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JAFSCD COMMENTARY

In search of the New Farmers of America: Remembering America's forgotten Black youth farm movement

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Any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot,
Silencing the Past, p. 27

On October 13, 1965, the New Farmers of America (NFA) disappeared without a trace. The organization had operationalized one of the largest Black youth farm movements in American history and boasted a membership of over 50,000 Black farm boys studying vocational agriculture in public high schools in 18 states across the South and parts

of the East Coast. They were last seen in the shadows of the Jim Crow era, participating in the national convention of the majority-white Future Farmers of America (FFA)—now named the National FFA Organization—in Kansas City, Missouri. At the convention, a ceremony took place that symbolized the July 1, 1965, decision to merge the NFA and FFA. But for some, as one former member told me, the “merger” was more like a “hostile takeover.” The “pageantry of the merger,” as Cecil L. Strickland, Sr. (1994, p. 44) described it, required Adolphus Pinson, the NFA's last president, to surrender the organization's charter to Kenneth Kennedy, the national FFA president. “I am duly authorized to transfer to you the National NFA Charter, together with the permanent record of officers of the organization,” Pinson told Kennedy. “Also, to inform you that the total membership of 50,807 students of vocational agriculture in 12 states are now active members of the

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Future Farmers of America” (Strickland, 1994, p. 43). The NFA charter was placed in the national FFA archives along with the minutes of the last NFA convention and important cultural artifacts of the organization, including its banner and flag. The NFA also transferred the US\$20,000 in its savings account to the FFA treasury. The final nail in the coffin for the NFA occurred when Pinson took off his NFA jacket and handed it to Kennedy. In return, Kennedy presented Pinson with an FFA jacket, declaring, “The exchanging of this NFA jacket for the FFA jacket by you, the last NFA President, symbolizes the joining together all students of vocational agriculture into one great organization” (Strickland, 1994, p. 46). And with Kennedy’s final statement, the NFA vanished.

What is analytically interesting about the mere existence and disappearance of the NFA is the near total absence of the organization in American history and histories of the Black experience. The absence of the organization in scholarly and public conversations about food justice, food sovereignty, and land justice in the context of urban and rural Black life. The absence of the NFA in ongoing, mainstream debates about the plight of Black farmers or the lack of Black youth and other marginalized communities interested in agriculture and farming.

Most people hear about the NFA through flashpoints in the history of the FFA. The *Journal of Agricultural Education*, the premier journal in the discipline of agricultural education, is virtually the only academic terrain that provides glimpses of the remarkable history of the NFA. Even there, only five articles have been published on the NFA (Connors, 2021; Connors et al., 2010; S. L. Jones et al., 2021; W. A. Jones et al., 2021; Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). While this scholarship provides a crucial window through which we can begin to see and unearth the story of the NFA, it situates the NFA in relation to the FFA. This positioning obscures the rich and instructive history of the NFA—producing “a particular bundle of silences,” borrowing the words of anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, surrounding the life of the NFA.

In many respects, such silences around the NFA raise a number of questions. What was the

NFA? How did it operate? Why do we not know about the NFA? Who were the key figures in the organization? Who were the over 50,000 Black farm boys who devoted themselves to the NFA? How did the NFA affect their lives? Where are they now? What can we learn about the NFA that could help us understand the current state of agriculture in rural and urban Black communities? How does the existence of the NFA reshape how we think about American history in general and Black history in particular? How can the NFA be a blueprint for Black youth today who are interested in agriculture but do not see any representation? As a scholar who studies agriculture and food in Black life, I purposely pose these questions in no particular order because that is how they entered my mind when I unknowingly started my search for the NFA.

Interestingly, my search for the NFA began with a text message. I was at home on the evening of March 17, 2019, watching some random show on Netflix, when I received a text message from my sister. She had been in my mother’s garage all day, cleaning out old storage bins from her own college days at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU), the Lone Star State’s 1890 land-grant university that is also designated as one of the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). It had been about 15 years since my sister had even seen the bins, and they were filled with old books and notes from her undergraduate studies as an agriculture major focused on agronomy. As she combed through book after book, reminiscing about her academic life on “The Hill,” buried in the crevices of the last bins, she found two books: Ernest M. Norris’s *Forty Long Years* and Cecil L. Strickland, Sr.’s *New Farmers of America in Retrospect: The Formative Years 1935-1965*. She immediately stopped going through the bins, snapped a picture of the books and sent it to me. “Going through old books and came across these gems,” her text message captioned the picture. As I examined the books in the photo and conducted a quick Google search of them, I found out that both books documented the history of the NFA. I was blown away by the fact that I had never heard of the organization. My sister was a student of Strickland, and he was a student of Norris, yet my

sister's intellectual lineage in the study of agriculture was never a topic of conversation growing up. Even though Norris and Strickland are no longer with us, their work in NFA and as professors of agricultural education at PVAMU played a crucial role in the development of the College of Agriculture and Human Sciences (CAHS) at PVAMU—the same college I graduated from in 2011. Excited about my “discovery,” I responded to my sister's text: “I NEED all of those!!! And anything else you find is great!! I'm going to write a paper on them.” A few weeks later, I received the books from my sister and embarked on my search for the NFA.

Founded as a national organization in 1935, the NFA was more than just an organization for Black boys in rural America. It was an incubator for the early twentieth-century Black youth farm movement that began in the South. This movement shaped the minds of Black boys and their communities. The NFA offered them a pathway to use agriculture as a site for Black self-determination, community uplift, economic vitality, and food security. The NFA was also a pipeline for Black boys who wanted to study agriculture at the college level at HBCUs, and these institutions provided administrative space for the organization. This pipeline produced generations of Black farmers, college professors, college presidents, federal USDA agents, cooperative extension personnel, and state agriculture officials, to name a few roles that NFA members assumed over the years. As I learned more about the NFA's pipeline, I reached out to two of my own professors at PVAMU to inquire about their knowledge of the NFA. I was surprised to find out that they were both products of the NFA. In our many conversations, both told me that the NFA is the reason why they decided to pursue a career in agriculture through the prism of teaching, research, and service in higher education. They also made clear to me that the NFA is one of the reasons why they wanted to train the next generation of Black boys like me who majored in agriculture and were interested in pursuing a career related to agriculture and food systems.

Three years into my search for the NFA, I am now working on the first book that tells the story of the NFA in Texas, formally known as the Texas Association of the New Farmers of

America. I see this book as my “homecoming” book in that I see myself as a part of this story. The story reveals that the NFA was not a product of a relationship between the NFA and FFA; it was born out of the lives of Black boys who navigated a sociopolitical landscape of agricultural education that itself was shaped by racial segregation in the wake of the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 that authorized the nation's precollege vocational agricultural education program that operated in public schools (Strickland, 1994). The scant research and discourses that discuss the NFA have provided an important narrative that captures the national story of the NFA, but overlooks the particularities of the organization at the local and state levels and how it shaped Black life in places like Texas. Understanding and documenting such particularities requires us to work against the deafening silence that has long rendered the NFA invisible.

As I am writing this essay, Antoine J. Alston, Dexter B. Wakefield, and Netta S. Cox's book *The Legacy of the New Farmers of America* represents the most recent treatment of the NFA. This book mixes photographs with stories about the NFA that emphasize the structure and leadership of the organization to honor and illuminate “the historical significance and legacy of the New Farmers of America and its former members” (Alston et al., 2022, p. 6). The book follows along the same lines as the current scholarship on the NFA. My book takes a “bottom-up” approach to understanding the story of the NFA and creates a conversation between the national body, state associations, and local chapters. This approach will enable my book to de-center the FFA and shed light on how the NFA emerged in rural Black communities as they struggled for access to vocational agricultural education in the early twentieth century. It will also show how the NFA continues today in the lives of Black children like me in organizations including the National FFA and the National Society for Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS). It is my hope that my book, as it builds on the minimal scholarship on the NFA, invites others to begin their own search for the NFA. The NFA provides a model for those concerned about agriculture in Black life.

This model centers Black youth, who are often overlooked in discussions about the future of the agricultural worlds we navigate as a nation. Indeed, such worlds are steeped in inequality at multiple

levels. But the NFA shows us that in the face of such inequality, Black youth offer us a canvas by which we can reshape the past, present, and future of agriculture.



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