

[Sallie Smith]

Interview Mrs. C. W. Higgins

Burksville, Alabama,

R. D.

Marie Reese

Lowndes County

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SALLIE SMITH

The morning I called on Sallie I found her gathering pecans in the grove whihc which was near the house. As she leads a lonely life she was glad to see me and have as she expressed it, a good old heart-to-heart chat. She invited me in and gave me a most cordial welcome, but as it was a glorious day we decided to set out in the open and have our visit.

Living alone, she did not have anyone to talk with every day and all one had to do was to give her a start. She begin to tell me it was her day to get ready for the curb market the next day and that she was exceedingly busy but assured me she could work and talk at the same time. I asked her to tell me about her work at the market and as it was one of the ways she had of making a living, she was very much interested and I was interested in hearing it. She said she did not know what would have become of her if it had not been for this and the cows as they pulled her through the lean years. She explained to me that the curb market she goes to is located in Montgomery, Alabama, but the distance of

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seventeen miles is nothing on the paved road (#80) and when her flivver is in good running condition.

The market was organized for the purpose of helping the women on the farm and to give them an opportunity of disposing of their farm produce. It is open or in operation three days in the week. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The days are arranged in this way so the intervening days can be spent in gathering and preparing the products they wish to carry and dispose of.

She says "We get ready one day and work late into the night and often make a sunrise start. We must get there very early, so our vegetables, flowers, etc., will be fresh. Also because the shoppers come early so as to buy something for dinner. If anyone is late someone else grabs the [customers?] and we lose trade." The market is supervised by outstanding women of the city who with an efficient board of directors have made a big success of it.

These regulate prices which has to be sold [but?] and regulations which has to be followed. These prices are printed on a board. However, after twelve o'clock all restrictions are lifted and the sellers can put whatever prices they choose on their articles of produce. In event any rule is broken, the one who gave the offense is either suspended or required to discontinue altogether.

One of the main requirements is that whatever is carried there for sale must be raised on their own plantation. Nothing whatever can be bought and resold there. Sallie told me a joke on some parties who sold there and who were caught buying the produce instead of raising. They were suspended from selling there three months which was a great loss as many things intended to cash in on were out of season by the time the parties were allowed to go back.

Each seller or lady has a table for which she pays a small monthly fee and in addition 10¢ every time she uses it. "It's mighty hard work," she says, "but I want the money and have

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to live. It keeps me 'turning'". I plant an all year round garden. In fact I am planting seed in my garden all the year around. In my childhood, I recall my parents making and having a Spring garden, but now its's an all-year round proposition.

"Now is our busiest and best season. Christmas is just around the corner which means turkey and decoration season. I sit way into the night having dozens and dozens of turkeys dressed and some of these 3 I have what is called "dry pickled". This is more work on me but the turkey is nicer fixed this way than it is dressed by the old fashioned way, that is pickled with hot water. Of course, I have to have help because I can't dress perhaps twenty turkeys, some chickens and prepare many other things without help and as soon as I turn my back Mary pours boiling water over the fowls.

"This makes the feathers come off easier, less work for her and almost spoils the appearance of the turkey or chicken. Sometimes the skins peels of in places, then when I get ready to sell it I have to reduce my price and scarcely break even.

"City folks have lots of airs and of course the seller who has the nicest looking things gets the trade. But there is might mighty good money in turkey business now. There are 20¢ and 25¢ on foot per pound and 35¢ per pound dressed. I sell them weighing anywhere from seven to twenty and you see that counts up. It is common to have a customer march in to the market and buy a \$5 and \$6 one. They tell me they eat off of it a day and then put it in the ice box and use some other meat, then use the rest after a few days change.

"I call people wip who come in and pay that much for one without trying to 'jew me down' real people and me real lucky. The best piece of luck I ever had on the market was a year ago, when a big lawyer in the city came to my table and said 'I want to give you an order.' To my surprise and delight he bought twenty-five turkeys dressed.

He siad said , 'please give me your choicest ones regardless of price as I want to send them around as Christmas presents to me friends.' I never saw him before, but trust to the good Lord, I will see him again. You see from the street my entrance my place comes first

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and he stopped. I lived with a man thirty-odd years and they are just alike 4 They won't do like women, run all around and price and turn the article over and over, upside down and begin to 'jew' you, but they buy and move on.

"This reminds me of myself one day when I was trying to save a few cents on a yard of cloth. I wanted to let out a last season's dress. Like most women I went around looking and pricing mind you, to save a couple of cents on one yard. Finally the clerk where I had been twice, said, 'Lady, you wear out more soles on your shoes than the small difference in the cloth will come to.! Of course, he was right, and as the old saying goes, much is lost by looking for greener pastures.' But I must finish telling you about my good luck story of the lawyer (and another saying) the 'Christmas turkey'. I was so glad and decided at once to get rid of my other produce as soon as possible and instead of standing there all day selling, I could see a picture. I could not come home earlier than I had planned for [?], the colored boy who drives me was out with my car.

"As soon as he puts me out and unloads he is off with the car and I'm sure, is seeing the town with his colored friends to the detriment of the car." "Why will you allow it? Why not park it nearby?" I asked.

She replied that the drivers would not stand for that. It was too expensive to keep a regular boy to drive as she only went three days in the week, for which she paid him 50¢ a day. Also 50¢ a trip to drive her anywhere else. However, she said it was best humor them as help was awful hard to get and she had to have someone to drive her about. She lives three miles from the village out on the farm and then there is the business trips into town and elsewhere. "I am 5 compelled to have him, she said. "I am too old to start driving myself now. I ought to have started when I first got a car. I know I am foolish not to manage as I do, but being alone, I can't do any other way.

"My car which is a Ford, costs me \$1.50 a trip into Montgomery (round trip) and 50¢ for a driver, then the wear and tear bill. I have also to allow for a dollar or two loss every now

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and then as something mysteriously disappears and the help tells me I just miscounted articles when I loaded.

"I can't help this either," she says. I can't come down too strict she explains. I have to count an occasional loss as expenses, but after the expenses come out, I consider I clear enough to have a car and of course I am compelled to have one and call it my business car. Of course, I'm not able to have a nicer one as the up-keep is too much and besides hauling all my products in it would ruin it and and it would not be a nice one very long." I was curious to know what her products were and asked.

Oh, she said, any and everything raised to eat and used that is raise on your own land. From pork and turkey to popcorn and persimmons, but I wanted to hear in detail and she gave me a near list.

'Fresh pork, sausage, all kinds of flowers, fowls, butter, eggs, fresh meat, vegetables all year round, pot plants, preserves, beautiful home made cakes, packages of light wood and many other things. This is a turkey and decoration season. In the early spring there is a flower season. Loads and loads of lovely flowers, trees bulbs are sold.

"The sellers consider the planting time a lucky break for them, because most of the trees and shrubs can be gotten in forests and of course, are all profit. Many kinds of wild flowers are also sold in 6 profusion and the only expense attached to them is the getting, which is very small. I want to tell you about a friend of mine who sells near me and the good luck she had last spring, she said, in going over her woodland she discovered some wild blue phlox in bloom. As it was in abundance she picked quite a bit and carried it to the market.

"It took like wildfire and its popularity spread like wildfire. Worlds of it was sold in bunches and it became so popular that the customers began to order plants. Small baskets of two dozen plants each brought 50¢. A blue phlox wave spread over the city. My friend sold \$400.00 worth of those plants and blooms during the planting season.

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I stood nearby, taking note of her good luck and about the time the planting season was passed, I discovered a patch in my own pasture. I am going to sell them by the wholesale next year if I live and nothing happens.” She was extremely enthusiastic about the Christmas season and asked me to go with her into a rear room and see the many decorations she was preparing to put in the market. The reason of her intense interest in these was as she explained, all profit, almost.

She has gone into the woods and gathered an abundance of evergreens. Lovely leaves, pine cones, berries and holly. These she was to sell some in their natural state, some she making into graceful garlands and pretty wreaths.

Having bought bright colored paints from the 5¢ and 10¢ store and with gold and silver paints she was working it all into some kinds of ornamental decorations. The large room was literally full of it. She prided herself on the graceful smilax and vines she had silvered. 7 She told me she bought a gallons of the silver paint for \$2.70 and poured it in a basin and simply dipped the vines in and she said she would “mop up” on that alone. “It is mighty messy”, she said, “but I am going to gather it by day work it up by night and on Christmas Eve night I expect to set up and paint and fix all night.”

“I can't do this and get free money but once a year.” “How on earth are you going to do all this?” I asked. She told me she had made a good trade with Mary, the cook woman. She had a nice crepe dress she had bought on special sale for \$5.00 “but it too loud for me.”

She wore it once and the cook woman traded to work every night next week and help me paint, etc., for the dress. “I'll be all right as to help and it won't cost me one penny unless she gets drunk. She gets gutter drunk every Christmas and lays up on me for the week, but I am trusting to providence she will wait till she pays for the crepe or finishes my things. We start a roaring fire and I want you to know I work. “While Hube lived (her husband) he made hot coffee and passed it around once or twice during the night.

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She told me she had been going to the curb market six years and had made good at it, but she could not stand and work like she once did, but was going as long as she could hold out.

Her children did not want her to work, but come and live with them but she was not content to sit idle and thought older people could not be transplanted. One of her son-in-laws especially, did not want her to work and considered her type of work not in keeping with their station in life, and offered her a nice monthly check to retire. This did not appeal to her at all. Said it was all airs and false pride, and besides she wanted independence and intended to work for it but none of them were growing any younger. When she had given me all the information on her plans for the Christmas work she told me her life story.

Sallie was 60-odd, she laughed and told me after she had celebrated her 60th she did not intend to have any more birthdays. She lost her husband two years with heart trouble. Though a widow woman had a hard struggle, but did not want to try the matrimonial venture again.

Her girls sent her attractive colored dresses and discouraged her mourning garments in the early day of bereavement, but she had the old ideas of respecting the dead deeply instilled in her and kept repeating that the dresses were too gay, too short and too tight and the idea seemed to worry her that by wearing them some man might think she was after him. She is nice looking, medium size, has pretty pepper and salt hair and attractive face, but has worn herself to a great extent by hard work.

She was the granddaughter of rather large pioneer planter. Her mother married during the depression years of the late 60's and began her married life in the plantation home which was homesteaded by the pioneer father and of course the grandfather of Sallie.

There were four children born of this union. Sallie was the youngest. Soon after her birth the young mother passed on. The father proudly boasted that he would not farm out and

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separate his children, but would show that he could rear them as well as any woman could, so he hired an old colored woman who had been a [familt?] slave and a mammy in the house. The young widower and the faithful old negro began the task of rearing the three little girls and small boy. Sallie said, "He was mighty strict on us, but guess he had to be and people said 9 "I remember papa stepping out lots, but I guess there were too many young ones to raise and no lady wanted such a large ready-made family, so he never made another marriage. Let me tell you a funny thing about his affairs with the fair sex and I'm sure the joke which spread everywhere broke him up from courtin'.

"He was smitten with a young widow in an adjoining village and on occasion when he was in the city, he decided to send her a box of flowers. The same day he purchased for himself a suit of underwear. By chance both purchases were put in boxes about the same size and wrapped. On reaching home he did not take time to open them, but sent one to the widow and wrote on it "Wear these and think of me."

"On opening the box she found the undies instead of flowers. The mistake ended their affair and he never tried again. Two things in particular he was strict about, our table manners and going out with boys. He never allowed one of us to go alone with a boy, but he would have to carry a sister and I together and when we came into the village to dances he would not allow us to come in a top buggy. Yes, about the time I was dating, it was the buggy and horse period or as I hear the 'put one' say, it was in the 'gay nineties'. But a top buggy better not be hooked at our gate. It had to be 'open' if we went in it. Another funny thing I recall", she said, "most of had sweethearts off at college and my sister and I would make up and save our fresh dresses till the boys came in. We did not care if the other girls did joke us about it.

"I don't think it pays for parents to be too strict with children. Both of my sisters planned runaway marriages as means of escape. Papa believed in education but would not put a dime on a college education, unless you would follow a profession. I wanted to go to college 10 as all my class mates were going, but he wanted to be a M. D. and as I refused,

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he would not pay my way. I went anyway to a normal school and paid my expenses by teaching in the under classes.

“Soon after I finished I escaped it all by getting married. Papa was pleased as Hube was the son of one of his old war cronies and they attended all the confederate reunions together. I went to the city and remained there five years when my father died.

I decided to come back and reclaim the old home where I was born and the farms that my pioneer grandfather had bought almost 100 years ago. But in reality I came back to work and drudge. My husband was a town man, and knew nothing on earth about a farm. To succeed on a farm you must know the ‘ology’ of the nigger and the mule, else they will eat you up. We decided to go into it in a big way, so I bought up the interests in the land of my sister and brother and bought a nice herd of cows and started a dairy.

“We had four little girls to raise and educate and I went over to Georgia and got my brothers' two small children to raise. He had died out west and they were left alone. About this time my husband lost his health and I knew the load would be mine. Milk was a good price then and giving it personal attention, I realized a good monthly check.

Operating a dairy is hard work and it is confining as a prison sentence, but it bring in ready money, where the money from the farm does not come in till fall. I helped to [amilk?] and saw to it that it got off (by wagon to meet a daylight train at a distance of six miles). To do this I had to get up at three and four A. M. During the hard winter months I caught ‘fits’; In the cold, rain and sleet, but I will tell you how I managed to hold out and it is a big help. 11 “I make it a rule and it is a good rule too, I take care to eat plenty and to wear a plenty if it is cold and this keeps you going, but I see now it does not pay to work too hard, that is, drive yourself”. One pays for it in the long run.

When I was young it seemed ‘[Putonishg?] to hear people saying they were tired. I did not know the meaning of the word until the past year or two, and never had a sickly day. My children were never sick. I began to think of their education which I strongly believed in, I

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sent them for three to six at a time into the village school. At night I would take them in my lap one at a time, and teach them and next morning while I was cooking breakfast I 'heard their lessons.'

"They were all bright and I sent them to college two at a time and my goodness it was a drain on my pocketbook. I had taught them to stand on their own and when they finished that they would have to make their own way.

"I could not tell you how many thousand dollars their schooling cost me, but I had a wonderful herd of dairy cows and pulled them all the harder, but I got good results from the pile I spent on my girls. All made good and taught a few years and married. The best idea to raise children is to make them as self-reliant as possible. No petting and pampering, but at the start make them help themselves. It is handed to me that I raised an unusually nice set of girls, five in all. (She did)

My dairy increased, but for profits began to fall off. I backed it up with my dairy money, but year after year I lost by doing so. The cash I made on my cows was eaten up by crop failure and nigger. I never put out a good dollar after a bad one. I made this terrible mistake which cost me my farm. Always let each business keep account of itself and take care of itself. Not make one carry the other.

I fell way behind. The hands were getting lazier day by day. My husband who never understood the farm was rapidly failing in health. We really put too much in the college fund. The girls were teaching but spent it on handsome dressing and did not want to save the land. They said they were through with the farm. The last depression almost finished us up, but work commenced improving road #80 one mile below my house.

"We sold plenty of gravel to use in its construction, hundreds of dollars worth. I hired me an extra cook, got some cheap beds and bedding and I took in boarders, ten at \$25.00 a month.

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"I felt that I was back in luck. The gravel and boarders tidied the farm trouble over, but interest works while you sleep and is evergreen. Road #80 was completed, but next year my debt faced me again and the gravel and boarders' money could not come again. I am sixty years old going on higher and after a life of hard work and sacrifice I lost my home and land, the place where I was born and my mother before me. Then I lost my, husband. But conditions were not as bad for me as they might have been.

"My oldest daughter's husband stepped in and bought it and gave me a life-time home, so I hardly realized the difference, in fact I don't have to scratch up tax, interest and insurance every year. He is a State official and a fine man. He wants me to retire on a monthly check from him but I won't lay up on anyone.

Sallie, however, is slipping. She has high blood pressure and does not feel that she can lead an active life many more years. She lives in the old home which is built on a log foundation and framed on the exterior. The 100-year old house has nondescript furnishings. 13 Some exquisite antique pieces and filled in with modern furniture. The half sory room is a real curosity. It is filled with old letters, documents, etc., dating over a hundred years back. She says she does not appreciate these, but the stamps are valuable.

She lives a life of work, but prefers it. Has a cook who assists her in preparing her produce for the market. Then two old colored men carry on the dairy. She still operates this on a small scale. Milk is very cheap now, as so many have gone in the business.

One of her great interest is her immense flower and bulb plot which she cultivates right on with the vegetable garden. She claims to have thousands of bulbs and told me she usually made a neat sum on Daffodils and narcissus blooms and bulbs. She does not believe in any social activity and says her cows and the curb market are her interest in life. She votes, but no especially interested in politics. A member of the Baptist church and her

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husband was a Catholic. She says she is called the “outworkingest” woman anyone ever saw.

(Note - But in the end does it pay to lead a hard life of work and lost all her property in her old age.

12/2/36

S. J.