



Bruce Jackson\*

## INSIDE/IN COLOR

1.

Nearly all the state prisons in the American South in the 20th century were agricultural farms. The structural model for those prison farms was that of the 19th century slave plantation: a large number of prisoners controlled by a small group of armed free people did unpaid farm labor. On the plantations, the free people were the owners and the overseers; in the prison farms, the free people were the wardens and the guards.

The prisons, like the plantations, were nearly self-sufficient. When I did research in Texas prisons (1964-1968, 1978-1979) and Arkansas prisons (1971-1975), prisoners grew, ranched, and processed nearly all the food they ate. They grew, picked, spun and wove cotton, and they fashioned the cloth into the white uniforms they wore. They made shoes and belts from the cattle slaughtered in the prison abattoirs. Only a few things had to be brought in from outside: things made of metal, salt, medical supplies.

Most of the prison farms I visited in Texas and Arkansas, like those in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and other Southern states, occupied land that had, before 1865, been slavery plantations. What went on in them and how things went on had changed very little; the primary differences were the job titles and the ownership.

2.

I first visited Texas prison farms in July 1964. I was there to do research on black convict worksongs. Between those recording sessions, I'd have conversations about life in crime and life in prison. I recorded those, and very soon my subject expanded to a broader ethnography of life in southern prisons. I took photographs then only as aides-memoires: visual notes to jog my memory when I got back to my desk and began writing. I thought a few of the photographs might be useful as illustrations to articles or books. But I wasn't, so far as I knew, thinking in terms of images when I took photographs.

That didn't happen until my second visit to Cummins prison in Arkansas, which was in August 1974. I'd visited Cummins the previous summer on my way to California. It was the first prison declared unconstitutional by a federal court. I planned to do an article about the place for the *New York Times Magazine* or *Atlantic Monthly*. When I revisited Cummins, I realized that the story I had to tell about that place would be better told as photographs with text as supporting information rather than the other way around.

That's when I became a photographer, or, rather, that's when I understood I was one.

3.

With few exceptions, documentary imagery of the 20th-century American southern prison farm depicts a world in greyscale. One reason for that is, until last quarter of the twentieth century, documentary photographers had few places to publish or display color images. Kodachrome (a color positive film) was invented in 1935 and Agfacolor (a color negative film) in 1936. World War II slowed down the use of both: the military wanted both the dyes and the film. The first newspaper to use full color news photos was the *St. Petersburg Times* in 1954. But acceptance was slow: in 1979, only twelve per cent of American newspapers used color.

The other, more compelling reason is processing color images in those days was hugely more complex, costly, and time-consuming than processing greyscale images. A photographer could develop black and white film and make contact prints in a hotel bathroom (Walker Evans did just that in 1936 when he was in

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Alabama with James Agee doing the work for what would become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*); color film had to be sent in a lab. Black and white prints were far simpler to make and control than color prints. That led to a curious tradition: even now, when processing color images is far simpler and publishing them far less expensive than in the twentieth century, editors still often opt to print images from certain times and places in greyscale rather than in color. Several of the great photographers documenting America for the Farm Security Administration began shooting Kodachrome in 1938. Those images are now freely available in high resolution files online from the Library of Congress. But they are rarely published. When a story is about the 1930s, editors almost always use the black and white images. That's what the 1930s looked like, right? A year ago, the photography magazine *Aperture* did an entire issue on prison photography, *Prison Nation*. There was an exhibit at the Aperture Gallery in New York; the exhibit is now traveling. One of the major articles was a profile of my prison photography by Brian Wallis, former chief curator of The International Center of Photography. The *Aperture* editors used only greyscale images, even though I sent them dozens of Kodachromes, Ektachromes and Polaroids from Texas and Arkansas. Ten of my photographs are in the traveling exhibit, all of them greyscale.

4.

I asked my friend Deborah Luster, whose photographs from Angola prison farm in Louisiana appear in the same issue of *Aperture*, if she knew any publisher who might be interested in looking at a color version of that greyscale world. She suggested that I write to Jack Woody, publisher of Twin Palms Press, arguably the best publisher of photography books in the U.S.

He responded to my email immediately. He liked the pictures and we agreed to do a book based on the color transparencies and Polaroids. A few of them have been published elsewhere in greyscale; most have never been published anywhere.

I recently came across one of the small yellow boxes Kodak used for mounted slides. On the outside was a note in my handwriting: "Texas prisons, 1968." The box contained 28 slides, two of them of a prison rodeo, the rest of convicts picking cotton. Some of those will go into the book.

*Inside/In Color* will be, so far as I know, the first book of color images from southern prison farms in the 1960s and 1970s. Here are some of them.



**Fig. 1:** Convict guards. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1971



**Fig. 2:** Work squads in carts. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1975



**Fig. 3:** Squads heading to the fields. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1973



**Fig. 4:** Spade squads. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1973



**Fig. 5:** Spade squad. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1973



**Fig. 6:** Flatweeding. Ellis prison farm, Texas, 1966



**Fig. 7:** Guard and prisoner. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1975



**Fig. 8:** Hoe squad. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1975



**Fig. 9:** Hoe squads. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1974



**Fig. 10:** Water break. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1975



**Fig. 11:** Cotton picking. Ellis prison farm, Texas, 1978



**Fig. 12:** Cotton picking. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1975



**Fig. 13:** Cotton picking. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1975



**Fig. 14:** Cotton squads heading to weighing site. Ellis prison farm, Texas, 1978



**Fig. 15:** Cotton wagon. Ellis prison farm, 1968



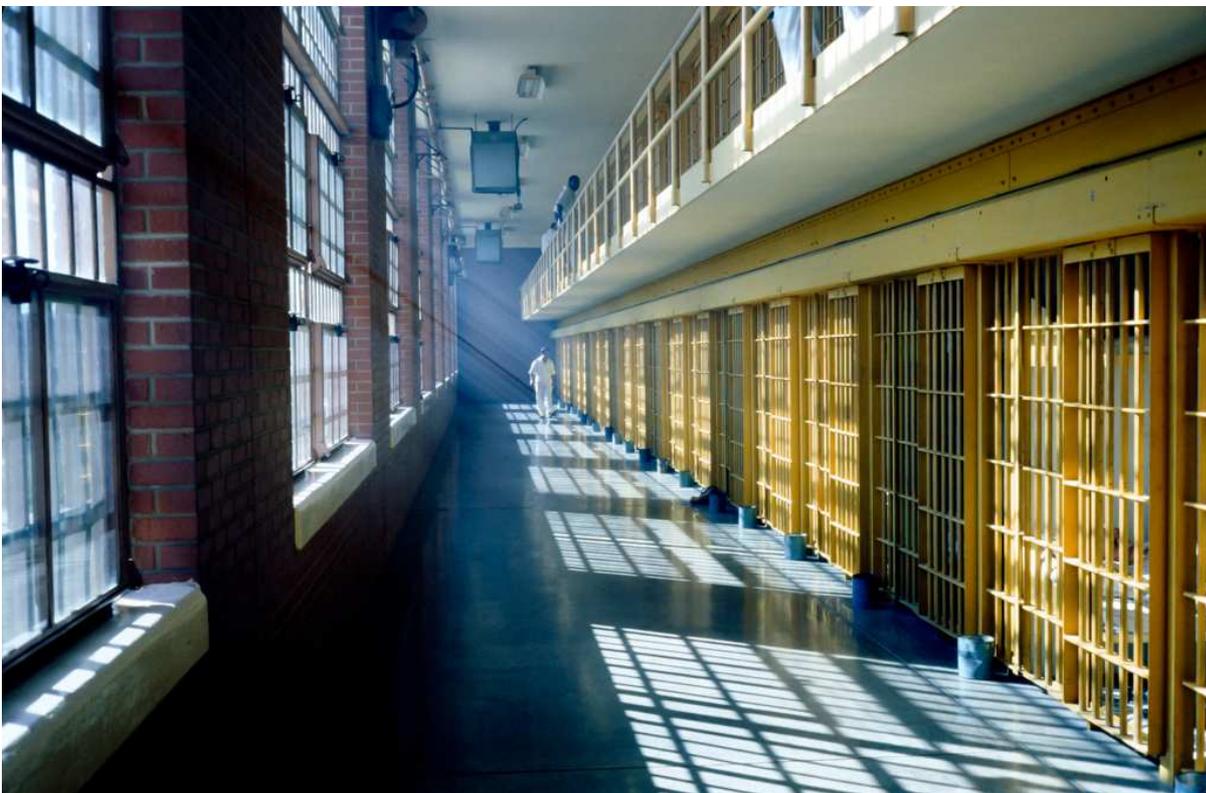
**Fig. 16:** Shakedown. Ramsey prison farm, Texas, 1978



**Fig. 17:** Heading into the showers. Ramsey prison farm, 1978



**Fig. 18:** In the tank. Cummins prison farm, Arkansas, 1975



**Fig. 19:** Diagnostic Unit. Texas, 1978



**Fig. 20:** Paul Rougeaux. Death Row, Ellis prison farm, Texas, 1979



**Fig. 21:** Death Row, Ellis prison farm, Texas, 1979