

The Tuskegee Negro Conference

From a Special Correspondent

The third annual session of the Tuskegee Negro Conference took place on Wednesday, February 21. All night long the rain had fallen in torrents. Every "branch" and creek was filled to its banks; roads were submerged, and the mud everywhere was unspeakably deep. It did not seem possible that the farmers from the surrounding country could come. But long before daylight they began to arrive, and by ten o'clock, when the meeting was called to order, they were there; not all of the eight hundred who were present last year, but by scores and scores they came in, some in large farm-wagons, some in comical little gigs, some on horses and mules. One man started at one in the morning and drove twenty-seven miles in the drenching rain. Another drove more than fifty miles. By three o'clock in the morning he reached a stream too deep to ford, and he sat patiently in the rain till daylight waiting for the waters to go down. Then, as the rain abated somewhat, he forded the stream and came patiently onward.

It goes without saying that men who take so much trouble to attend a conference of this kind are deeply interested in what is going on, and it is just as true that the men themselves were interesting. They filled the chapel, where for five hours a brisk discussion of practical methods and measures went on, guided by the President, Mr. Booker T. Washington, Principal of the Tuskegee Industrial School. Mr. Washington made an excellent presiding officer, cutting short with much tact the unpracticed speakers who did not know how to wind up their remarks, holding all to the point under discussion, and with courtesy and good humor guiding the meeting to an excellent conclusion.

A committee on "Declarations" was elected, and when these were presented they were discussed in detail, and afterward unanimously adopted as expressing the views of the men present.

There was but one voice as to the value of these conferences. Indeed, the good claimed to have been accomplished by them would have seemed exaggerated had not facts been given to substantiate these claims. The local gatherings of a similar kind held by Mr. Washington in various neighborhoods during the year have undoubtedly kept the people up to their good intentions, and have helped to make permanent the effects of the larger conferences.

As might naturally be supposed, the farmers who had taken so much pains to get here were among those who had been most successful. The stories of their lives, as they incidentally came up, were most instructive. One, for instance, took, as he said, the words from the Bible, "If you will get a will, I will provide a way," for his life motto; and, exercising his own will, he had trusted in the Lord to keep His word and provide the way, and He had never failed. Born a slave, still unable to read and write, this man has reached a hale and hearty old age to find himself the owner of a good farm, well stocked and tilled, of a comfortable home of his own, a stockholder in the bank, and a man respected and trusted throughout the community. Another, a tall, handsome man of thirty-one, who now pays taxes on five thousand dollars' worth of property, began life a fatherless lad without care or training. He married at twenty-one without a penny or a possession, and his wife had only one quilt for her wedding portion. By their joint industry and frugality they are now beyond want.

As illustrating the effect of these conferences, one Hezekiah Short told the following story: "Thirteen months ago I had no land. I came here to this conference, and I made up my mind that I would have a home. To-day I have a good home on three hundred and twenty acres of land, and I am moving on finely. I have no mortgages. What we want for our race is *homes, homes, homes!* I have set out for a home for me and all my children. I have made during the last year enough to pay \$32 every month on my land. I would start with the first day of every month and lay by my dollar,

and by the last day of the month have had the whole ready. I paid ten dollars an acre for my land. I own four mules and six cows." Some one asked him how he earned the \$32 a month, to which he replied: "Some days I sell five or six gallons of milk, some days six or eight pounds of butter, some days a lot of eggs, some days a load of wood, some days ten cents' worth of greens, five cents' worth of cucumbers, ten cents' worth of squashes, etc., etc."

These instances show what industry and frugality can do for the black man as well as for the white. The frankest statements were made by various speakers, and several times the people were asked to stand in response to questions. Once it was to show how many had money in the bank. About a dozen rose in answer to this. One man said he kept his money under "de do'step." Another said he had room in his pocket for all he ever saw. One of the best speeches was made by the colored President of a bank in Birmingham.

When asked to rise if they spent at least a dollar a year for tobacco, one man replied that he had never spent a dollar in his whole life for it, that he did not use it. One speaker asked all those who had been true to their marriage vows to stand. There was an awkward pause, and then a number rose, while others remained seated.

The facts elicited about schools, or rather the lack of them, the absence of school-houses, and the woeful effects of the mortgage system, were extremely interesting. From first to last there was no allusion to politics or to voting. No one complained of any oppression except that which invariably comes through the mortgage system. There was no fault-finding with the white race, though fault enough might be found, every one knows. When the subject of emigration came up, some of the younger, more restless spirits were ready to go to Africa at a moment's notice if a way could be found, but the older, more settled men were quite content to stay in Alabama. The declarations adopted give a very good synopsis of the results of the discussions and statements. They are encouraging to blacks and whites alike. They are as follows:

We believe education, property, and practical religion will eventually give us every right and privilege enjoyed by other citizens, and, therefore, that our interests can best be served by bending all our energies to securing them, rather than by dwelling on the past, or by fault-finding and complaining. We desire to make the Tuskegee Negro Conference a gauge of our progress, from year to year, in these things, in the Black Belt.

First. With regard to education, it is still true that the average length of the country school is about three and a half months; there is either no school-house or a very poor one, and the teacher, as a rule, is but little prepared for his work. We would suggest, as remedies, the raising of money by subscription, to lengthen the school term and to provide more and better school-houses. We would also urge upon our schools and colleges for the training of leaders, the importance of sending more of their best men and women to the smaller towns and country districts.

Second. As regards property, we find that four-fifths of our farmers still practice the habit of mortgaging their unplanted crops for the supplies furnished them, live on rented lands, are in debt, and two-thirds live in one-room cabins. As remedies, we recommend the immediate purchase of land; its thorough cultivation; the raising of sufficient food supplies for home use; that we avoid the emigration agent; keep out of the cities; pay our taxes promptly; stop moving from farm to farm every year; work winters as well as summers, Saturdays as well as other days; practice every form of economy, and especially avoid the expensive and injurious habit of using liquor, tobacco, and snuff; and since our interests are one with the white people among whom we live, we would urge the cultivation, in every manly way, of friendship and good will towards them.

Third. While in morals and religion we are far from what we ought to be, we yet note, each year, real improvement. To help us in this direction we urge a better preparation for the Christian ministry; the settlement of more of our differences outside of the courts; that we draw sharp lines between the virtuous and the immoral; that we refuse to tolerate wrong-doing in our leaders, especially in our ministers and teachers; that we treat our women with more respect, and urge upon them the importance of giving more time to their home life, and less to the streets and public places.

In conclusion, the facts gathered from these three Conferences warrant us in saying that each year education is increasing, more and more property is being acquired, and, gradually, religion is becoming less a thing of the emotions and more a matter of upright living. We are glad to note a growing interest on the part of the best white people of the South in our progress.

The second day of the Negro Conference was devoted to a discussion by the workers

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in the schools. A large number of educational institutions were represented by their principals or teachers, the number of whose pupils would aggregate more than fifty thousand young men and women. Different methods, were rehearsed, and accounts of the various schools were given.

The greatest harmony prevailed throughout. It was decided that one of the most important things to be done was to keep in close touch with the graduates. Interesting accounts of the substantial work accomplished by these graduates were given, and all were encouraged to further self-sacrifice and devotion.

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—Dr. Antonin Dvorák has signified his willingness to remain with us another two years. One cause of his cheerful resignation may be found in an income of \$15,000 from the National Conservatory of Music.

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