

American Black Farmers Project

Overview

History

For the last sixty years, black family farmers in our country have been in crisis. Although occasionally reported in local and national media, it has gone largely unnoticed by most Americans. A recent class action suit, and the issues that it raised, have brought the crisis further attention.

Black owned farms peaked in the early 1920s with an estimated combined total of 15 million acres and over 900,000 farmers to tend that land. Today there are only 2.2 million acres owned by black farmers with less than 18,000 farmers to cultivate them. According to a study by the Southern Cooperative Land Assistance Fund, an agency working to save black owned farms in the south, black farmers are losing their land three times faster than white farmers, a rate of about a thousand acres every day. This study predicts that within the next ten years there will be virtually no black owned farms.

While mechanization and the call of urban promise can explain some of the dwindling numbers, it is poverty and the lack of accessible credit that remains the primary reason for the decline of black family farms. Lack of funding is at the heart of the black farmers' plight. It affects their ultimate survival and the fulfillment of their legacy. The Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), an agency designated by the Department of Agriculture to help farmers through economic slumps and cycles of bad weather with crop subsidies and low cost loans, has been delinquent in providing credit to this country's black farmers.

The nationwide network of the FmHA county offices is known to be entrenched in prejudicial practices. These offices were meant to keep farmers afloat, but have systematically excluded blacks from government subsidized farm programs over the decades. Black farmers have been denied the same access to loans as white farmers. In 1984 and 1985 the USDA lent 1.3 billion dollars to farmers nationwide to buy land. Of the nearly 16,000 farmers who received those funds, only 209 were black. Today, almost all black-operated farms are smaller than 50 acres. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has repeatedly warned the FmHA to cease its prejudicial practices:

1965: "The technical assistance rendered to Negroes by FmHA in the form of loans and technical assistance is consistently different from that furnished to whites."

1967: "Discriminatory treatment is observed in the withholding of loans and other agricultural services to Negro farmers as well as in the failure to appoint Negroes to the FmHA Committees or to permit them to participate fully in the activities of the committees."

1970: "It is public record that black Alabama farmers receive proportionately fewer and smaller loans than whites. Given this handicap, even the greenest of thumbs can harvest little from life."

1982: "FmHA has not given adequate emphasis of priority to the crisis facing black farmers; thus, despite their disproportionate need, black farmers are not benefiting fully from FmHA loan programs."

1990: A report by the House Committee on Government Operations declared: "FmHA has covertly and tacitly permitted race and ethnicity to become criteria for assistance, thus betraying its mission, denying its purpose and neglecting its responsibility."

1991: In Washington, U.S. District Judge Harold Greene blasted the FmHA for withholding information on loan discrimination requested by black Mississippi farmers. He said, 'It is outrageous...people being paid by the United States Government to do a service for farmers...and they sit there as if they were being put upon and they give as little out as they can. Black farmers will get FmHA records if I have to haul agency chiefs into court and drag it out of the them one by one.'

1999: In commenting on the class action settlement between Black farmers and the Department of Agriculture, Secretary Dan Glickman acknowledged past prejudices stating, 'Today's agreement will close a painful chapter in the Department's history and allow us to open a more constructive front in our efforts to be the federal civil rights leader in the 21st century. Our commitment to minority farmers and to civil rights does not end here.'

Unfortunately, many of the farmers have yet to receive their settlement awards and new Federal Government obstacles have delayed farmers' individual class action settlements.

Documentary Photography Project

What makes this project unique is its depth, humaneness and sense of spirit. Mainstream journalism, when reporting about the demise of black family farms, reports on the financial losses, land loss, and other tangible things. This story is about losing a way of life, a loss of tradition for many families and indignities still experienced by African Americans today.

Having first photographed this story for *Newsweek Magazine*, photographer John Ficara continued to document farm families who are in financial trouble as well as those who were able to financially stay afloat. His four years of photographing black farmers around the country has resulted in a final selection of 110 images to tell the story of the demise of black family farms in America. This project captures present day black family farms and seeks to tell the national story of their struggle and decline through the individual farmers. The photographs have been awarded the White House News Photographers Association Documentary Grant and the prestigious National Press Photographers Nikon Documentary Sabbatical Grant.

The purpose of putting together an in-depth photographic body of work today is to preserve for future generations a visual resource on the last days of black farmers in America. These photographs today may not have any impact in stopping the decline of black family farms. They will however provide a lasting and important record of black farmers and a tradition and way of life that provided the path to freedom for many African Americans. At the early stages of John Ficara's career, his interest in the work produced by the Farm Security Administration lead him to study that project. That body of work today is considered to be one of the most complete, in-depth

bodies of documentary photography assembled. Some of those photographs today have become iconic images from that period in history. It is with that sense of history that John Ficara set out to document black family farms.

The importance of this body of work may not be fully realized today, however as we now look back on the FSA Project and other documentary projects, the historical connection of that work is first and foremost. While the book and exhibition of about one hundred images from this project will be shown, the several thousand negatives produced during the project will continue to provide a rich and deep record for future historians to review.

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