9. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

JAMES AGEE

Judging only from the facts of his biography, one would not be able to guess that James Agee (1909-1955)—middle-class native of Knoxville, Harvard '32, staff writer for Henry Luce (first Fortune, then Time), movie reviewer for The Nation, screen writer, and would-be novelist—was capable of producing an extraordinarily haunting exposition of the life flow of the American tenant farmer. It took a long time, but it is now recognized almost universally that Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is a great work of reportage which, in its sensibility, its painstaking accuracy, its humility, its noble orchestration, its indelible marriage of words and unforgettable photographs (by Walker Evans), is also an American classic. The reason for it is quite simply that James Agee was—in addition to the other listable merits of his tragically brief biography—a poet. And this not just because he had published a book of verse (Permut Me Voyage, 1934) but because he was driven as are all true poets to find the exact word, the exact phrase, and to hunt unflinchingly for the truth. Working during school vacations as a harvest stiff in the Kansas and Nebraska wheat fields, he had developed a deep love of the land. When, in the summer of 1935, he and Walker Evans went South on assignment from Fortune magazine to write up the sharecroppers, he was so overcome by the overwhelming reality of what he encountered that he gave up his job to devote himself to writing with these people as one of them and to writing of what he had been through.
At the end of the season he pays him back further, with half his corn, with half his cotton, with half his cottonseed. Out of his own half of these crops he also pays him back the rations, money, plus interest, and his share of the fertilizers, plus interest, and such other debts, plus interest, as he may have incurred.

What is left, once doctors' bills and other debts have been deducted, is his year's earnings.

Gudger is a straight half-cropper, or sharecropper.

Woods and Ricketts own no home and no land, but woods owns one mule and Ricketts owns two, and they own their farming implements. Since they do not have to rent these tools and animals, they work under a slightly different arrangement. They give over to the landlord only a third of their cotton and a fourth of their corn. Out of their own parts of the crop, however, they owe him the price of two thirds of their cotton fertilizer and three fourths of their corn fertilizer, plus interest; and, plus interest, the same debts on rations money.

Woods and Ricketts are tenants; they work on third and fourth.

A very few tenants pay cash rent; but these two types of arrangement, with local variations (company stores, food instead of rations money, slightly different divisions of the crops) are basic to cotton tenantry all over the South.

From March through June, while the cotton is being cultivated, they live on the rations money.

From July through to late August, while the cotton is making, they live however they can.

From late August through October or into November, during the picking and ginning season, they live on the money from their share of the cottonseed.

From then on until March, they live on whatever they have earned in the year; or however they can.
During six to seven months of each year, then—that is, during exactly such time as their labor with the cotton is of absolute necessity to the landlord—they can be sure of whatever living is possible in rentals advanced and in cottonseed money. During five to six months of the year, of which three are the hardest months of any year, with the worst of weather, the least adequacy of harvest, the worst and least of food, the worst of health, quite normal and inevitable, they can count on nothing except that they may hope least of all for any help from their landlords.

Codgers—a family of six—lives on ten dollars a month rations money during four months of the year. He has lived on eight, and on six, Woods—a family of six—until this year was unable to get better than eight a month during the same period; this year he managed to get it up to ten. Rickotts—a family of six—lives on ten dollars a month during this spring and early summer period.

This debt is paid back in the fall at eight per cent interest. Eight per cent is charged also on the fertilizer and on all other debts which tenants incur in this vicinity.

At the normal price, a half-sharing tenant gets about six dollars a bale from his share of the cottonseed. A one-mule, half-sharing tenant makes on the average three bales. This half-cropper, then, Codger, can count on eighteen dollars, more or less, to live on during the picking and ginning; though he gets nothing until his first bale is ginned.

Working on third and fourth, a tenant gets the money from two thirds of the cottonseed of each bale: nine dollars to the bale. Woods, with one mule, makes three bales, and gets twenty-seven dollars. Rickotts, with two mules, makes and gets twice that, to live on during the late summer and fall.

What is earned at the end of a given year is never to be depended on and, even later in a season, is never predictable.

James Agee 149

It can be enough to tide through the dead months of the winter, sometimes even better: it can be enough, spread very thin, to take through two months, and a sickness, or six weeks, or a month: it can be little enough to be completely meaningless: it can be nothing: it can be enough less than nothing to insure a tenant only of an equally hopeless lack of money at the end of his next year's work: and whatever year may bring in the way of good luck, there is never any reason to hope that that lack will be repeated in the next year or the year after that.

The best that Woods has ever cleared was $1300 during a war year. During the teens and twenties he fairly often cleared as much as $300, he fairly often cleared $500 and less; two or three times he ended the year in debt. During the depression years he has more often cleared $100 and less; last year he cleared $150, but serious illness during the winter ate it up rapidly.

The best that Codger has ever cleared is $120. That was in the poor-under year. He felt exceedingly hopeful and bought a mule; but when his landlord warned him of how he was coming out the next year, he sold it. Most years he has not made more than $55 to $70, and about one year in three he has ended in debt. Year before last he wound up $80 in debt; last year, $12; of Boles, his new landlord, the first thing he had to do was borrow $14 to get through the winter until rations advances should begin.

Years ago the Rickotts were, relatively speaking, almost prosperous. Besides their cotton farming they had ten cows and sold milk, and they lived near a good stream and had all the fish they wanted. Rickotts went $40 into debt on a fine young pair of mules. One of the mules died before it had made its first crop; the other died the year after; against his fear, amounting to full horror, of sinking to the half-crop level where nothing is owned, Rickotts went into debt for other, inferior mules; his cows went one by one into debts and desper-
It is not often, then, at the end of the season, that a tenant clears enough money to tide him through the winter, or even an appreciable part of it. More generally he can count on it that, during most of the four months between settlement time in the fall and the beginning of work and resumption of ration advances in the early spring, he will have no money and can expect none, nor any help, from his landlord; and of having no money during the six midsummer weeks of laying by, he can be still more sure. Four to six months of each year, in other words, he is much more likely than not to have nothing whatever, and during these months he must take care for himself; he is no responsibility of the landlord's. All he can hope to do is find work. This is hard, because there are a good many chronically unemployed in the towns, and they are more convenient to most openings for work and can at all times be counted on if they are needed, also there is no increase, during these two dead farming seasons, of other kinds of work to do. And so, with no more jobs open than at any other time of year, and with plenty of men already convenient to take them, the whole tenant population, hundreds and thousands in any locality, are desperately in need of work.

A landlord saves up certain odd jobs for these times of year; they go, at least, he would have to pay others, to those of his tenants who happen to live nearest or to those he thinks best of; and even at best they don’t amount to much. When there is wooded land on the farm, a landlord ordi-

narily permits a tenant to cut and sell firewood for what he can get. About the best a tenant gets of this is a dollar a load, but more often (for the market is glutted, so many are trying to sell wood) he can get no better than half that and less, and often enough, at the end of a hard day's peddling, miles from home, he will let it go for a quarter or fifteen cents rather than haul it all the way home again: so it doesn’t amount to much. Then, too, by no means everyone has wood to cut and sell. In the whole southern half of the county we were working mainly in, there was so little wood that the negroes, during the hard winter of 1935-36, were burning parts of their fences, outbuildings, furniture and houses, and were dying off in great and not seriously counted numbers, of pneumonia and other afflictions of the lungs.

WPA work is available to very few tenants; they are, technically, employed, and thus have no right to it: and if by chance they manage to get it, landlords are more likely than not to intervene. They feel it spalls a tenant to be paid wages, even for a little while. A tenant who so much as tries to get such work is under disapproval.

There is not enough direct relief even for the widows and the old of the county.

Gudder and Ricketts, during this year, were exceedingly lucky. After they, and Woods, had been turned away from government work, they found work in a sawmill. They were given the work on condition that they stay with it until the mill was moved, and subject strictly to their landlords’ permission: and their employer wouldn’t so much as hint how long the work might last. Their landlords quite grudgingly gave them permission, on condition that they pay for whatever help was needed in their absence during the picking season. Gudder hired a hand, at eight dollars a month and board. Ricketts did not need to: his family is large enough. They got a dollar and a quarter a day five days a week and seventy-five cents on Satur-
day, seven dollars a week, ten hours' work a day. Work did not even try for this work: he was too old and too sick.

Work

To come devoutly into the depths of a subject, your respect for it increasing in every step and your whole heart weakening apart with shame upon yourself in your dealing with it: To know at length better and better and at length into the bottom of your soul your unworthiness of it: Let me hope in any case that it is something to have begun to learn. Let this all stand however it may, since I cannot make it the image it should be, let it stand as the image it is: I am speaking of my verbal part of this book as a whole. By what kind of foreword I can make clear some essential coherence in it, which I know is there, balanced of its chaos, I do not yet know. But the time is come when it is necessary for me to say at least this much: and now, having said it, to go on, and to try to make an entrance into this chapter, which should be an image of the very essence of their lives: that is, of the work they do.

It is for the clothing, and for the food, and for the shelter, by these to sustain their lives, that they work. Into this work and need, their minds, their spirits, and their strength are so steadily and intensely drawn that during such time as they are not at work, life exists for them scarcely more clearly or in more variety and seizure and appetite than it does for the more simply organized among the animals, and for the plants. This achieves physical work, to which a consciousness beyond that of the simplest child would be only a useless and painted encumbrance, is undertaken without choice or the thought of chance of choice, taught forward from father to son and from mother to daughter, and its essential and few returns you have seen: the houses they live in; the clothes they wear: and have still to see, and for the present to imagine, what it brings them to eat, what it has done to their bodies, and to their consciousness; and what it leaves of their leisure, the pleasures which are made available to these. I say here only: work as a means to other ends might have some favor in it, even which was of itself dull and heartless work, in which one's strength was used for another man's benefit, but the ends of this work were absorbed all but entirely into the work itself, and in what little remains, nearly all is obliterated, nearly nothing is obtainable; nearly all is cruelly stained, in the tensions of physical need, and in the desperate terrors of the need of work which is not available.

I have said this now three times. If I were capable, as I wish I were, I could say it once in such a way that it would be there in its complete awesomeness. Yet knowing, too, how it is repeated upon each of them, in every day of their lives, so powerfully, so entirely, that it is simply the natural air they breathe, I wonder whether it could ever be said enough times.

The phantasm and tortuousness of work must be one of the things which make it so extraordinarily difficult to write of. The plain details of a task once represented, a seem enough effort in itself, how is it possibly to be made clear enough that this same set of leverages has been undertaken by this woman in nearly every day of the eleven or the twenty-five years since her marriage, and will be persisted in in nearly every day to come in all the rest of her life; and that it is only one among the many processes of wearying effort which make the shape of each one of her living days; how is it to be calculated, the number of times she has done these things, the number of times she is still to do them, how conceivably in words is it to be given as it is in actuality, the accumulated weight of these actions upon her; and what this cumulative has made of her
bodily; and what it has made of her mind and of her heart and of her being. And how is this to be made so real to you who read of it, that it will stand and stay in you as the deepest and most iron anguish and guilt of your existence that you are what you are, and that she is what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at her: but only by consuming all that is in you into the never relaxed determination that this shall be made different and shall be made right, and that of what is 'right' some; enough to die for, is clear already, and the vast darkness of the rest has still, and far more passionately and more skeptically than ever before, to be questioned into, defied, and learned toward. There is no way of taking the heart and the intelligence by the hair and of wresting it to its feet, and of making it look this terrific thing in the eyes: which are such gentle eyes: you may meet them, with all the summoning of heart you have, in the photographs in this volume of the young woman with black hair: and they are to be multiplied, not Seizing the knowledge that each is a single, unrepeatable, holy individual, by the two billion human creatures who are alive upon the planet today, of whom a few hundred thousands are drawn into complications of specialized anguish, but of whom the huge swarm and majority are made and acted upon as she is: and of all these individuals, contemplate, try to encompass, the one annihilating chord.

But I must make a new beginning.

(Selection from Part 1)

The family exists for work. It exists to keep itself alive, it is a cooperative economic unit. The father does one set of tasks; the mother another; the children still a third, with the sons and daughters serving apprenticeship to their father and mother respectively. A family is called a force, without irony, and

children come into the world chiefly that they may help with the work and that through their help the family may increase itself. Their early years are leisurely; a child's life work begins as play. Among his first imitative gestures are gestures of work, and the whole imitative course of his maturing and biologic cervix is a stepdaughter of the learning of physical tasks and skills. This work solidifies, and becomes steadily more and more in greater and greater quantity and variety, an integral part of his life.

Besides imitation, he works if he is a man under three complications, in three stages. First for his parents. Next for himself, single and wandering in the independence of his early manhood: 'for himself,' in the sense that he wants to stay alive, or better, and has no one dependent on him. Third, for himself and his wife and his family, under an employer. A woman works just for her parents; next, without a transition phase, for her husband and family.

Work for your parents is one thing: work 'for yourself' is another. They are both hard enough, yet light, relative to what is to come. On the day you are married, at about sixteen if you are a girl, at about twenty if you are a man, a key is turned, with a sound not easily audible, and you are locked between the state earth and the sky, the key turns in the lock behind you, and your full life's work begins, and there is nothing conceivable for which it can afford to stop short of your death, which is a long way off. It is perhaps at its best during the first two years or so, when you are young and perhaps are still enjoying one another or have not yet lost all hope, and when there are not yet so many children as to weigh you on. It is perhaps at its worst during the next ten to twelve years, when there are more and more children, but none of them old enough, yet, to be much help. One could hardly describe it as slackening off after that, for in proportion with the size of the family, it has been necessary to take on more land and more work, and, too, a son or daughter gets just old enough to be
any full good to you, and marries or strikes out for himself; yet it is true, anyhow, that from them on there are a number of strong and fairly responsible people in the household besides the man and his wife. In really old age, with one of the two dead, and the children all married, and the widowed one making his home among them in the slow rotations of a floated twig, waiting to die, it does ease off some, depending more than on the individual: one may choose to try to work hard and seem still capable, out of duty and the wish to help, or out of egosism, or out of the dread of dropping out of life, or one may relax, and live unnoticed, never spoken to, dead already; or again, life may have acted on you in such a way that you have no choice in it; or still again, with a wife dead, and children gone, and a long hard lifetime behind you, you may choose to marry again and begin the whole cycle over, lifting onto your back the great weight a young man carries, as Woods has done.

That is the general pattern, its motion within itself little-unfolded, slow, gradual, grand, tremendously and quietly weighted, as a heroic dance: and the bodies in this dance, and the spirits, undergoing their slow, miraculous, and dreadful changes: such a thing indeed should be constructed of just these persons: the great, seemer, bloodbrooded, beanroot helmed fetus unfurling within Woods' wife; the infants of three families, staggering happily, their hats held full of freshly picked cotton; the Rickeets children like delirious fan-wes and panthers; and secret Pearl with her wicked skin; Louise, lifting herself to rest her back, the heavy sack trailing, her eyes on you; Junior, pardon her joy, malingered, his fingers sore; the Rickeets daughters, the younger stepping beautifully as a young mare, the elder at the stove with her mouth twisted; Annie Mae at twenty-seven, in her angular sweeping, every motion a wonder to watch; George, in his Sunday clothes with his cuffs short on his blocked wrists, looking at you, his head slightly to one side, his earnest eyes a little squinted as if he were looking into a light; Mrs. Rickeets, is that time of mourning when from the corn she reaps into the green roasting grounds of her home, falls into a chair with gaspings which are almost groaning sobs, and dries in her lifted skirt her delicate and quaking head, Max-Molly, chopping wood as if in each blow of the axe she held captured in focus the vengeance of all time; Woods, slowed in his picking, forced to stop and rest much too often, whose death is hastened against Auctor's warnings in that he is picking at all: I see these among others, on the clay in the grave mutations of a dance whose business is the genius of a moving camera, and which it is not my hope ever to record: yet here, perhaps, if not of these archaic circulations of the rude clay altar, yet of their shapes of work, I can make a few crude sketches:

A man: George Godger, Thomas Woods, Fred Rickeets: his work is with the land, in the seasons of the year, in the sustenance and ordering of his family, the training of his sons.

A woman: Annie Mae Godger, Ivy Woods, Sadie Rickeets: her work is in the keeping of the home, the preparation of food against each day and against the dead season, the bearing and care of her children, the training of her daughters.

Children: all these children: their work is as it is told to them and taught to them until such time as they shall strengthen and escape, and, escaped of one imprisonment, are submitted into another.

There are times of year when all these three are overlapped and collaborated, all in the field in the demand, chiefly, of cotton; but more largely, the woman is the servant of the day, and of time-biotic life, and the man is the servant of the year, and of the basis and boundaries of life, and is their ruler, and the children are the servants of their parents: and the center of all their existence, the central work, that by which they have their land, their shelter, their living, that which they must work for no reward more than this, because they do not own themselves, and without hope or interest, that which they cannot eat and
get no money of but which is at the center of their duty and
greatest expense of strength and spirit, the cultivation and
harvesting of cotton: and all this effort takes place between a
sterile earth and an uncontrollable sky in whose propitiation
is centered their chief reverence and fear, and the deepest
earnestness of their prayers, who read in these machinations of
their heaven all signs of a fate which the hardest work cannot
much help, and, not otherwise than as the most ancient peoples
of the earth, make their plantations in the upwelling pieties of
the moon.

WORK 2: COTTON

Cotton is only one among several crops and among many
labors: and all these other crops and labors mean life itself.
Cotton means nothing of the sort. It demands more work of a
tenant family and yields less reward than all the rest. It is the
reason the tenant has the means to do the rest, and to have
the rest, and to live, as a tenant, at all. Aside from a few
negligibilities of minor side and barter and of out-of-season
work, it is his one possible source of money, and through this
fact, though his living depends far less on money than on the
manipulations of immediate nature, it has a certain royalty.
It is also that by which he has all else besides money. But it is
also his chief contracted obligation, for which he must neglect
all else as need be; and is the central leverage and symbol of
his privation and of his wasted life. It is the one crop and labor
which is in no possible way useful as it stands to the tenant's
living; it is among all these the one which must and can be
turned into money, it is among all these the one in which the
landowner is most interested; and it is among all these the one
of which the tenant can hope for least, and can be sure that
he is being cheated, and is always to be cheated. All other
tasks are incidental to it; it is constantly on everyone's mind,
yet of all of them it is the work in which the tenant has least
hope and least interest, and to which he must devote the most
energy. Any less involved and self-contradictory attempt to
understand what cotton and cotton work 'means' to a tenant
would, it seems to me, be false to it. It has the doubleness that
all jobs have by which one stays alive and in which one's life
is made a cheated ruin, and the same spun and twined and
effect on those who must work at it: but it is because it is only one
among the many jobs by which a tenant family must stay alive,
and deflects all these others, and receives still other light from
their more personal need, reward, and value, its meanings are
much more complex than those of most jobs: it is a strong state
magnet among many others more weak and more yielding of
life and hope. In the mind of one in whom all these magnet
isms are daily and habituated from his birth, these meanings
are some somber mill: yet all their several forces are pulling at
once, and by them the brain is quietly drawn and quartered.
It seems to me it is only through such a complex of meanings
that a tenant can feel, toward that crop, toward each plant in
it, toward all that work, what he and all grown women too ap
pear to feel, a particular automatism, a quiet, apathetic, and
inarticulate yet deeply vindictive hatred, and at the same time
utter hopelessness, and the deepest of their anxieties and of
their hopes: as if the plant stood enormous in the unlit sky
fastened above them in all they do like the eyes of an overseer.
To do all of the hardest work of your life in service of these
drawings-apart of ambitions; and to have all other tasks and
all one's consciousness stained and drawn apart in it: I can
conceive of little else which could be so inevitably destructive
of the appetite for living, of the spirit, of the being, or by what-
ever name the centers of individuals are to be called; and this
very literally: for just as there are deep chemical or electric
changes in all the body under anger, or love, or fear, so there
must certainly be at the center of these meanings and their
directed emotions perhaps most essentially, an inscrutably numbed and heavy weight and dark knotted iron of substance at the peak of the dimples, darkening and weakening the whole body and being, the literal swaying by which the words a broken heart are no longer poetic, but are merely the most accurate possible description.

Yet these things as themselves are wrought almost beyond visibility, and the true focus and right telling of it would be in the exact textures of each immediate task.

Of cotton farming I know almost nothing with my own eyes; the rest I have of Bud Woods. I asked enough of other people to realize that every tenant suffers a little in his methods, so nothing of this can be set down as 'standard' or 'correct'; but the dissonances are of small detail rather than of the frame and series in the year. I respect dialects too deeply, when they are used by those who have a right to them, not to be hesitant in using them, but I have decided to use some of Woods' language here. I have decided, too, to try to use my imagination a little, as carefully as I can. I must warn you that the result is sure to be somewhat inaccurate: but it is accurate anyhow to my ignorance, which I would not wish to disguise.

From the end of the season and on through the winter the cotton and the corn stand stripped and destroyed, the cotton black and brown, the corn gray and brown and rotted gold, much more shattered, the beds of woodland bare, drenched and black, the clay dirt numbed wet or hard with a shine of iron, peaceful and exhausted; the look of trees in a once full-blowcd country where such a burning of war has gone there is no food left even for birds and insects, all now brought utterly quiet, and the bare homes dark with dampness, under the soft and mourning midwinter suits of autumnal days, when all glossy gold yet lifeless, and under constrictions of those bitter froezings when the clay is shafted and splinted with ice, and the aching thinly drifted snows which give the land its shape, and, above all, the long, cold, silent, intractable, and dark winter rains:

In the late fall or middle February this tenant, which of the three or of the millions I do not care—a man, dressed against the wet coldness, may be seen small and dark in his prostrated fields, taking down these sometimes huddle, sometimes rotted forests of last year's crops with a club or with a scythe, putting death to bed, cleaning the land and late in February, in fulfillment of an obligation to his landlord, be he a second moon and, with 3/2 or 4/horse plow, run up the levees.2 that is, the terraces, which shall preserve his land, this in a softening mild brightness and odoriferousness of vegetation spring, and a rustling shearing apart of the heavy kind, his mules moving in slow source-sweated method as of work before dawn, knowing the real year's work to be not started yet, only made ready for. It is when this is done, at about the first of March, that the annual work begins, with what is planted where, and with what grade and amount of fertilizer, determined by the landlord, who will also, if he wishes, criticize, advise, and govern at all stages of planting and cultivation, but the physical work, and for that matter the knowledge by which he works, is the tenant's, and this is his tenth or his fortieth year's beginning of it, and it is of the tenant I want to tell.

How you break the 'seed in the first place depends on whether you have one or two or three miles or can double up with another tenant for two miles. It is much better to broadcast if you can. With two miles you can count on doing it all in that most thorough way. But if you have only one mile you break what you have time for, more shallowly, and, for the rest, you bed, that is, start the land.

1 These farms are the width of a state and still more from the river. Is lower originally a land or a river word? It must be a river word, for ter- nining against erosion is meant in America. So the Mississippi has such power that men who have never seen it see its language in their

2 These images are the width of a state and still more from the river. Is lower originally a land or a river word? It must be a river word, for ter-
To broadcast, to break the land broadcast: take a twister, which is about the same as a turning plow, and, leading the mule in concentric the shape of the field, lay open as broad and deep a ribbon of the stuff dirt as the strength of the mule and of your own guidance can manage: eight wide by six deep with a single-horse plow, and twice with that as double, is doing well: the operation has the staggering and reeling yet steady quality of a small sailboat clambering a storm.

Where you have broadcast the land, you then lay out the furrows three and a half feet apart with a shovel plow, and put down fertilizer; and by four furrows with a turning plow, twist the dirt back over the fertilized furrow. But if, lacking mule power, you have still land which is not broken, and it is near time to plant, you bed the rest. There are two beddings. The first is hard bedding: breaking the hard pan between the rows.

Hard bedding: set the plow parallel to the line of last year’s stalks and along their right, follow each row to its end and up the far side. The dirt lays open always to the right. Then set the plow close in against the stalks and go around again. The stubble is cleared out this second time round and between each two rows is a bed of soft dirt: that is to say, the hard pan is all broken. That is the first bedding.

Then drop guano along the line where the stalks were, by machine or by hand. Few tenants use the machine; most of them either buy a horse, or make it, as Woods does. It is a long time cone, small and low, with a wood handle, and a hole in the lead core. It is held in the left hand, pointed low to the furrow, and is fed in faultfuls, in a steady rhythm, from the fertilizer sack, the incipient frock, slung heavy along the right side.

After you have stowed the guenawyer you turn in the dirt back over with two plowings just as before: and that is the second bedding. Pitch the bed shallow, or you won’t be able to work it right.

If you have done all this right you haven’t got a blemish in all your land that is not broken: and you are ready to plant.

But just roughly, only as a matter of suggestion, compute the work that has been done so far, in ten acres of land, remembering that this is not counting in ten more acres of corn and a few minor crops: how many times has this land been retraced in the rolling-gaited guidance and tangents and whippings and orderings of plowing, and with the steadily held horn, the steady arc of the right arm and right hand listing and opening like a heart, the heavy weight of the sack at the right side?

Broadcasting, the whole unbroken plane sloped open in rectilinear concenters, eight inches apart and six deep if with one mule, sixteen apart and twelve deep if with two: remem ber how much length of line is coated in one reel or within one phonograph record: and then each furrow, each three and a half feet, scooped open with a shovel plow: and in each row the fertilizer laid: and each row folded cleanly back in four transits of its complete length: or bedding, the first bedding in four transits of each length, and then the fertilizer and four more transits of each length: every one of the many rows of the whole of the field gone eight times over with a plow and a ninty by hand; and only now is it ready for planting.

Plowing

There are three hars you might use but the spring-toothed harrow is best. The long-toothed section harrow tears your bed to pieces, the short-toothed is better, but catches on snags and is more likely to pack the bed than to loosen it. The springtooth moves lightly but incisively with a sort of knee-action sensitivity to the redundancies of the ground, and it jumps snags. You harrow just one row at a time and right behind the harrow comes the planter. The planter is rather like a tennis-court marker: a seed bin set between light wheels, with a little plow protruded from beneath it like a foot from under a hockspur. The little beak of the plow sits open the dirt, just at its lifted heel the seed thrills out in a spindling stream; a flat wheel flats
the dirt over: a light-traveling, tender, iron sexual act entirely worthy of setting beside the deskleg and the swept broad-handled arm. 

Depending on the moisture and the soil, it will be five days to two weeks before the cotton will show. Cultivating begins as soon as it shows an inch.

Cultivation:

Barring off: the sweepings: chopping: laying by:

The first job is barring off. Set a five- to six-inch twister, the smallest one you have, as close in against the stalks as you can get it and not damage them, as close as the breadth of a finger if you are good at it, and throw the dirt to the middle. Alongside this plow is a wide tin defender, which doesn't allow a bliblium to fall on the young plants. Then comes the first of the four sweepings. The sweepers are blunt stocks shaped a good deal like stringrays. Over their dull foreheads and broad shoulders they neither twist nor roll the dirt, but shake it from the middle to the beds on either side. For the first sweeping you still use the defender. Use a little stock, but the biggest you dare to, probably the eighteen-inch. Next after that comes the chopping, and with this the whole family helps down through the children of eight or seven, and by help, I mean that the family works full time at it. Chopping is a simple and hard job, and a hot one, for by now the sun, though still damp, is very strong, but with a kind of itchy intensity that is seldom known in northern springs. The work is, simply, thinning the cotton to a stand, hills a foot to sixteen inches apart, two to four stalks to the hill. It is done with an eight to ten-inch hoeblade. You cut the cotton flush off at the ground, bent just a little above it, with a short sharp blow of the blade at which each stroke is light enough work; but multiplied into the many hundreds to each continuously added hour, it aches first the forearms, which so harden they seem to become one bone, and in time the whole spine.

The second sweeping is done with the twenty to twenty-two-inch stock you will use from now on; then comes hoeing, another job for the whole family, then you run the middles; that is, you push down soda by hand or horn or machine; soda makes the weed, guano puts on the fruit, then comes the third sweeping, and then another hoeing. The first and second sweepings you have gone pretty deep. The stuff is small and you want to give loose ground to your feed roots. The third sweeping is shallow, for the feed roots have extended themselves wide, danger of injury.

The fourth sweeping is so light a scraping that it is scarcely more than a ritual, like a barber's but delicate moments with his muse before he holds the mirror up to the dark side of your skull. The cotton has to be treated very carefully. By this last sweeping it is making. Break roots, or lack rain, and it is stopped dead as a hammer.

This fourth sweeping is the operation more properly known as laying by. From now on until picking time, there is nothing more a farmer can do. Everything is up to the sky, the dirt, and the cotton itself; and in six weeks now, and while the farmer is feeding off such of its enemies as he can touch, and, lacking rains money to live on, is desperately seeking and conceivably finding work, or with his family is hung as if on a hook on his front porch in the terrible leisure, the cotton is making, and his
year's fate is being quietly fought out between agencies over which he has no control. And in this white miasmata, while he is thus waiting however he can, and defending what little he can, these are his enemies, and this is what the cotton is doing with its time:

Each square points up. That is to say: on twigs, ends, certain of the fringed leaves point themselves into the sharp form of an infant peep; each square points up and opens a flat white flower which turns pink next day, purples the next, and on the next day shrivels and falls, forced off by the growth, at the base of the bloom, of the boll. The development from square to boll consumes three weeks in the early summer, ten days in the later, longer and more intense heat. The plants are well fringed with pointed squares, and young cold bulbs, by the time the crop is laid by; and the blooming keeps on all summer. The development of each boll from the size of a pea to that point where, at the size of a big walnut, it darkness and dries and and its white contents slightly explode it, takes five to eight weeks and is by no means ended when the picking season has begun.

And meanwhile the enemies: bittersweet, ragweed, Johnson grass, the weevil, the army worm, the slippery chances of the sky. Bittersweet is easily killed out and won't come up again. Ragweed will, with another prong every time. That weed can suck your crop to death. Johnson grass, it takes hell and scissors to control. You can't control it in the drill with your plowing. If you just cut it off with the hoe, it is high as your thumb by the next morning. The best you can do is dig up the root with the corner of your hoe, and that doesn't hold it back any too well.

There is a lot less trouble from the weeds than there used

It is therefore not surprising that they are constant readers of the sky; that it holds not an ounce of 'beauty' to them (though I know of no more magnificent skies than those of Alabama); that it is the lodestone of their deepest piety; and that they have, also, the deep storm fear which is apparently common to all primitive peoples. Wind is as terrifying to them as cloud and lightning and thunder; and I remember how,
sitting with the Woods, in an afternoon when George was away at work, and a storm was building. Mrs. Gudget and her children came hurrying three quarters of a mile beneath the blackening air to shelter among company. Gudget says: 'You never can tell what's in a cloud.'

Picking season

Late in August the fields begin to whiten more rarely with late bloom and more frequently with cotton and then still thicker with cotton, a sparkling ground starlight of it, steadily bursting into more and more millions of points, all the leaves seeming shrunk smaller; quite as at night the whole frontage of the universe is more and more thoroughly printed in the increasing darkness; and the wide cloudless and tremendous light holds the earth clamped and trained as beneath a vacuum bell and burning glass, in such a brilliance that half and two thirds of the sky is painful to look into, and in this white maturing even the enlarged hogs are streaked a rusty green, then brown, and are split and splayed open each in a loose vomit of cotton. These split body are now burns, hard and edged as chiseled wood, pointed nearly as thorns, spread open in three and four and five, and five gears or cells. It is slow as feet, just a few dozen scattered here and there and a few tens of dozens, and then there is a space of two or three days in which a whole field seems to be cracking open at once, and at this time it seems natural that it must be gone into and picked, but all the more temperate and experienced tenants wait a few days longer until it will be fully worth the effort: and during this bursting of hogs and this waiting, there is a kind of quickening, as if deep under the ground, of all existence, toward a climax which cannot be delayed much longer, but which is held in the tension of this reluctance, tightening and delay, and this can be seen equally in long, sweeping drivings of a car between these spangling fields, and in any one of the small towns or the county seats, and in the changed eyes of any one family, a kind of tightening as of an undertow, the whole world and year lifted nearly upon its crest, and some beginning the long chat down to winter: children, and once in a while a very young or a very old woman or man, whose work is scarcely entered upon or whose last task and climax this may be, are deeply taken with an excitement and a restlessness to begin picking, and in the towns, where it is going to mean money, the towns whose existence is for it and depends on it, and which in most times of year are sunk in sleep as at the bottom of a sea; these towns are sharpening awake; even the white hot streets of a large city are soberly charged in this season; but Gudget and his wife and Ricketts and Woods, and most of the heads of the millions and a quarter families who have made this and are to do the working of it for their own hands and another's use, they are only a little more quiet than usual, as they might be if they were waiting for a train to come in, and keep looking at the fields, and judging them; and at length one morning (the Ricketts women are already three days advanced in ragged work), Gudget says, Well:

Well, I reckon tomorrow we'd better start to picking:

And the next morning very early, with their broad hats and great sacks and the hickory baskets, they are out, silent, their bodies all slanted, on the hill: and in every field, in hundreds of miles, black and white, it is the same: and such as it is, it is a joy which scarcely touches any tenant, and is worn thin and through in half a morning, and is gone for a year.

It is simple and terrible work. Skill will help you; all the endurance you can draw up against it from the roots of your existence will be thoroughly used as fuel to it: but neither skill nor endurance can make it any easier.

Over the right shoulder you have slung a long white sack whose half length trails the ground behind. You work with both hands as fast and steadily as you can. The trick is to get the cotton between your fingertips at its very roots in the burl

James Agee 1935
in all three or four or five gores at once so that it is brought out clean in one piece. It is easy enough with one burr in perhaps ten, where the cotton is ready to fall; with the rest, the fibers are more tight and tricky. So another trick is, to learn these several different shapes of burr and resistance as nearly as possible by instinct, so there will be no second trying and delay, and none left wasted in the burr, and, too, as quickly to judge what may be too rotted and dirtied to use, and what is not yet quite ready to take: there are a lot suspended between these small uncertainties, and there should be no delay, no need to use the mind's judgment, and few mistakes. Still another trick is, between these strong pulls of efficiency, proper judgment, and maximum speed, not to hurt your fingers on the burrs any worse than you can help. You would have to try hard, to break your flesh on any one burr, whether on its sharp points or its edges; and a single raindrop is only scarcely instrumental in ironing a mountain flat: but in each plucking of the hand the fingers are searched deep in along those several sharp, hard edges. In two hours' picking the hands are just well limbered up. At the end of a week you are favoring your fingers, still in the obligation of speed. The later of the three to five times over the field, the last long weeks of the season, you might be happy if it were possible to exchange them for boils. With each of these hundreds of thousands of insertions of the hands, moreover, the fingers are brought to a small point, in an action upon every joint and tendon in the hand. I suggest that if you will try, three hundred times in succession, the following exercise: touch all five fingertips as closely as possible into one point, trying meanwhile to hold loose cotton in the palm of the hand; you will see that this can very quickly tire, cramp and deteriorate the whole instrument, and will understand how easily rheumatism can take up its strictures in just this place.

Meanwhile, too, you are working in a land of sunlight and heat which are special to just such country at just that time of year: sunlight that stands and stacks itself upon you with the severe weight of deep sea water, and heat that makes the painted and muscled and fine-structured body glow like one indiscriminate oil, and this brilliant weight of heat is piled upon you more and more heavily in hour after hour so that it can seem you are a diving bell whose strained seams must at any moment burst, and the eyes are marked in stinging sweat, and the head, if your health is a little unstable, is gently roaring, like a private blowtorch, and less gently beating with aching blood: also the bag, which can hold a hundred pounds, is filling as it is dragged from plant to plant, four to nine burrs to a plant to be rolled swiftly, and the load shurged along another foot or two and the white row stretched ahead to a blur and innumerable manifested in other white rows which have not yet been touched, and younger bolls in the cleaned row behind already breaking like slow popcorn in the heat, and the sack still heavier and heavier, so that it pulls you back as a beast might rather than a mere dead weight: but it is not only this: cotton plants are low, so that in this heat and burden of the immanent sun and of the heavying sack you are droggling, you are continuously somewhat stooped over even if you are a child, and are bent very deep if you are a man or a woman. A strong back is a godsend, but not even the strongest back was built for that treatment, and there combale at the kidneys, and roll down the thighs and up the spine and allow the shoulders the ticklish weakness of girdle or water, and an aching that is increased in geometric progressions, and at length, in the small of the spine, a literal and persistent sensation of yielding, buckling, splintering, and breakage: and all of this, even though the mercy of nature has hardened your flesh and has anesthetized your nerves and your powers of refection and of imagination, yet reaches in time the brain and the more mirror-like serotonin, and thereby is redoubled upon itself much more powerfully than before: and this is all compounded upon you during each successive hour of the day and during each successive day in a
force which rest and food and sleep only partly and superficia-
ly refresh: and though, later in the season, you are relieved
of the worst of the heat, it is in exchange at the last for a cool-
ness which many pickers like even less well, since it so slows
and chills the habituverdant of sweat they work in, and
seriously slows and stiffens the fingers which by them at best af-
ford an excruciation in every touch.

The tenants’ idiom has been used ad nauseam by the more
unassuming of the northern journalists but it happens to be
accurate: that picking goes on each day from can to can: sometimes, if there is a feeling of rush, the Bicketts continue
it by moonlight. In the blazing heat of the first of the season,
unless there is a rush to beat a rain or to make up an almost
completed wageload, it is customary to quit work an hour and
a half or even two hours in the worst part of the day and to sit
or lie in the shade and possible draft of the hallway or porch
asleep or dozing after dinner. This time narrows off as the
weeks go by and a sense of rush and of the wish to be done
with it grows on the pickers and is tightened through from the
landlord. I have heard of tenants and pickers who have no rest-
period and no midday meal, but those I am acquainted with
have it. It is of course no parallel in heartiness and variety to
the prodigious and enormous meals which farm wives of the wheat
country prepare for harvest hands, and which are so very zest-
fully regarded by some belated Virginians as common to what
they like to call the American Scene. It is in fact the ordinary
every day food, with perhaps a little less variety than in the
earlier summer, hastily thrown together and heated by a
woman who has hurried in exhausted from the field as few
jumps as possible ahead of her family, and served in the
dishes she hurriedly rinsed before she hurried out on the early
morning as few jumps as possible behind them. When they
are all done, she hurries through the dish washing and puts on
the straw hat or her sunbonnet and goes on back into the field,
and they are all at it in a string out little bunch, the sun a bit-
ter white on their deeply bent backs, and the sacks trailing, a
slow breeze idling in the tops of the pines and hickories along
the far side but the leaves of the low cotton scarcely touched
in it, and the whole land, under hours of heat still to go, yet
listed sadly forward toward the late end of the day. They seem
very small to the field and very lonely, and the motions of
their industry are so small, in range, their bodies so slowly
moving, that it seems less that they are so hard at work than
that they are bowed over so deeply into some fascination or
grief, or are at those pilgrims of Quebec who take the great
lights of stairs upon their knees, slowly, a prayer spoken in
each step. Ellen lies in the white load of the cotton-basket in
the shade asleep. S权威ch picks the front of his dress pull and
takes it to his mother. Clare Bells fills a hat full time after time in
great speed and with an expression of delight rushes up behind
her mother and dumps the cotton on all of her she can reach
and goes crazy with laughter, and her mother and the girl stop
a minute and she is huged, but they talk more among them-
sew themselves than the other families, they are much more quiet than
is usual to them, and Mrs. Bicketts only passes a minute,
cleaning the cotton from her skirts and her hair and putting it
in her sack, and then she is bowed over deeply at work again.

Woods is badly slowed by weakness and by the pain in his
shoulder; he welcomes any possible excuse to stop and some-
times has to pause whether there is any excuse or not, but his
wife and her mother are both strong and good pickers, so he is
able to get by without a hired hand. Thomas is not old enough yet to be any use. But too is very young for it and works only by fits and starts, little is expected of children so small, but it is no harm what little they do, you can’t learn them too young. Junior is not very quick with it at best. He will work for a while furiously hard, in jealousy of Louie, and then slacken up with some hands and begin to bully Burt. Katy is very quick. Last summer, when she was only eight, she picked a hundred and ten pounds in a day in a race with Flora Merry Lee. This summer she has had runarounds and is losing two fingernails but she is picking steadily. Pearl Woods is big for her age and is very steady and useful. Louie is an extraordinarily steady and quick worker for her age; she can pick a hundred and fifty pounds in a day. The two Ricketts boys are all right when their papa is on hand to keep them at their work; as it is, with Ricketts at the sawmills they clow a good deal, and tease their sisters. Mrs. Godger picks about the average for a woman, a hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds a day. She is fast with her fingers until the week exhausts her; last half of the day I just don’t see how I can keep on with it. George Godger is a very poor picker. When he was a child he fell in the fireplace and burnt the flesh off the flat of both hands to the bone, so that his fingers are stiff and slow and the best he has ever done in a day is a hundred and fifty pounds. The average for a man is nearer two hundred and fifty. His back hurts him badly too, so he usually picks on his knees, the way the others pick only when they are resting. Mrs. Ricketts used to pick three hundred and three hundred and fifty pounds in a day but sickness has slowed her to less than two hundred now. Mrs. Ricketts is more often than not a fastidiously, quite without realizing, and in all these figures they gave me there may be inaccuracy—according to general talk surrounding the Hunt machine a hundred pounds a day is good picking—but these are their own estimates of their own abilities, on a matter in which tenants have some pride, and that seems to me more to the point than their accuracy. There are sometimes shifts into glee in the picking, or a brief excitement, a race between two of the children, or a snare killed, or two who sit a few moments in their sweat in the shaded clay when they have taken some water, but they say very little to each other, for there is little to say, and are soon back to it, and mainly, in hour upon hour, it is speechless, silent, serious, ceaseless and lonely work along the great silence of the unshodded loft, ending each day in a vast blaze of dust on the west, every leaf shaped in long knives of shadow, the clay drawn down through red to purple, and the leaves losing color, and the wild blind eyes of the cotton staring in twilight, in those ocher of work done and of nature lost once more to night whose sweetness is a torture, and in the slow, loaded walking home, whose stiff and gentle motions are those of creatures just awakened.

The cotton is ordinarily stored in a small structure out in the land, the cotton house, but none of these three families has one. The Godgers store it in one of the chambers of their barn, the Woods on their front porch, raising planks around it, the Ricketts in their spare room. The Ricketts children love to play in it, tumbling and diving and burying each other; sometimes, it is a sort of treat, they are allowed to sleep in it. Bats like it too, to make nest-as in, and that draws ratsakes. It is not around, though, for very long at a time. Each family has a set of archaic iron booms and scales, and when these scales have weighed out fourteen hundred pounds of cotton it is loaded, if possible during the first of the morning, onto the narrow and high-boarded wagon, and is taken into Cookstown to gin.

5 Mrs. Godger’s word. Her saying of it was, 'rat like it to make nest-as in.' It is a common phrasing in the south. There is no obstacle in it, of speaking by diminutives, and I wonder whether this is not Scottish dialect, and whether they, too, are not the echo of the "mishmeying" which the middle-class literary assumes of them. Later, on the proof-sheets is the following note, which I use with thanks: “In the Middle-Eng., leaf plural? Changed rite for this rime word and as a usual plural ending.”
It is a long tall deep narrow load shoved in with weathered waggoneers and bulged up to a high puff above those sides, and the mule, held far over to the right of the highway to let the carts go by, stops more steadily and even more slowly than ordinary, with a look almost of pout, dragging the house-shaped wagon; its iron wheels on the left grime in the slugs of the highway, those on the right in clay: and high upon the load, the father at the reins, the whole of the family is sitting, if it is a small family, or if it is a large, those children whose turn it is, and perhaps the mother too. The husband is dressed in the better of his work clothes; the wife, and the children, in such as they might wear to town on Saturday, or even, some of them, to church, and the children are happy and excited, high on the soft load, and even a woman is taken with it a little, much more soberly, and even the man who is driving, has in the tightness of his jaws, and in his eyes, which meet those of any stranger with the curious challenging and protective, fearful and fierce pride a poor mother shows when her child, dressed in its best, is being curiously looked at, even he who knows best of any of them, is taken with something of the same: and there is in fact about the whole of it some raw, feudal quality, some air also of solemn grandeur, this member in the inconceivably huge and slow parade of mule-drawn, crawling wagons, creaking under the weight of the year's blood-sweated and prayer-overs work, on all the roads drawn in, from the utmost runnings and ramifications of the slender red roads of all the south and into the outhem highways, a wagon every few hundred yards, erected this with a white and this with a black family, all drawn toward those little trembling lodes which are the gin, and all in each private and silent heart toward that climax of one more year's work which yields so little at best, and nothing so often, and worse to so many hundreds of thousands.

The gin itself, too, the wagons drawn up in line, the people waiting on each wagon, the suspended white-shirted men on the platform, the emblematic sweep of the grand-shouldered iron beam scales creaking gently on the dark doorway their design of justice, the handkerds in their shirt-sleeves at the gin or relaxed in swivels beside the decorated safes in their little offices, the heavy-muscled and bloodred young men in baseball caps who tumble the bales with their sharp hanks, the loafers drawn into this place to have their batteries recharged in the violence that is in process here in the bare and weedy outskirts of this bare and brutal town, all this also in its kard, slack, nearly speechless, sullen-eyed way, is danblie and triumphal! the tag blank surfaces of corrugated metal, bright and sick as gin in the sunlight, square their darkness round a shuddering racket that sesames all easy speaking; the tenant gets his ticket and his bale number, and waits his turn in the long quiet line; the wagon ahead is emptied and moves forward lightly as the mule is out; he sees his own load heavily under as the gin head is hoisted; he reaches up for the suction pipe and they let it down to him; he swings and cradles its voracity down through the crest of and round and round his stack of cotton, until the last lint has kept up from the wagon bed, and all the while the gin is working in the deadening appetites of its metal, only it is his work the gin is digesting now, and standing so close in next its flank, he is intimate with this noise of great energy, cost and mystery, and out at the rear, the tin and ghostly interior of the seed shed, against whose roof and rafters a pipe extends a steady sleet of seed and upon all whose interior surfaces and all the air is a dry nightmare fleck like the false mows of Christmas movies lungs shudder as it might in horror of its just accomplished pasturition: and out in front, the last of the cotton snowlike relaxing in pulses down a slide of dark iron into the compress its pure whiteness, and a few moments merely of pressure under the floor level, the air of an off-stage strangling; and the bale is lifted like a theater organ, the presses unlatched, the numbered brass tag attached, the metal ties made fast; it hangs in the
light breathing of the scales, his bale, the one he has made, and a little is alivered from it, and its weight and staple length are recorded on his ginning slip, and it is caught with the hooks and tumbled out of the way, his bale of cotton, depersonaalized forever now, identical with all others, which shall be melted indistinguishably into an oblivion of false, woods, bleedings, and wars; he takes his ginning slip to his landlord, and gets his cottonseed money, and does a little buying, and gathers his family together, and leaves town. The smoke from town is even more formal than the parade in was. It has taken almost exactly eighteen minutes to go each bale, once the wheat was over, and each tenant has done almost exactly the same amount of business afterward, and the empty, light grinding wagons are distributed along the roads in a likewise exact collaboration of time and space apart, that is, the time consumed by ginning plus business, and the space apart which, in that time, a mile traverse at his classic noctambular pace.

It is as if those who were drawn in full by the sun and their own effort and soaked dry at a metal heart were restored, were sown once more at large upon the slow breadths of their country, in the precision of some mechanical and superhuman hand.

That is repeated as many times as you have picked a bale. Your field is covered over there, four or five times. The height of the ginning season in that part of the country is early October, and in that time the loaded wagons are on the road before the least crack of daylight, the wheat is endless hours, and the gin is still pushing and beating after dark. After that comes bag killing, and the gisting of the corn and sorting of the sorghum that were planted high to come ready late, and more urgent and specific meditation of whether or not to move to another man, and of whether you are to be kept, and settlement time; and the sky descends, the air becomes like dark glass, the ground stiffens, the clay honeycombs with frost, the corn and the cotton stand stripped to the naked bone and the trees are black, the odors of plain and woodsmonth sharpen all over the country, the long dark silent sleeping rains stream down in such grievings as nothing shall ever stop, and the houses are cold, fragile drums, and the animals tremble, and the clay is one shapeless sea, and winter has shut.

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.

The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning.

Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power, giving counsel by their understanding, and declaring prophecies:

Leaders of the people by their counsels, and by their knowledge of learning meet for the people, wise and eloquent in their instructions:

Such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing:

Rich men furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations:

All these were honored in their generations, and were the glory of their times.

There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported.

And some there be which have no memorial, who perished, as though they had never been, and are become as though they had never been born, and their children after them.

But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.

With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are within the covenant.

Their seed standeth fast, and their children for their sakes. Their seed shall remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out.

Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name liveth for evermore.