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Masthead illustration from *The Southern Cultivator*, vol. 51, 1893. Courtesy, Georgia Department of Archives and History.
FOOD FOR THOUGHT:
RESCUING OUR AGRARIAN HERITAGE

Ronald E. Raven

I always welcome an opportunity to discuss two of my favorite topics: history and farming. History, of course, is the study which allows every nation to use the other countries' past record as an alibi. Farming I need not define, as each of you knows what it means. Perhaps that is just the problem we are to discuss. You know what farming is, you practice it; but fewer and fewer others do.

This problem was first brought to my attention when I was in the 7th grade. It was in Math Class and the lesson involved using a story to set a problem. It went like this: If a farmer had a cow which gave 10 pounds of milk per milking, how much milk would he get in a week? The solution was, of course, simple: 2 milkings/day x 10 lbs. = 20 lbs./day x 7 days = 140 lbs./week. However, when the teacher asked for answers, only two students had it right. The remainder of the class was split evenly between two different answers. Half of the class insisted that the answer was 70 lbs. They didn't know a cow was milked twice a day. The other half insisted on 100 lbs. They knew that cows gave milk twice a day or 20 lbs. However, living in a suburb, they believed cows, like everyone else, worked a five day week.

That example of ignorance is not too unusual. As people have gotten away from the farms, the knowledge of the farming industry is being lost. Our Agrarian Heritage is not being passed on to the bulk of our people. When the children of this country can't tell a cow from a deer, there is little hope that the role farming plays in our country or economy will be understood or appreciated. Soon the knowledge of farming may be as specialized as that of engineering, and our children will have grown away from land and nature.

Part of rescuing our agricultural heritage must be an understanding of how it came to be in danger. The reasons for the demise of general agrarian

Ronald E. Raven is Deputy Director at the Records Management Division, Georgia Department of Archives and History. This bit of wisdom is an edited transcript of his talk before the alumni of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan State University, in celebration of Farmers Week, 1977.
knowledge within the country are well known. The twin influences of urban migration and farm mechanization increased production and left fewer people in contact with farming. As a result, the farm population has steadily declined. A century ago, in 1870, over 50% of the population worked on the farms raising food. By 1910, within the memory of many people living today, that population had dropped to 35%. By 1960 only about 8% of the people were working on farms, and today barely 4% earn their living from farming.

During the same period of time, a technological revolution swept agriculture. At the turn of the century, it was estimated that one farm worker produced enough to support seven non-farm laborers; by 1960, the output of the individual farm worker supported nearly 26 non-farm persons. Today this ratio is even higher. This high degree of industrialization has also added to the disappearance of a number of farms. The new machinery was best suited to large operations, and its cost was such that only the larger producers could invest the sizeable capital required to buy and maintain the machinery.

Consequently, the number of farms steadily decreased while their size increased. In 1930 there were over 6,500,000 farms. Today, there are barely 2,500,000, but their size has correspondingly increased. In 1950 the average farm had 216 acres; today it is about 400 acres. Even more important in showing this trend is the fact that farms of more than 1,000 acres account for over half of today's farmland.

In light of these trends, it is no wonder our children don't know that cows work a seven day week. Most have never been in contact with one and probably couldn't even identify one if it weren't for TV westerns. The progression of planting the seed, harvesting the grain, milling the flour and baking the bread has only textbook familiarity for our children. Their experience tells them only that bread is produced, sliced, and put in plastic bags in some factory and sold in a food store. The heritage of living, growing agriculture is not being passed on.

What use is this knowledge of skills we don't use every day? It is the knowledge of today and the research of tomorrow that will keep us fed, employed and happy. This I believe is a dangerous attitude.

We cannot afford to lose knowledge. Much of the basic knowledge of the sciences was discovered by the Greeks. Facts such as the size and shape of the earth and all of our fundamental geometric and mathematical prin-
ciples were known to ancient civilization, yet this knowledge was lost precipitating the "Dark Ages" because it was not valued as something precious to be preserved. Fortunately, this knowledge was appreciated by the Arab inheritors of the Mediterranean lands and assisted them to expand their culture and power throughout the known world. It is curious that the great "discoveries" of the Renaissance, that the world was round, its size and continents, and its relationship to the universe, were all part of a body of knowledge over 1,000 years old. How much time had been wasted through ignorance and neglect.

There are other practical reasons for preserving the knowledge of the past. There were, among the Inca Indians, some eighty varieties of potatoes. Some were used as main courses, others as desserts. A number of them were delicate, others were bred hardy for long storage. With the coming of Conquistadores, the knowledge of how to grow all of these excellent foods was lost because the conquerors viewed the skills as unimportant. These same people had cross-bred grasses until they produced maize, a process of development that was also lost. Neither of these agricultural secrets has ever been rediscovered.

Knowledge is a precious thing and should not be lightly discarded, or man may suffer while he goes back to rediscover it. Although maybe it is a good thing that this continent was not "discovered" earlier. When white men arrived, there was no pollution, no taxes, no crime, and the Indians had a social system where the women did all the work. Those brave white men were foolish enough to think they could improve on that system. Sometimes I'm not sure how far we have come.

It was Abraham Joseph Ryon, a Civil War poet, who once observed, "A land without historical records is a land without memories — A land without memories is a land without liberty." Giving a people a history is important as it provides a sense of self.

Without knowledge of our past and that of others, a deeper understanding of people is possible. Too often hostility is based on fear of the unknown. The recent TV special "Roots" and its impact on the country is dramatic proof of the yearning people have for a sense of where they come from, for the knowledge of what forces shaped their lives and how their families came into being. We cannot afford to let the heritage of who we are and what we stand for be eroded or forgotten. That heritage is the compass that guides our people and government in seeking a path to travel with pride.

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With the preservation of bodies of knowledge comes the opportunity to do research. Research is today, as it has always been, the key to progress. But all research must start with records created in the past. It is the writings of an established scientist, economist, or politician which gives the aspiring one a place to begin. How slow progress would be if each scientist had to rediscover the laws of gravity or each political thinker had to reinvent the democratic process. Research depends not just on published works, but on the notebooks of experiment observations, the diaries of farmers, the letters of political leaders and thousands more kinds of records which transmit raw knowledge.

Many times ordinary information from the past assumes great importance when viewed through a researcher’s eyes. For example, in colonial times, rice was a major cash crop which was planted extensively even around the city of Savannah. At the same time Savannah had the reputation of not being a very healthy place to live as official reports of the period complain. Ultimately, the city authorities sought the land for expanding the town and took over and drained the rice paddies abandoning the culture of rice as a staple crop. As a result, reports of Savannah’s unhealthiness gradually died down, though these events were not associated at that time. The same symptoms cropped up again in the 1950’s. Savannah was again having health problems. In researching the old records, officials noted the connection between ill health and the presence of stagnant water around the city, and began investigating potential sources for this. They found serious problems with drainage and mosquito infestation in the marshlands surrounding the city. After establishing a mosquito eradication program, officials noted the same health improvement as had been seen in colonial times.

Let us turn our attention from the lessons of the past to how we can preserve our heritage. The first important step is to collect records documenting a period of time and its activities. This is the work of an archives. The basic functions of archival work are to identify, collect, preserve, and make available for research the recorded evidence of our past. This documentation comes in many forms: letters of individuals telling of their lives and businesses, catalogs showing products, diaries revealing attitudes and feelings, pictures capturing personalities and events, magazines, books and tape recordings of the times, all add to our picture of the past.

Present recordings of events remembered called oral history has particular value for agrarian history. Farming, because of the long hours of physical labor required, is not well documented in paper records. However,
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there are lots of life-long farmers available to talk for the purpose of recording their collections. A good example of how important these recorded documents can be for the history of agriculture is found right here in Georgia. For over a century, cotton was the crop around which the life of Georgia and the entire south revolved. Even in 1920, 68% of all farm income was derived from cotton. This means that all other crops and livestock combined accounted for only $1 in $3 of farm income. However, today cotton accounts for only about 5% of farm income; it has been replaced by other mainstays of the rural economy such as commercial broilers, eggs, and peanuts. Cotton and the economic empire it built are no more, and all because of one little bug, the boll weevil, which invaded Georgia about 1918 feeding on the buds of ripe cotton or bolls. By 1925 the entire State economy was a shambles. For the next two decades Georgia farmers struggled to find alternate crops to support their families and worked to develop new markets. This effort led to the widely diversified agriculture we have today, and to an economy that is on a much stronger footing. In the space of one man’s lifetime, one way of life died and another was born. We have the bones of the story, the bare facts, but where is the flesh that makes it a human event?

It is the generation of my grandparents that has the full recollections of this time, but since the events were just “ordinary living” then, no particular attempt was made to document this era with written records. But we do have a fleeting opportunity to recapture what cotton and the boll weevil meant; we can talk to the old farmers, but we must do it quickly while they are still available to lend you their memories of the drama and poignancy of this era when a farmer was the master of his own spread and faced nature and the Depression alone. They will not remain with us long, and the knowledge they have to offer with its lessons must be recaptured now, before it passes on with them.

Once documentation is collected and preserved, the heritage can be passed by a variety of methods. Research for textbooks can be done. Studies of how the crops evolved can be passed on, and a basis for new research developed. The skills required to work the land can be taught. This is particularly important today when many of our young people are seeking a return to the land. For small farming, simple equipment and time-tested methods are often perfectly suited. A farmer doesn’t need to plan an egg factory for his dozen chickens.

There are two additional methods that can be effective media for
educating our children and passing on our heritage. These are the Restoration and Recreation of historic sites. Both are aimed at creating an environment in which the person becomes submerged in a former time. All that he sees about him relates to a past period and place. Having a person stand and walk in a living past is an enormously effective way of teaching. The most famous example of this type of experience is probably colonial Williamsburg. Thousands of our citizens have a much clearer picture of the origins of the country and revolution thanks to their visits there.

Restoration involves taking what remains of an historic site and restoring it to its original condition. This work requires extensive documentation of the physical remains and of the people associated with the particular place and the time period it reflects. The problem with restoration is that seldom does a site exist in the setting of its era. Often later alterations intrude upon the effect to recapture the illusive atmosphere of the past.

Recreation of an historical setting offers a greater opportunity for total environmental reconstruction, but requires even stricter attention to advance planning and solid research. Gathering surviving pieces and then constructing a suitable environment around them is the soul of historical recreation. Research must be done on what sort of sites did exist and what they might have contained. The planner designs what he wants and gives it back to the researcher to find out what each part looked like. This too requires an extensive documentation basis.

Very little historic preservation work has been done in agriculture. More often such efforts have been addressed to historical buildings such as Independence Hall, or the home of a famous citizen in the case of Mt. Vernon. In Georgia, we have two agricultural preservations currently underway.

The first, Jarrell Plantation, is an historical restoration. It was acquired by the State in 1973. Jarrell is unique among agricultural sites in that it was remarkably intact. The same family ran this isolated farm in Jones County for 130 years, during which they never threw away any implement or altered or destroyed any buildings. Of further importance is that the Jarrell Place functioned as a technology center for the surrounding county. The family built and operated a steam-powered sawmill, cane grinding operation, cotton gin and grist mill, as well as an implement and blacksmith shop, in addition to their subsistence farming activities.
The second, an heritage preservation project called the Georgia Agrirama, is located on the property of the State Agriculture Experiment Station at Tifton. It is the recreation of a South Georgia farm and adjoining village from the 1880's and 1890's. Buildings of this era have and are being collected and moved to the site to create a living museum. The site is being worked by the old methods for demonstration and has a farm with livestock, printing press, church, grist mill, and cotton gin. It is now about one-third complete and is open to the public. Preservation efforts like Jarrell Plantation and the Agrirama are only a small part of the picture. In fact these depend on and draw nourishment from something far more basic and essential — a program to increase public appreciation for our agricultural heritage through the preservation and use of records of all types. Without these source documents, photographs, and artifacts, it would not be possible to know our past, much less to reconstruct it.

It is, I believe, important that we make a concerted effort now to preserve our agrarian heritage. *Remember, only what is preserved today will be known tomorrow*. Farming groups must be encouraged to work with state and local governments, colleges, and libraries to establish and support archives and historic sites important to agriculture. These agencies are dedicated to preserving the heritage for this state, and need practicing farmers' cooperation to identify, obtain, and preserve historic documentation and sites. Let's get together; we will all enjoy the exchange.

In closing, I will leave you with this little story.

It seems a new farm hand was awakened at 4 a.m. by the farmer who announced they were going to cut oats.

"Are they wild oats?" the hand asked.

"No, why?" the farmer replied.

"Then why do we have to sneak up on them in the dark?"

That is the way you have to approach the preservation problem. You need to get up early in the morning with a solid plan or the remaining evidence of the past may slip away from you.
"ta ca lchale": "To light a new fire." A Timucuan ritual of kindling a new flame to remove or prevent impurities; celebrated at a time of transition or crisis, the ritual was performed as an attempt to control or to minimize change when the status quo was threatened.

The title refers to the natives' efforts during the period of European conquest and colonization to resist or adapt to the encroaching European presence.

In these essays recognized authorities focus on the interaction of southeastern Indian populations with European cultures, dealing with the Calusa tribe of the southwest Florida coast, the Tocobago of the Tampa Bay region, the Timucuans of northern Florida and southeastern Georgia, the Guale of the Georgia coast, and the Seminoles' migration into Florida.

This new monograph series, sponsored by the Florida State Museum, honors Ripley P. Bullen for his scholarly contributions to the archeology of Florida and adjacent regions. It will be devoted to archeological and historical study of the southeastern United States and the Caribbean, the areas of Dr. Bullen's research for almost three decades.


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