

January 2000

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Recommended Citation

Reid, Debra A., "Rural African Americans and Progressive Reform" (2000). *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*. 71.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/history_fac/71

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Rural African Americans and Progressive Reform

DEBRA REID

Histories of African Americans in the postbellum rural South tend to depict sharecroppers and tenants as victims of the crop lien system, racism, and the capitalization of agriculture. This paper concentrates instead on rural reformers who celebrated life in the country and believed that comfortable homes, better schools, and wholesome residents could free blacks from bondage. Their agrarian ideology reflected Euro-American influences; most believed in the Jeffersonian rhetoric that linked land ownership to virtue and independence. Because they realized that the crop lien system made property acquisition an impossible dream for most blacks, they advocated diversification and sustainable agriculture as a means to challenge the economic limitations of this system. They pursued reform from their office desks rather than from cotton fields. Some posed political challenges, but most African American agrarians, intent on creating an educated, moral, and thrifty rural population, found that cooperating with white authority furthered their goals. Rural African American landowners looked toward these new leaders for guidance during a period of intense change between the 1880s and World War I.¹

Black agrarians undertook reforms as ambiguous as that of their white counterparts. They provided information and inspiration to a small percentage of the Texas population, African Americans who either owned land or enough property to give them some control over their own resources. Yet, the reformers never realized their full potential because discrimination, under-funding, and the abject poverty of most rural blacks limited their effectiveness. In addition, government did little to intervene in local affairs. Black public appointees at the local level remained beholden to white authority figures whose narrow attitudes about race and gender contributed to the further subjugation of the race.²

The objectives and strategies of five reformers active during this period provide the means to compare approaches and to assess the ways that race and gender affected agrarians and public-sponsored reform in the South. Those selected include Robert Lloyd Smith (1861-1942), the founder of the Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas, and his two wives who served as his financial agents, Francis Isabella Isaacs (ca. 1870-1918) and Ruby L. Cobb (1883-1966). Smith became the first state leader of the "Negro" division of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (TAES) when it segregated its activities in 1915. Joseph Elward Clayton (1879-1958) became the first African American who organized farmers' institutes under the auspices of the Texas Department of Agriculture in 1917. Clayton's wife, Brittie White, assisted him in fundraising through other endeavors related to vocational education. These reformers' careers encompassed politics, education, business, and philanthropy, and indicate the degree rural blacks became involved in public service in the South.³

Robert Lloyd Smith was born in Charleston, South Carolina, to free parents who were both teachers. He graduated from Avery Normal Institute, then attended the University of South Carolina, and eventually graduated from Atlanta University in 1880. In 1885 he moved to Oakland, Texas, and organized the Oakland Normal School, which became one of the best in the state. One-crop agriculture and dependence on the crop lien contributed to the depressed conditions in Oakland, but Smith did not see these factors as the causes of illiteracy and poverty. Instead, he linked the improvidence and thoughtlessness that he observed among the tenants to the legacy of slavery. In 1889, Smith gained inspiration from an article about self-help and improvement in New England that he read in the *Youth's Companion*. In December 1889, he organized the Village Improvement Society with fourteen charter members. The *Youth's Companion* article provided a model for him to use in order to satisfy his "'irresistible impulse' to improve... the 'common negro.'" Smith wanted black farmers to learn the self-help philosophy by practicing it and paying their own way. He found fault with those who failed to follow his advice.⁴

Smith's ideas to improve black communities first revolved around the home. He urged members to buy homes and improve their appearance, structurally and aesthetically. He expected members to avoid gambling, intemperance, and immorality, and thus "bring up our homes and home life to the highest American standard compatible with our income." Six years of life in Texas helped Smith to recognize that poverty resulted from the crop mortgage system, not slavery. He reorganized his society so farmers could receive more support to reduce their dependency on furnishing merchants and landlords. In 1891 he changed the organization's name to the Farmers' Improvement Society (FIS) and refined its purpose to focus on five objectives: abolishing the credit system, improving methods of farming and economy, cooperating in purchases, aiding members in sickness and death, and pursuing home and community improvements. In this way, the organization combined civic and fraternal functions.⁵

Increasing interest prompted Smith to travel around Colorado and neighboring counties, but he did not extend membership beyond the local area until he participated in the 1896 Tuskegee Conference. Soon thereafter the FIS started an annual convocation, and members adopted a constitution with bylaws, a dues structure, and a method to form local branches that fostered discussion of the issues that black farmers faced. In 1897, Smith thanked Booker T. Washington for opening people's eyes to the value of industrial education as a means to attain "the profoundest statesmanship" and not remain trapped as a "hewer of wood and drawer of water." Smith told Washington that "I should throw myself with all the energy of my being into the work of founding a Little Tuskegee at Oakland [Texas]."⁶

White Texans noticed the changes that the FIS generated. They appreciated the economic boost that large gatherings of black farmers brought to their communities. In 1899, more than 1,200 black farmers attended the annual state convocation in Columbus, Texas. In 1902, newspapers commented on the significant financial

resources controlled by landowning blacks attending the state convocation, and towns vied for the honor of holding the meeting.⁷

Newspapers failed to note Smith's interest in interracial cooperation. Smith addressed FIS members in 1902, encouraging them to "join hands with the whites in fighting the boll weevil and in any other matter which is made for the common welfare." He declared that "the best white and colored people" share "heavy burdens" and should protect their interests from the "low element," that is, underdeveloped and ignorant whites and blacks. A correspondent for the Boston Evening Transcript noted that Smith believed that if black men and women could "possess the qualities of true citizenship, the most intelligent and progressive white residents of the same community will recognize the fact." Smith did not actively recruit whites for the society, however, and his call to interracial cooperation carried with it a deference to white authority that pacified white skeptics. The editor of the Weimar Mercury wrote that "the white folks appreciated the racial harmony it generated."⁸

The society maintained a degree of secrecy and whites did not realize the extent to which the FIS could undermine the crop lien system. Smith believed that this strategy reduced the threats that members might encounter and thus encouraged more participation. The constitution adopted in 1896 designated mid-November through mid-December plus the last two weeks of February as the times devoted to cooperative endeavors. During these months, local branches discussed member needs, identified wholesale markets, and made buying trips. They also explored the best means to sell their cotton. Only members participated during this critical period and those who appeared as security threats were expelled.⁹

Just as Smith worked to assuage white opposition to his society and its cause, he also attempted to avoid division among its members. Religion held the power to unite and divide communities and this prompted him to incorporate testimonials, sermons, scripture readings, prayers, and hymns into FIS meetings. By imbuing FIS functions with religious fervor, the members, most of whom found comfort from their faith, felt more at home during the gatherings. Smith, a devout Methodist, de-emphasized denomination by avoiding the terms "convention" or "conference" in describing FIS gatherings. Instead he settled on "convocation," a neutral term borrowed from the Episcopalians. He also limited discussions of religion and politics at meetings. Smith's avoidance of topics that could potentially divide membership or upset white Texans ensured the growth of the society and generated a sense of purpose among members. By 1912, Smith coordinated 800 branches with 12,000 members. However, the society's growth in its remaining thirty years never matched the first twenty years and many branches faded into inactivity. Only 200 more branches began between 1912 and 1934, the last year that a branch sought a charter.¹⁰

Part of the reason the FIS lost status related to the proliferation of other sources of information and opportunities. Smith credited the farmers' journal *Texas Farm &*

Ranch with creating and nurturing the interest in free farmers' institutes among rural Texans as early as 1902. He encouraged FIS members to procure pamphlets from the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and supported other methods of education to reach the largely illiterate black population. Texans recognized Smith's accomplishments, valued his opinions, and believed he could best inaugurate a public program to serve rural blacks. In August 1915, Smith became the first state leader of the "Negro" division of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service at a salary of one thousand dollars. It developed into the FIS's primary competition.¹¹

The Farmers' Improvement Society and Smith's efforts did not address the needs of all rural blacks, however. Smith concentrated increasingly on serving property-holding farmers and responsible tenants and croppers who could become owners. He believed that this rural elite composed of virtuous and thrifty citizens could best nurture agrarianism and preserve their self-proclaimed superior society. His interests extended far beyond agriculture, and he served in Texas politics, held offices in segregated organizations, and even held a federal appointment.¹²

Smith's personal obligations kept pace with his reform efforts. In 1890, he married Francis Isabella Isaacs. She shared with him the struggles to organize the FIS. Together they developed a fiscally sound organization before Belle died on 22 February 1918. Belle assisted Smith in showing black tenants how they could reduce their dependency on the mercantile system if they kept hogs and poultry and raised a garden. Smith welcomed women as members because he recognized the importance of the household economy to creating a self-sustaining farm, but he advocated a hierarchy within the household. As an educator he believed both sexes needed vocational and moral training, but his idea followed a strict gender division: boys gaining information on agricultural methods and animal husbandry and girls learning to sew, cook, can, and garden. Black schools throughout the South began to adopt coeducation and home economies instruction several years before white public schools did so in Texas. To further such efforts, the Smiths organized the female members of the FIS into the Women's Barnyard Auxiliary in the late 1890s. This group coordinated the local and state fairs where members competed for premiums for their canned goods, garden produce, livestock, and other items of handiwork such as quilts and cloths.¹³

Booker T. Washington praised the Smiths' efforts to encourage tenants and youth to save their money in order to buy land, become farmers, and contribute to society. He also praised Belle as Smith's "good wife," never crediting her with individual accomplishments. Her anonymity did not extend throughout Texas, however. Members of the society that she helped manage recognized her contributions. FIS records document her involvement in organizing activities particularly related to the Auxiliary, the FIS school that was established in 1906 and opened in 1908, and the Juvenile Branch organized in 1907. Her photograph graced the frontispiece of published FIS constitutions and annual addresses. The caption identified her as

"Financial Agent." In that capacity, she visited most FIS branches in southern and eastern Texas in 1906, soliciting funds for the new FIS school. Belle's personal appearances in areas with black populations along with the inclusion of her photograph on FIS publications, ensured that FIS members recognized her. In 1918 the readership of the FIS newspaper, *The Helping Hand*, mourned Belle's loss. Nevertheless, in May 1919, they welcomed the next Mrs. Smith, Ruby Cobb.¹⁴

Ruby was the daughter of a prominent Waco Baptist minister, Rev. Stephen Cleveland Cobb, and his wife Feriba Crain Cobb. Ruby attended Bishop College and taught school before she married. As the new Mrs. Smith, Ruby assumed leadership of the juvenile branches and revived the program after a dormant period. She expressed her creativity and opinion via a play written for FIS juvenile branches that taught children the evils of the crop lien system and how to avoid its debilitating effects. During the 1920s she became the society's financial agent. Her management kept the FIS going through the worst of times. She functioned as the office manager and handled most of the correspondence for the frequently absent Smith.¹⁵

Robert Smith's separations from Ruby led him to write letters expressing his devotion and his appreciation of her womanly virtue as well as her intelligence and forthrightness. He missed her visits to the school, but he explained to the teachers that Ruby was "helping at the bank" during financial crises or otherwise engaged in society business and could not be spared. Over time he adopted her attitude. In 1927 he had to fail four out of nine students who did not pass their fourth-year exam. The concerned Smith explained to Ruby that "Papa's views are rapidly changing to yours which means that all this soft yielding and frantic effort to do for others what they will not do for themselves is over with" She in turn adopted Smith's preference for avoiding confrontation. In 1927 she told FIS members: "If I cannot go to the white man's church, I must create a church. If I cannot read books out of his library I must in some way get one of my own. If I cannot clerk in his stores it is my job to get one of my own." This statement reflected a continued dependence on the philosophy of self-segregation despite increasing protest to segregation in the South.¹⁶

The fourth reformer, Joseph Elward Clayton, experienced public education differently in some ways than Robert Smith. A native Texan, Clayton received his education at Guadalupe College, a black-owned and black-operated Baptist school in Seguin. He was younger than Smith and limited by discrimination and disenfranchisement in his pursuit of political activism. Furthermore, few personal papers exist, and this relegates the Claytons to the appearance of minor characters when compared to the Smiths. Activities tell a different story.¹⁷

Clayton began his career as the newly appointed principal of the Manor Colored School in 1903. He administered a traditional public school in one building until 1911 when Booker T. Washington's tour of Texas inspired him to expand his institute. Between 1903 and the 1920s, Clayton expanded the physical plant to

include dormitories, additional structures to house classrooms, and land for a school farm. His dream depended on diversified funding from black residents, white philanthropists, and state government. Clayton's wife, Brittie, played a central role in generating support. She had friends in the community because she grew up in the area as the daughter of a successful farmer. Clayton wrote a member of the Texas Department of Education that "Our colored people, under the leadership of my wife raised money_" White friends and black students also participated, securing funds for desks or books. Clayton borrowed money from the Farmers' National Bank, and "took the work of getting philanthropists interested in helping us to get an Industrial School there for our Race." Over time they built and furnished a two-story building on the old school lot. Another building contained a cannery where young men learned to preserve produce from their own farms to supplement family income. Clayton secured the funding for the structure from a foundation in Washington. In another instance, State Department of Education officials helped Clayton to locate a mover, while the Rockefeller Foundation contributed the cost for relocating a structure. Important support also arrived when the Manor school became one of four schools for African Americans in the state designated to receive Smith-Hughes funds in 1917.¹⁸

Also in 1917, Clayton became the first African American authorized by the TDA's division of farmers' institutes to organize black farmers. He volunteered his services but secured rail passes to travel on behalf of the institutes, as did other Texas State Farmers' Institute employees. This continued a long tradition of railways supporting public reform in Texas. Clayton spoke at the TDA State Farmers' Institute in July 1917 about the work that he had undertaken during the previous thirty days in twelve counties. He was obsequious in his efforts to secure white government support for the education of the farmers he organized. He told the white attendees at the state institute that "you white friends must help us train the negro how to intelligently and successfully till the soil, because we are getting them to more and more love the occupation of farming."¹⁹

By 1919, Joseph Clayton served as chairman of the Committee on Negro Farmers' Institutes with William M. Cain acting as secretary. Between 1 July 1918 and 30 June 1919, Clayton organized 289 colored institutes and spoke to 67,832 persons in mixed audiences. He visited 568 farms, organized 163 canning clubs, and demonstrated the technique to 5,418 persons including men, women, and children. C. W. Rice, later a labor activist and newspaper editor in Houston, also organized institutes without expense to the state other than transportation. After two years of sustained work with black farmers, the Division of Institutes of the TDA requested and was granted salaries for two "colored field workers," probably Clayton and Rice, at \$1,000 each. This appropriation took effect 31 August 1919. In July 1921, Clayton reported that black farmers' institutes had increased to 602 and canning clubs to 613. The lecturers installed 118 steam pressure canners, but most farmers could not purchase this expensive equipment due to the poverty under which they operated. Instead they used lard cans and wash pots to preserve 18,436 jars of vegetables,

fruits, and meat in twelve months. This expansion occurred in tandem with the success experienced by the Negro division of the TAES under Smith's leadership.²⁰

Clayton sought solutions to issues that concerned black tenants as well as landlords. Clayton chaired the committee to organize "Colored" farmers' institutes. In 1919 the committee reported that the shift from tenancy to day labor placed a hardship on tenant farmers and that the Texas Farmers' Institute should use its influence to rent land to black tenants on the third and fourth shares. The committee also recommended that landlords require their tenants to plant cover crops to protect the soil from erosion and leeching during the winter months and to remunerate the tenant for the work. These solutions that Clayton advocated differed from Smith's stated goals. While Smith encouraged farmers to break out of the crop lien system and buy land, Clayton and other TDA affiliates did not overtly challenge tenancy.²¹

Whether or not the TDA sponsored the scheme to rent land to tenants remains unclear, but Clayton proceeded to undertake the settlement of families in counties with significant black populations. He reported in 1921 that "colored" institutes helped convince a group of black farmers in Brazoria County to buy a tract of 2,200 acres near Sandy Point for colonization. Another group in Gregg County bought 1,900 acres at Easton. Both locations benefited from proximity to railroads. In addition, 309 families bought small farms at the encouragement of the agency. The TDA ceased offering farmers' institutes after August 1921, but Clayton remained active in rural resettlement and self-segregation. He continued to cooperate with railroad companies and he moved his activities outside Texas, working in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Clayton's enthusiasm for these projects likely resulted from his interest in the work of Isaiah T. Montgomery and the all-black community Montgomery developed at Mound Bayou, Mississippi.²²

The activities of the Smiths and the Claytons support comparison. Their careers spanned the Progressive Era and reflected multiple approaches to solving the problems rural blacks faced. Both Robert Smith and Joseph Clayton took the public roles in reform while their wives, for the most part, handled administrative jobs or worked with youth and women's programs. The exception related to fundraising, which occupied the time of all three women.

Smith and Clayton both attributed illiteracy and poverty to the influence of outside forces such as slavery and the boll weevil, not racism. They dedicated their efforts toward farmers who could put their recommendations into practice and criticized the intemperate and immoral. They worked to keep blacks on the land, even though Smith promoted land ownership and Clayton supported tenancy as well as ownership. They depended on diversified support from public and private sources whites as well as blacks generated. Both men became involved to some extent as government appointees, Smith serving four years as the first state agent of the Negro division of the TAES (1915-1919) and Clayton spending a comparable amount of time (1917-1921) affiliated with the TDA. Competition between the two educational pursuits of state government likely placed Smith and Clayton at odds,

however. Clayton reported that farmers lost valuable time in the field each year as they attended meetings, encampments, and board meetings. They recommended that the Texas Farmers' Institute discourage farmers from "the practice of running all over the State to attend so many conventions and boards and instead to put more time on his own crops."²³

Government programs affected male and female agrarians differently. Robert Smith and Joseph Clayton both welcomed the notoriety that the state appointments promised without realizing the long-term consequences of their actions. They both believed that by cooperating with the government they could expand their goals to reach more African American farmers. Their ambitions generated public support for rural improvement, and they became members of an elite group of government employees. Yet, government officials realized that by favoring them with appointments, they could expand new social programs to the underserved without committing comparative resources to the effort. Ultimately, the willingness of Smith and Clayton to serve the government defeated their own objectives. The expectations of white administrators forced black appointees to direct their efforts toward farmers who controlled their resources, not those on the quest of acquisition. Reformers also secured their appointments from white patrons and this limited their ability to challenge the status quo.

Women realized greater returns from their involvement in private and public reform. Ruby Smith and Brittie Clayton both outlived their husbands. They became visible because of the work they undertook at their husbands' behest, but neither pursued public positions. The TAES provided opportunities for black women to express themselves, organize communities, and validate the importance of domestic production. Black women found a prominent voice in rural reform as they helped forge a new profession using new methods and standards of home economics instruction as a model. Women used their government positions to benefit their race by fighting the economic causes of social problems affecting black families. They also gained entrance into an elite group of professional women (only 2.5 percent of African American women in 1920 held professional positions) and attained middle-class status.²⁴

Smith and Clayton both returned to private pursuits after their work with state government. The Smiths devoted their time during the 1920s and 1930s to the FIS. They struggled to retain members as the TAES grew and the Great Depression worsened, but they supported the FIS school until Smith's death. Robert and Ruby Smith held firmly to their doctrine of non-confrontation and this also contributed to the decline of the society as others sought more active solutions to legal discrimination. Smith served on the board of the Commission for Interracial Cooperation in Texas, remained active in fraternal organizations, and held the office of vice-president of the American Bible Society. Ruby took time to earn a college degree. The Claytons, on the other hand, did not limit their reform zeal to Texas following the demise of state-sponsored black institutes. Instead, Joseph Clayton expanded his pursuits, dividing his time between Chicago, Houston, and Littig,

Texas, and worked with colonization efforts in Texas and Louisiana. He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and worked with the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and community settlement in several states.²⁵

The work of the Smiths and the Claytons did not satisfy everyone and leaders received their share of criticism. Some rural blacks resented the insistence that they accept responsibility for their backward conditions, arguing that the system whites perpetuated bound them to repressive crop liens. Poor tenants and urban intellectuals alike challenged their accommodation to white racism. Peers did not always approve of management methods. Reformers launched criticism that hinted at racial separatism prompted by class divisions. More work is necessary to determine the influence these agrarians exerted among their constituency. Perhaps they did undermine rural black culture by stressing Euro-American values, but their organizations offered a voice to African American farmers who wanted to secure their positions in southern society. Women served in leadership positions, and they managed limited finances astutely. Most importantly, they served as harbingers for the largest public rural reform project to benefit African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century -- the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.

FOOTNOTES

1. For an explanation of agrarianism, see R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 72-77. Studies of southern agriculture that focus on this period include Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); and Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

2. Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972). Kirby describes dichotomous progressivism as representing either "decentralizing, democratic, agrarian, and localist interests in provincial America... [or] urban-based, professional-minded, bureaucratizing and centralizing futurists... in the new 'public service' state governments during the late 1910s and the 1920s," p. 3. William A. Link explores the competing approaches to progressive reform in *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). For a survey of historiography on the Progressive Era in Texas, see Larry D. Hill, "Texas Progressivism: A Search for Definition," *Texas Through Time: Evolving Interpretations*, ed. Walter L. Buenger and Robert A. Calvert (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 229-50.

African Americans operated one quarter of all Texas farms in 1890; 10 percent of these operators owned their farms. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 831-34. By 1910, nearly one-third (30.3 percent) of all African American farmers in Texas owned their farms, and these accounted for 10.8 percent of all farms in operation. The percentage of black owners declined steadily to 29.9 percent in 1920 and 23.9 percent in 1930. *The Negro Farmer in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 39; *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Agriculture*, vol. 7, 655. Enrollments ranged from 12,000 in the Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas (FIS) in 1912 to at least 15,000 in agricultural extension work in 1915-16, to more than 67,000 in black farmers' institutes in 1919. This represented between 2.3 and 13.1 percent of the state's rural African American population between 1910 and 1920. Robert Carroll, "Robert Lloyd Smith and the Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas" (master's thesis, Baylor University, 1974), 51; "Biennial Report of the Director of Extension Service Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, 1915-1917," *Bulletin of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas*, No. B-33 (November 1916), 9; "Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting, Texas State Farmers' Institute, 1919," *Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin*, No. 67, July/August 1919, 11.

3. For biographical information on Robert Lloyd Smith, Isabella Isaacs, and Ruby Cobb, see Smith-Cobb Family Papers, Personal Materials, Baylor University (hereafter BU); Clement Richardson, ed., *The National Encyclopedia of the Colored Race*, vol. 1 (Montgomery, Ala.: National Publishing Company, Inc, 1919), 383; and Joseph J. Boris, ed., *Who's Who in Colored America, 1928-1929*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Who's Who in Colored America Corp., 1929), 341-42. For biographical information on Joseph Elward Clayton and Brittie White, see Thomas Yenser, ed., *Who's Who in Colored America, 1930-1932*, 3rd ed. (New York: Garrett and Massie, Inc, 1932), 97; and David L. Bearden, "Clayton Vocational Institute: A Superior School," typed manuscript, Austin History Center, Austin, Texas, 11 (hereafter AHC). Lu Ann Jones places the activities of the wife of a prominent reformer in perspective. See Jones, "In Search of Jennie Booth Moton, Field Agent, AAA," *Agricultural History* 72 (Spring 1998): 446-58.

4. Lawrence D. Rice devotes a chapter to the activities of black farmers in Texas in *The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 111. For a comprehensive treatment of the FIS, see Carroll, "Smith and the FIS." The *Galveston Daily News* reported that Smith took "a Whizz at the Thriftless of his race, and says thrift always commands respect," 10 October 1902, Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU.

5. In a letter to Washington, Smith noted that "Our society was organized in 1891.1 must have made a mistake at Conference." See Smith to Washington, ca. June 1897, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 1-14, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1972-1989), 4: 307 (hereafter BTW Papers).

6. Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 36-50; Washington first came to Texas in 1897 to speak at the inauguration of E. L. Blackshear as principal of Prairie View Normal and Industrial School (now Prairie View A&M University). He followed that presentation with a speech in Houston at the behest of Emmett J. Scott, a newspaper owner and editor of the Houston Freeman who later joined Washington's staff. See BTW Papers, 4: 290-92; 297. In these speeches, Washington described the influence of the Tuskegee Conferences and mentioned Smith's society as "embracing very much the same ideas as the one started at Tuskegee." See BTW Papers, 5: 100. The Boston Evening Transcript correspondent talked with Smith at the 1899 Tuskegee Conference. See Max Bennett Thrasher, "A Texas Experiment. A Revolution in Negro Life Under Way. An Institution from New England Planted in Texas Robert Smith's Great Work Among the Colored Farmers "The Typical Freedman's Town," Boston Evening Transcript, 15 December 1899, Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU. Carroll described Smith's first state assembly of the FIS but did not mention the influence of the Tuskegee Negro Conferences (37-38). See Alien W. Jones, "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in the Education of Black Farmers," *Journal of Negro History* 60 (April 1975): 252-67; Alien Jones, "Improving Rural Life for Blacks: The Tuskegee Negro Farmers' Conference, 1892-1915," *Agricultural History* 65 (Spring 1991): 105-14; and Earl Crosby, "The Roots of Black Agricultural Extension Work," *Historian* 39 (February 1977): 229. Correspondence attests to the influence Washington had on Smith, e.g., Smith to Washington, 9 June 1897, BTW Papers, 4: 295-97. Smith encouraged Washington to speak to members of his Farmers' Improvement Society in 1900, traveled with Washington to the North in 1899, and accompanied Washington during his tour of Texas in 1911. See BTW Papers, 5: 3-4, 229-30; 11: 332.

7. Galveston Daily News, 10 October 1902, Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU; Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 49.

8. Annual Address of Hon. R. L. Smith, President Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas, Delivered at Eagle Lake, Texas, 8 October 1902 in the 7th Convocation" (Paris, Texas: Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas, 1902), 16; Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU; Thrasher, "A Texas Experiment." Smith encouraged the participation of white tenants as well as blacks in the FIS because they both were victims of the crop lien. The FIS Constitution of 1896 urged "All persons of good moral character of either sex that feel dissatisfied with their present condition" to join the society. Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 40. It is unknown if any whites did participate. Weimar, Texas, was only fifteen miles west of Columbus, the site of the 1902 convocation.

9. Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 35, 47-48.

10. Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 37-38, 48-49, 51.

11. Robert L. Smith, Annual Address of Hon. R. L. Smith, President, Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas Delivered at Eagle Lake, October 8, 1902 in the Seventh Convocation (n.p.: Farmers' Improvement Society, 1903), 11-12, Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU. See also The Helping Hand, FIS newspaper clipping file, Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU. Earl Crosby, "Building the Country Home" (Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 1977), 3-8, 13-20. Roy V. Scott notes that Farm & Ranch offered lecturers free to any community that furnished a hall as early as the late 1880s; see Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 89. The Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now Texas A&M) began sponsoring institutes in 1890. Henry Dethloff, *A Centennial History of Texas A&M University* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1976), 1: 145; 2: 385. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the First Called Session of the Thirty-Fifth Legislature, April 18, 1917 to May 17, 1917* (Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones Co., 1917), 171-72.

12. Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 15-17. Purvis Carter, "Robert Lloyd Smith and the Farmers' Improvement Society, a Self-Help Movement in Texas," *Negro History Bulletin* 29 (1966): 175-91. Smith's political activities include participation in Republican conventions in the 1890s. He served two terms in the Texas House of Representatives in the 1890s, then moved to Paris, Texas, in 1902 as office deputy United States marshal for the northern district of Texas, an appointment Washington helped him secure. When his appointment ended in 1909 Smith moved to Waco, which served as his home for the remainder of his career. Earlier the FIS had established a bank there and also operated an overhaul factory. See Earnest William Winkler, ed., "Platforms of Political Parties in Texas," *Bulletin of the University of Texas*, No. 53, 20 September 1916, 359, 392-93, 433. Analyses of Smith's legislative career include Merline Pitre, *Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares: The Black Leadership of Texas, 1868-1900* (Austin, Tex.: Eakin Press, 1985), esp. 179-87; Merline Pitre, "Robert Lloyd Smith: A Black Lawmaker in the Shadow of Booker T. Washington," *Phylon* 46 (September 1985): 262-68; and Barry A. Crouch, "Hesitant Recognition: Texas Black Politicians, 1865-1900," *East Texas Historical Association* 31, no. 1 (1993): 45. Booker T. Washington supported Smith's federal appointment and prevailed over "lily-white" Republicans in Texas who attempted to discredit him. For Smith's federal appointment see J. Mason Brewer, *Negro Legislators of Texas* (Dallas: Mathis Publishing Co., 1935), 101-4, 120-21; and *BTW Papers*, 4: 295-97, 6: 232, 346-47, 434-35, 488.

Smith also was active in reforms that benefited urban as well as rural residents. He served as the first president of the Texas branch of the National Negro Business League, and other reforms such as the Negro State Wide Prohibition Campaign Committee for which he acted as secretary in 1911. See Lawrence D. Rice, "Robert Lloyd Smith," in *The New Handbook of Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1995), 5: 1108.

13. Belle was the daughter of Smith's principal associate and friend, William H. Isaacs, a blacksmith in Oakland, Texas, and one of the first landowners in Colorado County. They traveled on buying trips together and when Smith left Oakland for Paris, Texas, in 1902, he left Isaacs in charge of the operation of the Oakland FIS branch. Marriage Record, Robert L. Smith and Francis Isabella Isaacs, 10 November 1890, Book I: 355, Colorado County Court House, Columbus, Texas; Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Schedule 1, Colorado County, Texas, 359; Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 35-36, 54, 57; Smith described his approach to self-sufficiency in "Elevation of Negro Farm Life," *Independent* (30 August 1900): 2103-6. He described activities of the Women's Barnyard Auxiliary in "Village Improvement Among the Negroes," *Outlook* (31 March 1900): 734; and in "An Uplifting Negro Cooperative Society," *The World's Work* (July 1908): 10465. See also "An Effort to Improve Farmers in Texas," Hampton Negro Conference, 1902 (Hampton, Va.: Hampton University Press, 1902), 40-41, quoted in Jack Abramowitz, "Accommodation and Militancy in Negro Life, 1876-1916" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1950), 134. Smith described his effort to maintain unity by choosing the term convocation to describe the annual gathering of all FIS members in "An Uplifting Negro Cooperative Society," 10464, discussed in Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 38.

White women did not have access to industrial training until the state legislature established the Girls' Industrial College in 1901. This resulted from the need among the black community for women to have skills they could put to work. See Judith N. McArthur, *Creating the New Woman: The Rise of Southern Women's Progressive Culture in Texas, 1893-1918* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 38.

14. BTW Papers, 11: 325; Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU. Carroll discusses her role as financial agent for the school. See "Smith and FIS," 88-89. Smith wrote Washington about his intentions to form a school for poor boys in Oakland in 1897. Smith's move to north Texas in 1902 gave him an opportunity to explore the possibility of creating a school in the northern part of the state that did not compete with Prairie View, the public institution of higher education for black Texans, but would still serve an audience in need. Smith initially envisioned a system of agricultural high schools throughout the state, but only one developed, the FIS school near Wolfe City. Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 88-102.

15. Ruby's father founded and served as pastor of the New Hope Baptist Church and her mother worked as a nurse. See Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU. Smith and Ruby never had children, but they did raise two girls. Ruby became financial manager after Roscoe Conkling Smith, Robert Smith's son by his first wife, made unwise decisions regarding the loaning of bank notes. See Richardson, *National Encyclopedia of the Colored Race*, 383.

16. Letters between Ruby and Smith document their attitudes. To "my own darling" from "papa," 23 October 1922; to "My own beloved Baby" from "Papa," 28 October 1922; and "my own dear Mama," from "papa" [November 1922], Smith-Cobb Family

Papers, BU. Letter, "dearest Mama" from "Papa," 26 January 1923, Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU. Letter, "my own darling" from "papa," 7 May 1927, Smith-Cobb Family Papers, BU. Carroll, "Smith and FIS," 70, 73, 79.

17. Michael R. Heintze, *Private Black Colleges in Texas, 1865-1954* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 31.

18. Ada Simond, "Looking Back," *Austin American-Statesman Neighbor*, 27 January 1983; Letter, J. E. Clayton, Chicago, to Dr. Gordon Worley, Texas Education Agency, Austin, 8 July 1953, AHC. Joseph Elward Clayton married Brittie White in December 1899. Marriage Records of Travis County, transcribed, AHC; Bearden, "Clayton Vocational Institute," AHC. They had four children in the next seven years so Brittie divided her time between child care and community fundraising. Clayton to Worley, AHC. Canning on black farms and in canning centers involved all members of the family. Men who operated syrup mills canned their own sorghum. See Ruth Jeanette Dawson-Batts, *Reflective Years, Reflective Moments: My Memories, A Vivid Story Told in Words and Photographs* (Waco, Tex.: Ruth Dawson-Batts, 1996), 44. African Americans used northern capital as leverage to help them secure their reform objectives. George R. Woolfolk describes the way a president of Prairie View Normal and Industrial College did this in "W. R. Banks: Public College Educator," in *Black Leaders: Texans for their Times*, ed. Alwyn Barr and Robert A. Calvert (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1981), 149. The Manor school became one of four black schools in Texas to receive Smith-Hughes funding. *Twenty-First Biennial Report, State Superintendent of Instruction, State of Texas, September 1, 1916 to August 31, 1918* (Austin: State Board of Education, [1918]), 258.

19. E. R. Kone, commissioner of agriculture (1908-1914), began farmers' institutes in April or May 1909. He favored cooperation, hoping that collaborating with demonstration agents employed by the USDA could improve agricultural conditions in the state. Letter, Ed. R. Kone to Bradford Knapp, 19 October 1910, reel 1, T-877. Kone's attitudes towards African Americans were not progressive. He welcomed the influx of European immigrants into Texas to reduce the percentage of blacks in the population. See Kone, "Our State Department of Agriculture," *Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin*, 1909 (Austin: Von Boeckmann Jones Co., 1909), 39-40, copy in Permanent Records, TDA, Austin, Texas. Nonetheless, J. L. Randolph, a black attendee at the 1917 TDA state institute, thanked Judge Kone for sending representatives to his people. This implies that white lecturers provided services to black farmers at least as early as 1914, even though blacks did not gain TDA appointments until 1917. This compares to the evolution in services offered by the TAEX.

Randolph's comments appear in "Proceedings of the Seventh Meeting Texas State Farmers' Institute 1917," *Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 57*, November/December 1917, 78. For Clayton's first address to the Texas State Farmers' Institute, see "The Negro and the South," *Texas Department of Agriculture*

Bulletin No. 57, 34-35. San Antonio Express, 27 June 1917, 2 July 1917, reported on the first two local institutes. Both the Manor and Elgin institutes selected the same officers and elected Clayton the special representative. Commissioner of Agriculture Fred W. Davis noted that Clayton was granted a commission by the state in 1917 but that it could not pay his salary or expenses. Clayton obviously accepted this arrangement and he worked with the department from 1917 until it ceased operation after 31 August 1921. The Division of Institutes did not appear in the general appropriations for the Department of Agriculture for fiscal years 1921-22 and 1922-23. See General Laws of The State of Texas, 37th Legislature, 1st sess., 1921 (Austin: A. C. Baldwin & Sons, 1921), 197-98; "Professor J. E. Clayton's Address," in "Proceedings of a Joint Meeting of State Farmers' Institute (In Eleventh Annual Meeting) and Texas Pecan Growers' Association," 1921, Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin, No. 69 (July/ August 1921), 97.

For the relationship of railway lines and public reform, see Roy V. Scott, *Railroad Development Programs in the Twentieth Century* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1985), 36-57. The first official lecture trains carrying USDA demonstration agents ran in Texas in February 1904. For information on their experiences and routes, see G. W. Orms, "History of Agricultural Extension Work in Texas," in *Silver Anniversary Cooperative Demonstration Work, 1903-1928, Proceedings of the Anniversary Meeting Held at Houston, Texas, 5-7 February 1929* (College Station: Extension Service, Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, [1929], 66; W. D. Bentley, "Early Experiences in the Demonstration Work," *Silver Anniversary Cooperative Demonstration Work*, 87. A photograph of a stop on the Extension Train in 1911 shows blacks among the gathering. Historical Files, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Cushing Library, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas (hereafter TAES).

20. General Laws of The State of Texas, 36th Legislature, 2nd sess., 23 June 1919 to 22 July 1919 (Austin: A. C. Baldwin & Sons, 1919), 435; Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting, Texas State Farmers' Institute, 1919, 8, 11; "Proceedings of a Joint Meeting of State Farmers' Institute (In Eleventh Annual Meeting) and Texas Pecan Growers' Association 1921," Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin, No. 69 (July/August 1921), 96-91; Debra Ann Reid, "Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, Agrarian Reform, and the Texas Agricultural Extension Service," (Ph.D. diss., Texas A&M University, 2000), 67-77.

21. Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin, No. 67, 1919, 109-10.

22. Residents of Manor who knew the Claytons recall Clayton's preoccupation with the work of Montgomery at Mound Bayou. Bearden, "Clayton Vocational Institute," 14. Montgomery cooperated with the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railway Company to establish the town in the 1890s. Mound Bayou is the focus of Janet Sharp Hermann, *The Pursuit of A Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). It offered an opportunity for blacks to enjoy some economic, social, and political autonomy and attracted agrarians who believed that the land could provide glue to

hold kinship networks together and make for strong communities. Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin, No. 69, 97; Diana J. Kleiner, "Sandy Point, Texas," *New Handbook of Texas*, 5: 838.

23. Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin, No. 67, 109-10.

24. McArthur, *Creating the New Woman*, 5, 48, 149; Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 65-66, 84-85.

25. Rice, *New Handbook of Texas*, 5: 1108. Ruby completed her B.A. degree at Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College in 1937, writing a thesis entitled "Teaching Reading to Retarded Children in East Waco Colored School," *Smith-Cobb Family Papers*, BU. *Who's Who in Colored America*, 97, notes that Clayton organized the National Self-Help Association in 1924 and worked with the Phenix Aid and Development Association in Phenix, Arkansas after 1930. See also Bearden, "Clayton Industrial Institute," 14-5, AHC; Clayton Industrial Institute Papers, AHC. Little is known of Brittie's life during these years except that she raised a daughter who became a lawyer. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 190-91. Foley describes how Clayton tried to convince Henry L. Mitchell to pay him as the STFU organizer in Texas. Mitchell refused to do so late in 1937 and early in 1938, but he did eventually cooperate with Clayton. See Harry Leland Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union* (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 183-85.