

History is what has brought us to where we are today. Today's places and things will be tomorrow's history. We plan to do the history of the Sunflower Plantation in a series, beginning with the time when wilderness and wild timberland made up that section of Sunflower County.

We are indebted to Mr. Carl T. Harkins who lived on the Plantation and who currently resides in Cleveland, for the portion of the history which is printed below. Due to his efforts through letter-writing and seeing people who remembered the early days, he was able to obtain a brief history done by a Mr. Horace E. Taylor. This copy is dated November 14, 1938 and traces the events from from the early days of the Plantation until the time that it was taken over by the U.S. Government.

In future issues we shall endeavor, through interviews with old-time residents and other information we can gather, to bring the history of the Sunflower Plantation up to the present time. We shall try to be as accurate as possible in recalling the growing years as well as remembering the toil and, sometimes, tribulations which befell those early Sunflower Plantation residents.

The pictures used with this article were obtained from Mr. George K. Culbertson of Spanish Fork, Utah, whose grandfather, Mr. George E. Bailey, managed the Sunflower Plantation, Inc. during the years described in this part of the history.

by Peggy Moore

Sunflower Plantation

Part I:

A History

by Horace F. Taylor



The Sunflower Plantation "Big House" built in 1903 was the residence of General Manager George E. Bailey and his family. The "Big House" had a huge central hall (upstairs and down) with two parlors, dining room, pantry, kitchen, bedroom and bath on the ground floor – and four bedrooms with three baths on the second floor. Picture is dated January, 1927.

"There is a large Ghinko tree...which stands where the front of the Big House stood. It was given...by President Teddy Roosevelt after a visit to Sunflower Plantation while on a bear hunting trip in Mississippi."

Sunflower Plantation, so named because of its location in Sunflower County, Mississippi within a half-circle meander of Sunflower River, presents an interesting example of the appropriation and orderly development of one of our richest resources – land of generous area and fertility. Fifty years ago a wild and almost trackless forest, the habitation solely of deer, bear and other game, these broad level acres responding to diligent oversight and toil, have now become transformed into one of the South's finest plantations. Soon to be the home of scores of enterprising farmers, these same acres under the expert guidance of our "Uncle Sam" are now to be called upon to yield profitable crops for their new owners.

The tract composing Sunflower Plantation originally included about 7000 acres and was bought about 1896 chiefly for its timber value, by Frederick W. Taylor and James Crate, composing the partnership Taylor & Crate, from the Delta & Pine Land Company. Subsequent purchases and sales have reduced the property to nearly rectangular outline, and to the 4616½* acres acquired by the U.S. Government on October 30, 1936.

The partnership Taylor & Crate, established in Buffalo, New York in 1865, had become one of the most widely-known hardwood lumber firms in the United States, and with its successor corporation of similar name, has owned timber and operated mills and yards in several States, including Mississippi where it became one of the pioneers in developing the timber of the Delta, holding land and timber in Quitman, Tallahatchie and Sunflower Counties. It was during the period from 1899 to 1903 that timber was first cut on what later became Sunflower Plantation. The logs were transported over a steam railroad to the east bank of the Sunflower River about 3 ½ miles due east from Merigold. Thence they were conveyed with the assistance of a "float boat" to the west bank where Taylor & Crate had installed a large band saw mill with a storage yard for the lumber product. When properly seasoned, the lumber was hauled from this yard by mule-power over a wooden tram to Merigold where it was loaded on cars for shipment to the market. The timber cut was chiefly Oak, Ash, Cypress and Gum – with proportionally little of the last-named, since Gum at that time had not come into its present wide use. This initial lumbering on the Sunflower tract, because of the quality and size of logs required by lumber standards of that earlier day, left a substantial amount of good timber uncut, and much of this was logged and made into lumber later, on a semi-portable mill installed by the same owners, on Section 4 of Sunflower Plantation.

Farming, a logical sequel, saw modest beginnings for what was to become the model "Sunflower Plantation". About 1901, the superintendent of the Taylor & Crate band-mill – located, as explained, on the west bank of the Sunflower River, east of Merigold – was confronted with a scarcity of negro labor. He therefore asked permission of the owners to build a few cabins on the Sunflower property, that some part of his mill crew might clear and cultivate small farm sites, and through more or less permanent residence be available for work in the mill and lumber yard. A few such 10- or 20-acre farms thus established, a commissary seemed essential, and soon a gin and other facilities; and thus from year to year Sunflower Plantation "just grew". A 950-foot artesian well was sunk shortly thereafter, and in 1903 the headquarters residence – the Plantation "Big House" – was erected. Subsequently as the surroundings took on more and more the aspects of civilization, this residence was modernized and provided with the comforts of running water, electric lights and a central heating plant. In general design the house is a copy of buildings provided by Taylor & Crate for similar management use in connection with

*(4016½ is stated in this document but the original letter from Horace Taylor states 4616½ -- GY.)

their business enterprises at other points. The last word in “going modern” was a two-way short-wave radio outfit provided by the last occupant to maintain contact with his friends and the cotton market.

The initial clearing for farm development, and indeed all eventual clearing was done under contract by which the Negro tenant, who in return for his work received the value of his entire cotton and other crops for the first two or three years of his tenancy, paying no rental in the meantime, and being “furnished” by the owner. Over a period of from 15 to 20 years a yearly average of 200 acres of “wild land” was by this method brought under cultivation. As it happened, about mid-way of this process an itinerant dynamite expert one day appeared at plantation headquarters. Land cleared “by hand”, as already described was, of course, still studded with tree trunks and stumps, although the virgin soil even with shallow ploughing between the stumps often yielded a bale of cotton per acre. But our “dynamite expert” was engaged to completely clear some 1200 acres, and did entirely remove stumps and debris from this area at a cost of less than \$5.00 per acre. This happened before the World War, at a time when explosives were very cheap. This wholesale clearing of a considerable area made possible the use of tractors for plowing and similar work, and was the beginning of a general resort to power farming during the latter years of the Taylor & Crate ownership. This ownership, incidentally, was actually the same throughout the entire development of the property and until its sale to the Government in 1936 although from 1926, for convenience, Taylor & Crate’s Mississippi property was held by a subsidiary corporation entitled “Sunflower Plantation, Inc.”

Although enjoying the ownership of substantial property interests in a number of Southern states the Taylor & Crate firm did not approach their enterprises in the Southland under a banner bearing the label “foreigners”. It was their practice in so far as acceptable to their neighbors, to “naturalize” themselves, take on their proper share of local responsibilities and candidly offer a basis for mutual friendship with the home folks of the locality. They have always consistently paid tribute to the southern hospitality with which this attitude has been reciprocated on the part of their Southern friends and neighbors. So satisfactory a relationship extending over a period of 50 years seemingly makes the term “absentee ownership” an anomaly as applied to Taylor & Crate.

Much has been written about the “plight” of the Southern “sharecropper” – in most cases by writers who lacked contact with the facts. Their experience as owners of Sunflower Plantation, which at one time accommodated 170 or more Negro families was entirely convincing that the tenant system in vogue with their Negro labor was one of the most sensible and equitable “profit-sharing” plans that could be devised; for the Negro and his family, admitted to a new and fertile opportunity, but bringing little of value aside from their bare hands, were afforded the privilege through sharing in the crop, of securing a living and a money return measured only by their willingness to work under intelligent guidance, any risk of loss being at all times borne by the owners. During the crop year 1936 there were approximately 115 Negro tenant farmers on Sunflower Plantation and at least 85 or 90 percent of these farm *tenants* had an available credit balance in addition to their subsistence, at the close of the year. It is doubtful whether the same number of small farm *owners* in any given community elsewhere fared so well.

In its earlier years, health conditions in the Delta bore a sad reputation. Mosquitoes and other tropical pests swarmed and everybody expected to suffer from malaria. The installation of drainage and other means of promoting healthful surroundings – and this

applied notably on Sunflower Plantation – served to effect a radical change in the picture. That Sunflower Plantation became positively a healthy place in which to live is demonstrated by the following exhibit.

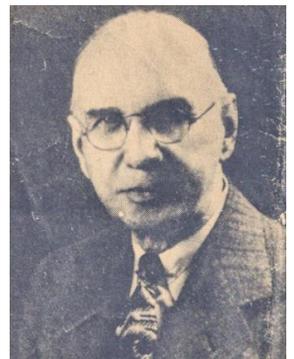
Some 15 years ago Miss Inez Hardin, the daughter of a white farmer at Sunflower, secured first prize for perfect physical condition at a local county health contest. She was then awarded first prize at a similar competition at the Tri-State Fair in Memphis where she successfully met all competitors from the States of Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee. This did not conclude her good record, for Miss Inez then captured the national prize in a like contest at Chicago held under the auspices of one of the National Farm Organizations. The later similar experience of Miss Jeanette Rushing and her brother, Sandy Rushing, both grown-up children of Sunflower's farm superintendent, is equally notable, both being victors in important health contests including that of the Tri-State Fair at Memphis. These three fine members of the rising generation, all reared in this same wholesome climate, afford ample proof of its healthfulness. And surely so signal an achievement by all three Sunflower champions can be no mere coincidence.

The satisfactory conduct of any farming or any business enterprise depends upon the individual interest, loyalty and devotion to a common purpose of the management and members of the staff. Sunflower Plantation has benefited notably in this respect. For many years the local management has been under the charge of Mr. George E. Bailey, now living in Minneapolis, who with Mrs. Bailey occupied the "Big House" for the last 15 or 20 years preceding the sale to the Government. Mr. Bailey, born in Buffalo, N.Y., earned his spurs as a lumberman in the employ of Taylor & Crate and was made their general southern representative about 1900. He applied his practical knowledge and interest in farming as effectively as his experience in the lumber business, and when lumbering yielded place to farming, Col. Bailey came to manage Sunflower so admirably that many of his neighbors studied and followed his methods as a pattern for their own farming. His standing in the Sunflower community was emphasized in his election as a director of the Merchants and Planters Bank at Drew and his membership in the Rotary Club and other organizations.

Mr. Bailey was ably assisted by Mr. S.N. Rushing, now a farmer in his own right at Itta Bena and for many years Sunflower's Farm Superintendent and head "rider". Mr. Ira C. Rushing, now engaged in business at Drew, a son of Superintendent Rushing, was the very dependable and efficient Sunflower accountant and Commissary Manager, and his brothers, including Crawford Rushing, an assistant superintendent, were most efficient helpers.

Under Mr. Bailey's general supervision, Sunflower Plantation logging and lumbering in connection with the operation of the mill on Section 4, were under the management of a longtime and highly regarded employee of the firm, Mr. John Alder, now a successful plantation owner of Marks, Mississippi. The ability and reputation of all members of the Sunflower Plantation staff is revealed by the fact that while necessarily released from service when the Plantation was sold, not one of the members of the staff failed to secure a new and satisfactory position.

**George E. Bailey,
Sunflower
Plantation
Manager, operated
his amateur radio
station, W5EEG,
from 1934 on,
occupying the "Big
House" for 15 years
prior to the sale to
the U.S.**



The improvements on Sunflower were of distinct value to farming and thus a benefit to the tenants. These included a second artesian well 1,050 feet deep sunk about 1933 and a fine school house built about 1925 to accommodate 300 scholars. Not only were the ordinary subjects taught here, but home economics and the fundamentals of farming were included. Among additional buildings provided were an excellent church building with a lodge hall on the second floor. Natural drainage was augmented chiefly by two ditches – one from headquarters to Lusinger Lake on the northeast and the other a large canal extending from headquarters to the south boundary. The latter was dug with a power dredge in 1915 at a cost of about \$13,000. While this larger ditch was occasionally cleared of its accumulation of earth and weeds, it is of moment to remark that ten years later the same ditch or canal had to be re-excavated, which confirmed the propriety of an annual 10 percent depreciation charge in connection with such open ditches. This is emphasized by the fact that the renewal was at a cost of about \$23,000.00. The locality has been remarkably free from serious high water conditions, and except for the result of occasional rains which overflowed tributaries, little trouble arose from this familiar threat. It is understood that local statistics show the last serious overflow of that locality to have occurred in 1888 when the Mississippi levee broke. Public improvements since that date appear to promise that such an overflow will not be repeated.

During the last 15 or 20 years of private ownership the Sunflower management did not neglect either the principle of crop diversification or experiments in farming enterprises collateral to the cultivation of cotton and food crops. As affecting all “side issues”, however, it is significant that staple cotton retained first place in the affections of the management, and furthermore it was, of course, almost by instinct that Negro labor planted and picked cotton. Thus in spite of excursions from time to time into the field of cattle raising, with an Aberdeen-Angus bull as sire, into the Poland-China hog domain, and into the feeding both of cattle and mules with ensilage for which modern silos were provided, Cotton persisted as King on Sunflower, and side issues did not attain to their theoretical possibilities.

The large barn with gambrel roof planned by a first-rate architect in consultation with the graduate of a well known agricultural college, was built primarily for the storage of hay and a recognized economy technique in feeding. This barn was equipped with electric feed elevators and with approved sheds to accommodate 135 mules. To save labor here, too, these mule sheds were provided with overhead feed and litter conveyors. This “big barn”, built in 1913, is still roofed with the same hand-split shingles of heart Cypress – the “wood eternal” and probably the most economical roofing known to man.

A branch of the farming enterprise perhaps destined to outlast all others consists of the 800 Pecan trees which should yield generous crops for years to come. Nature alone perhaps is entitled to the credit of this Pecan orchard, for here man has intruded the least with his expert knowledge, be it for good or ill.

During latter years Sunflower cotton was handled through the Staple Cotton Cooperative Association at Greenwood, Mississippi, with most satisfactory results. As regards the yield on Sunflower Plantation, while in occasional instances as many as 5 bales were harvested from three acres, or 3 bales from two acres, from land where intensive farming was not practiced the average over the long period was similar to that of the general locality, or around 350 pounds of lint cotton per acre. It must be expected that under the supervision of Government experts the per acre value of all crops will be greatly improved.



Mozelle Partridge Chason names these men in her book, When Sweat Turns to Tears:

Left to right: in dark glasses, Jim Miles; standing: H. T. Wheeler; seated: Ethan James, Fair Little, David Holman, N. C. Wright, Woodrow Perryhill, others unknown.

(-GY)

Concentration is the theme of this photo taken in the Sunflower Plantation Store around 1956.



Sunflower Plantation Commissary with the first artesian well and watering tub in the road in front. January, 1927.

These were the resettlement years...1936-1940...when the government and the new residents of the Sunflower Plantation worked together to create out of the cleared land a new growth of agricultural wealth, while endeavoring to maintain the same spirit and individual interest which has been at the heart of the plantation since its beginning.

We are indebted to Jack Haynes, Woodrow Berryhill, Mrs. Sarah Story, Mr. and Mrs. Bob Pope and Mr. and Mrs. A.Z. Rains for their invaluable recollections of the earlier years.

Peggy Moore

Sunflower Plantation

Part II: The Resettlement Years



The Sunflower Plantation Headquarters Area as viewed from the belfry atop the “Big Barn”. To the left of the Commissary and general offices is the Nunnery residence; to the right are the doctor’s office and the Rushing residence. A one-room schoolhouse once stood in front of and to the right of this house, but had been replaced by this time. The picture was taken in January, 1936.

In the winter of 1937, in the aftermath of the depression, the U.S. Government took over the land* known as Sunflower Plantation, Inc. There were, at that time, twenty-acre tracts of land with an empty tenant house on each tract. With headquarters at the Big House, government officials began the task of bringing the people to the plantation to work the land and take part in the creation of the government-sponsored project.

When the new settlers arrived, their household belongings were unloaded at the plantation general store onto a wagon. They were taken to their new home by A.Z. Rains, who was employed by the government.

According to Mrs. Sarah Story, who lived quite close to the store at that time, many of the families left their cows at her house to be milked while they were getting settled in their new quarters. She also, quite often, had overnight guests who had arrived too late to be unloaded at night and had to wait until morning to proceed with moving.

During the resettlement years, the rent charged was either one-quarter of the crop or \$5.00 per acre depending upon the decision made by the farm family. The crop, stored in the Big Barn, generally consisted of corn, hay and other feed grains. There was a cotton gin on the plantation although the cotton was not stored there. It was ginned and taken to be sold. Staple Cotton Cooperative Association at Greenwood handled Plantation cotton for many years. The crop of 1937 was the first harvested under government supervision.

Those first years were ones of hard work, adjustments and, eventually, rewards for the tremendous toil involved in taking hold of the land and bringing production to the highest level possible.

Mules and wagons were used by everyone, the mule barn being utilized by all those engaged in the farming operation. This barn held a large number of mules which were cared for, fed and watered by persons hired by the government for that specific occupation. Farmers also rented government-owned hay rakes, mowing machines and other farm implements. A book, kept by an employee, contained a list of names of those who wished to use the various farming tools. Each farmer had to wait until his name came up to utilize the particular piece of equipment needed.

Lusinger Lake was crystal clear and well stocked with bass and crappie. The lake originally drained into Long Lake. There were no drainage ditches at this time and drainage problems were serious. When the ditches were dug, Lusinger Lake then drained directly into the Sunflower River. In this process, a great number of fish were lost due to being drained along with the water from the lake into the river. Wildlife consisted mostly of fox. During the thirties there were no deer on the Sunflower Plantation. They migrated later, joining the other wildlife already there.

In 1939, the government, seeking to better the living conditions, posted a list of qualifications which had to be met by plantation residents in order to continue living on the plantation, since there was, at this time, one-third more people than land. These qualifications were based on the farmer's work and crop production. Those who did not qualify were moved by the government to other government-owned land or could choose a new location to make their home. Many of these families were moved by the government to the Sleepy Martin place, located east of Drew near the Wade community.

The government hired people to tear down the tenant houses and, later, all of this lumber was burned. They then sold forty-acre tracts of land to those qualified families who

* The deed had been signed 27 October 1936. A copy may be seen at the Sunflower County Courthouse. Taylor & Crate still owned and harvested crops in the field, so effective management by the government occurred only in late winter 1936-37.

remained. These tracts included a newly built house, barn, chicken house, smoke house, pasture fences and chicken yards. A hard-water hand pump was also furnished to each residence. There were outside toilets at this time and light was provided by kerosene lamps. The cost of the whole forty acres and residence was \$5,500 to \$6,500. The payments ranged from \$250 to \$325 per year at 3 percent interest for a 40-year term.

Underwood Green of Charleston was the manager in 1939 of the general store. Included in the stock at the store were work clothes; staple goods such as 50-lb bags of flour and 50-lb barrels of lard; boots and shoes; cotton sacks; plow lines; saddles; bridles; and various other items needed by the farmers and their families for their daily needs. The Farm Security Administration office was located in the rear of the general store. Across the hall was the government engineering office from which the engineers did the surveying of the land and designated where the houses were to be built. Mrs. Bob Pope was a clerk-typist in the Farm Security office which was managed by Otis B. Casanova of Cleveland.

A smaller building next to the store was the doctor's office and there was a library located nearby.

Drinking water was obtained from a large artesian well. Families would come in their wagons with containers, usually barrels, for their water. Wagons would be lined up late in the afternoon with the residents visiting and talking from wagon to wagon. Supplies were also obtained from the store at the same time.

Although hard work was the priority, there were times for relaxation, too. Jack Haynes recalls the Fourth of July Jamboree and barbecue held in the pecan grove in the summer of 1939. A small boy at the time, he has not forgotten the excitement of listening to Roy Acuff, Buck Turner and Billie Walker, the popular radio stars brought to the plantation by the government to provide entertainment for the day-long event.

By 1941 there were two automobiles on the plantation, a 1935 Chevrolet coupe owned by A.Z. Rains and a 1936 Ford owned by Dell Griffin. There were approximately 100 families living on the plantation when World War II was officially declared. Quite a few acres of woods had not yet been sold in 1941. The government issued an announcement that in return for clearing it a farmer could plant crops and harvest them on the land cleared by him for a period of five years – rent-free. With mules, wagons and the necessary equipment the farmers cleared the wooded areas showing the pioneer determination which has made our history one of success over great obstacles. During the war, the remaining woodland was divided into twenty-acre blocks and sold to Sunflower Plantation residents only for between \$5 to \$20 per acre. Of this original woodland sold, only five persons still own all or part of it at the present time. They are Jack Haynes, Woodrow Berryhill, Mrs. Lottie Mae Kiker, Mrs. Birdell Oswald and that part known as the Childres Block.

The government, in order to accommodate the farmers, formed a Co-op in the 1940's. It was a non-profit project. A.Z. Rains, outside manager of the co-op, received the corn, feed and hay, checked it in and the farmer could buy it back in the spring if he so desired. The Co-op had three tractors at this time and those who needed their land disked were listed in a book and, as previously stated, waited until their name came up to utilize one of the tractors. The Co-op had just about all of the 2-B cotton seed in the country. This seed, developed in Stoneville*, was sold wholesale to seed distributors as well as the

* A lot of history is crammed into the small tract of land officially known as the Mississippi State University Delta Research and Extension Center (near Leland, MS) that most people just call "Stoneville." ([Web site](#) & [article](#)) -- GY

farmers on the plantation and other persons wishing to plant 2-B cotton. The program was known as the pure seed program.

The Sunflower Plantation government headquarters was serving most of the northern Delta as well as parts of Bolivar and Humphrey counties during these years.

Around 1946 the Farm Security Administration office, managed at that time by Mr. Sumrall and located in the general store, owned then by John W. Johnson, was moved to Indianola, the county seat of Sunflower County. That office became known as Farmers Home Administration and a branch office was located in Drew.

The late 40's brought changes to the historic landmarks on the plantation. The mule barn was torn down and the lumber from it stored in the Big Barn. With more modern farming methods, with farmers obtaining their own storage bins or contracting to have their crops stored elsewhere, it was decided to sell the Big Barn. George A. Wofford, Sr., a resident of Drew, purchased it. In the process of tearing it down, some of the wooden shingles of which its roof was composed fell into the gutter which surrounded the Big Barn. It is believed that a cigarette tossed into the gutter by a worker started the fire. The Big Barn burned to the ground.

In the early 1950's, Bob Pope bought the plantation general store from Mr. Sumrall, operating it under the name of Bob's Grocery for two years before selling to another owner. His grocery sold meat, hardware, staple items, clothing, soft drinks and gasoline. A domino table was located in the store and the game was played by many of the men on the plantation.

The cotton gin, managed by Mr. Billingsley of the Linn community, caught fire just before daylight one morning during the 50's. Residents of the plantation were awakened by a shattering roar as the tanks holding both air and gas exploded. The heat was so intense that a cotton bale, located an eighth of a mile from the gin, burst into flame. The Drew Fire Department was called but in the midst of fighting the fire, the water ran out. The cotton gin burned to the ground.

The Big House, which was government headquarters, stood majestically behind what is now the A.Z. Rains home. It was torn down. The original columns from it, shortened in order to fit, now can be seen ornamenting the A.Z. Rains home. Original bathroom fixtures from the Big House are now being used by the Rains family. The brick on the outside of their home and also framing their living room fireplace is original brick from the Big House.

There is a large Gingko tree, also known as a Japanese maple, which stands where the front of the Big House stood. It was given to the headquarters by President Teddy Roosevelt after his visit to the Sunflower Plantation while on a bear hunting trip in Mississippi. He sent two trees to express his thanks for the hospitality shown to him during his stay at the Big House. One of them died, the other still stands.

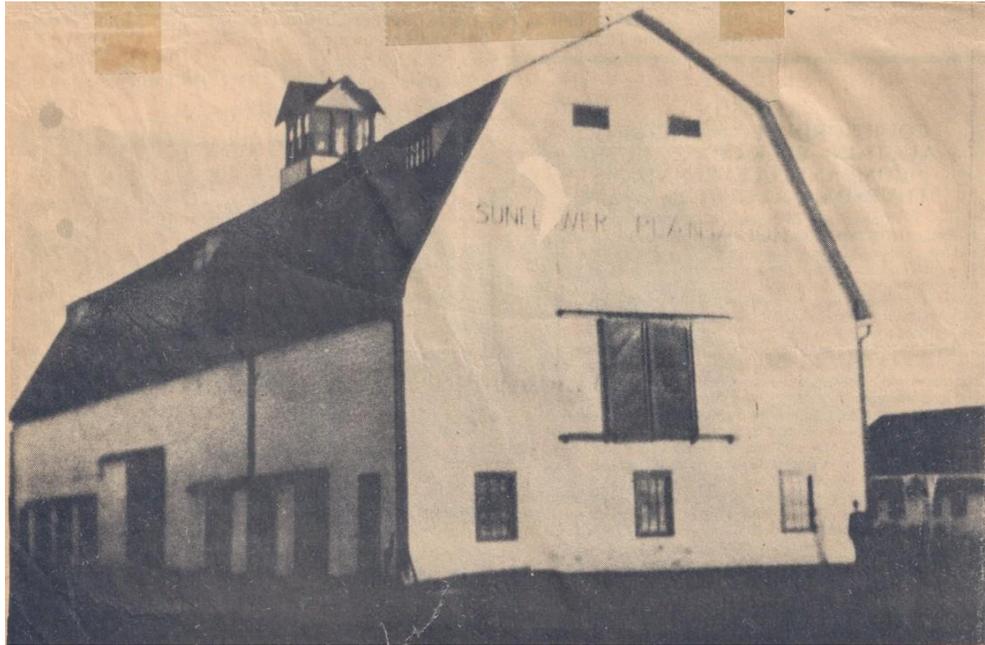
Although many of the original landmarks are now gone, new ones have been built. The landmarks of the present Sunflower Plantation will become tomorrow's history.



**Afro-Methodist Church with Masonic hall on the second floor.
The picture was taken in January, 1936.**



**Pictured in front of the Sunflower Plantation store is Tommy Lusinger
with his kill. This building is now the Pope's store.**



Sunflower Plantation "Big Barn" built in 1913 with a mule barn in the rear to house 135 mules. The picture was taken in January, 1936.