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in Eastern North Carolina

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Good Country People

from *Throwed Away: Failures of Progress*
in *Eastern North Carolina*

LINDA FLOWERS



*In front of a tobacco warehouse, Durham County, North Carolina, mid-twentieth century.
Courtesy of the Odum Subregional Photo Study, Southern Historical Collection, the University
of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.*

Commemoration 105

You don't see them much anymore. Not in Rocky Mount and Goldsboro, Wilson, Smithfield and Clinton; in Faison, yes, in little towns like that, sometimes. Especially if on Saturday you buy your groceries at one of the less-than-grand supermarkets, your clothes, when you have to have them, at the dry-goods store. They stay out of the shopping malls, away from the stores dazzling as operating rooms. At Christmas time, everybody sees them (but tries not to); they stumble along, slower than other people, more uncertain, as if they're not quite sure where they are. As for the men, you can spot them without too much trouble. At the tractor places, the filling stations where they go to pass the time of day, the run-down ones; they're driving battered pickup trucks and looking out across the land, poking along at forty and forty-five. But they're not as common as they used to be, these old farmers in faded overalls, in khaki shirts washed thin and almost white, brogans, hats usually: dusty as a March field. And the women, the country women of my childhood are as scarce now almost as hen's teeth.

Oh, but they were something! The beauty they'd had as girls wrung out of them, and in its place another: faces composed, purposeful as iron. A look that went right through you, bottomless and sad. People my mother's age, the blacks who had known her all her life, would stop me on the street sometimes and after getting it right ("Ain'cha Miss Geneva's girl? Ain'cha now? Ain'cha?"), they'd tell me what a fine-looking woman my mama had been; how in the fields chopping, picking cotton maybe, she could outwork anybody, them too, and did. They said she hadn't the need for conversation ("all sech as that"), and suffered no fools, gladly or otherwise, that she was all business, as good as her word and meant what she said. They'd tell me they knew my people. "Sho' do! Mist'Jim . . . Miss Annie, all of 'em!" And they did.

To have stood there on the sidewalk with these people, six or seven or eight years old, the year 1950, 1951, 1952, on a Saturday more than likely, and Faison full to beat the band, old black women congregated in the doorways, come to town. And you pulling away even as they told you, yet not wanting to offend, and their high cackle, the start on something else if you weren't quick, backing away: you knew that you were known, and exactly who you were.

This was a generation the like of which will never be seen again; they were the last of that breed of farmer and hand who had started out during the Great Depression. Their sons and daughters were the first taking up public work, and their grandchildren, the first in an entire lineage never to have known the land at all. Housewives in the 1960s wore pedalpushers and went to the beauty shop. If they didn't yet work at the sewing plant or Hamilton-Beach, they kept up with "As the World Turns" and "The Edge of Night," and they'd put supper on the table some nights out of a can. The men would wear overall pants and low-cut shoes, wide white belts and slacks when they dressed up, Mennen Skin Bracer maybe, or Old Spice; they'd go when they could to Topsail fishing (calling it "Tops!"), or they'd



*Telling the truth mattered to her,
“not being polite, but telling the truth.”
Author and professor Linda Flowers,
courtesy of North Carolina Wesleyan
College.*

take the family to the drive-in at Mount Olive where, in the 1950s, it had cost a dollar a car, but a dollar a head in the 1960s.

Farm people still, and they'd seldom had much schooling, but the plants and factories then springing up wanted them anyway, and as surely as the sun was going to rise tomorrow, women and men both did need them. Tenantry going to hell like it was, and small landowners having a time of it, too, the 1960s and early 1970s saw the virtual disappearance of one way of life, the birth of another: the dying out of good country people and the emergence of a semi-skilled class of laborers, their roots in the land but their future, as that of their children, in—why, whatever job they could pick up; they weren't particular, and they knew how to work.

Of course it was getting to the place where you had to know a little something extra to get on at some plants, education and training coming to matter more and more in the 1970s and 1980s, but nobody had asked them, and they couldn't help it; and if their children hadn't got what they ought to out of school, they couldn't help that, either. They'd done all right so far, and they reckoned the young people just starting out would, too—soon as they settled down some. They were making more than they ever had before, even if they couldn't begin to tell you where it all went, and if the plant where they worked would just stay open, if their hours weren't cut any more, if they didn't get laid off, why they thought they'd fare right well.

For their children a community college or technical school has sometimes made the difference, taking up the slack after high school, bridging the gap be-

tween the training they need for certain kinds of employment and the skills they, in fact, have; associate-degree programs provide entry into some of the technical fields, and for those not finishing high school or unable to read, courses in basic education are available. People thrown out of work by changes in the job market, as by layoffs and closings, can sometimes take advantage of the chance to try something else, computers, maybe, or data processing. But not everybody has found retraining to be the answer, or, for that matter, a two-year program. Jobs of any kind, but especially if they hold much long-range promise, still don't grow on trees; wages still are among the lowest in the nation, and the gap between these eastern counties and the Piedmont cities, as between rich and poor, gets wider and wider. Manufacturing is not what it used to be, and, yet, most people looking for work aren't prepared for anything else.

But these are proud people. Thrown away they may be, but it won't do to count them out. Men and women who have seen how, in the 1960s, machines pushed up the demand for land, even as they made farm laborers increasingly obsolescent, who have experienced the breakup of smalltime agriculture, yet who have kept going nonetheless, kept looking ahead—they know they're up against a hard time, but they know, too, they'll make it somehow: they always have. Business is business, and if people still matter less than profits, why they've always known that.

It's a hard lesson for the young: the realization that they're not likely to do even as well as their parents; that as many plants are closing as are coming in; that by itself a high-school diploma, as increasingly a college degree, means little to the man doing the hiring. Having sat for twelve years in more modern, more costly schools than any in history, they aren't happier for the experience or scarcely any more prepared for meeting the world head-on; nor are their parents any happier or more financially secure for having taken up public work. Neither schools nor factories have fulfilled the promises inherent in them. The one too often seems irrelevant; the other, willfully capricious if not worse. Fairness is something only little children any longer much expect.

But blood is thicker than water, and in these youngsters as often different from us as night from day, there may yet survive a farmer's cussedness, his equable and solid understanding of what counts and of who really matters. Others have come into less, surely.