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Black Farmers and the Agricultural Cooperative Extension Service:

The Alabama Experience, 1945–1965

JEANNIE M. WHAYNE

The Agricultural Cooperative Extension Service, a federally funded program serving both black and white farmers, functioned inequitably in the postwar South because of the agency's acquiescence in the region's prevailing racial mores. A 1965 report describing the steps taken by various agencies of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to comply with the Civil Rights Act of the previous year revealed, not surprisingly, that the department's Extension Service was "not in total compliance" in fifteen states. The findings on the Extension Service are interesting not only because of what they suggest about the influence of the Civil Rights Act but also because of what they reveal about the discriminatory manner in which the Extension Service traditionally functioned.¹ Especially illustrative of the inequitable manner in which it operated was the

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1. Orville L. Freeman, Office of the Secretary, USDA, to the president of the United States, 17 June 1965, pp. 7–10, box 358, Thomas M. Campbell Papers, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama (hereafter cited as Campbell Papers). For an interesting appraisal of the impact of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on the Soil Conservation Service, see Douglas Helms, "Eroding the Color Line: The Soil Conservation Service and the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 35–53.

experience of Alabama in the two decades prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

From its inception the USDA's Extension Service operated as a racially segregated agency. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which created the service, "linked it with the state land-grant colleges, which would direct the county agents' activities and report to Washington."² Smith-Lever embodied ideas formulated by those who had been involved for decades in addressing the problems confronting agriculture, but the form the legislation took was heavily influenced by southern senators who were determined to impose restrictions on black extension.³ The federal government's involvement in aiding agriculture began more than fifty years earlier. The Morrill Act of 1862 was intended to promote agricultural education; the Hatch Act of 1887 funded the creation of experiment stations attached to agricultural colleges;⁴ and the Morrill Act of 1890 required that funds be allocated and directly extended to black land grant institutions to support their efforts with farmers. Thus separate programs for black and white farmers existed side-by-side, "separate but equal," even before the Smith-Lever Act. But Smith-Lever dealt a telling blow to black agricultural education. While it sanctioned a segregated program, it also channeled funds through white agricultural schools, which discriminated further against black institutions like the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Of the \$10,000 of Smith-Lever funds designated for Alabama's extension efforts, the state allocated only \$1,800 for black colleges, \$200 to Alabama A&M near Huntsville, and \$1,600 to Tuskegee. The white land grant college, Alabama Polytechnic in Auburn, received \$9,200.⁵

2. Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 21.

3. R. Grant Seals, "The Formation of Agricultural and Rural Development Policy with Emphasis on African Americans: II. The Hatch-George and Smith-Lever Acts," *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 12–34.

4. Lou Ferleger, "Uplifting American Agriculture: Experiment Station Scientists and the Office of Experiment Stations in the Early Years after the Hatch Act," *Agricultural History* 64 (Spring 1990): 5–23.

5. Dwayne Cox, "Alabama Farm Agents, 1914–1922," *Alabama Review* 47 (October 1994): 289. For the Arkansas experience, see C. Fred Williams, "Frustration Amidst Hope: The Land Grant Mission of Arkansas AM&N College, 1873–1972," *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 115–30; see also Robert L. Jenkins, "The Black Land-Grant Colleges in Their Formative Years, 1920," *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 63–72.

Although black agents tended to begin their careers with better training than white agents, the white extension program was far better funded, and whites were paid far more than blacks.⁶ Perhaps of even greater significance was what Smith-Lever did to the Tuskegee Institute. Tuskegee, which had been included in the 1890 Morrill Act even though it was not a land grant institution, had developed an ambitious program for black farmers independent of white supervision and control;⁷ after Smith-Lever it was dependent upon the white agricultural school, Alabama Polytechnic Institute (later Auburn University).⁸ The loss of autonomy and control over funds made equity impossible to achieve. All the states providing information in a 1928 survey of black colleges described such a dependent relationship and indicated that their programs followed the segregated approach.⁹ As late as 1966, W. B. Hill, former state leader for Negro work in Alabama, testified that “prior to July 1, 1965, the offices of Negro and white extension agents in thirty-three of the thirty-five counties in which Negro agents are employed were located in separate buildings.”¹⁰

6. Cox, “Alabama Farm Agents,” 289; Joel Schor, “The Black Presence in the U.S. Cooperative Extension Service Since 1945: An American Quest for Service and Equity,” *Agricultural History* 60 (Spring 1986): 137–53; Charles S. Johnson, *Patterns of Negro Segregation* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1943), 13–14.

7. Allen Jones, “Improving Rural Life for Blacks: The Tuskegee Negro Farmers’ Conference, 1892–1915,” *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 105–14; Felix James, “The Tuskegee Institute Movable School, 1906–1923,” *Agricultural History* 45 (July 1971): 201–9; Thomas M. Campbell, *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

8. Frederick S. Humphries, “1890 Land-Grant Institutions: Their Struggle for Survival and Equity,” *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 3–11.

9. The survey likely included other states, but the author located responses from only ten states. Responses were addressed to L. N. Duncan, director, Alabama Extension, found in the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service Records (hereafter cited as ACES), box 355, Auburn University, from the following: Dan T. Gray, director, Arkansas Extension, 17 February 1928; A. P. Spencer, vice director, Florida Extension, 18 February 1928; J. Campbell, director, Georgia Extension, 16 February 1928; W. R. Perkins, director, Louisiana Extension, 17 February 1928; R. S. Wilson, director, Mississippi Extension, 16 February 1928; I. O. Schaub, director, North Carolina Extension, 15 February 1928; D. P. Trent, director, Oklahoma Extension, 24 February 1928; D. W. Watkins, assistant director, South Carolina Extension, 15 February 1928; C. E. Brehm, assistant director, Tennessee Extension, 16 February 1928; and J. Anderson, director, Virginia Extension, 16 February 1928.

10. W. B. Hill, sworn affidavit made to Curtis M. Crowe, special agent, Office of the Inspector General, USDA, box 358, 7 January 1966, p. 1, W. B. Hill Correspondence, ACES. Hill was state leader for Negro work in Alabama from 1949 through 30 June 1965.

Alabama's experience with agricultural extension is particularly interesting because of the role that Tuskegee played in administering the black county agent system. Booker T. Washington had anticipated the day when federal funds would no longer be explicitly designated for black institutions and had fostered a close relationship with Alabama Polytechnic in Auburn so that his program could survive in the event that something like Smith-Lever came about.¹¹ An astute politician skilled in the art of dissembling and projecting the image of being what whites considered a "safe Negro," Washington preached a philosophy of self-help in language that obscured the revolutionary potential of his message. Always a controversial figure, in part because of his long battle with W. E. B. DuBois over the leadership of the African American community, Washington was a pragmatic man who eschewed ideology in favor of practical self-help. His contemporary critics viewed him as an accommodationist, and he has received rough treatment from historians generally.¹² Louis Harlan, however, recognized how, given the realities of the South in the early twentieth century, Washington was forced to "work in the cracks of [white] social structure," and as Karen Ferguson recently pointed out others also have looked more favorably upon Washington.¹³ In an article on the revolutionary potential of the Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service, Ferguson cites black social critic Harold Cruse's identification of Washington as a black power figure, despite his accommodationist language.

So subtle and nuanced was the radical message buried within Washing-

11. Earl W. Crosby, "The Struggle for Existence: The Institutionalization of the Black County Agent System," *Agricultural History* 60 (Spring 1986): 130–33; see also Allen W. Jones, "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in the Education of Black Farmers," *Journal of Negro History* 60 (April 1975): 252–67; John R. Wennersten, "The Travail of Black Land-Grant Schools in the South, 1890–1917," *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 54–63; and Thomas T. Williams and Handy Williamson Jr., "Teaching, Research, and Extension Programs at Historically Black (1890) Land-Grant Institutions," *Agricultural History* 62 (Spring 1988): 244–57.

12. James D. Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 63–69, 102–8; Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 37–38.

13. Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1900–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), ix; 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* (Winter 1998): 33–54.



Figure 1. Members of a summer short course at Tuskegee Institute, ca. 1920s, standing before a statue of Booker T. Washington lifting the cover from a slave. *Courtesy: Manuscript Department, Auburn University.*

ton's accommodationist language, however, that some of Washington's black disciples in the Extension Service heard appeasement rather than revolution. Perhaps the disciples had understood the message initially, but the harsh reality of working with whites caused them to conform and adapt in ways that betrayed the revolution. Some probably became so invested in their positions within the Negro Extension Service that they were more interested in protecting their appointments than in pursuing Washington's hidden agenda. In any case, one could argue that while his approach was appropriate in the early twentieth century, it became outdated after World War II when blacks began to make gains in civil rights that were unthinkable fifty years earlier.

But even as some county agents were fired for defiant behavior, at least



Figure 2. African American county agents attending the summer short course at Tuskegee Institute, 25 July 1926. Thomas Monroe Campbell, chief field agent for the Negro Extension Service, is at the far right of the second row. *Photo by E. H. Green, Extension Service photographer. Courtesy: Manuscript Department, Auburn University.*

one black superior worked within the bureaucratic structure to secure better pay and working conditions for black agents. W. B. Hill, who was promoted from district agent to state leader for Negro work in 1949 and who disciplined black agents for behavior that threatened the extension program, was himself determined to improve conditions for his agents. Hill had acquired an undergraduate degree at Tuskegee before going on to Cornell and receiving a master's degree in extension education. It would be under his administration that black agents from 1949 to 1965 would operate. Although he acquiesced in the dismissal of at least one black agent, and, in fact, wrote the dismissal letter himself, he pursued a policy designed to expand the number of black agents employed within extension, to increase their salaries with respect to those of whites, and to authorize them to approach white agencies for local funding. Washington's most accomplished successor, Thomas M. Campbell, continued to espouse the



Figure 3. The “Booker T. Washington Agricultural School on Wheels” was designed by Thomas Monroe Campbell as a way to take extension services to isolated African American families. The original photograph is undated, but is ca. 1920s. A replica of the School on Wheels is in the George W. Carver Museum at the Tuskegee Institute. *Courtesy: Manuscript Department, Auburn University.*

accommodationist philosophy even though he criticized the economic exploitation of tenants and sharecroppers in testimony before a House committee in 1940. Campbell, a Tuskegee graduate and the first black county agent (in Macon County, Alabama, in 1906), served as a special field agent for the USDA and was responsible for carrying black extension to “seven states in the lower south” in addition to his work in Alabama.¹⁴ Stationed at

14. W. B. Hill, “A Brief History of Extension Work with Negroes in Alabama,” n.d., pp. 1–2, box 358, ACES; Allen W. Jones, “The South’s First Black Farm Agents,” *Agricultural History* 50 (October 1976): 636–44; B. D. Mayberry, “The Tuskegee Movable School: A Unique Contribution to National and International Agriculture and Rural Development,” *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 91.



Figure 4. Three county agents and a farmer stand near a flowing artesian well in Montgomery County, Alabama, ca. 1920. The second man from the left is Thomas Monroe Campbell. *Courtesy: Manuscript Department, Auburn University.*

Tuskegee and thoroughly committed to Washington's philosophy, he held his unique position from the time of his appointment in 1918 until his retirement in 1953.¹⁵ Campbell's correspondence and that of both Tuskegee and Auburn officials demonstrate the delicate balance between accommodation and defiance that men like Campbell and Hill engaged in. Their correspondence also provides a window on the world about the problems confronting the program, its agents, and Alabama's black farmers.

During and after World War II the black county agent system underwent considerable expansion that created a host of new challenges for black ex-

15. W. B. Hill, "Extension Service Celebrates 50th Anniversary," n.d., box 358, ACES; C. G. Ferguson to state extension directors, "T. M. Campbell Retires," 6 March 1953, p. 1, box 22, Campbell Papers; Cox, "Alabama Farm Agents," 288–89.

tension workers. The 1965 report on compliance with the Civil Rights Act elaborates on a wide range of problems faced by the black agents, including their inferior facilities; the absence of coordination or planning between white and black agents; the burdensome caseloads of the latter; the lack of opportunities for in-service training for black agents; and the absence of adequate programs to help black farmers to adjust to the modernization of the plantation system.¹⁶ Ironically, World War II, which spawned the expansion of the black county agent system, contributed to changes that transformed the southern agricultural enterprise itself; such changes worked to the disadvantage of black farmers and further complicated the problems of black extension agents.¹⁷

By funneling cash into the hands of southern planters, New Deal programs accelerated a trend toward mechanization that had begun at least as early as World War I.¹⁸ High prices during that war encouraged the purchase of machinery and equipment. Slowed by the postwar depression, this trend re-emerged in the mid- to late 1930s with New Deal parity payments and again accelerated during World War II as acute labor shortages drove up the cost of labor. The Extension Service organized war labor and farm machinery committees and introduced planters to an alternative to the labor-intensive tenancy system, namely seasonal Mexican wage laborers and tractors.¹⁹ But full mechanization of the cotton crop awaited the creation of a marketable mechanical cotton picker. Although experimental models had circulated since the mid-1930s, International Harvester was the

16. Freeman to president, 7–10.

17. For the long-term consequences of this transformation, see David R. Goldfield, *Black, White and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 199–225.

18. International Harvester began demonstrating its products in the South in 1915. Pete Daniel, *Breaking The Land: The Transformation Of Cotton, Tobacco, And Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 16. Daniel suggests that the greatest increase in machinery in the South came during the New Deal, 175.

19. Wayne D. Rasmussen, "A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943–1947," Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA, *Agriculture Monograph No. 13* (1951); *Memphis Press Scimitar* clippings, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis Library; *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 20 and 30 September 1948; Jeannie M. Wayne, "The Segregated Farm Program in Poinsett County, Arkansas," *Mississippi Quarterly* 45 (Fall 1992): 431–32. The Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Mo. (hereafter cited as Truman Library), has substantial holdings on the use of Mexican labor.

first to commercially market one. “During the war International Harvester marketed about 100 spindle pickers, and by 1948 it had sold 1,500 of the machines.”²⁰ The shift to a more capital intensive method of production in the South eventually made tenancy obsolete but “few scientists within the USDA agricultural complex paused to consider the human cost of mechanization.”²¹ Accompanying the modernization of the plantation was a dramatic reduction in the need for tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Many of them, both black and white, fled the South for urban areas.

Opportunities in war industries during World War II encouraged an even greater number of blacks to abandon the farm. According to Lucille D. Williams, Clarke County’s black home demonstration agent, “migration to defense boom towns and other similar areas,” was causing the farm population there to drop.²² Less than a hundred miles from Mobile, Clarke County black farmers responded to the city’s promise of employment. But proximity to the city held other possibilities which the county’s black farm agent, Arlingia A. Hicks, recognized. Because no point in the county was more than a hundred miles from Mobile, he helped his farmers organize a truck-pooling arrangement—crucial in a period when rubber and gasoline were heavily rationed—so that they could market products like “poultry, eggs, livestock, and sweet potatoes.”²³ With the allure of the city working against him, however, Hicks waged a hopeless battle against the odds. Between 1930 and 1970, Alabama lost 90 percent of its black rural-farm population.²⁴

Given the many problems confronting black county agents, they were limited in the assistance they could provide black farmers in the throes of a crisis. The limitations that black agents faced were certainly not unknown to officials at Tuskegee; D. F. Patterson, Tuskegee president, was one member of a special presidential committee charged with the responsibility of

20. Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 245–46.

21. *Ibid.*, 245.

22. Lucille D. Williams, Negro home demonstration agent, Clarke County, Alabama, “Annual Report,” 30 November 1944, p. 1, box 367, ACES.

23. Arlingia A. Hicks, Negro county agent, Clarke County, Alabama, “Annual Report,” 30 November 1944, p. 1, box 367, ACES.

24. A. Lee Coleman and Larry D. Hall, “Black Farm Operators and Farm Population, 1900–1970: Alabama and Kentucky,” *Phylon* 40 (December 1979): 393.

determining how best to organize black farm production for the war effort. In January 1943 the committee recommended the allocation of \$1,547,600 “to improve the total condition of the Negro farmer, as well as to fit him into the particular task at hand, raising more food for war purposes.” In addition to increasing the number of farm and home agents in the southern states from 516 to 849, the committee recommended the “standardization” (equalization) of salary and travel expenses and the provision of more clerical assistance.²⁵ Such recommendations were a tall order. By 1950, white agents were still being paid nearly twice as much as black agents in thirteen of fourteen southern states, \$5,011 for whites, \$2,752 for blacks in Alabama.²⁶

Just as Patterson and other black leaders pressed for an increase in the allocation of resources to the black Extension Service, they expressed deep concerns about the massive migration of blacks from farms and out of the South. Washington disciple Thomas Campbell demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of the issues involved and revealed a commitment to addressing the problems faced by black farmers that actually stretched the limits of Washington’s approach. In other words, Campbell tread close to challenging the white power structure openly and even defiantly. In testimony before a congressional committee in 1940, he directed the committee’s attention first to the economic exploitation of rural blacks; he argued that “the average tenant or small independent Negro farmer is not provided with the sufficient gainful occupation in the course of twelve months to provide the barest subsistence for himself and family.” He charged that racism played a major role in encouraging black migration: black farmers “who, by thrift and sacrifice in their communities, become self-supporting and quite independent only find that there are those in the community who take undue advantage of their racial timidity, due to the traditional lack of legal protection.” He linked together the lack of educational opportunities, poor medical care, and inadequate housing to segregation, and described black migrants as rejecting unjust and dismal conditions, often in favor of the promise rather than the reality of something better in the North. But

25. “A Proposal to Bring Up to Parity the Existing Facilities of Extension Service With Negroes in the Southern States,” January 1943, pp. 1–5, box 17, Campbell Papers.

26. Schor, “Black Presence in the U.S. Cooperative Extension Service,” 152.

some of what the North had to offer constituted a real improvement over existing conditions in the South. The ability to vote and secure an education were attractive incentives, despite the fact that jobs were not always secure. Improved transportation made the city more accessible and better communication broadcast its many attractions.²⁷

While Campbell argued that the economic exploitation and racism endemic in the South should be remedied in order to encourage blacks to remain, the members of the Postwar Planning Commission, a federal body established to ease the transition from war to peace, revealed a different attitude toward the migration. The commission drew its information from state-based postwar planning commissions which, in turn, reflected the attitudes of county postwar planning commissions. From the county to the national level, these commissions typically reflected the opinions of the larger landowners. Throughout the South the commissions were dominated by planters. In addressing the problems encountered by tenants, which was the highest status the overwhelming majority of black farmers achieved, the federal commission failed to identify economic exploitation or racism as factors. Rather they concentrated on faulty landlord-tenant contracts as the chief problem in the farm tenancy system and suggested the adoption of written leases that were “clear, concise, and complete.” But they also pointed out that another major impediment to tenant farmers involved their attempts to farm “uneconomic units” and recommended the “consolidation of these submarginal units.” Aware that the modernization of agriculture would involve a massive shift in population from the rural South, officials of the Post War Planning Commission ultimately concluded that a “back to the land” movement should be discouraged.²⁸ They expected “a large increase in farm machinery inventories on farms” and the “substitution of new and better machinery and equipment for old and inferior types.”²⁹

27. “Testimony of Prof. T. M. Campbell, Field Agent of United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Extension Service, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama,” to the House of Representatives, Special Committee Investigating the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, Washington, D.C., n.d. (cover letter dated 17 October 1940), pp. 1–4, box 26, Campbell Papers.

28. “Land Tenure Problems and Their Solution after the War” (undated report in 1944 file), box 3, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, RG 16, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NARG 16).

29. “Digest of Material Proposed for Presentation to the Senate Post-War Committee Hearing,” pp. 3–4, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, box 2, NARG 16.

Lauding the possibilities for increased efficiency, greater production, and rising land values, postwar agricultural planners ignored the problems mentioned by Patterson and failed to recommend any strategy for dealing with the inevitable postwar migration. Meanwhile, USDA officials disregarded the pleas of farm labor organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the recommendations of its own Commission on Migratory Labor when it determined to continue and expand a Mexican labor program that kept the cost of farm labor down and reduced alternative farm employment opportunities for displaced blacks.³⁰

The black men who found jobs with the Extension Service during and immediately after World War II were left to deal with the problems of black farmers during this transition period. But black agents faced the coming decades handicapped in a number of respects. Alabama county governments provided limited funds for black extension, and black agents were not allowed to solicit local businessmen for funds to support any of their activities. White agents could solicit these funds and jealously guarded this privilege. As late as 1961 the white county agent in Perry County complained to the state director about a black agent's activities. Having interrupted black agent Lawrence C. Johnson when he was talking to the president of the Marion Bank and Trust Company, the white agent was convinced he had come upon a black agent soliciting the bank president for funds. The white agent told Johnson that he "should not contact white people." Johnson, perhaps disingenuously, explained that he had only

30. For the Postwar Planning Commission, see: "Statements from the Department of Agriculture Inter-Bureau Committee on Post-War Programs," 23 August 1944, p. 5, box 3, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, NARG 16; Louis J. Ducoff to Carl C. Taylor, head, Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare, 10 May 1944, p. 1, box 4, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, NARG 16; and Inter-Bureau Committee on Post-War Programs, "Agriculture When the War Ends," 15 October 1943, pp. 36–39, box 3, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, NARG 16. For the use of Mexican labor, see materials in the Truman Library B-File, such as *New York Times*, "Farm Union Urges Mexican Deal End," file copy dated 15 January 1950; Clarence Mitchell, labor secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, "Statement before the President's Commission on Migratory Workers," 13 July 1950, Truman Library; George Stith, vice president, National Farm Labor Union, "Statement to the Commission on Migratory Labor," 31 August and 1 September 1950; Commission to the President, "Report," March 1951, Truman Library; H. L. Mitchell, president, National Farm Labor Union, to the president of the United States, 3 July 1951, Truman Library; president, American Federation of Labor to the president of the United States, 3 July 1951, pp. 1–2, Truman Library; Labor Policy Committee to the president, 10 July 1951, pp. 1–2, Truman Library.

been discussing the 4-H Foundation with the president and was not soliciting funds.³¹ Perhaps the white agent was sensitive about a trend begun the year before when two counties, Montgomery and Madison, actually voted small appropriations for their black agents.³²

Until the early 1960s, black agents operated in counties that gave them little or no support. They worked in dilapidated facilities, often lacking running water and electricity. Such conditions, according to W. B. Hill, the state leader for Negro work, were “not in keeping with the dignity of the work.”³³ Unlike their white counterparts, black agents rarely had clerical assistance. They typed their own monthly and annual reports on antiquated typewriters on broken-down tables and often did without such essential office equipment as file drawers and desks. They sometimes had to dig into their meager pay in order to purchase office supplies and to furnish the wood for the office stove and the oil for the lamps.

In 1948 Hill, while still serving in the capacity of district agent, predicted an acute situation if salaries were not adjusted to the level of white agents. Wages had not kept pace with the rising cost of living and had “already driven a number of these workers to other employment.” Extension work was suffering because the agents’ automobiles were “worn out,” which compromised their ability to travel around their counties.³⁴ Their poor pay made it difficult for them to make ends meet and sometimes resulted in indebtedness and embarrassing confrontations with their superiors when creditors reported them. Farm agent J. S. Barker of Tallapoosa County, Alabama, for example, was “put on a budget” and eventually terminated;³⁵ and home demonstration agent Thelma M. Frazier of Sumter County, Alabama, had to report to her supervisor concerning a debt she allegedly owed to the State Finance Company of Omaha.³⁶

31. W. B. Hill to L. C. Johnson, 1 December 1961, box 358, ACES; L. C. Johnson to W. B. Hill, 4 December 1961, box 358, ACES.

32. W. B. Hill to C. A. Williams, 28 October 1960, box 358, ACES.

33. Hill, “Annual Supervisory Plan of Work, Alabama, 1948,” p. 2, box 357, ACES.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

35. J. R. Otis, state leader for Negro work, to P. O. Davis, director, Alabama Extension Service, 30 May 1949, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES (hereafter cited as P. O. Davis Correspondence).

36. P. O. Davis to Bailey Hill, 28 September 1954, box 400, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

In the atmosphere immediately following World War II, when expectations among black Americans were rising, it was inevitable that confrontations would occur between young black county agents and the whites in the communities they lived within. A section of a USDA study detailing "Veterans Readjustment to Civilian Life" addressed the issue of race relations and foreshadowed some of the problems which later arose. The study suggested that white veterans likely reflected the racial attitudes of the communities from which they came, attitudes that included startling contradictions. One veteran, who readily admitted that black soldiers had "died and suffered just like the white boys did," nonetheless insisted they "should be put back in their place." He also believed that "they should have every right" to secure employment "but there are some jobs they shouldn't have."³⁷ These white veterans returned to communities which honored black soldiers killed during the war. Clarke County blacks and some whites, for example, witnessed the presentation of purple heart medals to the parents of two such black soldiers.

The occasion brought to gether more than two thousand citizens of Clarke County, to witness this affair, and to hear the teaching of Dr. F. D. Patterson, president of Tuskegee Institute, Dr. J. R. Otis of the Alabama Extension Service, Judge Come Garrett, of the probate courts, of Clarke County, and Col. Noal F. Parrish of the Tuskegee Air Base. It was an inspiration to the several hundred rural children to see Negroes performing in such an organized band which made a part of the days program.³⁸

Aside from sending their fair share of soldiers to the war, these black communities contributed to the war effort in numerous other ways. They organized Negro Divisions of the American Red Cross and Negro Divisions of the War Chest drives. They conducted war bond and scrap metal campaigns, and, of course, they worked to increase production of agricultural commodities which the government told them were crucial for securing

37. USDA, "Veterans Readjustment to Civilian Life," Declassified Confidential Document, Study No. 109, 23 March 1945, p. 111, box 35, Confidential Files, White House Central Files, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Truman Library.

38. Hicks, "Annual Report," 30 November 1944, p. 16.

victory.³⁹ Both these communities and their returning soldiers had greater expectations in the postwar period, but the white communities wanted them to return to their traditional “place.” In other words, notwithstanding the wartime sacrifice by blacks and the recognition accorded them by some whites, the return to the racial status quo thwarted the rising expectations of blacks.

In this environment of contradictory expectations, the Extension Service, which had always carefully guarded against violating southern racial norms, sometimes miscalculated. Especially delicate was the assignment of black agents to counties which previously had only white agents. The mere appearance of black agents in such counties was sometimes sufficient to cause an eruption of antiblack prejudice. To make certain that local white support for black extension existed, black farmers had to submit their request for a black farm agent to their local county board of commissioners.⁴⁰ But this procedure did not always accurately reflect local white sentiments. Nothing better illustrates this point than the situation in Washington County, Alabama, which grew so serious in the summer of 1945 that a sympathetic white county judge requested the removal of both the black home demonstration and the farm agent from the county. J. R. Otis, J. B. Hill’s predecessor as state leader for Negro work, sent Clarke County black agent Arlingia A. Hicks, an experienced and able man, to discuss the situation with the judge. Hicks’s report to Otis revealed that the agents had been headquartered inappropriately and that the judge believed it had been a mistake to place the two black county agents in the town of Chatom where there was “a whole lot of ignorant [white] people.” According to the judge, “had they lived out in the country and gradually let their work be seen before *they* were seen” [emphasis added], there would have arisen no opposition to the work they were attempting. Commending the young black farm agents for doing “good work” and admitting that they had been “interfered with,” the judge nevertheless reiterated that his removal was necessary.⁴¹ The state extension director agreed, de-

39. Ibid., 16–17.

40. J. R. Otis, state leader for Negro work, to W. J. Bonner, 2 May 1946, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence.

41. A. A. Hicks, Negro county agent, Clarke County, to J. R. Otis, 30 June 1945, p. 2, box 358, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

spite the fact that black farmers from the county petitioned to have both agents remain.⁴²

Fears arising from growing pressure from the black population to secure the ballot inspired some whites to vent their frustrations on black extension workers. Y. C. Nance, the black county agent in Bullock County, Alabama, was cleared of the accusation that he had attempted to register blacks in his county to vote in 1954. C. A. Williams, the Negro district agent, reported that according to F. W. Chappell, a member of the Bullock County Board of Registrars, “two white men and one colored man did influence a group of colored people to come before the Board, but Nance was not the person involved.” News of such activities “caused many of the white citizens to become alarmed. Because of the influence Mr. Nance might have with his people, it was felt by some that he was the colored person involved.” Although “the situation in the county has been serious,” the testimony of Chappell exonerated Nance, and he was not removed from his position.⁴³

In the immediate postwar era, other black agents who directly confronted the Extension Service over issues of parity were either reprimanded or dismissed. As president of the Association of Alabama Negro County and Home Demonstration Agents, Arlingia Hicks wrote a letter on 24 April 1948 to J. R. Otis, who was then state leader for Negro work. Hicks apparently demanded that the pay of black agents be brought into parity with that of whites. Otis forwarded Hicks’s letter to P. O. Davis, the state’s white director of extension in Auburn. Davis responded that under his administration the salaries of black farm and home agents had increased at a greater rate than those of white agents and complained that he did not like having to address “racial matters.” He considered “other parts” of Hicks’s letter “very objectionable,” especially Hicks’s presumption “to engage in administrative matters,” far afield “from his duties.”⁴⁴ By the beginning of the next year, Otis and Davis began to refer to Hicks’s unsatisfactory per-

42. Negro farmers and wives petition to P. O. Davis, 25 June 1945, box 358, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES; P. O. Davis to Eugene Smith (one of the petitioners), 2 July 1945, box 358, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

43. C. A. Williams, Negro district agent, to W. B. Hill, 30 January 1954, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

44. P. O. Davis to A. A. Hicks, 15 May 1948, pp. 1–2, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

formance. Of even greater significance, in their view, was Hicks's attention to matters they considered not in the best interest of the extension program. Otis's motivations are open to debate. Whether he was attempting to protect the black extension program from suffering the consequences of Hicks's letter or whether he was seeking to protect his own position remains unclear. As Hicks's supervisor he had forwarded the objectionable letter to Davis. The record does not reveal Otis's opinion of the matter prior to Davis's response. Did he caution Hicks about the potential ramifications of its content? Was he testing the waters himself and allowing Hicks to carry the burden? In any case, when Davis responded so negatively, Otis assumed no responsibility for the letter and willingly sacrificed his agent. On 8 June 1949, Davis dismissed Hicks from the service, ending the career of a black agent who only a few years earlier had the full confidence of his superiors and who had been entrusted with a special mission to Washington County in 1945.⁴⁵ His Clarke County post remained unfilled, despite repeated petitions from black farmers there.⁴⁶

A few years later another agent was dismissed for political activism. This time black agent Willie A. Brown was censured for appearing before the Coosa County Board of Education and requesting the addition of a lunch room in the black junior high school in the town of Rockford. Although the local board of education and a former black agent in the county merely suggested that Brown be transferred, he was fired. As in the case of Hicks, the white Extension Service director and the state leader for Negro work, who was now W. B. Hill, charged Brown with poor work performance and with engaging in activities that "strained race relationships." In his dismissal letter to Brown, Hill added, "you have permitted a situation of bad relationships to develop between you and both white and Negro leaders in that county which will make any future progress on your part most difficult."⁴⁷

Given the limitations imposed upon black agents, it is no surprise that

45. P. O. Davis to A. A. Hicks, 8 June 1949, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

46. P. O. Davis to W. B. Hill, 29 September 1952, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

47. R. M. Reaves to Director Davis, 20 April 1953, box 359, ACES; P. O. Davis to W. B. Hill, 4 May 1953, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES; Hill to Willie A. Brown, 2 May 1953, box 359, ACES.

the Extension Service had difficulty recruiting black agents. Despite the fact that few other opportunities existed for blacks trained in agricultural colleges, counties often went without black agents. A 1949 report revealed that salary increases that year were making it easier to fill the “vacancies in 35 of the 37 counties in which county agents have been employed.”⁴⁸ But because rising salaries remained far below those of whites, it continued to be difficult to retain capable black farm agents. And in an era when emphasis was placed on expanding the service, the number of blacks on Alabama’s roster of agents had risen by only five, from thirty-two in 1942 to thirty-seven in 1949.⁴⁹ By 1964 this figure had dropped to thirty-five. A frustrated black home demonstration agent, Christine O. Jackson, wrote to W. B. Hill in December 1961 demanding “to be compensated for my having done the County Agents work for two months.”⁵⁰ The record does not indicate how Hill responded to Jackson’s unusual request nor does it indicate what had created the vacancy that made it necessary for her to do the county agent’s work. The departed farm agent probably had not taken a promotion to the state office, however, unless salaries had been raised significantly after a plea by Hill, who in 1955 claimed that “the difference between State Staff salaries and salaries of the county workers is so small that some of our best agents will not accept promotions to the State Staff.”⁵¹ Although Hill may have been “producing” an artificial scarcity to bolster his own efforts to improve the salaries of his state staff, it may be that some field agents preferred isolation in the counties to supervision in the state office.

All the while, the transformation of the economy taking place in the postwar era vastly complicated the problems confronted by black extension workers at the local and state level. Certainly the trend toward mechanization posed a major challenge to blacks in the rural South who were forced to consider alternatives to plantation tenancy. In the labor-intensive era before the war, sharecroppers and tenants had been “essential to the op-

48. “Combined Annual Narrative Report of Negro Supervising Agents, Alabama—1949,” p. 4, box 357, ACES.

49. *Ibid.*; “A Proposal to bring up to parity the existing facilities of extension service with Negroes in the Southern States, January 1943,” box 17, Campbell Papers.

50. Christine O. Jackson to W. B. Hill, 18 December 1961, box 358, ACES.

51. W. B. Hill to P. O. Davis, 18 May 1955, box 359, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

eration of the farm economy.” As blacks in Alabama’s Extension Service well recognized, the adoption of “the tractor, the cotton picker, chopper, and other mechanical developments” rendered “the Negro unessential to the successful operation of the large farm units.” Unlike the sharecroppers and tenants, however, “the independent Negro farmer” had never been “essential to the total farm economy of the South.”⁵² Since federal farm policy was predicated on the notion that the larger units of operation were most efficient and thus most beneficial to the southern and national economy, small black independent operators fell into the category of farmers considered dispensable. Although some theorists were concerned about the survival of the family farm, they were usually addressing the collapse of small white farmers outside Alabama and the South. The black Extension Service served as the only bulwark against the complete absorption of small black farm units by larger farm units in the South.

The annual narrative reports filed by county farm and home demonstration agents described the program that they employed. Most agents used these reports to highlight their own accomplishments. Because of the nature of these reports and the restraints imposed on them, black agents rarely mentioned problems or failures. Many of the agents, however, revealed a great deal more about themselves than they might have imagined. Most of the farm agents had been trained in agricultural colleges and saw themselves having a mission to impart knowledge to the farmers in the counties to which they were assigned. Farm agents were prepared to show farmers the latest methods of cultivating and harvesting crops, using fertilizers and chemicals, and employing business methods, especially adequate record keeping. The home demonstration agents, generally trained in home economics, hoped to teach farm women better methods of preparing food, cleaning and maintaining the house, raising a home garden, canning vegetables, and caring for children.

Although most black farm and home demonstration agents came from farming backgrounds, they were derived from the upper strata of the rural population. Most black farmers were impoverished, and many were illiter-

52. Ernest E. Neal, “Low Income Negro Farm Families and Economic Stability in the Cotton South,” 15 December 1949, box 5, Campbell Papers.

ate. Although the cultural divide between the agents and the ordinary farm people was often immense, the agents were themselves subject to political, social, and economic exploitation, and working with farm people demonstrated the extremes to which that kind of exploitation could drive a people. Their daily encounters undoubtedly made them especially sensitive about their own hard-won status and often prompted them to distance themselves from those they were there to educate. The agents' dismay at the ignorance and poverty they encountered was not lost on the farmers and their wives who sensed the complicated psychological dilemma at work in the minds of the agents. They resented the intrusion of young college-trained men and women who presumed to know more than they about farming and running a farm household—something many of them had spent a lifetime doing.

Black leaders and sympathetic whites in Alabama as elsewhere in the South attempted to formulate a program and policy to assist black farmers in coping with the changes. Fully aware of the limited capital resources of most black farmers, they understood that in the capital-intensive environment created by the advent of mechanized agriculture, the typical black farmer simply could not compete. Although they encouraged the more substantial black farmers to replace mules with tractors, they recognized that the small farm units could not support the capital expenditure required to incorporate the use of mechanical cotton harvesters in their farming operations. Confronted by this situation, they placed greatest emphasis on diversified farming. White extension agents had been preaching the gospel of diversification from the earliest years of the Extension Service, but because white planters demanded a program that helped them produce more and better cotton and other commodity crops, the white agents had made little progress in accomplishing diversification. Black agents were subject to an additional and, perhaps, even more intractable problem. White planters determined what crops their tenants planted, and since most blacks in Alabama were tenants and sharecroppers, few of them could legitimately choose to diversify. Black agents typically had to secure the permission of white planters before approaching their black tenants, and they had to have a program in mind that did not contradict the program the planter dictated.

Nevertheless, black agents, when and where they could, promoted diversification. For example, they recommended livestock raising or, for farmers near a metropolitan area, truck farming.⁵³

Because of the inherent assumption that the out-migration from the farm should be stopped, black agents urged an improvement of living conditions in rural Alabama. They echoed the sentiments of Thomas Campbell, who claimed that the most urgent needs included “more doctors, dentists, nurses, hospitals, clinics, improved housing, a better water supply, more screen windows and doors, more sanitary toilets, and better recreational facilities for farm boys and girls.” Diversified farming, Campbell believed, would help to solve these problems for it would “attract more doctors and dentists to rural communities.”⁵⁴ The black extension program tended to focus on four of the recommendations espoused by Campbell: diversification, rural housing, health, and youth.

Black county agents employed the Extension Service’s time-tested strategy in implementing their programs: they reached farmers through establishing personal relationships with the most prominent individuals within the local black community. Since poverty and discrimination kept most blacks out of key economic and political positions, black agents frequently cultivated preachers and school officials, who usually constituted the local leadership. Typically, a new agent would advertise a meeting, often featuring a key speaker from Tuskegee, to demonstrate what Extension could do to improve their lot. He sometimes arranged a follow-up meeting before organizing his county’s farmers into community and neighborhood groups. Local youths were organized into separate groups. “To keep the organized groups in tact, and to have them to function effectively,” they were “checked at intervals of three, six and twelve months, and reorganized when found necessary.”⁵⁵ From the black community and neighborhood groups, a

53. J. R. Otis to P. O. Davis, 4 April 1945, box 358, P. O. Davis Correspondence, ACES.

54. T. M. Campbell, “What is the Responsibility of the Supervising Agents in the Field of Rural Housing,” n.d., box 22, Campbell Papers; Sherman Briscoe, “More Colored Farmers Now Live in Modern Homes Although Many Still Reside in Shabby Housing,” 20 July 1953, box 22, Campbell Papers; T. M. Campbell, press release, “Landlord-Tenant Clashes and Rural Poverty Reduced by Extension Program,” box 22, Campbell Papers.

55. J. T. Alexander, Negro county agent, Montgomery County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1948, p. 1, ACES.

county extension council was selected. The council, in conjunction with the county home and farm agents, then devised a county plan of work. Although it followed the overall guidelines of the state Extension Service, the plan of work attempted to conform to the particular needs of the county's farmers.⁵⁶ For example, in a county where cotton was a major crop, the plan of work necessarily focused on problems connected to that farming enterprise. In a county where livestock was a major endeavor, attention concentrated on the concerns of dairy or beef or hog farmers.

Following Extension Service guidelines, black agents utilized and distributed bulletins and circular letters, gave demonstrations, and, in the early postwar years, encouraged diversification over concentration on the production of a staple crop. But there were at least two inherent contradictions in the approach. First, they introduced notions of proper farm management and sought to move impoverished black farmers toward a more strictly capitalist enterprise. At the same time, they preached self-sufficiency—the home garden as superior to store-bought goods, for example. They wanted black farmers to perform as self-sufficient, diversified operators who practiced sound business management principles. One farm agent, J. B. Jordan, after twenty-six years in Conecuh County, ruminated over the need to make “farming a paying business,” and revealed a degree of introspection unusual in most of the farm agent reports: “It has definitely been demonstrated that if farming is done on a scientific basis it will pay off a big dividend; but the longings of the soul are not permanently satisfied with material things.”⁵⁷ A more typical remark, however, was that of the Wilcox County black farm agent, W. E. Street, who wrote “more machinery is needed all over the county for efficient farm operation”⁵⁸ and that of John T. Bulls Jr., Colbert County's black farm agent, who boasted that he had assisted farmers who were “buying tractors at a rapid rate to keep pace with our changing agriculture.”⁵⁹ On the one

56. W. L. Royston, Negro county agent, Tallapoosa County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1948, p. 1, box 372, ACES.

57. J. B. Jordan, Negro county agent, Conecuh County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 December 1951, p. 2, box 373, ACES.

58. W. E. Street, Negro county agent, Wilcox County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1951, p. 6, box 374, ACES.

59. John T. Bulls Jr., Negro county agent, Colbert County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1951, p. 10, box 373, ACES.

hand, they were advocating an economy of self-sufficiency, in keeping with the Washington philosophy, and on the other hand they were urging involvement in a larger market economy. Given the revolution in agriculture taking shape in the postwar environment, involvement in the latter would necessarily move them inexorably away from the former. Washington's self-help philosophy had been promulgated long before the rise of capital intensive agriculture in the South and had perhaps outlived its usefulness.

The second contradiction inherent in the farm program promulgated by black agents spoke even more directly to the principle of diversification. While some bulletins and circular letters stressed its importance, others provided information to those who wanted to increase cotton yields and walk through the maze of red tape connected to growing commodity crops in an era of subsidized production. Most black farmers continued to work as tenants and had little choice but to grow the crop demanded by the landlord. Given the necessity of avoiding conflict with the white community, black agents would not have attempted to persuade black farmers to defy their landlords. World events, meanwhile, conspired to encourage greater production of cotton. In June 1950 the Korean War broke out, and quotas on cotton production were eliminated. According to black agent Reuben Gilmore, "farmers were urged to step up cotton production" and Y. C. Nance of Bullock County reported that "most cotton farmers went all out for cotton production this year in an effort to help produce the 16,000,000 bales that were needed by the nation."⁶⁰ Gilmore set a goal for achieving "one bale or more to the acre."⁶¹ Thirteen years later, on the eve of the demise of a separate black extension program, Gilmore was still focusing on raising "the county's average to a bale per acre" and cotton production remained "a major source of income in all sections" of the county.⁶²

The Extension Service had not abandoned the idea of diversification, however. Farm agent Leonard Huffman of Macon County indicated that the farm program for 1964 focused on "cotton, corn, swine, and vegetables,"

60. Y. C. Nance, Negro county agent, Bullock County, Alabama, "Narrative Report," 30 November 1951, p. 3, box 373, ACES.

61. Reuben Gilmore, Negro county agent, Barber County, Alabama, "Narrative Report," 30 November 1951, p. 5, box 373, ACES.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

but admitted that “there are an extremely large number of Macon county farmers with large families who still rely on cotton as the sole source of income.” Huffman distributed circular letters and held demonstrations on corn, swine, and vegetable production. His experience with the hog program underscores the difficulties he faced: “Income for farmers in Macon county could be greatly increased if swine enterprises were placed into their farming programs. The lack of acceptance of modern methods of hog production, the lack of adequate capital, and the failure of farmers to realize that swine could constitute a very substantial supplementary farming enterprise, has been a hindrance in the promotion of hog production in this county. The exceptional low prices received for hogs has had its influence also.”⁶³

The 1951 farm program also focused on improving rural housing and the evidence suggests that farm agents had as great a difficulty accomplishing their goals in that area as they had with diversification. Identifying the improvement of rural housing as one means of retaining the black farm population, farm agents held meetings on construction of homes and outbuildings and provided “information on reading and interpreting plans.”⁶⁴ Agent Gilmore of Barber County reported that “improvements were made in training competent labor to build, repair and construct houses properly” and “a few farm families showed interest in painting their homes.” Gilmore also noted, however, that the majority of “farm houses are poorly constructed. There is a great need for a farm building and maintenance program.”⁶⁵ Agent Lawrence C. Johnson of Perry County described his approach: “In order to put over the program, information was given throughout the year in the following form: by circular letters, group meetings [and], talking with dealers of building material, local carpenters.” He furnished plans to farmers for all types of buildings and had the plans on display in his office throughout the year. “As a result of this information, 65 farmers were assisted in the construction of new homes, remodeling, repairing, and constructing of farm-buildings.”⁶⁶ Despite

63. Leonard Huffman, Negro county agent, Macon County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 31 December 1964, pp. 2, 6, box 382, ACES.

64. J. T. Banks Jr., Negro county agent, Choctaw County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1951, p. 8, box 373, ACES.

65. Gilmore, “Narrative Report,” p. 18.

66. Lawrence C. Johnson, Negro county agent, Perry County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1951, p. 11, box 374, ACES.

the improvements that Johnson noted in Perry County in 1951, Morgan County farm agent Eddie Bryant reported thirteen years later that “housing conditions in the state are below the national level in space per person . . . many are dilapidated and lack convenience [indoor toilets].”⁶⁷ The fact that few blacks owned the homes in which they lived was not lost on agents who recognized there was little incentive for them to repair them. Planters rarely had a propensity to invest money in them.

While farm agents offered a program to farmers, home demonstration agents addressed the needs of farm families, and their goals involved a more intimate connection with the families they sought to serve. Their programs invaded the home, the center of the family and a private sphere. The attitudes reflected by these agents are more dramatically illustrative of the cultural differences between agents and farm families than that between farm agents and farmers. Home demonstration agent Brunetta T. Montgomery, for example, complained in 1951 that farm families failed “to put skill and dignity in the performance of common everyday tasks. . . . Time has been spent with them in trying to get them to realize the value of the dollar, helping them to plan and spend money wisely by teaching them to recognize quality in all that concerns food, clothing, and shelter.”⁶⁸ Home demonstration agents also hoped to slow the migration by providing a healthier environment. Hence Willie E. Callins, home demonstration agent in Lee County, reported, “improvements are being made on a few tenant houses. The agent found that where houses were repaired, good floors, porches and good steps and electric lights replaced wooden shutters farm families were slow to move.” But she also reported, “a large number of the men in farm families work off the farm, leaving most of the farm and home work for the women and children.”⁶⁹

By educating farm women on nutrition, home demonstration agents

67. Eddie Bryant, Negro county agent, Morgan County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 1 January 1965, p. 21, box 382, ACES.

68. Brunetta T. Montgomery, Negro home demonstration agent, Conecuh County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1951, p. 2, box 373, ACES.

69. Willie E. Callins, Negro home demonstration agent, Lee County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1951, p. 6, box 373, ACES.

hoped that farm families would grow healthier and cease to be plagued with diseases related to malnutrition. Certainly there was a need to improve the diets of a population of farmers (sharecroppers and tenants) who for generations had grown a staple crop at the behest of planters opposed to using valuable acreage for home gardens. In other words, many rural black families lacked training and experience in growing vegetables and preparing nutritionally balanced meals. Home agents held demonstrations and distributed circular letters on the basics of nutrition as well as on all aspects of planning and cultivating a home garden. But the forces of the agricultural transformation taking place all around them worked against the efforts of the home agents. By 1965 “mothers and older members of the family work away from home,” according to Coosa County home agent Mariah Brymer, so that home gardens had become a rarity. Although “more money is available to purchase food,” they still did not have food in “adequate amounts,” and home demonstration agents confronted a daunting task in educating farm women on nutrition. “These homemakers continued to fall short in planning meals to include adequate amounts of meat, eggs, milk and milk products and deep yellow and dark green vegetables.”⁷⁰ Indeed, there was much to be concerned about. Conecuh County home demonstration agent Myrtie Keith lamented that “many people suffer from malnutrition, especially a lack of iron and ascorbic acid.”⁷¹

Another concern that echoed throughout the home demonstration reports was that “families are faced with managing changing situations, which causes confusion and misunderstanding. This points up a need for material guidance for all members of the family.”⁷² Chief among their concerns was the well-being of the young people within the farming community. Home extension agent Laura Daly of Macon County complained that “a great number of young people” had left the county and implied that the

70. Mariah B. Brymer, Negro home demonstration agent, Coosa County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 31 December 1964, p. 7, box 382, ACES.

71. Myrtie G. Keith, Negro home demonstration agent, Conecuh County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 31 December 1964, p. 2, box 382, ACES.

72. Sadie McClellan, Negro home demonstration agent, Lauderdale County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 31 December 1964, p. 12, box 382, ACES.

attractions of the city were far too enticing to those “seeking better opportunities.” Daly remarked that the most promising youth, “those who finish high school, leave the county.”⁷³ Work with the 4-H club had always been a significant aspect of the extension program, but because the transformation of the economy was bringing disintegration to many farm communities, “the whole pattern of life and child rearing practices has changed greatly. Many parents have been afraid to trust their own judgement, make decisions, determine ideals, values and goals for themselves, and their families.”⁷⁴ Young people were demonstrating their confusion and frustration in their “attitude toward work, authority, the rights of others, decency, cheating, personal discipline and a lack of self respect.”⁷⁵ Although some agents blamed poor parenting skills for the behavioral problems their children exhibited, others, like DeLois Carmichael of Monroe County, recognized that “parents and other adults are faced with rapid changes in home and family living.”⁷⁶ Truancy, teen pregnancy, and the school drop-out rate were of particular concern. One agent conducted a “Milestones to Maturity” program at three high schools in Macon County and another presented a film, “Adolescence,” which dealt with adolescent emotional problems, to two community groups.⁷⁷ In the end, home demonstration agents were attempting to present solutions to a problem that transcended the rural experience and confounded experts all over the nation: the challenge to the family in the postindustrial political economy.

The extension program’s black agents took to the fields of Alabama educated in the latest scientific methods and inspired by the agency’s self-help philosophy, a philosophy reinforced by Tuskegee. Charged with the responsibility of bringing uplift and succor to a population of farmers still

73. Laura R. Daly, Negro home demonstration agent, Macon County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 30 November 1951, p. 3, box 374, ACES.

74. Georgia E. Samuels, Negro home demonstration agent, Morgan County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 1 January 1965, p. 22, box 382, ACES.

75. DeLois L. Carmichael, Negro home demonstration agent, Monroe County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 31 December 1964, p. 18, box 382, ACES.

76. *Ibid.*

77. D. J. Smith, Negro home demonstration agent, Butler County, Alabama, “Narrative Report,” 31 December 1964, p. 9, box 382, ACES.

shackled by discrimination and poverty, the agents were themselves fettered by social, economic, and political constraints which made it difficult for them to function effectively. They hoped to accomplish the impossible in trying to stem the tide of black migration from southern farms, and the programs they attempted to implement were either rife with contradictions or undermined by the transformation which was shifting the ground from beneath them. Ironically, in trying to help black farmers to adjust in a rapidly changing environment, they were harbingers of change themselves.