



Mr. and Mrs. Farris Craig at dinner . . . kindly, uncompromising . . . hoping for a gravel road.



The cotton planter's home . . . wired for nonexistent electricity.



Share-croppers have one or two room shacks.



Large families are crowded into small homes on a typical cotton plantation.



Down by the mule barn, center of the plantation's motive power.
(Photos by Guy Murchie, Jr.)

Life on a Share-crop Plantation



With change in their pockets during picking time, light-hearted share-croppers literally "go to town" Saturday night for some fun at the honkytonk.

FARRIS CRAIG is a cotton planter. His face is red and raw from fifty-seven years of sun and wind and rain on his acres of rich bottom land by the Mississippi. Upon his feet are black boots frosted with mud from the rutted roads. His hat is gray felt, and he wears tan riding breeches and a red mackinaw over a brown sweater that buttons down the front.

That is a first glimpse of a typical planter.

Did you ever wonder how it would feel to be a planter on a southern plantation or a farmer in Arkansas? Were you ever curious to see whether a share-cropper's life is really as hard as they say it is?

The writer of this used to wonder about just those things—and that is why he spent his last vacation on a typical cotton plantation in eastern Arkansas.

It was at Nodena, Ark., not far from the great cotton center, Memphis, Tenn. The plantation was 750 acres of land traversed by the new big levee built by army engineers a few years ago to curb the spring excesses of the great river. Cotton is the big thing in that part of the country, though alfalfa, hay, and corn and some vegetables are commonly grown also. A dozen or more families of colored share-croppers live in rickety shacks on the Craig plantation, and they help Craig with his crops, each family sharing equally with him in the income from the particular piece of land on which they work.

To get the whole picture you need first of all to know the man. When you meet Farris Craig you meet a man who is kindly yet uncompromising and whose dry, weatherbeaten face is conservatism incarnate. In aspect he is much like a Vermont farmer.

Icebox Is Planter's Luxury; Tenants Happy Although They Are in Debt

By GUY MURCHIE JR.

The difference is apparent only with longer acquaintance, for his reserve is not as deep as it seems and presently gives way to easy conversation.

He is apt to begin cautiously with the weather, especially if it looks like rain. "This is a terrible country to live in. A man couldn't last here if he had anything wrong with his lungs. There's three kinds o' weather here—hot and cold and wet. First it's hot, then it's cold, then it's hot and wet, and then it's cold and wet."

In politics, of course, he is a Democrat. Andrew Jackson, "Jeff" Davis, and Franklin D. Roosevelt are about the three greatest Americans that ever lived. "President Roosevelt," he says, "has started me, I guess, than all the other Presidents put together. He gets school teachers and college experts to tell him how to do it, and then he does it."

If it is raining Craig will probably take you to his house to sit before the fire and talk. On the way you will have to walk beside the road rather than in it, because the back roads in Arkansas are practically impassable in wet weather to any vehicle other than a mule or sometimes a model T. The black mud extends downward to fabulous depths, they tell you, and often even after it has been covered, at great expense, with gravel, the gravel just sinks out of sight in less than a year.

At the door Craig always removes his muddy boots and puts on his slippers, being well trained in that respect by Mrs. Craig, an ample, devoted, and practical woman who married him thirty-five years ago when she was 16.

"I won't stand for mud on my carpets," she says in her shrill voice. "No, sir, when people start to trackin' mud in here I tell 'em, 'Get out o' here, you, till you get some civilizin' in you!'" For all her bluntness Mrs. Craig is as kindly and hospitable as her husband and shows her guest to his room, inviting him to stay as long as he will. The house is a five-room one-story affair with small screened porches in front and back. It is smaller than the Craigs' old two-story house which burned down a couple of years ago, but it is newer, and the roof doesn't leak, and the beds have fine box springs.

The Craigs' greatest luxury is a handsome big enameled icebox on the back porch and which is kept filled with ice by the ice-man who comes from town every few days if the roads are dry enough. There is no running water in the house, the only

source of water being the tin water wagon which stands in the back yard near the henhouse. That, too, must be refilled at intervals, at which times one of the Negroes on the place must hitch a team of mules to it and drive it to town. The Craigs' "bathroom" contains only a washstand with its old-fashioned crockery. The house is lighted at night by kerosene lamps, but electric light switches can be seen on the walls, for an electric wiring system was installed when the house was built, the theory being that some day the power lines would extend there.

Of course, the lack of running water and electricity is not a hardship for the Craigs, who are quite thankful to have a car and a dry-cell radio. What they hope for next in the way of improvements is a good gravel road from their house to the main road, which would enable them to use their car in wet weather. They have written to politicians about it for years.

Now it is time to go out of doors to see what plantation life is really like. It is seven in the morning, and Farris has just finished his breakfast of hominy grits, sweet milk, ham and eggs, corn bread, and coffee. He heads for the barn where the horses are and mounts a horse which has been saddled for him by one of the colored hired hands. As he rides slowly toward the nearby cotton fields a young hog roots into the mule manure and two chickens run across the road. At the mule shed by the turn in the road a cotton wagon is being hitched up. Along the shed's wall can be seen written the name of mules—Molly, Polly, Della, Stella, Gin, Whisky, Mike, Red Mike, Alice, Shine, Moe, Joe, Mary, and Ada.

By this time a few of the colored people are already in the cotton fields, picking in bunches of two or three—moving slowly along together between the rows, stooping to grab off the nodding white bolls with both hands and to stuff the cotton by the handful into their long white sacks which they drag along behind them from a strap across their shoulders. But it will be an hour or two before the sacks will be full enough for weighing. Farris in the meantime wants to ride around the plantation to see that his share-croppers are on the job.

"Hey, you there Excel!" he shouts at the first shanty he comes to. "Get out o' there an' pick cotton."

In the doorway appears an inane black countenance. "Yasuh, Mis' Farris. It mos' dry 'nough to pick now."

Riding on, Farris observes to his northern guest: "They're

all like that. You got to go and tell 'em to git out and pick cotton—their own cotton that they're standin' to make money on. They're my share-croppers, an' I share what they pick, but I'd never get nothin' from 'em if I didn't keep after 'em and drive 'em out. They live any ol' way. They never get divorces; when they get tired of their woman they jus' go git a new woman.

"There's no use tryin' to pay 'em more, neither. A few years ago you had to pay 'em only 40 or 50 cents a hundred pounds of cotton for pickin' by the day. Now the price is a dollar a hundred—but labor's just as scarce. If I had my way I wouldn't have any share-croppers at all; I'd hire 'em just by the day. It's cheaper. But I can't get enough to do the work thataway. So I got to keep 'croppers on my place all year, an' feed 'em in winter when they git hungry, an' help 'em plow an' use my



Like the mule, the hound is inevitable.

mules and tools, an' keep drivin' 'em to make 'em work."

About half of Craig's cotton is picked by his share-croppers and the rest by "day pickers," who come out to the plantation from Memphis and other towns to earn some money during this picking season. By the time Craig has ridden over most of his land on both sides of the great, rambling man-made ridge of earth that is the levee—by the time he has seen all his scattered share-croppers into the fields and paid his morning visit to the men cutting lumber with a portable sawmill in his strip of timberland—by that time the day pickers are getting their sacks full of cotton and he must rig up his weighing scales by the cotton wagon and weigh the sacks as the pickers drag them over to be emptied into the wagon. It is important, because the day pickers always get paid by the weight of the cotton they pick, and they want to get paid promptly.

"You know, things in the south can't hardly be understood by any northerner," says Craig. "Things is not so much different than in the slave days except now the Negroes get paid instead o' jus' bein' fed and given things.

My share-croppers are always a little in debt to me for things I give 'em, and so I can keep 'em here to pay off their debts. It's a good thing to keep them on your place a little in debt to you. It keeps 'em more contented. It keeps 'em from runnin' away."

Farris' statement about the Negroes' contentment seems borne out by the almost continuous sound of singing in the cotton field as the picking goes on. "Swing low, sweet chariot" is the most easily recognizable theme at the moment. And there is a steady interflow of chit-chat and light conversation between the pickers, mostly in the nature of kidding one another about various shady doings that happened "las' night."

As the sun sets the old plantation bell rings out the signal to quit picking. The full cotton wagons rattle along in the dirt ruts toward town and the gin, where the seeds will be removed by machinery and the resulting combed cotton baled for sale and shipment. The light-hearted colored folk saunter homeward from the field to the several little houses and their many children.

Most of the colored folk here are comparatively well off, even in the spring—and they all have cash in their pockets in this picking season. They come back to their little one or two room shacks (which are raised up off the ground to keep them out of the mud when it rains) and find a tasty meal of rice and bread, black-eyed peas, pork, and hominy, and sometimes chicken and corn. They are naturally light-hearted and are apt to pull out their banjo after eating and strum a tune. On Saturday nights they generally go to the honkytonk in town and try a little gambling, dancing, pool playing, or other social activity. On Sunday after church they may go on a squirrel hunt or a fox or coon hunt, taking along their old guns and hound dogs. Almost every colored family has its "string o' huntin' doags"—generally a sprawly, scrawny mongrel or two, with long ears and a well developed ability to scratch fleas.

Farris Craig and his wife spend their evenings listening to the radio or reading. They take a daily newspaper and inexpensive story magazines. Their few books include "The Life of Woodrow Wilson," by Daniels; "The Master of Ballantrae," by Robert Louis Stevenson; "A Case in Camera," by Oliver Onions; "Flaming Youth," by Warner Fabian; the Bible; "A Scientific Man and the Bible," by Kelly, and "The Bible Versus Theories of Evolution," by Elam. Significant is Farris Craig's concept of this last subject, evolution, as he leans back in his comfortable rocker by the kerosene lamp on the table to discuss it. "I believe in evolution, but I don't believe a white man ever came from an animal."