



# southern rural research project

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## PART II

### THE EXTINCTION OF THE BLACK FARMER IN ALABAMA

A survey by Southern Rural Research Project of relations between the black farmer in rural Alabama and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

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During the summer of 1967, the SOUTHERN RURAL RESEARCH PROJECT invited college students from all over the country to participate in a massive job of information-gathering in rural black areas of Alabama. The students, utilizing a 23-page questionnaire dealing with farm programs and related problems as well as living conditions, interviewed black families representing over 5,000 persons.

Two Hundred and Forty-Three (243) of the interviews were conducted by 14 students and 7 locally trained research assistants in 7 representative blackbelt counties of Alabama. The following is a composite of the factors indicative of the relationship between black farmers and the USDA--and the observations of the interviewers.

The black farmers interviewed are the invisible people of the South. One million black farmers were "lost" by the local white census takers for the 1960 census.\*

### THE RESULT IS AS FOLLOWS:

\*Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs, U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 1965, p.9, n.20.

Prepared by Nancy Scheper  
SRRP Field Staff  
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A survey by the Southern Rural Research Project of relations  
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U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

I. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is the reward for hard work in black rural Alabama. The hunger, malnutrition, and ill-health described in the SRRP report, BLACK FARM FAMILIES,<sup>1</sup> is the black farmer's payment at the end of each year for his long months of back-breaking labor.

ALMOST HALF OF THE FAMILIES WORK AN AVERAGE OF  
NINE TO TEN HOURS A DAY ON THEIR FARMS,<sup>2</sup> WHILE  
ANOTHER 17% WORK FROM ELEVEN TO FIFTEEN HOURS.<sup>3</sup>

A MEDIAN OF 4.7 PERSONS PER HOUSEHOLD WORK THE  
LAND<sup>4</sup> --ONE THIRD INCLUDE CHILDREN UNDER TEN.<sup>5</sup>

2/3 OF THE BLACK FARMERS ENDED THE 1967 FARM YEAR  
IN DEBT.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BLACK FARM FAMILIES, HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION IN RURAL ALABAMA (SRRP, March, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> 46.5%, A-5. All statements in capital letters are from the statistics of the survey. The percentages in footnotes refer to the exact figure. A-5 and all other such designations refer to the table numbers in the Agricultural Survey. (The largest sample was 243 households; however, each Table gives the different number of households for the specific question.) The statements not in capital letters are based on the direct observation or experience of the SRRP field staff.

<sup>3</sup> 17.7%, A-5

<sup>5</sup> 33.1%, A-4

<sup>4</sup> A-3.

<sup>6</sup> 63.1%, A-37.

The black farmer and his family, despite their long hours and hard work cannot make a living. Without expensive machinery, the cultivation of cotton and other crops is a backbreaking and financially unrewarding work. Over half of the black farmers continue to plow their land with a mule,<sup>1</sup> which is not only inefficient and exhausting, but related to the high incidence of high blood pressure and the fainting and dizzy spells from which they suffer.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of each farm year, the farmer finds himself more deeply in debt and more dependent upon the high interest loans and credit which he can get only from his plantation owner or merchant (often one man is both) in order to make it through the winter. The next spring at planting time, the black farmer must borrow against the credit of his government checks, which he signs over to his debtors - often without even seeing them -- and against the value of his future crops-- thus perpetuating the black farmers' cycle of poverty.

The following deals with the Federal responsibility for this poverty.

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<sup>1</sup>55.1%, A-6.

<sup>2</sup>In 52.8% of the Households surveyed in the SRRP report BLACK FARM FAMILIES, supra, someone in the family suffered from high or low blood pressure, while in 47.1% of the homes, someone suffered from fainting spells., H-28 and H-30, p.7.

# I. FEDERAL DISCRIMINATION IN APPLICATION OF FARM PROGRAMS

Ever since the Depression of the 1930's and the resulting "New Deal" legislation of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Federal government has decisively intervened in the economy on behalf of the farmer. Today, virtually all of American agriculture is sustained by Federal subsidies, farm loans, and federal-state teams of agriculture experts -- all administered under the following programs of the USDA:

ASCS: (Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service) which in every county determines how many acres of a crop (such as cotton) the farmer may plant (his allotment), and how much of the price support and subsidy payments on cotton (the major crop in Alabama) and other allotted crops he will receive -- all determined by federally employed white Southerners.

FHA: (Farmers Home Administration) which for all counties approves all Federal farm loans -- also determined by local white Federal employees.

FES: (Federal Extension Service) whose job it is to supply agricultural expertise and advice to farm households.

The American farmer cannot survive in today's poor agricultural market without the aid of these government programs. President Johnson, emphasizing the importance of these programs to both the individual farmer and to the economy at large, wrote the following in a letter to his Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman.

"These programs so essential to our continued welfare and economic growth must reach all in our rural areas if they are to be effective in lifting those areas to full economic self-sufficiency."<sup>1</sup>

It is the operation of these programs that is discussed below:

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<sup>1</sup>President Lyndon B. Johnson, letter to Orville Freeman (Feb. 27, 1965).

A. Discrimination in the Office

Each of the above-mentioned agencies of the USDA has an office located in the county seat of almost every county to handle its programs. Every black farmer knows that his presence is unwanted -- tolerated at best -- in these offices.

OF THOSE RESPONDING,<sup>2</sup> OVER 92% OF THE FARMERS WERE CALLED BY THEIR FIRST NAME<sup>3</sup> IN BOTH THE ASCS AND THE FHA OFFICE,<sup>4</sup> AND OVER ONE HALF AT THE FES OFFICE.<sup>5</sup>

A black farmer, dressed in his rough work clothes, is made to feel uncomfortable and out of place in the "downtown" Federal Office. While white clients are addressed always as Mr. and Mrs., black farmers are called by their first names -- or simply by "boy" or "nigger." An elderly Negro will often be addressed as "uncle" or "grandpa."

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<sup>1</sup>The vast majority of black farmers have been to the ASCS office (89.6%, A-69) because they are required to do so -- once a year -- in order to sign up for the cotton allotment program. (In most cases to insure a share of the payments for the plantation owner). Fewer black farmers have been to the FHA (38.6%, A-93) or to the FES (20.3%, A-115) because their presence there is not mandatory -- only those seeking benefits "brave" the office.

<sup>2</sup>In those questions where the number of "no response" answers was high (between 5 and 15%) because people did not choose to answer (particularly in those questions dealing with their treatment at the Federal offices), the percentages are based on the number of those responding to the question.

<sup>3</sup>The use of the first name by a white person to a black person in the South historically indicates inferior status, while the use of courtesy titles (Mr., Miss, Mrs.) is usually indicative of civil rights victories obtained either at the voting booth or by boycotts.

<sup>4</sup>93.8%, A-70 (ASCS); 92.9%, A-94 (FHA).

<sup>5</sup>54.8%, A-116, (FES).



OVER HALF THE BLACK FARMERS FELT THAT THEY  
WERE NOT TREATED EQUALLY TO WHITES AT ALL  
THREE OFFICES.<sup>1</sup>

Although technically the offices are desegregated and farmers are to be waited upon in order of arrival, it is still customary in rural Alabama for white farmers who come into the office to be waited on first, even though a black farmer may have already been waiting for a few hours -- or even if it means interrupting a black farmer in the middle of a sentence.

In some counties, white farmers will do business with the Office Manager in his private office while black farmers will be attended to briefly in the outer waiting room in the presence of other office staff and farmers.

Frequently after spending a full day at the office, away from his work at the farm, a black farmer will be told to come back the next day. At the FES, it is customary for white farmers to be attended to by the white county agent and personnel, and for black farmers to be attended to by the Negro county agent and his staff.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>55.6%, A-71 (ASCS); 60.8%, A-95 (FHA); 61.5%, A-117 (FES).

<sup>2</sup>Just as public toilets in many Southern towns no longer carry the signs "colored" and "white" but remain locked and numbered "1" and "2"--one key kept for white persons and the other key for Negroes, so the FES office remains "naturally" segregated so long as black farmers are intimidated enough not to challenge the system.

B. No Help or Assistance from Federal Personnel

Agencies of the USDA have both office and field personnel in each county to inform and assist the farmer. It is the job of the field personnel to visit the farmer and his family on his farm and at his home, as well as meet with the community at mass meetings. Through this grass-roots approach, the USDA expects to reach the rural people, so often isolated and uninformed, so that they can learn of the benefits for which they are eligible under the various Federal programs. While the white farmer in Alabama has been adequately serviced by these federally salaried personnel, there has been virtually no attempt to reach the black farmer.

1. ASCS: 97% OF THE FARMERS NEVER RECEIVED ANY HELP OR ADVICE FROM THE ASCS COMMUNITY COMMITTEE,<sup>1</sup> WHILE 95% HAD NEVER RECEIVED ANY HELP FROM THE ASCS COUNTY COMMITTEE.<sup>2</sup>

3/4 OF THE FARMERS STATED THAT NO ONE FROM THE ASCS HAD EVER VISITED THEIR FARM, CHURCH, OR MEETINGS.<sup>3</sup>

3/4 OF THE BLACK FARMERS HAD NEVER RECEIVED ANY HELP FROM THE OFFICE MANAGER OR FROM ANY ONE AT THE ASCS OFFICE.<sup>4</sup>

2/3 HAD NEVER HEARD OF ANY MEETINGS HELD BY THE ASCS.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>97.2%, A-78.

<sup>4</sup>73.2%, A-80.

<sup>2</sup>95.5%, A-76.

<sup>5</sup>67.3%, A-75.

<sup>3</sup>79.3%, A-74.

These failures on the part of the ASCS personnel to aid the black farmer are in direct violation of their job. The duties of the County Committee include:

"Insuring farmer and public understanding of ASCS programs through an effective public relations program."<sup>1</sup>

...while the responsibilities of the Community Committee include:

"Inform farmers of purposes and provisions of ASCS programs [and] Arrange for and conduct community meetings as necessary."<sup>2</sup>

2. FHA: OVER 95% OF THE FARMERS HAD NEVER RECEIVED ANY HELP OR ADVICE FROM ANY MEMBER OF THE FHA COUNTY COMMITTEE.<sup>3</sup>

87% SAID THAT THEY NEVER RECEIVED ANY LOAN HELP OR ADVICE FROM THE FHA COUNTY SUPERVISOR OR FROM ANY PEOPLE IN HIS OFFICE.<sup>4</sup>

92% SAID THEY NEVER RECEIVED ANY HELP FROM ANY OTHER FHA PEOPLE.<sup>5</sup>

85% HAD NEVER HEARD OF ANY MEETINGS HELD BY THE FHA.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>ASCS Handbook, USDA, Washington, D.C. (5/17/66), p.2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>87.0%, A-102.

<sup>3</sup>96.2%, A-100.

<sup>5</sup>92.1%, A-103.

<sup>6</sup>85.2%, A-98.



Once again, the failure on the part of these Federal employees to assist, aid, and educate the black farm population is in violation of their responsibilities:

"Under its outreach responsibilities, FHM assists individuals and groups in rural communities to utilize services of other Federal and State programs which can meet their particular needs.

Technical guidance in planning and carrying out sound farm operations is provided borrowers on the basis of their individual problems and needs."<sup>1</sup>

3, FES:     4/5 OF THE BLACK FARMERS HAD NEVER BEEN VISITED  
AT HOME, FARM, OR CHURCH BY A FEDERAL EXTENSION  
AGENT.<sup>2</sup>  
OF THE REMAINING FEW WHO HAD BEEN VISITED, IN  
MOST CASES THE AGENT WAS A NEGRO.<sup>3</sup>  
(FOR THE 1/5 WHO WERE VISITED BY A COUNTY AGENT:  
IN MANY CASES HE HAD NOT SPOKEN ABOUT COTTON,  
FEED PROGRAMS, ASCS ELECTIONS, OR THE FHA LOAN  
PROGRAM.)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Agriculture Appropriations for 1969, Hearings before the House Subcommittee on Agricultural Appropriations of the House Appropriation Committee, 90th Congress, Second Session, Part 3, p.503.

<sup>2</sup>80.3%, A-104.

<sup>3</sup>88.4%, A-105. In "Oral Testimony of William C. Payne, Jr., Program Analyst U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Equal Opportunity in the Alabama Co-operative Extension Service," Mr. Payne states that in a study of 12 Alabama blackbelt counties in 1967, "...there are 46 white extension agents and only 26 Negro extension agents to serve a rural population of over 72,000 Negroes and 27,000 whites," (p.3).

<sup>4</sup>44.2%, 58.1%, 55.8%, A-109.

It is the responsibility of the Extension Service, working on a county level, to supply information to residents at the local level through visits to individual farmers, organizing of associations and co-operatives, the arranging of demonstrations and farmers classes, and in assisting in community development committees.<sup>1</sup>

Little or no effort has been made by the FES to reach and inform the black farmers of rural Alabama.

NEARLY 3/4 OF THE FARMERS HAD NEVER  
HAD THEIR SOIL TESTED.<sup>2</sup> OF THOSE WHO  
DID, ALMOST 1/2 WERE NEVER TOLD THE  
RESULTS OF THE TEST.<sup>3</sup>

3/4 OF THE BLACK FARM HOUSEHOLDS HAD  
NEVER BEEN VISITED BY THE HOME DEMON-  
STRATION LADY.<sup>4</sup> IN 94% OF THE CASES  
WHERE SHE DID VISIT A BLACK HOUSEHOLD  
-- SHE WAS A NEGRO.<sup>5</sup>

The vicious cycle is complete: the Federal agents make no attempt to reach the black farmer, who, in turn, unaware of the agencies and their various programs, does not go into the Federal offices in town except when required to do so.

The result of this almost total lack of contact between black farmers and the USDA Federal employees is as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs, A report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Washington, D. C.

III. The Result: No Knowledge of Federal Programs

The black farmer, both intimidated at the county Federal Office from asking any questions, and "forgotten" by the county field personnel who reach and inform the rural white population, is isolated and appallingly uninformed about Federal farm programs -- and, therefore, does not participate in or benefit from them.

1. ASCS: NEARLY 2/3 OF THE FARMERS DID NOT KNOW ABOUT GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS TO HELP WITH SOIL AND WATER PROBLEMS.<sup>1</sup>  
41% DID NOT KNOW ABOUT GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS FOR CORN, SORGHAM, AND BARLEY.<sup>2</sup>  
2/3 DID NOT KNOW THAT THEY COULD APPEAL THE AMOUNT OF THEIR COTTON ALLOTMENTS.<sup>3</sup>  
1/3 OF THE FARMERS DID NOT KNOW THAT THEY COULD GET PART OF THEIR GOVERNMENT CHECK IN THE SPRING BEFORE PICKING THEIR COTTON.<sup>4</sup>
2. FHA: ALMOST 3/4 OF THE BLACK FARMERS EITHER DID NOT KNOW OR THOUGHT THAT FHA DID NOT HAVE LOANS TO MAKE SOIL AND WATER BETTER.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>60.8%, A-59.

<sup>4</sup>33.2%, A-18.

<sup>2</sup>41.7%, A-56.

<sup>5</sup>71.6%, A-88.

<sup>3</sup>67.3%, A-12.

MORE THAN 2/3 DID NOT KNOW THAT  
FHA HAD LOANS TO PAY FAMILY OR  
FARMING COSTS.<sup>1</sup>

65% OF THE FARMERS EITHER DID NOT  
KNOW OR THOUGHT THAT FHA DIDN'T  
HAVE LOANS TO HELP BUY LAND.<sup>2</sup>

OVER ONE HALF EITHER DID NOT  
KNOW OR THOUGHT THAT THERE WERE  
NO FHA LOANS TO BUILD, BUY, OR  
FIX UP A HOUSE OR FARM BUILDING.<sup>3</sup>

3. FES: We have already discussed the failure to inform black farmers of the opportunities for improving their farms and homekeeping -- the prime function of the Extension Service. In the highly technological field of farming, the black farmer has barely a chance without this professional aid given freely to white farmers.

The few black farmers who do learn about Federal farm programs will often get the information through the efforts of persons or agencies other than those employed by the USDA (such as civil rights groups and workers) or simply through local gossip. For example, 40% of the farmers interviewed learned of ASCS programs from sources other than the personnel of the county office which administers them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>68.0%, A-91.

<sup>2</sup>65.2%, A-90.

<sup>3</sup>57.4%, A-89.

<sup>4</sup>41.3%, A-60.

Most black farmers are unaware of the profound influence which the various Federal programs can and do wield over their economic lives. Often they do not even associate the offices with the Federal government at all. To most black farmers, the ASCS is simply the "cotton office" in town where one must sign up each year for the cotton allotment program.

While 80% of the black farmers<sup>1</sup> had expressed a dissatisfaction with cotton farming, the ASCS had never informed black people of the Federal programs that will help ease them out of cotton, and into more lucrative kinds of agriculture.<sup>2</sup> If black farmers have heard of the FHA at all, they think that the only kinds of loans they can get are small ones (for example, for seed and fertilizer) which do nothing to change the sub-standard level of working and living.

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<sup>1</sup>A-31.

<sup>2</sup>The following are some statements by FHA Federal employees cited by Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs, supra, p.82, n.34.

"Negroes are good row crop producers but they don't seem to take to livestock other than swine. ...cotton is the only crop Negroes can do anything with Negro farmers can't see this far ahead.

About all FHA can do for the Negroes is lend them enough to make a living or keep them off welfare."



CONCLUSION

There is also fraud and trickery directed against the few black farmers who somehow learn of the benefits and gamble on challenging the office personnel to demand their rights.

But this is a small group...and aiding them would still leave 70 to 90% of the rest cut off from these essential programs (and many with no alternative but migration to Northern ghettos.)

The responsibility for change lies with the Federal government; the President of the United States who appoints (and therefore could control) the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of Agriculture himself who (at best) has shut his eyes or (at worst) has sanctioned THE EXTINCTION OF THE BLACK FARMER IN ALABAMA...and in the South.