THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

BY *HARRIET GRAY BLACKWELL*

SOUTH CAROLINA is unlike any other Southern state. The upper layers of the state's society think of it as a kind of independent principality, as one of the last havens on earth where men can enjoy the divine right of oligarchy. But even among the underprivileged whites — a good percentage of whom are illiterate — there is a fierce pride of race. The feeling of a separate, uniquely superior heritage has persisted through the years.

Dr. Henry Nelson Snyder, president emeritus of Wofford College in Spartanburg, once described the South Carolinian as a man who believes in God, is a born Democrat and marries one woman for life. (The state, until recently, was the only one in the country that refused to allow divorce for any reason.) And that is about as far as anyone can go in making generalization about the South Carolinian. For actually, the state has always been divided into two sections, the Up Country and the Low Country, whose mores, economics, climate and topography are generally dissimilar.

The Low Country, which is much the more romantic region, was settled in 1663 after three previous attempts had failed. Colonization of the territory was promoted by eight Lords Proprietors, to whom Charles II had given all America between the thirty-first and thirty-sixth parallels of latitude. The great John Locke himself drew up its "fundamental constitutions," which handed 12,000-acre estates to barons, *caciques* and landgraves. When the settlers were not tangling with these gentry, they were fending off Spaniards from Florida, French traders, Indians, and, later, pirates.

But for the upper crust, life came close to being idyllic. Their Georgian homes were graced by English elegance (silver services were periodically shipped to London for re-modeling) and staffed by an ample supply of Negro flunkeys. Because it seemed to have a way of life worth preserving, the Low Country contributed five

HARRIET GRAY BLACKWELL *is a native South Carolinian who graduated from Teachers College, Columbia University, and has since done considerable writing. This is the twentieth in the series of articles on the states and territories of the Union.*

delegates to the first Continental Congress and four signers to the Declaration of Independence.

South Carolina's Up Country, a land of red clay and blue mountains, was not settled till fifty years later, and by a very different type of pioneer. Most of them were English, Scotch, Welsh or German small farmers without the taste for elegance or the means for many slaves. Their sharper accent contrasted with the soft slur of the lower altitudes. In times of trouble, however, it has usually been the Up Country men who stiffened the state's backbone.

And there have been many such times. One hundred and thirty-seven engagements of the Revolution were fought in South Carolina. It was the first state to sign the Ordinance of Secession, and it suffered such crushing losses in men and property during the Civil War that until a few years ago South Carolina children were taught simultaneously to love God and hate Sherman.

The state's hates, indeed, have always tended towards intemperance. Thus, in South Carolina the Ku Klux Klan rapidly gained a state-wide grip. After the Civil War, the Red Shirts, another well-bred but violent organization, also came into being. Both bodies aimed at suppressing the Negro and repressing the "poor white trash." In the face of a Radical challenge in the seventies, the Red-shirted gentlemen rode furiously hither and yon to save the state for the Democrats. (One gallant rider confessed to having voted forty times.) But the defeated Radicals clung to office and South Carolina, setting a precedent for a sister state, suffered two governors and two governments until President Hayes finally ordered the Federal troops out in 1877. Whereupon South Carolina resentfully went Democratic — seemingly forever.

The Red Shirts have long since departed from the scene, but the Klan has proved hardier. While the state's lawmakers went about officially disfranchising the Negro in the Legislature, the Klan unofficially backed it up outside. The Negro in South Carolina remained a voteless citizen until last year when, under a ruling of the State Supreme Court, he voted in the Democratic primary elections for the first time.

Yet the Negro has been an integral part of the state since its very first days. Three Negroes were in the initial shipload of English colonists in 1670. Indeed, until relatively recently, Negroes outnumbered whites in South Carolina. Today the Negro is better off than he was in *antebellum* days — but not as much as the passage of time might lead one to suppose. His schools are improved and his earnings are higher, but his home in

many cases is little better fitted for habitation, and he still finds it difficult (if not dangerous) to assert his political rights.

By and large, the white folks take less pride in such material advancement than in the old attitude of patrician benevolence. Thus a South Carolinian wrote not long ago of Ellen, a Negro maid who had served the Montgomerys for more than forty years: "When she died her body was not carried to a funeral parlor but to the exquisite drawing room of the house she had cared for so long. Serene in her gray casket in front of the long mirror, Ellen received her friends, both black and white, for the last time."

II

Politically, South Carolina remains a one-party state and, as a rule, will blindly vote the Democratic ticket. But the label "Democratic" as applied here is somewhat misleading unless preceded by the term "Tory." In recent years, voters have tended to take the Democratic bit in their teeth. First to discover this was President Franklin Roosevelt, when he tried to purge the egregious Senator "Cotton Ed" Smith in 1938.

Since then, the state's Democratic machine has become more and more centrifugal. In 1944 it tried to bolt the Democratic ticket, and last year it finally succeeded in doing so by running its own Governor, J. Strom Thurmond, as a States' Rights candidate. Thurmond went down, but with his South Carolina colors flying gallantly. To date, neither South Carolina's Governor nor its Senators — Burnet R. Maybank and Olin D. Johnston — have shown any desire to beg forgiveness of the Administration.

To the South Carolinian a field of white cotton blossoms or broad tobacco leaves may not be the most beautiful sight on earth, but it is by long odds the most familiar. From its rich black soil also come grain and rice, vegetables and luscious fruits, much of it destined for Northern tables. Soil conservation and crop rotation are renewing exhausted farmlands, and many farmers are turning to beef, pork and poultry.

Nevertheless, the state's industries have now outstripped its agriculture. Its factories already produce double the cash output of its farms. Primarily, this is due to industry's steady southward shift, since it is more profitable to process Southern cotton in the South. (South Carolina rates first among the states in cotton manufactures.) Actually, the state has been manufacturing textiles ever since Scotch and Irish settlers began making choice linen two centuries ago.

Labor is, if anything, less assertive in South Carolina than elsewhere in

the South. This is probably a consequence of the state's own conservatism, and of its rigid color line. The fact remains that, although its first union was formed by carpenters and bricklayers in Charleston in 1783, and its first strike was staged by bakers in 1786, labor in South Carolina remained more or less quiescent and unorganized until the American Federation of Labor stepped in about 1901. Indeed, child labor was not abolished until 1937. The unions are now gaining slowly in strength, but there have been remarkably few strikes in the state — which is doubtless one of its attractions for industry.

Today the earning power of its workers is among the lowest of any state in the union, while at the same time its percentage of families on public relief is among the highest. Thus the classic conditions for unionization are amply present — but then they have been, without appreciable result, for a long time.

III

In education, too, South Carolina appears to have slipped back badly after a good start. The first settlers had schooling as well as grace, and few of their early documents were signed with the cross, mark of the illiterate. Yet after the Civil War, the cross mark became so common as to brand South Carolina the most illiterate of the states, a questionable distinction it still retains.

Today its urban public school system is fully adequate, but in the rural districts too many South Carolinians, white and black, are still unable to read or write. The most persistent foe of illiteracy is Dr. Wil Lou Gray, who for twenty-five years has been trying to bring learning to the ignorant, first as supervisor of adult schools and currently as director of the state-controlled Opportunity School.

South Carolina College, now the University of South Carolina, was chartered in 1801 in the hope that its central situation would help bind the upper and lower parts of the state. This it has largely succeeded in doing. Its colonial library, which houses historic documents under the heading Caroliniana, was actually the first library building in the country.

In addition to its six state colleges, South Carolina has a number of denominational colleges founded because parents feared the "heretical teachings" of state institutions. Fifteen of these are for white students, four for Negroes. The junior colleges are split, four for whites, nine for Negroes.

Sometimes the visitor wonders just how far education goes in South Carolina. Probably no state in the union lends greater ear to ancient super-

stitions. For reasons now forgotten, folks will loosen a button when a funeral passes, heat a poker to still a screech-owl's cries, smile when picking up a pin, or worry after dreaming of muddy water. And this goes for both sides of the color line.

IV

The face of the state is, on the whole, its most prepossessing attribute. It might be called a genteel landscape, adorned by some of the loveliest gardens in the country. John Galsworthy once fell under the spell of its flowering magnolias, which are matched in the spring by blazing azaleas, camellias, dogwood and yellow jasmine. Legend has it that it took a hundred slaves ten years to create the twin butterfly lakes and formal perfection of Charleston's Middleton Place Gardens.

Regrettably, the homes that stand inside these gardens are often just as massive a monument to bad taste. For every stately colonial mansion, there are numbers of drafty Victorian piles encrusted with filagree gingerbread. Citizens of South Carolina prefer to point to their fine capitol building and their many admirable churches (some the work of Robert Mills, a native architect), but there is an understandable reluctance to discuss the tumbledown Negro shacks or the shabby millhouse slums.

Charleston, with a population of 100,000, is the state's bustling port, but Columbia, the capital, is where South Carolina's distinctive contribution to Southern culture may best be observed. Here is the bookshop of Joseph Gittman, who over a period of years has successfully nurtured an atmosphere both creative and cultivated. Each morning at ten a chosen group of writers, artists, professors and others, meets in the shop for coffee and intelligent conversation. Round the walls are portraits by Charles Mason Crowson. Shelves overflow with rare editions, set off by contemporary South Carolina authors like Julia Peterkin, DuBose Heyward, Josephine Pinckney and Robert Molloy. One of the group may talk tolerantly of the new Octavus Roy Cohen, another may gloat over a bargain in an Alice R. Huger Smith water color, or a third may display a new textile design by Anne Heyward Taylor.

On the other hand, some of the customary externals of culture are notably absent. The Gibbes Art Gallery, for instance, is the only one in the state, but then South Carolinians prefer to believe that their finest art is in private homes. Some of their public places, like the Brookgreen Gardens presented to the state by Archer M. Huntington, boast an admirable collection of sculpture, and

certainly much of Charleston's early silver — even the wrought-ironwork of its old estates — can legitimately be dubbed art.

Organized music in the state is in poor shape, although its Negroes would just as soon sing as talk. Some of the most moving spirituals were born here, yet South Carolina possesses no major symphony orchestra and has to depend on periodic music festivals for concerts. In the same way, although Charleston's Dock Theatre, opened in 1736, was the first building in America devoted entirely to drama, the only plays presented now are occasional bills by stock companies or amateur shows in the civic theatres.

These lacunae in cultural fields have not noticeably disturbed the equanimity of South Carolinians. At that, most of them would probably claim that the state's most artistic achievement lies in its cooking. Its dish of turnip greens and string beans, for example, seasoned with bacon ("a streak of fat and a streak of lean") and accompanied by cornbread, is a conversation piece. Okra soup, chicken or shrimp pilau, liver pudding and deviled crabs, are items Lucullus would remember. This writer will settle for Charlotte russe and fruit cake, served with coffee and topped with swirls of whipped cream.

Perhaps it might be more correct to call South Carolina's cooking a reflection of her way of life. The state may not recently have produced many philosophers, scientists or towering statesmen, but it has fashioned a way of life with a charm no other state can surpass. In this, South Carolinians like to believe, lies their real contribution to American civilization. The belief prompts their subtle, if sometimes misunderstood, attitude of superiority. Their state, they freely concede, may not lead, but at least it knows how to live.

JANUARY TWENTIETH

BY DOROTHY BROWN THOMPSON

This is that strange Saint Agnes Eve
  Of wind and sleet and wicked weather,
  When fire and phrases weave together
An ancient tale we half believe.

Outside, the stinging ice-wind beats
  Against our panes; it sets the stage
  Where dark words stride across a page
Spreading a feast with young John Keats.