

January

King Cotton Rode a Pale Horse

Recently, I was building a new horse trail with a crew of 30-somethings paying their debts to society for serious but non-violent offences when two of them made an interesting discovery.

“What is this, Professor?” using their nickname for me.

While clearing ground debris for the trail tread, I had pushed up the hub of an old buggy wheel. I explained that this item and the findings of a broken plow point, an old jar and a half-pint whiskey bottle, also obviously used a very long time ago, were evidence that we were either on or at the edge of an old home site. The explanation prompted one of them to ask me about the Homestead Act he remembered hearing of in school.

I casually explained that the house likely had been gone for more than 70-80 years as that was the age of most of the larger trees surrounding us. Furthermore, all of this land had been bought by the federal government in the 1930s. Subsequently all of the people were relocated and the buildings in existence had been destroyed by the most expedient methods.

Four of the five crew members were from “the street.” When I said that most of this landscape once had been largely covered by cotton fields and the people working those fields had lived as had those on this site, they could not picture a truly rural and agrarian South. Likely, many of their grandparents had lived in that scene. Their recent ancestors had witnessed this land, now forested, when it was monotonous with poor crops of cotton and corn. One of the great dangers of being away from the land too long is to forget that the land is where history was made and the people who begot you were a part of that saga. When forgetfulness is generational, it is as if history never happened.

King Cotton reigned over a southern American feudalistic system that temporarily gifted a few large landowners whose sharecroppers and tenants wrung from the land what economic gains could be had, but could keep little for themselves. Most others who worked the land were titled “subsistence farmers.” They owned land but little else, and usually very little land. These impoverished people had worked the land in service to King Cotton, mined it for its capacity to sustain life, drained it of its already low nutrient capital, and bared it to infamous southern rainstorms and droughts. Apocalyptic horsemen rode rough-shod and hard over the lands of the southern Piedmont. King Cotton rode a pale horse in whose tread was famine and plagues.¹

The Piedmont of the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama was once cotton and corn country. Cotton was grown as the main cash crop; corn fed people and livestock. I live and ride in the Upper Piedmont of South Carolina where it is said that in the 1920s one could walk or ride the 75 miles from Clemson University (then Clemson College) to the University of Georgia and never leave a cotton field except when crossing creeks.

Cotton was not just a crop; it was an entire socioeconomic system. Whoever invented the term “dirt poor” may well have been characterizing people struggling to extract a living from worn out cotton farms. King Cotton’s campaign over the southern Piedmont left in its wake great numbers of people destitute in body and spirit and a region of devastated soils.

The crusades of the New Deal programs of the 1930s brought salvation to misused, abused and worn out soils of the South and Midwest.² They also attempted to salvage the lives of the landless living on the holdings of landowners who could no longer afford worn out lands. Relocation and resettlement changed the rural social

¹ In Christian religion tradition, a comparison to the fourth horsemen of the Apocalypse, Revelations 6:2-8.

² While there was a web of programs dealing with the “national lands,” the centerpiece in this case was the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937.

scene while valiant attempts to restore the land began to change the landscape. In almost every instance in the South, the efforts were aimed at returning the “submarginal” agricultural lands to forests.

Today those who ride the southern Piedmont trails on public lands, or lands managed to be open to the public, ride through a history book in which the most recent pictures they enjoy but rarely do they ever study the text. The text lies open to them if they can only open their minds to how gullies came to be and what they mean. If they will only take note of areas of poor tree growth and low plant diversity, they will read the meaning of abused soils. If they will take note that rarely does a shortleaf pine, often 80 feet tall and straight as an arrow by age 35 years, live to be much older due to debilitating soil stresses that have made it prematurely susceptible to pathogenic soil fungi and nematodes. If they will only take note that most of the beautiful, large hardwoods are growing in areas that were too steep to plow, thus the soils escaped damage, they will think about what might have been.

Can these riders ever reach a point of seeing a Virginia pine stand devoid of most other plant life except for a ground covering of reindeer moss and see these species as the botanical company of Green Berets here to break through the front lines of the ravages of King Cotton and soften the battlefield for the oncoming more diverse hardwood-pine mixtures? Can they see multiple spring and fall wildflowers along the trail and marvel that less than a century ago this is where stunted cotton, corn, debt and poverty grew?

Will these riders look at a gully as a scar on the delicate face of the land, and be compelled to refrain from riding behaviors that initiate new gullies? Will these riders look upon this forest as the product of a human spirit once broken and down trodden but then renewed with optimism and promises of a better future if we only strive for mutuality with the land? Can these riders come to understand that the ride must not be limited to the physical experience but can be, should be, must be a

re-creation of the spirit and an enhancement of an intellectual curiosity about our place and role in time and space?
