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LA FORGE FARMS



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Southeastern Missouri — the "booteel" of the state — is a typical sample of the Lower Mississippi Valley. Unlike the rest of the state, it is a land of big plantations — the typical cotton plantations of the Mississippi Delta.

This is a region of rich land and poor people. Its soil is one of the most fertile in the world. Like the soil of the Nile Valley, it is deep, rich, level silt, laid down by the over-flow of the great river during the course of centuries. The people who work this land are mostly share-croppers or day laborers, whose standard of living is one of the lowest in America.

The typical plantation in this area is a big out-door factory, devoted to the production of one specialized cash crop — usually cotton, sometimes corn or wheat. In 1935, almost half of the farms did not even have a kitchen garden or a milk cow; and not one out of 40 had an orchard or vineyard. Ever since the timber was cut off and Southeastern Missouri was opened up to farming some 20 years ago, the average share-cropper family has lived along a traditional Southern pattern. It has planted every foot of its acreage to cotton or some other cash crop; and it has bought its food — usually corn meal and fat pork — on credit at the plantation commissary.

This kind of farming has meant poor diet and poor health. It has kept the ordinary share-cropper family in debt, at high interest rates, from one year to the next. It has caused a rapid wastage of the soil's fertility, as continual cash-cropping always does. It has resulted in poverty and discontent among the landless farmers — and four out of every five Southeastern Missouri farmers are share-croppers or tenants. One sign of this restlessness is the fact that nearly half of the renters move from one farm to another every year. This aimless shifting has led to run-down land and farm buildings — because no tenant takes the best care of a place when he knows he will be somewhere else next year. Worse still, it has led to bad citizenship, because no family can educate its children properly, or find a solid place for itself in the community, when it is continually on the move.

From almost any point of view, the traditional system of farming in Southeastern Missouri has not been a success, in spite of the rich soil. It has made money for a few big landowners; but even these profits are not permanent, so long as the land is rapidly wearing out. For most of the farm people, it has resulted in

poverty and unrest. This is an unhealthy condition, particularly in a time of national emergency, when our American way of life is being challenged from all sides by foreign doctrines. One of the most disquieting symptoms of this unrest was a roadside demonstration in the winter of 1938 by several hundred Southeastern Missouri share-cropper families, who claimed that they had been evicted from their shacks and had nowhere to go and no way to earn a living.

An Experiment With 100 Families

In 1937 the Farm Security Administration set out to discover a new system of farming for Southeastern Missouri which would work better than the old. It decided to take the same land and the same people who had failed under the old system, and try to find new methods which might lead them to success.

Since the problems of Southeastern Missouri are very much like those of the whole Southern Plantation region, such an experiment promised to be of considerable value to the entire Mississippi Delta. If it succeeded, the new methods might be adopted by thousands of farmers; they might mean new life to a sick economy.

Consequently, the Farm Security Administration bought 6,700 acres near LaForge in New Madrid County, most of which had once been in a typical plantation. On this land there lived 100 share-cropper families — 60 of them white and 40 Negro. Their homes were unpainted, loose-boarded shacks with sagging roofs. In many cases a family of five or more had only one room for sleeping, cooking, and eating. Sanitation was primitive -- when there was any at all. Living standards were barely above the starvation level. All of the possessions of the average family -- including its clothes, furniture, farming equipment, livestock, and the food in the pantry -- amounted to only \$28 in value. Like the plantation they lived on, these families had not been able to make much headway under the traditional methods of farming.

For that very reason, the Farm Security Administration asked these people to stay on the land as members of the new project. It wanted to find out whether these run-of-the-mill share-croppers could make a decent, secure living if they had a chance under different conditions.

Few of the families living on the FSA land had any schooling beyond the grades, and some could not read or write. Originally they had come from Tennessee, Arkansas, Kentucky, the Old South

and the Southern Appalachian areas, to Southeast Missouri, because they had heard rumors of new cotton land where one acre yielded a bale and a half of cotton every year. Once they got there, they stayed on, trying to scrape a living from the few acres they could work on shares.

As Bedford Robinson, one of these farmers, said: "I wanted to leave many times, but I never could get anything ahead. I always managed to keep enough beans, salt pork, potatoes and flour out of the 'furnish' to keep us alive over the winter. By the time spring came around the supplies were gone and there was no money to buy more. I was glad to sharecrop just so we could get furnish again."

Building 100 Homes in 100 Days

The first step in establishing the new project was to build cheap but decent homes for all 100 families. It was decided after careful planning and study that such houses should be built for about \$1,300 each or less. It was also expected that the few standard house plans developed at La Forge could serve as models for farm homes elsewhere.

A new technique had to be found to make such a low cost possible. The construction method finally used was worked out by a group of architects and engineers under the direction of Captain Roy B. Lord, Corps of Engineers, who was loaned to the FSA by the Army.

This method called for prefabrication by a belt-line, mass-production system much like that used in an auto factory. An outdoor prefabrication plant was set up at a railway siding near the center of the project. Since most of the work was done during the dry season, a factory building was unnecessary. The equipment was simple and inexpensive, consisting principally of small power saws. Lumber was unloaded directly from railroad cars to a cutting yard, where the power saws cut each board according to specifications. These boards then were placed in jigs and nailed together in sections. The plant also produced concrete foundation blocks; wall panels with built-in door and window frames; gable ends, trusses, partition panels and similar structural members. These pieces were then loaded on a truck and hauled to the house site, where the different parts could be put together in a few hours.

The most important feature of the plant was its carefully-planned layout. Each step in the prefabrication process was arranged so that materials and semi-finished products flowed easily from one group of workmen to the next, with a minimum of delay and lost motion.

This simplification of construction work made possible the employment of many of the La Forge homesteaders, as well as unskilled workers from nearby towns. During the first six months of 1938, the major period of construction, a total of 156,184 man-hours of work was done by local laborers. These workmen were paid a total of \$83,529, which eventually went back into local trade channels.

As a result of the prefabrication method, 94 four and five-room frame houses, without baths, were built for an average construction cost of about \$1,100 each. This is believed to be the lowest cost at which comparable houses have ever been built in this country. Seven existing houses were remodeled or repaired.

From this experiment, the Farm Security Administration learned that prefabrication of houses had many obvious advantages. The power saws, for example, cut lumber to exact specifications in about one-sixth the time ordinarily required for hand-sawing, and their greater precision resulted in strong, tight fitting construction. Other advantages were the small investment in plant, the low cost of supervision, and the savings in time. Approximately a house a day was erected at the La Forge Farms project after the plant began operation.

The prefabrication system also had definite limitations. It would not be practicable where fewer than 50 houses were to be built, and it was necessary to have the house sites within a 20 mile radius of the prefabrication plant. It also showed that every variation from the standard design increased costs.

By late spring, the new, white houses with their screened porches had sprung up alongside many of the old cabins. When the 100 families moved into their new homes, they found walls of tongued-and-grooved vertical paneling, oiled to retain the natural grain of the wood; double floors; a brick chimney located to serve both the kitchen range and the living room; screened windows; and built-in cabinets in the kitchen.

The fly-infested tables, the piles of dirty bedding next to the stove were to be things of the past. Moreover, for the first time in its experience, each sharecropper family had an efficient barn, a sealed well, fences, food storage vaults and a sanitary privy. This meant better health and stronger people, who were able to do more and better work.

A New System of Farming

But the new buildings were only the beginning of the experiment. Making a living from the land was the most important part. The entire tract was divided up into individual farms ranging from 47 to 114 acres in size depending on the land's productivity. About three out of four farms had 50 to 80 acres. The cost of the average farm — including land, barn, well, privy, food storage shed, fences, and a two-bedroom house — came to \$5,330, of which \$1,028 was spent on construction of the house. The farm units with a three-bedroom home came to \$5,912 including the house, which cost \$1,217.

To get a new start on a more efficient basis than in the past, each family borrowed from FSA an average of about \$1,300 for the purchase of livestock, machinery, feed and seed. These loans were to be repaid at five percent interest in five years.

For 1938, a cash rent of \$50 was set for each unit, plus the crop-share rent amounting to one-fourth of the cotton crop. By the second year, when families became more settled, rent was entirely on a cash basis, ranging from \$150 to \$335. The average rent per farm was approximately \$220.

From the first, the families at La Forge Farms realized the project was going to mean a new way of life for them. Small group meetings were held before a single house was erected to talk over the new kind of farming and the new equipment which would be needed. The excitement was catching. Families began digging their gardens even before they were settled in their new homes.

These gardens were to furnish most of the family food supply. Each family also planned to raise pigs and chickens, to give them as one share-cropper said, "a bone with some meat on it". Moreover, cash crops were to be diversified. Now that each farmer was to cultivate his own land on a long-time, permanent basis, he was anxious to stop practices which wasted the soil, and to rotate crops on a scientific basis. About 15 to 20 acres of each tract were put in cotton, 15 to 20 acres in corn, and the rest in lespedeza or barley for pasture and hay, and soybeans for green manure. With the help of their loans, each family purchased two mules, a milk cow, fifty chickens, a sow and two shoats to butcher in the fall.

The picture of the farming on the project changed rapidly. Where there were six acres in garden before La Forge Farms got under way, there were now 60 acres in garden. Cotton acreage was reduced from 3,500 to 1,725 acres, and wheat from 475 acres to 90. The acreage in hay and legumes increased 1,000 percent, from 200 acres to more than 2,000 acres; and the 69 acres of land previously in pasture grew to 1,272 acres. The number of livestock rose from 25 milk cows to 115; from 60 hogs to 1,000; from 600 chickens to 5,000; and from 80 mules to 200.

Profits Through Co-operation

Families who had never learned to raise livestock, or to grow any other crop but cotton, were started on a long process of education. By the end of their second year on the project, the women had canned more than 50,000 quarts of vegetables to feed their families through the winter months. Farmers got together to buy heavy equipment, which was too expensive for any one farmer to afford alone. Through this simple kind of co-operation, each family got the use of good equipment at a cost of about \$220 each. It would have cost each family about \$900 to buy this equipment on an individual basis.

When the project first started, the absence of a "boss-man" forced the La Forge families to do their own thinking and develop their initiative as they never had before. The beginning of their biggest undertaking was symbolized by the gold-embossed charter granted by the state of Missouri for their La Forge Cooperative Association.

This association was organized primarily to run the \$25,000 gin already located on the land purchased for La Forge farms. The 100 families chipped in to start it on the basis of \$1 a share, one vote to each family.

A Board of Directors was elected to manage the business affairs of the cooperative association, and various committees were appointed to report the suggestions of homesteaders to the Directors. The Negro families also organized a "Negro Planning Council" which has active committees to handle recreation, night schools, and other related work. One of the council's big jobs is to explain co-op work to the Negro families.

The cooperative fast developed beyond its original purpose of running the gin for the benefit of all. The Association borrowed \$19,930 from the Government to begin operations. It leased the existing cotton gin, warehouses, cotton seed houses, store and office buildings, blacksmith shop, manager's residence, and a large barn, and also began to operate a pure-bred sire service.

The Association decided to plant only one variety of high-grade certified cotton seed. After studying the varieties grown in the territory, they selected D.-and-P.-L., 11A. The cotton gin of the La Forge Cooperative Association became the first one-variety gin in Missouri. As a result, about 97 percent of the cotton grown at La Forge has been valued at a premium of from \$1.50 to \$5 per bale above the regular price. The total cotton crop of 1,380 bales in 1938 brought approximately \$56,000 to the growers.

The La Forge Cooperative is now paying \$3,600 annual rent to the government for the buildings and equipment which it uses, and is a year ahead with the repayments on its operating loan. This year it will distribute back to its 100 members about \$3,500 in profits, after making an extra year's payment on its government loan.

A New Start Towards Education

The election of officers and directors of the cooperative and the creation of committees led to wider group discussions. Community interest spread itself to other important activities, unrelated to the purely business activities of the cooperative. The women's advisory group started a library service, for example, by working out a plan to pay the express charges on packages of books borrowed from the Missouri State Library. Later, the women were able to buy books to start a library of their own.

The homesteaders, acutely aware of the educational opportunities they had missed, wanted classes for adults. The Work Projects Administration furnished a teacher for those interested in singing and band music, and another WPA teacher taught adult Negroes who were anxious to learn to "read 'n write 'n figger." Some of the young people were given part-time jobs by the National Youth Administration; and six of these girls are now being trained to assist in educational work on the project.

A school, newly-built, is opening this fall with accommodations for 160 pupils. The school auditorium will be used for church services and other community meetings. Since 65 percent of the land in the school district is owned by FSA, this agency made a grant of \$7,500 to the school board, which supplied the rest of the money necessary to build the school. The Work Projects Administration contributed the labor. For the Negro children, two school districts have cooperated to build a new school, and tear down the old ramshackle school buildings. Excellent teachers with Grade A certificates have been hired to run both schools.

Other educational activities also have developed on the project. There are 4-H clubs for the young people, a women's store committee, a knitting and crocheting club, and other clubs for home improvement. At times, these groups undertake surveys to find out various community needs; for example, one recent survey was made to find out how many La Forge people needed glasses.

Under a special health program, individual families have contracted with their physicians to get emergency medical care at a fixed fee, averaging about \$18 per family. Plans for a medical care program on an insurance basis, with free choice of physician, are now being seriously considered by the Cooperative Association's Board of Directors and the rest of the families at La Forge. Such a plan would include medical care, prescribed drugs, surgery and hospitalization.

One FSA employe who has worked closely with the La Forge families recently remarked; "Fundamental adjustments have taken place in the lives of these people during the period of transition from a one-crop system to diversified farming. In place of reliance upon the "boss man" for management and instruction, there is now reliance upon their own information and initiative. Where once their energies went almost entirely to raising one crop, they now must know how to care for cows, mules, hogs, and poultry; how to raise corn, grain, grasses, and a variety of garden produce; and how to maintain and care for their new houses, their lawns, and the outbuildings. Before, they looked to the "boss-man" for furnish to tide them over from season to season. Now they must plan for the growing and canning of their own foods. All these activities and responsibilities call into play information, skills, and intelligence that the sharecroppers formerly had no occasion to use. Thus, the transition is in itself a process of education for them."

The Balance Sheet

This process of education has led directly to economic gains. The families at La Forge, with two or three exceptions, have met all their obligations to the government, including rent and payments on equipment and livestock loans. Each family has increased its average gross worth in its two years in the project from \$28 to more than \$1,400.

The summary of progress made by December 20, 1939 speaks for itself:

GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT:

Land and buildings for farms.....	\$598,030.00
Operating loans to families.....	131,454.00
Land and Improvements leased to Cooperative Ass'n....	35,529.00
Operating Loan to Cooperative Ass'n.....	19,930.00
Waste Land.....	<u>1,500.00</u>
Total	\$786,443.00

*RETURN TO GOVERNMENT IN TWO YEAR PERIOD:

Repayments on Individual Operating Loans, 1938-1939	\$ 42,438.47
Rent for Individual Farms 1938-1939.....	42,364.77
Repayment on Cooperative Operating Loan, Including interest 1938-1939.....	2,643.85
Rent for property Leased to Cooperative Association 1938-1939.....	<u>7,008.00</u>
Total	<u>\$94,455.09</u>

*These amounts represent full amount due and paid to the Government. Five families owe a total of \$500.00 which has not been paid due to loss of livestock. These families were allowed to become delinquent for a limited period so that they could purchase replacements.

There is every prospect that the government's entire investment will be repaid, with interest, within a relatively short period.

BEFORE PROJECT STARTED

FAMILY INVENTORY

FARM AND HOME

Gross worth in December, 1937 - \$28.00 per family. This amount included all possessions held by the families at that time.

THE END OF TWO-YEAR PERIOD ON THE PROJECT

FAMILY INVENTORY

FARM AND HOME

Surplus cash, over and above all expenses including rent and loan repayments and all operating expenses for 1939, amounted to \$377.71 per family. In addition to surplus cash received by the families, the inventory of their personal property valued at present market values is:

635 tons of hay	\$ 3,810.00
22,118 bushels corn	12,165.00
15,203 pounds of lespedeza seed	608.00
100 tons certified planting cotton seed	3,500.00
1,856 head hog (sows & shoats, etc.)	7,250.00
226 head cattle (cows and heifers)	7,484.00
215 head workstock	26,500.00
100 complete sets farming tools	22,500.00
100 household furnishings	25,000.00
3,335 head poultry	<u>800.00</u>
Total	<u>\$109,617.00</u>

The surplus cash and the inventory makes an average gross worth of \$1,474.71 per family as contrasted to the gross worth of \$28.00 per family two years ago.

The progress which these 100 former share-cropper families have made has surprised everyone, including themselves. Simply by farming the same land, where they once had failed, in a new and better way, these people have achieved an American standard of living within the brief period of two years. They have become substantial citizens,

who are assets to the entire community; and they are rapidly paying back every penny the government has invested to help them get a new start.

But the real significance of Southeastern Missouri Farms lies beyond its own borders. The project apparently has demonstrated that ordinary tenants and share-croppers — the kind of people sometimes described as "shiftless" — can make good with a little training and financial help — and at little or no cost to the taxpayer.

The La Forge experiment already is attracting widespread attention among the farm people of Southeastern Missouri. If its success continues, it may carry a lesson for the entire Plantation South.

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U. S. Department of Agriculture
Farm Security Administration
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