

# The Rural Imprint

## 'Cleveland Benjamin's Dead'

Under the Sugar Act that expired in 1974, it had been up to the U.S. Department of Agriculture each October, at the start of grinding season, to determine "fair and reasonable" wages for sugar cane workers. Ever attentive to the wishes of prosperous growers, the USDA carelessly threw nickel and dime raises at the fieldworkers; wages crept no higher than \$2.35 an hour.

Then, in 1971, workers were denied even a trifling increase—and there begins Patsy Sims' remarkable tale, *Cleveland Benjamin's Dead*, a powerful report on Louisiana's 12,000 cane workers. Her story, which occasions anger and inspiration in about equal parts, has prompted admiring reviewers' comparisons with James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as well as John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. "An extraordinary journalistic account," declared the *Library Journal*, "An elegantly taut chronicle," said the *Washington Post*.

Yet, since publication in 1981, the book has sold fewer than 400 copies, and most of those have been bought in Louisiana, Patsy Sims' home state. Both she and the sugar cane workers deserve a wider audience.

What the USDA did back in October 1971 was fail to set new hourly wage rates. Not until December, when the grinding season was finished, did Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz announce that fieldworkers would receive a 10-cent-an-hour raise, effective in January 1972. By refusing to make the increase retroactive, Butz deprived workers of

some three months' worth of higher wages.

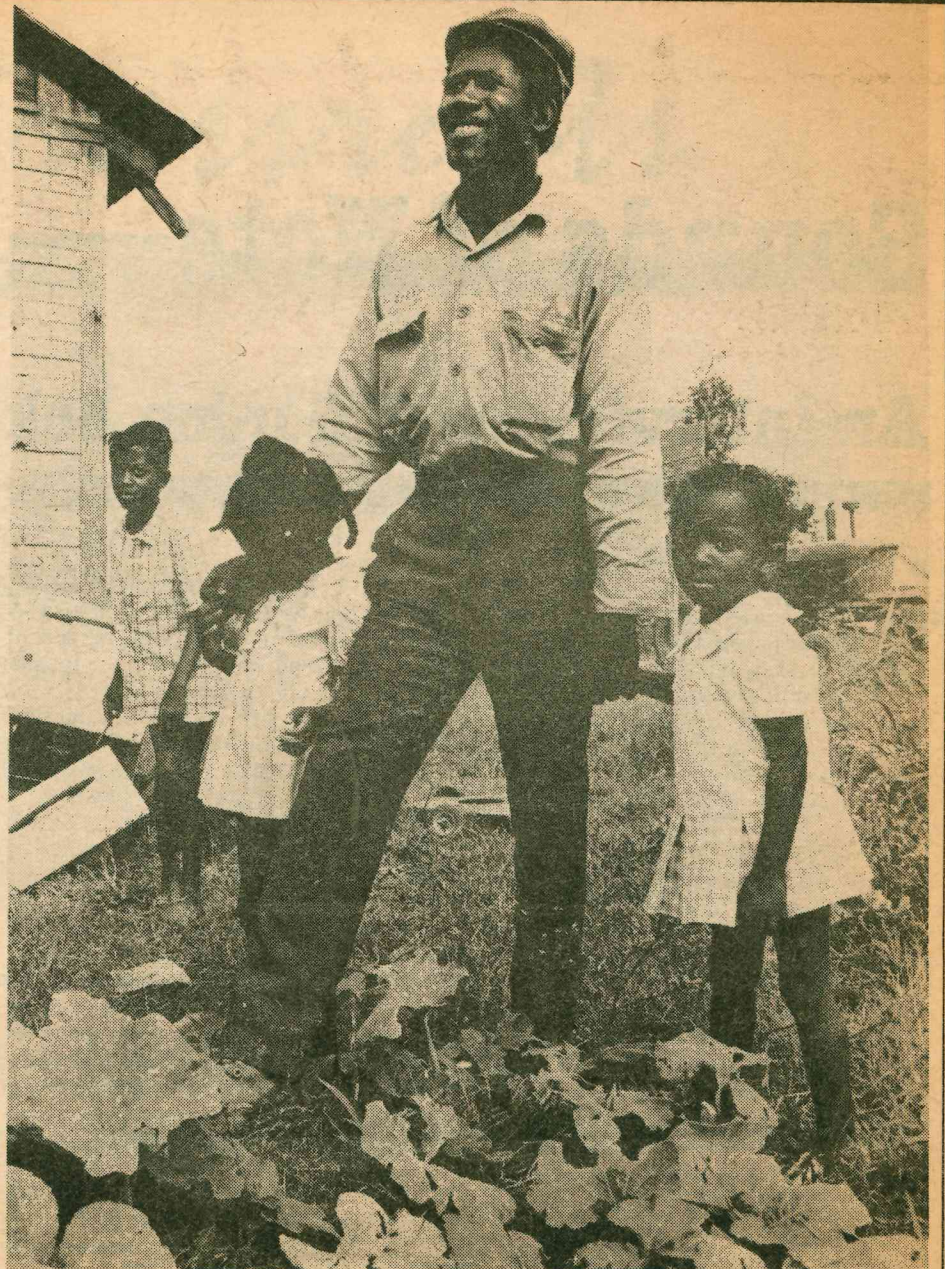
Most fieldworkers responded to this fresh humiliation with understandable restraint. "Partly because they lacked the education to express themselves," writes Sims, "partly because they feared the powerful growers, the workers complained to one another but not to outsiders. The growers—with the help of Nixon and Butz—had won again."

But this time, she adds, the workers had an ally—the Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA), a band of "renegade" priests and nuns and college students—and in the end they made all the difference. With the encouragement of SMHA, two cane workers, Huet Freeman and Gustave Rhodes, decided to sue Butz and the USDA for back wages.

As the case dragged on, the two suffered all manner of threats and harrassments. Eventually they were fired and with their families expelled from the shacks they'd been renting from plantation owners.

But all seemed worth the trouble when in 1974 a federal court ruled in the fieldworkers' favor. "Some a the people got high as two hundred an' fifty dollars," Gustave Rhodes told Sims. Rhodes himself got back just eight dollars, and he was delighted; money had been the least of his motives. "I need my wife to feel she have a man," he'd said.

Much of the impact of this book comes from Sims' astonishingly precise ear—she gets the cane workers' speech just right—and her no less astonishing talent for sharp portraiture. Avoiding polemics, she gives us instead a kind of composite biography of plantation workers—their hopes and affections as well as their agonies.



photo/Mitchel L. Osborne

Huet Freeman and his children

The death of Cleveland Benjamin, a worker on the Hard Times plantation killed when his tractor overturns, becomes a metaphor for much else in the life of that stricken community: its helplessness, its grief and its abiding courage.

"Do accidents scare you?" Sims asks a worker.

*He grew excited, his speech rapid. "Y'all passed that machine settin' down there off the road, that three-leg thang?" He pointed in the direction of a cane cutter pulled to the side of the road in the distance. "That's what I run, an' you knooow that enough to scare me!"*

E.P. Dutton, the publisher, has already remandered *Cleveland Benjamin's Dead*. To get a copy of this secret treasure, including 21 superb photographs by Mitchel L. Osborne, you must write to Patsy Sims, 402 E. St. SE, Washington, DC 20003. The price is \$12.75.

## Aunt Arie

Among the many elderly residents of Southern Appalachia whose words Eliot Wigginton and his high school students have recorded and set down in *Foxfire Magazine*, Arie Cabe was easily their favorite. They found her in 1970, living alone in a log house amid the mountains of Macon County, N.C., and they kept coming back till her death, eight years later, at age 92.

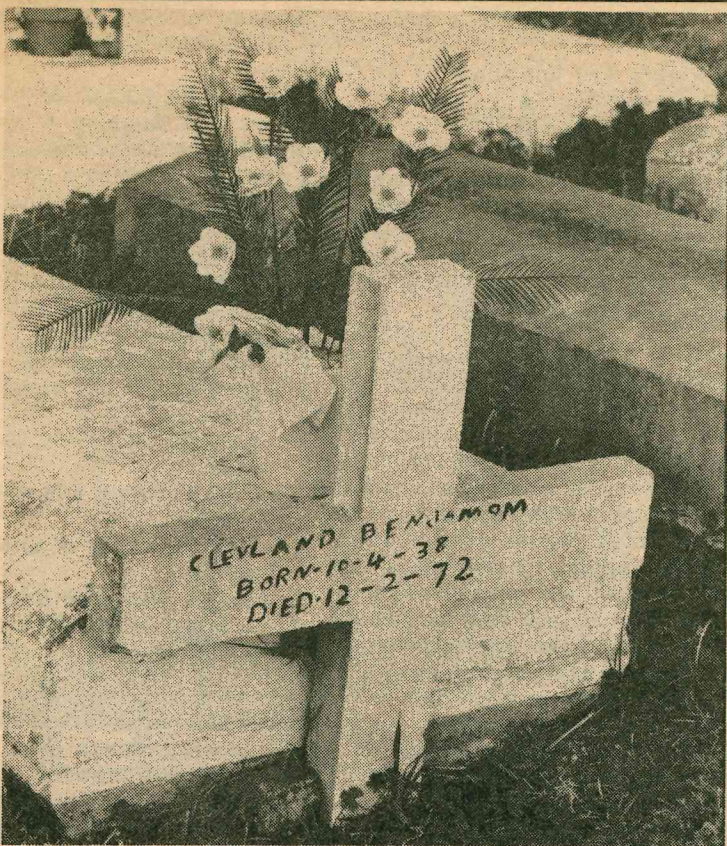
*Aunt Arie* (Dutton paperback with photos, \$9.95) is a collection of the many sprightly conversations that ensued and the many kindnesses exchanged. The tapes have been co-edited by Wigginton and Linda Garland Page.

As Wigginton observes in an introduction, Aunt Arie was not one to conceal her affections. "We set the groceries on the lounge," he writes, describing a typical arrival at the cabin of himself and the "younguns." "I hugged her . . . and she gave me a wet affectionate smack on each cheek and pounded my back; then she turned to grasp the hands of each of the students in turn . . . and exclaim over every one of them . . . 'Where have you been so long? I gave out a' th' notion you was ever comin' again!'"

She loved them all, says Wigginton, "instantly and without reserve." The students returned her love as best they could. They chopped wood, patched the roof, assisted with the cooking. Most of all, they helped Aunt Arie fight off loneliness. "And me just an old woman," she would marvel. "It doesn't look like young people like that would come see me and stay with me."

The picture we get is of an unworldly woman who nonetheless had world enough and time to live wisely and well. Because the editors relate to her as a friend rather than a character, Aunt Arie emerges whole and genuine. As she said, "People twist a lie t' suit themselves, but y' can't twist th' truth. It'll be there today, tomorrow, and forever." ■

—Richard J. Margolis



photo/Mitchel L. Osborne