

[WPA Road]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

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Edisto Island, S.C. LIFE HISTORY WPA ROAD

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The man who work on the Etiwan WPA road project, reported for duty at eight o'clock sharp. Thirty-nine Negro laborers answered the roll call, their voices ringing out cheerfully in the frosty air.

All of them had long handled shovels in their hands. They were variously dressed; some in overalls, some in coats and trousers held together in important places by brightly colored patches. The thermometer was hovering around 35, and many of the men were wearing two pairs of trousers, old shabby pants covering the newer ones. Tin buckets and bottles of coffee were in evidence. There was not a sullen face in the group. The laborers all appeared to be in good health.

The superintendent, the timekeeper, the foreman, and the truck drivers were white men. The foreman was a college man and an ex-army officer; the superintendent, a small farmer; the timekeeper, a mechanic out of a job; and the truck drivers, farm youths detached from the soil by adverse circumstances. None of them except the foreman had seen the inside of a college.

Most of the workers, white and black, rode to work in automobiles. A few , who lived only a few miles away, walked; a handful rode horses. The Negroes paid on the average of twenty cents a day for their transportation in passenger cars or trucks.

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For them walking was out of the question. Those who rode, lived on the other end of Etiwan Island, at least twelve miles from the job.

"I get up at six every morning," said the foreman. "Of course it is black dark then and I feed the animals by lantern light. I get my own breakfast. It is too much to expect of my wife. She has plenty to keep her busy beside getting up in the cold dark."

The other workers had similar experiences. Some of them said that they had to arise at five when they had firewood to cut, water to draw and cows to milk. Generally their wives

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fixed lunches for them the night before. "Too dark for fumble 'round with bittle 'fore day crack," one Negro remarked. "The old hen got for dress my kettle off 'fore she fall sleep."

As soon as the timekeeper checked his rolls, the laborers were divided into two crews. One crew began leveling off humps on the roadbed and the other group was assigned to ditching. Soon the shovels were moving rhythmically with a steady purposeful swing. A large green truck drove up, the engine racing. The men jumped to the ground, shovels in their hands. The loose yellow dirt started to move in a steady stream from the roadside to the truck's body.

The men were warming up to their work. It would be a steady pull from now on until twelve o'clock, noon.

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The water boy came by with a bucket from which projected the handle of a tin dipper. He was a serious looking Negro youth of about 25, neatly dressed, and wearing dark glasses. The nearest well is three quarters of a mile distant. Until knock-off time, the water boy will keep walking between the well and the place where the dirt is flying. Wielding shovels for hours at a stretch is dry work, even on a cold, dampish January day.

The youth with dark glasses deals with two elements - water and fire. There are periods when everyone's thirst is quenched, and then the boy fills out his time by tending the fire. About eleven o'clock a small fire is kindled on the roadside, not for the purpose of warming hands and feet, but to keep the lunches warm. The buckets are placed in a ring around the coals, and the glass bottles full of coffee, in the center. The water boy visits the fire once in a while to see that none of the buckets are burned or the bottles broken. He adds a twig or two when the flames die down.

The sound of soft singing is heard, coming from the place where the second truck is being loaded. The Negroes are singing so softly that the words do not register with the group of

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white men, even though the singers are only seven yards away. The Negroes might be filling in a grave , so low and mournful is their song.

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"I don't object to singing at times," the superintendent says," but this thing of one loud song after another had to be stopped. It interfered with the work. Oh, it might help when they are pulling on a load [?] helps them keep together. When we were moving logs on a CWA project several years ago they used to sing: 'I thought I hear the captain say, ho,ho,ho,' They would pull hard together at the word 'ho.' But they have got to remember that they come here to work - not to sing".

By this time the ditch diggers have heaped a big pile of earth along the edge of the road. Before long there will be several trucks truck loads to move. The earth will be used for the fills or top surfacing. It is a good grade of soil, suited either for fills or top surfacing. "The government saved on this dirt," says the superintendent proudly. "We had to buy very little dirt outside. Most of it was already here."

The ditches are not dug "by air." Stakes placed at intervals along the road indicate the depth and angle; line cord and the surveyor's levels insure accuracy in excavating and grading. The men evidently take a real pride in the clean cut symmetrical ditches. Once in a while a Negro laborer will step back, survey the excavation and say: " Now ain't that a pretty ditch?"

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"Come on boys, come on boys!" sings out the superintendent. The shovels move at a faster tempo. The foreman echoes the command. "Come on boys ! Throw it out ! " The sun goes under a cloud and the white men shiver. The Negroes do not seem to mind the biting wind and the absence of sunshine. A few laborers are obviously sweating.

"Do the men knock off to rest now and then? " I should say not." The superintendent seemed irritated at the question. "They don't knock off for any purpose except to eat lunch.

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They are supposed to take care of their bodily needs before they leave home. But I can tell you this - the work doesn't hurt them. They thrive on it."

"They are hardly ever sick," the foreman adds. "None of the laborers have lost more than five percent of the working hours on account of sickness during the past ten months. As a matter of fact they cannot afford to be sick for more than five days in succession. If they are absent five days hand-running, they are automatically dropped from the rolls. That's the regulations."

The timekeeper looks at his watch, turns to the superintendent and announces: "Twelve o'clock."

The superintendent, a stockily built little man, draws himself up to his full height and shouts: "All right, boys, Knock off for lunch."

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The men scramble out of the ditch, brushing the earth from their clothing. They are joined by the laborers who have been leveling the roadbed. All carry shovels on their shoulders. The thirty-nine Negroes walk toward the fire where their lunch awaits them. The white men assemble at a fire of their own. As a special treat the timekeeper has brought along a peck of oysters. The oysters will be roasted and eaten with cheese sandwiches and coffee.

The Negroes open their quart buckets and begin eating without ceremony. Table spoons are stuck into masses of hominy grits soaked with bacon grease, are pulled out with a quick motion, and then disappear into wide open mouths. There is much smacking of lips and licking of spoons. Some of the men have brought sweet potatoes and they divide the tubers with their fellows. The coffee is now steaming hot. The men drink it direct from the bottle, scorning cups. Cups are for women, children and sick people, they say. Those who didn't bring fried fish produce butts meat fried to a turn, or fat pork.

"You got for eat meat on the job or bear going to get you," explains one of the Negroes.

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When they talk about “bear getting you,” they mean that you will faint with hunger and exhaustion.

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They laugh and joke as they eat, kidding the bachelor members of the crew about their scant lunches. They talk about the coming planting season, the revival to be held in the African Methodist Episcopal Church on Sunday, their ill neighbors, and trout fishing. They recall how a certain young man named “Boy Rat” used to gorge himself with sweet potatoes until he could hardly move, and had finally been released from the project. “This ain't no place for trifling nigger,” observes an oldish man.

Around the other fire there is also laughing and joking. The superintendent, the foreman and the time-keeper have known each other all their lives. The time-keeper's wife died two years ago and he is “courting” again. He uses part of his precious half hour recess to drive to the postoffice, , where a letter awaits him from his girl. When he returns his friends pretend that they have eaten his lunch. This is no joking matter for the timekeeper for he has an enormous appetite.

By half past twelve the men are back at work. Three and a half hours before time to knock off for the day. The minutes pass slowly when the lunch is behind them; the last hour is the longest, so the foreman says. There is no slacking of effort, however. The shovels move rhythmically as before and none of the laborers pull on their watch strings.

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The youngest of the crew is around 21. He is of slight build, but his arm muscles stand out like heavy cord, and his shovel seems a toy in his hands. The oldest on the project is a man nearing sixty. His skin is pot black and shriveled; his form tough and wiry. He is said to be one of the best workers on the road - and the ugliest.

Several months ago the men over 65 were discharged since they were supposedly eligible for social security benefits. The superintendent says that if the truth is known they were

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really unfit for hard work. And one of them grumbled continually and spread dissatisfaction among the others. "The trifling ones are all weeded out now," the superintendent asserts.

The white men have from two to three dependents; some of the Negroes as many as ten. All of them say that without this government work they could not hope to clothe and feed their families and pay the doctor bills. Over and over again they have tried to get outside jobs but there was no use, the foreman says. He for one has reached the conclusion that private industry has no jobs to offer men who have been down on their luck since the depression set in and who are getting along in years. "When a man reaches forty it is all over for him. Friends and politicians have made me promises but they were just talking, trying to let me down easy," the ex-army officer remarks.

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During the ten months the road project has been in progress only one man has found outside employment. This was a young Negro who quit recently to join a county road building gang.

About one third of the workers, including the white men, run small farms on the side. They say that there is little if any profit to this farming business, but it helps to provide them with vegetables and meats, and if they are lucky they can pay taxes out of cotton sales. On the whole they break about even with their farming ventures from a cash standpoint. Thrown out of the WPA job, they declare that they could not make a decent living. A large stake is needed for successful truck farming. There is no money in planting a few acres of cotton. Thousands of dollars must be available to equip a modern, motorized farm.

Few of the Negroes who rent or own land plant cotton. An acre or so of peas and sweet potatoes is about all they can manage. No one can carry on a farm by working only on Saturdays and holidays - at least not in a very efficient manner. Some of the more industrious raise hogs and chickens, and a small percentage own cows. Scant attention is paid to vegetable gardens; even watermelons are seldom planted. The men want to

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rest up a bit on non-work days, put on clean clothes and “take a walk out, ” as one of them expressed it.

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Jobs on the Etiwan plantations do not pay a living wage. One has to work from sunrise to sunset to earn 75 cents. Beside this is only seasonable employment, except in rare instances. Etiwan farmers white and black say that they cannot pay high wages with cotton bringing less than nine cents a pound and potatoes and cabbages a glut on the market.

During the time the project has been running, only one man has been discharged for cause. “He knew too much,” the superintendent comments. “He thought he knew more than the chief engineer. And although he was a strong, hefty man, he was always slacking. I just had to let him go. He was a bad influence on the men.”

The superintendent says that the road is laid out by an engineer from the county road commission, and that the work is inspected at regular intervals. The county commission furnishes the tools and the two motor trucks for hauling earth. The WPA pays the laborers.

Every month the superintendent turns in a written report, telling how far the work has progressed, and giving the time required to complete certain stretches. He is provided with a level to check the grades and depths. The foreman has charge of part of the laborers. The timekeeper fills in a report at the end of each day and administers first aid to the men when necessary. In the event of serious accident, he is instructed to rush the wounded one to the nearest physician.

The project will be completed by the end of February, the superintendent predicts. Of the four miles of projected road, at least three miles have been finished and all of the grubbing has been done. The roadbed measures 28 feet from ditch to ditch, and 50 feet overall including the ditches. When the last shovel of dirt has been dug, the farmers enroute and

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the people of Etiwan will have a durable, top surfaced highway that will hold up under heavy motor traffic.

The superintendent turns to the timekeeper and says: "Lord, this has been a cold day. I have been cold every minute. Wish I had my feet propped up in front of a roaring fire. How is the time going anyhow?" He looks at his watch. The timekeeper consults his. Ten more minutes yet.

The men in the ditch seem to be working like automatons. Lines of weariness are appearing on the older faces. The young men are apparently as fresh as they were eight hours ago.

The watch hands crawl around slowly and finally one points to four and the other to six.

The superintendent yells: "Time up. Store your tools.

The men stop working, at least they ease down to a stop. Several keep their shovels going for another minute or two so they can cut down little humps on the ditch edge.

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They march in line to the big wooden box which stands under a small oak, and one by one put their shovels away. The automobiles and trucks are throwing out clouds of smelly blue smoke. An ancient looking Ford truck refuses to start. A Negro is turning the crank as fast as his arm can work, and cursing under his breath.

In five minutes the road is bare of black laborers. Automobiles are disappearing around the sweeping bend that skirts the river bank. The white men stand around and talk for a while, then the foreman says. "Boys, I've got to start for home. Got wood to bring in and water to turn off. Looks like its going to freeze tonight."

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"Hope you are wrong," answers the timekeeper. "I would hate to see ice in this ditch tomorrow."