

[Alice Fairweather—Squatter Farmer]

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Alice Fairweather

Squatter Farmer

Mrs. Caddie Crews

Venus Florida

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The small home of Alice Fairwether was somewhat nearer the village than these of the other squatter farmers. After traveling the paved highway some miles southward and then following a smooth grass grown woods road for about three miles westward one came directly to the house.

The clearing, in which stood the small four room house weathered to a silvery grey by time and the elements, was surrounded with a crude fence of several strands of bent and rusty wire strung along on crooked poles set at irregular intervals. This fence served no apparent purpose, for pigs and chickens came through it at will and there were places between the wire strands large enough to admit a cow. However, as usual in most of these [cases?] the gate was securely fastened with several wrappings of wire the combination

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of which defied the visitor . Finally a bashful little boy slipped quietly out of the house and came to open the gate. He then held the gate open without a word and after I passed through he securely fastened it again.

The house stood in the middle of the clearing with its lean to kitchen facing the gate and as there was no apparent path around the house there seemed nothing left to do but to follow the shy speechless little boy through the trash strewn yard to the kitchen door and then through the bed rooms, to the front porch. Here sat his Mother, Alice Fairwether, quietly rocking a baby.

The small house was neat and clean. The kitchen held a small wood stove, a crude table and several home made chairs, 2 and upon its walls hung shelves holding bottles, dishes and pans. The four small bed rooms were barely furnished, but were in order. The beds, the sole furniture, were neatly made and covered with clean spreads of unbleached [muslin?] with gay colored quilts folded at the foot of each. The large square front porch, deeply shaded by a low overhanding roof faced out across the clearing toward a dense forest of pine. The porch held several old weathered rocking chairs and a long bench. There were no steps leading from the porch and it looked as if it might have been intended for a room but never completed.

As I entered the porch, Alice, a frail pale little woman with faded blue eyes and greying blond hair, extended her hand but did not rise. She said shyly: "You must please ma'am excuse me not comin' to the door or gettin' up. I aint been so well since this here baby came and hits a quarrelsome baby too and cries awful if I wake hit.

"This here is my thirteenth child too and before this'n I never had no trouble, but I been sick for some weeks 'fore it come and ever since. Hit been most three weeks now and seems like I just can't get no strength back. We had a doctor tend me this time too , most always I just has a nigger woman to come in.

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“Yes ma'am, I got quite a family. Can't everybody have that many chillens, and there is some [wimmen?] don't have none. I have heard wimmen say they just won't have any, or not more'n one or two and say they know how to keep 'em from a comin' but I don't know if that's truth. Hits agin nature anyway and don't seem right to me. Chillens is a lot of comfort and trouble too but we have to have 'em and the Lord gives 'em 'cordin' to His will and [taint?] no use to complain. I ain't so old yet but 3 what I may have three or four more but 'taint for me to [say?], the Lord sends 'em as He sees fitten to do. My mother had a whole passle of chillen and why shouldn't I, hits just life.

“My two oldest boys is out working now, seems like they been away from home a long time. Ike is workin' in the Citrus but he aint experienced as yet and he don't have steady work or make much money. Ben wants to be a range rider but he aint got no horse yet but anyway he's somewhere in Glades County a huntin' work. When they left they thought they would get work right off and send money home to me and their paw but they aint been able to do hit yet. I miss them boys a lot too and though they is now feedin' theirselves and food is sure hard to get for such a passle of chillen I'de rather they be home with us.”

She paused and sighed deeply: “Thirteen chillens do seem like a heap to feed and raise up but it wouldn't be so hard somehow most of the time if Ed just wouldn't drink so much liquor. Seems like when he gets a little money he just can't help a spendin' most of it to get liquored up. But don't you let on I told you”, she whispered with a scared look upon her thin face, for Ed sure would be rampagin' mad. He's afishin' right now but lows to be back most any time. When he's liquored up he aint always in a good nature and he riles up mighty easy like.”

Again Alice sighed deeply and looked about timidly as if to make sure there were no other listeners, then she resumed her story: “When we was on the relief seemed like the money come in more regular then, though there never was very much but it sure helped us. But then Ed just would take most o' that money and buy liquer and he drank a lot but he

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almost always managed to get back 4 to the work the next week. One time the County Commissioner here come out to see me and said he were agoin' to ask the Relief to let me have [Ed's?] money or fix it at the store so I could buy the groceries, or fix it someway so [Ed?] couldn't get the money but I was sure [scared?] to try that. I made out like I didn't know what he was a talkin' about and we was hungry right then but I told him we always had plenty to eat and he must not do [no?] such a thing with the Relief. My, My, [Ed?] would'er been rampagin' mad about that and I know hit wouldn't do for none of us to mess things up like that.

"I aint never did the buyin' no way, and I didn't have no way to git in town and wouldn't know nothin' [?] about it all if I could. Well Commissioner didn't seem to like it much but I guess he never did nothin' about it cause the Relief they never said a word.

"Yes, ma'am, hit do take a lot of food and clothes to raise a passle of thirteen chillens but we get on somehow. They don't need so many clothes way out here in the woods and the weather don't never get very cold and we have always lived this way and like hit. We have us a little garden but [Ed?] don't take much time with hit [any?] more, and when he aint doin' anything else [Ed?] hunts and fishes a lot. Did I tell you he's a fishin' today, ma'am? This aint no day for fishin', the wind's too high and they aint much sun but [Ed?], he's notionate and you can't tell him nothin'. Hot weather is the [best?] fishin' time and when the Red-birds sing in the summer you sure can catch the trout in these here creeks and ponds but 'taint much use to go when the Red-birds aint a singin'.

In regard to my [query?] about her family, Alice replied, "My 5 [Paw?] had a big family and Ed's Paw did too. Yes ma'am, we was both borned right over in Hardee County near a place Crewsville, right near the Highlands line but it used to be called [De?] Soto County in them days. We knew each other from the time we was chillens and we married right there too and we haint never been out the State. We got married about twenty-two years ago I believe hit is but I anit real sure, I kind of forgets the time. I'm thirty-nine now but I look older don't I. Folks say that's because I had so many chillens in so short a time but

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I'm proud of my family even if I do look old. Ed, now let me think, he must be [nigh?] on to forty-three but I aint sure of that but I know he's some older than me.”

She paused and seemed to be gazing into the past as she rocked softly.” We was both raised on farms and we had some cattle too, my Paw did and Ed thought we would raise cattle and have a big farm but he just never could seem to get a start. He would liquor up even in [?] them days, I guess I knew he drank a lot when we married, but nobody never thought much about hit then. When all the chillen started a comin' along so fast and times got so bad with us is when his drinkin' seemed so bad for all of us. Ed had several jobs as a range rider and helpin' on [farms?] in other places around here but somehow he just never got one.”

She spoke with pride[:?] “Neither of us ever been out the State and we don't want to go neither, hit might be so different way off yonder. We aint even been away from this part of the State but we lived in several Counties before we come here. For awhile after we married we lived at Crewsville but seemed like we just couldn't get on there, so we went over in [De?] Soto County and lived there a long time, guess most of my chillen was borned there. Ed 6 got work on farms around there but we didn't get no better start for ourselves and so after a long time we went down to Glades County and Ed worked on some cattle ranches part of the time. He was a range rider for a little while but his horse died and he just never could get another one and so he just kinder drifted ‘round doin' most any kind of work and stayin' liquored up most of the time. Then we got over [here?] in this County and here I hope to stay. I like hit here, livin' way out this way don't no folks pester us much and hit's nice and quiet all the time.”

The wind harp in the pines sounded its wistful melody as Alice paused again and looked at the sleeping baby in her arms. “I aint never heard much talk of where my folks come from”, she said, “we never though much about anything like that except just being borned and raised here in Florida. But, my Paw did sometimes say he thought his family must have come from England because he loved to farm and always wanted a big country farm

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house with lots of horses and [?] dogs and such like. Most all of us was fair with blue eyes and light hair too and aint that like the English people be?"

We spoke of farming and Alice said with some show of pride: "My Paw were a good farmer too but he never got nothin' for his [crops?] seemed like. He sure could raise potatoes and corn and beans and such but we never cared much for green vegetables ourselves. Ed could be a good farmer if he'd stay off the liquor and work his farm but he don't do much with hit."

Alice continued to gently rock the baby which had long since stopped nursing and gone to sleep, and a [?] silence fell to be broken only by the [cackle?] of chickens and grunts of little 7 pigs which had gathered in neighborly confusion on the ground below the edge of the porch.

Finally she spoke again: "We never did neither of us go to school much but we read a little and I can sign my name", she stated proudly. "Those days there warnt so much schoolin' way out in the woods like we lived and hit warnt handy to git to the school house regular like. I just went a few weeks at a time when I wanted to, maybe I went as far as what the third grade is now but I aint sure. I didn't take much to it and Ed didn't neither.

She continued in her low gentle voice: "When we went to school everybody was in one little room and there wasn't many children either and one lady she learned 'em all. We carried any books we had and did the best we could, I guess. Sure is different in these days, the schoolin is, ma'am. Why in the school over yonder in the village seems like they get a different room and and extra teacher for every year the chillens is in school. They learn a lot too that we never was taught in our schoolin. Seems they [?] learned a lot they oughter know at home such as cookin' and house cleanin' and such. If they just learn my chillen to read and write good that's all I want and all they need to know. They might not even need that much specially the girls, fer why does girls need so much educatin' [?] I aint never had no use fer the readin' and writin' I learnt, I been to busy a

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raisin' a family and a cookin' and a sewin' to do any readin'. They is some people reads books and papers, I seen 'em in the stores too.”

We talked a little about the various phases of education and then Alice remarked: “Well, ma'am, maybe they is a reason why they is teachin' as many queer things in school these days 'sides just a education, but I ain't a goin' to make my chillen take more'n 8 they want [o'?] schoolin'. All the chillens is in school now 'cept Ike and Ben and these four little [?] 'uns you see, they all be under six years old and can't go yet. Bill there, he'll be six next spring and I am to start him for he is always a rampagin' to go with the other chillen, 'course he don't know what its like yet. Expect when times comes to go he won't like it no better'n me and his Paw did. He's so much like his Paw with a high temper and rampagin' mad a [?] lot 'o the time. Ed always was a bad 'un in school and he never took much schoolin.”

Alice said there was no regular and dependable income and never had been in all her married life as Ed just could not be depended upon to work steady and leave liquor alone.

“We been in right good fortune with our health, I guess”, remarked Alice when I mentioned how well the little boys looked, “none o' this whole passle been sick much. Sometimes one o' 'em has a hurtin tooth and some folks say they oughter have these tooths fixed up but we never did that. When them tooths get loose and ready they come out alright and it did seem agin nature to fool with 'em. [Just?] pack a hurtin' tooth with snuff, if it get a hollow in hit, or if hit just hurt without no bad place pack the snuff on the gum and hit'll soon stop a hurtin'. Sometimes chewin' tobacco, that's been chewed some till its kiner soft does better [an?] the snuff, specially to pack on the gum. I keep some castor oil in the house but don't never use much.

Once one of the little 'uns, she was little then, a started eatin' dirt and dried mud and her stomach would swell up and she would cry awful. Castor oil didn't seem to do no good neither. Then a nurse came out and said she had some kind o' worms, I don't remember

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what kind and she got a treatment and gave Annie and she 9 she's been alright since. We don't spend no money for doctors for we aint got none to spend thataway. What little doctorin' we done the doctors don't charge us, I guess they know how pore we is. What little money we got, hit all goes for food whatever Ed don't spend in gettin' liquored up.

"I aint never handled the money and I hardly ever go to a store. Even when we had money for [dress good?] for me, Ed bought it. Havin' so little all the time I just don't know how much it would take to take good care o' us, I aint thought much about it one way or the other because I don't see no chance of gettin' any more. Seems like though if we had a dollar a day we could be real sure of and none of hit went for liquor we could get on fine what with the garden and huntin' and fishin'. Maybe we could have some clothes too fitten to wear then, but I ain't sure about that."

Alice seemed to consider with surprise that work could be a matter of pride in any special way.

"We all just work, have to to live. We always have been farmers and my Paw he were a good one too. I guess if Ed could a left liquor he might have a farm now too. The little garden we got now hit don't amount to much, Ed won't work it much seems like, but hit helps us some with food. We learned to eat lot of vegetables we didn't use to like. When we was on the Relief a lady came out here and talked with me about food and the vegetables 'specially and she got me to promise to try carrots and beans and other things besides collards and turnip greens. Collard greens cooked up done with lots of side meat is best though, I don't care what anybody says about hit.

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And if you have potatoes with hit, the sweet yellow mushy ones where the juice runs out like syrup when they's baked there just aint nothin' better. We like fried bread too and eat a lot of it when we have the flour. When it's made right with thick batter dropped in hot hog fat, now I'm a tellin' you hit is good. We do eat beans and cabbage and such like and

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sometimes carrots when we is real hungry, seems like carrots aint fitten for nothin' but hog feed though.”

Alice paused again and looked about her porch and then seemed to peer intently into the open doors of the two front bed rooms: “I try to keep my house clean, I was learned that at home. [?] is hard work with all these chillens. I like to cook and sew too and raise my family, that's my work and hit's all I know to do except piecin' quilts in my spare time. I always try to keep the chillen clean and teach 'em to work. Most every body has to do some kind o' work, I guess hit's work what really keeps us all a livin' in this here world, ma'am.

“Yes ma'am, I do like to piece quilts. Don't know how many I made for I've gave some away but I got nigh on to twenty-five right in this house now. No, I don't ever try to sell 'em. Few people I know who would buy 'em. And, we need 'em right here. You see we aint got enough beds and some of the boys sleeps on pallets on the floor and when its cold weather too we need all the quilts. I don't usually foller no special pattern, just put the scraps together the best I can. Seems like they is never large enough to make a special pattern like. Somehow I usually manage to get the stuff for the whole quilt but hit takes a long time sometimes but I keep a right on piecin' the tops. Sometimes I get a hold of a old quilt or comfort what is about wore out and I wash it clean 11 and put one of my quilt tops on it. Then sometimes my quilts start a wearin' out and I cover them with a new top.

“I expect I could get some good large scraps from the Church folks in the village but I just don't like to tell folks about myself. I never did make friends very easy like and if people don't help me when a talkin' I don't never know what to say. I always been like that and I can't change now even if I wanted to and I don't care. Why would I want to change now, hit's what I always been used to knowin. We always did live way out in the woods too, Paw always liked it and said he never did want folks a messin' in his business and I'm kinder thataway too. Ed feels the same way, and when he is a drinkin' he likes to get off by hisself

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for hit mostly though he will take a drink and start liquorin up with his friends. He likes to go to the village too and talk with the men sometimes.

“Hit's quiet out here and we don't have to worry what folks is a thinkin' of us and the chillen don't have others to play with and learn mischief from. I hope we stays right on here. We was lucky to find this here place without no rent for we just couldn't pay no rent. Whoever hit belongs to don't never pester us neither and this here is a right good little house and hit don't hardly leak at all.”

We talked for a few minutes of life in the towns and cities and a look of fright came in to the blue eyes of Alice and she shivered slightly as she spoke[:?] “No ma'am, I wouldn't want to live in a city or a town, I think I be kinder scared o' livin' there, theynis all so noisy and rushin'. I been in the cities 'round here and I was glad to get out too. Everybody looked in such a awful hurry looked like they [?] almost run over theirselves and where 12 to get to. I don't see no use in such a hurryin', we all maybe is a tryin' to get to the same place when we go from this here world and why rush so there be plenty room Up Yonder for all o' us, I reckon.

“I just couldn't sleep or rest in all that city noise neither, with all them autos a screechin' and horns a blowin' and the trains and lights and everything, hit sure aint no fitten place to live in those cities aint. My, my, give me my little old woods [?] 'way out here all the time, ma'am”

Among other things we talked of politics and Alice showed more animation than on any other subject. Her eyes fairly glowed as she spoke: “No ma'am, I aint interested in politics much seems like hit aint a thing for wimin to mess up with, but I done went in and wrote my name in that book so they would know I am a Democrat cause Ed said I must. Ed likes to talk and he's a good Democrat too like we always have been, and my Paw were too. But, I don't see no one hardly to talk to and don't read no papers and when I vote hits just like Ed tells me to do.

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"I think we got a great President way up there in Washington now, the best we ever had that I knows of. He really seems to care about the real pore folks like us and if he could just do like he wants too he would help us all more. Some people gets mad because they don't get all they think they belong to have and they blame Mr. Roosevelt but hit aint his fault he can't see all over the Country. Ed likes him too though he never did think he got enough on Relief but he didn't blame Mr. Roosevelt for that.

"Seems like somebody just got to help pore folks these days and if we hadn't a all had some help what would a 13 happened to all of us. There aint much in this here world for folks as pore as we is exceptin' a place to sleep and a little somethin' to eat and wear and we wouldn't had even that if Mr. Roosevelt hadn't a felt sorry and helped us like he had. I heard once that he had plenty of money hissself too and yet he feels sorry for us pore people."

Alice then spoke of religion and said she supposed they were Baptist but none of them attended Church regularly.

"I reckon we don't none of us go to the Church like we oughter but we don't have no way to go and nothin' fittin to wear much of the time. We don't like to get in such a crowd neither least I don't and have to shake hands and talk to so many people. They always ask me so many questions and I never do know what to tell 'em. I reckon we is Baptists though we don't go to Church and give any money to hit fer we never have none to give. Once in a while they has a super supper at the Church and once I baked a cake for them when had plenty of [?] flour and our hens was a layin' good. They all said hit were a real good cake too, and sometimes I send a jar of canned vegetables or something I make. I can't do much and they all know hit and don't ask me.

"Ed don't like to go to Church neither, he's scared the Preacher will call him about drinkin'. He says he has a right to drink liquor if he wants to do hit and I don't never arguefy with

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him, 'taint no use. But we both want the chillen to go to Sunday School when they can, hit might be good for 'em, and other folks chillen go just like they all go to school.

“The Baptist don't believe in dancin' and I heard that the Preacher that preaches to our Church don't think the picture shows is right neither. [Well?], I don't believe in 'em myself and I aint seen many neither. Don't none of us go anywhere much. I guess the 14 chillen might like the shows but I wouldn't want 'em to go even if we had plenty o' money for they might learn a bit o' mischief there. Of course I can't say what my boys away from home is a goin' but I hope they don't go neither. Our chillen never do seem to want to go places much anyway, not even to Sunday School when they can. They like to [?] play right here at home and that's about all.”

The three little boys, too young for school, came runnin through the house and jumped out on the porch then stopped in surprise and shyness as if they had forgotten that their Mother had a visitor. Alice admonished them gently to be quiet and not wake the baby. Their clothes were ragged and dirty from much scuffling around in the sandy yard but they stood quietly watching me for a moment and then returned to the yard.

Alice watched their departure lovingly and then remarked: “Hit sure do take a lot o' washin' to keep all my chillen in clean clothes but I try to do hit the best I can. And, I try to make 'em keep theirselves clean too just like I was raised to do. We can't have fine [?] clothes or many of any kind but I can keep what we got patched and clean as long as they lasts. The chillen will scabble around in the sand and that gets 'em dirty and wears out their clothes too but they got to have a little fun I guess.

“We don't have one o' them new fangled bathin' tubs like I seen in town but we got plenty water with our pump here and the chillen can take a bath every night out by the pump if they want to. I always make all o' them take a bath every Saturday, then if they do get a way to go to Church and want to go they is clean. Some times hit's kinder hard work gettin'

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that whole passel o' chillens 15 washed up clean but they is right good for such a lot and I don't have much trouble with 'em.

“Ed aint much good at helpin with the chillen. They gets on his nerves he says and if they don't do just like he says right then he gets rampagin' mad and there is trouble. They must always come to me for askin' about things and for mindin'. When Ed gets mad at the chillen he gets mad at me too and I don't never say much to him then and the chillen they most always keep outer his way.”

Alice said that she found plenty of work with such a lot of children: “I keep busy all the time, I guess, right here in the house. We all get up at sun up and what with the cookin' and a gettin' the chillens ready for school there is lots to do. When Ed's a workin' on the Government work or the County, or aint liquored up he likes to go to town and stand around awhile and talk to the menfolks there. He don't have no special time for farmin' and don't pay much care to the little garden we got, the chillens tends it mostly.

As I arose to leave, Alice came with me and we walked back through the house. “I hope you will excuse the looks o' the yard, ma'am,” she said, “seems like hits been cluttered up this a way a long time. I don't get time to clear hit up and Ed is always a promisin' to so but he never gets to it, and the chillens don't seem to think about it neither. But perhaps hit'll be cleaned up sometime.”