

Cheerful Journey Through Mississippi

SOME months ago, I was invited by the Negro Business League of Mississippi to make a rather extended journey through that state for the purpose of learning something at first-hand of the progress that the members of my race are making there; to say a word of encouragement and advice; and, if possible, to make some suggestions that would help to improve the relations between the races.

Before I attempt to say anything about the results of my observations, however, I want to add something more definite about the circumstances under which the journey was made. When I first came into Alabama, some twenty-seven years ago, to begin my work at Tuskegee, I made it a practice to go out into the country districts whenever I had an opportunity, in order to visit the people in their homes, on the farms, and on the plantations. On these trips, I frequently stayed overnight with some of the colored farmers. On such occasions, in the evening, after supper, we would usually sit around the fire until a late hour at night, and discuss the condition, difficulties, hopes, and ambitions of the colored people in that part of the country. I inquired about the schools and about the churches, and I learned a great deal also about the personal histories, the struggles, the failures, and the successes of the individual men and women whom I met. In this way and in others I got to know the people in their daily lives.

Usually, when I visited a community, I was called upon at some time during my stay to make an address to the people. In these "lectures," as the country people called them, I tried to say something that would have a direct, practical bearing on the difficulties that they were meeting in their schools or in their churches. Incidentally, I told them about the school we had started in Tuskegee; I explained to them the kind of education that I proposed to give there, and tried to make clear to them in what way I hoped that this education would meet the actual needs of the people, by fitting the children to take up and carry on the work that their fathers and mothers had begun.

In making these visits, I had a double purpose: I wanted to find out the actual condition of the people in the country districts, so that I could make the work of the school fit into the lives of the people; and, at the same time, I wanted to popularize the idea of this kind of education among the masses of the people. I wanted to make the fathers and mothers of our pupils realize and thoroughly understand that a real education, whether it was "high" or "low," whether it was education in the book or in the field, must somewhere touch the earth and change the conduct, the character, and the condition of the people.

As years went by, the circle of my journeys widened, and so I have been able to speak to members of my race in all parts of the country in a way to impress them not merely with the value of industrial education but with the importance of getting property, of building homes, of thrift, industry, and those other fundamental things which are essential to the success of any race and any class of people.

In 1900, in Boston, in company with a number of other colored men, I succeeded in organizing what is known as the National Negro Business League, of which there are now more than four hundred local organizations in different parts of the country. These organizations have done much, not merely to encourage the economic progress of the masses of the colored people, but to extend and emphasize the idea that is back of the movement for industrial education among the colored people of the South.

I mention these facts here because they illustrate the purpose of my visit to Mississippi, and because they indicate that the work of the National Negro Business League is very clearly related to the work of education that we are carrying on at Tuskegee Institute.

As an indication of the general interest in the purpose and the success of my visit, I ought to say that, while the journey was made under the direction of the Negro Business League of Mississippi, representatives of nearly every important interest among Negroes in the state either accompanied the party for a portion of the journey or assisted in making the meetings successful at the different places at which we stopped. For instance, as I remember, there were not less than eight presidents of Negro banks and many other successful business men who were members of the party at some time in the course of the eight-day trip. Among them were Charles Banks, president of the Negro Business League of Mississippi, and one of the most influential colored men of the state. It was he who was more directly responsible than anyone else for organizing and making a success of our journey. Not only the business men, but the representatives of different religious denominations and of the secret organizations, which are particularly strong in Mississippi, united with the members of the Business League to make the meetings which we held in the different parts of the state as successful and as influential as it was possible to make them.

It is a matter of no small importance to the

success of the people of my race in Mississippi that business men, teachers, and the members of the different religious denominations are uniting disinterestedly in the effort to give the colored children of the state a proper and adequate education, and that they are using their influence to encourage the masses of the people to get property and build homes.

Dr. E. C. Morris, for instance, who was a member of the party, represents the largest Negro organization of any kind in the world -the National Baptist Convention, which has a membership of more than two millions; J. W. Straughter, as a member of the Finance Committee of the Negro Pythians, represented an organization of about seventy thousand persons, owning about three hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars' worth of property. "The African Methodist Episcopal Review," of which Dr. H. T. Kealing is editor, is probably the best-edited and one of the most influential periodicals published by the Negro race. It has been in existence now for more than twenty-five years.

I have mentioned the names of these men and have referred to their positions and influence among the Negro people as showing how widespread at the present time is the interest in the moral and material upbuilding of the race.

I had heard a great deal, indirectly, before I reached Mississippi of the progress that the colored people were making there. I had also heard a great deal through the newspapers of the difficulties under which they were laboring. There are some portions of Mississippi, for instance, where a large part of the colored population has been driven out as a result of white-capping organizations. There are other portions of the state where the white people and the colored people seem to be getting along as well if not better than in any other portion of the Union.

After leaving Memphis, the first place at which we stopped was Holly Springs, in Marshall County. Holly Springs has long been an educational centre for the colored people of Mississippi. Shortly after the war, the Freedman's Aid and Southern Educational Society of the Methodist Church established here the Rust University. Until a few years ago, the State Normal School for Training Negro Teachers was in existence in Holly Springs, when it was finally

abolished by Governor Vardaman. The loss of this school was a source of great disappointment to the colored people of the state, as they felt that, in vetoing the appropriation, the governor was making an attack upon the Negro education of the state. Under the leadership of Bishop Cottrell, a new industrial school and theological seminary has grown up to take the place of the Normal Training School and do its work. During the last two years, Bishop Cottrell has succeeded in raising more than seventy-five thousand dollars, largely from the colored people of Mississippi, in order to erect the two handsome modern buildings which form the nucleus of the new school. He is now at work in the hope of raising \$50,000, during the coming year and from the same sources, with which to erect a new central building for the school. In this city there has also been recently established a Baptist Normal School, which is the contribution of the Negro Baptists of the state in response to the abolition of the State Normal School.

The enthusiasm for education that I discovered at Holly Springs is merely an indication of the similar enthusiasm in every other part of the state that I visited. At Utica, Miss., I spoke in the assembly-room of the Utica Institute, founded October 27, 1903, by William H. Holtzclaw, a graduate of Tuskegee. After leaving Tuskegee, he determined to go to the part of the country where it seemed to him that the colored people were most in need of a school that could be conducted along the lines of Tuskegee Institute. He settled in Hinds County, where there are forty thousand colored people, thirteen thousand of whom can neither read nor write. In the community in which this school was started the Negroes outnumber the whites seven to one. He began teaching out in the forest. From the very first, he succeeded in gaining the sympathy of both races for the work that he was trying to do. In the five years since the school started, he has succeeded in purchasing a farm of fifteen hundred acres. He has erected three large and eleven small buildings of various kinds for school-rooms, shops, and homes. On the farm, there are one large plantation house and about thirty farmhouses. He tells me that a conservative estimate of the property which the school now owns would make the valuation something more than seventy-five thousand dollars. In addition to this, he has already started an endowment-fund in order to make

the work that he is doing there permanent, and to give aid by means of scholarships to worthy students who are not fully able to pay their own way.

At Jackson, Miss., there are two colleges for Negro students. Campbell College was founded by the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Jackson College, which has just opened a handsome new building for the use of its students, was established and is supported by the Baptist denomination. At Natchez, I was invited to take part in the dedication of the beautiful new building erected by the Negro Baptists of Mississippi at a cost of about twenty thousand dollars.

Perhaps I ought to say that, while there has been considerable rivalry among the different Negro churches along theological lines, it seems to me that I can see that, as the leaders of the people begin to realize the seriousness of the educational problem, this rivalry is gradually dying out in a disinterested effort to educate the masses of the Negro children irrespective of denominations. The so-called denominational schools are merely a contribution of the members of the different sects to the education of the race.

Nothing indicates the progress which the colored people have made along material lines so well as the number of banks that have been started by colored people in all parts of the South. I have made a special effort recently to learn something definite of the success and something of the influence of these institutions upon the mass of the colored people. At the present time,

there are no less than forty-five Negro banks in the United States. All but one or two of them are in the Southern States. Of these forty-five banks, eleven are in the State of Mississippi. Not infrequently I have found that Negro banks owe their existence to the secret and fraternal organizations. There are forty-two of these organizations, for example, in the State of Mississippi, and they collected \$708,670 last year, and paid losses to the amount of \$522,757. Frequently the banks have been established to serve as depositories for the funds of these institutions. They have then added a savings department, and have done banking business for an increasing number of stores and shops of various kinds that have been established within the last ten years by Negro business men.

A special study of the city of Jackson, Miss., shows that there are ninety-three businesses conducted by Negroes in that city. Of this number, forty-four concerns do a total annual business of about three hundred and eighty-eight thousand dollars a year. But, of this amount of business, one contractor alone did one hundred thousand dollars' worth. As near as could be estimated, about 73 per cent. of the colored people own or are buying their own homes. It is said that the Negroes, who make up one-half of the population, own one-third of the area of the city of Jackson. The value of this property, however, is only about one-eleventh of the taxable value of the city.

As nearly as can be estimated, Negroes have on deposit in the various banks of the city almost two hundred thousand dollars. Of this amount, more than seventy thousand is in the two Negro banks of the city. I said that most of these businesses have been started in the last ten years, but as a matter of fact one of the oldest business men in Jackson is a colored man with whom I stopped during my visit to that city. H. T. Risher is the leading business man in his particular line in Jackson. He has had a bakery and restaurant in that city, as I understand, for more than twenty years. He has one of the handsomest of the many beautiful residences of colored people in the city, which I had an opportunity to visit on my journey through the state.

Among the other business enterprises that especially attracted my attention during my journey was the drug store and offices of Dr. A. W. Dumas, of Natchez. His store is located in a handsome two-story brick block, and although there are a large number of Negro druggists in the United States, I know of no store which is better kept and makes a more handsome appearance.

According to the plan of our journey, I was to spend seven days in Mississippi; starting from Memphis, Tenn., going thence to Holly Springs, Utica, Jackson, Natchez, Vicksburg, Greenville, Mound Bayou; and then, crossing the Mississippi, to spend Sunday in the city of Helena, Ark. As a matter of fact, we did stop, and I had an opportunity to speak to audiences of colored people and white people at various places along the railroad, the conductor kindly holding the train for me to do this at several points, so that I think it is safe to say that I spoke to forty or fifty thousand people during the

eight days of our journey. Everywhere, I found the greatest interest and enthusiasm among both the white people and colored people for the work that we were attempting to do. In Jackson, which for the last ten years has been the centre of agitation upon the Negro question, there was some opposition expressed to the white people of the town attending the meeting, but I was told that among the people in the audience were Governor Noel; Lieutenant-Governor Manship; Major R. W. Milsaps, who is said to be the wealthiest man in Mississippi; Bishop Charles B. Galloway, of the Methodist Episcopal Church (South); United States Marshal Edgar S. Wilson; the postmaster of Jackson, and a number of other prominent persons.

At Natchez, the white people were so interested in the object of the meeting that they expressed a desire to pay for the opera-house in which I spoke, provided that the seating-capacity would be equally divided between the two races. At Vicksburg, I spoke in a large building that had been used for some time for a roller-skating rink. I was informed that hundreds of people who wished to attend the meeting were unable to find places. At Greenville, I delivered an address in the court-house; and there were so many people who were unable to attend the address that, at the suggestion of the sheriff, I delivered a second one from the steps of the court-house.

The largest and most successful meeting of the trip was held at Mound Bayou, a town founded and controlled entirely by Negroes. This town, also, is the centre of a Negro colony of about three thousand people. Negroes own thirty thousand acres of land in direct proximity to the town. Mound Bayou is in the centre of the Delta district, where the colored people outnumber the whites frequently as much as ten to one; and there are a number of Negro settlements besides Mound Bayou in which no white man lives. My audience extended out in the surrounding fields as far as my voice could reach. I was greatly impressed with the achievements and possibilities of this town, where Negroes are giving a striking example of successful self-government and business enterprise.

From what I was able to see during my visit through Mississippi, and from what I have been able to learn from other sources, I am tempted to believe that more has been accomplished by the colored people of that state during the last ten years than was accomplished by them during the whole previous period since the Civil War. To a large extent, this has been due to the fact that the colored people have learned that in getting land, in building homes, and in saving their money they can make themselves a force in the communities in which they live. It is generally supposed that the colored man, in his efforts to rise, meets more opposition in Mississippi than anywhere else in the United States, but it is quite as true that there, more than anywhere else, the colored people seem to have discovered that, in gaining habits of thrift and industry, in getting property, and in making themselves useful, there is a door of hope open for them which the South has no disposition to close.

As an illustration of what I mean, I may say that while I was in Holly Springs I learned that, though the whites outnumbered the blacks nearly three to one in Marshall County, there had been but one lynching there since the Civil War. When I inquired of both white people and colored people why it was that the two races were able to live on such friendly terms, both gave almost exactly the same answer. They said that it was due to the fact that in Marshall County so large a number of colored farmers owned their own farms. Among other things that have doubtless helped to bring about this result is the fact that the treasurer of the Odd Fellows of Mississippi, who lives in Holly Springs, frequently has as much as two hundred thousand dollars on deposit in the local banks.

I have long been convinced that the most important work that we have been able to do at Tuskegee and through Tuskegee, during the years that the school has been in existence, has not been in the educating of six or seven thousand students to the point where they are able to do good work, but that it has been in turning the attention of the masses of the people in the direction of those fundamental things in which the interest and the desire of both races in the South are in harmony; in teaching the people the dignity of labor; and in emphasizing the importance of those simple, common, homely things which make the life of the common people sweet and wholesome and hopeful.

If circumstances would permit, I would like to carry the campaign begun in Mississippi into every state in the South.