Where Have All the Black Farmers Gone?

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Mr. William Chambers, 92 years old

FOR THE AVERAGE INDIVIDUAL., the idea that chickens do not lay eggs all times of the year would be new information, perhaps even revelatory. However, some small-scale farmers live by the creed that the natural rhythm of their farm animals and plants is the most sensible and practical one. Their approach to farming addresses long-term strategies and long life.

In a recent interview with Mr. William Chambers, a 92 year-old African-American farmer in southern Ohio, I learned that "With fowl there are months when chickens don't lay eggs, also months you can raise crops and months you can't. You can give them something to lay eggs all times of year, but if you do that chickens won't last that long... If you let a chicken do it natural, its body can rest. Hogs and cows the same way."

Not only does Mr. Chambers subscribe to a natural approach to farming, he also believes in utilizing everything on the farm like potato peels, egg shells, and anything that will decompose to send either back to the soil or the farm animals. Mr. Chambers, similar to other black farmers, practices a natural agriculture that harnesses the local natural resources and converts them into foodstuffs for the animals, fertilizer for the soil, or into wholesome food products for humans.

Author Gail P. Myers (center) with Mr. & Mrs. William & Rosemary Chambers

Mr. Chambers says he received his farming knowledge from his mother who lived to be 107. His grandmother lived to be 116. The valuable knowledge he learned from his mother he passes on to his sons. He said that when his mother would kill a chicken, she would not eat the chicken for three days. Farming practices and food ways obviously contribute to long life.

However, black farmers have had a very short life as a whole in the United States. Currently there are less than 16,000 black farmers nationally, owning less than 2 million acres. At one point from the 1910s through the 1920s, over 920,000 black farmers owned more than 16 million acres, although 680,000 were sharecroppers or tenant farmers.

It could be argued that from the beginning black farmers in the U.S. were doomed because of converging ideological firmly entrenched within the institutional frameworks. Black farmers were working against a dominant ideology that strongly believed that they were inferior and not at all deserving of opportunities to own land or raise families or communities.

Structurally, they were also set up by the crop lien, tenant, and sharecropper systems. Blacks emerged from slavery with no financial capital. Therefore, the sharecropper system, the crop lien, and tenant systems were of major importance to the aspiring farm owner. After the institution of slavery ended, the sharecropper system became the plantation institution's reincarnate. Because of the nature of the sharecropper system, African-American farmers had to borrow fertilizer and seed from the planter. Even before the first seed was placed in the ground, these farmers were in debt. Landlords, who were former plantation owners, had the privilege of coming to the property when they desired, inspecting the farm, and giving directions. If the sharecroppers produced a surplus, their limited access to distribution outlets would have curtailed their ability to distribute their goods for a profit.

Another important credit system was the crop-lien system, which allowed the merchant to hold a lien upon the growing crop in security for supplies advanced, giving as security a mortgage upon the crop that he promised to plant. The nature of the crop-lien system kept the interest rates high and gave extreme advantage to the merchant and the landlord.

Nonetheless, blacks began to purchase farmland and create communities, and a small amount of black landholders did appear very soon after emancipation. In 1910, the peak

year for black land ownership only fifty years after emancipation, blacks owned 15 million acres. However, as impressive as the numbers suggest (1910: 890,000 farms; and 1920: over 920,000 farms), the fact remains that in and structural tensions. Ideologically, from the days following the Civil War, early black farmers were most severely hampered by the belief system which once justified slavery and later the Jim Crow policies. Even after the slave system ended, the ideologies that facilitated slavery remained 1910, only 218,000 farms were run by full or part owners, with the remaining 670,000 farms run by tenants (Browne 1973). In other words, because of the nature of their relationship to the means of production and the market, they were never incorporated into the main structure of agriculture as free and competitive agents. With the current agribusiness structure of agriculture, these farmers may never become incorporated into the mainstream of agriculture.

The USDA, the agency of the federal government responsible for supporting and protecting the family farmers, also hindered their ability to succeed. The institutional policies related to racial discrimination within the various agencies of the USDA affected African-American farmers' ability to compete because they lacked the capital to purchase equipment and were unable to obtain credit on reasonable terms. Black farmers could not withstand the structural nor ideological tensions of agriculture in a capital-based economy. Most recently, the USDA has admitted to its role in discriminating against black farmers. In April 1999, the USDA settled a class action suit and agreed to a settlement amount of $3 billion dollars. (See `Hispanic Farmers Sue USDA, "page 15.)

Browne (1973) lists seven reasons for the rapid decline of black farmland:

1) Tax sales;
2) Partition sales;
3) Mortgage foreclosures;
4) Failure to write wills;
5) Land ownership limitations on welfare recipients;
6) Eminent domain; and
7) Voluntary sales.

Although these farmers were credit and financially capital poor, they were by virtue of having toiled and tilled the soil for hundreds of years, culturally capital rich in regards to the natural environment. Their knowledge and insight of the natural rhythms of the local environments extended through time and space. Yet, albeit a marginal role in the business

of agriculture, black farmers have an incredibly valuable place in the effort to feed the world through sustainable, safe, efficient, low-fuel consumption methods.

My research suggests that these farmers are enhancing the natural environment around their farms by working with the natural rhythms of the earth and by not wasting anything. These farmers, like many minorities and small-scale farmers, recycle everything. In the U.S., we live in a wasteful society. We waste everything from food to human lives. Because black farmers have by necessity and tradition utilized every thing from the farmland, anything that rots, they have enhanced the natural rhythms of the farm life. By keeping the decomposition process going, they have eliminated build-up in one pest population and preserved the biological diversity of the soil. African-American farmers incorporate ecologically friendly practices into their small-scale farming operations.

These minority farmers, like other minority and small farmers, have rich cultural capital that promotes the natural capital of the local farm environments. On the Chambers family farm, there were several types of fowl-Cornish hens, quail, chickens, and guinea fowl-rabbits in and outside of cages, free roaming goats, milking and beef cattle, an emu, hogs, kittens, and a host of diverse wild plants. Around his farm, biological diversity flourished. I asked him about the rabbits eating the vegetables in his garden, and he said, "That's alright, it's all going to get eaten around here."

Farmers like Mr. Chambers are a wealth of experience and a storehouse of knowledge. What will happen when farmers like Mr. Chambers are no longer on the land? Will we look around one day and say to ourselves, "Where have all the black farmers gone?"