

SCENE AND SETTING

The Luffton Lumber Company has its big mill and quarters deep in the primeval woods of South Central Florida. Huge live oaks, pines, magnolia cypress, "sweet gum" (maple) and the like grow lush. Spanish moss hangs the trees. Tall cabbage palms

STEPHEN KELEN -d' OXYLION

PRESENTS

P O L K C O U N T Y

A COMEDY OF NEGRO LIFE

ON A SAWMILL CAMP

WITH AUTHENTIC NEGRO MUSIC

IN THREE ACTS

BY

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

AND

DOROTHY WARING

COPYRIGHT 1944;

WBW 20p 45

SCENE AND SETTING

The Lofton Lumber Company has its big mill and quarters deep in the primeval woods of South Central Florida. Huge live oaks, pines, magnolia cypress, "sweet gum" (maple) and the like grow lush. Spanish moss drapes the trees. Tall cabbage palms tilt their crowns in clusters above the surrounding trees. Scrubby palmettoes make a dense undergrowth.

The woods surround everything. Bull alligators can be heard booming like huge bass drums from the lake at night. Variagated chorus of frogs, big owls, and now and then the cry of a panther.

There are a hundred or more houses in the quarters. They are laid out in straight rows like streets. There is a main street, wider than the others called "The Square". On it are the public places like the Jook, or pleasure houses furnished by the management. There is a piano in it (sometimes a victrola also) tables for card games made of unpainted lumber, and a big table with a trip-string for dice. This is the life of the camp after work hours. There is a sort of cafe where soft drinks, tobacco, dried fish, chitterlings, etc. are sold. It is the second place in popularity.

The streets of the quarters are unpaved, sandy places. There are trees that have been left standing here and there.

The houses are of raw, second grade lumber, unpainted, each with a porch and two or three rooms. Each man with a "family" is allotted a house for which he is docked about fifty cents a week. The single men live with others or room

at the rooming house next door to the cafe. No fenced in yards, few flowers, and those poorly tended. Few attempts at any kind of decoration or relief of ugliness. Everyone lives temporary. They go from job to job, or from job to jail and from jail to job. Working, loving temporarily and often without thought of permanence in anything, wearing their switch-blade knives and guns as a habit like the men of the Old West, fighting, cutting and being cut, such a camp where there is little law, and the peace officers of state and county barred by the management, these refugees from life see nothing unlovely in the sordid camp. They love it and when they leave there, will seek another place like it.

Such a place is the cradle of the Blues and work songs. There they are made and go from mouth to mouth of itinerant workers from one camp to the other.

They are ephemeral in every way. The murderous fight of today is forgotten tomorrow and the opponents work together in utmost friendship inside of twenty-four hours. The woman of today may be forgotten tomorrow. Certainly it is remarkable for a love affair to survive a change of scene. There will be more women where they are going, and they say, "Let every town furnish its own. Its a damn poor town that can't furnish its own. Take no woman anywhere." Here and there an attachment becomes permanent, and they settle down together, or travel together from camp to camp.

The women are misfits from the outside. Seldom good looking, intelligent, or adjustable. They have drifted

III.

down to their level, unable to meet the competition outside. Many have made time in prisons also. Usually for fighting over men. They too pack knives. No stigma attaches to them for prison terms. In fact, their prestige is increased if they have made time for a serious cutting. It passes for bravery--something to give themselves a rating in their small world, where no intellectual activities exist. Hence the boastful song: I'm going to make me a graveyard of my own, etc.

Rough, fighting drinking, loving, reckless, but at times a flash of religion comes to the top when they are very troubled or scared. Then for a short while, a Spiritual will well up out of them and be much-felt for the moment. Small churches have a hit-and-miss existence on the camps. They feel the need of a preacher for funerals. He is more often a man of the same stripe who reformed.

But these people have given the world the Blues, Work Songs, guitar picking in the Negro manner, and the type of piano playing which made Fats Waller famous, and is now being taken up by the world. Because it is typical, they call that type of piano playing "jooking".