The stories in this volume are of real people. All names of persons have been changed, and where there is any danger of identification, places also.

These Are Our Lives

As told by the people and written by members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia.
Several months ago the writing of life histories of tenant farmers, farm owners, textile and other factory workers, persons in service occupations in towns and cities (such as bell hops, waitresses, messenger boys, clerks in five and ten cent stores, soda jerks), and persons in miscellaneous occupations such as lumbering, mining, turpentining, and fishing was begun by the Federal Writers' Project in North Carolina. This work has recently been extended to six other states, and a large number of stories have already been written.

The idea is to get life histories which are readable and faithful representations of living persons, and which, taken together, will give a fair picture of the structure and working of society. So far as I know, this method of portraying the quality of life of a people, of revealing the real workings of institutions, customs, habits, has never before been used for the people of any region or country. It seems to me that the method here used has certain possibilities and advantages which should no longer be ignored.

A large amount of material is already in print dealing with life in the South; but that portion which is fictional, excellent as it is as fiction, cannot be and has not claimed to be accurate in the sense indicated here. In works of fiction, the author may and usually does make his characters composites of persons he has known.
or imagined; and because of its composite or imaginary character fiction cannot be regarded as a transcript of the experience of particular individuals.

Popular non-fiction has not attempted the task contemplated here. Sociology has furnished the classifications and much of the information on the basis of which this work has been shaped and the stories in this book selected. But sociology has been content in the main to treat human beings as abstractions. Certainly, sociologists have used case histories, but for the most part their use has been limited to narrow segments of experience collected and arranged to illustrate particular points. Useful as such segments of experience are they cannot possibly convey as much information and real knowledge as a story which covers the more significant aspects of the whole life experience, including memories of ancestry, written from the standpoint of the individual himself. This principle has been recognized and applied in a number of sociological works dealing with special problems, particularly those of personal maladjustment, but never for the purpose contemplated here.

The life of a community or of a people is, of course, made up of the life of individuals, who are of different status, perform different functions, and in general have widely different experiences and attitudes—so different, indeed, as to be almost unimaginable. It would seem therefore that one important method of revealing the life of a people would be through life histories selected to represent the different types present among the people, with attention proportioned according to the numerical importance of the different types.

In writing the life histories the first principle has been to let the people tell their own stories. With all our talk about democracy it seems not inappropriate to let the people speak for themselves.

This volume is published only as a suggestion of what can be done with life histories. It is my hope that later separate volumes will be published on people in agriculture, in industry, in lumbering, turpentineing, mining and in miscellaneous groups; at the same time it may be possible to choose typical communities and use this method to reveal their nature and workings. Until after a large amount of material has been collected and studied, it is not possible to know what is most important, most typical, or how stories should be classified and published in order to give the most faithful representation.

Twenty of the stories in this volume are from North Carolina, fourteen from Tennessee, one from Georgia. Stories have been written in Alabama, Florida, South Carolina and Virginia; but for various reasons I have had to decide not to include any from these states in this first volume. Among the more than 400 stories that I have had to choose from are life histories of babyboarding house keepers, barbers, bootleggers, business men, carpenters, cigar makers, clerks, cooks, dairymen, doctors, dressmakers, elevator operators, farm owners, farm laborers, and tenants, fishermen and florists, boarding and lodging house keepers, housemaids, janitors, lawyers, lunchroom workers, mailmen, milliners, miners, workers in cleaning and pressing shops, nurses, midwives, ministers, old people, peddlers, policemen, railroad men, sawmill workers, shoe salesmen, shrimpers, stone masons, storekeepers, street car conductors, textile workers, tobacco warehouse owners, managers, doorkeepers, auctioneers, buyers and speculators, tramps, jailbirds and bums, truckers, salesgirls, sheriffs
and deputies, shopkeepers, teachers, vegetable market
men and women, waitresses, wash women, kept women
and prostitutes, people on relief and people not on but
who are in dire need.

I have chosen for this first volume stories which
seem to me most typical and most important. I would
like to have included at least one story each of fisher-
men, coal and iron miners and smelters, turpentiners,
lumberers and miscellaneous factory and shop workers
and especially of Negroes in these occupations. At
present we have no life histories of factory owners and
managers, and few of middle class people. I doubt
whether any owners have ever spoken better for them-
selves than Kate Brumby and Smith Coon here speak
for them; but nevertheless they should be given a chance
to speak for themselves. I have not included in this
volume any one of a number of extremely sordid stories
which I think are of considerable importance, be-
cause space is limited and the stories here presented
seem to me to deserve attention first.

My ideas as to what ought to be done and what can
be done in the writing and publishing of life histories
are subject to change. I have learned and hope to
learn from this material things about people that can-
not be learned by reading books written from other
books, or books, however interesting, by persons with
literary talent and fertile imaginations.

How authentic are the stories in this volume? I be-
lieve the best answer to this is to ask the reader to read
carefully a few of the stories. If he does, I am con-
vinced he will agree that real people here are speaking.
Each story has been written after one or more interviews.
When one name is given after a story the story has not
been sent back to the author for revision and no revision
or changes of any consequence have been made. Where
two or more names are given, the names after the first
one are of the editors, who have made cuts, suggested
that additional material be secured, and made revisions
generally. In all such instances the copy has been read
and approved in final form by the author and, in some
instances, by the subject of the story. All names of
persons have been changed, and where there is any
danger of identification, places also.

I have included in an appendix the instructions
which have been given to the writers. These instruc-
tions have been amplified but have not been changed
in any essential respect. In the stories here printed
they have been carefully followed, and if the stories are
not worth printing the fault is in the idea and the in-
structions, not in the persons who have carried it out.

To those who glance at a page and imagine they
have absorbed its contents, to those who are fixed in
their ideas as to how writing should be done, to those
who are already certain how people think and feel, to
those who are not genuinely interested in the rich variety
of human experience, to those who cannot for a moment
look at the world and people as if they were seeing
them for the first time, pushing aside all patterns and
doctrines that might be obstructive, this book will have
no meaning. I ask only that the reader take the time
to consider and understand why and how it has been
written. I shall appreciate greatly any suggestions or
criticisms which might lead to improvement of the
method used here, or to a better method of revealing the
people as they are.

This is no trivial matter. The people, all the people,
must be known, they must be heard. Somehow they
must be given representation, somehow they must be
given voice and allowed to speak, in their essential character. To accomplish this, many different kinds of effort on different levels will be necessary. Books of life histories can help with this job.

* * * * *

Here, then, are real, living people. Here are their own stories, their origins, their more important experiences, their most significant thoughts and feelings, told by themselves from their own point of view.

Here are John and Sarah Easton, farm laborers, one-time sharecroppers, past middle age, parents of five children all now away from home but two, living in a one-room filling station, getting jobs and wages when and how they can. In the cotton states in the last ten years there have been three-quarters to a million farm laborers living as they live, excepting that John and Sarah are probably better off than the majority in this group. How many families are dependent on farm laborers, how many people are in this group, no one knows with any exactness. This class shifts from town to country, from one farm to another, from working for wages to sharecropping.

The farm laborer and his family in the South are near the bottom of the social pyramid. Beneath them in economic and social status are only such groups as the down and out and almost hopeless unemployed not on relief, the derelicts, tramps, bums and criminals. No wage and hour laws protect the farm laborer; social security overlooks him, and likely as not he will overlook old age insurance if he does not die before he knows he is eligible. The proportionate size of this class is increasing because of the rapid introduction of machinery and rationalization of methods.

Here are Gracie and James Turner, Negro sharecroppers, with their children, and their children’s children, and Gracie’s father, age 91. At the time this story was written the Turners were looking for a place to move. Gracie gives an account of the places in which they have lived. Her family has not moved as frequently as the typical cotton tenant family. Throughout the vast area from Virginia through Texas, tenants move, on an average, once every three years. This is probably the most severe handicap of this region, not without possible remedy, but nothing has been attempted by the states to correct it. In the story of the Turner family, as told by Gracie, we see the helplessness of the sharecropper, his awareness of his handicaps, and his inability to do anything to remove them.

Just how typical Irma is in “Get Out And Hoe” when Morrison comes home, after having run away with another woman, I cannot say; but when Irma says:

“I aint got no right to be mad now, Morrison. You had your fling and done come home. We need you awful bad. We got to get out and hoe in the tobacco tomorrow. You better get some sleep,”

I feel as if I know Irma better than I possibly could from mere statistical facts concerning tenant farmers. I can assure the reader that Irma and Morrison are not unusual so far as those experiences of tenant farmers are concerned which have been counted, tabulated, and analyzed (except for division of crops four-fifths to tenant, one-fifth to landlord—which is unusual); but this, which tells what kind of person Irma is, cannot be contained in any tabulation or subjected to any analysis. If we are to know the character of
I rma it is necessary that we be given this view of her.

The experience of Irma and her family and of the Turners is typical of that of about three-quarters of a million families, involving with children, three to four million people.

The Joe Fieldings, white share renters, are a little better off than the sharecroppers. The number of share renters, white and black, is slightly greater than that of sharecroppers. Tom Doyle and his family, Negro cash renters, are sturdy, self-respecting farmers, living probably as well as it will ever be possible for large numbers of people to live.

In the story, "Five Year Lease," the white cash renter, Martin, gives a good statement of one of the customs which make tenancy in the South so costly and destructive of both human and property values. His landlord, he says,

"—won't give me a five year lease and so I can't afford to make many improvements. If I was sure I could stay on, I could make over the house, fix up the terrace and clear off some more land. The trouble is that just as sure as the tenant makes the farm more productive, the owner boosts his rent."

In the Southern states there are about a quarter of a million cash renters, amounting with families to a million or a million and a quarter people. Tom and Martin, Negro and white cash renters, are probably above the level in prosperity of the majority of the group to which they belong.

Sally Reams, Negro woman, age 52, with her family, husband dead, faces her last chance to own a farm. She and her husband managed to acquire a farm of 50 acres and paid for it. Then they bought another

50 acres adjoining and were trying to pay for the additional 50 when two years ago George, the husband, was crushed to death in a road accident. Sally has not been able to make the payments on the additional 50 acres and fears she will lose the first 50 as well as the second. Sally is not bitter; she makes no charges of unfairness. From her account, she and her family were first fortunate but later, in recent years, have been victims of a series of misfortunes. George was killed by a careless driver:

"The feller that was drivin' the truck wa'n't wuth nothin'; so we couldn't get no damages out'n him. They say he was put in the pen for five years. I don't know. It didn't do us no good; it didn't bring George back. Looked like I had a lapful o' trouble these last few years. A hailstorm destroyed the crop one year, my house and furniture got burnt up; my boy died of pneumonia; the land we paid for had to be mortgaged; I lost my husband. But I keep hopin' for better days."

Sally and her family in their ownership status represent roughly about a quarter of a million white and Negro families, or about a million people.

Sam Bowers, substantial Negro farm owner, "makes plenty." Sam and his wife are exceptional in that they have no children. Most Negro farms are well supplied with children. If we accept Sam's word, he is more prosperous than most Negro owners. In the South there are between one hundred and fifty and two hundred thousand Negro farm owners, comprising, with their families, six hundred to eight hundred thousand Negroes. In the corresponding white owner group there are about a million families or four to five million people. This group, white and Negro, comprises about
one-third of the South’s farm population. Not many small owners have as much cash income as Sam and it is doubtful whether cash incomes of this size will ever be generally earned by farmers in this group. Except for the size of his cash income a majority of Southern farmers could be as well off as Sam. The barriers to well-being are not in the land or the people. They are in certain customs and habits which can be changed.

What is to be done for the farmer and his wife who have worked, reared a large family, who now at an advanced age are too old and weak to work, children now grown and away from home, earning barely enough but not more than enough to support themselves? “Our troubles,” says the farmer, who tells of first living on a place in western North Carolina, of exhausting the fertility of the soil there, selling out, moving to Tennessee, living on other places and wearing them out, “Our troubles,” he says “is just because we’ve lived too long.” The experience of this farmer is certainly typical of that of hundreds of thousands of others.

John Sylvester Hinson, white, son of a tenant farmer, worked hard for 19 years, saved his money, bought the place which his father had rented and is now a small landlord. Marsh Taylor, intelligent, humane, prosperous large landlord, tells the story of his family’s fortunes and gives a picture of the community in which he lives: how some landlords are losing out and why, how others are gaining and why. Hinson and Taylor belong to a comparatively small group, less than 100,000, with their families amounting to less than a half million people. It is hard to understand how a country with people in it as vigorous and intelligent as Marsh Taylor can continue failing to find methods that will make chances better for the Eastons, the Turners, the Joe

Fieldings, the millions of members of wage laborer and tenant families. The interests that are involved are not only humanitarian, they are equally those of property, the preservation and creation of wealth.

Thus the eleven stories in the first part of the book give a picture of the life of the different groups of people in farming in the South.

The same method has been followed in portraying the experience of people in mill villages and factories, in service occupations, and on relief. The stories in these three parts have not been arranged according to status in the economic and social scale. The effort here has been only to represent different types and occupations as well as possible with the materials that have been secured up to the present time.

* * * * *

I owe thanks first of all to Henry G. Alsberg for giving me the chance to work on this job—a job which I have wanted to do for many years; to Frank Graham and Paul Green for active support and advice; to Mrs. Blanche Ralston of the Regional staff and Mrs. May Campbell of the North Carolina staff of the Works Progress Administration for intelligent interest, encouragement and support when these were needed; to Edwin Bjorkman and George Lawrence Andrews, Director and Assistant Director of the North Carolina FWP; to William McDaniel, and Samuel Tupper, State Directors of Tennessee and Georgia.

When the writing of life histories was no more than an idea and a nebulous one, Ida Moore started work and showed that the job could be done. Her first stories were used as samples. Her work included in this volume will speak for itself. I would have been
severely handicapped without the assistance of James
Aswell of the Tennessee staff and Walter Cutter, As-
sistant Regional Director. My wife, Elizabeth Calvert
Couch (another example of exploitation—she is on no
one’s payroll), has read and edited stories, classified
them, abstracted them, carried them back and forth for
me, listened to me talk endlessly about them, and she is
still my wife.

To the Board of Governors of the Press and to the
University administration I am grateful for permission
to help, on a part-time basis as Regional Director of the
Federal Writers’ Project, do the very important work
that is being done under the able direction of Mr.
Alsberg.

W. T. COUCH

Chapel Hill, N.C.
February 20, 1939

On The Farm
look so sleepy-headed. I go to the shows some and I guess I make much as I need. I spend every blame penny I git my fingers on. I get eight dollars a month to spend. I sure do run through with it. Bet I could spend twenty dollars without half trying."

NELLIE GRAY TOLER
JAMES R. ASWELL

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Instructions to Writers

1. Materials are to be collected on tenant farmers and their families, farm owners and their families, cotton mill villagers and their families, persons and their families in service occupations in towns and cities, and persons and their families in miscellaneous occupations such as lumbering, mining, fishing, turpentineing. Samples showing the nature of the materials to be collected are attached hereto.

2. The life histories may range from approximately two thousand words to ten or fifteen thousand words, depending upon the interest of the material.

3. An outline is attached hereto. This outline shows the nature of the subject matter which should be covered in the life history. However, it is not desired that each life history or story follow this outline in a rigid manner. The stories will not be usable if they are constructed on a rigid pattern. For instance, the writer may reverse the order of the outline, he may begin with any item which he considers of special importance in the case under consideration, he may follow the whole outline or limit himself to a part of it in any particular story. It is immaterial whether the stories are written in the first, second, or third person. Insofar as possible, the stories should be told in the words of the persons who are consulted. The effort should be made to get definite information. Avoid generalities such as “those who are industrious and ambitious can do well,” “had not made good use of opportunities”—wherever possible expand such wording to give detail, that is, exactly what industry and ambition might have done or what the opportunities were that could have been used. In general
avoid the expression of judgment. The writer will, of course, have to exercise judgment in determining the course of a conversation through which he gains information, but aside from this, he should keep his own opinions and feelings in the background as much as possible. For instance, if he sees people living under conditions which he thinks are terrible, he should be most careful not to express his opinion in any way and thus possibly affect the opinion of the person to whom he is talking. He must try to discover the real feeling of the person consulted and must record this feeling regardless of his own attitude toward it. Any story in which this principle is violated will be worthless.

4. Writers should not limit themselves to the types of stories shown in the samples. It is hoped that original modes of presenting the material will be developed. The criteria to be observed are those of accuracy, human interest, social importance, literary excellence. It may not be possible to combine all these in any one story. However, accuracy and literary excellence should be present in all. A story of some very exceptional family may be of great human interest but of minor social importance. The best stories will be those which combine all these elements. (By accuracy, it was explained in conferences, is meant simply write what you smell, see, hear. Writers cannot check on the accuracy of what is said. Get in the subject’s own words what he has done, felt, and thought. If the subject’s head is filled with wrong notions, foolish thoughts, and misinformation, if this kind of material comes out in conversation, record it. Let the subject’s mind speak for itself.)

5. While the majority of stories should be about families and should attempt to include information on all the points listed in the attached outline, it may be best in some instances to write about a section of a village or a community dealing with all the families in that section or community; or a story may be written about any one of the items in the outline, such as, for instance, the size of the family, the coming of children and the effect their coming has on the fortunes of the family.

6. Some topics of importance may come up which are not covered in the outline. It will be best to go ahead and treat such topics and not wait to ask for permission to deal with them. However, no state director should allow writers to abandon the outline and sample stories to such an extent as to change the nature of the work.

7. All the stories do not have to be solemn and packed with information. If an amusing incident reveals the attitude of a family towards some important problem then this incident should be related.

8. The purpose of this work is to secure material which will give an accurate, honest, interesting, and fairly comprehensive view of the kind of life that is lived by the majority of the people in the South. It is extremely important that families be fairly selected, that those which get along well or fairly well be selected for stories as well as those that make a less favorable impression. The sub-normal, the normal, the above normal, all should have stories written about them. As the work gets along, it will be necessary to expand it in order to include other important groups, but insofar as possible, a beginning should be made with the groups indicated above. In those parts of the South where cotton textile manufacturing is unimportant, and other industries dominate the scene, these other industries should be selected for treatment. For instance, in and around Birmingham, Alabama, both families in textile manufacturing and families working in coal and iron industries should be treated.

9. Each story should carry on the first page the date when the first version is written, the name of the writer and the name and address of the family written about. This information needs to be given for purposes of verification. Names will be changed in any material that is published.

10. It is hoped that out of this material four or five volumes will be secured which can be published under a series name.
INSTRUCTIONS TO WRITERS

such as LIFE IN THE SOUTH with individual names for each volume.

OUTLINE FOR LIFE HISTORIES *

I. Family
   1. Size of family.
   2. Effect of family-size upon financial status of family.
   3. Attitude toward large families.
   4. Attitude toward limitation of family.
   5. Occupational background of family.
   6. Pride in family, including ancestry.

II. Education
   1. Number of years of school attendance.
   2. Causes of limited education.
   3. Attitudes toward education.
      b. Whether worker believes school training is economic advantage.
      c. Evaluation of school system.

III. Income
   1. Comparison of present income with first weekly or annual income.
   2. Actual needs to be covered by income.
   3. Extent to which income covers actual needs.
   4. Sense of relative values in expenditure of income.
   5. What person consulted considers an adequate income.

IV. Attitudes Toward Occupation and Kind of Life
   1. Pride or shame in work.
   2. Influence of attitudes of others.
   3. Basis of objections to or satisfaction with life.
   4. Attitudes toward owners.
   5. Advantages or disadvantages of present life in comparison with other types of life, e.g., working in mill compared with working on farm, life in town with life in country.

V. Politics
   1. Extent of voting.
   2. Degree of independence in casting ballot.

* Prepared by Ida Moore.

INSTRUCTIONS TO WRITERS

3. Preferences in choice of candidates.

VI. Religion and Morals
   1. Influence of religion on morals.
   2. Attitudes toward various forms of amusements.
   3. Relations to churches.
      a. Contributions.
      b. Attitude toward aid from churches.
      c. Attendance.

VII. Medical Needs
   1. Money expended for hospital and doctor bills.
   2. To what extent health has been protected through adequate medical care.
   3. What effect work has had upon health.

VIII. Diet
   1. Knowledge of balanced diet.
   2. To what extent knowledge is applied.
   3. To what extent it is possible to have balanced diet on wage earned.

IX. Miscellaneous Observations
   1. Cleanliness and order of house; number of rooms.
   2. Cleanliness of person.
   3. Furnishings in house.
   4. Sleeping accommodations.
   5. Bathroom facilities.
   6. Pride in possessions.

X. Use of Time
   1. Annual routine.
   2. Daily routine during the different periods indicated above.
   3. Amusements, visiting, courting. Where do courting couples go? Where do men spend their leisure hours?