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BLACK COMPANY TOWN: A PECULIAR INSTITUTION IN PIERCE, FLORIDA

By Joseph G. Mannard

The Great Depression supplied an unexpected impetus to the study of local history and culture. In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of the myriad agencies created by New Deal legislation to effect relief, recovery, and reform, established a program known as the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). The FWP was implemented to provide employment for out-of-work writers by having them contribute to *The American Guide Series*, a geographical, social, and historical survey of the nation, encompassing the state and local levels. Although lambasted by critics as another government boondoggle, the FWP eventually proved itself one of the most successful and worthwhile of the WPA projects.

The awakening interest of the Roosevelt Administration in the plight of black Americans fostered the formation of an Office of Negro Affairs within the FWP with Sterling A. Brown, a black professor of English at Howard University, as its head. Significantly, black writers took an active part in the research in many Southern states, especially Virginia, Louisiana, and Florida. It was common policy to deploy segregated writer units, and the amount of racial discrimination encountered by the black researchers appears to have varied from place to place.

The principal contribution of the FWP investigations into Negro history and culture has been a compilation of narratives based on interviews with over 2,000 former slaves. The initial stimulus for this research resulted from the example and efforts of the Florida Writers' Project directed by Carita Dorsett Corse. This massive collection of slave narratives, recently published under the editorship of George P. Rawick, portrays slavery from the perspective of the slave and constitutes an invaluable source about the "peculiar institution."

Less use has been made of the FWP findings on black society and institutions during the 1930s. A full list of the information covered cannot be given here, but categories of inquiry in Florida included: art, celebrations, education, games, labor unions, language, folklore, literature, plays, music and songs, newspapers and periodicals, occupations, religion, superstitions and the supernatural, and towns. Professor Brown ultimately had hoped to use this material and the ex-slave narratives to produce a separate series of works on Afro-American life. The withdrawal of federal funding in 1939, however, sounded the death knell for the FWP. As a result, only one state study, the highly praised *The Negro in Virginia*, subsequently emerged.

Although the proposed volume for this state, *The Negro in Florida*, never attained fruition, the gathered data rests on file in the Florida Collection in the University of South Florida Library. The material remains chiefly in its rough form, as the document below illustrates.

In this essay the black author, in general, offers a highly favorable account of a company town of black phosphate workers. He indicates that the Pierce community provided a better standard of living for blacks than was the national norm. In fact, in many places this report reads like a sale brochure exulting the benefits of model community living: "mostly comfortably furnished"



A Polk County phosphate mine, circa 1907. Photograph courtesy of University of South Florida Library

homes "with plenty of space between them," "very healthy" children, "very tidy" and "well-equipped" schoolrooms, a "well-surfaced basketball court," a commissary with fair prices and the "best brands," and "automobiles of the latest makes."

Some questions immediately arise when one evaluates the accuracy of this account. Was the author influenced by the company to present conditions in a favorable light? The security measures cited reveal the strict control by the company of many aspects of its employees' lives. Consequently, one wonders how free the workers and teachers would have felt to relate possible complaints or grievances. On the other hand, perhaps the fact that the writer was a Negro assisted him in gaining their confidence and obtaining valid testimony from them. Such, at least, was the case with regard to the success of black writers in questioning former slaves - some of the latter having been reluctant to express themselves to white interviewers.

Even should one admit that Pierce represented a "model" black community by the standards of the time, the report still refers to problems which reflect a less than idyllic situation. For example, the use of newspapers on the walls as a form of insulation hardly suggests a healthy atmosphere, while the mention of deaths from brawls alludes to a lack of harmony resulting from cramped living conditions. Occupations of blacks remained limited to manual labor, implying the

existence of few opportunities for advancement. And though one worker showed a biweekly net savings of \$5.17, it should be noted that his hourly wage fell well below the 40 cents minimum prescribed by the Fair Labor Standards Act passed earlier that year.

Their working conditions were part of a racial caste system. In 1938, segregation formed a pattern of life taken for granted by a majority of both races. For a later generation, however, the description of a "high wire fence" surrounding a compound in which one race lived forcibly isolated from another evokes an ugly image of similar, though admittedly far more deplorable, conditions existing contemporaneously in Nazi Germany. The document reprinted below suggests the complex nature of race relations in Florida and the South. Those readers who seek further information about this topic and related themes are directed to the following material:

Escott, Paul D. *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978.

Mangione, Jerre Gerlando. *The Dream and the Deal; the Federal Writers Project, 1935-1943*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1972.

Penkower, Monty N. *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Governmental Patronage of the Arts*. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Rawick, George P. (ed.) *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1976.

Woodward, C. Vann. "History From Slave Sources." *American Historical Review*, 79 (April 1974), 470-481.

Yetman, Norman R. "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection." *American Quarterly*, 19 (Fall 1967), 536-553.

Federal Writers' Project
Paul Diggs
Lakeland, Florida
December 2, 1938

A NEGRO COMMUNITY -PIERCE, FLORIDA

A visit to this community called "Pierce" located 15 miles South of Lakeland, Florida in Polk County. The American Agricultural Chemical Company is located here and there is a well planned, "Negro Community" that is a part of the development of this organization.

Enroute you pass through towering beds of phosphate which have been worked and now stand like little mountains along the road, and in places the excavations have developed into many small lakes where fish [are] in abundance.

A phosphate mine in Polk County, circa 1907. Photograph courtesy of University of South Florida Library

On through Mulberry, passing the famous Mulberry Tree that stands now beside the railroad station. This tree was the only station known to this settlement before the real station was built. Any freight that was routed to this settlement was known to be thrown off at the Mulberry Tree. Today it still stands with its spreading branches old in years and strength. It bears many a scar. Four miles beyond this tree through a winding road that is also flanked on each side with mounds thrown up by the phosphate mining you enter the town of Pierce.

As you enter Pierce you pass a railroad station that is erected beside a beautiful lake on the West side of the town. Adjacent to this station is the colored section. It is surrounded with a high wire fence with large signs posted at the entrance stating, "No peddlers, collectors, and insurance agents allowed on these premises unless they have permission from the manager of the Phosphate Company."

The quarters are located in a [place] where the oaks served as a natural park with their outstretching limbs. This collection of oaks gives this quarters a picturesque scene. The streets are layed off parallel to each other, with the avenues crossing. Here will be found seventy-five houses of wooden structure, and painted red with white trimming. Their external appearance is very good, and the interior of the homes mostly were comfortably furnished. The interiors were not [sealed]. Many of the homes have newspaper on the wall, which protects them from the cold. The grounds were kept in good shape with many garden plots growing vegetables. There is a penalty of \$5.00 against any one of the tenants found throwing paper on these grounds. The houses contain from one to four rooms, and the average number in them ranges from the single men to families of two to ten. There [are] two long wooden sheds built for the storage of the cars owned by the employees. One of the highlights of these houses is that they are built with plenty of space between them. So as to give the families some outlet.

At the extreme end of the quarters there stands a model rural school, it is not very modern in construction, but in its planning. The principal and two teachers are in charge. Their average enrollment is 95 daily. The children were found to be very healthy. There is a rule made by this Phosphate company that all employees who work for them must take a blood test. The teachers reported that they very seldom have children to remain out from school due to illness, and the natural death rate was very low. Some deaths result from the usual brawls that occur in small quarters.

The interior of the school classrooms [was] very tidy. They have a well equipped Home Economics classroom where the course is given to the upper grades. This is considered unusual for an eight grade school. [Another] project is the garden planted by the various grades in the rear of the school. There vegetables can be seen growing. The front lawn was beautified, and a well surfaced basketball court stands in front of the school building. This is their major recreation for both boys and girls.

Larger recreational facilities [have] been provided for their use on the North side of the main highway. Their major sport is baseball. It was reported that last season their team played fifty games and only lost three. The adult recreation comes through the church clubs and the organizations created in the school.

The type of work the colored workers do is manual labor, in and around the phosphate works. Here they are paid by the hour and a very definite check is made on each worker. An example of one of the worker's pay check is as follows:

In settlement of wages due 83 hours in settlement of wages due
bi-weekly. 83 at 29; equal \$24.07
[Deductions]

Christmas	\$ - - -		
Doctor	\$ 1.00		
Ins. Syn	\$ - - -		
G.A.L. Ins	\$. . .		
Pan American Ins	\$ - - -		
Rent	\$ 1.33		
E.B.A. Group Ins	\$.30		
Total fixed	\$ 2.63		
Commissary	\$12.50		
Dairy	\$.53		
Tel & Tel	\$ - - -		
F.O.A.B.	\$.24		
Miseel	\$ 3.00	Total	\$18.90
		Bal. due	5.17

No. 4-822 Period ending November 17, 1938

Through this system each worker is checked. In an interview with one of the workers in regard to the prices in the commissary, they revealed that they find very little variation in those in the central shopping centers of the adjoining towns. After they have purchased oil and gas it amounts to about just the same. This commissary is known to handle the best brands of goods.

The moral standard must be upheld as stated by the management. They have to abide strictly by the [company's] rules, and any one of the workers found unreliable, and becomes objectionable in the quarters, he is blacklisted and never can obtain another job in the mines.

The outstanding accomplishments in setting this model community aside from the rest is that the standards are highly maintained, particularly in health, morals and recreation. It was observed that most of the employees had automobiles of the latest makes, showing that through steady employment thrift existed among them. Some have started with the company over thirty year's ago. For example one of the older employees has educated his daughter through the earnings obtained from working in the phosphate mine. Johnnie Jean Davis was educated through the community school, Summerfield High School, Bartow, Florida, and Bethune Cookman College, Daytona, Florida. Receiving her graduate certificate, she was given a position in the school of her girlhood days. Today she commands a respectful place in her own community, and is trying to lead her people to higher standards.

(Reference from the management of the American Agricultural Chemical Company, teachers, and workers.)