would exact in Alabama.<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of the boll weevil, Alabama bore little resemblance to the Delta. Whereas the dark topsoil of the alluvial Mississippi region is rich and flat and consistent, Alabama has a landscape and geology that varies and shifts from acre to acre and field to field.<sup>6</sup> The southeastern corner of the state is worthy of particular study because of the fascinating combination of historical forces at work as the boll weevil approached (See Figure 5.1). First, the region's geography embodies two typical southern cotton growing areas, the Black Belt and Wiregrass. Southeastern Alabama was also home to two of the South's most important agricultural schools, Tuskegee Institute and Alabama Polytechnic Institute (renamed Auburn University in 1960). In addition, the women and men of southeast Alabama were not surprised by the boll weevil—they had heard about, read of, and researched the pest for fifteen years before it arrived in their state. Because of this long period of time, Alabamans had to prepare for the

---

<sup>5</sup> From 1909, the year the weevil entered the Delta, until 1919, planters increased their cotton acreage from 724,815 acres to 1.18 million. Though the boll weevil is estimated to have destroyed as much as twenty percent of Mississippi's cotton statewide during these ten years, the Delta increased its production by sixty-four percent. *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922). Dickerson et al., eds., *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999*, 590.

<sup>6</sup> I define the region of Southeastern Alabama as the counties of Barbour, Bullock, Coffee, Covington, Crenshaw, Dale, Geneva, Henry, Houston, Lee, Macon, Pike, Russell. Houston County was created in 1903 from parts of Henry, Dale and Geneva Counties. See Figure 5.1.

weevil's arrival. The diversification schemes that had been all but ignored by farmers in states to the west, had a real chance of success in Alabama. Knowing the range of effects that the boll weevil might have on their society, Southeast Alabamans were actually interested in the idea of growing something other than cotton. It was a region wooed by the promise of diversification in the face of the weevil's menace, and one in which an amazing and unlikely combination of factors made the dream of diversification come true.<sup>7</sup>

As early as the 1820s, farmers in the southeast corner of Alabama tried to make cotton grow in both the Black Belt and Wiregrass with varying results. In the naturally fertile and relatively flat Black Belt counties, cotton would grow with little effort. In the Wiregrass, however, the soil was too sandy and lacked sufficient nutrients to produce the plant. In the second-half of the nineteenth century, however, the advent of widely available commercial fertilizers made

---

<sup>7</sup> Soil maps of the Deep South indicate three major bands of land types that run from west to east through the Alabama. Within each major region, however, dozens of local variations of soil, topography and geology exist. The skinny southernmost region is a level coastal plain that runs from the Florida border about sixty miles to the north. The soils of this region, which embody Covington, Geneva, and Houston Counties, are rich in nutrients, relatively flat and productive. Above this section, making up more than its share of the lower half of the state, is the hilly coastal plain sometimes called the Wiregrass. Like its southern neighbor, the land has mixed sandy loam soils where the land is flat, but many hills that roll through the countryside breaking up potential farmland. Comprising most of six counties, a 1953 state study called the soils of this region "badly mixed in character," and "very subject to erosion." A third band runs to the north of these sandy hills and is comprised of flat, dark soils. Most of Macon, Lee, Bullock and Russell Counties are within this Black Belt region, though by the early twentieth century the lands were not all in equal condition. In Lee County, the "grayish brown to red soils" were the state's most severely eroded. At mid-century the state was willing to admit that Lee's land had washed away to the point where "many areas [have] gone out of crop use." Mary Elizabeth Hines, "Death at the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Geography of Lynching in the Deep South, 1882-1910" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1992). Alabama Department of Agriculture, "Soil Map of Alabama" (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, 1953). See also, Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 276-9.

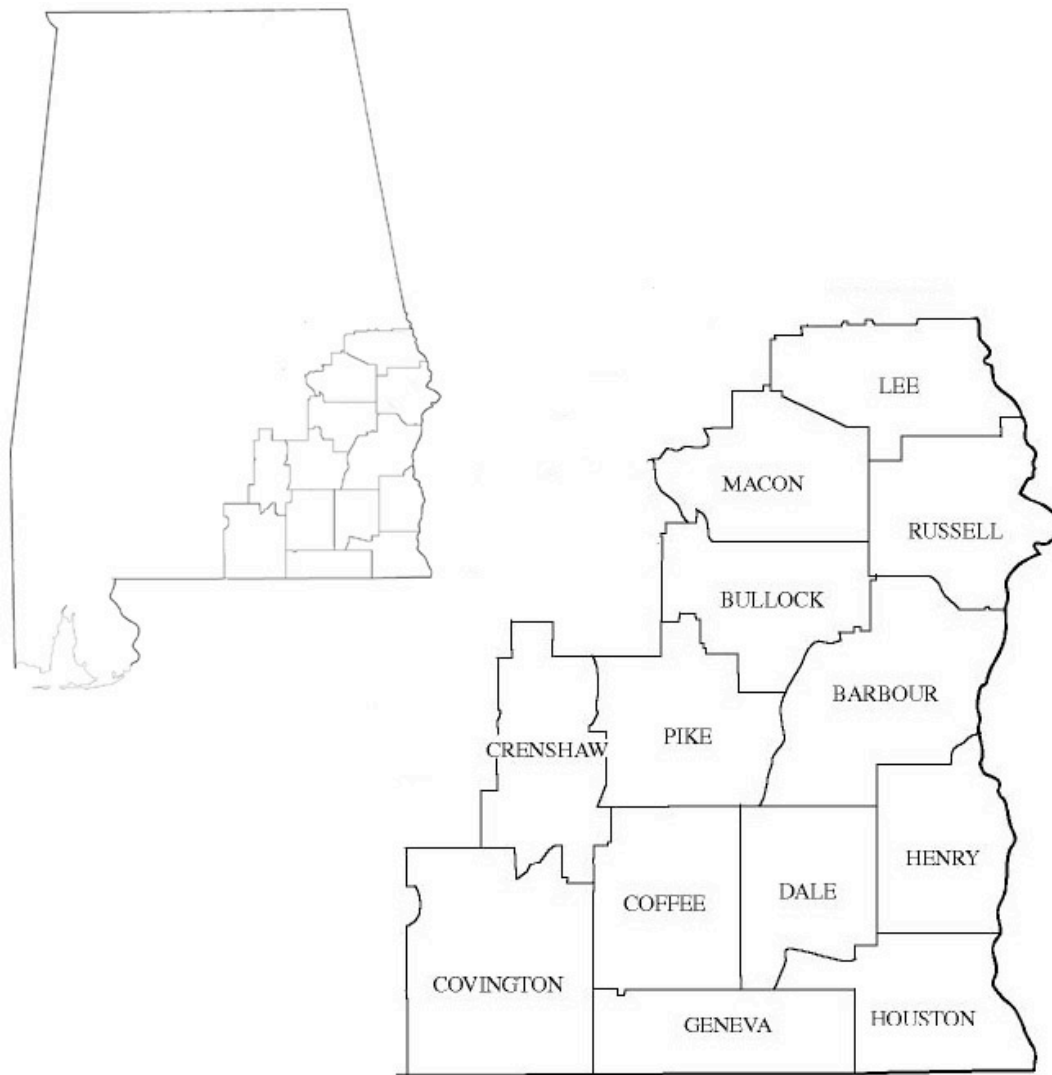


Figure 5.1: Southeastern Alabama

cotton farming in the Wiregrass possible. By the turn of the century, farmers in Southeast Alabama were committed to cotton production everywhere and anywhere the staple would grow, no matter the soil type or the impact it had on the land.<sup>8</sup>

Immigrants intent on turning the poor land into a cotton kingdom flooded southeastern Alabama. From 1890 to 1900 there was a huge influx in population. During the decade, Covington, a sprawling county on the Florida border, saw its population more than double; Geneva and Coffee Counties saw near one-hundred percent population gains. In fact, all counties in the region except one experienced double-digit increases in population during this decade. Despite the availability of fertilizer and local farmers' willingness to pay high prices for it, however, farming in the sandy soil was never a sure thing. Cotton farming in the Wiregrass was more dependent on sufficient rainfall, field preparation, and precise application of the proper fertilizer than it was in the Black Belt. Farmers in the area summed up the precariousness of their work in a popular local rhyme: "Sift your meal and save your bran, 'cause you can't make a livin' in sandy land."<sup>9</sup>

As happened across the South as marginal lands caught cotton fever, most of the immigrants to the new cotton fields of southeast Alabama soon found

---

<sup>8</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *Soil Survey of Coffee County, Alabama* (Washington: Government Printing Office, March, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902). Charles Grayson Summersell, *Alabama History For Schools*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Montgomery, AL: Viewpoint Publications, 1975), 439.

themselves mired in tenancy. As Table 5.1 shows, in 1910, on the eve of the weevil's entry into the state, those southeastern Alabama counties that grew the most cotton also had the highest percentages of tenancy, as well as the largest African American population. Bullock County, for instance, located in the Black Belt just to the east of Montgomery, had a tenancy rate pushing 90 percent; not surprisingly, given that figure, 80 percent of its population was African American and it was the region's most productive cotton land. Of the six counties in the region with tenancy rates higher than the state average, all were major cotton producers. These factors of race, tenancy, and soil conditions combined to determine the response of each county to the boll weevil's arrival.<sup>10</sup>

In 1910, Southeastern Alabama was not only home to expanding cotton production and tenancy, both also to the state's major agricultural education institutions. Both Alabama Polytechnic Institute and Tuskegee Institute had been in existence long before the boll weevil's arrival in the region, but each would grow significantly after the pest's appearance in the state. From 1910 to 1930, Alabama Polytechnic and Tuskegee developed into two of the South's most influential agricultural schools and became major voices for crop diversification.

In 1872, with a charter from the state legislature and federal Morrill Act funding, Alabama Polytechnic Institute took over operation of the small East Alabama Male College located in the town of Auburn, in Lee County. Not only

---

<sup>10</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, Volume 1: Population, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913).

Table 5.1: Cotton, Tenancy and Race in Southeastern Alabama, 1910.<sup>11</sup>

<b>State/County</b>	<b>Cotton acreage</b>	<b>Percentage of farms operated by tenants</b>	<b>African Americans as percentage of total population</b>
<b>Alabama</b>	3,730,482	57.7%	45.25%
<b>Bullock</b>	107,099	87.2%	81.70%
<b>Barbour</b>	99,170	70.3%	63.64%
<b>Pike</b>	96,540	64.1%	42.76%
<b>Macon</b>	89,796	83.3%	81.61%
<b>Russell</b>	83,750	80.1%	78.10%
<b>Lee</b>	79,261	71.0%	59.91%
<b>Coffee</b>	72,535	45.2%	20.18%
<b>Henry</b>	70,229	50.2%	37.64%
<b>Dale</b>	61,056	45.2%	22.98%
<b>Crenshaw</b>	58,833	47.3%	28.45%
<b>Geneva</b>	56,645	35.5%	16.85%
<b>Covington</b>	42,528	21.3%	15.86%

did the buildings and land of the struggling college became part of the new A&M school, but its faculty and students remained as well. For its first thirty years the school struggled to attract and retain students. At the turn of the century, with no annual state funding the institution was perpetually on verge of collapse. In 1907, the state legislature finally agreed to begin supporting the school and its farm research on a permanent basis. After 1910, as the boll weevil began devouring a sizable chunk of the state's annual cotton crop, legislators became even more

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

convinced of the need to support the college's research and teaching resources.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty miles southwest of Auburn, in the Macon County town of Tuskegee, another A&M school struggled for funding. The Alabama legislature had founded the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in 1881 as the state's first institution of higher education for African Americans. Like Alabama Polytechnic, the school could not rely on the state for annual funding and depended instead on private donations. In 1895, the fate of the school changed abruptly with founder and principal Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" speech, delivered to the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition. The address argued that African Americans should not again press for the "folly" of political gains realized briefly during Reconstruction, but should instead learn to work and "contribute to the markets of the world." Washington's school became the institutional embodiment of his philosophy, and donations began pouring in from northern philanthropists.<sup>13</sup>

An integral part of Washington's philosophy was the improvement of black farm life. When the educator spoke of "industrial education" he included farming; indeed, the school's early years were spent largely in developing its resources for agricultural research and teaching. Beginning in 1892, Tuskegee held annual

---

<sup>12</sup> Norwood Allen Kerr, *A History of the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, 1883-1983* (Auburn, Alabama: Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station and Auburn University, 1985), 29, 8, 34-35.

<sup>13</sup> Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 583-587.

farmers' conferences, a day when area landowners and tenants could visit the campus, listen to lectures about farm advances and ask questions of the school's faculty. In the 1890s Washington also began to expand the corps of teachers at the school. In 1896 he hired George Washington Carver, the first black graduate of Iowa State University. Washington appointed Carver head of the school's Agricultural Department and the pair immediately began a course both to educate the Institute's students and to reach out to the black farmers in rural southeast Alabama. Washington believed that African Americans who paid attention to their growing methods would improve not only their own lives but the life of their communities as well. As LuAnn Jones has written, those "who attended annual farmers' conferences at Tuskegee resolved to remove the yoke of the mortgage system...and to dedicate themselves to obtaining better schools, churches, teachers and preachers."<sup>14</sup>

As funding to Tuskegee and Alabama Polytechnic increased, each school looked for ways to use the encroaching boll weevil not only to further the public's knowledge of their educational work but to gain access to farmers previously reluctant to work with them. The boll weevil did much of diversification proponents' work for them; the bug put the flaws of the mono-crop system on the

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* reprint ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 22. Linda O. Hines, "White Mythology and Black Duality: George W. Carver's Response to Racism and The Radical Left," *The Journal of Negro History* 62, Issue 2 (April, 1977): 135. Lewis W. Jones, "The South's First Negro Farm Agent," *Journal of Negro Education* 22, Issue 1 (Winter, 1953), 38-39. Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16. See also Allen Jones, "Improving Rural Life for Blacks: The Tuskegee Negro Farmers' Conference, 1892-1915" *Agricultural History* 65, no. 2 (1991): 105-114.



front page of every newspaper in the state. It was the state extensions agents' job to make farmers connect the presence of the boll weevil to the promise of diversification.

The agricultural schools' staffs and the state's farm agents were joined in their effort to educate farmers and modernize the rural farm by a host of other, more powerful groups. The ideology of diversification—the hope that if farmers grew less cotton it would rescue the South not only from the boll weevil but from intractable rural poverty and tenancy—had found an audience at the highest levels of government. In fact, many administrators in Washington were convinced that the boll weevil had been slowly moving through the South convincing farmers to diversify as it went. On May 31, 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt told a Michigan conference of land grant college presidents that “The farmers in the region affected by the boll weevil, in the course of the efforts to fight it, have succeeded in developing a most scientific husbandry.” Despite the fact that the weevil was less than half-way across the Cotton Belt and that few signs of a permanent move from cotton existed, the president declared victory. The ravages of the boll weevil had rescued southern cotton farmers from cotton itself. “Not only did the industry of farming become of very much greater economic value in its direct results,” Roosevelt told the educators, “but it became immensely more interesting to thousands of families.” To hear the president tell it, the boll weevil had moved through Texas and Louisiana leaving not dead

cotton and a forlorn people in its wake, but an energized rural population who raised stock and organized corn clubs. Echoing the line spoken so often by progressive farming voices, Roosevelt announced that “in many places the boll weevil became a blessing in disguise.”<sup>15</sup>

The southern A&M presidents undoubtedly recognized Roosevelt’s comments as either a dream or a lie. His remarks spoke to a vision that farm educators had embraced fifteen years earlier when the boll weevil first crossed the Rio Grande, namely that the insect menace would convince farmers to leave cotton for other ventures. Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson, writing in 1909, echoed the president’s misconceived vision that diversified farming had already taken hold in the South. Wilson recalled the earliest days of the national extension service, describing how “when the boll weevil came bankers and business men lost confidence and extensive local panics resulted.” Wilson argued that things had changed since the invention and implementation of the demonstration system in 1904. His extension agents had preached the gospel of diversification to a receptive audience. Secretary Wilson bragged of the increase in the number of southern agents from a single person in 1904, to 450 men and women in 1909. “More than 75,000 farmers are receiving direct instruction on their farms,” he claimed.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, “The Man Who Works With His Hands: Address of President Roosevelt at the Semi-Centennial Celebration of the Founding of Agricultural Colleges in the United States, at Lansing, Michigan, May 31, 1907,” Circular No. 24 (July 1, 1907), 10.

<sup>16</sup> James Wilson, “Report of the Secretary,” *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1910* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 81.

Despite the impressive numbers of agents and the farmers they supposedly helped, Wilson had to admit that efforts to convince the majority of southern farmers of the folly of the one-crop system had actually failed. The secretary admitted that the boll weevil continued to ruin unprepared farmers because of overdependence on cotton. “The problem of meeting the advance of the weevil in the South is a complex one,” he wrote. “In order that the farmers might be able to raise cotton at a profit and in sufficient quantities to meet the world’s demands,” Wilson and the USDA recommended a two-part course of action. First, the “adaptation of modern cultural methods” and second, “the teaching of modern farm methods by which *other* standard crops can be produced for the purpose of furnishing food for the family and feed for the stock.” It was a recommendation familiar to any farmer that had met with an agent or read a newspaper during the previous decade. It boiled down to a confusing, if not entirely contradictory mantra: better cotton farming and less cotton farming.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., italics mine. Part of the confusion and failure of previous diversification efforts, farm agents argued, was the limits of federal policy. In its 1903 bill to fund Knapp’s demonstration system, Congress had authorized agents to work only with farmers within the area already invaded by the boll weevil. This precluded the extension service from preparing farmers for the pest. In January, 1909, Knapp pressed southern Congressmen for \$250,000 to expand the work of his agents into the rest of the South. Senator Murphy J. Foster of Louisiana introduced a resolution reflecting Knapp’s request, but it died in the agriculture committee. Other senators tried to introduce similar appropriations, but Congress refused to act. Despite the rhetoric of the president and USDA, federal legislators were hesitant to support education bills that were perceived as helping one area of the country more than others. “Fund to Fight Boll Weevil” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 6, 1909, p.3. Congress, Senate, Senator Foster of Louisiana, 60th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* (January 9, 1909): 688. Early in 1909, Senators F.M. Simmons of North Carolina and Anselm J. McLaurin of Mississippi introduced separate bills to further funding for the boll weevil fight. Congress, Senate, Senator Simmons of North Carolina, 60th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* (February 9, 1909): 2079. Congress, Senate, Senator McLaurin of Mississippi, 60th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* (February 17, 1909): 2561.

For Seaman Knapp, Wilson's top extension agent, the ideology of diversification was no less clear. He encouraged all southern farmers to "raise the food for the family and for the farm stock" as the first priority. Only after a planter had devoted sufficient land to sustaining the people and animals of the farm should he turn his attention to cotton, "so that his principal cash crop may be all profit." Knapp was convinced by the possibilities of "other" crops in the South. The demonstration chief wrote one Louisiana Congressman that the South was better suited to produce "Indian corn" than the Midwest. Forage plants like soybeans, velvet beans and cowpeas were perfectly suited for the region, he argued. And the real money-making promise, Knapp told lawmakers, lay in stock raising. "The South has not developed" its pasture lands, he argued "because the farmers have been so engrossed in other crops that they have paid but little attention."<sup>18</sup>

It was an unrealistic expectation. Greater independence from cotton would have meant a fundamental shift in the business of the rural South. The *New York Times* had been right to call the fleece "gold." Cotton was a currency for southern farmers. Neither landowners nor tenants could summon credit from thin air; they had to promise the lender that there would be some kind of crop at the end of the season that would pay back the loan. Diversifying one's farm from cotton to food crops, stock, and a cash crop still demanded credit, but farmers

---

<sup>18</sup> Knapp quoted in Martin, *Demonstration Work*, 30, 31.

found few merchants or banks willing to extend them money so that they could grow food to feed their families. Tenants were in an even less realistic position when it came to diversification. Landowners told most renters and sharecroppers how much of their allotment was to be devoted to cotton, and few gave tenants permission to grow food for the families and animals as the first priority. In addition, tenants could not shop around for credit on the open market; they relied on landowners or on a merchant recommended by the landlord to provide their initial funding. If these credit issuers told the tenant what to grow in order to get financing, then the tenant had no choice but to follow these orders.

As a result, diversification would only have a chance in a place that met an unlikely list of requirements. First, cotton's hold on the local economy and society could not be absolute. Second, the environment would have to support an alternative crop. Third, the local financial power structure, namely bankers and merchants, would have to be behind the initial move away cotton, so that farmers would have credit and supplies to grow something else. Third, farmers would need to gain practical knowledge of growing a different crop or raising stock. Finally, there would have to be a market for the replacement crop. It would do no one any good if farmers in a certain area moved from cotton into a commodity for which there was no sufficient market .

Despite this list of factors that needed to be met for diversification to be successful, state extension agents continued to try to persuade bankers,

merchants and farmers to support the policy. While the boll weevil's invasion of Alabama dominated local headlines, agents saw their opportunity to make diversification work. John F. Duggar, president of Alabama Polytechnic Institute, kept a large file of clippings about the pest from newspapers across the South. He knew of experts' dire predictions for Alabama's cotton, and he slowly recruited a staff of researchers and agents from states to the west experienced in the boll weevil fight, in order to prepare Alabama farmers for the pest's arrival. Before joining the Alabama Experiment Station in 1907, state entomologist Warren Hinds had worked for the U.S. Bureau of Entomology in Texas and Louisiana. B.L. Moss, the newly appointed state agent of the Bureau of Plant Industry also had experience in the boll weevil territory, formerly serving as an agent in southern Mississippi.<sup>19</sup>

Not only had the Alabama extension service employed workers with direct boll weevil experience, but they sought information about living with the pest firsthand. Officials in Auburn sent several researchers to Texas to investigate that state's long-term reaction to the pest. The Alabama agents were impressed by Texans' ability to grow cotton in spite of the boll weevil, which local farmers

---

<sup>19</sup> One small booklet in Duggar's papers, for instance, promised "there is not even a remote probability that the boll weevil will ever be exterminated... it will eventually be distributed all over the cotton belt." Joseph Hillman, *The Cultivation of Cotton: A Short Treatise Specially Bearing on Fertilization and the Control of the Ravages of the Boll Weevil* (New York: William S. Myers, 1905) in Duggar Family Papers, box 7, folder 79, Auburn University Special Collections. W.E. Hinds, "Heading Off Boll Weevil Panic," Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin no. 159 (December, 1911), 228. USDA, Bureau of Plant Industry, Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work, Annual Report of Progress, Alabama, 1910, in Alabama Cooperative Extension Service Records, Auburn University (hereafter ACES Records), box 355.

attributed to the work of the state's extension agents. The Alabama representatives were happy to hear this. They reported that the weevil had been a "blessing in disguise" in Texas, where "the great prosperity of the country" could be traced "to the boll weevil which forced the adoption of the methods advocated by the Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work." Good times reigned in weevil plagued Texas, the agents claimed, because of the local work of the government. "The people have thoroughly recovered from the ravages of the boll weevil," they optimistically reported.<sup>20</sup>

Hinds was hopeful that the arrival of the pest in Alabama would have a similar effect on the cotton growers of his state. "The coming of the boll weevil has awakened an intense interest among the cotton planters of the state," he wrote in early 1911, "and they are now in a position to accept and adopt recommendations for improved methods, such as would not heretofore have appealed to them." Unfortunately, Hinds recognized, much of the "interest" that farmers expressed could also be dubbed "panic." In order to assuage this weevil anxiety and to give the appearance that the state's experts were meeting the insect head on, Alabama Polytechnic president Duggar toured the state's black belt talking to farmers in 1911 about ways to deal with the creeping pest. One newspaper claimed that "farmers collected in a body to hear him answer questions directed to bring out something of the boll weevil." "He received most

---

<sup>20</sup> USDA, Bureau of Plant Industry, Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work, "Annual Report of Progress," Alabama, 1910, in ACES Records, box 355.

rapt attention from the farmers,” the paper reported, who “understand the value of the work done at Auburn.”<sup>21</sup>

As early as 1907, three years before the expected arrival of the pest, these state extension leaders recognized that many farmers were already in a near panic about the encroaching insect. Duggar, Hinds, and Moss began assuring the public that despite “Numerous reports of the presence of the Mexican Boll Weevil in different parts of the State” that it had not yet appeared. The station also distributed pamphlets with images of the boll weevil in various stages of development so that farmers could differentiate the menace from other cotton pests. In spite of these assurances that the weevil was not yet present, state leaders made no claims that it would not soon arrive and that its effect would not be devastating.<sup>22</sup>

In 1909, Hinds assured Alabama farmers that “there is no possibility of greatly retarding this annual advance,” but began an intensive campaign to educate the public how best to limit the pest’s destruction. To confront the anxiety of cotton producers, Hinds and Moss developed a relatively complex set of recommendations for the state’s land owners, tenants, merchants, bankers, and businesspeople. The level of detail and completeness of these

---

<sup>21</sup> Twenty-third Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (January 31, 1911), 19-20. “Duggar Investigates Alabama Cotton Pests,” newspaper clipping [no paper name], September 1, 1911, in Warren E. Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 6, Auburn University Special Collections, (hereafter Hinds Papers).

<sup>22</sup> Nineteenth Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (January 31, 1907), 36. Twentieth Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (January 31, 1908), 35.



recommendations stands in stark contrast to the nature of the advice given in Texas and Louisiana and to a lesser extent, Mississippi. Alabama had had the time and resources to prepare for the advancing pest and took advantage of it.<sup>23</sup>

Alabama's extension leaders recognized that despite their assurances to the public that the weevil would soon arrive and that methods were available to limit its destruction, farmers might panic. During 1909, Hinds received 1,200 letters from nervous farmers. He replied to most enquiries with a slim bulletin titled "Facing the Boll Weevil Problem in Alabama." The following year even more letters came from panicked cotton growers, and Hinds, in turn, published three circulars and four bulletins dealing directly with the weevil. He also began traveling the state giving lectures to farmers' institutes and business groups. He and Moss also privately wrote the state's demonstration agents asking them to keep an eye out for the encroaching insect and to send any samples immediately to the state laboratory in Auburn.<sup>24</sup>

These early efforts to meet with farmers and to publish bulletins about the weevil were as much an exercise in public relations as they were an effort to actually slow the insect's spread or to advance practical solutions. Hinds and his colleagues wanted Alabama farmers to believe in their department's ability to

---

<sup>23</sup> Twenty-first Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (January 31, 1909), 27.

<sup>24</sup> Twenty-second Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (January 31, 1910), 18. Warren E Hinds to Cotton Demonstration Agents, July 27, 1911, in Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 1. B. L. Moss to All Alabama Agents, July 19, 1912, in Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 2.

fight the pest and to help their farming generally. Their intention was not to calm the farming public entirely, but to position themselves at the center of the solution. In “Heading Off Boll Weevil Panic,” a lengthy bulletin sent to farmers, local political leaders, newspapers, and business interests in 1911, Hinds was measured but negative in his appraisal of the weevil’s arrival. He guaranteed yield reductions of at least twenty-five percent, and advised that nothing short of “immediate diversification of crops” and other changes to the “agricultural *and economic* systems” were all that would prevent “large loss from the boll weevil.” Growers could avoid widespread cotton destruction only with the execution of Hinds’s plan.<sup>25</sup>

Hinds’s advice was not directed solely at farmers. His article included a pointed warning to “bankers, cotton factors, merchants and others relative to loans or advances.” Economic disaster would surely result, he argued, should these groups recall loans or refuse to issue new ones once the boll weevil appeared. Without credit, tenants would simply “be forced to move...again starting ‘panic.’” It was these business interests’ responsibility as “intelligent whites” to direct and help “the blacks.” If financial concerns “stand shoulder to shoulder,” Hinds wrote, “victory in the fight against the boll weevil will be certain.” He implored bankers and merchants to continue to extend credit in spite of the

---

<sup>25</sup> “Duggar Investigates Alabama Cotton Pests,” newspaper clipping [no paper name], September 1, 1911, in Warren E. Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 6, Auburn University Special Collections, Auburn, Alabama. W. E. Hinds, “Heading Off Boll Weevil Panic,” Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin no. 159 (December, 1911), 228.

weevil's potential damage, but to use that credit as a lever to force diversification. The entomologist asked creditors to loan money only to farmers who promised to employ his department's recommendations. In addition, lenders should contractually oblige farmers to reduce their cotton acreage. "This will allow him also to raise more food stuffs," Hinds pointed out, "and to adopt some reasonable and profitable diversification and rotation of crops." Hinds was using the anxiety created by the pest's appearance as a means to control how farmers farmed, and in so doing, he exerted pressure on the state's financial community to play their own part.<sup>26</sup>

By the end of 1911, the boll weevil had invaded close to a third of Alabama. Though actual cotton loss had been moderate, that year the state legislature passed two pieces of emergency legislation to fund boll weevil research and education. After reviewing several proposals, the state enacted two laws. The first funded work at the state experiment station in Auburn. This bill was the first direct government funding of the research farm since 1883. The second act allocated \$27,000 to agents already at work in the state. Though these bills would have a great effect on the research in Auburn and the state agent's ability to travel and meet with cotton farmers, it did nothing to slow the pest or decrease its damage.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> W.E. Hinds, "Heading Off Boll Weevil Panic," *Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin* no. 159 (December, 1911), 234-236.

<sup>27</sup> Kerr, *A History of the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station*, 35-37.

While officials in Auburn were buoyed by the state's new boll weevil appropriations, in Tuskegee, funding continued to be an obstacle to an effective rural education program. Whereas many of the problems faced by the white extension system were ideological—farmers resisted the lessons of the extension service—Tuskegee's crisis was more practical. In fact, the Tuskegee campus was soaked in ideology. Booker Washington had provided the school, its students and faculty, with an intellectual vision, but it was funding for the practical implementation of that vision that remained the greatest challenge.

Whereas white extension agents had trouble convincing farmers that they should abandon cotton, Carver and Washington had trouble actually reaching farmers with their diversification and modernization ideas. The school had been giving out advice to the region's black farmers for years, but these warnings had not affected farmers' methods. As early as 1899, Carver had complained in a Tuskegee bulletin that, despite heavy fertilizer use in the Black Belt and Wiregrass, soils were wearing out an alarming rate. He sent out additional warnings about soil degradation in 1903 and 1905, but few farmers diversified or rotated crops in order to replenish nutrients.<sup>28</sup>

Carver realized that the periodic distribution of a farmer's bulletin simply was not an effective means of reaching growers. Tuskegee's teachers traveled

---

<sup>28</sup> George W. Carver, "Fertilizer Experiments on Cotton," Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 3, 1899. George W. Carver, "Cow Peas" Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 5, 1903. George W. Carver, "How to Build Up Worn Out Soils" Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 6, 1905.

to farms and visited outlying churches in Macon County in an effort to reach farmers with their message. But unlike the state-sponsored extension service in Auburn, Tuskegee had no outside support for this field education, and there was a limited number of outings that its representatives could make. Tuskegee needed an inexpensive way to talk to farmers face-to-face, and they needed outside support to accomplish it.<sup>29</sup>

In 1905, with hopes of finding a more efficient and wide-ranging method of rural education, Washington asked Carver about the feasibility of a mobile farm school—a horse-drawn cart loaded with machines, plants, fertilizers, and literature, which a Tuskegee professor could take out into the countryside and use to teach farmers on their land. Carver liked the idea, drew a sketch of what the proposed wagon might look like and gave it to Washington. The principal took the drawing north on a fundraising trip, with hopes of finding someone willing to pay for the purchase and rigging of the wagon. In New York, Moris K. Jesup, a well-known banker and philanthropist, promised Washington \$500 for the project. On May 24, 1906, the Jesup Movable School made its maiden voyage, with Tuskegee professor George Bridgeforth at the reigns. The project was immediately successful, at least in terms of the number of rural farmers it reached. By the end of summer, school officials claimed the wagon had reached

---

<sup>29</sup> Jones, "The South's First Negro Farm Agent," 38-39. In 1897, the Alabama legislature had approved funding for an experiment station on the Tuskegee campus, but offered no support for public education. Allen W. Jones, "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in the Education of Black Farmers," *The Journal of Negro History* 60, no. 2 (April, 1975), 257.

more than two thousand people per month. Perhaps more importantly, the mobile school attracted the attention of the South's most important agricultural educator, Seaman Knapp.<sup>30</sup>

The following fall, Knapp visited Tuskegee's campus. The aging educator toured the Institute's research farm, laboratory and classrooms, and examined the Jesup wagon. As director of the USDA's extension service, Knapp was so impressed by Tuskegee's work that he offered to make a formal connection between the school and the federal education system. As historian B.D. Mayberry has written, "Dr. Washington seized this opportunity to link his successful but financially insecure agricultural extension operations with that of the federal government." Knapp was barred from using federal funds for black extension, but promised help from John D. Rockefeller's philanthropic General Education Board, to hire a black extension agent. Washington could draw money from a separate charity, the Slater Fund, to pay the agent's expenses.<sup>31</sup>

Washington and Knapp agreed to hire Thomas Monroe Campbell as the South's first black farm agent. Campbell had grown up in Georgia, worked his way through Tuskegee, and graduated the previous spring. In early 1907, he officially became the school's one-man extension service. The USDA covered \$500 of Campbell's salary with General Education Board money and Tuskegee

---

<sup>30</sup> B.D. Mayberry, "The Tuskegee Movable School: A Unique Contribution to National and International Agriculture and Rural Development" *Agricultural History* 65, no. 2 (1991): 87.

<sup>31</sup> Mayberry, "The Tuskegee Movable School," 87.

paid him the rest, \$340, with Slater funds. The two organizations shared the agent's expenses.<sup>32</sup>

Campbell was charged with taking Tuskegee's message of modernization and diversification to the average small farmer battling the boll weevil in the counties surrounding the Institute. Campbell knocked on farmhouse doors, talked to groups of growers in schoolyards and held meetings after Sunday church services. He spoke to crowds of white and black rural Alabamans (see Figure 5.2). Often he made presentations in tandem with white extension agents or prominent local planters. In 1915 for example, he spoke to a crowd at an African Methodist Episcopal church in Inverness and was joined by the local newspaper editor, a prominent cotton buyer and banker, and a county commissioner.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the crowds and company, Campbell found the work unsparingly depressing. "The average Negro rural home continued to be a dilapidated shack," he wrote later, "in which the living conditions were unspeakable." The conditions of the fields were worse. Campbell found no use for most of the machinery that the Jesup Wagon carried. "I was very seldom able to use the cream separator, the churn or the Babcock testing outfit," he recalled, "because

---

<sup>32</sup> Booker T. Washington to Seaman A. Knapp, November 9, 1906, in Thomas Monroe Campbell, *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer* (Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1936), 160.

<sup>33</sup> Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 13. Lawrence Elliott, *George Washington Carver: The Man Who Overcame* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 107. "Movable Farmers Schools Last Week," n.d., clipping of unknown newspaper inside report of county agent, Bullock County, 1915, in ACES Records.

so very few people had cows.” There was no point in teaching farmers how to use modern implements that they had no access to. As a result, Campbell adapted his message, speaking on a broad range of farm topics with diversification at the heart of his message. Rural farmers needed to do more to improve the totality of their lives, not simply work cotton to the exclusion of all else. Campbell’s frustration in preaching diversification to farmers who ignored his message must have been similar to the dissatisfaction experienced by Carver. Years earlier, the scientist had told a local black landowner to consider a crop other than cotton for the following season. The farmer reportedly replied “Son, I know all there is to know about farming. I’ve worn out three farms in my lifetime.”<sup>34</sup>

Though Campbell’s work with black farmers was particularly difficult, the bulk of federal aid for extension was going to the “white” agency. In 1914, the state extension service received a boost from the federal government in the form of pioneering legislation. That year Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, which appropriated federal funds to state agricultural colleges to fund extension

---

<sup>34</sup> Campbell, *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer*, 109, 94.





Figure 5.2: "Mr. T. M. Campbell, Field Agent, Southern Region, speaking to group of Negro Extension Workers at Soil Conservation Project, Dadeville, Alabama."<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> ACES Records, Photographs Box 25, "Negro Extension" subject folder, Auburn University Special Collections, Auburn, Alabama.

education.<sup>36</sup> Despite its broad vision, the passage of the 1914 bill, like the rural development legislation that preceded it, made no immediate impact on rural life in Alabama. An army of well qualified men and women did not immediately appear in rural county seats ready to help farmers. One Alabama agent recalled that after passage of the Smith-Lever Act he was appointed to serve Randolph County but that he received no substantial training. “You can understand that I was not a very good county agent,” Richmond Bailey admitted, and “nobody else was.” The success of local extension efforts before 1930 seemed to be tied to the work of individual agents.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to Carver and Campbell, a growing number of black agents began working rural southeast Alabama with varying levels of success. Unlike Bailey, who was unprepared and had little initial success, M. B. Ivy, a black agent in the Black Belt county of Bullock, reported immediate achievements working

---

<sup>36</sup> The Act built on the 1903 demonstration farm bill created in the aftermath of Knapp’s supposed success against the boll weevil in Terrell, Texas. The Smith-Lever Act gave Knapp’s loosely organized and often underfunded extension service federal, institutional status. One of the bill’s goals was to place an extension agent in the courthouse of every county in the country. Appropriations were based on the rural populations of states, the more farmers, the more funding. The federal government financially supported the system, but left the control of the workforce to the state land grant schools. The resulting Cooperative Extension Service notably failed to make specific contributions for black southern industrial schools. During the debates over the Smith-Lever bill, an amendment was added guaranteeing equal funding for black A&M institutions, but Georgia Senator Hoke Smith, the Senate sponsor of the legislation, bitterly opposed the amendment and it failed. The black extension service would continue to be separate and unequal, supported with less federal funding and still reliant on philanthropic donations. For the “white” state farm schools at least, the Smith-Lever Act fundamentally changed their mission, their connection to formal political bodies and, most importantly, their institutional financial health. Pete Daniel, “The Crossroads of Change: Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures in the Twentieth-Century South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 50, no. 3. (August, 1984), 434. *Smith Lever Act*, U.S. Code Title 7, Chapter 341, et seq. (1914).

<sup>37</sup> Richmond Y. Bailey, Transcript of interview by Norwood Kerr, July 19, 1982. Auburn University Agricultural Alumni Association Oral Histories. Auburn University Special Collections.

with the region's black farmers. He wrote a small column for a local newspaper in which he advised the county's farmers to "swat the boll weevil" by deserting cotton immediately and forever. "Destroy all cotton stalks at once," Ivy wrote, and replace the plant with wheat and corn and livestock:

When every farmer in Bullock county shall eat bread from his own fields and meat from his own pastures, and [be] disturbed by no creditors and enslaved by no debt, shall stand amid his teeming gardens and orchards and vineyards and barnyards, pitching his crops in his own wisdom—then and until then will the farmers of old Bullock be standing on the threshold of progress.

When he visited black growers in Bullock County, Ivy found that some were prepared for the weevil's arrival. Those farmers with the means, the agent reported, had begun growing fruits and vegetables and selling them in the county seat. Farmer William Ousley told Ivy, "we don't go to town on Saturday or any other day unless we carry something to sell."<sup>38</sup>

Though it was rare that landlords allowed tenants to grow something other than cotton, those sharecroppers that did were less likely to migrate. Landlords, then, had an incentive to allow agents like Ivy to work directly with their tenants. One sharecropper promised Ivy that because he had sold his crop directly to the market in town, "I've got plenty to eat and wear a little money in my pocket." He had no reason to leave in search of a better deal somewhere else. "If I go off in this fix from Bullock[,] Hell ought to be my home." But it remained to be seen if,

---

<sup>38</sup> M.B. Ivy,, "A Thought For Bullock County," n.d., unknown newspaper, clipping found inside report of county agent, Bullock County, 1915, in ACES Records.

when the cotton insect finally arrived in southeast Alabama, all farmers would be as receptive to diversification rhetoric as Ivy's demonstrators.<sup>39</sup>

By the middle of the 1916 season, county agents began reporting heavy weevil infestations, as well as building momentum for diversification. The Barbour County agent reported "This year we had our first real experience with the boll weevil...so our cotton yield is low." The Geneva County agent wrote to his supervisors, "You will notice that our yield in cotton is very low. This is due to boll weevil and the July flood." His demonstrators "were making a good fight on the weevil," he claimed, but late season rains brought thick clouds of insects. In Russell County, the agent painted a bleak picture of devastation. "Some of the demonstration fields were entirely destroyed," he testified.<sup>40</sup>

As weevil damage in southeast Alabama increased, agents turned first to business owners and lenders to make their diversification pleas. Agents pressed bankers and merchants to be judicious with their loans and to attempt to influence the way that borrowers farmed their cotton. In Opp, a town in Covington County, the local bank offered a reward of twenty cents for every hundred dead boll weevils people brought in.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Ivy, "Mithell Ivey Sees Bright Future," unknown newspaper, clipping found inside report of county agent Bullock County, 1916, in ACES Records.

<sup>40</sup> Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1916, in ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Geneva County, 1916, in ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Russell County, 1916, in ACES Records.

<sup>41</sup> Kathryn Holland Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts': Billy Boll Weevil Comes to the Alabama Wiregrass," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 3 (Summer 1989), 20.

Once the pest had arrived, local extension workers reported an increasing number of farmers showing up to lectures, asking for literature, and volunteering to serve as demonstrators. “The old time idea that any man can raise cotton and so is a farmer has gone,” the Covington County agent wrote in 1916, “and the farmer looks up to the educated man as an agricultural leader and comes to the book farmer for advice.” As the landowner turns from cotton to another crop, one agent claimed, he “becomes a better diversified farmer than he was a cotton grower, and necessarily a better citizen.”<sup>42</sup>

Many of these farmers interested in crops other than cotton asked specifically about peanuts. “Since the appearance of the boll weevil,” the Bullock County agent wrote in his 1915 report, “the farmers have become very much interested in the peanut industry and consequently will grow a very large acreage of this crop next year.” Even in the Black Belt county of Bullock, peanuts seemed to be threatening cotton as the major farm commodity. Though Southeastern Alabama’s move from cotton to the peanut was influenced by the long-term work of agricultural agents, bankers, merchants, and researchers, there were smaller, local events that shifted farmers’ and merchants’ perspectives about the suitability of the legumes to the region’s culture.<sup>43</sup>

One such event occurred in an unlikely place, Tuskegee Institute’s dining hall. Carver organized his laboratory research around the principle that an

---

<sup>42</sup> Report of County Agent, Covington County, 1916, ACES Records.

<sup>43</sup> Report of County Agent, Bullock County, 1915, ACES Records.

effective diversification program would have to offer a profitable replacement for cotton. The scientist worked to make either sweet potatoes or peanuts an acceptable replacement crop. Not only did he need to engineer plants well-suited for the sandy Southeast Alabama soil, but he sought ways to make these products useful. There would need to be a market for peanuts or sweet potatoes that brought a price comparable to cotton's if diversification was going to endure. As a result, Carver's work was part scientific and part public relations. He not only had to make sure that there were uses for these alternative crops, but he had to convince merchants and industrialists that they could be turned into cash just as easily as with cotton.<sup>44</sup>

Carver capitalized on the rising tensions over the boll weevil by publicly advertising the countless ways that these alternative crops could be used on the farm. In a Tuskegee bulletin he posed, and answered, a rhetorical question common to the time period. The scientist asked, "Since the coming of the boll weevil, what is the farmer going to do for a money crop?" His answer was diversification. "There are several crops," Carver argued in his reply, "from which the farmer can realize more money than from cotton; viz., corn, velvet beans, peanuts, sweet potatoes and cow peas." He also noted the primary advantage to growing peanuts. If there was an excess of the crop, and "a paying market

---

<sup>44</sup> The USDA and state extension services across the South had long offered peanuts and sweet potatoes to farmers as replacements to cotton. Carver's research built on this previous work. More about Carver's role in this research is discussed in chapter six.

cannot be had for the raw product,” the nuts could be fed to pigs and cows, “and turned into milk, meat, butter, eggs, lard, etc.”<sup>45</sup>

By the late 1910s, having spent several tiresome years preaching diversification to reluctant farmers, Carver turned to the merchants and bankers who sat at the heart of the rural cotton economy. In a wild, if perhaps apocryphal move, Carver invited a group of prominent Macon County businessmen to have dinner at the Institute. As Carver later recalled the story, he served them a grand meal of roasted chicken, mashed potatoes and assorted side dishes. Following the meal, the businessmen praised the student cooks in Tuskegee’s kitchen who had turned out the extraordinary feast. It was then that Carver announced to the men that the food they had eaten was not actually chicken and potatoes. It was peanuts. Everything on the menu, Carver claimed, had been made from peanuts. The businessmen were shocked and, as Carver tells it, convinced of the promise of peanuts. The scientist explained to the men that not only could the peanuts be used for a variety of human foods, but as livestock feed and as food for the soil itself. The potential profitability of peanuts, a crop that could be used as food for humans, animals, and soil, persuaded these Macon County businessmen that the legumes might be a better investment than cotton. In the words of Carver hagiographer Lawrence Elliott, the dinner was all it took to convince all of southeastern Alabama to quit cotton and plant peanuts:

---

<sup>45</sup> George W. Carver, “Twelve Ways to Meet the New Economic Conditions Here in the South” Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 33 (1917).

And slowly, pushed by the weevil and pulled by Carver, the people began to do as he said... Soon peanuts were the number one crop in a great farming belt that ran from Montgomery to the Florida border, then began pushing north as whole communities abruptly abandoned cotton.<sup>46</sup>

The growth of peanut production in southeast Alabama was not quite as simple a progression as Elliott lets on, though the legumes did become a hot crop in the area just as the boll weevil entered from the west. This move from cotton was not due completely to Carver's laboratory research or his public relations skills, however.

In no county was there more swift a change from cotton to peanuts than in the Wiregrass's Coffee County. The main business of the county had long been farming, but its population remained sparse until the 1890s. Enterprise, the county's commercial capital, had only 250 residents in 1897, but the following year the railroad and telephone arrived, and the population soared. By 1903, Enterprise claimed 2,750 citizens. The rail line brought people and industry. In 1906, the Enterprise Mills and Novelty Works began operation, making doors, blinds, and other products out of the timber that came into town from the surrounding counties. By 1910, Enterprise was one of only a handful of towns in all of southeast Alabama that the U.S. Census considered "urban."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Elliott's discussion of this meal is the only reference to it the author has found. Elliott cites no specific date for the event, though he places it in the context of a 1915 Carver bulletin. Elliott, *George Washington Carver*, 151, 153-154.

<sup>47</sup> The Census considered towns with more than 2,500 residents to be "urban." Fred Shelton Watson, *Piney Wood Echoes: A History of Dale and Coffee Counties, Alabama* (Elba, AL: Elba Clipper, 1949), 105-107. Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts'," 18.



Coffee County's growth corresponded with the arrival of the railroad and the related expansion of the timber and cotton industries, but agriculture was at the heart of its economy. Farmers dumped massive amounts of fertilizer on their sandy soil so that it would produce cotton, though the Wiregrass county was never as cotton-centric as many in the Black Belt. In fact, for a generation before the boll weevil arrived, farmers had been experimenting with other crops, including peanuts. The Wiregrass counties of the southeast corner of Alabama had led the state's peanut production for years, although it remained a relatively small part of their overall farm production. This changed quickly when the weevil arrived.

On the eve of the weevil's entry into Coffee County, local business leaders and farmers strove to protect the cotton that was central to their economic health. Area leaders called several meetings to discuss the approaching pest and invited experts from Auburn to talk about diversification possibilities. Alabama Polytechnic sent their own version of the "movable school" to Enterprise, and farmers gathered around it to examine dead boll weevils and to hear from the experts about early planting, quick-growing seed, and pesticides. In 1915 when the weevil arrived, the town was energized to fight it. Local merchants and bankers reportedly left their jobs in town and made their way into the cotton fields to help farmers pick the weevil-infested cotton squares. These actions amounted to little more than publicity stunts (hand-picking infested cotton squares could

never seriously halt the spread of the pest or limit its damage). The town had attempted to prepare for the pest as most southern counties had, with lots of talk about diversification but little actual movement away from cotton. The boll weevil caused severe damage in 1915 and 1916; local reports estimated crop losses at near sixty percent.<sup>48</sup>

In Coffee County farmers were certainly aware that peanuts were an alternative to cotton. George Washington Carver and USDA researchers had agitated for the legumes for years, and most Wiregrass farmers were familiar with how to grow them and where to sell them. The boll weevil also added additional cost to cotton farming in a land where it was already expensive to produce the staple. Wiregrass farmers knew growing cotton in the sandy soil was a precarious endeavor and that peanuts were more suitable to the land.

In addition to the pull of peanuts, factors in the cotton market pushed Wiregrass farmers away from the staple. Just as the weevils were arriving in the area, peanuts became a more secure investment than cotton. In the summer and fall of 1914, war in Europe disrupted both the demand for cotton and safe shipping routes across the Atlantic Ocean. As historian Kathryn Holland Braund put it, "Overnight, cotton prices plummeted." Locally farmers had received twelve

---

<sup>48</sup> There is no way to check the efficacy of the 60 percent crop loss figure. Though there were places in the South that experienced losses this heavy during one season, it was rare. This figure could have been a symptom of the weevil myth itself. Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts,'" 20. Fred S. Watson, *Coffee Grounds: A History of Coffee County, Alabama, 1841-1970* (Anniston, AL: Higginbotham, 1970), 197.

cents per pound in June, 1914, but only six cents by the end of the year.

Farmers now had more than a few reasons to contribute more land to peanuts.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to Carver's dinner ploy, another highly publicized local event in the Spring of 1916 gave the final push that many farmers needed to move to peanuts. That year an Enterprise banker named H.M. Sessions contacted C.W. Baston, a local farmer. Baston reportedly owed Sessions money, though it is unclear why or how much. Using this debt as leverage, the banker instructed Baston to devote 125 acres of farmland to peanuts. Sessions promised to pay Baston as a peanut demonstrator, assuring a price of one dollar per bushel at the end of the season. Baston acquiesced to the demand and grew the legumes. In late October, he picked a huge peanut crop. When he delivered it to Enterprise, it was an impressive display. Word quickly spread through town that the farmer had delivered eight thousand bushels and, that keeping to his word, Sessions paid Baston \$8,000 for the nuts. At the same time Baston delivered his peanuts to town and collected his money, cotton farmers in Coffee County harvested a tiny, weevil-ravaged crop.<sup>50</sup>

Baston's peanuts became the stuff of local legend. Cotton growers immediately turned to Sessions for peanut seed. The banker, in order to meet area farmers' demand for the goobers, re-sold Baston's entire crop as seed.

---

<sup>49</sup> Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts'," 22. USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, "Statistics on Cotton and Related Data," Statistical Bulletin 99 (June, 1951), 34.

<sup>50</sup> Watson, *Coffee Grounds*, 105. Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts'," 27.

Though Baston's success story became instantly famous throughout southeast Alabama, it was not actually too extraordinary. Baston was not the only farmer making a profit from peanuts, only the most famous. John E. Pittman, Coffee County's extension agent, claimed the dozens of farmers in the county moved into peanuts from cotton the same year as Baston simply because the agent had suggested it. "The Boll weevil being with us," he wrote at the end of 1916, "caused us to cast about for a crop to partly take the place of cotton so I recommended peanuts." In fact, the same season Baston made his bumper crop, county agent Pittman worked with twenty-five peanut demonstrators who devoted an estimated two-thousand acres to peanuts. But the individual success of these twenty-five peanut growers could never have the effect of Baston's high-profile harvest. The following year, Coffee County farmers turned thousands of acres of land from cotton to peanuts. Diversification was finally getting its chance in southeastern Alabama.<sup>51</sup>

For all of the years that the progressive chorus of voices, including extension agents, scientists, businesspeople, newspaper editors, and politicians, had called for immediate diversification from cotton, Coffee County's move to peanuts happened almost overnight. Pittman suggested peanuts to the county's

---

<sup>51</sup> It may have been Pittman's idea that Sessions direct Baston to plant peanuts. The agent worked closely with Enterprise business interests. He wrote in 1916 that merchants "prefer to do business with them [agents], and often invite us to call on their regular customers." Report of County Agent, Coffee County, 1916, in ACES Records, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama. The move to peanuts was not relegated to the southeastern Alabama counties under study here, by the region was without a doubt the heart of the peanut boom. Two peanut researchers with the USDA claimed that total peanut acreage in the South doubled to two million acres from 1916 to 1917.

cotton growers in 1915, Baston made his bumper crop in 1916, and by the end of the year, the local agent could report that Coffee had “become famous as the Hog & peanut County.” In 1917, the county produced one million bushels of peanuts, making it the most productive county in the nation. As Table 5.2 shows, over the course of the decennial agricultural censuses, the move from cotton to peanuts was not minor. From 1909 to 1919, peanut acreage increased more than five hundred percent, while cotton growers cut their acreage nearly in half.<sup>52</sup>

Table 5.2: Diversification Figures, Coffee County, Alabama, 1909-1919<sup>53</sup>

	1909	1919
cotton acreage	72,535	41,284
cotton bales	25,207	10,729
peanut acreage	8,559	49,393
peanut bushels	173,012	1,204,958
fertilizer cost	\$284,471	\$488,385

Not surprisingly, this quick and enormous increase in peanut production glutted the local market. Every farmer who diversified into peanuts was not greeted in the fall with a guaranteed price, as Baston had been the prior year. Local businesspeople, farmers and extension agents realized that all the talk about the profitability of diversification meant nothing without a market for the

<sup>52</sup> Report of County Agent, Coffee County, 1916, in ACES Records, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama. Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts'," 27. *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922).

<sup>53</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922).

crop that matched its production. It was clear that the farmers of southeast Alabama could make peanuts, but this was only half of the diversification equation. It was not clear what could be done with all of these peanuts.

George Washington Carver had been at work for almost two decades on ways that the legumes could be made into a variety of marketable products. With the advent of peanut production in the southeastern part of the state, Carver again put on a publicity blitz to convince buyers of the nuts' uses. In a set of farmers' bulletins, Carver noted the legumes' high fat and calorie content and devoted entire bulletins to peanut recipes. In one 1915 publication, for instance, Carver listed 105 "Ways of Preparing it for Human Consumption," including five for soups alone (creatively named "peanut soup no. 1," "peanut soup no. 2," "Peanut Bisque," "peanut soup no. 4," and "consommé of peanut"). USDA researchers also got in on the peanut boosterism. A 1917 *Yearbook* article advertised tasty recipes for "creamed peanuts and rice" and "peanut fondu" [sic.]. Despite these "appetizing" pleas for farmers to eat more of the nuts, it was not even close to creating a sufficient demand for the commodity. Peanut growers needed industrial outlets for their crop if the legume was truly going to be a profitable replacement for cotton.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> George W. Carver, "How to Grow the Peanut and 105 Ways of Preparing It for Human Consumption" Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 31, June, 1915. H.S. Bailey and J.A. LeClerc, "The Peanut, A Great American Food," *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1917* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), 289, 293.

Peanuts had historically been a secondary crop in the South, but as southeastern Alabama began producing more and more of the nuts, farmers found ways to make use the crop central to a profitable operation. Farmers had grown the “goobers” mainly to replenish the soil and feed livestock, particularly hogs, which grazed peanut fields in late fall to fatten them for market. With the advent of a serum to control hog cholera in 1906, and the state’s funding of a veterinary program to produce the medicine, hog raising became an increasingly safe investment and one that could grow alongside peanut production. The Swift Company recognized this rise in peanuts and hogs in southeast Alabama and built two large meat processing plants in the region. R.C. Conner, owner of a cottonseed oil mill in Enterprise, also looked to profit from the sudden growth in the local peanut supply. He recognized that his mill was particularly well-suited to turn the surplus peanuts into oil. He adapted the plant’s compresses for peanuts and began buying nuts by the truckload, becoming the first peanut oil producer in the county. Sessions himself built a factory turning the goobers into jars of peanut butter.<sup>55</sup>

With the advent of peanut and pork buyers, the field crop boomed in Southeast Alabama. African American agent M.B. Ivy declared in his 1916 report that “The hog industry is becoming the leading industry of the county.” Black and white farmers alike were making “special preparations for the growing of more

---

<sup>55</sup> Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts'," 23-24. Watson, *Coffee Grounds*, 105. Watson, *Piney Wood Echoes*, 108.

and better hogs,” he wrote. In 1915, no railcars of hogs had been shipped out of Bullock County, but by the following year sixteen cars of hogs were sold to market. The Covington County agent admitted that it was the local demand for hogs created by the arrival of a processing plant to the county, as much as the boll weevil, that spurred local farmers to raise pigs. “The packing plant in Andalusia (the county seat) has done more to get the farmers interested in hog raising than all things combined,” the agent reported in 1915, “and within another year or two this county will be full of hogs.”<sup>56</sup>

The promise of diversification had been realized in southeast Alabama and it seemed to be making everyone wealthy. Peanut growing success stories filled the agents’ end-of-year reports. “Since the appearance of the Boll Weevil this crop has done more and made more money for Dale County Farmers than cotton did or any crop ever has” declared an agent in 1919. Cotton was no longer the center of Wiregrass farm production, the agent argued, “Hogs and Peanuts is rightly called the Back Bone of this section.”<sup>57</sup>

Agents and newspapers alike painted the material results of the pig and peanut fever as a gold rush. Farmers sold their peanuts and walked into stores to pay their outstanding debts with cash. Peanut-rich landowners made improvements to their farms and homes. Agent R.L. King cited diversification’s

---

<sup>56</sup> Report of County Agent, Bullock County, 1916, in ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Covington County, 1915, in ACES Records.

<sup>57</sup> Report of County Agent, Dale County, 1919, in ACES Records.



results in Geneva County: “More and better church and school houses. Rural telephones. Hundreds of Automobiles. Light and Water systems, etc.” The black agent for Barbour County claimed that among the rural African Americans he worked with, “Automobiles are replacing buggies” and he recorded “More farmers paying for and reading newspapers than ever.” They were using their peanut money to hire better teachers “who are industrially trained and so train their children” in rural schools. W.M. Welch, African American agent for Macon County reported black peanut farmers “buying furniture, rubber tire buggies, automobiles, fine buggy horses.” The Henry County agent’s end-of-season report recorded success in two almost poetic juxtaposed pairs: “Peanuts & hogs. Bank accounts and Automobiles.”<sup>58</sup>

The evidence of southeast Alabama’s prosperity on the heels of the boll weevil’s arrival and subsequent crop diversification is not limited to the anecdotal stories of state agents (who, it should be noted, saw diversification as a personal and institutional victory). The demographic data bears out drastic changes as well. As Table 5.3 demonstrates, from 1900 to 1919 farm ownership among white and black Alabamans increased, the average value of both farm property and farm land skyrocketed, and the percentage of improved farm land grew.

---

<sup>58</sup> Alyce Billings Walker, ed., *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*, New Revised Edition (New York: Hastings House, 1975), 330. Watson, *Coffee Grounds*, 105. Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts'," 27. Report of County Agent, Geneva County, 1917, in ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1918, in ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1918, in ACES Records. W.M. Welch to Farmers of Macon County, November 25, 1918, in Report of County Agent, Macon County, 1918, in ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Bullock County, 1918, in ACES Records.

Table 5.3: Demographics of Coffee County, Alabama 1900-1919<sup>59</sup>

	1900	1909	1919
No. of farms	2,849	3,925	4,789
No. farms run by white farmers	2,464	3,259	3,902
No. farms run by “Negro and other nonwhite” farmers	385	665	886
Percent of land area in farms	N/A	82.5	85.3
Percent of farm land improved	N/A	51.8	58.7
average acreage per farm	116.5	91.2	77.3
value of all farm property	\$2,187,785	\$6,214,850	\$14,770,613
average value of farm property	\$768	\$1,583	\$3,084
average value of land per acre	\$3.67	\$10.62	\$24.01

Wiregrass boosters took advantage of these figures. Geneva County advertised the success of its diversification in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, hoping to court land-hungry farmers. The county offered immigrants “to Share With Them Plenty and Prosperity.” The text of the full-page advertisement recalled how many pessimists had predicted “the boll weevil would cause stagnation in agriculture in this section as it had done in the states to the west of Alabama.” But, the boosters claimed, “the agricultural wealth of this section has continued uninterruptedly.” The prosperity of hogs and nuts had replaced the cyclical poverty of cotton: “Where once broad acres of cotton bloomed, there is now a

<sup>59</sup> *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902). *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922).

green carpet of peanuts, dotted with hogs of improved type, gathering their own feed, that will bring the top prices in the markets.”<sup>60</sup>

Geneva County’s print advertising campaign soon looked diminutive when compared to the boosterism efforts of neighboring Coffee County. Business leaders there were not going to let the quick ascension of peanuts to the fore of their economic life go unnoticed. In 1918, Roscoe Fleming, a local merchant, farmer, and member of the Enterprise city council proposed a grand monument to the county’s diversification: a statue to the boll weevil. Like the boosters in Geneva County, Fleming hoped that erecting a statue to the boll weevil would garner the county favorable publicity, and attract the attention of industry and settlers. He began soliciting contributions from area farmers and businesses and ordered a stock metal statue in a classical design from Italy. When it arrived several months later, however, he had not raised the necessary funds to pay for it. The sixty statue pieces sat in the Enterprise station for several weeks until Fleming finally agreed to pay for half of the statue’s \$1,795 cost himself to insure that his vision became reality.<sup>61</sup>

On December 11, 1919, an estimated five thousand people from around the South gathered in a driving rain at Enterprise’s central downtown intersection of Main and College Streets, not coincidentally across from Fleming’s own store,

---

<sup>60</sup> *Montgomery Advertiser*, October 22, 1919, clipping in Report of County Agent, Geneva County, 1919, in ACES Records.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* Watson, *Piney Wood Echoes*, 166. Watson, *Coffee Grounds*, 105, 107.

to witness the unveiling of this monument to the boll weevil. The statue stood in a circular fountain in the dead center of the intersection (See Figure 5.3).

Towering thirteen and a half feet tall, it depicts an alabaster-white woman in a wavy dress, with her arms stretched above her head. In her hands she held a bronze basin, which spouted water collected from the base of the statue high into the air. A marker unveiled on a nearby corner proclaimed:

In profound appreciation of  
the Boll Weevil  
And What It Has Done  
As The Herald of Prosperity  
This Monument Was Erected  
By the Citizens of  
Enterprise, Coffee County, Alabama

Slated to speak at the unveiling was George Washington Carver himself. Walter M. Grubbs, president of the Peanut Product Corporation of Birmingham, a company that had bought tons of peanuts from Coffee County farmers, had written to Carver asking him to attend the monument's dedication. "I want to present you, in person, to that town, as I have told them about you in my feeble way," he asked Carver, "They want to see you and know you. Will you go?" Amazingly, Carver was being asked to share the public stage with white county leaders near the spot where eighteen years before a white mob had gruesomely and very publicly lynched John Pennington, an African American accused of rape. In spite of this recent history, Grubbs repeated his invitation to



Figure 5.3: Boll Weevil Monument, Enterprise, Alabama, date unknown.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Photograph, "Boll weevil monument, Enterprise, Alabama," ACES Records, Photographs Box 16, "cotton" subject folder, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

Carver, assuring the professor “We will be the honorees by reason of your presence on the trip. I am looking after your comfort and conveniences at Enterprise. I want you on the stand or platform, with me, or us. I am reserving for myself the pleasure of introducing you.” Carver agreed to appear at the dedication—it was certainly not a new experience for the Tuskegee scientist to appear in front of white audiences in sites of previous racial violence—but several days of rains flooded the rail lines from Tuskegee to Enterprise and he was unable to make the trip. In his stead, an agricultural agent of the Southern Railroad, along with several local politicians, addressed the crowd. The statue was, in the words of one observer, “a beacon pointing ever toward the saneness of diversified farming.”<sup>63</sup>

The dedication of the boll weevil statue in 1919 marks a remarkable time in the story of southern farming and the boll weevil’s profound threat to the social and economic system of the South. The promise of diversification had been fulfilled. Not only did the statue mark the end of King Cotton’s grip on Southeast Alabama, but it seems that, with the organizers’ inviting Carver to make the dedication, a new day of racial harmony had arrived in the Wiregrass. A Montgomery newspaper even went so far as to claim international implications for the Enterprise statue. “Maybe bolshevism is derived from the word bollweevil

---

<sup>63</sup> Walter M. Grubbs to George Washington Carver, November 30, 1919, in George Washington Carver papers, microfilm edition, reel 6. Walter M. Grubbs to George Washington Carver, December 12, 1919, in George Washington Carver papers, microfilm edition, reel 6. Walker, ed., *Alabama*, 330. Watson, *Piney Wood Echoes*, 166.

[sic.],” the paper ventured. “But we know of nobody who contemplates erecting a monument to bolshevism in Russia,” the *Advertiser* argued, “bolshevism can’t bring the practical blessings to Russia that the bollweevil has brought to Coffee County, Alabama.”

Perhaps the unveiling of the statue in Enterprise did mark the realization of the diversification dream that so many Americans had had for so many years. And perhaps the lessons of Southeast Alabama would spread throughout the South and those in the boll weevil’s path would turn away from cotton as had the wily farmers of southeast Alabama. Industrialists would see the South’s move away from the mono-crop system and build factories and industries in the rural South. For the region’s boosters, the unveiling of the boll weevil monument was the beginning of this dream. But if this was to be the story of the boll weevil statue, diversification would have to be more than a fad. It had been a very short time between 1916, when Baston delivered his famous bumper peanut crop to Enterprise, and the unveiling of the statue in 1919. The real question was not how quickly diversification would spread to the rest of the South, but whether it would last in Coffee County.

## CHAPTER 6

“YOU WILL BE POOR AND IGNORANT  
AND YOUR CHILDREN WILL BE THE SAME”:  
THE FAILURE OF DIVERSIFICATION IN ALABAMA

The dedication of Enterprise’s monument to the boll weevil on December 11, 1919, marked the most public celebration of diversification’s success in the South. The county’s figures for peanut and cotton that year were impressive in their stark contrast. Cotton acreage was down 43 percent since 1909, but over the same period peanut acreage had increased 577 percent. The year Enterprise declared the weevil the “herald of prosperity,” peanut acreage actually surpassed cotton in Coffee County, a rare feat for any southern county. The merchants and peanut brokers who funded the statue’s construction believed the monument would serve as a permanent reminder of the folly of cotton and the one-crop system, but in truth, most Coffee County farmers paid no attention to the marble effigy as they considered what crops they would plant the following year.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922).



That rainy December day when a crowd gathered to see the statue unveiled marked not the beginning of a mass movement for diversification, but its apex. For a combination of economic, cultural, and practical reasons, Coffee County farmers disobeyed the statue's reminder to diversify. Despite the development of peanut and hog plants which were supposed to have guaranteed a local market for the legumes, cotton remained the major economic force in Coffee County and southeast Alabama. As prices, costs, and demands fluctuated, growing peanuts did not prove to be a clearly better choice than cotton every year. Beyond unpredictable economics, farmers were pulled back into the white staple's grasp by cultural reasons as well, not the least of which were cotton's own monuments built to celebrate the crop's long grip on the region, which countered the weevil statue's vision of prosperity. Finally, practical reasons damaged diversification's chances in Coffee County and the surrounding area. The extension system was hindered by the racism that ruled all rural institutions. Within the USDA and Alabama's own extension system, the ideology of white supremacy ran from top officials to county agents and it prevented the kind of rural reform that might have actually lifted Alabamans out of poverty by diversifying their fields. This was but one of several reasons its educational programs failed. Though Enterprise's statue remains a prime contributor to the myth of the weevil's destructiveness, a close look at southeast Alabama's long-term response to the pest tells a different story.

Before understanding why farmers turned so quickly back to cotton, it is important to look at the specifics of how, where, when, and to what extent cotton rebounded. As Figure 6.1 starkly portrays, for the first five years after the statue's dedication, peanut acreage in Coffee County climbed only marginally, but cotton's return was swift. Only a couple of years after they had announced their allegiance to the peanut, farmers around Enterprise again planted more land in cotton than in the legumes. Ten years after the statue was erected, cotton acreage had risen to pre-boll-weevil (and pre-statue) levels. Cotton returned to Coffee County almost as quickly as it had gone.<sup>2</sup>

Not only in the statue's home county, but across southeast Alabama farmers had given diversification a try, but almost without exception they returned to cotton in the years that followed. All counties in southeastern Alabama were not equal in their commitment to cotton, however. As Table 6.1 demonstrates, in 1929, state-wide farmers still devoted more than 90 percent of their crop land to cotton, but among southeastern counties, those lying predominantly within the Wiregrass planted less cotton than their neighbors in Black Belt counties. By the end of the 1920s, Black Belt farmers relied on the white staple to a greater

---

<sup>2</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922). *Agricultural Census, 1925* (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1927). *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930*, Agriculture Volume (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932).

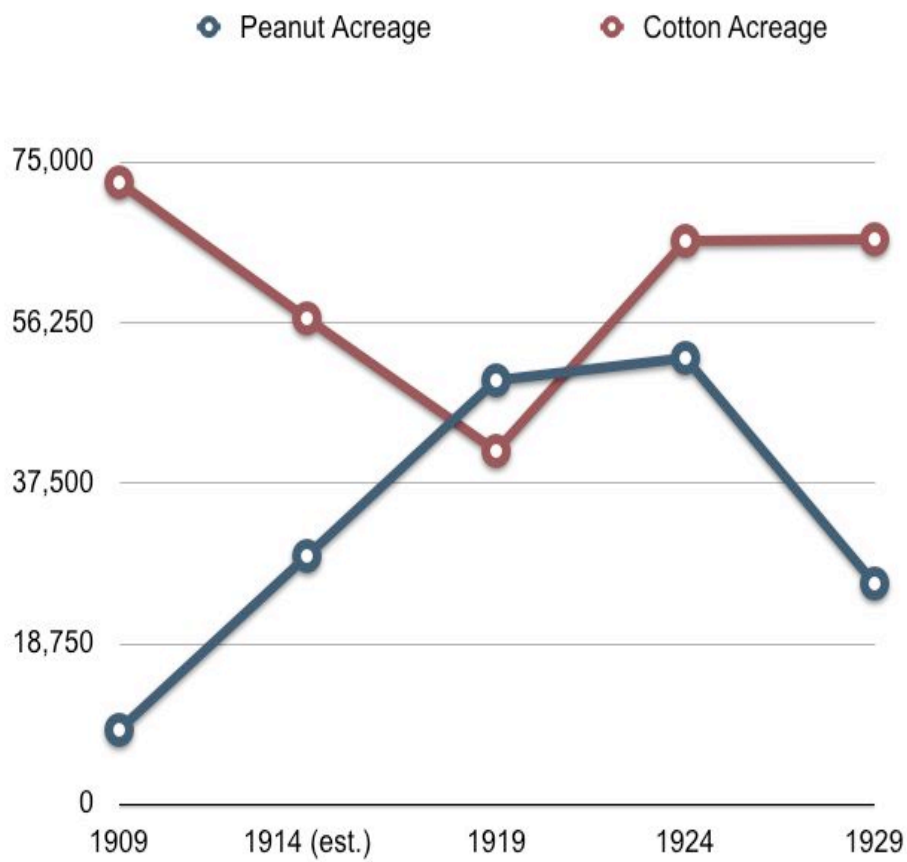


Figure 6.1: Coffee County, Alabama cotton and peanut acreage, 1909-1929<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Table 6.1: Farming sectors as percentage of the value of all farm production, southeast Alabama, 1929.<sup>4</sup>

	All field crops	Cotton (including seed)	Crops other than cotton	Livestock	Livestock products	Forest products
<b>Alabama</b>	81.98	72.54	9.44	6.31	9.72	1.99
Macon	84.45	78.8	5.65	5.59	8.12	1.84
Russell	79.9	72.6	7.3	7.82	7.76	4.52
Bullock	71.99	64.35	7.64	16.85	8.36	2.8
Lee	78.54	70.64	7.9	5.71	12.51	3.24
Crenshaw	85.92	75.96	9.96	6.67	4.85	2.56
Houston	88.44	78.15	10.29	5.31	5.57	0.68
Covington	82.49	71.31	11.18	7.38	6.99	3.14
Barbour	88.46	76.55	11.91	4.6	5.23	1.71
Geneva	82.26	69.07	13.19	10.82	4.87	2.05
Pike	82.82	66.41	16.41	9.14	5.02	3.02
Dale	81.52	62.16	19.36	9.58	4.75	4.15
Henry	89.88	69.99	19.89	5.18	3.43	1.51
Coffee	87.69	66.56	21.13	6.77	4.15	1.39

degree than the state average, but in the Wiregrass, there were clear remnants of the diversification movement. Pike, Dale, Henry, and Coffee Counties all devoted more than 15 percent of the crop land to a plant other than cotton. But even Coffee County's seemingly impressive figure of 21 percent non-cotton crops paled in comparison to the numbers a decade earlier. By 1930 cotton still accounted for more than 66 percent of the county's farm production. In short, despite diversification schemes, Black Belt farmers turned to their rich soil for cotton, aided by an increasing amount of fertilizer. In the Wiregrass, farmers

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

were more willing to plant peanuts and sweet potatoes, and to raise livestock, but these “other” crops did not amount to a direct threat to cotton.<sup>5</sup>

Though these figures reveal that the statue’s claim of successful diversification was at best short-lived, what of the monument’s assertion that the boll weevil had been the “herald of prosperity”? Economic success cannot be tested simply by looking at short- or long-term diversification figures. Perhaps the return to cotton was accompanied by a decrease in tenancy or poverty.

Yet here again the statue’s message rings hollow. Over the entire period from 1900 to 1930, which begins prior to the boll weevil’s entry in the county, includes its initial appearance and the subsequent diversification experiment, and ends long after most farmers had returned their fields to cotton, it is clear that the weevil did not end poverty in Coffee County. Table 6.2 presents a number of demographic factors that fill in the actual picture of “prosperity.” From the turn of the century, per acre farm land values rose until 1920, then evened off and dropped slightly before 1930. The value of farm property similarly peaked in 1920, dropping nearly 30 percent by the end of the decade.<sup>6</sup>

This drop in value was clearly bad for landowners, but it could be suggested that lower land prices opened up ownership opportunities to tenants. Perhaps the prosperity to which the statue’s marker referred was tenants

---

<sup>5</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930, Agriculture Volume* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Table 6.2 Testing the Prosperity Thesis, Coffee County, Alabama, 1900-1930.<sup>7</sup>

	<b>1900</b>	<b>1910</b>	<b>1920</b>	<b>1925</b>	<b>1930</b>
No. of farms	2,849	3,925	4,789	5,000	4,174
White operated farms	2,464	3,259	3,902	4,134	3,442
Negro and other nonwhite operated farms	385	665	886	866	732
Percent of land area in farms	N/A	82.5	85.3	77.7	77.2
Average farm acreage	116.5	91.2	77.3	67.4	80.3
Value of all farm property (in millions)	\$2.19	\$6.21	\$14.77	\$12.82	\$9.58
Average value of farm property	\$768	\$1,583	\$3,084	\$2,564	\$2,295
Average value of land per acre	\$3.67	\$10.62	\$24.01	\$24.47	\$19.77
Percentage of tenancy	45.2	57	64.6	69.1	71.3
No. of farms operated by tenants	1,289	2,238	3,095	3,455	2,982
Total fertilizer cost	N/A	\$284,471	\$488,385	\$611,661	N/A

becoming landowners. The figures do not support this notion either. Tenancy rates soared over the period. In 1930, 231 percent more farms were operated by tenants in Coffee County than in 1900. Rather than making land affordable for tenants, the drop in land value seems to reflect the fact that fewer people could afford to buy land or to keep it. By 1930, nearly three-quarters of the county's farmers were tenants. As Kathryn Holland Braund argues, tenancy increases may have been attributable to an influx of poor farmers from other places, courted by the now famous wealth of the peanut farmers in the county. Nevertheless, these immigrants still found themselves poor and landless. Only

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

making matters worse, there was a sharp rise in the cost of fertilizer on which Coffee County's growers increasingly relied to make the soil produce cotton. For tenants, it was just one more expense for which they had to borrow money.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, these figures reveal a more basic change in land ownership in the county. From 1900 to 1930, the number of farms rose 68 percent, from 2,849 to over four-thousand. While the number of individual farms (and farmers) rose, the average farm size dropped. Additionally, the total amount of land in agricultural production in the county shrank. In other words, more farmers were farming on less land in 1930 than in 1900, and more were doing so as tenants. As banks foreclosed on landowners unable to meet their debts, a surplus of available land drove down prices. Some of the farms were divided into smaller plots while some land was simply abandoned. Some of the farmland never made it back into agricultural production at all. Despite the claims of Enterprise business leaders that the statue represented "prosperity" brought to the county by the weevil, few Coffee County farmers could have been labeled prosperous. Whether landowners, renters, or sharecroppers, farmers were spending more money on less land and trying to keep it productive with increasing amounts of fertilizer.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902). *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930*, Agriculture Volume (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932). Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts'," 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922). *Agricultural Census, 1925* (Washington D.C., Government

The remarkable statistics in the tables above cannot portray the frustrating failure of diversification felt on the ground in southeast Alabama by the region's extension agents. Evidence of diversification's fast rise and fall rang loudly throughout the writings of the local extension agents who had put so much hope in communities' moves away from the mono-crop system. Not only had the educators pushed peanuts and hogs, but they had reported to their superiors in Auburn and Washington, D.C. that cotton was disappearing from their territories. They had also predicted that along with cotton, tenancy and poverty were departing as well. After 1920, agents began to realize that tenancy rates were actually climbing, as farmers failed to continue diversification plans. For dozens of southeast Alabama agents, it was a crushing blow.

In 1919, the same year the statue was unveiled in Enterprise, Barbour County's agent reported the insect pest had destroyed 40 percent of farmers' cotton. "In some instances," he reported gloomily, the crop "was a complete failure." Local agents harangued farmers about the boll weevil and cotton's economic and social costs, but only a small number listened.<sup>10</sup>

No one communicated this disappointment better than Covington County agent J. P. Wilson. Less than two months after the dedication of the Enterprise statue, Wilson was distraught to find farmers returning the majority of their fields

---

Printing Office, 1927). *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930, Agriculture Volume* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932).

<sup>10</sup> Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1919, ACES Records.



to cotton. They had dutifully replaced the crop with peanuts and hogs for several years and had success, but it seems that the absence of cotton had fooled farmers into thinking that the boll weevil was no longer a problem. "We have had two right good cotton years with very little weevil damage and abnormally high prices," he admitted, but "these facts have almost completely covered up the results of 1915 and 1916 in the farmers [sic.] eyes and a large acreage in cotton is being planned for this year." He begged farmers to reconsider their choice and to look at cotton's effect on their lives in the long-term. "Let me give you something to think over," he wrote in 1919:

If you plant ten to twelve acres in cotton this year and the weevils come, as they are almost sure to, and you make about one and a half bales per plow, with nothing else to sell, where will you be next fall? Why not use some horse sense and plant several money crops[?] [W]ill the farmers of this County go crazy again and act like a bunch of small school boys?

He named peanuts, oats, and potatoes as alternatives, and encouraged cow and hog raising. "Help the wife market the eggs and chickens and look after the pigs," he implored. It was near the end of his report that Wilson's plea reached a fevered pitch. In an almost hysterical tone, he promised farmers who continued with cotton that they were inviting devastating boll weevil damage, which he promised would return them to intractable poverty and despair. His closing line was directed at these farmers who had returned to cotton. "My friends," he told them, "you will be poor and ignorant and your children will be the same."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> J.P. Wilson, "Cotton Acreage," February 1, 1919, typed article in Report of County Agent, Covington County, 1919, ACES Records.

Unfortunately for thousands of southeast Alabama farmers, Wilson's prediction that growing cotton meant enduring poverty came true. As growers chose cotton over alternative crops season after season, the boll weevil returned in dreadful numbers. Statewide data shows that the insect menace continued to be a major consumer of raw cotton in Alabama throughout the 1920s. (See Figure 6.2.) This return of the boll weevil coincided with the profound failure of diversification in southeast Alabama. What had once been a model of the possibility for diversification created by the cooperation of business leaders, state and federal extension agents, and farmers, had become just another cotton-drunk corner of the South.

But why, considering the boll weevil and the cycles of debt that cotton production carried with it, had farmers returned to the crop? The most important and immediate reason lies in the complicated economy of cotton production. Simply put, farmers were attracted to high cotton prices. Demand for the staple had been low on the brink of World War I, and the consequent drop in prices had been one reason farmers had turned to peanuts. As Figure 6.3 demonstrates, however, shortages around the world drove prices sky high at the end of the 1910s. Global demand for southern cotton increased as the First World War came to an end and shipping routes to Europe again opened.

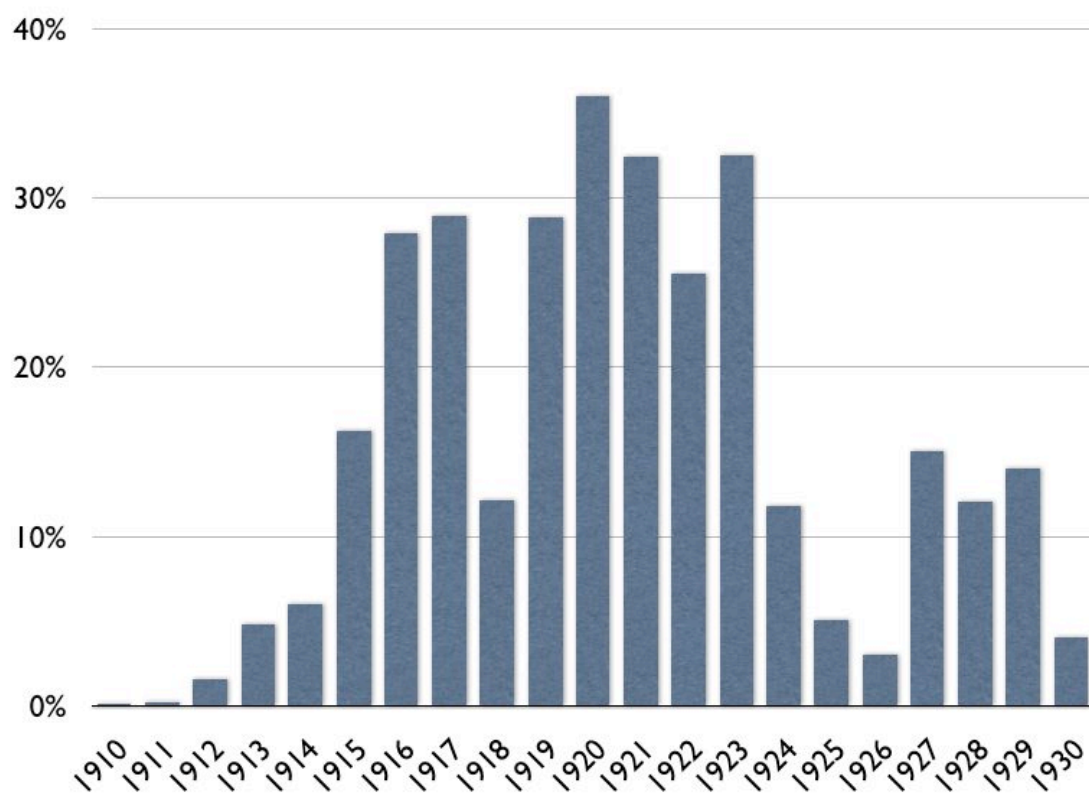


Figure 6.2: Annual percentage cotton crop loss from boll weevil in  
Alabama, 1910-1930<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Dickerson et al., eds., *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999*, 601, 604.

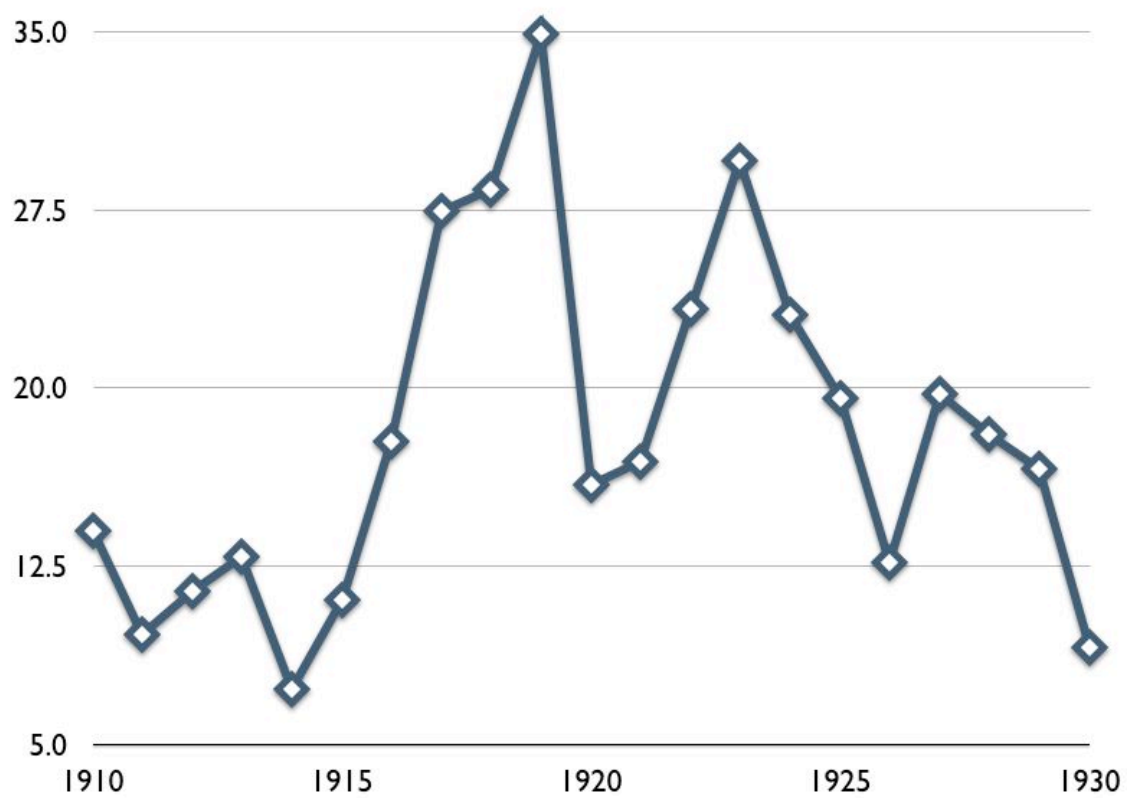


Figure 6.3: Alabama cotton price, cents per pound, 1910-1930.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

This chart of cotton prices' quick rise and fall helps to explain why in 1914 farmers were willing to listen to talk of decreasing cotton acreage while prices hovered under ten cents per pound, as well as how, despite the money made in peanuts in 1919, they stood to make a much greater profit by returning to cotton when the price topped thirty-four cents per pound. Alabama growers embraced the roller coaster ride of prices for a multitude of reasons, but the main factor was that cotton *could* pay off. If a farmer fertilized, planted a fast-growing variety and fought the boll weevil with poison, he or she could, weather permitting, make a big crop. If farmers then sold their cotton when prices were high, they stood to make a substantial profit. Cotton could bring riches to farmers, even considering the boll weevil, if everything fell into place, but it took an amazing combination of factors. Making cotton profitably under weevil conditions meant overcoming a lot of "ifs," but farmers had a hard time ignoring the lure of high prices.<sup>14</sup>

Growers were dazzled by even the prospect of a bumper cotton crop; high prices blinded them to potential losses and the cyclical debt that was part and parcel of cotton farming for all but the wealthiest planters. J.P. Wilson, the agent who promised growers that cotton would make them "poor and ignorant," admonished landowners and tenants to "Forget the idea of getting rich in one year." Few listened. In their year-end reports, local agents bemoaned farmers' attraction to high cotton prices. At the end of the 1919 season, Houston County

---

<sup>14</sup> USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, "Statistics on Cotton and Related Data," Statistical Bulletin 99 (June 1951), 34.

agent J.H. Witherington lamented that “Cotton acreage was increased this year” despite the boll weevil reducing farmers’ yields. “We will have a large acreage next year owing to the present high prices,” he predicted. Though he tried to stop farmers from growing more cotton, once they had made up their minds, Witherington found there was nothing to do except try to help them get the greatest cotton yield they could. Instead of advising demonstrators on peanuts and potatoes, he responded to questions about weevil poisons.

Agents like Witherington and Wilson had a hard time convincing farmer to stay with peanuts because farmers realized that cotton usually paid more per acre than peanuts. The boll weevil had made peanuts a safer crop choice in the Wiregrass, but rarely a more profitable one. When farmers timed the market right, selling their cotton while prices were high, the crop was profitable even considering the weevil’s added expense. “Even under our conditions with weevils,” Witherington wrote in 1919, “figures show some acres yielding a profit of sixty dollars.” Though he concluded that “You can’t find any crop we can grow that will return more profit than our cotton crop,” in truth farmers rarely made sixty dollars per acre on either cotton or peanuts. Taking the census years as snapshots, cotton remained a better profit maker than peanuts for Coffee County growers most years, though as farmers gained more experience with the

Table 6.3: Potential Value of Cotton versus Peanuts, Coffee County, Alabama.<sup>15</sup>

	1909	1919	1924	1929
cotton acreage	72,535	41,284	65,744	72,869
cotton bales	25,207	10,729	22,535	19,198
cotton bales per acre	0.348	0.260	0.343	0.263
cotton price per bale	\$69.90	\$174.50	\$115.40	\$82.75
<b>dollar value cotton per acre</b>	<b>\$24.33</b>	<b>\$45.37</b>	<b>\$39.58</b>	<b>\$21.80</b>
peanut acreage	8,559	49,393	52,087	25,804
peanut bushels	173,012	1,204,958	1,346,371	966,288
peanut bushels per acre	20.21	24.40	25.85	37.45
Peanut price, cents per pound	\$0.039	\$0.080	\$0.048	\$0.038
<b>dollar value peanuts per acre</b>	<b>\$17.34</b>	<b>\$42.94</b>	<b>\$27.30</b>	<b>\$31.31</b>

nuts, the gap decreased. As Table 6.3 attests, the relative prices of peanuts and cotton were the most important factors in determining dollar value per acre of each crop.<sup>16</sup>

The point that Witherington and other agents tried to drive home with farmers was that this per acre value of cotton versus peanuts did not include costs, and that—thanks to the boll weevil—growing cotton was increasingly

<sup>15</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922). *Agricultural Census, 1925* (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1927). *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930*, Agriculture Volume (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932).

<sup>16</sup> Report of County Agent, Houston County, 1919, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Houston County, 1920, ACES Records. *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume VI: Agriculture, 1909 and 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913). *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Volume VI, part 2: Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922). *Agricultural Census, 1925* (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1927). *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930*, Agriculture Volume (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932). The author figured value per acre by first computing bales and bushels per acre from census data, then multiplying the yield figure with the price. The author figured the dollar value per acre figures assuming cotton bales were five-hundred pounds and peanut bushels as twenty-two-pounds.

expensive. Insecticide prices rose as farmers turned back to cotton. “We carried out the calcium arsenate test on one co-operators [sic.] farm but it did not prove economical this year,” Witherington reported at the end of 1919. Farmers had no choice whether or not to apply poisons, however; if they chose not to poison, the weevil would destroy vast quantities of cotton. If they did apply the pesticide, as Witherington reported, cotton profits did not meet costs.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of hard data, however, rarely swayed yeoman farmers. Farming was an unpredictable business. Prices fell, weevils appeared in varying degrees, weather helped or hindered the crop—these were all factors that could determine whether making a profit with the white staple was even possible. At the beginning of the season, however, most growers simply eyed the cotton price and decided what crops to plant. Unfortunately, the price at harvest time often had little resemblance to its spring counterpart. These price fluctuations also underscore the relative meaninglessness of the boll weevil itself. Despite the statue’s presence and the myth of the insect’s destructiveness, prices meant more to farmers weighing a decision of what to plant than did the weevil.

The volatility of the cotton market effected not only small farmers in the southeastern corner of Alabama, but farmers’ decisions across the country. As the boll weevil continued to march across the South and prices fluctuated, the

---

<sup>17</sup> J.P. Wilson, “Cotton Acreage,” February 1, 1919, typed article in Report of County Agent, Covington County, 1919, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Houston County, 1919, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Houston County, 1920, ACES Records.



division between the country's largest growers and its smallest cleaved. While small farmers were dependent on the credit of local banks and merchants and could rarely afford to hold their crops until prices rose, large planters operated under wholly different rules.

"In our state, in our nation," Alabama governor Braxton Bragg Comer once told a graduating class at the University of Alabama, the key question to ask when gauging the health of the state "is not how are the banks, is not how are the private and public service corporations, but how are the crops?" By 1920, falling cotton prices and increasing boll weevil damage meant the answer to Comer's question was a pessimistic one. Comer owned the Avondale mill conglomerate as well as a sizable cotton plantation. By the time the boll weevil entered his state, Comer's stint as governor was over, but he maintained political and industrial power. He served on the board of the American Cotton Association (ACA), a group that represented large growers who believed that they were not getting a fair price for their harvests. A list of the earliest leaders of the ACA reads like a directory of the South's most powerful men.<sup>18</sup>

In 1921, Comer and his ACA colleagues were seemingly concerned with the boll weevil's effect on cotton production and declining prices. That year the Association wrote to large planters across the country, from Virginia to California,

---

<sup>18</sup> Braxton Bragg Comer, "Great Work is Done in State," June 1, 1910, typed speech in Braxton Bragg Comer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, hereafter Comer Papers, folder 3.

enquiring about their plans for growing the staple in the upcoming season. It was an attempt to predict the eventual price for cotton at harvest time by finding out how much and where cotton was to be planted. By the time of the ACA's enquiry, the boll weevil had traveled throughout Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and even reached parts of southeast North Carolina. The ACA believed it was a crucial point in time as the pest covered the majority of the South and prices were in flux. The previous season the bug had devoured nearly 3.7 million bales of cotton belt-wide, the most for any single year to date. The pest destroyed an astounding 21 percent of the cotton crop across the country. It was a \$282 million loss. The additional cost of insecticide and its application for that single year has been estimated at almost \$5 million.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these mind boggling losses, planters responded to the ACA's questionnaire optimistically. Considering the reality of the boll weevil's damage, the survey results are astonishing. Farmers in North Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana and Oklahoma planned to grow as much cotton for the 1922 season as they had in the previous weevil-plagued year. Growers in five states, Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, Alabama, and Tennessee, intended to actually increase their cotton acreage. Only growers in South Carolina and Florida intended to reduce their devotion to the staple.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Dickerson et al., eds., *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999*, 591.

<sup>20</sup> Harvie Jordan to Braxton Bragg Comer, February 23, 1922, in Comer Papers, folder 98.

Buried under this discussion of cotton was the notion of diversification. For generations, men like Comer had preached that farmers move away from cotton, but they been ignoring their own advice. It would seem from the ACA's final report that diversification had no future for the country's largest planters. Harvie Jordan, a Georgia politician and planter who served on ACA's board did write to Comer claiming that the questionnaire's respondents "report sentiment favorable to a continuation of the policy of crop diversification, especially to the extent of raising enough food and feed supplies for home consumption." Planters' stated strategy, however, offers no support to Jordan's claim. It is clear that no matter what planters were telling the ACA about their continued commitment to diversification, cotton acreage was increasing despite the damage and additional costs brought by the weevil.<sup>21</sup>

Planters' failure to give anything more than lip service to diversification is rooted in the tangible differences in economic power between large landowning planters and other farmers. For men like Comer, diversification was a simple idea perfectly suited for small farmers with small land holdings, but it had little relevance to the increasingly common industrial plantations. Comer's brother, E.T. Comer, who was also a cotton planter and industrialist, supported diversification too, but only on small farms. His was a simple vision of how small farmers could pull themselves away from cotton and out of the cycle of debt. "If

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. J.S. Wannamaker to Braxton Bragg Comer, January 17, 1922, Comer Papers, folder 96.

the planter...would live at home on his own hog and hominy, buying nothing, except to barter some farm product for a few years," he wrote, "it would put him in a different position." In 1921 he admitted that "Debt, however, is a great trouble" and that most farmers knew of only one way to climb out: "The idea still prevails that cotton is the only thing that can be raised to pay debt. As a matter of fact, the present situation would make this seem so." Though there is nothing particularly unique about Comer's insight, it speaks to the heart of cotton's tragedy: high prices had attracted small and mid-sized landowners back into cotton and low prices trapped them there.<sup>22</sup>

Not even large planters were free from the trap of credit. Though their operations were large and they served as lenders to their tenant workforce, even the biggest planters relied on credit most years. Though most had steady access to money, lenders still demanded cotton production. From the perspective of planters, in fact, diversification was a more suitable solution for small landowners than for themselves because they had fewer laborers (or in some cases none at all) to extend credit to themselves.

The vagaries of the cotton market and credit systems, as well as planters' unwillingness to contribute to diversification's solution were not the only factors in its failure in Southeast Alabama. Cotton had a cultural hold on the region that peanuts could never combat. Though the supporters of the boll weevil

---

<sup>22</sup> E.T. Comer to Braxton Bragg Comer, January 11, 1922, in Braxton Bragg Comer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. folder 95.

monument hoped that its presence in downtown Enterprise would entrench peanuts' own social and ideological presence in the region, these men and women failed to realize that cotton had its own monuments. Everywhere one looked in the rural South there were effigies built to the tangible prosperity that cotton could bring. Enormous mansions from the ante- and post-bellum periods dotted the southern countryside, serving as their own statues *for* the mono-crop cotton system. The big automobiles that lined downtown streets after a harvest reminded poor farmers of cotton's possibilities. In fact, cotton was such a part of the fabric, the material conditions of rural Alabama, that any sign of wealth was a sign of cotton's possibility. The heyday of peanuts was so short that it never had the chance to carve out its own meaning in the culture to rival that of cotton.

In addition to these economic and cultural factors, practical problems within the rural education system hampered diversification's prospects. Fundamental flaws in the extension system began at the highest federal level and repeated themselves throughout the chain of authority, ending with county agents. Disagreements within the USDA had begun with the department's earliest study of the weevil in the 1890s, but by the time there was a statue to the pest in Enterprise, these oppositional groups had still not settled all of their internal fighting. Douglas Helms offers an excellent description of the boll weevil's role in sparking conflict within the USDA over which branches would take the lead in the fight against the pest. There were other disagreements

between Knapp's arm of the service, including the local extension agents, and federal and state researchers.<sup>23</sup> In addition to these problems on the federal level, a plethora of conditions on the ground in the South made it difficult for local agents to get their message across, and to make it stick. As Elizabeth Sanders argues in *Roots of Reform*, farm groups that had been the driving force behind the passage of a wave of rural improvement bills dating back to the 1880s were heartened by the rise of the extension service in the twentieth century, but turned critical of the way this legislation was enacted on the local level. "The process of movement-driven democratization and outreach by the land-grant universities," she writes, won reformers' "ever wider support among the rural population. The support of local farmers, however, was clearly contingent on their relevance to the improvement of farm life." This relevance was not always easy to see for rural reformers at the local level however.<sup>24</sup>

To begin with, agents at the local level were not always well-prepared. Though Knapp understood the importance of having educators well-versed in the latest scientific farming methods, he argued that the more important quality was agents' ability to relate to "uneducated" farmers. In fact, Knapp admitted that in selecting an agent, "We prefer even that he shall be less broadly educated and have the quality of acceptability than to be more highly educated." Knapp's ideal

---

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Helms does an excellent job describing these clashes both within the USDA and between the federal agency and its state counterparts. See Helms, "Just Looking For a Home," *passim*, especially Chapters 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers and the State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 317.

agent was one who could spend more time in farmer's fields than at the state's own research farms. Unfortunately for the extension service, the agents were forced to spend more time calming farmers' fears over the boll weevil and answering their individual queries than teaching new farming methods.<sup>25</sup>

The boundaries between the different aspects of extension agents' work were not well-defined. Not only did these teachers and scientists make their own investigations into new poisons, application methods, and hybrid cottons, but they also were forced to respond to the numerous and wide-ranging boll weevil cures dreamed up by legitimate companies, individual inventors and scam artists. Douglas Helms has described in-depth the rise of "flim-flam men" who "like the boll weevil, migrated cross-country." As with the myth of the weevil's all-destructive power, rumors about solutions were very powerful and spread quickly through the Cotton South, arriving in southeast Alabama just as the pest itself did. Farmers, often gripped by the fear that the boll weevil was to drive them from their land, embraced any solution that they encountered, no matter the source. Men and women across the country recognized that solving the boll weevil problem could bring a great fortune. As Helms details, newspapers often published local accounts of a farmer beating the boll weevil with some odd remedy, and soon the story and the solution spread. Farmers across the South tried a variety of wild solutions to stop the weevil.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Martin, *Demonstration Work*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Helms, "Just Looking For a Home," 63, 64,

At the turn of the century, for instance, a rumor spread from Texas that red paint made from oxide of iron was an effective weevil poison. The USDA's Hunter later located the rumor's source, the owner of a local mineral paint mine. Other rumored solutions including planting "trap plants" like tobacco, onions, or red peppers between cotton rows, so that weevils would be repelled by the noxious tastes and smells of these other crops. Others believed that pigeons or sheep grazing cotton fields would eat the cotton pests. One man wrote to a newspaper suggesting an even more bizarre solution: "From the result of my observations of the boll weevil: Take your own home seed, even with the weevil in it, and soak it in human urine for twenty-four hours and then dry it in the shade." More elaborate solutions included the "Jones Boll Weevil Cremating Machine," and another device that actually blasted cotton with X-rays from a cart that moved through the field. Though many of these suggestions were simply absurd, others were dangerous because they ran directly counter to agents' advice. J.W. Vogler, who managed a Louisiana cotton oil company, went so far as printing and spreading bulletins throughout his parish advocating late planting—advice that ran directly opposite the USDA's cultural method.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Helms, "Just Looking For a Home," 72, 76, 77, 81, 98, 100. Urine quote is from Hunter to Frank H. Crittenden, September 8, 1903, General Correspondence, SFCII, RG 7, National Archives, as quoted in Helms, "Just Looking For a Home," 76. Helms devotes an entire chapter to these ineffective solutions. See also, Helms, "Technological Methods for Boll Weevil Control," in George L. Robson Jr., and Roy V. Scott, eds., *Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: A Symposium* (Santa Barbara: McNally & Lotin, West, 1979): 286-299.





Figure 6.4: Hill's Mixture Label.

Despite the ludicrous nature of the majority of these “solutions,” farmers leapt at them because the boll weevil seemed such a profound threat to their livelihood. This forced state and federal agents to devote resources not only to testing these remedies but to convincing farmers not to spend money on them. Agents were kept busy testing these solutions and squelching rumors, leaving less time to actually teach farmers new information. Many growers were skeptical of the “book farming” that extension representatives advocated, and as a result, agents often had difficulty convincing farmers that their advice was different or better than the folk remedies others peddled.

By the 1920s, agents had legitimate advice of their own to deliver. And when agents did successfully reach farmers with boll weevil advice, the results could be impressive. One black Mississippi farmer admitted that before he began working with his local extension agent, “the boll weevils just ate us up...just like sucking blood.” The farmer admitted he “knew nothing about killing boll weevils and nothing about chemicals at that time.” Later, the county agent “would always get something that would kill them so we could make crops.” Unfortunately for the bulk of southern African American farmers, examples like this were rare.<sup>28</sup>

Much of the pedagogical elitism that led to diversification’s failure was founded simply on white supremacy. Racism was, if not a policy of the extension

---

<sup>28</sup> Robert Collins, transcript of interview by Daisy Greene, September 17, 1977, William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi, 12.

system, an unwritten organizing principle. White supremacy ideologically guided the group's work, and Jim Crow social restrictions limited the work on a practical level. From the very top of the extension system to the bottom, racism reigned. Seaman Knapp told University of Georgia chancellor David Barrow that despite the boll weevil, the South would prevail as the country's greatest agricultural land not only because of the "germinating power" of its soil, but because its "people are the purest Anglo-Saxon." "To me the Southern people are the purest stock of the greatest race the world has produced," Knapp told Barrow. Beyond the racial assumptions of Knapp's comment, the more telling aspect is that it reveals that he did not consider black southerners a part of the "Southern people." He surely knew that over one-third of southern farmers were not "Anglo-Saxon," but he did not consider those who were not white or did not own land to be worthy of his tally. To Knapp and his colleagues, African American tenants were invisible<sup>29</sup>

At the root of the rural education philosophy was a contradiction related to racism: most educators believed that tenants and small farmers could not learn and apply the very instruction that agents taught. The majority of local extension agents, and the bureaucrats that directed them at the state and federal levels, believed that the modern farm methods they sanctioned could not be put in place by tenant farmers, white or black, or even by black landowners. From the beginning of the boll weevil's invasion of the South, in fact, experts predicted that

---

<sup>29</sup> Martin, *Demonstration Work*, 8, 9.

the pest would exact the heaviest damage in areas heavily populated by African Americans with high tenancy rates.

G.A. Rich, white agent for Bullock County, reported in 1911, prior to the pest's entry to his county, that it "has been apprehended that the boll weevil will do more damage [here] than in the sections where the small white farmer gives his personal supervision to the farm." Alabama Polytechnic's John Duggar warned large white landowners not to leave the boll weevil fight to tenants. "The only feasible thing for large farmers with negro tenants to do would be to reduce the acreage one-half to the tenant," Duggar told a gathering prior to the weevil's arrival, "it would be advisable for the landlord to tend the other half not rented to the negro tenant in some such crop as peas, oats, etc., thus affording an opportunity to kill the boll weevils." In Alabama, as had been the case in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi, fighting the boll weevil meant dealing first with the non-white farm population. Seaman Knapp believed that rural African Americans simply might not understand the diversification message itself. "When I talk to a negro citizen I never talk about the better civilization" he said, "but about a better chicken, a better pig, a white-washed house."<sup>30</sup>

This brand of rhetorical racism was also evident at the state level. Warren Hinds, Alabama's state entomologist, recorded the results of one experiment

---

<sup>30</sup> "Caterpillar Cause of Much Complaint," *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 14, 1911, newspaper clipping in Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 10. "Duggar Investigates Alabama Cotton Pests," newspaper clipping [no paper name], September 1, 1911, in Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 6. Knapp quoted in Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp*, 213.

with a mechanical poison duster, noting that “Machine trouble” was “nothing serious,” but “Nigger trouble is worse than engine trouble.” The results of this racism, found both at the heart of the white extension institutions and in the personal politics of local agents, was not merely the failure of diversification efforts.<sup>31</sup>

In hidden, sinister ways, white agents’ disregard for black farmers caused physical injury and perhaps even death. In a separate incident, Hinds methodically recorded the results of experiments with Paris Green, an anti-boll-weevil chemical applied in dust form on infested cotton. In a multi-county study, Hinds found that the poison was causing poor health in sharecroppers and livestock across the state. He made little delineation between livestock and black tenants, and made no mention of poisons ever effecting white farmers. In Baldwin County, for instance, a cow had died from Paris green; in Bullock County the poison had caused sores on livestock. But in Dallas, Perry and Pike Counties, Hinds noted “sores on men and mules,” and in Mobile there were “2 negroes sick.” “One family [of] negroes” poisoned from the insecticide in Geneva County were listed as “all recovered,” but in the other cases Hinds made no notation of the final outcome. The evidence offered by Hinds’ chart, found tucked away inside his personal papers—not published publicly in a state bulletin or local newspaper—raises the question of what the effect of the extension-

---

<sup>31</sup> Warren E. Hinds, “Cotton Dusting Record: 1919,” in Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 4. Martin, *Demonstration Work*, 32.

prescribed poison had when scientists were not keeping a tally. At the very least it may explain tenants' own apprehension in working with agents. Why would a farmer literally getting poisoned by extension service advice be willing to work with the agents? <sup>32</sup>

This racism started at the top of the extension chain of command, but its most sinister manifestation was at the county level. Beginning in 1918, extension agents found an additional two-page section attached to the blank reports they filled out at the end of each season. These new pages, titled "Special Report By White Agents on Work With Negro Farmers," asked agents to specifically record their work with black Alabamans. Despite the request, the overwhelming majority of agents simply left these new pages blank, indicating either that they had no contact with black farmers or that they did not deem that work important enough to report. <sup>33</sup>

Filling out the form for the first time, the agent for Covington County wrote simply "We have no negrow [sic.] farming section in the county," explaining that "The Negrows all farm for or with white farmers." According to the census, however, Covington had nearly eight-thousand black farmers in 1920, including 165 landowners. This was but one misleading example of the claims agents commonly made on the end-of-year forms. S.N. Crosby of Dale County claimed

---

<sup>32</sup> "Alabama County Statistical Sheet," Hinds Papers, box 1, folder 16.

<sup>33</sup> See county agents reports beginning 1918, ACES Records. See also Harold Woodman, *New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995). Black agents were instructed that they "need not report" on these new forms.

that there were “Very few Negro farmers in this county” despite the fact that over half its farms were operated by African Americans, some five-thousand men and women. Crenshaw County’s agent claimed in 1920 that “There are very few Negro farmers in this county aprox. 95% of the farmers are white.” The census reported less than 65 percent of Crenshaw’s residents were white; the figure was probably even lower for the farming population. In Bullock County, where 81 percent of farmers were African American, the white agent noted simply “I have left this part of the work to our negro county agent.”<sup>34</sup>

Other white agents were more realistic in their explanations of why their work centered around white landowners. “Among the negro farmers in Geneva county there is scarcely a land owner,” agent Rufus King wrote, “consequently the farms operated by the negro farmers are done under the supervision of the white landlord.” King worked only with those black tenants whose landlords allowed their contact, and found that “with the negro farmers in the county they are no less responsive to instruction and encouragement than are white farmers of the less intelligent class.” Non-landholding whites, in King’s view, were no better or worse equipped to receive his teachings than black tenants. With no sense of irony, King reported the following year that black farmers were only contacted in connection with the efforts to educate white landowners, but that

---

<sup>34</sup> Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1918, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Covington County, 1919, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Dale County, 1919, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Bullock County, 1919, ACES Records.

“No discrimination is made of the two wherever service can be rendered.”

Macon County’s white agent claimed to “answer Negro calls as quickly as I do White calls.” “To a man they always follow Boll Weevil instructions,” he wrote at the close of 1918, “We have proven that cotton can be raised under boll-weevil conditions.”<sup>35</sup>

White agents were clearly working within a racist system. Not only was cotton production predicated on the overwhelmingly African American tenant force being excluded from land ownership, but the racism of landowners, merchants, bankers, and politicians was no less important than agents’ own feelings of white superiority when it came to the failure of extension work. Agents were pressed with making rural Alabama modern and diversified, but their hands were tied when it came to reforming issues most pertinent to rural African Americans, namely access to landownership. Clearly from the above testimonies, however, white agents rarely did anything other than endorse the racism at the heart of the rural economic and social structures. Black agents were rarely better at truly reforming African American rural life.

Black extension agents faced an even greater set of problems in executing federal education strategies than their white counterparts. Thomas M. Campbell of Tuskegee worked tirelessly with farmers white and black, but his

---

<sup>35</sup> Report of County Agent, Geneva County, 1918, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Geneva County, 1919, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Macon County, 1918, ACES Records.



effort showed few signs of success. For all of the fame surrounding the Jesup Wagon and its successor, the Booker T. Washington Movable School, the mere ability to travel into remote areas and teach farmers did not automatically mean that rural growers modernized their operations and diversified their fields. Even black extension agents like Campbell could not overcome the restrictions of tenancy and racism. Few black or white agents worked directly with tenants.

As table 5.1 shows, Macon County, home to the Tuskegee Institute, and its neighboring Black Belt counties, had high African American populations, but very few black landowners. As a result, Campbell and his colleagues were forced to first approach the most powerful white landowners in order to access tenants. Even then, pleas for diversification directed to tenants were meaningless; only landowners made the decisions of what, how, and when to plant. The black agent for Barbour County echoed the Tuskegee message in 1918, telling farmers to “‘Let your bucket down where you are.’ Buy your farms and settle down,” but the advice carried no concrete economic plan for tenants to make economic uplift a reality. The best Campbell could hope for was that tenants would plant more food crops on the small plots of personal land that some owners allowed. Historian Robert J. Norrell has concluded that Tuskegee’s “efforts to improve farming practices apparently benefited black farmers in Macon County only marginally.”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Karen J. Ferguson, “Caught in ‘No Man’s Land’: The Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service and the Ideology of Booker T. Washington, 1900-1918,” *Agricultural History* 72, no. 1 (Winter

Much of this failure can be attributed to black agents' own elitist views of African American tenants. One black extension worker argued that there were "three general classes" among black farmers: "One that is lazy, shiftless and try to get all he can and pay back none." A second group "gets as little as he can [and] doesn't know how to plan his business even to pay that back." The final group "is buying and improving his farm." Barbour County's black extension agent explained that he worked only with white landlords, rather than directly with black tenants, not because it was the owners who made the farming decisions, but because "seeking to better the relations" between the extension service and landlords was more important than directly helping tenants. He sought owners' "cooperation in the uplift of the tenants... 'furthest down the hill.'" But he also failed to mention how his work with landlords trickled down to tenants. In fact, he reported that most of the black Alabamans he dealt with were small landowners, not the constantly moving tenants. "Our demonstrators are generally land owners and do not move from place to place, or migrate North, East and West," he wrote, "They stick to farm." Dealing only with owners and not tenants, however ineffective, was the agents' only choice.<sup>37</sup>

Agents were not in the position to push for fundamental land reform, and many resorted to giving tenants advice that had little to do with farming. One

---

1998), 29. Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1918, ACES Records. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> M.B. Ivey, letter to the editor, n.d., unknown paper, clipping found inside report of county agent, Bullock County, 1915, ACES Records. Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1918, ACES Records.

black agent, for instance, advised rural African Americans to make three changes for improving their livelihoods. The first piece of advice, “Kill out all of the sorry, worthless dogs,” hardly seemed to embody the root cause of African Americans’ problems. Second, the agent advised tenants to “Stop free feeding strong, sorry worthless people.” If killing domestic animals and pushing out people who would not work hard did not solve their problems, black Alabamans were advised to “Stop buying lots of cheap jewelry, organs, mules, machines and other things generally brought by peddlers.” This last admonition may have been at its core sound advice, but it was not the kind of agricultural advice that tenant farmers could use to make a better crop or to gain access to landownership. Though few landless farmers ever got the chance to talk directly to agents, if they received advice like this when they did, it may have soured tenants to the whole extension system.<sup>38</sup>

Some scholars have even argued that both African American tenants and landowners in southeast Alabama actively refused to work with agents from Tuskegee. Historian Karen Ferguson suggests that to black farmers, black extension agents represented not uplift, but accommodation. The substance of the modernization message, some tenants believed, was one intended to push African Americans toward white control. Black farmers recognized that the ideas behind boll weevil control, diversification, and modernization were intended not to

---

<sup>38</sup> Report of County Agent, Barbour County, 1918, ACES Records.

guide black farmers to independence, but to bring black farmers into the white-dominated rural economic market. Black tenants, Ferguson argues, “demonstrated their distrust of Tuskegee reformers through active noncooperation with the school’s agricultural extension programs.” This is a claim that is hard to verify, however, because there is a shortage of evidence from sharecroppers critical of the powerful extension service.<sup>39</sup>

The success or failure of diversification might hinge in particular instances on this agent-farmer relationship, but fundamental economic forces almost always worked against diversification. In places where agents worked with small farmers there was some evidence of cotton loosening its grip on rural life, but in most places the breakdown of the agent-farmer relationship meant the final end of the diversification dream as well. This was clearly not only the result of farmers refusing to work with agents, or educators’ elitism when dealing with farmers. Within the economic, social, and cultural system of agricultural production in the rural South there was little room for any kind of talk of true reform of systems. Within these constraints, agents did what they could do to help farmers and, in turn landowners and tenants alike tried to retain more cash and personal independence.

Though high cotton prices had been an initial impetus for farmers to stop their peanut and hog production, the failure of the relationship between farmers

---

<sup>39</sup> Ferguson, “Caught in ‘No Man’s Land’,” 44.

and the extension service contributed to the death of the diversification dream. As a result, poverty continued to plague the southeastern corner of the state. By 1930 per capita income in these counties trailed other parts of the state, a state that was itself near the bottom of the national income average. The Black Belt counties of southeastern Alabama had the direst numbers. In 1929, Russell County ranked fifty-ninth out of sixty-seven counties for total farm income. In fact, eight of the thirteen counties under study ranked in the bottom half of the state's agricultural income ranking.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these calamitous figures, white Alabamans remained steadfast in their claim that the boll weevil had truly been the “herald of prosperity.” The Works Progress Administration's guide to Alabama claimed “Enterprise is famous in American economic history as the community that successfully introduced diversification in agriculture when much of Alabama was committed to growing cotton.” As with most myths, the tale proved stronger than reality and was self-perpetuating. In 1949, county business leaders looked to improve on the monument by finally adding a bronze boll weevil to the top of the statue. A visitor to Enterprise today still finds the monument presiding over downtown, with the statue's arms holding a gigantic boll weevil overhead (that is if vandals have not stolen the bug, a fairly consistent occurrence). At the nearby Pea River Historical and Genealogical Society, a tourist can buy a mini statue, a boll weevil pennant,

---

<sup>40</sup> USDA, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, “Statistics on Cotton and Related Data,” Statistical Bulletin 99 (June 1951), 61.

or a t-shirt emblazoned with the boast “I’m Bugged.” The fact that the county’s claims about the boll weevil bringing prosperity are patently untrue mattered little to the town’s boosters in 1920, and mean even less today.<sup>41</sup>

The myth of diversification’s success that is perpetuated by the statue is not the only legend created in the wake of the weevil’s invasion of southeast Alabama. A related fable revolves around George Washington Carver. Indeed, if Carver had actually been able to appear at the boll weevil statue’s dedication ceremony in Enterprise in 1919, it would have marked a great symmetry. Carver and the statue both serve as symbols of the power of the boll weevil’s destructive reputation. The scientist, who had followed the USDA’s lead in recommending that peanuts replace cotton in Alabama fields, created and nurtured his own legend in the wake of the boll weevil.

A growing number of scholars, in fact, have written that the scientist’s accomplishments in the field of peanut research have been grossly overstated. Due to the timing of the weevil’s invasion and the sudden importance of alternative crops to cotton, Carver’s work was thrust into the limelight. Several historians have more recently suggested, however, that the scientist actually did little original research, never took notes on his experiments, and has been credited with inventing several products he had no involvement with. Much of his success was purely in public relations. The peanut industry itself, it seems,

---

<sup>41</sup> Walker, ed., *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*, 330.

created Washington's image as "The Peanut Man." As Linda O. McMurry points out in her study of Carver as "Scientist and Symbol," "if the sweet potato industry had been as well organized Carver might never have become the Peanut Man."<sup>42</sup>

The creation of these Alabama myths owe their origin to the strength of the boll weevil's threat to southern life. Alabamans believed that the pest was going to destroy cotton cultivation forever, and they worked in different ways to protect themselves. Ironically, this myth of the weevil's destructiveness did not result in a rural revolution, but helped to entrench the power structures that existed before its arrival in Alabama. The boll weevil gave diversification a chance in southeast Alabama, but when it failed, what remained was a stronger planter class, a weaker, larger landless labor force, and an extension system largely ineffective in its education efforts.

---

<sup>42</sup> Barry Mackintosh, "George Washington Carver: The Making of a Myth," *The Journal of Southern History* 42, 4 (November, 1976): 511-512. Linda O. McMurry, *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 171. See also Linda O. Hines, "White Mythology and Black Duality: George W. Carver's Response to Racism and The Radical Left," *The Journal of Negro History* 62, Issue 2 (April, 1977): 134-146.

## CHAPTER 7

## POSTSCRIPT TO PEASANTRY: THE BOLL WEEVIL IN GEORGIA

A 1989 history of Washington County, Georgia explains that, when the boll weevil appeared shortly after World War One, “hordes of devastation covered the countryside.” By the 1920s, the insect pest “was desimating [sic.] the county’s cotton crop.” Despite this bleak picture, the author admits that by the end of the decade, “few farms were lost, few businesses failed.” In an almost apologetic tone, the article suggests that Washington County citizens felt few effects from the pest, “Possibly because by nature its people had been conditioned to be conservative and parsimonious.” This interpretation attempts at once to endorse the myth of the weevil’s destructiveness and to argue that the pest actually had only a small local effect. This contradiction speaks to the power of the boll weevil legend. For generations, Georgians have heard and read that the boll weevil ended the state’s allegiance to King Cotton, but a close examination of the record reveals that the pest was merely one of many factors that pushed cotton from the state’s marginal farms.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Maurice L Friedman, “The World War Years—Coming of the Boll Weevil, 1910-1945,” in *Cotton to Kaolin: A History of Washington County, Georgia, 1784-1989*, ed. Mary Alice Jordan (Sandersonville, GA: Washington County Historical Society, 1989), 80, 83.



The image of the boll weevil as the destroyer of the plantation system has proven stronger and more lasting in Georgia than in any other state. It is an impression originally nurtured prior to the weevil's arrival by the state's own agricultural leaders, both in the public and private sectors, and fostered by a cross-section of Georgia society after the pest began destroying Georgia cotton. Planters sought a more favorable credit system and greater restraints on labor, and they used the weevil to try to convince legislators to make bills favorable to their class. Farm educators used the pest as a scare tactic aimed at the state's mid-sized and small farmers. Many of these growers, in return, used the boll weevil as a specific, material reason to finally leave rural Georgia. Entrepreneurs embraced the notion that the boll weevil was destroying the state's plantation system and used this image to advance their own business schemes for replacing cotton. During the period of the insect's invasion of Georgia cotton, artists from the state and around the South described the pest in the darkest of terms throughout stories and songs that had a growing impact on the national consciousness. Finally, the most important factor in the enduring myth of the boll weevil's effect on Georgia has been the work of academics who studied rural Georgia during a time of a major outmigration by thousands of the state's rural cotton laborers.

Despite the claims of these Georgians—farmers, politicians, extension agents, writers, musicians, and scholars—the boll weevil's invasion did not serve

as what sociologist Arthur Raper called a “preface to peasantry.” In fact, the majority of the state’s rural residents had been stuck in a condition nearing peasantry for generations prior to the pest’s appearance. No frequent visitor to rural Georgia could have detected a marked improvement in the quality of life of most landless farmers during the forty years prior to the pest’s arrival. But if the weevil simply made bad conditions worse, how did the destructive image hold?

The answer lies in a series of economic and social changes in rural Georgia that occurred around the time of the weevil’s appearance. Indeed, there was real change in the state that corresponded to the boll weevil’s destruction of Georgia cotton. The first two decades of the pest’s presence in Georgia coincided with a slow breakup of the cotton plantation system in parts of the state, and a massive migration of the rural workforce, but the cotton boll weevil was hardly the principal factor in this demise. The destruction of cotton exacted by the insect, though devastating for many individual farmers, was merely the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back, ending cotton production that had already grown too expensive on marginal farm lands throughout the state. Rather than a “preface to peasantry,” the boll weevil’s entry to Georgia marked its postscript.<sup>2</sup>

An observer in the 1910s, however, could easily have been swayed by the illusion that Georgia cotton farmers were enjoying a period of great prosperity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Franklin Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936).

As Figure 7.1 reveals, there was a marked rise in both cotton acreage and bales produced in the state from 1900 to 1917. As in southeast Alabama at the same time, farmers in Georgia had responded to rising cotton prices during World War I by planting more of their fields in the white staple. The state's gins and ports filled with record numbers of cotton bales. Newspapers heralded the crop's upsurge as county cotton production records fell year after year. It seemed to most observers that pessimists who had predicted cotton's demise in the 1890s, promising only that diversification could save farms from bankruptcy, had been wide of the mark.<sup>3</sup>

A close examination of the figures, however, reveals that despite higher prices, cotton farmers in this so-called "Golden Era," were in fact falling deeper and deeper into debt. For the decade prior to the boll weevil's invasion, bale production rose alongside cotton prices, but farmers' profits did not grow with them. Farmers' costs for seed, rent, fertilizer, and ginning all increased along with prices, making it almost equally as hard to make a profit when cotton was selling for thirty cents per pound as when the price was near eight cents.

Two studies made by the state's College of Agriculture and the USDA's Bureau of Farm Management in 1913 and 1918 explained how this economic model worked. For the 1913 study, the authors figured the bulk line price, or the price that 85 percent of Georgia farmers needed to receive for their cotton in

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Willard Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture, 1850-1950* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 175.

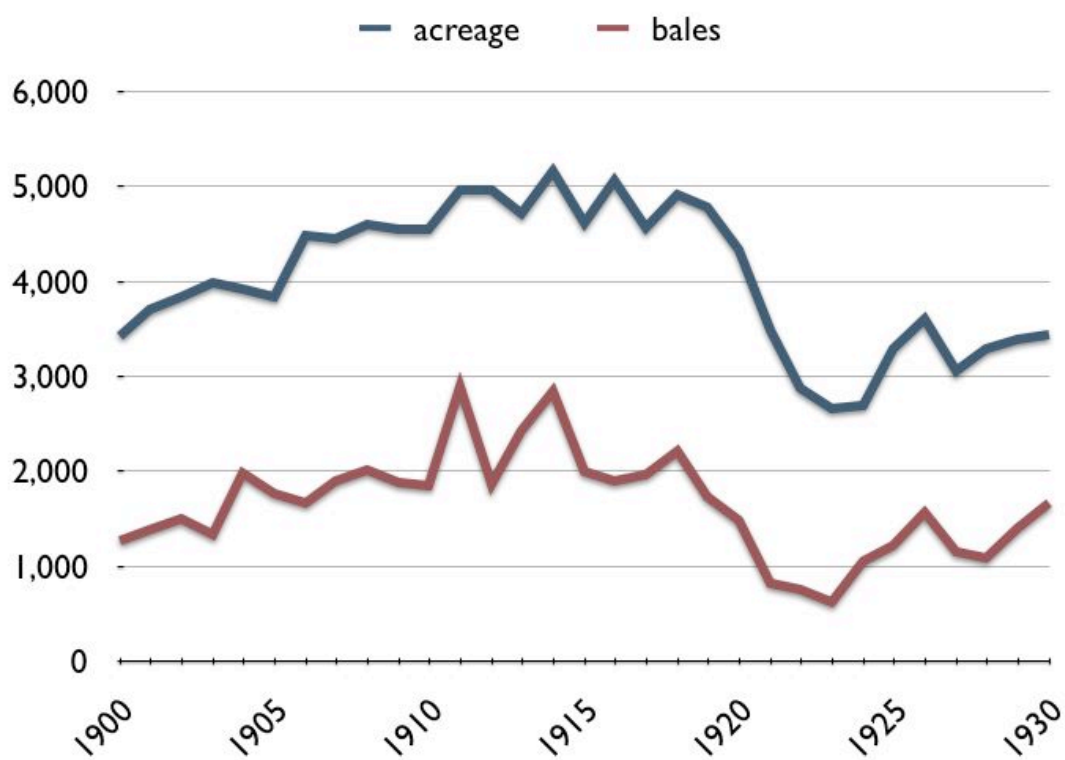


Figure 7.1: Cotton acreage and bale production (x1,000) in Georgia, 1900-1930.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Dickerson et al., eds., *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999*, 598, 601, 604.

order to break even. That year, cotton sold for 12.23 cents per pound in Georgia, but the bulk line price was considerably higher, sixteen cents per pound, which means that most farmers were losing money. Five years later, cotton prices had climbed to 23.39 cents per pound, but the bulk line price had soared to thirty-two cents per pound. At that price, only 56 percent of farmers managed any profit. The rise in prices did not automatically mean a rise in profits.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to discover which farmers were managing a profit despite these high bulk line prices, the investigators examined farmers' costs in terms of their yield. They found that the higher the yield farmers squeezed from their land, the lower their cost of production. In other words, if a farmer managed only 172 pounds of lint cotton per acre, it cost 11.6 cents per pound to produce, but if they increased their yields to 456 pounds per acre, the cost dropped to 7.5 cents per pound. Paradoxically, in order to meet these higher production costs, farmers had to spend money, labor, and time to improve their yields, so that their costs might decline. For most, this meant heavy fertilizer use. Over the one-hundred year history of cotton production in Georgia, landowners had rarely rotated fields to rest the soil, and this constant cotton production had robbed the land of its nutrients. Georgians consistently increased the amount of fertilizer spread on their fields each year, in a desperate attempt to replace the nutrients

---

<sup>5</sup> USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, "Statistics on Cotton and Related Data," Statistical Bulletin 99 (June 1951), 136. "Stop the Losses in Farming," Georgia State College of Agriculture, vol. VIII, No. 33, Bulletin 211 (1920), 10, 14, 15.

that generations of cotton crops had taken from the earth. This fertilizer came at a high cost, however, which cut into profit margins. Cotton farmers were caught in a pinch: if they wanted to lower their production costs, they needed more capital in order to make their land more productive. Though for a decade these growers had been losing money, despite increasing their cotton production, things were about to get worse.<sup>6</sup>

The boll weevil first entered the state in late 1914, and, in the words of writer Harris Dickson, “marched through Georgia like Sherman to the sea, and creating far more havoc.” By the end of 1915, the pest had traveled nearly half the distance across Georgia. The following year, farmers in every cotton-growing corner of the state could find weevils in their fields.<sup>7</sup>

Though the pest had entered the state in 1915, it did not begin to seriously threaten the state’s crop until 1919, just about the time cotton prices in the state plummeted (see Figures 7.2 and 7.3). Once the boll weevil was a factor in the state’s farm economy, however, the 1914 bulk line price study meant little. The pest increased farmers’ costs substantially as it forced them to purchase huge amounts of calcium arsenate, extra fertilizer, more expensive seed, and other

---

<sup>6</sup> “Stop the Losses in Farming,” Georgia State College of Agriculture, vol. VIII, No. 33, Bulletin 211 (1920), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Dickson, *The Story of King Cotton*, 96. When it reached the Atlantic Ocean, the weevil did find a kind of cotton there that indeed had no chance against it, no matter what farmers did. In the coastal regions, a number of farmers grew long-staple Sea Island cotton, though it was a miniscule portion of the state’s overall cotton production. The boll weevil’s arrival on the coast did destroy all hopes of growing that breed profitably. Sea Island cotton demanded a long growing season, which meant that as its bolls ripened in late summer, when boll weevils were at full strength. Sea Island cotton disappeared almost overnight.

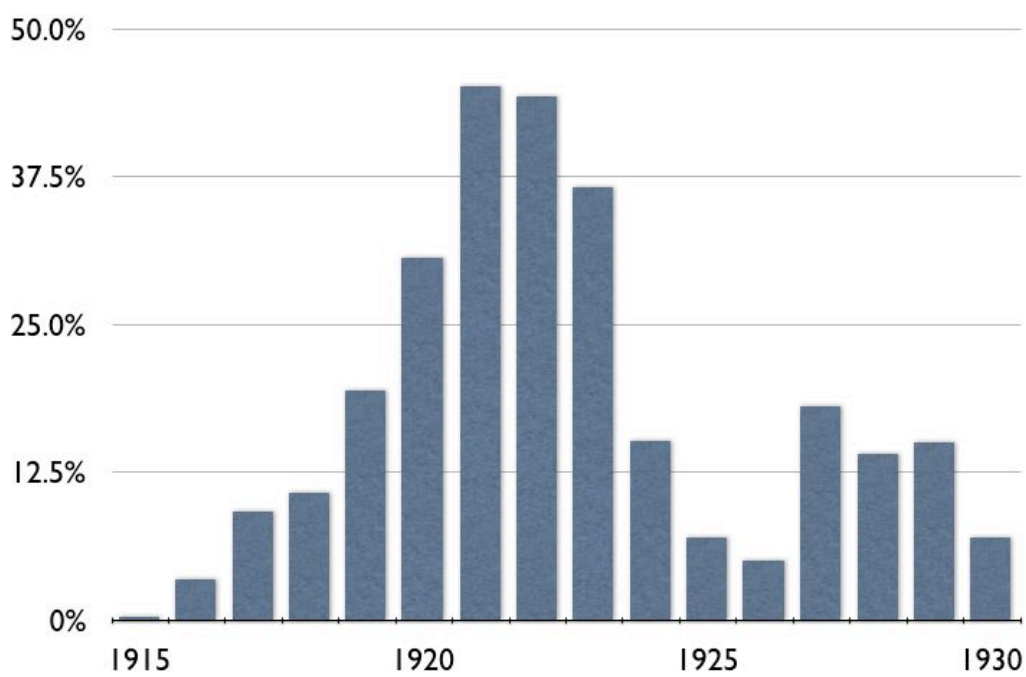


Figure 7.2: Percentage crop loss from boll weevil in Georgia, 1915-1930<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Dickerson et al., eds., *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999*, 614-5.

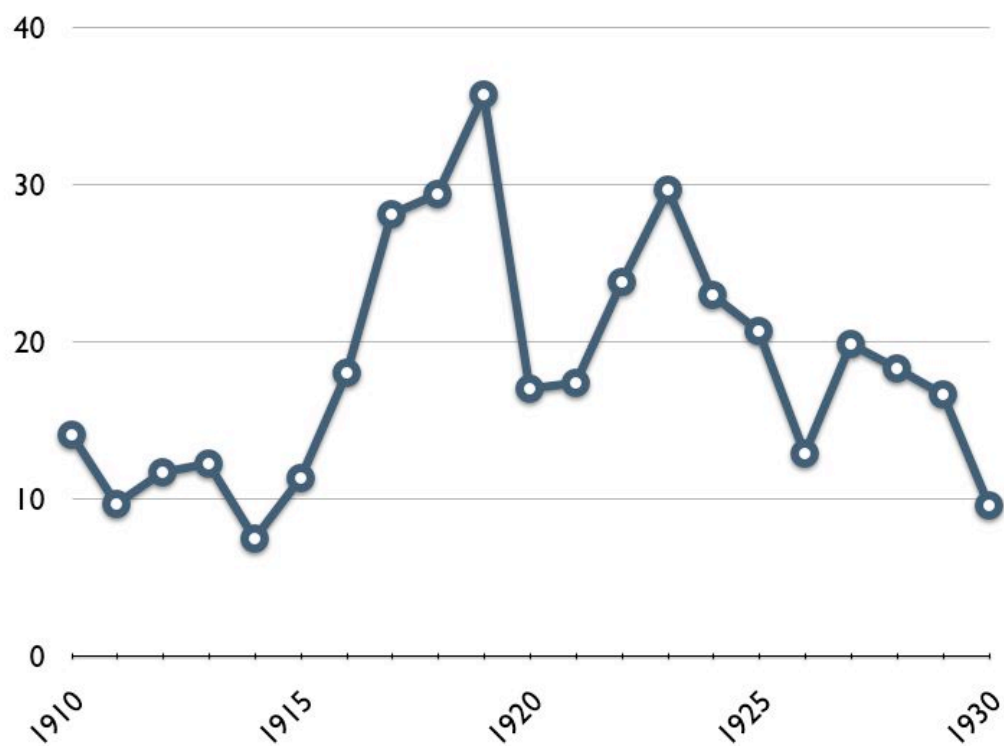


Figure 7.3: Georgia cotton prices, cents per pound, 1910-1930.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, "Statistics on Cotton and Related Data," Statistical Bulletin 99 (June 1951), 136.



supplies in order to fight the pest. In other words, farms that were struggling to stay profitable even in the “Golden Era,” had little means to make up for the added costs of the boll weevil. “Thus the golden hue of prosperity that appeared to be covering Georgia in the first decade of the new century,” as Willard Range wrote, “was not so real as it seemed to be, and the costs incurred fighting the boll weevil after 1918 made more severe an already bad situation.”<sup>10</sup>

Though Range made this point in 1954, few historians seem to have picked up on his appraisal. If the boll weevil had never appeared, Georgians on the state’s least productive land would have quit cotton growing anyway. They could not sustain cotton farming on any land that did not produce cotton at a high pound-per-acre yield. Though many must have recognized the handwriting on the wall, few Georgians admitted that cotton farming in all but the state’s best land was dying. As the pest approached and then finally invaded, state leaders made the appearance of preparing Georgia’s farmers to fight the weevil, though much of their work used the boll weevil’s threat as a means to reach farmers about other farm issues, principally modernization and diversification.

The responsibility of educating the farmers about the coming of the boll weevil fell to Georgia State College of Agriculture president Andrew M. Soule. Soule, a native of Canada, had worked in the extension services of Tennessee and Texas and as dean of the College of Agriculture at the Virginia Polytechnic

---

<sup>10</sup> Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture*, 175.

University before moving to Athens to become president of the Georgia College of Agriculture in 1907.<sup>11</sup>

Soule took over a few years prior to the boll weevil's arrival in the state, but he wasted no time in making a fight against the bug the central part of the school's program. His first act as president was the planning of a cotton school for January, 1908. The College invited cotton farmers from across Georgia to Athens for eleven days of faculty lectures and hands-on work at the school's research farm. The College required a tuition of one dollar, so that, in Soule's words, it would be "virtually free to every farmer and farmer's boy in Georgia." The school was designed to teach Georgia's cotton farmers three basic principles: maximizing cotton yields, diversification, and self-sufficiency. Soule himself delivered a series of lectures at the institute, including one titled simply "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil." He warned farmers against importation of weevils through seed and hull shipments from infested states, but he also linked general improvement of Georgia's farms to the coming of the pest. It was a strategy he would employ for several years.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Stephen J. Karina, *The University of Georgia College of Agriculture: An Administrative History, 1785-1985* (Athens: The University of Georgia, 1989), 123-4. The Board of Trustees choose Soule over several other candidates, including University of Georgia alumnus Ulrich B. Phillips, who refused the job offer.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew M. Soule, "Preparing Georgia for the Advent of the Boll Weevil," n.d. Andrew M. Soule Papers, University Archives, University of Georgia, hereafter Soule Papers. Soule, "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," n.d., in folder "Lectures, Cotton School, January 6-17, 1908," Soule Papers. "The Cotton School," (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, November, 1907), vol. VIII, no. 3, serial no. 77, Soule Papers.

Following the first cotton school, Soule directed the college's efforts to take information directly to farmers via the state's rail system. An educational train began annual tours of the state, reaching rural towns with the College's message of modernizing farm operations and devoting less land to cotton. It too featured lectures on the boll weevil, though most of the focus was on improving farmers' methods of raising stock and growing crops other than cotton for profit. The following year, in reaction to the positive response of farmers to the train, the state legislature appropriated \$10,000 for extension education. In 1911, the body raised its appropriation to \$40,000. The greatest boost for Georgia's extension system came with the 1914 passage of the Smith-Lever Act. The following year, Georgia received \$35,174 from the federal government, the greatest of all of the Deep South states, trailing only Texas and Illinois nationally. The State College of Agriculture immediately put these new funds to use.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the College's work directly with farmers, Soule and his staff enlisted the support of the state's most powerful business interests. In November, 1910, the College of Agriculture co-sponsored with the USDA and the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce a meeting in the capital city. Planters, state and federal educators and Georgia's most powerful business people discussed what the weevil's eventual invasion of Georgia would mean for the economy of the state. Participants not only talked of methods of combating the weevil, but of

---

<sup>13</sup> J. Phil Campbell, "Extension Service Report for Georgia, 1915-1916" (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, August, 1916), vol. IV, no. 1, Bulletin 110.

ways to assuage the fears of the state's cotton farmers. Attendees, especially those business leaders whose livelihood depended on an active cotton market, feared that landowners would abandon cotton completely when the boll weevil arrived, rather than learning to grow cotton under weevil conditions. Merchants, bankers, and agents of the state's railways recognized that the weevil could get the attention of the state's farmers, and, as a result, they too attempted to use the pest as a means to push their own agendas. Later, the Central of Georgia Railway distributed a bulletin up and down its line with the alarmist title "'The Boll Weevil is Coming! What Are You Going To Do About It?'"<sup>14</sup>

While the school courted the help of the private sector, it increased its direct communication with farmers. The College continued to hold farmers' institutes in Athens, hoping to use the boll weevil, and farmers' own anxiety about the pest, to entice farmers to hear about alternatives to cotton. From 1910 to 1930, the State College of Agriculture sponsored nearly one-hundred meetings that claimed to be concerned in some way with the cotton pest. However, in many cases, the real point of the meetings had little to do with the boll weevil. The co-sponsors of these conferences revealed the true intentions behind the meetings. In 1917, for instance, the Georgia Dairy and Live Stock Association, the State Horticultural Society and the Georgia Breeders' Association convened

---

<sup>14</sup> Soule, "Preparing Georgia for the Advent of the Boll Weevil," n.d., Soule Papers. Central of Georgia Railway, "The Boll Weevil is Coming! What Are You Going To Do About It?" (Savannah: Central of Georgia Railway, 1914).

a conference ostensibly devoted to the cotton pest. The content of the meeting's message, however, had more to do with raising livestock, breeding animals, and growing alternative plants than it did about fighting the insect.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the farmers' institutes and bulletins organized and published by the College, in 1912 Soule dispatched several agents to the infested areas of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. These researchers studied not only how the weevil destroyed cotton and the methods used locally to limit the pest's effects, but also the broader social and economic changes brought by the weevil.

Echoing the line repeated across the South about the weevil acting as a "blessing in disguise," agents reported that not all change brought by the weevil was bad for rural society:

The boll weevil in Louisiana and Mississippi has destroyed absentee landlordism; he has helped to introduce livestock and a crop rotation system of farming; he has forced the farmers to grow their home supplies, which has largely done away with the credit system; he has brought to the large farmers competent superintendents, and has awakened the small farmers of the country to the necessity of a better system of farming.

Intrigued by the agents' reports of diversification and modernization, in 1914, 1915, and 1916 Soule dispatched more farm educators and researchers to Alabama and Mississippi. For the 1915 journey, Soule sent 150 South Georgia

---

<sup>15</sup> Invitation for "Annual Meeting of the Georgia Dairy and Live Stock Association, Georgia Breeders' Association, State Horticultural Society and A Boll Weevil Conference," 1917, Soule Papers.

farmers with his agents to explore local conditions in the weevil-infected regions.<sup>16</sup>

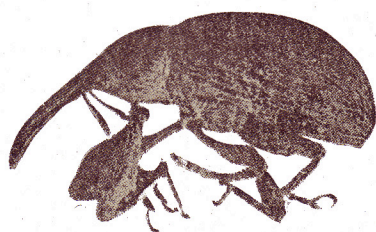
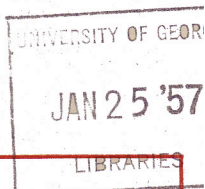
Sending agents to the infested areas and preaching diversification at conferences was Soule's carrot. The wide-spread distribution of informational bulletins that scared readers into thinking that the pest would, or had, destroyed all of the state's cotton, was his stick. The College used informational literature prior to the entry of the boll weevil to the state, but as the pest moved closer, the school increased both the frequency and total numbers of bulletins printed. In 1916, the first year the boll weevil did measurable damage to Georgia's cotton, the College printed and distributed seven different circulars dealing with the weevil. Again, however, just as the local farm schools had used the boll weevil as a ploy to attract farmers to hear about a different farm topic, most of the state's bulletins dealt not with the pest directly, but used its arrival as a means to push for crop diversification and other farm improvements.

In November, 1916, for instance, the College advertised its "short courses" on farming with a bulletin emblazoned on its front cover with a huge photograph of a boll weevil. Below the picture, a bright red caption (the first instance of color used in any bulletin) declared "Get Ready for the Boll Weevil. Make No Mistake" (See Figure 7.4). The pamphlet attempted to get readers' attention with the giant

---

<sup>16</sup> J. Phil Campbell, "Farmers' Co-operative Demonstration Work in Georgia," (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, February, 1914), vol. II, no. 8. Soule, "Preparing Georgia for the Advent of the Boll Weevil," n.d., Soule Papers.

Bulletin  
Georgia State College  
of Agriculture



**Get Ready for the Boll Weevil**  
**Make No Mistake. Attend the Short Courses**

Announcement of  
**SHORT COURSES**  
January 3-14, 1917

Entered as second-class matter December 21, 1912, at the post office at Athens, Georgia, under the Act of August 24, 1912. Issued monthly by the College.

Figure 7.4: Georgia State College of Agriculture Bulletin Number 112.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> "Announcements of Short Courses" (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, November, 1916), vol. IV, no. 3, Bulletin 112.

weevil, though its content had very little to do with the bug itself. The College published similarly misleading bulletins with catchy titles like “Starve the Boll Weevil,” “Beating the Boll Weevil,” and one which declared in bold-face simply “POISON BOLL WEEVILS.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite preparations, in the early 1920s, the boll weevil exacted a very heavy toll on the state’s crop. As Figure 7.2 illustrates, from 1920 through 1923, the weevil destroyed more than a quarter of the crop annually. By 1922, Soule admitted that “the advent of the boll weevil was a staggering blow to the farmers of Georgia.” He added, however, that the weevil’s damage was great because of the failure of the state’s farmers’ to heed his department’s warnings:

In spite of all the efforts made to prepare them for its onslaught, the cry of ‘Wolf! Wolf!’ so frequently heard and discounted, lulled them into a false sense of security. Like all plagues which have afflicted humanity, the weevil struck suddenly and with devastating fury.<sup>19</sup>

The pest had not, of course, struck suddenly. Georgians had known it was coming for nearly twenty years. No farmer in the state was surprised to find the pest damaging their crop in the early 1920s. In fact, if any entity had “cried wolf,” it was Soule’s own department, which consistently used the coming of the

---

<sup>18</sup> “Announcements of Short Courses” (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, November, 1916), vol. IV, no. 3, Bulletin 112. J.G. Oliver, “Starve the Boll Weevil” (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, September, 1919), vol. VIII, no. 10, Bulletin 188. W.E. Hinds, “Beating the Boll Weevil,” in “Proceedings of Georgia State Horticultural Society, Georgia Market Conference, Georgia Breeder’s Association and Georgia Dairy and Live Stock Association” (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, June, 1916), vol. IV, no. 16, p.71-81. Frank C. Ward, “Poison Boll Weevils” (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, January, 1920), vol. VIII, no. 18, Bulletin 196.

<sup>19</sup> Dickerson et al., eds., *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999*, 598, 601, 604. Soule, “Annual Report of the President, State College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts, 1921-1922” (Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, June, 1922), vol. X, no. 15, Bulletin 254.



weevil as a means to talk to farmers about issues having little to do with the pest. Of course, Soule's contention that the weevil had appeared overnight, was another attempt to recontextualize the pest's arrival, to give the insect a kind of power that would in turn bolster his department's own authority. By playing up the pest's threat prior to its arrival, and by suggesting that it was an unstoppable force after the weevil was present in the state, Soule was using the pest as a scapegoat for whatever disintegration of the state's cotton economy was occurring.

Soule and the College of Agriculture were not alone in portraying the boll weevil as an invincible, devastating force. In May, 1922, Harvie Jordan, a Georgia planter and board member of the ACA, wrote John Judson Brown, Georgia's agriculture commissioner, ostensibly asking for advice. The first two pages of the three-page letter gave the impression that Jordan's main reason for contacting Brown was to impress upon the Commissioner that the boll weevil was exacting devastating damage on southern cotton farmers' livelihoods. Planters, Jordan told Brown, were in dire straights. The large landowners whom Jordan represented had become "insolvent" due to the "widespread invasion of the cotton boll weevil over the cotton states east of the Mississippi River." The weevil was no small threat; it "presents an economic problem in our agricultural industry which demands a complete change in the customs and habits of the farmers." The menace was a threat to the very foundation of the southern cotton

economy: “The negro, the mule, an extensive acreage of cotton and the supply merchant are rapidly becoming a tradition,” Jordan wrote. The insect had inexplicably fostered both a “heavy and continuous” exodus of tenant labor, and at the same time forced large landowners to move into towns, “leaving their lands at the thriftless mercy of ignorant tenants who are incompetent to cope with the boll weevil.” Small farmers were “giving up in despair and leaving these lands idle and unproductive.” Nothing less than a “complete change” in the way farms operated could save southern cotton production.<sup>20</sup>

The final page, however, revealed Jordan’s reasons for emphasizing the damaging presence of the weevil. Jordan and the ACA were not calling for Brown’s aid in the boll weevil fight, but for his support of a new crop credit plan. Rising labor, pesticide and fertilizer costs, along with falling market prices for the staple, had made cotton farming painfully expensive, even for the South’s largest planters, Jordan argued. The ACA sought greater access to credit for the region’s planters. Jordan also asked for Brown’s support of a federally-mandated minimum cotton price and his opposition to legislation limiting agricultural workers to an eight-hour work day. Jordan’s rhetoric about the boll weevil was merely to attract Brown’s attention by painting a dismal picture of southern

---

<sup>20</sup> Harvie Jordan to John Judson Brown, May 4, 1922, in John Judson Brown Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, hereafter Brown Papers, box 1, folder 22.

agriculture that would spur action on mostly unrelated cotton marketing and labor issues.<sup>21</sup>

Powerful organizations of large landowners, like the ACA, were not the only groups using the weevil to press for their own disparate agendas. Brown, in fact, used the pest to advance his own cooperative farming plan. When a farmer from Union Point, Georgia wrote Brown asking for his help in finding a more affordable solution to the boll weevil than applying the expensive poison calcium arsenate, Brown's answer had little to do with chemicals. "I can say to you, in all seriousness," Brown replied, "that we can grow cotton in Georgia in spite of the boll weevil but it cannot be done at the prices now prevailing, or anything like it, without losing not only our crops but our lands as well." Only if farmers were willing to sell cotton at "a price to cover cost of production plus a reasonable profit" would Brown recommend the crop. Those who sell their cotton at any price "insist that we take a gambler's chance at staying out of bankruptcy."<sup>22</sup>

The solution Brown offered the Union Point farmer and many like him was a cotton growers' cooperative. Brown again put the boll weevil at the heart of his rhetoric, though it was not actually a main facet of his plan. The menace had raised the cost of production beyond what the crop earned at market, Brown pointed out. Skimping on the application of pesticides was certainly not an option for farmers, but prices for the poison were constantly on the rise. "So you see we

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> J.J. Brown to J.L. Smith, February 11, 1922, in Brown Papers, box 1, folder 18.

cannot grow under boll weevil conditions with Calcium Arsenate” he wrote a constituent in 1922, “and cannot grow without.” He advised the farmer to join a cooperative and to demand that his neighbors do as well. If farmers across the South refused to sell their cotton below a grower-determined price, and “say to the World: ‘You cannot get our cotton unless you pay this price’,” then the price would automatically climb.<sup>23</sup>

The cooperative movement had had limited success in the state in the 1890s, when The Grange and Farmers’ Alliance organized farmers to boycott using jute to wrap cotton bales, and helped farmers organize rural cooperatives throughout the state. Though these organizations gained hundreds of active members, most failed because of a combination of poor business practices and the refusal of powerful urban-based industrial interests like railroads and banks to give in to the cooperatives’ demands.<sup>24</sup>

In his attempt to convince Georgia farmers to again join the cooperative movement, Brown added a powerful enticement to his argument: the final destruction of the boll weevil. If landowners followed through with their threat to cease cotton growing for an entire season, not only would prices soar, “We would destroy the boll weevil absolutely,” ridding the “American continent” of the insect. “And if it takes that to destroy the boll weevil,” he added “and to teach the cotton

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture*, 141. For a longer discussion on the cooperative movement in the South, see Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, Ayers, *Promise of the New South*.

consuming world” that farmers “cannot afford to raise cotton at a loss” then the weevil will be dead and prices will climb.<sup>25</sup>

The real dilemma, in Brown’s view, was the disjuncture between producers and marketers, not the boll weevil, but he continued to name the pest as the instigator of this trouble. In his 1922 state report, he pointed to the “continued ravages of the boll weevil” which make “permanent co-operative marketing associations” necessary. He admitted that the crop was “yet our money crop, and will be possibly for many years to come,” despite the pest. “It is no longer a question as to whether Georgia can or cannot produce cotton under boll weevil conditions,” he wrote. “It is an established fact...that we CAN grow cotton at the rate of one bale per acre on lands that were capable of producing one bale per acre before the advent of the boll weevil.” In order to beat the weevil, Georgians would have to make major changes in the way they marketed the crop, not in the way that they planted it or protected it from insect ravages. “The great question now to be settled,” he concluded “is whether the cotton consuming world is willing to pay cost plus a reasonable profit for cotton, or whether they will insist that the farmer continue to grow cotton for less than cost of production.”<sup>26</sup>

Brown’s ideology, however, did not match his own farming record. All the while recommending that cotton farmers band together to sell their crop, or that

---

<sup>25</sup> J.J. Brown to J.L. Smith, February 11, 1922, in Brown Papers, box 1, folder 18.

<sup>26</sup> Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, 1922, in Brown Papers, box 1, folder 23.

they cease cotton production altogether because of low prices, Brown directed his brother, who managed Brown's personal plantation, to plant more and more cotton. In 1922, he wrote to his brother, J. Polk Brown, advising him to "PUT THE CALCIUM ARSENATE TO THE COTTON." Prices for the staple were climbing, this supposed proponent of diversification told his brother, and he wanted to have a bumper crop and sell it while prices were near their peak. "Cotton went up awfully today and the world has got a cotton famine right on," he wrote, adding that if they sold the crop for a good price, "I hope to eat fried chicken and have some good old milk and butter and really enjoy myself."<sup>27</sup>

Following a visit to his farm, however, Brown was apparently less than impressed with the management his brother was performing. "Glad you are well and getting along all right," he wrote upon his return, "But, I am afraid you are not dusting the Cotton like I want it done. There is absolutely no necessity of allowing the boll weevil to ruin a single little boll of cotton." Brown advised his brother to tell the neighboring landowner to "put the dusting on his and to do it NOW" or else the "b.w. will back-work the cotton and ruin it." "NOW is the time to fight like the house was on fire," he concluded.<sup>28</sup>

Even for the state's leaders in the modernization and diversification effort, the pull of periodic spikes in the cotton price was too enticing to resist. Brown was willing to ignore his own advice in favor of the prospect of one more bumper

---

<sup>27</sup> J.J. Brown to J. Polk Brown, July 13, 1922, in Brown Papers, box 1, folder 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

cotton crop. As the weevil's damage increased through the 1920s, farmers, educators, and entrepreneurs sought ways not only to cash in on one more cotton harvest, but many sought ways to take personal economic advantage of cotton's demise. Farming was the leading industry in the state and there was no shortage of people who saw the arrival of the boll weevil as a means to profit from the changes it was bringing. If cotton was truly dying as rural Georgia's primary cash crop, what would replace it? How would the alternatives be grown and marketed?

James William Firor was one educator-turned-entrepreneur who thought he had the answer. Firor was in many ways a typical twentieth century farm educator. He formally studied agriculture at the Maryland Agricultural College and upon graduation in 1908, found a job with the West Virginia extension service. He moved to Athens, several years later, to join his brother on the staff at the Georgia State College of Agriculture. Shortly after the breakout of war in Europe, Firor volunteered for the army, and served in France for nearly two years. Upon his return, he rejoined the faculty and settled into his job as an extension agent.<sup>29</sup>

As a farm educator pressed with the responsibility of teaching landowners how to prepare for and fight the boll weevil, Firor found himself constantly away

---

<sup>29</sup> "John William Firor, Sr. 1887-1956," John William Firor Papers, Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University, hereafter Firor Papers. Andrew M. Soule to John Firor, April 10, 1919, Firor Papers. Firor's daughter, historian Anne Firor Scott, has written about her youth and family in Anne Firor Scott. "My Twentieth Century: Leaves From a Journal," *Southern Cultures* 9, no.1 (Spring 2003): 62-78.

from his fiancée, traveling through the state visiting farms. He grew frustrated not only by the constant travel, but by farmers' unwillingness to consider alternative crops to cotton. When Robert Schmidt of Yorktown, Virginia, wrote Firor asking about the prospects of employment as an extension agent in Georgia, Firor replied with uncharacteristic bluntness:

I have just returned from a trip through the southern part of Georgia and feel somewhat weak in the summach [sic.]. You have heard of an insect called Boll Weevil. What he did to the cotton in the southern part of Georgia is hardly possible to relate in a letter under existing postal laws and regulations. Consider that a doughboy is expressing his usual opinion of the YMCA and you have a mild conception of the cotton growers idea of the boll weevil. The season was very favorable to the weevil and unfavorable to cotton.

Firor advised Schmidt to steer clear of the cotton South entirely. Schmidt wrote Firor later to tell the Georgia agent that he had secured a job at the Kansas State Agricultural College. Firor's frustration had been building from the moment he returned from France, and pushed the agent to begin his own search for a new job. He applied for several similar extension jobs outside the boll-weevil-plagued South, at schools in Illinois, Florida, and Kansas, and also inquired about jobs in the private sector. By the end of 1919, Firor was a newlywed looking to build a family, but trapped in an exhausting job with little reward.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> John Firor to Robert Schmidt, September 25, 1919, Firor Papers. Firor's job led him to be concerned about the boll weevil's movements across the South. He wrote to one farmer asking if "the boll weevil has done great damage to cotton this year." In another he asked his brother "To what extent has the boll weevil damaged the cotton in your neck of the woods and what effect has it had on the morale of large planters?" John Firor to Paul Moore, October 2, 1919, Firor Papers; John Firor to Guy Firor, September 3, 1919, Firor Papers; Robert Schmidt to John Firor, October 4, 1919, Firor Papers.



Firor knew that Georgia cotton farmers, especially those on marginal lands, were standing on their last leg. Recognizing that these growers could not make the change from cotton to a different cash crop without substantial aid from seed suppliers, marketers, and buyers, Firor began looking for another career that might take advantage of farmers' exodus from cotton. In a letter to Atlanta businessman M.C. Gay, Firor laid the groundwork for a project that he thought would bring financial success and stability. Firor attempted to convince Gay that sweet potatoes were in the process of replacing cotton as the region's important cash crop. Putting the boll weevil's devastation at the center of his pitch, Firor wrote Gay that "The production of sweet potatoes is at the present time being greatly stimulated by high prices and by the fact that farmers throughout the cotton belt are looking to crops to take up some of the acreage which was formerly planted to cotton." Firor estimated that if farmers had the support of a company to supply the proper seed, to store the sweet potatoes after harvest, and to take the product to market, then the tubers would eventually replace cotton as the king of southern agriculture. He pressed Gay to help him form a business that would guide farmers through the transition to sweet potatoes.<sup>31</sup>

Less than a year later, Firor resigned from the College of Agriculture and became manager of the Montezuma, Georgia-based Planter's Products

---

<sup>31</sup> John Firor to M.C. Gay, November 20, 1919, Firor Papers.

Company. A company statement placed the boll weevil at the center of its marketing pitch:

The experience of farmers during the last few years, under boll weevil infestation, has shown that cotton alone is not significantly dependable as a money crop for south Georgia, and most of us who have grown cotton under the boll weevil conditions, will doubtless agree that your community will not remain prosperous unless we diversify our farming program so as to have at least another money crop. The question therefore arises—what other crop shall we grow?

To no reader's surprise, the answer Planter's Products offered was sweet potatoes, and the company was available to provide all of the apparatus necessary to grow, store, and sell the tubers.<sup>32</sup>

In private letters, Firor explained the economic motivation behind this sweet potato "opportunity." He knew first-hand that Georgia's farmers were skeptical of diversification talk—if cotton was to be replaced, it could not be done with simply a variety of fruits and vegetables. Farmers sought a single cash crop to replace cotton. As a result, Firor emphasized the economic benefits available to the sweet potato farmer. He knew that once farmers believed in the potatoes, he could easily fill his company's new warehouses. Supplying seed, know-how, marketing help, and storage, Firor expected the business to take off.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his hopes for independent success, five years after he left the College of Agriculture Firor was back on its staff. For reasons unexplained in his

---

<sup>32</sup> United States Railroad Administration to "Sir," December 12, 1919, Firor Papers. John Firor to William H. Barrett, December 11, 1919, Firor Papers.

<sup>33</sup> John Firor to Mary Valentine Ross, October 1919, Firor Papers.

correspondence and personal papers, Planter's Products failed. There could be dozens of reasons why the company did not succeed, but at the very least the company's demise suggests the difficulty that Firor and his partners faced in convincing South Georgia cotton farmers to grow and market sweet potatoes. Beyond the social and cultural significance of cotton to rural Georgia, a switch to sweet potatoes would have necessitated an upset of the rural economy itself. No single company was equipped to help farmers to grow, store, and market the crop, and to generate buyers for a replacement crop. Firor had attempted to capitalize on the destruction caused by the boll weevil, but in the end, most farmers were still committed to growing the staple that the bug attacked. Even those who wanted to diversify may have lost their access to credit after a single devastating cotton season. Acres and acres of Georgia farmland turned to timber in the late 1920s, too eroded to farm and lacking laborers to work it. By the end of 1925, Soule found himself back in the fields representing the state's College of Agriculture, talking to growers about the best way to beat the boll weevil.

Years before Firor's failed experiment, Andrew Soule had addressed a group of farmers and asked, "Can we whip Billy Boll Weevil?" "Undoubtedly we can!," he replied. Fifteen years later, the boll weevil had destroyed thousands of tons of Georgia cotton. Diversification efforts had stalled. Reports of a vast outmigration of rural workers had gripped local and national headlines for a

decade. Yet still Soule was ready to publicly declare victory over the weevil. In the spring of 1930, in the *Atlanta Journal*, he asserted that after a decade of agricultural depression caused by the boll weevil and low cotton prices, “the days of pessimism are behind us.” Soule referred to the successful cotton crop of 1929, and foresaw a future of cotton growing in the South similar to its now relatively distant past.<sup>34</sup>

In one sense, the agricultural educator was right. Cotton production had rebounded to the levels of the 1890s and early 1900s, but there was one major difference in rural life by 1930. Since the earliest days of the pest’s arrival in the state, Georgia’s farm experts, like those in states across the weevil territory, had been very concerned about a labor exodus, and in Georgia, the outmigration had been heavy. As Soule wrote his boll weevil victory speech, the stream of African American migration from the rural areas of the state continued. For Soule, however, this was not a tragic turn of events spawned by the weevil.

Much of Georgia agricultural officials’ fear about labor exodus was based upon their own long-term reputation for creating policies damaging to the plight of landless farm workers. Agriculture officials had not ignored tenants for generations, but instead crafted a vicious system plainly intended to limit black landownership opportunities and to tie African Americans to the rural areas. Thomas P. Janes, Georgia’s Commissioner of Agriculture set the tone for the

---

<sup>34</sup> “Georgia’s Record of Farming, A pledge of Prosperity,” *Atlanta Journal*, March 12, 1930. Soule, “Whipping Billy Boll Weevil” n.d. Soule Papers.

state's policy towards black laborers as early as 1875 when he commented on the prospects of black land ownership:

It is not reasonable to suppose that men, naturally indolent, ignorant and superstitious, mere muscular automata by habit, having been accustomed to direction even in the minutia of their work, could, by a presidential proclamation, be converted into intelligent and reliable business managers.

The spirit of Janes's remarks guided the state's treatment of black tenant farmers well into the twentieth century. The extension service's treatment of the state's tenant population exacerbated the already precarious ties binding farmers and tenants. For small landowners, there was little help that the state could provide to insure that they or their tenants survived the weevil's onslaught. For tenants, however, changes in the fate of small landowners who they worked for could be more fickle and devastating than those who worked for large planters.<sup>35</sup>

Minnie Stonestreet of Washington, Georgia, was not a typical farmer. In 1924 she was an educated, unmarried woman, when to her surprise, an uncle left her his 190-acre farm after his death. Stonestreet jumped at the chance to be an independent farmer. "How proud I was over owning a farm," she later wrote, "a plantation all my very own." With "dreams of a fortune made farming," Stonestreet "set about to make those dreams come true." After selling timber from the land for six hundred dollars, she negotiated with Lee Slakey, "An old

---

<sup>35</sup> Thomas P. Janes, *Annual Report of Thom P. Janes, Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Georgia, for the Year 1875* (Atlanta: 1875), as quoted in Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, "Tenancy, Farm Size, Self-Sufficiency, and Racism: Four Problems in the Economic History of Southern Agriculture," Southern Economic History Project, Working Paper Series No. 8 (Institute of Business and Economic Research, University of California, Berkeley, Apr. 1970) pp. 75-76.

Negro man and his wife whom he called 'Pig'" to rent part of the land and to help put in the crop.<sup>36</sup>

The three farmers went to work on the land, planting cottonseed in early spring, and chopping the weeds that grew as summer began. For Stonestreet, farming meant a kind of personal independence she had always desired. "Why the first time my tenant came driving my mules to my wagon, I felt like a millionaire!" she recalled. Part of this feeling came with hiring tenants. With cash from the timber sale, Stonestreet had enough money to pay her tenants at the beginning of the month "their rations for 30 days." Despite feeling rich, Stonestreet ran out of cash by mid-summer, and like most landowners began to borrow against her cotton crop. Spring planting had gone well, but "Then came the summer." A small number of boll weevils appeared early in the season, and they multiplied into an enormous throng by late summer. At year's end, Stonestreet recalled, "Lee Slakey, the negro farmer, came to the office with the gin certificates for all the cotton grown on my place that year." Instead of realizing her "dream of a fortune made on a farm," the tenant reported to her that they had ginned very few bales. Stonestreet had "nightmares of acres and acres of cotton with all the people I owed standing in the middle of them."<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> "In Lieu of Something Better," *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940*, published electronically by The Library of Congress, available at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>; Internet, hereafter *American Life Histories*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Having gambled against the boll weevil and lost, Stonestreet saw her life quickly spiral out of control. With no cash, she stopped payment on her house insurance, only a few weeks before it caught fire and burned to the ground. Over the winter of 1925, one of her two mules died along with most of her chickens and hogs. Though the effect of these tragedies on Stonestreet was damaging, for Lee and “Pig” Slakey, it closed all hope of staying on the land for another year. Stonestreet could move home and live with her mother in town, but the tenant farmers had to hit the road and search for a new place to live and work. Slakey, however, never made it off Stonestreet’s farm; he died over the winter. “Pig” left on her own. Without tenants, Stonestreet knew she could not possibly recover her losses the following year. “With this last blow,” Stonestreet later wrote, “like the drinking man who was several times thrown out of a party he had gone to uninvited, I picked myself up with the conclusion that fate did not want me to farm.” She returned to her mother’s house in town and eventually found government work with the Works Progress Administration (WPA).<sup>38</sup>

Though Stonestreet judged her farming stint a “grand failure,” she did not find herself on the road in search of a new home and a place to farm, as so many tenants hurt by the boll weevil did. Janie Young, a middle-aged black farmer from Blythewood, South Carolina, would not be so lucky. Following an elaborate wedding celebration, complete with several cakes, “a white dress and a long

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

white net veil,” and “a big bouquet of white flowers,” Young and her husband drove off from the reception under a shower of rice, bound for a new job on a nearby plantation.<sup>39</sup>

A landowner had hired Young’s husband Nick to work his cotton, and Janie was to work in the planter’s house. The landowner paid the newlyweds fifteen dollars per month for their labor and provided, in Janie’s words, “a ramshackle old house to live in.” From the time they arrived, the couple constantly sought ways to make (and retain) more money, to climb the mythical agricultural labor ladder. Janie found she could make more money working in the fields alongside Nick than in the house, and moved into the fields. “We could live very well with me working all de time in de field for forty cents a day,” Janie later told a WPA interviewer, “I did anything dere was to do on a farm, ‘cept plow. I sow de seed, chop cotton, hoe de crop, and put down fertilizer, and do anything else dey wants done.”<sup>40</sup>

The Youngs scraped by as wage laborers on a section of Mr. Wilson’s land for four years, scrimping and saving every penny they earned until they had saved enough money to buy a mule and a wagon. With these tools, the Youngs bargained that they could make more money renting a piece of land than laboring for a set wage. For a poor couple with a roof over their heads and a small but steady income, this decision was no small matter. It was, however, a choice that

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. “Tricked By Gypsies,” *American Life Histories*.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



thousands of southern farm laborers who hoped to climb out of wage or sharecropping labor arrangements made each year. Moving was always risky, but tenants looked for better jobs after both bad times and good. The Youngs' gamble, however, could not have been made at a worse time.<sup>41</sup>

The couple found a landowner, Mr. Wall, who agreed to rent fifteen acres to the Youngs for a one-time payment of five-hundred pounds of lint cotton due at the end of the season. With a mule and tools, the Youngs could limit the amount of debt they took on at the beginning of the year, and could make back what they borrowed and owed in rent at the end of the season. The arrangement had major advantages over their previous deal. The couple acquired limited debt for the use of a plow, cottonseed and other necessities for raising a crop, and they tilled and planted the land. Unfortunately for the Youngs, boll weevils made their first appearance in the area late in the season. Janie remembered "dat was de first year de weevil was so bad, and we didn't make no cotton to speak of. We didn't have near enough to pay de rent." The tools and savings that the Youngs had spent five years accumulating during their climb from wage laborers to renters vanished with one weevil-heavy season. In debt to Mr. Wall, the Youngs agreed to stay and try work as sharecroppers the following year in an attempt to square the balance, slipping back down the mythical ladder.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

The Youngs' example demonstrates how difficult it was for sharecroppers merely to become renters, let alone landowners. For African American tenants, there was no shortage of obstacles to landownership. Though there is a good deal of scholarship that explains these restraints on ownership in great detail, the obstacles basically came down to a wicked combination of social, economic, and political factors. Banks often refused credit to African Americans to buy land because many white bankers simply did not believe that African Americans could profitably farm their own land. Others might refuse loans to African Americans because landownership was an expression of economic power that some whites found threatening. As one sharecropper put it, "It ain't what I owes, it's gettin' to owe." Politically, those African Americans who actually bought land had few ways to ensure its protection. Though some of the state's white leaders, including agricultural commissioner Brown, suggested that the state should encourage black landownership with progressive legislation, these voices for land reform were rare and ineffective.<sup>43</sup>

Sociologist Arthur Raper found that those African Americans in Greene County, Georgia who became landowners usually did so only thanks to the direct aid of some prominent white landowner. Seventy-five percent of black owners bought their land from former landlords, who in most cases initiated the sale of

---

<sup>43</sup> Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture*, 259. For a longer discussion of the obstacles to black landownership, see Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*.

land. “In some instances the white landlord liked a particular Negro and helped him become an owner,” the sociologist explained, and “in other cases they needed because of debts to sell off part of their land.” “Only in rare instances” Raper argued, did black landowners purchase a farm “on the open market.” From the turn of the century to 1920, as Figure 7.5 shows, as cotton production increased in the state and the boll weevil was at most a minor threat to Georgia cotton, black landownership increased slightly, though tenancy levels increased markedly.

As discussed in the opening of this chapter, the increases in cotton production from 1900 to 1920 did not bring with it riches, and by the time the boll weevil began destroying huge portions of the crop in the early 1920s, tenants’ slim options for landownership were disappearing. With the open market closed to African Americans in search of their own land, plus the increased burden of farming in the presence of the boll weevil, the oppressive credit system, Jim Crow segregation, and racial violence, many black Georgians decided to quit farming altogether. The timing of the resulting outmigration, which coincided with the weevil’s worst years, became the subject of a number of scholarly investigations that publicized the notion that the weevil alone pushed millions of black Georgians from the land.

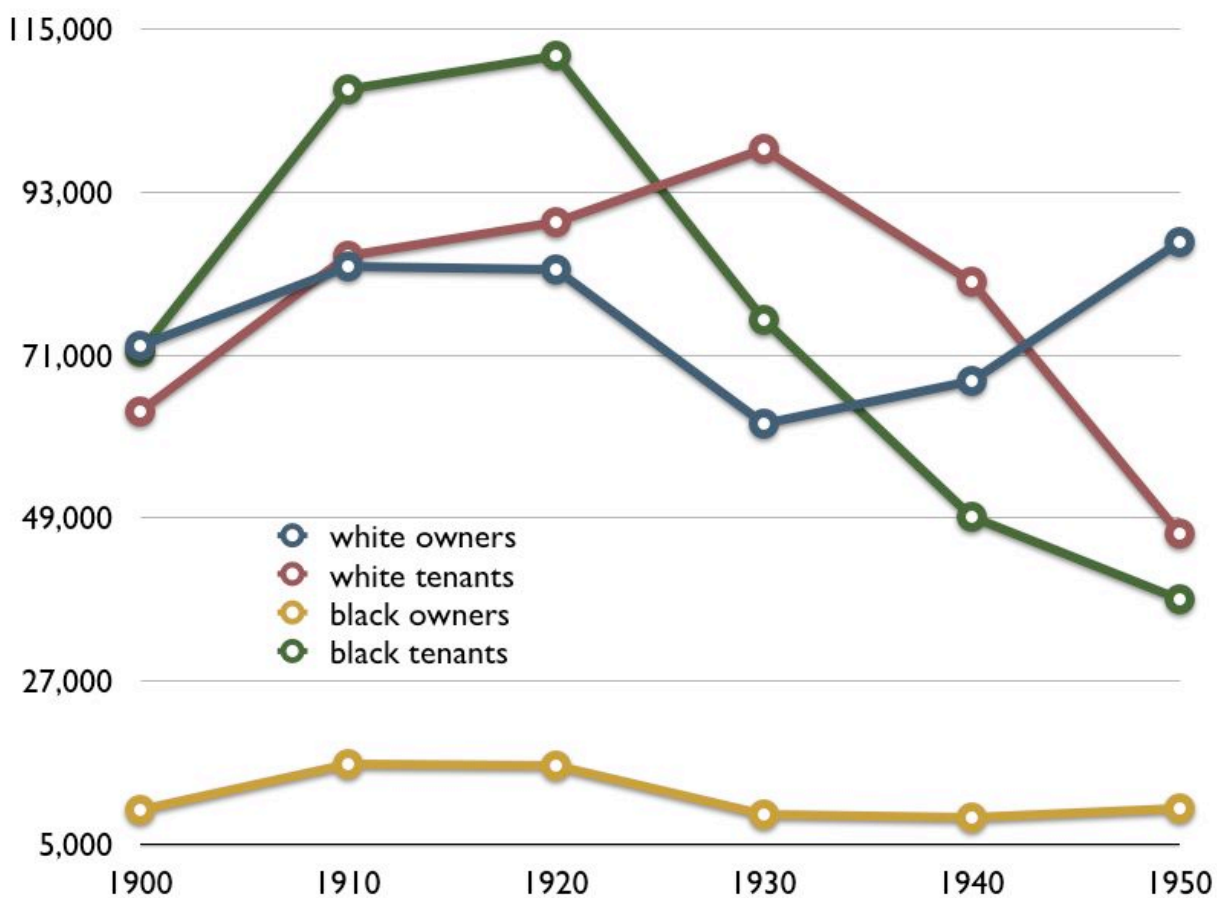


Figure 7.5: White owners and tenants and black owners and tenants in Georgia, 1900-1950.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Neil Fligstein, *Going North: Migration of Blacks and Whites from the South, 1900-1950* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 84-85.

For instance, the most revealing trend in figure 7.5 is not the slight rise in both tenancy and ownership levels from 1900 to 1920, but the plunge in the number of African American tenants in the state following 1920. In fact, Georgia's entire population grew only 0.4 percent from 1920 to 1930. Montana was the only state with a lower percentage of growth. It was this drastic change in rural life—the exodus of nearly two hundred thousand black Georgians from rural areas over that decade, which coincided with the worst years of the boll weevil invasion—that would foster the notion that the insect was to blame for the rural upheaval.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the migration was especially important to Raper's Greene County study. Raper was but one of a cadre of prominent social scientists who studied rural Georgia during the early twentieth century whose findings perpetuated this idea. Howard Odum, Will W. Alexander, Thomas J. Woofter, Charles S. Johnson, and Raper worked both together and independently on a number of studies of life in the Georgia countryside from roughly World War I to World War II. Arthur Raper's *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties*, perhaps the best known and most important of these books, concluded that the boll weevil was a principal factor not only in the demise of cotton culture in Black Belt Georgia, but in the exodus of African Americans from rural areas as well. It

---

<sup>45</sup> Hope T. Eldridge and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, "Demographic Analyses and Interrelations" in *Population Redistribution and Economic Growth: United States, 1870-1950*, ed. Simon Smith Kuznets, vol. III (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1964), 16-17.

was a conclusion endorsed by the bulk of subsequent scholarship, which has relied heavily on Raper's research.

Indeed, the statistics surrounding Raper's research are dramatic. Raper devotes an entire chapter of *Preface to Peasantry* to the "Exodus" of African Americans from Black Belt Georgia. In it, he argues that the "immediate causes of the exodus" were the county's overdependence on cotton and subsequent boll weevil devastation. "The winged demon" Raper writes, "had descended upon the planters over night." In fact, from 1917 to 1919, Greene County experienced a boom in cotton production. As prices in the state peaked, its farmers had near-record harvests reaching twenty-thousand bales in 1918 and 1919. In 1920, the boll weevil arrived, but Greene's farmers continued with cotton. By the end of the season, the insect had devoured a third of the previous year's total. By 1921, the county's ginned cotton level reached only 1,487 bales, down from twenty-thousand two years prior. In 1922, farmers managed only 333 bales county-wide. In Raper's rendition, "Debts and taxes went unpaid; credit vanished; chaos reigned."<sup>46</sup>

Considering these colossal crop losses, it is no surprise that over the decade of the 1920s, as Raper notes, a quarter of Greene County whites and nearly one-half of African Americans left the county. Though the migration of black farmers from Greene County was major and important, Raper himself

---

<sup>46</sup> Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 204, 201-2

admits that it was far from typical. In Macon County, far fewer tenants left. Greene farmers had been unlucky, Raper argues, because the weevil's three most vicious years were consecutive. "One lean year consumed the fat of the previous years" he argued, and three bad years together could rock the economy of the whole community. In the county seat at Greensboro, two major banks failed during the weevil's worst years. In Macon, however, none of the weevil's worst years fell back-to-back, providing at least one season for farmers to make back their losses, or to diversify into a less risky crop. In fact, it was rare for any county across the South to experience consecutive years of devastating boll weevil damage. Greene County made for an illustrative, even dramatic example, but it was atypical—a fact few of the scholars who have relied on *Preface to Peasantry* have admitted.<sup>47</sup>

A sampling of other Georgia counties reveals that the outmigration of African Americans from rural areas during the boll weevil's most devastating decade varied significantly. Greene County lost 41 percent of its black population during the 1920s, but other heavy cotton producing counties lost far fewer people. Macon County, for instance, which had roughly the same acreage of cotton as Greene County in 1920, lost only 7 percent of its black population over the decade. As one of Georgia's heaviest cotton-producing counties, Sumter had one of the state's largest African American populations in 1920, but

---

<sup>47</sup> Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 201-2, 205, 206, 209.

its black population fell less than 10 percent over the decade. These examples demonstrate that Greene County's experience with the boll weevil and population loss was rare, but the larger and more important point is that scholars' heavy use of Raper's example has distorted our understanding of the boll weevil's effect on outmigration.<sup>48</sup>

Though much has been made in United States historiography of the "Great Migration," this mass movement of rural southerners is still a misunderstood and understudied subject. As suggested in Chapter Four, the migration of rural southerners had been a constant condition since the Civil War, and it was not relegated to African Americans. As Numan V. Bartley wrote, while black Georgians moved in search of better lives, "[white] Farmers, who lived in another man's house and worked another man's land, moved into the mill villages to live in another man's house and work another man's machine." Because of constantly changing land, credit, and crop conditions, landless laborers had been on the road in search of new or better work arrangements constantly, beginning immediately after the Civil War. The boll weevil had perpetuated this movement of laborers all along the frontier of its eastwardly moving mass. In fact, as the boll weevil pushed slowly to the east from Texas towards the coast, labor moved against it. Cotton farming expanded in the western Cotton Belt, in places like Texas and Oklahoma where the soil was less

---

<sup>48</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930. Sixteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1940.*



worn out, and would produce still cotton, and many tenants from 1895 to 1920 had moved into these expanding lands.<sup>49</sup>

African American migration from the South to northern cities has its own long and complex history. Though this migration increased markedly during the First World War, it was an extension of a pattern of movement north that had been in place for generations. The pull of industrial jobs was one factor in migrants' decisions, but most individuals also felt a sufficient number of "push" forces that motivated them to leave. Many black tenants responded to the destruction of the boll weevil by packing up their possessions and moving, but it was rarely the boll weevil alone that made up one's mind. Steven Hahn has argued that despite most historians' understanding of The Great Migration as "the product of a very specific set of circumstances that coalesced in the mid-1910s," including the boll weevil, it in fact began much earlier. "We must remember," Hahn argues, "that a northward shift in black migration was already in evidence in the 1890s, and that it was closely connected to a substantial trend, beginning in the 1880s, that took growing numbers—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently—from the rural districts to the towns and cities of the South." The migration was not a single movement at all, but simply a coalescing series of individual decisions that men and women made about how their personal fates were linked to the place they lived. As Amiri Baraka has written,

---

<sup>49</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The Creation of Modern Georgia* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 130.

“It was a decision Negroes made to leave the South, not an historical imperative.”<sup>50</sup>

As the number of African Americans leaving the rural South increased, white landowners who had been dependent on their work became concerned about a sufficient supply of labor. As the trickle of black labor leaving the South swelled to a steady stream, Posey Oliver Davis studied this outmigration from Alabama and found that among southern whites “the chief concern is not about where Negroes are going but (1) Why are they leaving and (2) What will be the effect of their going on southern agriculture?” Davis cited a plethora of reasons African Americans had for moving: “poor schools, extortionate charges of creditors, swindling, wretched homes, unfair suffrage laws, cheating in the handling of cotton, injustice of courts, boll weevils, and high wages elsewhere.” In sum, however, this litany of factors was not reason enough. In the end, Davis concluded that “The main reason is an economic one,” lower wages on cotton fields than in northern factories. Many white southerners embraced this explanation. The idea that the pull of northern industry was the only force at work in migration was a half-truth held particularly strongly by southern whites like Davis. Scholars, farmers and politicians claimed that poor schools and housing were merely “minor” reasons for the outmigration. “This is evidenced by

---

<sup>50</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles In The Rural South, From Slavery To The Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 466. Baraka quoted in Farah Jasmine Griffin, *“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18

the splendid feeling existing between the Negro and White races in the South” Davis concluded, “Not since the Civil War has the feeling been better” between rural whites and African Americans.<sup>51</sup>

If, in addition to the pull of northern jobs, scholars allowed for any single southern factor to explain rural black outmigration, the boll weevil was the most convenient . “It is known that the migration of Negroes from the South has paralleled the spread of boll weevils” Davis pointed out. “Much destruction frequently followed the spread of boll weevils, and in many instances this has been followed by Negro migration.” African Americans, “Being well suited to cotton farming, they naturally become frantic when weevils make cotton-growing hazardous,” the scholar continued, “Instead of trying to adjust their farming to meet boll-weevil conditions, they turn to industrial life.” It was for Davis and others the “panic” of African Americans in the face of the insect that created this exodus. The bug, rather than poor schools, economic exploitation, Jim Crow social restrictions and racial violence, was the real culprit. In other words, white Southerners had done little to foster the movement, could do nothing to stop it, and should not be too concerned about it. Davis concluded that black migration would end up having only a positive effect on the South.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Posey Oliver Davis, “Migration in Relation to Alabama Agriculture, 1940,” typed manuscript in Alabama Collection, Auburn University Special Collections.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Other white southerners came to a different conclusion and worked to stem the outmigration. John Egerton concluded that at first, “White Southerners couldn’t decide whether the exodus was a good sign or a bad one.” Agriculture commissioner John Judson Brown, however, was sure that black labor leaving the farm was a bad sign for white landowners. As a member of the Ku Klux Klan, Brown urged his fellow Klansmen to do what they could to keep African-Americans in the South. Many white Georgians obeyed. Incidences of violence at rural train stations, along roads north, and within the black communities increased along with migration.<sup>53</sup>

More recent scholars have returned to the idea of the boll weevil as a crucial factor in The Great Migration. In fact, historians have put the boll weevil at the heart of a scholarly debate about when and where the Great Migration began, and why exactly individual African Americans left. Most historians have claimed that the pest was *the* important southern “push” factor in the Great Migration. Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch argue in their influential *One Kind of Freedom*, that it was the boll weevil, and the boll weevil only, that woke the South from its post-Civil War institutional slumber. “It required a shock nearly equal to emancipation to jolt the agrarian South out of the routine it had followed for the four post-emancipation decades,” they wrote, “The shock was the coming

---

<sup>53</sup> John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 50. Nancy McLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 183

of the boll weevil.” Migration was but one effect of the weevil’s shock of the agrarian South, but it is the one whose impression has been most durable. While some scholars have found that the sections of Georgia damaged most by the boll weevil were the points of origin for the greatest number of migrants, others challenge this point, instead claiming that the pest had little bearing on black migration.<sup>54</sup>

The most prominent example of the latter argument is found in Robert Higgs 1976 article in *Agricultural History*. Higgs claims that migration studies “suffer from an excess of pluralism” when it comes to explaining why individuals left the rural South. He sets out to determine, through a series of economic models, the exact effect of a single factor, the boll weevil, on this historic movement. In the end, he concludes that “the boll weevil infestation was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition underlying the Great Migration,” though he does so by embracing the very plurality of migration causes he initially condemned. Higgs found, for instance, that before the weevil’s arrival in South Carolina, black emigration was substantial ,and conversely that the largest

---

<sup>54</sup> Ransom, Roger L., and Richard Sutch. *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 171-172. Almost all studies of black outmigration from the South in the twentieth century cite the boll weevil as one cause. Of the studies that attempt a systemic, specific examination of the boll weevil as a direct cause of the migration, the most important are Fligstein, *Going North*, 15, 102, 104, 120, 125, and Warren C. Whatley and Gavin Wright, “Black Labor in the American Economy since Emancipation: What Are the Legacies of History?” in Richard F. America, *The Wealth of Races: The Present Value of Benefits from Past Injustice* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 76-79. For examples of general studies that point tot the boll weevil as a cause without closely examining the correlation, see Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 53-54. and John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 186-187.

migration of African Americans to Texas was during World War One, when the pest was entrenched in the fields of the Lone Star State. The boll weevil could not, he argues have been a factor in these migrations.<sup>55</sup>

The main problem with Higgs's argument is that he strips from South Carolina tenants the notion that they could understand the effect of the boll weevil before the pest actually began destroying their own cotton. Laborers did not have to wait for the pest to wipe out their own meager cotton share before realizing that the pest was a threat to their livelihood. Indeed, sharecroppers spread news of the boll weevil with their steady migration and it was clear what the pest could do to their condition. Higgs's Texas example fails as well because much of the state was too dry for the weevil; migrants who moved into Texas after the pest's appearance were actually pushing cotton's western frontier into the areas more resistant to the pest. Higgs, however, relied on statewide data in most cases, which does not portray the diversity of farming conditions within states like Texas. In both the South Carolina and Texas examples, Higgs fails to account for the complexity of local conditions and the tenants' knowledge about cotton farming generally and the boll weevil specifically.

Higgs cites one period of heavy weevil damage in Georgia and South Carolina from 1920-1923, the so-called "boll weevil depression," as the single case when heavy insect infestation directly produced black outmigration.

---

<sup>55</sup> Robert Higgs, "The Boll Weevil, the Cotton Economy, and Black Migration, 1910-1930." *Agricultural History* 50 (1976): 350, 338, 345.

Though, as discussed above, the drop in prices and increase in boll weevil damage in these years was simply another period of debt for the bulk of southern cotton growers, it seems to have had a profound effect on tenants.<sup>56</sup>

In Warren C. Whatley and Gavin Wright's study of southern black labor in this period, the authors address this 1920-1923 "boll weevil depression" from the perspective of northern industry. Whatley and Wright found a surprisingly high level of African Americans hired during 1922 and 1923 in three different northern factories, Ford in Detroit, Byers Steel in Pittsburgh, and Pullman in Chicago. The factories hired very few African Americans prior to these years and a smaller number after, until the late 1930s. Though each of these factories were in different industries, regions, and "different points in their life cycle," each experienced an increase in the *available* black labor during that year. The authors conclude that the explanation for this "striking example" was "on the supply side." The boll weevil had created such havoc by destroying Georgia cotton in this two-year period that there was a huge shortage of ripe bolls to pick in the fall, meaning tenants and part-time pickers were not needed. Thousands of Georgians boarded trains for the North, where employers reacted to this brief interruption in the labor supply by hiring the southerners. Interestingly, these factories did not again hire massive amounts of southern black labor until the late 1930s and 1940s.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Higgs, "The Boll Weevil, the Cotton Economy, and Black Migration, 1910-1930," 338, 345.

<sup>57</sup> Whatley and Wright, "Black Labor in the American Economy since Emancipation," 76-79.

Studies like Wright and Whatley's that trace specific points of departure and destination at precise time periods are rare. Unfortunately, most scholars have relied on decennial census figures and bolstered their arguments with anecdotal evidence. A number of these scholars turn to Raper's Greene County findings to provide a local perspective because of convenience. Historians of the early twentieth century South have indeed relied too heavily on Raper's study, and readers of the literature on Georgia must surely be growing tired of hearing about Greene County almost to the exclusion of the rest of the state (and region).

Of course academic studies were by no means the only works that used the boll weevil as an explanation for plantation failures and mass migration. More popular narratives about life in rural Georgia also use the boll weevil as the influential protagonist in a migration story. In 1921, Jean Toomer, a young writer and teacher living in Washington D.C., agreed to serve as a substitute principal at a county-run elementary school, Sparta Agricultural and Industrial School, in Georgia's Hancock County. Two years later he published *Cane*, a novel based on the lives of black Georgians he had observed. The boll weevil became an important part of his description of rural black poverty. In "November Cotton Flower," Toomer describes the "Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold...And cotton, scarce as any southern snow / Was vanishing." With cotton's



disappearance, things changed fundamentally, and for the worse, for Toomer's African American characters.<sup>58</sup>

Despite mentions of the boll weevil sprinkled throughout southern literature from this era, the most common form of artistic expression about the pest was in song. As described in previous chapters, songs about the weevil generally centered on the search for a home conducted by both the insect and farmers whom the pest had dislocated. "These boll weevils will rob you of your home," goes the most famous version, "they are lookin' for a home." Singers commonly played with the speaker's role as well, not only personifying the boll weevil but creating a revealing dialogue between the pest and other characters of the rural South, most commonly a farmer, merchant, and banker. Sometimes it is the boll weevil moving, sometimes the farmer, and often it is intentionally unclear just who is moving. In Texan Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter's version, the weevil survives a bevy of attempts on his life, and the frustrated farmer refuses to sell his lone remaining cotton bale to the merchant. If he retains the bale, "I'll have a home" the farmer promises, "I'll have a home." The farmer than ends the song by "moving on":

If anybody asks you people who sang you this song  
Tell 'em it was Huddie Ledbetter,  
He done been here and gone.  
He's lookin' for a home,  
He's lookin' for a home.

---

<sup>58</sup> Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr, *Jean Toomer and Terrors of American History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 9. Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 7.

This theme of migration and constant struggle for a new place to live and work permeates nearly all versions of the song from the first-half of the twentieth century, and it left an indelible impression on many about the history of the boll weevil.<sup>59</sup>

Though the song was developed by farmers and ranchers in Texas as early as the 1890s, by the mid-1920s people around the country could buy the boll weevil song. Professional recordings of the song, like the first recorded version sung by Mississippian Charley Patton, were distributed throughout the country beginning in the 1920s. By 1930, the song could be heard in the repertoire of dozens of prominent blues and folk singers, both in concerts around the country and on recordings.

Though Patton's recording had a sound and substance that made it distinctly Deltan, the first wave of weevil records appeared when Georgia was ground zero for the pest. In fact, Georgia's two most influential early blues performers, Blind Willie McTell and Kokomo Arnold, both recorded versions of the boll weevil song in the 1920s as their home state battled the bug. Arnold's "Bo-Weevil Blues" became widely distributed in the 1930s. The song reflects the growing migration of rural Georgians to urban areas. Though Arnold follows the standard tune and form of the traditional boll weevil song that had been in

---

<sup>59</sup> Leadbelly, "Boll Weevil," Library of Congress Recordings (LC 273-A-1 and LC 135-A), audio recording.

existence for decades, his lyrics have very little to do with country life. In fact, the boll weevil itself has lost its affection for cotton in the song:

Now Mister Weevil, how come your bill's so long?  
 Now Mister Weevil, how come your bill's so long?  
 Done eat up all my cotton, started on my youngest corn.

There is more evidence of urban life in Arnold's version. Not only could the pest put pricey health care remedies (or recreational items) like drugs out of reach, but the mill life that so many former cotton laborers found themselves in by the mid-1920s itself had become another victim of the weevil.

Says the merchant to the doctor, "Don't sell no mo' C.C. Pills"  
 Says the merchant to the doctor, "Don't sell no mo' C.C. Pills"  
 'Cause the boll-weevil down here in Georgia done stopped all  
 these cotton mills."

Arnold pleads with the weevil to tell the world what it has done to the Georgia farmer:

Now Mister Boll-Weevil, if you can talk why don't you tell?  
 Now Mister Boll-Weevil, if you can talk why don't you tell?  
 Say, you got poor Kokomo down here in Georgia catchin' a lot of hell.<sup>60</sup>

Georgian Blind Willie McTell played his version of the song mostly for urban audiences in Atlanta, crowds that undoubtedly contained many migrants from the rural areas. McTell tells a history of the pest's movement in the song, linking it to the migration of those that worked cotton fields and now found themselves listening to the singer on the streets and in the clubs of Atlanta. As

---

<sup>60</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*, second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16, 18. Harris, *Deep Souths*, 251, 284.

the song begins, the speaker asks the boll weevil, “where you say you get your great long bill?” The pest replies

I got it from Texas, out in the western hills.  
Way out in the panhandle, way out in the western hills.

As the song progresses, the weevil comes to represent more than simply a threat to cotton, but a potential destroyer of rural life. “Boll weevil, he told the farmer, don’t buy no Ford machine,” McTell sings, “you ain’t gonna make enough money to even buy gasoline.”<sup>61</sup>

Though Arnold’s and McTell’s versions of the song gained relatively wide audiences, no version from Georgia better links the boll weevil to tenant migration than that of Buster “Bus” Ezell, who performed publicly in the state into the 1950s. Ezell begins the song with a description of the weevil’s ability to quickly multiply:

Well the first time I saw a boll weevil he was setting on a cotton square,  
Next time I saw Mr. Weevil he had his whole family there.  
What you reckon he said?  
‘Bout to kill me dead.

By the third verse, the speaker is already destroyed, and is in search of a better place to farm:

Well, I’m going back to Texas where I was bred and born,  
I ain’t fond to leave Georgia, but Georgia ain’t none of my home,  
I’m on my way, I’m on my way.

---

<sup>61</sup> Blind Willie McTell, “Boll Weevil,” Library of Congress Recordings (LC AFS L51), audio recording..

The speaker's allusion to a previous migration, from Texas to Georgia, underscores the gravity of his decision to move all the way back west. When the weevil later tells the frustrated migrant farmer, "Don't you lose your mind, Don't lose your mind," it is easy for the listener to understand the emotional wear that constant movement must have exacted on the tenant farmer.<sup>62</sup>

These songs are not mere records of movement, however. In several versions the weevil is simply a cover for the real reason for tenants' discontentment, namely white landowners. In one version, the singer bemoans:

Boll Weevil in the Cotton  
 Cut worm in the corn  
 Devil in the White man  
 I'm good and gone.<sup>63</sup>

Whether bringing devastation to white landowners or not, the bulk of the boll weevil songs painted a picture of the pest as simply pushing black tenants off the farm. Willie Williams' "Boll Weevil," recorded in the 1930s, explains that

Boll weevil been here,  
 Done bored his hole and gone.  
 Boll weevil been here,  
 Done bored his hole and gone.

You can tell by that,  
 Weevil won't be here long.

---

<sup>62</sup> Buster "Bus" Estell, "Boll Weevil," from "'Now What a Time': Blues, Gospel, and the Fort Valley Music Festivals," American Folklife Center, Library of Congress Recordings, audio recording.

<sup>63</sup> These lyrics are quoted in Farah Jasmine Griffin, *"Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22. Griffin does not cite the song itself., however and the author has been unable to find a recorded version containing these lyrics.

The speaker in this version identifies with the pest's movement. "If I could sing," Williams promises, "I would be like [a] boll weevil, Fly from town to town." But where could the speaker go? He had traveled the South and found "boll weevil here, boll weevil everywhere." The impression left on the listener was that weevil conditions were inescapable unless one moved out of the cotton South entirely. Ma Rainey's 1923 version, "Bo-Weevil Blues," describes "boll weevils here, boll weevils everywhere you'll go."<sup>64</sup>

Though by the 1930s the song had found an audience throughout the South and parts of the North, and lost some of its rural context along the way, the decade that followed took the song even farther from its element. The 1940s and beyond saw the boll weevil song escape its relevance to the plight of southern cotton workers entirely, though as it gained a wider and wider audience the pest's myth contained in the songs continued to hold its power. If the boll weevil songs were essentially migration narratives, then these were powerful statements for listeners who most likely did not know the reality of the weevil's spread. They learned that the pest had moved rural tenants around the countryside and eventually to the North; like the pest, tenants were "just lookin' for a home."

---

<sup>64</sup> Willie Williams' "Boll Weevil," from "Deep River of Song: Virginia and the Piedmont Minstrelsy," (Rounder 1827), audio recording. Ma Rainey, "Bo-Weevil Blues," (Paramount 12080), audio recording.

In her study of migration narratives, Farah Jasmine Griffin admits that the artists who created these stories—whether visual, musical or literary—cite explanations for why and how they moved from the South that are rarely accurate. Griffin argues that seldom do the specifics of the artistic narratives match those of the real migrants. Those southern African Americans who moved north were more direct in their explanations for leaving than were the artists. While songs about the migration focus on general forces, like violence, or a single specific factor, like the boll weevil, the historical record left by those who moved more often point to familial ties and larger economic processes at work (namely northern jobs).<sup>65</sup>

As James C. Cobb has written, “A combination of fear, frustration, disillusionment, and anger” drove African Americans to migrate north. One migrant to Ithaca, New York, wrote to *Opportunity Magazine* explaining that it was not the pull of high wages or the boll weevil that motivated him to leave. “Unjust treatment, failure to secure a square deal in the courts, taxation without representation, denial of the right to vote...poor schools, unjust pay...and public torture” were just a few reasons he named. Big Bill Broonzy, a Mississippi-born blues singer, recalled his own experience with this last factor. Broonzy returned from World War I to his hometown in the Mississippi Delta proudly wearing his

---

<sup>65</sup> Griffin, “*Who Set You Flowin’?*”, 22.

Army uniform. The plantation owner promptly told him to take it off and “get you some overalls.” Broonzy’s reply came in his song “Keys to the Highway”:

I got the keys to the highway;  
I’m booked and bound to go.  
Got to leave running;  
Walking’s got most too slow.<sup>66</sup>

The fact that the boll weevil songs did not paint an entirely accurate picture of the pest’s effect on southern life or motivations for migration mattered little once the song made it onto radio and later television. Thanks in part to Alan and John Lomax, who “discovered” folk music across the South during the 1930s and after, the boll weevil song became popular among singers who never stepped foot in a cotton field. Though the Lomaxes recorded dozens of versions of the song in southern prisons, work camps, and farm houses, it was the generation of artists who heard these recordings and in turn took the songs to a new audience who are most responsible for spreading the boll weevil song and the myth it contained. Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, and Carl Sandburg began singing the song in the 1930s and 1940s. Though these leftist folk singers originally embraced the song’s political message, they slowly turned its melody and content into a children’s song. The choruses became more repetitive and humorous. In Guthrie’s version, for instance, verse after verse describe the farmer asking a merchant for something and getting denied for variations on the

---

<sup>66</sup> Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 115, 116, 294. C. Otis, *Opportunity Magazine*, October, 1923, in Malaika Adero, *Up South: Stories, Studies, and Letters of This Century’s Black Migrations* (New York: The New Press, 1993), 48.



same reason. The merchant (or banker) denies the farmer's requests because the "boll weevil's in your field," "the boll weevil's down you neck," and "there's a boll weevil on your coat." In each case the bug "is a gettin' your home."<sup>67</sup>

Since the 1950s the song's meaning has had little to do with the insect's trek across the South. Minnesota native Eddie Cochran recorded an upbeat, rockabilly version in 1959, complete with a chorus of "doo-doo-wop-wop" between verses. Two years later Elvis Presley had a hit that mentioned the insect in "Little Sister." "She's mean and she's evil," Elvis crooned, "Like that old boll weevil." By the 1960s and 1970s, songs about the weevil became less fit for jook joints or roadhouses and more fine-tuned for television audiences and elevator rides. The song appeared in the repertoires of singing television cowboys like Tex Ritter, and silky smooth, overproduced rhythm and blues singers like Brook Benton (whose popular version featured strings and a chorus of harmonized background singers). As recently as 2003, the Detroit-based garage-rock duo The White Stripes reinvigorated Leadbelly's take on "The Boll Weevil Song," performing it at shows across the U.S., and even playing it live on BBC television for an English audience. Indeed, the boll weevil song is now a long way from any of the historical or cultural indicators that gave it its birth in Texas in the nineteenth century—yet people around the world have continued to

---

<sup>67</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Boll Weevil Blues," from "Woody Guthrie Sings Folk Songs," Smithsonian Folkways (40007), audio recording. Cisco Houston, "Boll Weevil," American Roots: A History of American Folk Music, Disky (248612), audio recording. Carl Sandburg, "Boll Weevil Song," from "New Songs from the American Songbag" Lyricord (LL 4).

hear the song's increasingly misleading historical narrative, thereby spreading the legend of the pest's destructiveness long after King Cotton had loosened its grip on the rural South.<sup>68</sup>

These stories that southerners have told about the boll weevil wiping out their cotton livelihood comes closer to the truth in Georgia than in any of the other Deep South states. The appearance of the pest did correspond with both a decline in the state's cotton production and a massive exodus of cotton laborers. At the local level, however, the weevil made its greatest impact on cotton societies already in decline before the pest arrived. Those locales with soil weakened by a century of cotton growing, and by an increasingly vocal and powerful rural working class, found it hard to maintain cotton's supremacy. Farmers on much of the state's marginal farm land turned to other crops or raised livestock, and much of the land reverted to timber. The federal government even stepped in to parts of the state to create national forests on land that had previously grown cotton. These were important, telling changes in the state's agricultural, economic, and social histories, but instead of pointing to generations of tenancy and land mismanagement, debilitating credit arrangements and persistent racism, most southerners, white and black, chose

---

<sup>68</sup> Eddie Cochran, "Boll Weevil," from "Never To Be Forgotten," Liberty Records. Elvis Presley, "Little Sister," from "Something for Everybody," RCA (2370-2-R), Tex Ritter, "Boll Weevil," from "American Legend," Capitol (11241).

to point to the boll weevil as the instigator of this great change. It has proven a powerful legend in Georgia and across the Deep South.

## CONCLUSION:

### THE BOLL WEEVIL'S LOST REVOLUTION

In July, 2003 a story aired on National Public Radio's news program *Morning Edition* that heralded the final demise of the boll weevil in the United States. "A century-long war between American cotton farmers and one of their most dreaded foes, the boll weevil, is coming to a close," announced host Bob Edwards, "It looks like the farmers are going to win." Reporter Dan Charles explained that during the 1980s, scientists in Mississippi isolated a chemical that male boll weevils produced to attract females. Replicating this scent allowed researchers to place traps, baited with the chemical, throughout fields to monitor local infestations. Farmers paired this monitoring system with heavy aerial applications of Malathion, a new breed of insecticide that had proven successful against weevils. Where and when the traps caught the insects, farmers covered the area with pesticide. Using crop dusters that bore little resemblance to those first tested at DPLC in the 1920s, farmers sprayed the weevils with Malathion. In order to make sure the poison reached every inch of infested fields, airplanes were equipped with Global Positioning Systems (GPS). Computers then matched the course of each airplane's flight to field maps, generated by all-

terrain vehicles on the ground, to ensure that every single weevil was killed.

Researchers in Mississippi found it effective and sought to replicate the technique across the Cotton Belt.<sup>1</sup>

In 1983, with the help of the federal government and state extension services, but largely paid for by individual planters, farmers began this monitoring and spraying system in Virginia and North Carolina, in an attempt to slowly push the weevil back to Mexico. By the summer of 2003, scientists could claim that the weevil had been eradicated from the entire Cotton Belt except Arkansas and Texas. Eradication's boosters promised the entire South would be free of the weevil by 2010. Despite testimony from historian Edmund Russell that "we can never declare victory" in wars against insect pests, because the weevil would undoubtedly develop resistance to Malathion and return to the Cotton Belt, the radio story overall reflected the optimism of the scientists interviewed.<sup>2</sup>

The story's producers rooted this positive portrayal of the weevil's demise in the idea that the boll weevil had been an all-encompassing destructive force on southern agriculture. Reporter Dan Charles claimed that eradicating the pest would be an encouraging example of man's rare conquest of a devastating natural enemy. Explaining the history of the pest's move across the South, Charles recalled that in the twentieth century, "Cotton was the economic

---

<sup>1</sup> Dan Charles, "Boll Weevil Eradication," report on *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, July 7, 2003. An archived audio recording of this program was accessed by the author on the Internet, November 8, 2004 at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1321881>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

foundation of southern society” until the pest emerged and destroyed the region’s entire way of life. “Wherever the boll weevil appeared,” the reporter explained, “landowners went bankrupt and sharecroppers abandoned their homes.”<sup>3</sup>

As this dissertation explains, the boll weevil’s arrival in the South did not mean the automatic and complete collapse of the southern economy. Few landowners went bankrupt, and most sharecroppers did not abandon their homes in the face of the weevil. The boll weevil did bring some important change to the South, but it never caused the rural revolution that experts in the 1890s predicted, or scholars since have claimed.

The myth of the weevil’s destructiveness was born in the fields of Texas when the first few bugs began damaging American cotton, and it has proven to be powerful and enduring. One reason for the legend’s initial strength was that to observers in the 1890s, it looked like the weevil was going to completely destroy the agricultural South. Cotton fields stretched across the region. The fleece was the foundation for the South’s economic, social, and cultural organization. No one could escape cotton’s grip. As soon as people began to understand how effective the boll weevil was against the plant, many understandably felt that the crop’s demise was imminent.

Despite this fear that the weevil would end cotton production in the South, creating an agricultural, economic, and social revolution at the same time, it did

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

not. For different reasons in different geographic places, the rural order was not upset by the boll weevil. By 1930, the insect pest had made its way across the entire region, but permanently changed very little. The South was actually growing more cotton than when the weevil set out; landowners still enjoyed great advantages over the large, majority-African-American tenantry; and the region's credit system still forced thousands into debt and wedded the region to cotton production. This evidence of continuity over the period does not suggest, however, that the threat was not real, or that the battle to protect the status quo was not fought vigorously by different groups in different ways. The fight against the boll weevil was at its heart not a struggle between man and insect, but a contest between the region's landowners, tenant farmers, and rural educators, and it was never a foregone conclusion who would win.

As this dissertation has revealed, this struggle played out in various ways across the South. In Texas, cotton actually expanded as the boll weevil made its initial foray into the state, adding to the complexity of the economic and social upheaval brought by the staple itself. Tenants tried to take advantage of this turmoil by moving around the pest in a constant search for a better deal on a nearby cotton farm.

In the Mississippi Delta, the region's elite worked to ensure that the pest would not threaten their place in the rural order. Planters sought to control not only the spread of the boll weevil, but information about its spread. Elite Delta

landowners also had a means of access to state and federal extension agents that the average southern farmer did not, and when this line of information proved unsuitable, they conducted their own research and published their own findings. All the while tenants sought to take advantage of lower land prices, though they were rarely successful. In the social space that the boll weevil helped to open on plantations, however, sharecroppers created their own enduring narratives about the pest, which became an important vehicle for the spread of knowledge about the insect around the world throughout the twentieth century.

In southeastern Alabama, farmers, merchants, bankers, and extension agents together gave diversification a chance, albeit briefly. The boll weevil threat had been so profound that local merchants built a statue standing in an ornate fountain commemorating the pest, but before the water even started flowing out its spout, area farmers had returned their fields to cotton. Despite the close proximity of the state's agricultural colleges, agents worked only with the regions landowners, ignoring black and white tenants altogether. What became clear in Enterprise's experiment with diversification was that credit and marketing structures were rigidly tied to cotton and that the state's extension service was not prepared to address this structural reality, or to deal with the prevailing white supremacy that lay at the heart of rural Alabama's economic and social life.



In Georgia, cotton farmers had been losing money for a full generation prior to the pest's arrival, and the weevil only made matters worse. Though on the surface it seemed that the state's extension leaders made an attempt to educate farmers about the boll weevil, most of this rhetoric used the pest only as a way to grab the public's attention. At its root, the rhetoric offered by these educators had little to do with cotton farming and more to do with alternative crops. As was the case in Alabama, however, these diversification efforts failed. By 1930 many farms in the state's Piedmont, Wiregrass, and Black Belt sections were too worn out for cotton and reverted to trees or grazing land. As a result, tenants continued to move in search of better land or a more honest owner, and an increasingly large number left the rural areas altogether.

There were rare cases across the South when the boll weevil offered a course of change, but most areas eventually returned to pre-weevil conditions. Because of the boll weevil, the sharecroppers on Johanna Reiser's Delta plantation enjoyed a brief stint renting their own land, but it was short-lived and exceptional. The diversification success in Coffee County, Alabama likewise came as the result of the boll weevil, but it too failed. Of all the specific changes brought by the pest to the locales under study here, only the example of DPLC had any lasting legacy. The company, which owed its creation and development to the pest, still markets fast-growing cottonseed and produces tons of the white fleece on its Delta plantations today. It serves not entirely as an example of

continuity, however, because through the 1930s it remained a white-controlled plantation worked by a nearly all-African-American labor force.

Throughout the rest of the South, the pest did not destroy all cotton equally. In lands with a short growing season, farmers could modify their practices only modestly and still have a successful crop. On marginal lands, however, whether eroded, worn-out, hilly, soggy, rocky, or having some other undesirable attribute, the boll weevil often made it impossible to grow cotton, though land like this had never made farmers wealthy. In other places it was simply the timing of the weather that determined the success of the crop in the presence of the pest. As Arthur Raper's Greene County example shows, three consecutive years of rainy weather made boll weevil populations high and could produce unmatched destruction.

Not all of the reasons for the boll weevil's failures to bring a revolution to the South were the work of the weather or other natural phenomena, however. The extension service played a role in maintaining the economic and social arrangements of the South. Though the weevil's presence in Texas and Louisiana helped to create the service itself, and it soon became a force on the rural scene, its agents never threatened to change the basic economic and social relationships in the countryside. Though its leaders believed that diversification could be a solution to the boll weevil problem, it never sufficiently supported the fundamental economic changes that a move from cotton necessitated.

As seen in the examples of the Mississippi Delta, Southeastern Alabama and Georgia, the South's mono-crop system was at its base an economic problem, not an agricultural one. Therefore, the boll weevil as strictly a farming issue mattered little; educators telling farmers how to more effectively till their land, for example, was not going to improve the lot of southern farming because it did not deal with the economic problems that forced farmers into cotton (and debt) season after season. In Southeast Alabama, for instance, farmers' success growing peanuts became less important as the price of cotton climbed. Even the threat of the boll weevil destroying an entire cotton crop was pushed aside by the promise of high cotton prices. In Enterprise and the rest of the South, diversification proponents tried to convince mid-sized and small farmers to move away from cotton, but without creating structural changes in the rural economy—credit, suppliers, and markets—there was no real hope of delivering crop diversification to the agricultural South.

Some scholars have pointed to the rise of the extension service as one permanent change in the rural South produced by the boll weevil. While it is true that federal agents moved into southern counties and became part of a rural community's educational and social life in response to the weevil threat, agents had little effect on the overall structures of these places. This would change in the 1930s, when the federal government more drastically and effectively dealt with the economic issues of farming and introduced real change to the rural

South. Rather than addressing the basic farming issues, as agents had during the initial period of the boll weevil crisis, in the 1930s the federal government began to address the fundamental problems in rural life. The Agricultural Adjustment Act and a host of related New Deal policies put the government at the heart of farmers' decisions about crop production and labor, as well as rural bankers' and merchants' credit and marketing business. These changes could have happened with the boll weevil, but they did not.

So if the contention that the boll weevil was a destructive, revolutionary force on the southern landscape is a myth, what was the pest's real legacy, and what explains cotton's eventual demise throughout most of the South? As Table 8.1 demonstrates, despite a brief downturn in cotton production in some states during the first few years of the boll weevil's presence, by 1930 cotton had rebounded, even surpassing pre-weevil levels in most places. A snapshot of that year would reveal a South much more similar to its state in 1900 than in 1945.

Table 8.1: Cotton acreage by state, 1899-1929<sup>4</sup>

<b>State</b>	<b>1899</b>	<b>1909</b>	<b>1919</b>	<b>1929</b>
Alabama	3,202,135	3,730,892	2,628,160	3,566,494
Georgia	3,343,081	4,883,314	4,543,864	3,405,623
Louisiana	1,376,254	956,411	1,309,378	1,946,354
Mississippi	2,897,560	3,395,120	2,894,494	3,965,234
Texas	6,884,148	9,225,883	10,581,321	13,557,053

In 1930, land that had easily grown cotton before the weevil's arrival still produced the crop, and on less productive land farmers still struggled. In each of

<sup>4</sup> Neil Fligstein, *Going North: Migration of Blacks and Whites from the South, 1900-1950* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 89.

these places, however, the basic structure of the cotton society remained the same. The largest landowners had the easiest access to credit, relied heavily on a tenant workforce, and grew cotton with the lowest expenses. Mid-sized and small farmers still depended on some outside labor, struggled to afford the latest machines and services, and saw their bottom lines turn red as often as they showed a profit. For thousands of southern tenants, things were much different in 1930 than 1892, but only part of this was the result of the boll weevil. Though migration had been a constant in the life of landless laborers prior to the boll weevil, the pest had kept tenants in motion, and during the 1920s it helped some farmer to decide to move off the farm altogether, toward southern or northern cities. For the majority of tenant farmers, however, the arrival of the boll weevil had simply meant more internal migration from farm to farm. Those that gained access to land in the face of the pest recognized how rare their situation was and tried desperately to hold on to it.

The rural South's endemic problems did not arrive with the boll weevil nor did they end as farmers began to figure out ways to stop the pest. It was cotton, not its natural enemy that made the South what it was. Even as late as 1936, the Southern Regional Committee of the Social Science Research Council could still claim that "The South is a land of cotton, and largely because of cotton the South is a region of problems." The group's report went on to describe how

interrelated economic stagnation and enduring poverty were to the region's commitment to the staple:

Cotton and high percentage of farm tenancy; cotton and a high ratio of Negro to white population; cotton and low family income; cotton and changing world-market conditions; cotton as king in the far-flung area of the South, and the appearance of new textiles; cotton and the one-crop system; cotton and soil wastage; cotton and a debtor economy—all of these combinations, and more, are the problems of the cotton economy.<sup>5</sup>

The boll weevil could have changed this situation, but it did not. In the end, one of the boll weevil's most important lost revolutions was that when cotton finally did die out on the South's marginal farm lands, the ground reverted to weeds and erosion gullies. Due to generations of farmers knowingly misusing the region's soil, much of the farmland was unable to support any kind of agriculture after cotton's demise. Rather than being turned over to other crops that might have assured the existence of a small farming class, the South's farmland became either corporate and highly specialized, or wasteland.

It was not the boll weevil, but post-World War II changes in southern agriculture, which arrived as the result of the New Deal's structural attack on the rural South, technological innovation, and new national labor realities that finally brought revolution to southern farm life.

---

<sup>5</sup> Southern Regional Committee of the Social Science Research Council, "Problems of the Cotton Economy: Proceedings of the Southern Social Science Research Conference" (Dallas: The Arnold Foundation, 1936), in Howard W. Odum Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Series 2.1, folder 628.

Though many people in the early twentieth century thought it would be the boll weevil that brought these changes, and though many scholars have made that argument since, the pest had not revolutionized the rural South when it reached the Virginia coast.

The often untold addendum to this modernization story is that these quick changes in turn hastened the destruction of the diversification dream itself. There would be few examples of balanced agriculture in the mid-twentieth century South. Farming became, and remains today, a specialized pursuit. A farming map of the South today shows islands of fruit, chickens, tobacco, soybeans, hogs, peanuts, and cotton. Though the dependence is no longer on a single crop across the entire region, it is still an adapted form of mono-crop agriculture.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the most lasting legacy of the boll weevil on the South is a cultural one. The myth of the weevil's destruction of the plantation South has gained such a following that it is central to the way that southerners tell their history and view their region today. It has become as powerful a force in the region's own story as tenancy, farm land use, the Great Migration, and rural education. If not for this one little tiny insect, the story goes, the plantation South

---

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview," in Robson Jr., George L., and Roy V. Scott, eds. *Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: A Symposium* (Santa Barbara: McNally & Lotin, West, 1979), 16.

would have lasted forever. In the end, this explanation, though untrue, has become more powerful than the pest's reality.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**PRIMARY SOURCES*****Manuscript Collections*****Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama:**

Alabama Cooperative Extension Service Records. Auburn University Agricultural

Alumni Association Oral Histories.

Duggar Family Papers.

Hinds, Warren E. Collection.

Poland, Carter D. Photograph Collection.

**Delta State University Archives, Cleveland, Mississippi:**

Abide, Lee. Transcript of interview by Dave Wilkes. Oral History Collection.

Abrams, Fletcher. Transcript of interview by Dave Palmer. Oral History Collection.

Bowen, Reese. Transcript of interview by Neil S. Goodman. Oral History Collection.

Faulkner, William. Address to the Delta Council, 1952. Audio Tape. Oral History Collection.

Griffin, Joe. Transcript of interview by Ora Saunders. Oral History Collection.

Hand, James Jr. Transcript of interview by Charles Pearce. Oral History Collection.

Lindsay, Arthur. Interview by William Cash. Audio Tape. Oral History Collection.

Sillers, Walter Jr. Papers.

Sillers, Walter Sr. Papers.

Talbot, John. Transcript of interview by Ora Saunders. Oral History Collection.

**Duke University, Special Collections, Durham, North Carolina:**

Firor, John William. Papers.

Tompkins, Daniel Augustin. Papers.

**Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson:**

Allen, James B. Papers.

Boll weevil. Subject file.

Delta and Pine Land Company. Subject file.

Dockery, Joe Rice. Transcript of interview by John Jones. Oral History Collection.

Ferris Family Papers.

Percy Family Papers.

**Mississippi State University Special Collections, Starkville:**

Butler, Eugene. Papers.

Cobb, Cully A. Papers, Includes Ruralist Press Papers.

Cobb, Louis P. Dowdle. Papers.

Delta and Pine Land Company Records

**University of Georgia, University Archives, Hargarett Library:**

Andrew Soule Papers

**University of Kentucky Special Collections, Lexington:**

Hankinson, W.S., Mercantile Company Records.

Henderson Store Records.

Robinson Mercantile Company Records.

**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection:**

Brown, John Judson. Papers.

Comer, Braxton Bragg. Papers.

Federal Writers' Project Papers.

Odum, Howard W. Papers.

Parker, John Milliken. Papers.

Prudhomme Family Papers.

Raper, Arthur. Papers.

Southern Oral History Collection.

**William Alexander Percy Public Library, Greenville, Mississippi:**

Caldwell, Burrell. Transcript of interview by Daisy Greene. Oral History Collection.

Collins, Robert. Transcript of interview by Daisy Greene. Oral History Collection.

Crump, Brodie S., Transcript of interview by Lelia Clark Wynn. Oral History Collection.

Ewing, Early C. Jr. Transcript of interview by Roberta Miller. Oral History Collection.

Hall, John James, Jr. Transcript of interview by Roberta Miller. Oral History Collection.

Law, Allen Reid. Transcript of interview by Roberta Miller Oral History Collection.

McGee, Burrell Otho. Transcript of interview by Don Robinson Baker. Oral History Collection.

McMullin, Maxie Lowell. Transcript of interview by Daisy Greene and William Douglas Jackson. Oral History Collection.

Nash, Rev. George William. Transcript of interview by Daisy Greene. Oral History Collection.

Nash, Jere B. Transcript of interview by Roberta Miller. Oral History Collection.

Parker, Lillie Belle. Transcript of interview by Iday J. Wilkerson. Oral History Collection.

Slay, Robert. Transcript of interview by Daisy Greene. Oral History Collection.

Stein, Lawrence, Transcript of interview by Roberta Miller. Oral History Collection.

### ***Other Manuscript Collections***

*American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940*, published electronically by The Library of Congress, available at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>; Internet

George Washington Carver Papers. Microfilm Edition.

### ***Government Publications***

Alabama Department of Agriculture. *Soil Map of Alabama*. Montgomery: Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, 1953.

Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station. *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute*. January 31, 1907.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Twentieth Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute*. January 31, 1908.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Twenty-first Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute*. January 31, 1909.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Twenty-third Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute*. January 31, 1911.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Twenty-second Annual Report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of*

- the Alabama Polytechnic Institute*. January 31, 1910.
- Agelasto, A.M., C.B. Doyle, G.S. Meloy, and O.C. Stine. "The Cotton Situation." *USDA Yearbook 1921* (1922): 323-406.
- Agriculture, United States Department of. *Farm Ownership and Tenancy in the Black Prairie of Texas*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922, Agricultural Bulletin 1068.
- Agricultural Experiment Station, The A&M College of Texas, Bulletin no. 1 (1888).
- Bailey, H.S. and J.A. LeClerc. "The Peanut, A Great American Food." In *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1917*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918.
- Bailey, Vernon. *Birds Known to Eat the Boll Weevil*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Biological Survey, 1905.
- Boeger, E.A. and E.A. Goldenweiser. "A Study of the Tenant Systems of Farming in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta." United States Department of Agriculture, Bulletin No. 337, January 13, 1916 (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1916).
- Campbell, J. Phil. "Extension Service Report for Georgia, 1915-1916." Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, August, 1916. vol. IV, no. 1, Bulletin 110.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Farmers' Co-operative Demonstration Work in Georgia." Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, February, 1914. vol. II, no. 8.
- Carver, George W. "Cow Peas" Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 5, 1903.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Fertilizer Experiments on Cotton," Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 3, 1899.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "How to Build Up Worn Out Soils" Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 6, 1905.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "How to Grow the Peanut and 105 Ways of Preparing It for Human Consumption." Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 31, June, 1915.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Twelve Ways to Meet the New Economic Conditions Here in the South." Tuskegee Experiment Station Bulletin No. 33 (1917).
- Clark, Victor S. "Mexican Labor in the United States." *Bulletin of the Bureau of*

- Labor*, no. 78 (1908): 466-522.
- Coad, Benjamin. "Killing Boll Weevils with Poison Dust." *USDA Yearbook* (1920): 241-252.
- Coad, Benjamin, E. Johnson, and G.L. McNeil. "Dusting Cotton from Airplanes." *USDA Bulletin*, no. 1204 (1924): 1-40.
- Cook, O. F. *Report on the Habits of the Kelep, or Guatemalen Cotton-Boll-Weevil Ant.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology, 1904.
- Eighth Annual Report of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1895.* College Station, TX: Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, 1896.
- Fox, J.W. "Report of Work at the Delta Station for 1906." Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 106, January, 1907.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Report of the Work at the Delta Station for 1907-8," Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 119, March, 1909 [date on first page is misprinted as 1907].
- Georgia State College of Agriculture. "Announcements of Short Courses." Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, November, 1916. vol. IV, no. 3, Bulletin 112.
- Harned, R.W. "Boll Weevil in Mississippi, 1909." Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service Bulletin, No. 139. March, 1910.
- Hinds, Warren E. "Heading Off Boll Weevil Panic." Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin no. 159 (December, 1911).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Proliferation as a Factor in the Natural Control of the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology, 1906.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Some Factors in the Natural Control of the Mexican Boll Weevil.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology, 1907.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Beating the Boll Weevil," in "Proceedings of Georgia State Horticultural Society, Georgia Market Conference, Georgia Breeder's Association and Georgia Dairy and Live Stock Association." Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, June, 1916. vol. IV, no. 16, pp.71-81.
- Hinds, W. E., and W. W. Yothers. *Hibernation of the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology, 1909.

- Howell, Arthur H. *Birds That Eat the Cotton Boll Weevil : A Report of Progress*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1906.
- Hunter, Walter D. "The Present Status of the Mexican Cotton-Boll Weevil in the United States." *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1901* (1902).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Some Recent Studies of the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," United States Department of Agriculture. *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1906*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907.
- Hunter, Walter D., and W. E. Hinds. *The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil Bulletin* (United States. Division of Entomology) ; No. 45. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Division of Entomology, 1904.
- Hunter, Walter D. and W. Dwight Pierce. *The Mexican Cotton-Boll Weevil: A Summary of the Results of the Investigation of this Insect up to December 31, 1911*. Bureau of Entomology Bulletin No. 114, U.S. Department of Agriculture, S. Doc. 305, 62<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 1912.
- Hyde, John. *Wages of Farm Labor in the United States: Results of Eleven Statistical Investigations, 1866-1899*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Division of Statistics, 1901.
- Messenger, Kenneth, and W.L. Popham. "From One to Five Thousand in Thirty-Four Years." *USDA Yearbook* (1952): 250-51.
- Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station. "Cotton Worm." Bulletin No. 3. May 20, 1888.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Recent Cotton Experiments." Bulletin, No. 155. December, 1911
- Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service. "Insects and Diseases Liable to be Introduced into Mississippi," Bulletin, No. 96, February, 1906.
- Oliver, J.G. "Starve the Boll Weevil." Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, September, 1919. vol. VIII, no. 10, Bulletin 188.
- Pierce, W. Dwight. *Studies of Parasites of the Cotton Boll Weevil*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology, 1908.
- Pierce, W. Dwight, R. A. Cushman, Clifford E. Hood, and Walter David Hunter. *The Insect Enemies of the Cotton Boll Weevil*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology, 1912.

Sanderson, E. Dwight. "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil." Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, Entomological Department. Circular No. 1. February 15, 1903.

Soule, Andrew M. "Annual Report of the President, State College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts, 1921-1922." Athens: Georgia State College of Agriculture, June, 1922. vol. X, no. 15, Bulletin 254.

Sterling, J. Morton. "Report of the Secretary." *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1895* (1896): 9-62.

Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. "Sundry Brief Articles." Bulletin no. 37 December, 1895.

United States. Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Fourteenth Census of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Thirteenth Census of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Twelfth Census of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901.

\_\_\_\_\_. *United States Census of Agriculture:1925*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925.

\_\_\_\_\_. *United States Census of Agriculture:1935*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935.

United States. Bureau of Entomology. *Papers on the Cotton Boll Weevil and Related and Associated Insects*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bureau of Entomology, 1909.

United States Department of Agriculture. "The Man Who Works With His Hands: Address of President Roosevelt at the Semi-Centennial Celebration of the Founding of Agricultural Colleges in the United States, at Lansing, Michigan, May 31, 1907." Circular No. 24 (July 1, 1907).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1895*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1898*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899.



\_\_\_\_\_. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1905.*  
Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1910.*  
Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1917.*  
Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1921.*  
Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922.

United States. Department of Agriculture. Bureau of Agricultural Economics.  
"Statistics on Cotton and Related Data." Statistical Bulletin 99 (June,  
1951).

United States. Department of Agriculture. Soil Conservation Service. *Soil  
Survey of Coffee County, Alabama.* Washington: Government Printing  
Office, March, 1979.

United States. Department of Labor. Division of Negro Economics., R. H.  
Leavell, and J. H. Dillard. *Negro Migration in 1916-17.* Washington,: Govt.  
Print. Off., 1919.

Walker, G.B. "Report of Work at the Delta Branch Experiment Station For  
1911," Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin, No. 157,  
February, 1912.

Wallace, Henry A. "Report of the Secretary." *United States Department of  
Agriculture Yearbook 1921* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing  
Office, 1922).

Ward, Frank C. "Poison Boll Weevils." Athens: Georgia State College of  
Agriculture, January, 1920. vol. VIII, no. 18, Bulletin 196.

Wilson, James. "Report of the Secretary." *Yearbook of the United States  
Department of Agriculture, 1898* (1899): 9-62.

### ***Books, Articles, Recorded Interviews***

Adero, Malaika. *Up South: Stories, Studies, and Letters of This Century's Black  
Migrations.* New York: The New Press, 1993.

Agee, James, and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* Boston,:

- Houghton Mifflin company, 1941.
- Ambruster, Howard Watson. *Arsenic, Calcium Arsenate and the Boll Weevil*. New York,: Barr-Erhardt Press, 1923.
- Boyle, James E. *Cotton and the New Orleans Cotton Exchange: A Century of Commercial Evolution*. Garden City, NY: Country Life Press, 1934.
- Branson, E.C. "Farm Tenancy in the Cotton Belt: How Farm Tenants Live." *Journal of Social Forces* 1, no. 3 (1923): 213-221.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Farm Tenancy in the South, II. The Social Estate of White Farm Tenants." *Journal of Social Forces* 1, no. 4 (1923): 450-457.
- Burkett, Charles William, and Clarence Hamilton Poe. *Cotton, Its Cultivation, Marketing, Manufacture, and the Problems of the Cotton World*. New York,: Doubleday Page, 1906.
- Campbell, Thomas Monroe. *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer*. Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1936.
- Candler, Allen D., and Clement A. Evans. *Georgia; Comprising Sketches of Counties, Towns, Events, Institutions, and Persons Arranged in Cyclopedic Form*. Atlanta,: State historical association, 1906.
- Central of Georgia Railway Company, Agricultural Department. *The Boll Weevil Is Coming. What Are You Going to Do About It? Rev. And Approved by W.E. Hinds, State Entomologist, Auburn, Ala.* Savannah: Central of Georgia Railway
- Cohn, David L. *The Life and Times of King Cotton*. New York,: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Cohn, David L., and James C. Cobb. *The Mississippi Delta and the World : The Memoirs of David L. Cohn* Library of Southern Civilization. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.
- Dickson, Harris. *The Story of King Cotton*. New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1937.
- Goldenweiser, E. A., and Leon E. Truesdell. *Farm Tenancy in the United States. An Analysis of the Results of the 1920 Census Relative to Farms Classified by Tenure Supplemented by Pertinent Data from Other Sources* U.S. Bureau of the Census. Census Monographs Iv. Washington,: Govt. Print. Off., 1924.

Harlan, Louis R. ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974.

Hillman, Joseph. *The Cultivation of Cotton: A Short Treatise Specially Bearing on Fertilization and the Control of the Ravages of the Boll Weevil*. New York: William S. Myers, 1905.

Howard, Leland O. *The Insect Menace*. New York: The Century Company, 1931.

Hillman, Joseph. *The Cultivation of Cotton : A Short Treatise Specially Bearing on Fertilization and the Control of the Ravages of the Boll Weevil*. New York: William S. Myers, 1905.

Houston, D.F. "Cotton and the General Agricultural Outlook" *Publications of the American Economic Association*, 3rd Series, Vol. 5, No. 1, Papers and Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting. Part I. New Orleans, LA., December 29-31, 1903 (February, 1904).

Howard, Leland O. *Fighting the Insects: The Story of an Entomologist, Telling of the Life and Experiences of the Writer*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Insect Menace*. New York: The Century Company, 1931.

Johnson, Charles Spurgeon. *Shadow of the Plantation*. Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago press, 1934.

Johnson, Charles Spurgeon, Edwin R. Embree, Will Winton Alexander, and Rupert Bayless Vance. *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy : Summary of Field Studies & Statistical Surveys, 1933-35*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935.

Martin, Oscar B. *The Demonstration Work: Dr. Seaman A. Knapp's Contribution to Civilization*. Boston: The Stratford Company, 1926.

Mercier, W.B. and H.E. Savely. *The Knapp Method of Growing Cotton*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913.

Miller, Booker. Interviewed by Gayle Dean Wardlow recorded on *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*. Revenant Album No. 212.

Moss, Benjamin Lawrence. *The Boll Weevil Problem; an Analysis of Its Significance to the Southern Farmer and Business Man*. Birmingham: The Progressive Farmer, 1914.

- Neillie, C.R., and J.S. Houser. "Fighting Insects with Airplanes." *National Geographic Magazine*, March 1922, 333-338.
- Park, Robert Ezra. "Human Ecology" *American Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 2 (July, 1936), 1-15.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Succession, An Ecological Concept" *American Sociological Review* 1, no. 2 (April, 1936), 171-179.
- Percy, LeRoy. "A Southern View of Negro Education." *Outlook*, August 3 1907.
- Percy, William Alexander. *Lanterns on the Levee; Recollections of a Planter's Son*. New York,: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941.
- Phelps-Stokes Fund., and J. H. Dillard. *Twenty Year Report of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1911-1931, with a Series of Studies of Negro Progress and of Developments of Race Relations in the United States and Africa During the Period, and a Discussion of the Present Outlook*. New York city,: The Phelps-Stokes fund, 1932.
- Rowland, Dunbar. *Mississippi: Comprising Sketches of Counties, Towns, Events, Institutions and Persons, Arranged in Cyclopedic Form*. Vol. I. Atlanta: Southern Historical Publishing Association, 1907.
- Rubin, Harold. "Boll Weevils Started His Airline." *Dixie*, February 13, 1955.
- Sanderson, E. Dwight. *A Statistical Study of the Decrease in the Texas Cotton Crop Due to the Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil and the Cotton Acreage of Texas, 1899-1904*. Austin: Department of Agriculture, Insurance, Statistics and History, 1905.
- "Silver Anniversary Cooperative Demonstration Work, 1903-1928," Proceedings of the Anniversary Meeting Held at Houston, Texas, February 5-7, 1929. College Station, TX: Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas.
- Speir, Henry C. Interview by Gayle Dean Wardlow recorded on *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*. Revenant Album No. 212.
- Stone, Alfred Holt, and Julian Harrison Fort. *The Truth About the Boll Weevil; Being Some Observations on Cotton Growing under Boll Weevil Conditions in Certain Areas of Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi*. Greenville, Miss., 1910
- Stone, Alfred Holt, and Walter Francis Willcox. *Studies in the American Race*

- Problem*. New York,: Doubleday Page & Company, 1908.
- Taylor, Paul S. *An American-Mexican Frontier: Nueces County, Texas*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934.
- Thomas, Gates. "South Texas Negro Work Songs." In *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society* 5 (1926): 154-180.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Six Negro Songs from the Colorado Valley." In *Texas Folk and Folklore*. Mody C. Boatright, Wilson M. Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, eds., 165-6. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1954.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923.
- Truesdale, Julius A. "Spraying from the Air." *New York Times*, January 8 1922, 4.
- Vance, Rupert Bayless. *Human Factors in Cotton Culture; a Study in the Social Geography of the American South*. Chapel Hill,: The University of North Carolina press, 1929.
- Washburn, F.L. *Injurious Insects and Useful Birds: Successful Control of Farm Pests*. 2nd rev. ed. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1918.
- Woofter, Thomas Jackson. *The Negroes of Athens, Georgia* Phelps-Stokes Fellowship Studies ; No. 1. [Athens, Ga.,, 1913.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Negro and the Farm Crisis." *Social Forces* 5 (1928): 615-20.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Southern Population and Social Planning* Southern Policy Papers ; No. 1. Chapel Hill,: The University of North Carolina press, 1936.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Negro Migration; Changes in Rural Organization and Population of the Cotton Belt*. Reprint. New York,: Negro Universities Press, 1969.
- Woofter, Thomas Jackson, Gordon W. Blackwell, Harold Hoffsommer, James G. Maddox, Jean M. Massell, B. O. Williams, and Waller Wynne. *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation* Research Monograph No. 5. Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1936.
- Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Arkansas. *The WPA Guide to 1930s Arkansas*. 1st paperback ed. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987.

### ***Newspapers and Periodicals***

*Atlanta Journal*

*Congressional Record*

*Fortune*

*Gloster Herald* (Mississippi)

*Greenville Daily-Times* (Mississippi)

*Greenville Times* (Mississippi)

*Greenwood Commonwealth* (Mississippi)

*Greenwood Enterprise* (Mississippi)

*Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*

*Memphis Commercial-Appeal*

*Montgomery Advertiser*

*National Field*

*New Orleans Daily-Picayune*

*New York Times*

*Outlook*

*Progressive Farmer* (Raleigh Edition)

*Troy Messenger* (Troy, Alabama)

### ***Musical Recordings***

Cochran, Eddie. "Boll Weevil." From "Never To Be Forgotten." Liberty Records.

Estell, Buster "Bus." "Boll Weevil." From "'Now What a Time': Blues, Gospel, and the Fort Valley Music Festivals." American Folklife Center. Library of Congress Recordings.

Guthrie, Woody. "Boll Weevil Blues." From "Woody Guthrie Sings Folk Songs." Smithsonian Folkways 40007.

Houston, Cisco. "Boll Weevil." From "American Roots: A History of American Folk Music." Disky Records 248612.

Leadbelly. "Boll Weevil." Library of Congress Recordings LC 273-A-1 and LC 135-A.

McTell, Blind Willie. "Boll Weevil." Library of Congress Recordings LC AFS L51.

Patton, Charley. *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*. Revenant Album No. 212.

Presley, Elvis. "Little Sister." From "Something for Everybody." RCA 2370-2-R.

Rainey, Ma. "Bo-Weevil Blues." Paramount 12080.

Ritter, Tex. "Boll Weevil." From "American Legend." Capitol Records 11241.

Sandburg, Carl. "Boll Weevil Song." From "New Songs from the American Songbag." Lyricord LL 4.

Williams, Willie. "Boll Weevil." From "Deep River of Song: Virginia and the Piedmont Minstrelsy." Rounder Records 1827.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

### **Books**

Alston, Lee J. *Costs of Contracting and the Decline of Tenancy in the South, 1930-1960*. New York: Garland, 1985.

Arnett, Hazel. *I Hear America Singing!: Great Folk Songs From the Revolution to Rock*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975.

Ayers, Edward L. *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Baker, Lewis. *The Percys of Mississippi: Politics and Literature in the New South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1983.

Bailey, Joseph Cannon. *Seaman A. Knapp: Schoolmaster of American Agriculture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1945.

- Barenbaum, May R. *Ninety-nine More Maggots, Mites, and Munchers*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.
- Barlow, William. *"Looking up at Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.
- Barr, Alwyn. *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.
- Barry, John M. *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- Bartley, Numan V. *The Creation of Modern Georgia* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.
- Bastin, Bruce. *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Berlin, Edward A. *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Boatright, Mody C., Wilson M. Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, eds., *Texas Folk and Folklore*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1954.
- Brandfon, Robert L. *Cotton Kingdom of the New South: a History of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta from Reconstruction to the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Briggs, Shirley A. and Staff of Rachel Carson Council. *Basic Guide to Pesticides: Their Characteristics and Hazards*. Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1992.
- Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *Lynching in the New South : Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 Blacks in the New World*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.
- Calt, Stephen and Gayle Wardlow. *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*. Newton, New Jersey: Rock Chapel Press, 1988.
- Campbell, Randolph B. *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003
- Cash, W. J. *The Mind of the South*. New York,: Vintage Books, 1960.
- Charters, Samuel Barclay. *The Country Blues*. Da Capo Press ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1975.



- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Legacy of the Blues: A Glimpse into the Art and the Lives of Twelve Great Bluesmen : An Informal Study*. 1st American ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1977.
- Cline, Isaac Monroe. *Storms, Floods and Sunshine*. New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1945.
- Cobb, James C. *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Most Southern Place on Earth : The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Cohen, William. *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991.
- Conlogue, William. *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture Studies in Rural Culture*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Conrad, David Eugene. *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965.
- Cowdrey, Albert E. *This Land, This South: An Environmental History New Perspectives on the South*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983.
- Cross, Henry E. and James A. Sandos. *Across the Border: Rural Development in Mexico and Recent Migration to the United States*. Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, 1981.
- Daniel, Pete. *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969*. Urbana,: University of Illinois Press, 1972.
- Daniel, Pete, and Eric Foner. *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life since 1900*. 1st ed. American Century Series. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986.

- Davis, Allison, Burleigh B. Gardner, Mary R. Gardner, and W. Lloyd Warner. *Deep South; a Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1941.
- DeCanio, Stephen J. *Agriculture in the Postbellum South: The Economics of Production and Supply*. M.I.T. Monographs in Economics. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1974.
- Dickerson, Williard A., Anthony L. Brashear, James T. Brumley, Frank L. Carter, William J. Grefenstette, and F. Aubrey Harris. *Boll Weevil Eradication in the United States through 1999* The Cotton Foundation Reference Book Series; No. 6. Memphis.: Cotton Foundation Publisher, 2001.
- Dittmer, John. *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* Blacks in the New World Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.
- Egerton, John. *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- Edwards, David Honeyboy. *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing: The Life and Times of Delta Bluesman Honeyboy Edwards*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1997.
- Elliott, Lawrence. *George Washington Carver: The Man Who Overcame*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966.
- Evans, David. *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in Folk Blues*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- Evans, Howard Ensign. *The Pleasures of Entomology: Portraits of Insects and the People Who Study Them*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985.
- Fahey, John. *Charley Patton*. London: November Books, 1970.
- Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Fite, Gilbert Courtland. *Cotton Fields No More : Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* New Perspectives on the South. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900* Histories of the American Frontier. New York,: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

- Fitzgerald, Deborah. *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Fligstein, Neil. *Going North: Migration of Blacks and Whites from the South, 1900-1950*. New York: Academic Press, 1981.
- Flynt, Wayne. *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989.
- Foley, Neil. *The White Scourge : Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Fulmer, John L. *Agricultural Progress in the Cotton Belt since 1920*. Chapel Hill,: University of North Carolina Press, 1950.
- Grant, Robert B. *The Black Man Comes to the City; a Documentary Account from the Great Migration to the Great Depression, 1915 to 1930*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Co., 1972.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *"Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Haas, Edward F. *Political Leadership in a Southern City: New Orleans in the Progressive Era, 1896-1902* Ruston, Louisian.: McGinty Publications: Dept. of History Louisiana Tech University, 1988.
- Hahn, Steven. *A Nation Under Our Feet: A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles In The Rural South, From Slavery To The Great Migration*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Roots of Southern Populism : Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Hahn, Steven, and Jonathan Prude. *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Harris, J. William. *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont, and Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Harrison, Robert W. *Alluvial Empire*. Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1961.

- Haskins, James with Kathleen Benson. *Scott Joplin*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1978.
- Hazzard-Gordon, Katrina. *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.
- Hemphill, Marie M. *Fevers, Floods, and Faith: A History of Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1844-1976*. Indianola, MS: Sunflower County Historical Society, 1980.
- Hicks, John D. *The Populist Revolt*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931.
- Hicks, Ruby Sheppard. *Song of the Delta*. Jackson, MS: Howick House, 1976.
- Higgs, Robert. *Competition and Coercion : Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Hurt, R. Douglas. *American Agriculture: A Brief History* Revised ed. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2002.
- Jackson, Mahalia. *Movin' on Up*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966.
- Joyner, Charles. *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- Johnson, H. Thomas. *Agricultural Depression in the 1920's : Economic Fact or Statistical Artifact?* New York: Garland, 1969.
- Johnson, W.H. *Cotton and Its Production*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1926.
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow : Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.
- Jones, Lu Ann. *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Karina, Stephen J. *The University of Georgia College of Agriculture: An Administrative History, 1785-1985*. Athens: The University of Georgia, 1989.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Hammer and Hoe : Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Race Rebels : Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press, 1996.

- Kerr, Norwood A. *A History of the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, 1883-1983*. Auburn University: Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn University, 1985.
- Kirby, Jack Temple. *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.
- Kirwan, Albert Dennis. *Revolt of the Rednecks: Mississippi Politics, 1876-1925*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1951.
- Lee, Dallas. *The Cotton Patch Evidence*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1991.
- Lewis, W. David, and Wesley Phillips Newton. *Delta: The History of an Airline*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979.
- Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.
- Mandle, Jay R. *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1978.
- Marks, Carole. *Farewell—We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration Blacks in the Diaspora Series*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- McLean, Nancy. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- McMillen, Neil R. *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Montejano, David. *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987.
- Munro, John M. *Cotton* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Longman Scientific and Technical, 1987.
- Nelson, Lawrence J. *King Cotton's Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.
- Norrell, Robert J. *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee*. Reprint ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

- Oliver, Paul. *Blues Fell This Morning; the Meaning of the Blues*. New York: Horizon Press, 1961.
- Otto, John Solomon. *Southern Agriculture During the Civil War Era, 1860-1880*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Owens, William A. *Texas Folk Songs*. Austin: Texas Folklore Society, 1950.
- Ownby, Ted. *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty & Culture, 1830-1998*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Paisley, Clifton. *From Cotton to Quail; An Agricultural Chronicle of Leon County, Florida, 1860-1967*. Gainesville,: University of Florida Press, 1968.
- Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Paredes, Américo. *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border*. 1<sup>st</sup> University of Texas Press ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.
- Pfadt, Robert E. *Fundamentals of Applied Entomology*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978.
- Phillips, Kimberley L. *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- Piazza, Tom. *Blues and Trouble: Five Stories*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1996.
- Pledger, Dennis Jay. *Cotton Culture on Hardscrabble Plantation: Conservation, Mechanization*. Shelby, Mississippi: Hardscrabble Plantation, 1951.
- Powdermaker, Hortense. *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* Studies in American Negro Life. New York,: Atheneum, 1968.
- Range, Willard. *A Century of Georgia Agriculture, 1850-1950*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954.
- Ransom, Roger L. and Richard Sutch. *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Raper, Arthur Franklin. *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tenants of the Almighty*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943.
- Raper, Arthur Franklin, and Ira De Augustine Reid. *Sharecroppers All*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1941.
- Raper, Arthur Franklin, and Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching. *The Tragedy of Lynching*. New York: The New American Library, 1969.
- Rasmussen, Wayne David. *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989.
- Reisler, Mark. *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976.
- Robson Jr., George L., and Roy V. Scott, eds. *Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: A Symposium*. Santa Barbara: McNally & Lotin, West, 1979.
- Russell, Edmund. *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Sachs, Carolyn E. *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture, and Environment* Rural Studies Series of the Rural Sociological Society. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996.
- Sanders, Elizabeth. *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers and the State, 1877-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Saloutos, Theodore. *Farmer Movements in the South, 1865-1933*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
- Scott, Roy Vernon. *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914*. Urbana,: University of Illinois Press, 1971.
- Scruggs, Charles, and Lee VanDemarr. *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Sharpless, Rebecca. *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* Studies in Rural Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

- Shivers, Forrest. *The Land Between: A History of Hancock County, Georgia to 1940*. Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Co., 1990.
- Simon, Bryant. *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- Sitton, Thad, Dan K. Utley, and Samuel Lee Evans. *From Can See to Can't: Texas Cotton Farmers on the Southern Prairies*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.
- Snyder, Robert E. *Cotton Crisis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- Spratt, John S. *The Road To Spindletop: Economic Change in Texas, 1875-1901*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1955.
- Stoll, Steven. *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth Century*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.
- Summersell, Charles Grayson. *Alabama History For Schools*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Montgomery, AL: Viewpoint Publications, 1975.
- Tindall, George Brown. *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945*. Vol. 10 History of the South. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967.
- Walton, Anthony. *Mississippi: An American Journey*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996.
- Watson, Fred S. *Coffee Grounds: A History of Coffee County, Alabama, 1841-1970*. Anniston, AL: Higginbotham, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Piney Wood Echoes: A History of Dale and Coffee Counties, Alabama*. Elba, AL: Elba Clipper, 1949.
- Wetherington, Mark V. *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia, 1860-1910*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994.
- Wharton, Vernon Lane. *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947.
- Wayne, Jeannie M. *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* Carter G. Woodson Institute Series in Black Studies. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Williams, Wirt A., ed. *History of Bolivar County, Mississippi*. Spartanburg, SC:



- The Reprint Company, 1976.
- Williamson, Frederick. *Origin and Growth of Agricultural Extension in Louisiana, 1860-1948*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951.
- Willis, John C. *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.
- Woodman, Harold D. *New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *King Cotton & His Retainers; Financing & Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925*. Lexington,: University of Kentucky Press, 1968.
- Woodson, Carter G. *The Rural Negro*. Washington, DC: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938.
- Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Wrenn, Lynette Boney. *Cinderella of the New South: A History of the Cottonseed Industry, 1855-1955*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.
- Wright, Gavin. *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.
- Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Young, Earle B. *Galveston and the Great West*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997.

### **Articles**

- Adams, William Hampton, and Steven D. Smith. "Historical Perspectives on Black Tenant Farmer Material Culture: The Henry C. Long General Store Ledger at Waverly Plantation, Mississippi." In *The Archeology of Slavery*

- and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa A. Singleton, 309-334. Orlando: Academic Press, 1985.
- Berthoff, Rowland. "Southern Attitudes toward Immigration, 1865-1914." *Journal of Southern History* 17 (1951).
- Bradley, Jr., J.R. "Major Developments in Management of Insect and Mite Pests in Cotton." In *Cotton Insects and Mites: Characterization and Management*, eds. Edgar G. King, Jacob R. Phillips and Randy J. Coleman. Memphis: The Cotton Foundation Publisher, 1996.
- Brandfon, Robert L. "The End of Immigration to the Cotton Fields." *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 50, no. 4 (1964): 591-611.
- Branson, E.C. "Social Occasions and Contacts in a Rural County." *Journal of Social Forces* 1, no. 2 (1923): 162-63.
- Braund, Kathryn Holland. "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts': Billy Boll Weevil Comes to the Alabama Wiregrass." *Agricultural History* 63 (1989): 15-39.
- Chancey, Andrew S. "Race, Religion, and Agricultural Reform: The Communal Vision of Koinonia Farm." In *Georgia in Black and White : Explorations in the Race Relations of a Southern State, 1865-1950*, ed. John C. Inscoe. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.
- Cline, W. Rodney . "Seaman Asahel Knapp, 1833-1911," *Louisiana History* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1970): 333-340.
- Cobb, James C. "The Blues Is a Lowdown Shakin' Chill." In *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999.
- Coclanis, Peter and Bryant Simon. "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: African American Strategies for Day-to-Day Existence/Resistance in the Early-Twentieth-Century Rural South." In R. Douglas Hurt, ed. *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, (2003):189-209.
- Cohen, William. "Negro Involuntary Servitude in the South, 1865-1940: A Preliminary Analysis." *Journal of Southern History* 42 (1976): 31-61.
- Collin, Richard H. "Theodore Roosevelt's Visit to New Orleans and the Progressive Campaign of 1914." *Louisiana History* 12, no. 1 (1971): 5-19.
- Coulter, J.L. "Agricultural Development in the United States, 1900-1910." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 27 (1912): 1-26.

- Cox, Dwayne. "Alabama Farm Agents, 1914-1922." *Alabama Review* 47, no. 4 (1994): 285-304.
- Cox, LaWanda Fenlason. "Tenancy in the United States, 1865-1900: A Consideration of the Validity of the Agricultural Ladder Hypothesis." *Agricultural History* 18 (1944): 97-105.
- Crosby, Earl. "Limited Success against Long Odds: The Black County Agent." *Agricultural History* 57 (1983): 277-88.
- Daniel, Pete. "The Crossroads of Change: Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures in the Twentieth-Century South." *The Journal of Southern History* 50, no. 3. (August, 1984)
- Down, Eldon W., and George F. Lemmer. "Origins of Crop Dusting." *Agricultural History* 39 (1965): 123-35.
- Earle, Carville. "The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner: Macrohistory, Agricultural Innovation, and Environmental Change." In *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Donald Worster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Eldridge, Hope T, and Dorothy Swaine Thomas. "Demographic Analyses and Interrelations." In *Population Redistribution and Economic Growth: United States, 1870-1950*, ed. Simon Smith Kuznets, vol. III. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1964.
- Evans, David. "Blues on Dockery's Plantation: 1896-1967." *Blues Unlimited*, no. 49 (1968): 3-4.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Charley Patton: The Conscience of the Delta." In liner notes of *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*, Revenant Album No. 212.
- Evans, H.E. "Year of the Locust," in *Life on a Little Known Planet*. New York: Dutton, 1966.
- Ferguson, Karen J. "Caught in 'No Man's Land': The Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service and the Ideology of Booker T. Washington, 1900-1918." *Agricultural History* 72, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 33-54.
- Fisher, James S. "Negro Farm Ownership in the South." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 63, issue 4 (December, 1973): 478-489.
- Foley, Neil. "Mexicans, Mechanization, and the Growth of Corporate Cotton

- Culture in South Texas: The Taft Ranch, 1900-1930." *Journal of Southern History* 62 (1996): 275-302.
- Foner, Eric. "Reconstruction Revisited." *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982).
- Foscue, Edwin. J. "Agricultural History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Region," *Agricultural History* 8, no. 3 (July 1934): 124-137.
- Friedman, Maurice L. "The World War Years—Coming of the Boll Weevil, 1910-1945." In *Cotton to Kaolin: A History of Washington County, Georgia, 1784-1989*, ed. Mary Alice Jordan. Sandersonville, GA: Washington County Historical Society, 1989.
- Giles, William Lincoln. "Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970." In *A History of Mississippi*, vol. II, ed. Richard Aubrey McLemore. Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973.
- Glave, Dianne D. "The African American Cooperative Service: A Folk Tradition in Conservation and Preservation in the Early Twentieth Century." *International Journal of Africana Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 85-100.
- Goodwyn, Lawrence C. "Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study." *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 1435-56.
- Green, James R. "Tenant Farmer Discontent and Socialist Protest in Texas, 1901-1917." *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 81 (1977): 133-54.
- Harrison, Robert. "Formative Years of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta Levee District." *Journal of Mississippi History* 13 (1952).
- Helms, Douglas. "Technological Methods for Boll Weevil Control," in George L. Robson Jr., and Roy V. Scott, eds., *Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: A Symposium*. Santa Barbara: McNally & Lotin, West, 1979: 286-299.
- Higgs, Robert. "The Boll Weevil, the Cotton Economy, and Black Migration, 1910-1930." *Agricultural History* 50 (1976): 335-50.
- Hilton, Kathleen. "Both in the Field, Each with a Plow: Race and Gender in USDA Policy, 1907-1929." In *Southern Women: Hidden Histories of Women in the New South*, ed. Virginia Bernhard, et al., 114-133. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994.
- Hines, Linda O. "George W. Carver and the Tuskegee Agricultural Experiment Station." *Agricultural History* 53 (1979): 71-83.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "White Mythology and Black Duality: George W. Carver's Response to Racism and The Radical Left." *The Journal of Negro History* 62, Issue 2 (April, 1977): 134-146.
- Holley, Donald. "The Rust Cotton Picker and How It Changed Arkansas." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (1993): 44-77.
- Holmes, George K. "Cotton and the General Agricultural Outlook—Discussion." *Publications of the American Economic Association*, 3rd Series, Vol. 5, No. 1. Papers and Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting. Part I. New Orleans, LA., December 29-31, 1903. (February, 1904)
- Holmes, William F. "Labor Agents and the Georgia Exodus, 1899-1900." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (1980): 436-48.
- James, Felix. "The Tuskegee Institute Movable School, 1906-23." *Agricultural History* XLV (1971): 201-09.
- Jones, Allen W. "Improving Rural Life for Blacks: The Tuskegee Negro Farmers' Conference, 1892-1915." *Agricultural History* 65, no. 2 (1991): 105-114.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in the Education of Black Farmers." *Journal of Negro History* LX (1975): 252-67.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The South's First Black Farm Agents." *Agricultural History* 50 (1976): 636-644.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Thomas M. Campbell: Black Agricultural Leader of the New South." *Agricultural History* LIII (1979): 43-51.
- Jones, Lewis W. "The South's First Negro Farm Agent." *Journal of Negro Education* 22, issue 1 (Winter, 1953): 38-45.
- Jones, Lu Ann. *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Folk'." *American Historical Review* 97 (1992): 1400-1408.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South." *Journal of American History* 80 (1993): 75-112.
- Kirby, Jack Temple. "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians." *Journal of Southern History* 49 (1983).

- Kornweibel, Theodore Jr. "An Economic Profile of Black Life in the Twenties," *Journal of Black Studies* 6, issue 4 (June, 1976).
- Leigh, Thomas F. Steven H. Roach, and Theo F. Watson. "Biology and Ecology of Important Insect and Mite Pests of Cotton." In *Cotton Insects and Mites: Characterization and Management*, eds. Edgar G. King, Jacob R. Phillips and Randy J. Coleman. Memphis: The Cotton Foundation Publisher, 1996.
- Mackintosh, Barry. "George Washington Carver: The Making of a Myth." *The Journal of Southern History* 42, 4 (November, 1976): 507-528.
- Matthews, Bruce F. "The 1914 Cotton Crisis in Alabama." *Alabama Review* XLVI (1993): 3-23.
- Mayberry, B.D. "The Tuskegee Movable School: A Unique Contribution to National and International Agriculture and Rural Development" *Agricultural History* 65, no. 2 (1991): 85-104.
- Osband, Kent. "The Boll Weevil Versus 'King Cotton'." *Journal of Economic History* 45, no. 3 (1985): 627-643.
- Paisley, Clifton. "Madison County's Sea Island Cotton Industry, 1870-1916." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 54 (1976): 304.
- Pittman, Walter. "Chemical Regulation in Mississippi: The State Laboratory (1882- )." *Journal of Mississippi History* 41 (1979): 133-154.
- Ransom, Roger and Richard Sutch. "Tenancy, Farm Size, Self-Sufficiency, and Racism: Four Problems in the Economic History of Southern Agriculture." Southern Economic History Project, Working Paper Series No. 8 (Berkeley: Institute of Business and Economic Research, University of California, Berkeley, April 1970).
- Reid, Joseph D. Jr. "Sharecropping as an Understandable Market Response: The Post-Bellum South." *Journal of Economic History* 33 (1973): 106-130.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sharecropping in History and Theory." *Agricultural History* 49 (1975): 427-40.
- Rieff, Lynne A. "'Go Ahead and Do All You Can': Southern Progressives and Alabama Home Demonstration Clubs, 1914-1940." In *Southern Women: Hidden Histories of Women in the New South*, ed. Virginia Bernhard, et al., 114-33. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994.

- Rosenberg, Charles R. "Science, Technology, and Economic Growth: The Agricultural Experiment Station Scientist, 1875-1914." *Agricultural History* 45 (1971): 1-20.
- Saloutos, Theodore. "The Alabama Farm Bureau Federation: Early Beginnings." *Alabama Review* XIII (1960): 185-98.
- Schlomowitz, Ralph. "Sharecropping in History and Theory." *Agricultural History* 53 (1979): 557-575.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Origins of Southern Sharecropping." *Agricultural History* 53 (1979): 557-575.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Plantations and Smallholdings: Comparative Perspectives from the World Cotton and Sugar Cane Economies, 1865-1935." *Agricultural History* 58, no. 33 (1984).
- Schott, Matthew J. "Progressives against Democracy: Electoral Reform in Louisiana, 1894-1921." *Louisiana History* 20, no. 3 (1979): 247-260.
- Schultz, Mark R. "Interracial Kinship Ties and the Emergence of a Rural Black Middle Class: Hancock County, Georgia, 1865-1920." In *Georgia in Black and White : Explorations in the Race Relations of a Southern State, 1865-1950*, ed. John C. Inscoe. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.
- Scott, Anne Firor. "My Twentieth Century: Leaves From a Journal." *Southern Cultures* 9, no.1 (Spring 2003): 62-78.
- Scott, Roy V. "American Railroads and Agricultural Extension, 1900-1914: A Study in Railway Developmental Techniques." *The Business History Review* 39, No. 1 (Spring, 1965): 74-98.
- Scruggs, Charles and Lee VanDemarr. *Jean Toomer and Terrors of American History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Snow, J.W. "Radiation, Insects and Eradication in North America: An Overview from Screwworm to Bullworm." In *Modern Insect Control: Nuclear Techniques and Biotechnology*. Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1988,
- Snyder, Howard. "Negro Migration and the Cotton Crop." *North American Review* 219 (1924).
- Spratt, John S. "The Cotton Miner, 1865-1910," *American Quarterly* 4, number 3 (Autumn, 1952).

- Stoltz, Jack. "The Porter Demonstration Farm." *East Texas Historical Journal* 1992 30(1): 16-21.
- Strickland, Arvarh E. "The Strange Affair of the Boll Weevil: The Pest as Liberator." *Agricultural History* 68 (1994): 157-168.
- Taylor, Paul S. "Corrido de Texas." In *Texas Folk and Folklore*. Mody C. Boatright, Wilson M. Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, eds.. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1954.
- Tolnay, Stewart E. and E.M. Beck. "Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930." *American Sociological Review* 57, issue 1 (February, 1992): 103-116.
- Vietmeyer, Noel D. "Our 90-Year War with the Boll Weevil Isn't Over." *Smithsonian* 13 (1982): 60-68.
- Walker, Alyce Billings ed. *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*, New Revised Edition. New York: Hastings House, 1975.
- Wolfe, Charles and Kip Lornell. *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- Woodman, Harold D. "Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law." *Agricultural History* 53 (1979): 319-37.

### ***Unpublished Theses and Dissertations***

- Austin, Deborah W. "Thomas Monroe Campbell and the Development of Negro Agricultural Extension Work." M.A. Thesis, Auburn University, 1975.
- Branch, Ellis Ray. "Walter Sillers, Sr.: The Politics of a Southern Planter, 1870-1931." M.A. Thesis, Delta State University, 1975.
- Brooks, Robert Preston. "The Agrarian Revolt in Georgia, 1865-1912." Ph.D. Dissertation, 1914.
- Brown, Robert Norman II, "Coming Home: Black Return Migration to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta." Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2001.
- Evans, Samuel Lee. "Texas Agriculture, 1880-1930." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, 1960.
- Glave, Dianne D. "Fields and Gardens: An Environmental History of African



- American Farmers in the Progressive South." dissertation, State University New York, Stony Brook, 1998.
- Helms, Douglas. "Just Lookin' for a Home: The Cotton Boll Weevil and the South." Ph.D. Dissertation, The Florida State University, 1977.
- Hines, Mary Elizabeth. "Death at the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Geography of Lynching in the Deep South, 1882-1910." Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1992.
- Matthai, James Paul. "An Atlas of Cotton Production in the Southern United States: 1840-1960." Ed.D., Dissertation, Columbia University, 1962.
- Schott, Matthew J. "John M. Parker of Louisiana." Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1969.
- Schultz, Mark Roman. "The Unsolid South: An Oral History of Race, Class, and Geography in Hancock County, Georgia, 1910-1950." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1999.
- Sunderman, Frederick William. "Neither Natchez Nor Tara: An Environmental Historical Geography of the Upper Pearl River Basin of Mississippi, Protohistoric Period to 1940." Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2001.
- Willis, John Charles. "On the New South Frontier: Life in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, 1865-1920." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1991.