

Locations of Black Identity: Community Canning Centers in Texas, 1915-1935¹

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In 1915, African Americans in rural Texas observed communities in transition when they looked out the doors of their wood-frame houses. In that year approximately 72 percent of all blacks in the state, or 511,321 individuals, lived in rural areas. During the 1920s low commodity prices and high inflation combined to ruin many, but few left the land. Instead they rented land on the shares and struggled to earn enough of a living to keep families together. Yet the Great Depression intensified the poverty and forced many blacks to leave rural life behind. In addition, the violence and disfranchisement of the Jim Crow era, the race's subjugation to the crop-lien system, and the birth of the "New Negro" in an urban environment hastened the decline of black communities in the South. Scholars tend to concentrate on these factors, thus presenting the rural African American as a victim of economic, political, and demographic change. Few consider the ways that rural blacks challenged these persistent trends.²

A study of local black community development offers an alternative to the story of decline. Some residents struggled to improve their conditions and they managed to strengthen their position, at least temporarily, even though they ultimately lost the war. These activists believed that they had to stabilize their economic position and cultivate a sense of community among rural

¹The author wishes to thank Dan McMillan for making thoughtful comments on an earlier draft.

²*The Negro Farmer in the United States, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Census of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 27, 30. Charles E. Hall, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 601. Between 1910 and 1930 the number of black farm operators in Texas increased by 23.1 percent. Only two other southern states, Arkansas (25.1) and Louisiana (34.5), experienced a larger percentage of growth. States with smaller increases included North Carolina (15.8), Oklahoma (14.9), and Mississippi (11.0). All other southern states experienced declines. The number of African Americans living on farms decreased by 13.6 percent, from 409,922 in 1930 to 354,485 in 1940. See *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940-Population, vol. II, part 6* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 763.

blacks to pose a viable challenge to the racist system that trapped them. They believed that canning centers offered one practical solution to their situation.

Government employees of the segregated Texas Agricultural Extension Service (TAEX) introduced the idea of community canning centers in 1915. Personal and public networks combined as women and girls raised the funds, organized activities, and did most of the canning while men and boys helped construct, fuel, and operate the centers. Time has obliterated the physical evidence of much of this economic development and community building, and historians have overlooked the written evidence that the individuals generated. Yet, canning addressed many economic problems and provided a focus for community organization that had not existed previously.³

The first message the segregated extension service presented focused on canning. The state leader, Robert Lloyd Smith, and the home economics demonstrator, Mary Evelyn Hunter, conducted their first meeting in September 1915. The families gathered at the Ted Williams's place in Blackjack, a small community just one-half mile east of the International & Great Northern Railroad line in northeast Texas. They listened as Smith and Hunter explained the general plan of the extension service. Mrs. Hunter set up an exhibit of canned goods and described the need to increase food

³Texas became the twelfth state to establish a separate division to provide practical information on agriculture and home economics to rural African Americans. The Texas "Negro" division quickly became the largest, securing more federal funding, more staff, and more participants than the other segregated branches did. It followed the model established by Seaman Knapp and the United States Department of Agriculture in Texas in 1903 and offered practical solutions to the problems assailing the rural South. Extension agents encouraged club members to diversify, improve their homes and farms, and participate in informal educational offerings. Officials believed that the advice they offered could free rural southerners from abject poverty and illiteracy. For a summary of the work of Seaman Knapp in Texas and the evolution of Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work see Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 206-53, esp. 226 and 234. For a history of TAEX's segregated division see 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.

production for the family. She then gave a demonstration in canning the surplus.⁴

Involving the entire community offered opportunities for rural reform that individual participation did not. Extension agents found that they could reach more people of all ages through community gatherings. They worked with the youth initially but believed that this offered the best opportunity of involving the entire family. They encouraged the mixed-age audience to cooperate and adapt materials that they already owned to the purpose. Agents continued to support the use of homemade items even though the price of manufactured steam pressure canners declined as club work became more popular. A cauldron over an open fire, called the “open-kettle method,” worked fine if club members took special care with the preparation of the jars. If clubs did not have a cauldron they could buy two wash-tubs, punch holes in the smaller one, insert it in the larger, fill the larger one with water and the smaller one with jars, and be well on the way to productive canning. Lard cans worked just as well. Others used oblong washer or laundry boilers, and canning club members adapted them by placing wire in the bottom to protect the jars from the heat source.⁵

⁴Hunter recalled that they held the first demonstration on either 6 September or 11-12 September. See M.E.V. Hunter, “History of Extension Work Among Negroes in Texas from 1 August 1915 to 15 September [sic] 1931,” box 4, Texas Agricultural Extension Service Historical Files, Cushing Library, Texas A&M University, College Station, (hereafter TAEX Historical Files); M.E.V. Hunter, Petersburg, Virginia, to I.W. Rowan, Prairie View, 13 February 1940, box 4, TAEX Historical Files. Hunter remembered that the meeting occurred in a rural church in the Wellingham community, a switch where the train stopped, but Smith County residents remembered it in the home of the Williams family in Blackjack. See Hattie R. Green, “Historical Appraisal, Smith County, 1939,” box 15, TAEX Historical Files.

⁵White extension agents began the first canning clubs for girls in Texas in 1912. A TAEX publication provided information about starting girls’ clubs. See Laura F. Neale, *Girls’ Canning Clubs, Garden Clubs and Poultry Clubs*, Bulletin B-43 of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (January 1918). In 1914, Bernice Carter, the assistant state leader for girls’ clubs, spoke to the Texas State Farmers’ Institute about the benefits of canning clubs and having a home canner on the farm. For her description of inexpensive equipment see Bernice Carter, “The Home Canner on the Farm,” *Proceedings of the Fourth Meeting Texas State Farmers’ Institute 1914* (Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones Company, 1914), 47-50. The extension service encouraged families to meet their needs by making rather than purchasing conveniences.

These makeshift tools could not endure the steady use of a community canning center. Instead club members built brick furnaces or fireboxes and purchased commercial steam canners to ensure that the final product met sale standards. Most clubs used the cold-pack method. They placed raw fruits and vegetables or cooked beef in cans or jars, and then applied steady heat for a specified time period. Government regulations required beef to be packed in no. 3 cans and cooked for 180 minutes in a steam pressure cooker at five pounds pressure or 40 minutes at ten pounds pressure. Farm families who followed these specifications found a ready market for their quality canned goods.⁶

Railway lines and roadways carried these goods to urban areas in Texas and beyond, creating new markets. The Texas Department of Agriculture published a testimonial from T. G. Simpson who began canning to survive a glutted truck-garden market in Jacksonville, Texas. Jacksonville was near the crossing of the St. Louis Southwestern and the International & Great Northern railroads, and not more than twenty-five miles south of Blackjack in Smith County. Simpson testified that by canning the culled tomatoes from the first shipment, a truck farmer could pay shipping costs for the fresh crop for the rest of the season. Simpson encouraged anyone interested to contact the Texas Home Canners’ Association to get information on joining the growing business. Joan Jensen documents a reticence among Mexican women to adopt the recommendations of white extension agents.

See C.E. Hanson, *Household Conveniences and How to Make Them*, Bulletin B. 8 of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (Oct. 1915). Specialists described the “open-kettle method” as “old” by the 1910s. See E.M. Barret, *Canning and Preserving* (Austin: Texas Department of Agriculture, [1916?]), 10, in the Katherine Golden Biting Collection on Gastronomy, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. By 1914 the Texas Federation of Women’s Clubs also encouraged canning clubs through its Rural Life Committee, established that year and chaired by Mrs. Mamie Gearing. Texas Federation of Womens Clubs, *Annual 1914-1915, Sixteenth Convocation held in Galveston, 17-20 November 1914* (n.p.: Printing Committee, [1915]), 60-1. Gearing also served as the first president of the Texas Home Economics Association, founded in 1913.

⁶For contemporary descriptions of cold-pack methods and government regulations see Barret, *Canning and Preserving*, 10; 14. Mary E. Creswell and Ola Powell, *Home Canning of Fruits and Vegetables* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 26, includes standards for 4-H canned goods.

African Americans may have hesitated also, but they did adopt the strategy when it became available to them.⁷

The first meetings between extension agents and farm families concentrated on the economic benefits of home and commercial canning. Prosperous farmers led the way in acting on their advice. A group with “large farms and fair houses” in Stump Toe, near Fredonia in Gregg County, stood to profit from the approach to truck farming that Simpson had advocated due to their proximity to the growing towns of Tyler and Longview and several railroad lines. They contacted Hunter to speak with them about three weeks after the demonstration at Blackjack. She showed them how to preserve culled sweet potatoes and return a greater profit. The economics of her argument swayed them, and by 21 October 1915 residents had purchased a hot water canner for community use. They continued to invest in their center through World War I, and by 1922 they used steam canning equipment, cooperatively owned, to can tomatoes and sweet potatoes for market.⁸

Diversification and marketing the excess combined to help many participants avoid debt, increase income, pay off debts, and even purchase farms. World War I provided another incentive to farmers located in cotton counties or in areas removed from main routes of transportation. As a result, the number of canners operated by African Americans increased from one in 1915 to 250 in 1918. Lea Etta Lusk, a home demonstration agent in Washington County, employed through emergency funding,

⁷Vista K. McCroskey, “Blackjack, Texas,” *New Handbook of Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 1:569. *Texas Department of Agriculture Yearbook 1908* (Austin: Texas Department of Agriculture), 98-100. Joan Jensen, “Canning Comes to New Mexico: Women and the Agricultural Extension Service, 1914-1919,” in *New Mexico Women: Intercultural Perspectives*, ed. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 201-26.

⁸Hunter to Rowan, 13 Feb. 1940, box 4, TAEX Historical Files; M. E. V. Hunter, “Outstanding Achievements in Negro Home Demonstration Work,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files. Rebecca Sharpless summarizes the importance of canning and the numbers of rural women of different races involved in the process in the Blackland Prairie in *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 126-31. *Annual Report of the Extension Service of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, 1922* (College Station: Extension Service, A. and M. College of Texas and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating 1923), 75-6 (hereafter *Annual Report, date*).

recalled that she spent all of May, June, and July in 1919 canning surplus vegetables. In this way she reached “all communities where our people were free to plant gardens.” The farm families in Washington County had known nothing about the process because they lived in cotton country, where all energies were focused on the one cash crop. The high food prices during the war forced families to can for home use and the women and girls “showed a deep interest” as a result. They realized that canning freed them from dependency on commodities purchased at inflated prices. Robert Hines, the county agent in McLennan County, reported that nearly every African American farm family planted a home garden and preserved the majority of the harvest. This differed from the situation in 1917 when “practically no vegetables were saved and a very little fruit.”⁹

Agents knew that poor health contributed to the debilitation of rural African Americans, and canning offered a means to improve the nutritional value and variety of foodstuffs. Agents believed that a healthier black population had the potential to earn more and participate in society to a greater degree than those debilitated by pellagra and other diseases associated with the rural poor. The extension service published booklets to educate members in the health benefits of properly canned foods, but the illiteracy of rural blacks made it difficult for them to absorb the information. Mary Evelyn Hunter faced this impediment directly. She simplified the instructions for semi-literate, rural African Americans through her “Steps in Canning” program which she introduced immediately in 1915. She explained to the women and girls that they could enjoy fresh vegetables from their gardens only four months of the year,

⁹*Annual Report, 1918, 82*; Lea Etta Lusk, “Historical Appraisal, Washington County, 1939,” box 15, TAEX Historical Files. The United States Department of Agriculture microfilmed all of the annual narrative reports prepared by county and home demonstration agents, specialists, district agents, and state leaders. See United States Department of Agriculture, *Annual Narrative and Statistical Reports of the Cooperative Extension Work Demonstration Program*, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 33, Microfilm Series (T845 to T895), Texas (1909-44), T890 [hereafter cited as *Annual Reports, state, year, reel number, and T number, i.e. Annual Reports, TX (1909) reel 1, T890*]. Duplicates of all reels in series T890 are housed in Payroll Services, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. Robert Hines, *Annual Report, McLennan County (1919) reel 10, T890*.

leaving 240 days without vegetables. Thus, she encouraged “each family to put up 240 cans of vegetables, so that they would have at least one can for each day of the year not supplied by the garden.” Such practical advice encouraged many rural families to participate and allowed them to diversify their production to take full advantage of the opportunity that canning centers provided. All who participated learned new skills that made them better farmers and more savvy in the ways of the market. By 1919, thirteen agents helped Hunter implement her “Steps in Canning” program. At least 14,366 women and girls processed 298,445 jars of fruits and vegetables with a value of \$98,058.80. By 1921, Hunter believed that the sustained emphasis on the benefits of canning for home use and for sale convinced individuals and clubs in “nearly every community in Texas” to make or purchase a canner. Canning proved so popular that it did not matter if a black home demonstration agent worked in the county or not. Residents in black communities still purchased canners.¹⁰

Farmers used canning centers as a means of defense. Some chose to can their beeves instead of selling cattle at low prices in times of drought, or when counties passed new stock laws as many did in the 1920s. Stock laws threatened poor farmers because they forced them to pasture stock in fenced areas. Many black farmers, owners and tenants alike, had no land to fence. The stock sales that resulted forced the price of cattle down and farmers could not sell their beef. The new home demonstration agent in Houston

¹⁰Hunter, “Outstanding Achievements in Negro Home Demonstration Work,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files. Early instruction manuals included James Frank Breazeale, *Canning Vegetables in the Home*, United States Department of Agriculture Farmers’ Bulletin no. 359 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), located in The Katherine Golden Bitting Collection on Gastronomy, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Canning, Preserving, Pickling*, Bulletin B-26 of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (July 1916); and Cornelia Simpson, *Food Saving in Texas: Drying, Brining, Canning, Curing*, Bulletin B-38 of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (1 June 1917). Federal inspectors commented on M.E.V. Hunter’s enthusiasm for canning work in 1922. See Schaub and Goddard, “Annual Visitation to the Texas State Agricultural College, College Station, Texas, 4-14 October 1922,” box 25, Annual Inspection Reports of Cooperative Extension Work in the Field, Records of the Extension Service, Record Group 33, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter ES, RG 33, NA); *Annual Report, 1922*, 76. The published annual reports provide a chronology of the development of canning and canning centers.

County, Annie G. H. Hall, set to work in the fall of 1924 to mitigate the loss to farmers. In a few months she organized the farmers to construct six community canners. By working cooperatively, families could can their beef and still harvest their cotton crops. Thus they made their crop and realized some gain from their cattle which “would have otherwise been a total loss to them.”¹¹

The drought of 1925 forced farmers in Washington County to can their beeves. Lea Etta Lusk traveled throughout the county, with help from her husband John. They reintroduced canning to communities that had forgotten about its usefulness since World War I and convinced discouraged farm families to “can their beeves in order to have something to help tide their families through the winter.” Some dried-up milk cows became chili during that harsh year, but canning softened the blow to those farmers who faced the loss of a significant capital investment.¹²

The community canning centers provided a focus for the expansion of extension programming following World War I. The new state leader of the segregated service, Calvin H. Waller, attempted to get more rural African Americans involved in extension by borrowing the organizational structure used by community councils of agriculture. The administration expected agents to form clubs of women and girls and hold demonstrations for men and boys in at least twelve communities strategically positioned in each county. Agents created maps to help them pick black communities in all four corners of their counties to extend the service. Once selected, agents worked to recruit members, hold elections, form a county council with representatives from the community councils, and elect a county president. A federated organization of these clubs existed at the state level for girls by 1922 and for women by 1925. Because community canners were so widely accepted and yet so desperately needed by poor rural

¹¹*Annual Report, 1924*, 16. By 1925, twelve large community canners existed in Houston County and eight had community kitchens. *Annual Report, 1925*, 68.

¹²John M. Lusk, Annual Report, Washington County, TX (1924) reel 35, T890. [Brenham] *Press Banner* (7 Aug. 1925), quoted in Thad Sitton and Dan K. Utley, *From Can See to Can't: Texas Cotton Farmers on the Southern Prairies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 60.

families, agents decided that canners could help them broaden their appeal to men, women, and children.¹³

The canneries became visible signs of the public and private partnership in rural development. Agents depended on voluntary labor and resources provided by club members. The men provided brick or stone and volunteered their services to build a furnace and small structures to protect it from the elements. The buildings varied depending on the resources of the community. A TAEX bulletin, *Community Canning Plants*, provided elevations for a simple board-and-batten building with a shed roof measuring twenty by forty-eight feet. It resembled a typical farm shed of box construction and posed no challenge for a local carpenter. Some followed the recommendations and the effort paid off. By 1925, members in twenty-three counties, almost all of the counties with black agents, built and rehabilitated a total of 267 canning plants.¹⁴

African Americans often constructed canning centers from available materials because they had no resources to purchase materials. The experiences of residents in Flynn community provide an example of their resourcefulness. Iola Rowan, the African-American home demonstration agent, and William C. David, the county agent in Madison County, met with individuals in the Flynn community in Leon County in 1933. The agents gave a canning demonstration on the creek bank “because water was

¹³TAEX administrators described the model of organization that Calvin Waller borrowed as similar to the county farm bureau structure. White agents organized a county council of agriculture or home economics following this model as early as 1920. See *Annual Report, 1920*, 12. *Annual Report, 1922*, 71; Hunter, “History of Extension Work Among Negroes in Texas,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files,” and Hunter, “Outstanding Achievements in Negro Home Demonstration Work,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files. *Annual Report, 1925*, 68; *Annual Report, 1927*, 63; *Annual Report, 1929*, 48; R.H. Hines, “County Organizations,” Annual Report, McLennan County (1919) reel 10, T890.

¹⁴Walton Peteet, Chauncey Merwin, and Cornelia Simpson, *Community Canning Plants*, B-48 (College Station: Extension Service, Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, 1919). This includes an undated photograph of the first community canner, probably for white extension members, located in Smith County. *Annual Report, 1925*, 68; *Annual Report, 1929*, 49. Hunter, “Outstanding Achievements in Negro Home Demonstration Work,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files; *Annual Report, 1930*, 31.

available at the creek but not at the home.” The agents constructed a furnace by digging a hole three feet long and three feet deep in the bank. They laid a piece of galvanized iron sheeting over the hole to hold the retort and cookers. This made “an excellent furnace” which they used to process three hundred cans of beef.¹⁵

Other communities used logs to build their houses and fire clay as chinking. They rived shingles for the roofs, poured concrete floors, and built furnaces to hold the retorts and canning utensils. They constructed screen doors and windows and graded and landscaped the grounds with native shrubs. Most purchased steam-canner outfits that consisted of a hotel-size retort that cost \$27, a sealer for tin cans that cost \$16, and tin cans that cost as much as five cents each. Cooperation made it possible for four Gregg County clubs with a total of 180 members to save \$200 dollars on their equipment purchases in 1923. The multiple tasks necessary to build and outfit these centers provided practical instruction in at least six areas: economy, cooperation, sanitation, drainage, conveniences for the home, and landscaping. Residents then applied this knowledge to their homes, churches, and schools, thus spreading the benefits of the knowledge gained in the canning centers.¹⁶

Black families canned more than one million containers of food in 1929, an average of 115 cans or jars per family. This kept at least 368 community steam pressure canners busy during the canning season. Agents estimated the value of their work in gardening, canning, poultry, and dairying to equal \$371,518.70. Community residents had to cooperate to sustain this production. They had to agree on schedules for use of the facility and they paid for the privilege with cans of food. Many adopted this toll

¹⁵C.H. Waller, Annual Report, Texas (1933) reel 84, T890.

¹⁶Clubs bought thirty-eight canners in 1924 and as many sealers to finish the work. *Annual Report, 1924*, 15-6; *Annual Report, 1925*, 68; *Annual Report, 1929*, 49. Hunter, “Outstanding Achievements in Negro Home Demonstration Work,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files; *Annual Report, 1930*, 31. R. G. Johnson, Annual Report, Gregg County (1923) reel 27, T890. Cooperative purchasing continued into the 1930s as clubs pooled premiums from fairs and purchased equipment. See district agent reports quoted in Earl Crosby, “Building the Country Home: The Black County Agent System, 1906-1940,” Ph.D. diss., Miami University (1977), 143. C.H. Waller, Annual Report, Texas (1933) reel 84, T890.

method, paying a fixed fee set by the committee that managed the plant. If residents furnished the tin cans, the toll usually amounted to one-half of the finished product. The proceeds from the cans retained as the toll contributed to the operating costs of the plant.¹⁷

The momentum continued into the 1930s even as the depression worsened. Rural African Americans constructed four centers in 1931, twelve in 1932, and forty-three more in 1933. Sixty-three operated by early 1934. Even black agents forgot the precedence set by centers constructed in the 1920s when they reported that residents in the Beulah Community in Anderson County built the first “really modern canning house” in 1932. Residents salvaged materials from an old hall destroyed by a storm and pooled two-years’ worth of winnings from displays at the Anderson County Fruit Palace to complete their canning house. They laid a concrete floor and installed pipes for running water. Extension staff featured the Beulah center at the annual agents’ conference in 1932. Male and female agents left the conference committed to the idea. They secured plans from the TAEX to help them construct centers in their counties. Within a year they built forty-seven kitchens in nine counties, three owned by individuals but the rest owned by communities. State leader Calvin Waller noted this support “enabled the Negroes to take full advantage of the program put into effect by the R.F.C. as in many cases they had places already prepared to house equipment.”¹⁸

Rural relief efforts during the New Deal era also supported the construction and operation of canning centers. Loans from the Reconstruction Finance Commission (RFC) and grants from the

¹⁷*Annual Report, 1922, 75-6.*

¹⁸Neil Foley incorrectly cites 1931 as the first year that African American women had access to their own community canning centers. See Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 155. In 1931 agents reported that four community canning houses were built, including the Beulah Community Canning House in Anderson County. *Annual Report, 1931, 35.* Later construction projects benefitted from New Deal funding and this caused the number of centers to increase with twelve constructed in 1932 and forty-seven in 1933. “Negro Agents Work Toward Farm Ownership,” *Texas Extension Work of 1933* 20, no. 9 (May-June 1934), 8. C. H. Waller, *Annual Report, Texas (1933)* reel 84, T890. Agents helped construct seventy-eight more in 1934. See H.S. Estelle to I.W. Rowan, 1 May 1936, box 4, TAEX Historical Files.

Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), both distributed through the Texas Relief Commission, created a new wave of canning centers in the Texas countryside in 1933. In April the RFC provided funds to build, equip, and operate community and county canning plants. County commissioners, civic organizations, and other local or county committees helped agents purchase pressure cookers and sealers for public use in the centers. Agents provided a device and supervised the processing of vegetables and meat in this phase of emergency work. The funds available in 1933, a total of \$3050, helped rural African Americans construct fourteen buildings and furnish others already constructed. Regardless, Calvin Waller considered the federal support inadequate to meet the need. He reported that “we have not been able to secure much of the R.F.C. money in building canning houses.”¹⁹

The New Deal programs provided more money but also more white influence in the black programs. Black agents interested in having canning centers had to gain the support of the white county agent to act as their sponsor. The white county agent in Walker County, D.R. Carpenter, secured funds from the County Relief and Improvement Committee and built eighteen canning units in 1933. He established one-half of them in black communities. Each center had one retort, one twenty-nine-quart cooker, and one sealer. The relief committee collected a toll from those who used the center and they distributed these cans to the needy. The black county agent, K.H. Malone, praised the work of the community extension councils for building the canning houses. He motivated the communities to raise the funds for the buildings through concerts, picnics, box suppers, community sings, and 4-H club events so the African American population still had a vested interest in the result. He located the centers so residents in each of the twenty-five black communities in the county had an

¹⁹Robert Calvert and Arnolde De León. *The History of Texas* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1990), 300. Miriam Ferguson created the Texas Relief Commission to distribute RFC funds and the Texas legislature renamed it the Texas Rehabilitation and Relief Commission. Lynn Anderson Rieff, “Rousing the People of the Land: Home Demonstration Work in the Deep South, 1914-1950.” Ph. D. diss., Auburn University (1995), 124-27. “Relief Canning Directed by Home Agents,” *Texas Extension Service News* 20, no. 9 (May-June 1934), 3; C. H. Waller, *Annual Report, Texas (1933)* reel 84, T890.

opportunity to use them. At least 180 farm families in twenty-two communities participated, using the cannery “day and night” by the end of June 1933. A newspaper columnist wondered “where all the food comes from?”²⁰

These canning centers helped agents accomplish their goal of strengthening rural communities in several ways. The canner provided a means to generate common interest in the development of community life and a forum to introduce racial solidarity. Mary Evelyn Hunter recognized this in 1915 when she introduced the centers to rural African Americans. Hunter believed the declension in communities resulted from feuding and bickering instigated by the clergy and masters of competing churches and lodges. Operating the cannery required residents to cooperate to purchase seeds and negotiate a schedule for planting and harvesting that allowed them to process the vegetables efficiently. Hunter believed that this created “a new community relation that had not been thought of before.” Hunter believed that the community canning plants did more “to increase community interest than any one thing undertaken.” The furnaces and kitchens in many plants also provided a new gathering place for

²⁰D.R. Carpenter, Annual Report, Walker County (1933) reel 90, T890; K.H. Malone, Annual Report, Walker County (1933) reel 90, T890 with unidentified newspaper articles attached: “Busy Canning Days Continue,” and “Negro Canning Units at Work.” Some of the communities and local supervisors of the work include: Tom Oliphant served as the county supervisor for the Negroes. The canning units operated in the following communities, with supervisors listed: Crabbs Prairie, Emma Wynne; Cotton Creek, L. O. Stykes; New Waverly and Hawthorne, Jessie Sykes; Mount Zion, Florence Naylor; Mount Prairie, Annie Wiley; Galilee, Carrie Owens; Wesley Grove and Hopewell, Mary Birdwell; Arizona, Lucius Jackson; Everline, S. B. McGown. African Americans most often recall these sorts of canning centers when they reminisce about their Depression-era experiences. Ruth Dawson-Batts recalls that her father-in-law, Fred Douglas Batts, coordinated the canning center in Hammond, Robertson County, in the 1930s and that his wife, Eunice Love Batts, assisted in the center. See Ruth Dawson-Batts, *Fred Douglas Batts, Sr.: A Family with a Mission. . . to Educate, to Serve in the School, Church, and Community* (n.p: Ruth Dawson-Batts, 1994), 19-20; Dawson-Batts recalls that her father shared his syrup mill with neighbors in Wortham, Freestone County, and assisted at the canning center, see Dawson-Batts, *Reflective Years, Reflective Moments: My Memories, A Vivid Story Told in Words and Photographs* ([Waco]: Ruth Dawson-Batts, 1996), 44.

functions such as picnics and festivals, further strengthening community identity.²¹

Canning also gained popularity because it offered black Texans a way to stabilize their precarious existence. The money saved by using home-produced canned goods instead of store-bought goods protected many from indebtedness. Agents then advised families to invest their savings in a pig or a dairy cow or a piece of land. Property ownership, particularly the ownership of real estate, became one of the most blatant forms of black opposition to plantation agriculture. It had political consequences. Property holders paid taxes and thus had some say in local government expenditures.²²

The process of canning did not affect the political inequality of southern society, nor did it offer long-term solutions to economic or social ills. It did create evidence of the effort, however. Canning contributed to the success of the E. D. Roberts family of Brenham. Roberts’ family canned the extra food they grew while he “fertilized the soil, ploughed and planted as per the Agent’s directions..., raised more chickens, sold eggs, fed cows a balanced ration, and sold more butter.” With the proceeds Roberts bought more tools, a better team of mules, paid off the debt on his first fifty acres, purchased fifty more, and even bought the family “a Ford car for their comfort, and as a means of hauling his produce to town.” Roberts became the model black capitalist farmer.²³

Such practical accomplishments helped African Americans challenge the influence of white paternalism and nurture a sense of race solidarity through community cooperation. Blacks had to cooperate to build structures, purchase canning supplies, and market the commodities. They elected governing councils to

²¹Hunter, “History of Extension Work Among Negroes in Texas,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files. *Annual Report, 1925*, 68. Hunter, “Outstanding Achievements in Negro Home Demonstration Work,” box 4, TAEX Historical Files.

²²In 1930 Lea Etta Lusk was still “striving to have every club member cut out the annual yearly account run at the stores, by producing and conserving the food supply for the family.” Lusk, Annual Report, Washington County (1930) reel 71, T890. Steven A. Reich, “Soldiers of Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for Citizenship, 1917-1921,” *Journal of American History* 82, 4 (March 1996), 1487-89.

²³Lusk, Annual Report, Washington County (1924) reel 35, T890.

administer the operations, and they realized that they could take responsibility for their own actions and reduce their reliance on white landlords and other authority figures. The money saved and earned gave farmers an opportunity to accumulate personal property, including land and homes, and thus created physical evidence of a minority culture eager to claim its economic and social equality. At the same time more organized urban-based challenges to the racist system began to make a difference. People organized, created new ideologies, and expressed a different race pride than did the black agrarians. The quiet resistance that rural African Americans expressed when they used the community canneries failed to impress their urban peers or later historians who have labeled their tactics as “accommodationist.” Over time, the canneries, the visible proof of their attempt at economic security and self-promotion, collapsed, as did the communities around them. But the significance of the use made by rural African Americans of segregated canning centers remains.