

A Serf Joins the Landed Gentry

By Lancaster M. Greene

For two years L. W. Glasco, a Tyler, Texas, oil man, searched for O. K. Johnson, the heir to an inheritance of \$250,000 in oil royalties, one form of ground rent. Recently, he found the man working in a cotton-patch in Woodruff County, Ark. Johnson was a landless sharecropper. Glasco announced the news. Johnson understood.

When the newspaper reporters came around, Johnson told them of his unusual good fortune. He has never been "more than a few dollars ahead" in the dozen years he has farmed twenty-six acres on shares in Arkansas. Sharecropping doesn't pay. But landowning grandfathers, it seems, do.

"My grandfather owned a 100 acre farm near Gainsville, Texas," Johnson said. "He sold it in 1891 but reserved the mineral rights. Today there are nineteen producing oil wells on the land. My grandfather died two years ago but I didn't know any estate was left to me."

Johnson's grandfather quit producing wealth on the farm forty-seven years ago when he disposed of the land and its improvements. But he held on to that mythical thing which has a tangible value under our out-moded conception of property rights, the right to any minerals that might be found in the land he had sold as farm land.

When oil was found by others, Johnson's grandfather took no part in bringing it to the surface and adding it to the world's stock of fuel resources. He merely consented to allow others to risk their labor and capital in sinking wells down to the deposits. For his generosity with the gratuitous offering of nature to man, the result of geological forces, ages before his time, he exacted a substantial toll on all the oil produced and was able to transfer this toll-taking privilege to his heir on his death.

Johnson said he would pick his cotton, gin it and then quit the production of wealth as a crop grower to enjoy an easy life on the income from his windfall. He can get something for nothing through the existing legal system merely by allowing individuals having labor power or capital claims what they need as a prerequisite to the production of wealth, access to natural resources, which justly belong to all.

Johnson has every right to do so, as did his grandfather before him. But would he not have been better off during those years of backbreaking toil as a sharecropper if access to the better grades of land had been made available to all on an equal basis by the socialization of rent? And would he not be better off in the future if his particular wells should run dry?

See: "Progress and Poverty," pp. 341-343.