

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy

Reconstruction

LESSON IDEA

To reveal some of the less-understood aspects of Reconstruction, and to show the enduring damage — to relations between races, between the North and the South, and between citizens and their government — which Reconstruction caused.

PREPARATION

Review last week's lesson, which described the personalities and issues involved in the political maneuvering which followed the War Between the States. Read the Fourteenth Amendment and look up the voter restrictions, if any, in your state.

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WHEN THE WAR Between the States ended, a total way of life had been destroyed in the South. Imagine, if you can, that you are a Confederate officer returning home. As you ride up a long line of moss-covered oaks toward the big white house you call home, an eerie silence greets you. No servant comes to take your horse, no one crosses the porch to welcome you. The shutters are closed; the door locked. Your family has fled to escape the Union armies.

Weeds have overgrown the flower beds and the vegetable garden where once okra, peppers, cabbage, onions, eggplant, peas, and squashes were grown to feed the family and the hundred slaves your father owned. Behind the house, you stop for a few minutes beside the log house where slaves had done the family washing and at the old kitchen with its empty brick ovens and cold hearth. You move on to the smokehouse where hams and sides of bacon were once cured. The rafters are empty now, but

you remember the smell of smoking pork and burning wood. Farther on, there is a poultry yard, pigeon roost, and dove cote — all empty, the plump occupants devoured by the invading army that lived off the land. You pass the barn and notice the silence when there is no neigh of a horse or braying of a mule. The stock has been taken for supply wagons of a Union army or as mounts for Union cavalry. In the orchard you find hard green knobs on the branches of peach trees and realize there is a ray of hope; something is still growing.

Walking back to the house, you wonder what to do. You have land, but no money to buy stock, or seeds, or hire labor to farm it. As you gaze down the tree-lined lane you see a mule cart driving up to the entrance. In the cart is one of your former slaves with his wife and children. You talk of the past, of happier times, and then of the present. He is as confused as you are. You are a landowner without labor to work your fields. He is a laborer without land to work on, or a home in which to live.

You suggest planting cotton on shares, borrowing money if necessary, and dividing the profit evenly after the crop is sold. He accepts the offer and moves his family into one of the cabins behind the main house.

The sharecropper plan works well for both of you. Each year you have enough to buy more supplies for the next planting and keep up the interest payments on your loans; your former slave has enough to feed his family and a little extra to put aside for the purchase of land of his own, perhaps an acre or two of the surplus you now have.

