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# CAUGHT IN THE CROSS FIRE: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND FLORIDA'S SYSTEM OF LABOR DURING WORLD WAR II

## By JAMES A. SCHNUR

The Second World War greatly altered Florida's social climate. The trends of tourism, business progressivism, urbanization, and industrial development that evolved during the war and flourished in its aftermath competed with conventional agricultural and extractive enterprises. Countless soldiers served on Florida's military bases, and many returned after the war in search of jobs and greater economic mobility. Women answered the call to fill vacancies in wartime industries. The state's African American residents, however, were caught in the cross fire between the immediate labor demands of a nation transformed by war and the long-standing traditions of segregation and paternalism that had historically stifled their economic welfare. When the Pittsburgh Courier announced its "Double V" campaign two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, it encouraged blacks throughout America to fight for victory in two distinct wars: the external struggle against Fascism and the internal culture of racism. This essay examines the precarious balance between labor and race relations in Florida during World War II.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their loyalty and patriotism, blacks in Florida encountered blatant discrimination and paternalistic race relations in the years prior to World War II. A story in a 1917 issue of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* claimed that German agents hoped to incite blacks to rebel by

promising them "complete franchise, freedom, and political and social equality." Guards closely monitored activities in the Scrub and other black areas of the Cigar City. In June 1918, the mayor of Miami ordered police to prohibit any gathering of blacks in Colored Town because he feared such an assembly might become rowdy and unmanageable. Police abuse, coupled with other forms of institutional bigotry and a revived Ku Klux Klan, haunted blacks throughout Florida long after hostilities concluded on Armistice Day in 1918. The Klan reemerged in Florida during the early 1920s and promptly became immersed in the political hierarchy. Wherever klaverns appeared, violence soon followed. In this paternal culture, many of the white Floridians who rewarded blacks deferential behavior would evoke terror to maintain their social and economic hegemony. Similar to abusive parents who excessively punish their children, Southern whites considered it their duty to discipline blacks for any infringement of customs and traditions. Blacks who challenged the division of labor that relegated them to low-wage, low-skilled jobs often endured acts of public humiliation, beatings, and, occasionally, murder.<sup>2</sup>

Florida's unbalanced scales of justice promoted a system of statutory bondage. In the years following the Civil War, authorities maintained a supply of cheap labor by instituting a convict lease program



and enforcing debt peonage regulations. Blacks constituted a majority of the convicts leased from Florida's prisons to work for private companies. Though the state officially ended this exploitative program in 1923, the custom of leasing prisoners persisted into the 1940s. A law enacted 1919 legislative during the session considered it "prima facie evidence of the intent to defraud" if individuals accepted any item of value -- such as transportation to a labor camp -- but refused to fulfill their obligations. White recruiters could mislead desperate and impoverished African Americans by promising them transportation, food, and accommodations if they worked in the forests or plantations. In this modern form of indentured servitude, once new employees arrived at the labor camps, the\ witnessed deplorable conditions and realized that they owed the company for their passage. The law offered no recourse for the duped black laborers because it required them to prove that the employer had misled them: Florida courts would never permit blacks to make such accusations the white businessmen bolstered the state's economy with captive labor.<sup>3</sup>

Turpentine camps egregiously violated the civil rights of black workers. Camp authorities colluded with sheriffs, politicians, and civic leaders to keep African Americans in a state of peonage. Beatings, attacks, and murders frequently occurred within the guarded confines of these camps. Some rural law enforcement officers arrested innocent people on vagrancy charges to meet quotas established by turpentine operators. Similar to the purchase of a slave in the antebellum period, camp administrators could secure additional workers by assuming the accounts of indebted blacks from other camps. The government made no attempt to halt this

practice, even after the U. S. Department of Justice and a committee assembled by Gov-Doyle E. Carlton conducted ernor investigations during the early 1930s. In the fall of 1936, newspapers throughout America reported that 400 blacks remained enslaved on a farm in Macclenny. One man remarked that "it would be easier for an enemy of Hitler to operate in Germany than for a union organizer to attempt to set foot in one of these camps." By the end of the decade, Governor Fred P. Cone denied that forced labor existed in Florida. When someone once asked Cone about the 1919 codes that reconstituted slavery, he replied: "It's a good law. Peonage? We have no peonage in Florida. Our colored people are the happiest folk on earth-when the Yankees'll (w) let them alone." Debt peonage served as an important investment for Cone and the state of Florida. Authorities usually managed to capture laborers who escaped from the plantation, and judges placed the escapees on chain gangs and forced them to build Florida's roads and infrastructure.<sup>4</sup>

Despite federal intervention, peonage at turpentine camps continued throughout the war years. A turpentine foreman told folklorist Stetson Kennedy during a 1941 camp visit that his authority allowed him to "the law, judge, jury, act as executioner.... even rank(ing) ahead of God." These plantations-often owned by Northern business interests -- used their Southern brand of justice on any unwelcome interloper: Authorities even charged Federal Bureau of Investigation agents with criminal trespass for trying to investigate conditions at these camps. In 1945, a Marianna turpentine operator falsely arrested and forcibly transported across the state a black man who owed him money. A similar case of bondage prompted the U.S. Supreme Court decision that annulled the peonage statute. Emanuel Pollock received \$5 after



he agreed to pay off a loan by performing acts of labor. When Pollock failed to keep his promise, the judge levied a \$100 fine and imprisoned him.

In Pollock v. Williams the Supreme Court declared Florida's 1919 law unconstitutional because it violated the Thirteenth Amendment and federal anti-peonage statutes. But this 1944 verdict failed to curb de facto peonage. In 1949, the Workers' Defense League (WDL) claimed that 14 more forms of forced labor arc more widely practiced in Florida than in any other state. Its legislature by successive enactments has most consistently attempted to evade or ignore United States Supreme Court decisions." During a visit to Alachua County in 1949, the WDL located fourteen turpentine camps which flagrantly violated workers' civil rights.<sup>5</sup>

Atrocities also occurred on sugar plantations around Lake Okeechobee. The United States Sugar Corporation (US Sugar) harvested its first Successful crop near the Everglades in 1931. For the next eleven years, white agents recruited Southern blacks to cut cane by offering the false assurance that the company would provide free housing, food, medical care, and transportation. When America's entry into World War II seemed inevitable, the sugar industry cloaked its exploitation under the guise of patriotism. Recruiters for U. S. Sugar and other firms told prospective laborers that they worked for the government and tried to convince blacks that cane cutters served an important role in national defense. Once again, plantation conspired with managers government officials to enslave African Americans. Local constables did nothing to prevent farm supervisors from attacking their workers with guns, blackjacks, or machetes. Ironically, one black newspaper that documented peonage cases throughout the South printed an article informing readers that the sugar industry needed 500 laborers during the upcoming season. This story in an August 1942 edition of the *Atlanta Daily World* mentioned the same "free" benefits that white recruiters had promised to unsuspecting black men on street corners. The paper asked interested persons to contact the U. S. Employment Service, an agency that enlisted cane cutters for sugar corporations. The Employment Service claimed it assumed no responsibility for the welfare of the workers once they entered the plantation. 6

The sugar industry modified its hiring practices by 1943. A year earlier, U. S. Attorney General Herbert S. Phillips had zealously prosecuted U. S. Sugar. Although the court revoked a grand jury indictment that claimed U. S. Sugar forced field hands to toll under peonage, sugar corporations decided to halt the recruitment of blacks with United States citizenship to prevent further litigation. Beginning in 1943, Caribbean residents of African descent replaced the black Americans who found employment opportunities in other areas during World War II. This non-native black population posed new difficulties for a region that staunchly adhered to segregation: The government detained and deported many immigrants who challenged discrimination found in the plantation system. In an October 1943 incident, staff at U. S. Departments of State, Agriculture, and Labor attempted to suppress public knowledge of the incarceration of nearly 900 Jamaicans. When the islanders refused to sign a Jim Crow agreement given to them by Jamaican and American officials, authorities notified the immigration office transferred them to jails in Tampa and Miami, as well as the penitentiary at Raiford. An official dispatched from the War Food Administration the following year



discovered 25,000 West Indian recruits seething in near rebellion and heard that peace officers had arrested thousands of other Caribbean natives upon their arrival. Slavery continued, only the birthplace of the victims had changed.<sup>7</sup>

Long before **Jamaicans** replaced Afro-Americans on sugar plantations, whites had erected barriers to fetter economic mobility among blacks. New Deal programs often excluded blacks: While over 850 white Floridians participated in the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1935, coercion by state and local officials limited the black enrollment to less then twenty. Similarly, African Americans profited from few National Youth Administration work-study programs because Southern blacks could not enroll in white technical schools. As America prepared for war, whites hoped to forestall an exodus of blacks from Southern farms to Northern industries.8 On editorial urged blacks in Seminole County to "think twice" before leaving because:

(S)outhern darkies who have migrated (N)orth have lived to regret it... Only those with exceptional talents, or who manage somehow to keep one jump ahead of the law for a short time, ever find living conditions better off in the (N)orth ... The average (N)egro is far better off in the (S)outh where he is among friends who understand him and his problems and where the climate is much more suited to his nature.

Whites denied black farmers membership in many agricultural organizations, even though they demanded that blacks contribute more than their share to sustain wartime needs. By 1942, the St. Lucie Defense Council encouraged blacks to enroll in a labor pool that would assure the harvest of tomato and fruit crops. The council planned to submit the list to St. Lucie County

authorities for verification, and also offer it to employers in need of laborers. <sup>10</sup>

"Work-or-fight" mandates prolonged black peronage. In a sense, "wage slavers" could keep blacks in a subordinate role by regulating the status and location of their employment. If black workers protested too loudly, authorities might threaten to invoke the Selective Service Act. Throughout Florida, law enforcement officers broadly interpreted vagrancy laws while patrolling in black neighborhoods to meet the demand for labor on the home front. Beginning in 1942, St. Petersburg police mustered able-bodied men from black establishments. Police officers and city councilmen coordinated raids exclusively in the African American community to coincide with the menial and agricultural labor needs of local business interests. The following year, a Key West Judge vowed to investigate residents who terminated their employment in Monroe County without a good reason and arrest them for vagrancy. While citrus workers in some central Florida groves faced fines and jail terms for not appearing in the fields on Saturday, a Clearwater man served a ten-day sentence for missing one day of work.

By January 1945, Governor Millard E Caldwell asked all sheriffs to eliminate indolence. The Martin County sheriff promptly seized this opportunity to warn loafers that: "It is going to be the policy of this office to cooperate with farmers, saw-mill men, and others doing essential work-to see that they get all the help available." A month later, Hillsborough production County's community war committee planned a drive to combat "idlers" in the city of Tampa. White newspapers also supported the governor's request when they waged an editorial war against loafing. The press community leaders to confine "Indolent"



blacks, cure any venereal diseases they may possess, and haul them before local draft boards.<sup>11</sup>

State officials sought to supervise the behavior of African Americans through and economic social coercion. considering themselves the final arbiters of proper moral behavior. politicians, bureaucrats, law enforcement officers, and members of the State Defense Council assailed jook joints, social diseases, and other influences that might "sabotage" the war effort. As early as August 1942, Governor Spessard Holland and the state Board of Health negotiated with the federal government to secure land for detention camps to house diseased prostitutes. The state planned to offer defense training to women confined in these former Civilian Conservation Corps camps, and assign them to war industries upon their release. Officials at the U. S. Public Health Service. claiming the Florida possessed the highest venereal disease rate in the nation, asked policemen to corral "professional disease spreaders." Local authorities seized this initiative. Under the orders of Mayor John Alsop, Jacksonville police officers arrested 1140 prostitutes and place more than 200 of them on a prison farm during the first nine months of 1942. By July 1944, Alsop ordered the detainment of all un-escorted women "who have no legitimate reason for being alone in the streets." Though officers did incarcerate many white "Victory Girls," they tended to search for salacious behavior in black neighborhoods. A poor black woman, lacking the economic mobility available to her white counterparts, offered a much easier target than the white "Rosie the Riverters" that community leaders deemed essential to the war effort. 12

One sheriff created a notorious "vagrancy dragnet." Broward County Sheriff Walter

Clark exhibited malfeasance of office by repeatedly seizing African Americans. By 1944 Clark had established an "enforced labor decree" that offered him full discretion to hold any person found idle on the streets. Without providing a trial or any semblance of justice, he gathered blacks from Fort Lauderdale's slums and placed them in bondage on a farm owned by the mayor of nearby Oakland Park. Although state officials intended for "work-or-fight" regulations to apply to unemployed and unproductive adults, a substantial number of Clark's victims possessed jobs with stable incomes. Some of the men also belonged to labor unions. While the Workers' Defense League scorned the sheriff's actions and demanded an investigation by the Justice Department, law enforcement officers who admired Clark's successful tactics emulated them elsewhere in Florida. By the spring of 1945, a similar "reign of terror" had appeared in Sebring; others soon followed. 13

"Jook joints" offered an obvious target. These roadside drinking establishments, often found in rural areas and frequented by farm workers, rankled civic leaders who feared that leisurely drinking sapped the productivity of black laborers. expression of freedom -- even if confined to a segregated bar in the black community -threatened white social control. A May 1942 report from the Florida State Defense Council blamed a decline in agricultural yields on the "vagrancy, laziness, and indifference" of blacks who often lived "in the Negro quarters of various cities where they are not under such strict control and have amusements more to their liking." The State Agricultural Labor Committee, a branch of the Defense Council, believed that drinking by farm laborers amounted to "sabotage of the war effort." Rural whites agreed with this assessment. For example, a May 1942 editorial in the Ocala Evening



Star accused unscrupulous customers in black jook joints of committing most of the crimes in Marion County. While the Defense Council passed a resolution that urged the closing of jooks in farming areas, municipal authorities often profited from keeping their saloons open. Frequent police raids in Pensacola, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere provided laborers for the white community.<sup>14</sup>

Economic barriers stifled career opportunities for urban blacks. When jobs became scarce during the Great Depression, employers often replaced African Americans possessing years of loyal and reliable service with less-qualified whites. Edward D. Davis, a prominent black Floridian who contributed to the postwar civil rights movement, once estimated that ninety percent of Tampa's black residents appeared on the relief rolls in the 1930s. Even though infusions of federal capital invigorated the economy Pensacola by the late 1930s, most Afro-Americans in this port city on the Panhandle continued to subsist in squalor. Jim Crow traditions prevented black laborers from fully reaping the benefits of the wartime boom. White women secured better industrial Jobs than black men, and women of color discovered even fewer opportunities for economic mobility. A city ordinance in Miami discouraged blacks from seeking skilled or semi-skilled jobs outside of their residential neighborhoods; no similar law prevented them from shining shoes or cleaning houses in the white community. When one Tampa firm advertised it desperately needed workers. twenty-four black from carpenters Columbia. South Carolina. dutifully answered this call for laborers. After the carpenters arrived in Tampa, however, company officials refused to employ them because of their race and offered no compensation to help them return to South Carolina.<sup>15</sup>

Racism also hindered labor reform. Due to the precarious nature of an economy historically based on tourism and agriculture, Floridians tolerated little dissension among workers. When the Second World War redefined Florida's economic structure, business executives assiduously protected their financial interests. They manipulated the prejudices of workers to subvert attempts by labor unions to organize. Business and community leaders refused to forsake their hegemony over the state's developing economy at a time when military installations and industrial enterprises proliferated throughout Florida. These moguls would not condone any overtures that resembled A. Philip Randolph's proposed March on Washington.

faced formidable Labor organizations barriers that federal authorities sometimes failed to confront. Despite the protests of Tampa's National Maritime Union, ships docked in the harbor continued to violate contracts by adamantly refusing to hire blacks. At citrus plants in Bartow and elsewhere, managers distributed brochures which implied that a vote for the union would inevitably lead to racial equality. On the day the National Labor Relations Board sponsored a ballot at one company, officials sent all black workers home two hours before the election. White cronies patrolled black neighborhoods and intimidated any laborer who tried to return to the plant and The Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPO offered limited assistance during the wartime years due to a small budget and constraints imposed by its parent War Manpower Commission. When Roosevelt President restructured strengthened the FEPC in 1943, his actions angered Southern politicians who knew that



blacks filed a majority of the complaints investigated by this agency. <sup>16</sup>

Many whites loathed black civil servants and blamed the Roosevelt Administration for damaging race relations by allowing African Americans to compete for federal positions. One Southerner epitomized the sentiments of white supremacist Floridians by saying to Stetson Kennedy that: "When the war's over we oughta (sic) take all the Germans, Japs, Wops, Jews, and every nigger who's worked for the federal government and pen'em (sic) all up behind electrified barbed wire and keep'em (sic) there." Such a statement conflicted with the maxims Americans repeated to people throughout the world as they waged a "war for democracy."17

Despite the throes of Jim Crow, African American educators did win an important victory during the war years. The struggle to equalize salaries, which began with a suit filed by a Brevard County principal in 1938, received support from civil rights organizations and garnered publicity from the national Negro press. Blacks filed lawsuits against boards of public instruction throughout Florida when school officials repeatedly ignored their pleas for fair compensation. While attorneys for the plaintiffs never questioned the premise of segregated education. thev did request administrators offer equal salaries to teachers working in black schools. During the early 1940s, Thurgood Marshall and other talented lawyers from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund successfully argued their cases in Florida courts. Judicial decisions that compelled authorities to disburse wages "without discrimination because of race or color" encouraged educators in other counties to demand reform. Some participants did

jeopardize their careers. Officials in Escambia County fired a principal who led the movement among Pensacola's teachers. They justified this action by deeming the principal "negligent in authority" because he failed to prevent the beating of two white vendors who visited the campus, even though the incident occurred off school grounds. This fight to equalize educational salaries served as a skirmish in the larger battle to improve educational opportunities for blacks. <sup>18</sup>

The state's provision for segregated education met the needs of white business and agrarian interests. Boards of public instruction in Florida subjected most blacks to inferior curricula, inadequate school terms. appalling facilities. poorly-trained teachers. Courses in home economics, farming, and industrial arts offered at Leon County's black high school prepared graduates to serve as maids, office workers. and agricultural laborers. Abbreviated school hindered terms educational opportunity by emphasizing than labor rather academic enrichment. Officials adjusted the duration of classes in many schools so they would not conflict with agricultural needs. School authorities aggravated this situation by refusing to enforce compulsory attendance laws. While some rural regions furnished only two or three months of instruction each year, others failed to provide any facilities for black children. Teachers often lacked adequate resources and proper training. They usually conducted classes with a paucity of materials in dilapidated shacks or buildings abandoned by whites. Some teachers entrusted with the intellectual development of black children had never completed fifth grade educational careers. 19 during their



Labor reform and economic empowerment in the black community required educational reform. As a number of college-educated blacks entered the teaching profession, they ioined the Florida State **Teachers** Association – the counterpart to the all-white Florida Education Association-and established regional chapters that worked with the NAACP and other civil rights organizations. In 1943, two years after its creation, the Palm Beach County Teachers Association successfully challenged an edict to close black schools "in the interest of the national war effort" so children could harvest crops. Even though the board of public instruction in Palm Beach County sought to close black schools, it allowed white schools to remain open. Due to their efforts. African American teachers reversed this order and even persuaded white administrators to abolish split school terms.<sup>20</sup>

Moderate improvements in black education throughout Florida during the Second World War fostered greater reform in the postwar years. A progressive method of school financing adopted by lawmakers in 1947 benefited Afro-Americans. This measure created a Minimum Foundation Program that made no racial distinctions in the allocation of school funds to individual districts. While black schools received less than forty-five percent of the instructional dollars provided to white schools in 1939-1940, that percentage increased to nearly seventy-eight percent by 19491950. But gross disparities remained. Despite Governor Caldwell's insistence on equal educational opportunity regardless of race, some blacks saw the perpetuation of segregated education as an obstruction to social equality. By seeking admission to the law school at the University of Florida in 1949, Virgil Hawkins openly defied the system of Jim Crow schools mandated in Article XII.

Section 12, of the 1885 state constitution. When the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregation unconstitutional, Florida responded by constructing numerous black schools and junior colleges-and by designating Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College as a full-fledged university-with the false hope that the Court would vacate its decision if the state improved separate facilities.<sup>21</sup>

the contemptible institution With segregation, blacks faced an unvielding menace that granted more liberties to prisoners of war than to a substantial number of American citizens. Although Nazi P.O.W.'s incarcerated in Florida did provide the state's lumber and agricultural industries with cheap labor, they often received better treatment in detention camps throughout the South than did black soldiers in uniform. Amazingly, American military personnel even acquiesced to the prejudiced demands of German prisoners. Though black and white soldiers shared a single mess hall at MacDill Field in Tampa, Jim Crow customs required that members of each race sit on a separate side of the building. When German prisoners in the kitchen refused to work because American soldiers of both races shared the same dining center, military authorities appeased the P.O.W.'s by removing blacks. Such an incident causes one to wonder which nation's ideals truly won the war in the short term.<sup>22</sup>

Scholarship has neglected the economic contributions of black Floridians during the Second World War. Fortunately, newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Atlanta Daily World*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* recounted the heroic efforts of blacks on both the home front and the battlefield. After the *Courier* launched its "Double V" campaign in early 1942, black



journalists, intellectuals, and community leaders demanded greater social, political, and economic empowerment. Although veterans returning from the war discovered that many of the same perverse Jim Crow barriers continued to restrain their mobility, they viewed race relations differently: The democratic rhetoric of the Second World War compelled blacks to choose adept civic leaders and to strengthen neighborhood institutions. During World War II, one writer captured the essence of the emerging struggle to refine racial and labor relations in this brief passage: "It was as if some universal message had come through the great mass of Negroes urging them to dream new dreams and protest against the old order." Victory against fascism instilled new life in a struggle over the division of labor that had persisted since the days of slavery. However, blacks would continue to find themselves caught in this cross fire for many years after the Allied forces had secured military victory.<sup>23</sup>

### **ENDNOTES**

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- <sup>5</sup> Stetson Kennedy, *Southern Exposure* (Garden City, NX: Doubleday, 1946), 50-51; *Atlanta Daily World*, 12 January 1944, 1, 18 April 1944, 1; Shofner, "Force Labor," 24; Shofner, "Peonage as Usual," 172.
- <sup>6</sup> Alec Wilkinson, *Big Sugar: Seasons in the Cane Fields of Florida* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 5-6, 82, 92-94,124-127, 134; David Philip McCally, "Cane Cutters in the Everglades," (M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1991), 36, 39; *Atlanta Daily World*, 18 May 1942, 2, 27 August 1942, 2, 21 October 1942, 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Wilkinson, *Big Sugar*, 5-6; McCally, "*Cane Cutters*," 59-62, 69-70; *Atlanta Daily World*,. 26 October 1943, 1; Frank E. Pinder, Jr., *Pinder: From Little Acorns* (Tallahassee, Florida A & M University Foundation, 1986), 61-64.



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Sanford Herald, 15 November 1941, 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Florida Times Union, 11 November 1942, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Kennedy, Southern Exposure, 56-61; Raymond 0. Arsenault, St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1880- 19,50 (Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1988), 305-306; Key West Citizen, I March 1943, 1; Atlanta Daily World, 2 May, 1945, 1, 1 June 1945, 1; Stuart News, 25 January 1945, 1; Ft Lauderdale Daily News, 28 February 1945, 1.

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