


On the **CHAIN GANG**

A black and white photograph showing a line of prisoners in striped uniforms, likely in a prison camp or workhouse. They are bent over, working in a field. The background shows a line of trees under a cloudy sky.

by
John L. Spivak

5¢

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PREFACE

THESE flashes of chain gang life are written by the author of *Georgia Nigger*, the sensational novel about peonage and chain gangs. In this pamphlet Mr. Spivak, a well-known New York newspaper reporter, paints some of the scenes he witnessed in Georgia.

The Georgia chain gangs described here are no different than those found in any other southern state. For the chain gang, with all its brutal forced labor and torture, is a southern institution, adapted specifically to the equally brutal system of peonage in the Black Belt. The plantation owners, credit merchants and bankers of the South have evolved it as their own peculiar weapon with which to enforce debt slavery and peonage particularly for the Negro peasantry in the Black Belt. It is part of the whole system of repression.

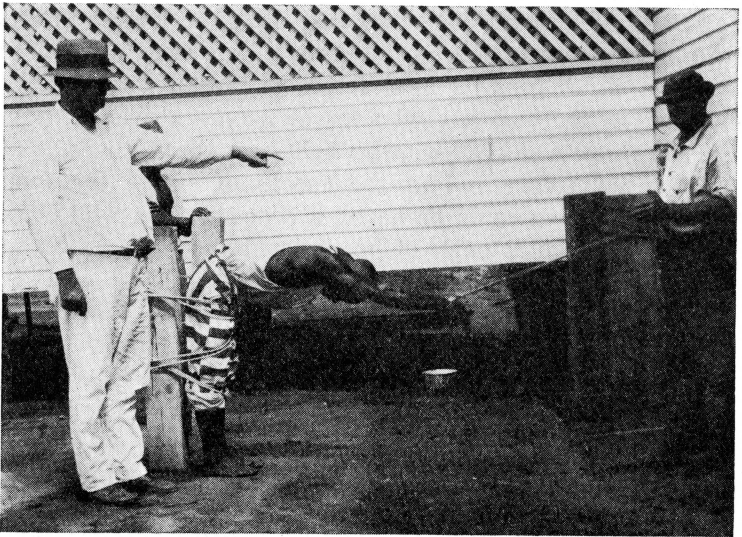
By the use of the vagrancy laws "unattached" or unemployed workers are picked up by the police, thrust into chains and forced to work either for the county or for planters. There is no distinct line between the two in the Black Belt. In the large plantation areas of the South the sheriff acts as the planter's foreman recruiting and driving labor for him wherever it is required. Objections by Negro croppers to conditions on the plantations receive swift satisfaction—on the chain gang. Working class organizers, Negro and white, have been thrust into chains for leading the revolt against such conditions.

During recent years the chain gang has been used more and more for unemployed white workers also. This only proves that as long as the white workers permit the enslavement of the Negro people they themselves suffer much the same fate at the hands of the ruling class.

The special oppression of the Negro toilers exists in the North also. Here the Negro is crowded into Jim-Crow ghettos, lynched both by mobs and courts, terrorized by the police. He is in fact little freer in the North than in the South.

And both North and South, the Negro workers in industry and on the land are fortunately beginning to move toward revolt against their conditions. The organization of share-croppers unions, as at Camp Hill, Alabama, the active participation of Negroes in recent strikes of coal miners, the wide struggles developing around the Scottsboro case, and the joint fight under the leadership of the International Labor Defense of white and Negro workers against recent frame-ups illustrate the beginnings of these revolts. Together with the white workers, the Negro workers are moving forward toward the abolition of lynching, Jim-Crow laws, and every form of persecution and oppression.

LABOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATION.



"Stretching" on the Early County, Georgia, chain gain, Warden J. D. Williams supervising. (Photo by John L. Spivak.)

ON THE CHAIN GANG

By JOHN L. SPIVAK

I SAW the Spanish Inquisition of 300 years ago. I saw men chained by the neck like galley slaves. I saw men with monstrous bayonets riveted around their feet so they could not sleep without waking when they turned. I saw men trussed up like cattle ready for slaughter and ants crawling over their helpless bodies. I saw men hanging in stocks such as the Puritans used in their cruelest days. I saw men broken on the rack as they broke them under the Spanish Inquisition.

I saw these things and I photographed them—not in a forgotten dungeon in ancient Spain but in the United States—in Georgia—in this year of our "civilization" 1932!

We talked in low tones, sitting there on the two worn, wooden steps of the Seminole County, Georgia, convict camp stockade. The night was heavy, stifling.

The rasping sound of snores disturbed the hush over the wire inclosed world. They came from a huge cage, like one in which a circus pens its most ferocious beasts. Two lanterns hanging on the outstretched arms of a cross driven deep in the soil threw a sickly, yellowish light over the stockade.

In a momentary lull in the chorus of snores the faint sound of rustling could be heard, a sound as of a wild beast creeping through a tangle of jungle brush.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Straw mattresses," the night guard replied. "When they turn in their sleep, you know."

"Yes," I said, "and that clinking sound of iron?"

"The clank of their chains when they turn in their sleep," said the guard.

A mosquito lit on my neck and I slapped at it. A fly droned about our heads.

I strolled over to the cage. A sickening stench rose from a zinc pan under it, used by the prisoners at night. Through the screened bars I saw them stretched out on the iron bunks ranging the cage in three-decker tiers, the whites in a compartment near the door and the Negroes in the rear. Coats and shoes were off. They slept in their trousers, their chests bare, for few had underwear. In the faint light from the cross the sweat on their backs glistened.

One scratched himself tiredly. Another slapped at one of the insects that hummed and buzzed in the cage, insects attracted by the pan under the sleeping men and entering through the holes in the screen. And one, who could not sleep, lay on an elbow looking at me through the bars with despair in his eyes.

"What did these men do to be chained and caged like this?" I asked.

"Anything from vagrancy to murder."

Thirty days and thirty years mingled indiscriminately. There, with his face pressed close to the bars for the cool feel of iron on his hot forehead was a boy who could not have been more than seventeen; and in the bunk adjoining his was a

thin, weazened man in his fifties, with a face marked by years of suffering and being hounded.

"A killer," explained the guard.

The cook, sleeping in a sagging, dilapidated shack in a corner of the stockade, was awakened. He came out scratching himself and pulling his jacket over his torn underwear. He stumbled to the kitchen. A lamp was lit and his shadow moved across the dirty window panes like a weird, fantastic bat.

The smell of coffee filled the air.

Tin plates and cups clattered on the long, wooden mess hall tables, shining with the grease of countless meals under the lamp hanging from a beam in the ceiling.

With a harsh, grating sound the iron door of the cage swung open.

"Everybody out!" the guard shouted. "Come an' get it!"

Bare feet thudded to the floor. Twenty-inch chains riveted around their ankles rasped and clanged as they struck the rims of the iron bunks. The convicts straggled sleepily out of the two-foot aisle in the cage and down the wooden steps to the cool soil, a ragged crew, three whites and eight Negroes.

I entered the cage while they were at their breakfast of grits, molasses and coffee. The stench from the pan mingled with the smell of the eleven unwashed bodies which had slept there. Flies and mosquitoes buzzed and droned angrily. The mattresses and blankets were filthy.

A truck appeared at the stockade gate. Streaks of a drab dawn flecked the sky and Seminole County convicts were ready to be taken on the road for their day's work, for the State of Georgia requires that "the hours of labor shall be from sunrise to sunset".

They counted out as they passed through the gate, a straggling, weary crew, their chains dragging on the dark soil.

I talked with a seventeen-year-old Negro boy sitting on the steps of the stockade commissary. There was tragedy in his eyes.

"Tell me," I said, "what did you do to get in here?"

The boy smiled bitterly and shrugged his shoulders.

"A white man wanted a road from his farm finished quick," he said helplessly.

I understood what he meant. I had heard similar stories. Negroes arrested for swearing. Negroes arrested for shooting crap. Negroes arrested for "talking back to a white man." Unemployed Negroes arrested for vagrancy. It did not matter much what excuse was used so long as husky black boys could be arrested and sentenced to the chain gang—to build roads for planters to transport their crops or to press the Negro cropper into debt slavery to a planter. Between slavery on the chain gang and slavery on the plantation there is not much to choose.*

All of the county convict camps in Georgia are run by wardens appointed by the State Prison Commission. The Commission consists of three men elected by popular vote every two years for a term of six years. Their office is in the State Capitol in Atlanta and in a little room cluttered with letters and papers and desks sits Commissioner Vivian E. Stanley.

"How do you rehabilitate your prisoners?" I asked.

"Georgia," said the Commissioner firmly, "takes the attitude that these men committed a crime and consequently owe a debt to society. The State proposes to collect this debt."

So I set out to discover, with a letter of introduction from the Commissioner in my pocket, what the crimes were and how "the state collects its debt."

I went out on the road to watch the Seminole County prisoners work.

I had seen men stripped to the waist before a roaring inferno stoking a ship; I had seen men in steel mills working with molten iron; I had seen men deep in the bowels of the earth

* Recent books and pamphlets on present-day Negro slavery published by International Publishers and International Pamphlets include Walter Wilson's *Forced Labor in the United States*; James S. Allen's *The American Negro* and *Negro Liberation*; and *Lynching*, by H. Haywood and M. Howard.

cutting coal, but I had never seen a Georgia chain gang at work and I said to myself: "This cannot be so everywhere. I will go to a larger town. This county is lost in rural Georgia. It must be different in other places."

I stood with Warden C. H. Wheatley on a Sumter County road. The road was torn up. Red clay was heaped high in irregular mounds to be shovelled into wagons and transported to level hollows. Convicts in stripes, with their feet shackled, ranged in a semi-circle, ankle deep in the soil, shovelling it into a mule wagon. A Negro set the lick, for a shovel crew must work in unison lest if one digs while another heaves, they slash each other's arms.

The lick leader was a hulking, two hundred-pound convict and he hummed a tune as he shovelled. The convicts bent and rose with him in perfect rhythm. The sun beat upon them with tropic fierceness. Their mouths were wide open, gasping for air. Little rivulets of sweat ran down their faces and their striped suits clung to their bodies. The soil dribbled into their shoes as they bent and rose, bent and rose, fourteen times to the minute, minute after minute, hour after hour—from sunrise to sunset under that burning sun.

Dust hung in the air like a cloud, dust that settled in their nostrils and mouths and ears and covered them with a fine, red film.

I left Sumter County wondering if men drop under that terrific strain.

There was that death report in the State Capitol in Atlanta, the one about Will Harris who died of apoplexy in the Clarke County convict camp stockade at five o'clock in the afternoon of June 13, 1931. Dr. H. M. Fullilove, the county physician, said Harris had been sick about four hours. I wondered if working from sunrise to sunset under a burning sun is conducive to apoplexy.

Or George Johnson, who was a strapping youth of 27, five feet ten and a half inches tall and weighing 161 pounds. He

had coughed up his lungs on the Georgia highway. "Sick with T.B. for some time," Dr. Fullilove had reported when the boy died at 3 o'clock in the morning of February 23, 1931—of T.B. they said.

I wondered why this youth was kept in the Clarke County stockade until he died if he had T.B. The Prison Commission rules say: "When a convict is found to be permanently impaired or diseased, so as to incapacitate him from labor, the physician shall certify the fact to the Prison Commission."

I wondered if Dr. Fullilove had certified the fact before George Johnson died, and if so, why the ailing convict was not transferred. And I saw that this law had been passed to placate a few harmless reformers and that it was as dead as the laws that were supposed to have freed the Negroes.

I wondered if men and boys go mad under that strain and prefer the silence of death to the agony of the chain gang. Like twenty-year-old George Neal who drank phosphorus, soap and turpentine rather than continue in the Chatham County chain gang. I remembered this boy's letter, a pitiful complaint mailed hopefully to the Prison Commission saying that he was suffering untold pain and couldn't get medicine, that he was swelled all over and that people in the camp laughed at him when he asked for medicine.

The Prison Commission wrote as a matter of form to Warden T. Newell West at Savannah on June 19, 1930, quoting the boy's complaint. Two days later, on June 21, Warden West replied with an equally formal letter from county physician J. C. O'Neill that "He has been so singularly free from anything pointing to such a condition that it must be self-induced by taking substances such as phosphorus, soap and turpentine. . . ."

There was nothing said about the boy's complaint that people laugh at him when he asks for medicine. There was nothing said, but two days later they mailed in George Neal's death certificate.

I remembered those death certificates, the neat little batches with rubber bands around them, each telling a story of one

dead of apoplexy, tuberculosis, heart failure, sunstroke... little sheets of paper in the Prison Commission office where they are neatly filed away and forgotten.

On a wide stretch of highway with the sun shining clear I saw a man working with a group of convicts and as he shovelled the sun caught the glint of bayonets on his feet.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Spikes," said the guard.

Spikes. Long, steel bayonets riveted around ankles, ten inches long, in front of you and ten inches behind, so that when you walk you can scarcely keep from tripping.

"Why those instead of chains?" I asked.

"Reminds them when they wake up in their bunks that it doesn't pay to run away," said the guard. "Every time they turn in their sleep they have to wake and raise their legs."

I remembered Commissioner Stanley telling me:

"We have no spikes in Georgia."

But now I knew better.

I had heard of the sweat box. When I first saw one it was standing in the sun beside a cage. Stood there like an upright coffin, with its long shadow etched on the red soil of the stockade. It was solidly built of unpainted pine and its heavy wooden door was wide open. A revolting stench was over it.

A convict had just been taken out. He lay on a lower bunk in the cage, his eyes closed, moaning. It was two hours before he was able to talk. He told me what had happened from the time the thick door of the pine box was opened and he was thrust in and the padlock snapped shut.

It was dark inside except for a small spot of light entering a two by four inch air hole in the top. The box was too narrow to turn around in and he stood motionless, a living mummy in the upright coffin. The tropic sun beat upon it. His tongue was dry, thick, swollen. It was hard to breathe.

He became dizzy. He opened his mouth for air. Perspiration ran down his chest and legs. The striped suit clung to him. His

SLAVERY TODAY

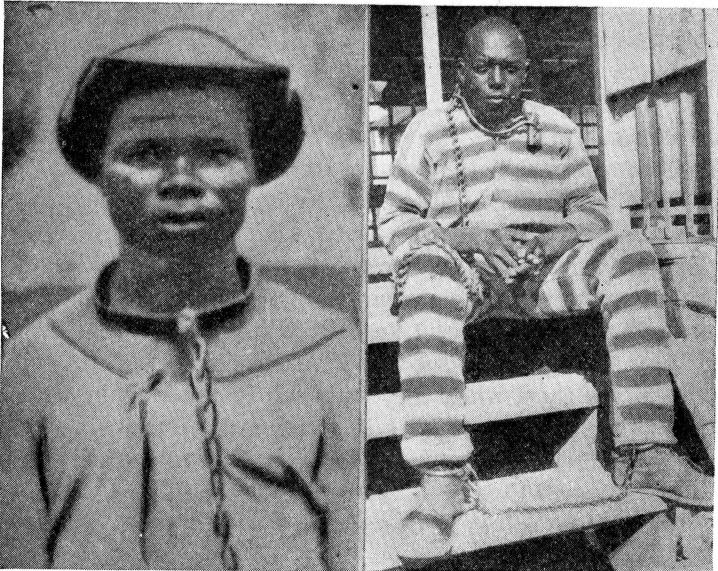


Photo by John L. Spivak

IN LIBERIA, AFRICA

A native chained by the neck and forced to work on the roads.

IN GEORGIA, U. S. A.

Chained by the neck in a Muscogee County chain gang camp.

head ached. A mosquito entered through the air hole and fastened on his neck despite his spasmodic jerks to dislodge it. Flies whirred and droned about his head.

Sometime in the afternoon he could no longer restrain the demands of his bowels and bladder and his excretions dribbled down his thighs.

The humid, stifling air in the sweat box filled with a sickening stench. Flies and mosquitoes, attracted by the odor, swarmed through the air hole.

That was all he remembered.

A merciful blanket of unconsciousness had covered him.

A hundred convicts were relaxing in the Muscogee County camp stockade that Sunday morning. As I walked through the white-washed cages the sounds of a hymn reached my ears.

Some preacher was leading them in song and while the preacher taught them to pray I found a convict lying on a bunk with an iron collar locked around his neck, like some ancient galley slave.

"He ran away," said the Warden.

"I want to talk to him alone," I said, and the warden withdrew.

"Why did they do that to you?" I asked.

He looked sullenly on the ground.

"You may talk freely," I said. "There will be no harm come to you for it."

"Not while you are here," he said.

"What happens when no outsiders are here?" I persisted.

"We get hit over the head with sticks and pick handles," he said.

Prison Commission rules—such a pretty cloak for the Georgia inquisition!—said: "Guards shall not be permitted to strike a convict except to prevent escape, in his own defense or in that of another, and in no case will be permitted to curse a convict." And I remembered prison inspector S. W. Thornton's letter on May 16, 1931, from Milledgeville to Miss Ida J. Henderson, the Commission's secretary:

"I expect that one of the commissioners did have an axe handle and did use it which in my opinion was the best way to get them out of the cage."

And I remembered the Prison Commission's letter (for the newspapers and for the records) to Mr. Thornton on July 30, 1931:

"Many complaints of laxness in camps throughout the state and of abuses of prisoners, of improper feeding and of working prisoners in violation of the rules keep coming in; and, as you have seen, the papers are teeming with criticisms made by outsiders touching some of these matters."

And the pathetic letters convicts themselves scrawled laboriously in pencil, pleading letters like Eugene Brown's sent from Gwinnett County on May 2, 1931:

"Mr. E L Reany lissen here Mr Reiny This is Eugne Brown

talking Mr Reiney I am begging you with tears in my eyes for a transefor Becais I cannot make my time here Becais this worden and county C B M is beating us over the head with pick handle and they draw their guns on us and make us stand and let these trustes Beat us up and Let the hare gun to Mr Reiny I dont Belive that you know how they is treating us prizners you auto cone and see Mr Reiney I want you to do all you can I am willing to go anywhere and make my Time Becais my hand is all messed up and every time I ask the doctor for anything they is ready to punish me my hand is so bad till I cant hardely hold a shurvle and I am asking you now for help I am looking for your awancer wright away Yours

EUGNE BROWN"

I remembered the many, many such letters of abuse and torture from those who "owed Georgia a debt."

I found myself within eight miles of the Seminole County camp and went there again.

A drowsy summer hush was over the stockade. In the glaring light of the day the clapboard shacks baked under the tropic sun. The kitchen with its torn screen, the mess hall with its grease and flies and mosquitoes, the rusty, wire fence and the cross, now bare and bleak, throwing its shadow on the red soil swarming with ants.

A boy lay at the foot of the cross, bound hand and foot, with a pick thrust between the limbs. His eyes were closed and his head lay loose on the soil, as though the neck were broken. He could not move.

He opened his eyes when I walked over to him.

"Does it hurt, boy?" I asked.

"Yes, suh. It sho does," he said weakly and closed his eyes again.

"What did this boy do?" I asked.

"Talked back to a guard," said the warden. "Sometimes they become unconscious and then we untie them," he added.



Photo by John L. Spivak

TORTURE—SOUTHERN STYLE

A prisoner trussed up in a Seminole County (Ga.) chain gang stockade. He is being punished because he "talked back" to the guard. He was left under the hot sun until he fainted.

I examined the neat little booklet of prison rules. Each warden is instructed to "frame in a glass, and hang up in a conspicuous place in the building, a copy of these rules." I did not see them hanging anywhere, nor did the warden have a copy available. But my copy read:

"They [the wardens] shall safely keep all prisoners committed to their custody, rigidly enforce discipline by the use of such humane modes of punishment as will best enforce submission to authority. . . ."

"Humane modes of punishment. . . ."

The Commission itself suggests as one humane method of punishing "fastening them in stocks in such a way as will cause them to be restricted in their movements for not longer than one hour at one time, provided the prisoner is found to be physically sound upon examination by the camp physician."

"Stocks," I thought, "this cannot mean the old Puritan stocks for that is gone three hundred years. Even Webster's dictionary says: 'Stocks: a frame of timber, with holes in which formerly the feet and hands of offenders were confined . . . by way of punishment.'"

In the Early County stockade I saw a prisoner in stocks. His hands and feet protruded through the holes made to hold them. I walked closer. I had seen pictures of Puritans in stocks. They sat them on boards in a public place, but here in Georgia, 300 years later, he did not sit on a board.

He hung, a groaning, helpless, pain-wrenched thing crying weakly:

"O my Lawd, my Lawd, look what they is doin' to Yo' chillun."

He hung, for the board was pulled out from under him, hung three inches from the ground, with the wood encircling his wrists squeezing against his arteries and interfering with the circulation while the weight of the body dragged him down, tearing at his shoulders and threatening to break his back.

The sweat broke out on his face and tears rolled down his cheeks.

"How long do you keep him in stocks?" I asked.

"Not more than an hour at a time," said Warden J. D. Williams. "If they lose consciousness we release them and when they are a little stronger we restrict them again."

"What did he do for this?"

"He's been fussin' about his meals," said the warden.

"Isn't this worse than the lash the legislature abolished?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'd like to see the leather returned. The worst we can give them now is a little stretching."

"Stretching," I thought, "what can this stretching be that is worse than hanging helpless in stocks?"

When you work from sunrise to sunset under a Georgia sun you go mad sometimes and talk back to the guard, and a convict in Early County talked back.

They put handcuffs on him and tied a rope to the cuffs and led him to a little post to which they laced him tightly from ankles to hips. A guard took the rope attached to the handcuffs and swinging it around another post, yanked sharply at the warden's command.

The convict's torso jerked forward, his hands outstretched.

"Pull!" shouted the warden.

The trustee pulled until the rope was taut. He dug his heels into the red clay of the stockade.

The convict screamed in agony.

His head drooped between his outstretched arms.

And as the beads of sweat broke out on his arms and neck and face a cold sweat broke out on me. I doubted my sanity.

They were tearing this convict's arms out!

The guard quickly tied the rope around the post and left him stretched on the Georgia rack while the sun beat upon him and the sweat from his head dripped to the red soil.

Georgia, in this year of our "civilization," 1932, was breaking its convicts on the rack!

I left with the convict's groans ringing in my ears.

PUBLISHERS' NOTE



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