

Northern Man Writes of Conditions in the South

The following communication was received by Mr. W. J. Ingalls from a friend in Florida, and while some of the opinions therein expressed are hardly in accord with those of many who have studied the subjects, nevertheless the Astorian is glad to publish the article, as an interesting and lively letter in the old South:

WINTER HAVEN, Fla.—To be a voter a man must have been a resident of the State two years and the county six months. He can then run for any public office by making public announcement of his intention to do so. At every political meeting he is expected to tell his own story of his qualifications for the office he desires without any help from anyone, and he never has a good word for any office holder or office seeker except it is for the man who is running for the same office he wants.

Polk County is about to elect County officials.

The County Judge and all officials are elected by popular vote and all hold office two years or more.

I have attended two political meetings; every office holder and those seeking office sit on a raised platform. The present tax assessor was the only man who didn't have an opponent. The high Sheriff had five men who wanted his job. He was called to give an account of himself and told what he had done, while in office and what he would promise to do in the future. His opponents told the people how he had a pass, and had in many ways neglected his duty. If a candidate for office ever did anything in an official way, any suspicious act, he is asked at these meetings to explain it and if not made perfectly clear to his hearers that he had done no wrong to the county or any man in it, he will get no votes.

The primaries are held in May, and the candidate getting the most votes there is the only candidate at the regular election. The qualifications for office here are honesty and ability and without them one had better not try for office. There is only one party in local politics but in National I find many white men who vote with the G. O. P. The high Sheriff is one, but that won't stand in the way of his getting more votes than any of his five opponents—which he is sure of—and re-election.

Judge Preston came from Iowa years ago, and is sure of a re-election. I am indebted to him for a few court records—Many think "up north" that in the "Solid South" there is no respect for law, that every man carries a gun and settles his troubles on the spot.

We believe in no part of the United States where the laws are more respected and better enforced, where honesty virtue and character are more highly prized or better protected than in the "Solid South". An ex-Judge was arrested and fined \$20 for not fishing according to law.

A great temperance war is going through the south and the next legislature will try and pass a state prohibitory law. It is now on the local option plan and out ride the cities, the laws are very strict. They say the home and family are never safe where the bar-room exists.

There are plenty of "Blind Tigers" here but the Sheriff, and Judge Preston, have made it very hot for them during their years of holding office.

85 convictions have been made, fines collected—\$6 to \$300 and 21 years of time served. Total convictions for three and one half years, 640—fines paid \$19,850.00 time served 51 years. All convicts are let out, mostly in the Phosphate mines, and are quite a source of profit to the County, which get \$30.20 per month and board for each convict, so you see this is quite an item.

There are very few Negroes in Polk Co. but over 80 per cent of the crime is committed by the Negro; the white man pays 98 1-2 per cent of the taxes. The County has no bonded debt, or debts of any kind and has money in the treasury. Judge Preston tells me.

There is a Negro at Barton who is a good mechanic works in a lumber and has \$4 a day the year round, who is the envy of every negro in the city. One negro told Judge Preston: "If I could get \$4 a day I wouldn't work but one day in a week and that is the way about every nigger in Florida looks at it. Good wages and the bar-room has made the "nigger" a trifling rascal, who can not be depended upon where a steady laborer is needed. He wants to go to the cities and do a few odd jobs, and just earn money enough to buy whiskey and gamble a little. Only 15 per cent of the cotton raised in the South last year was made by Negro laborers.

Judge Preston says at the Lumber camps and Phosphate mines, there is always a "Blind Tiger" and the Negro won't work only a small part of the time—but the Judge got after them with a sharp stick; sent the Sheriff down to a Phosphate mine, and arrested 10 of the most ones as Vagrants and sentenced them to 4 months at hard labor and let them out to owners of this same mine at \$30.20 a month and board and the county got

the whole benefit of the transaction. Now these mean "niggers" have left Polk Co. and those that are here are of a better class 90 per cent of these vagrants have been arrested and worked 4 months each for the Company in the three and one-fourth years of Judge Preston's rule.

The Judge says that every lynching in the south can be traced to whiskey as the first cause.

The Negro earns big wages in the Phosphate mines for no white man can work there; thirty feet in the ground in a Florida sun, with no air, is not a desirable job for a white man. It seems the more wages a "nigger" gets the more mean and more trifling he becomes.

The Yankees talk about the poor negro; why, he can get as good wages here as a Florida sun, with no air, in the New England states and he can get work every day in the year if he has a mind to work and has many advantages over the Yankee. He can wear a straw hat and overalls the year round and be comfortable. His rent and fuel cost him nothing and clothing very little.

I wish all our common laborers in the north were as well off as the southern darkey.

To the credit of the negro they never shield one another when in trouble. A negro witness in court is pretty sure to tell the truth. What he where are around Winter Haven are all good, and many own nice pretty homes, in and near town, but all seem to think it a disgrace to be a wage worker.

They are all religious. A Negro preacher once said "Never give up your Religion—I have been in jail and prisons many times—but praise the good Lord I never give up my religion". It is an old saying "If you once go to Florida and get the sand in your shoes you are sure to come back" and it has proved true in my case. I first came to Florida in 1884, and never left the state for three years, and have spent the past three winters here and intend to spend all my few remaining winters here in Winter Haven.

Chas. H. Whithier.

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