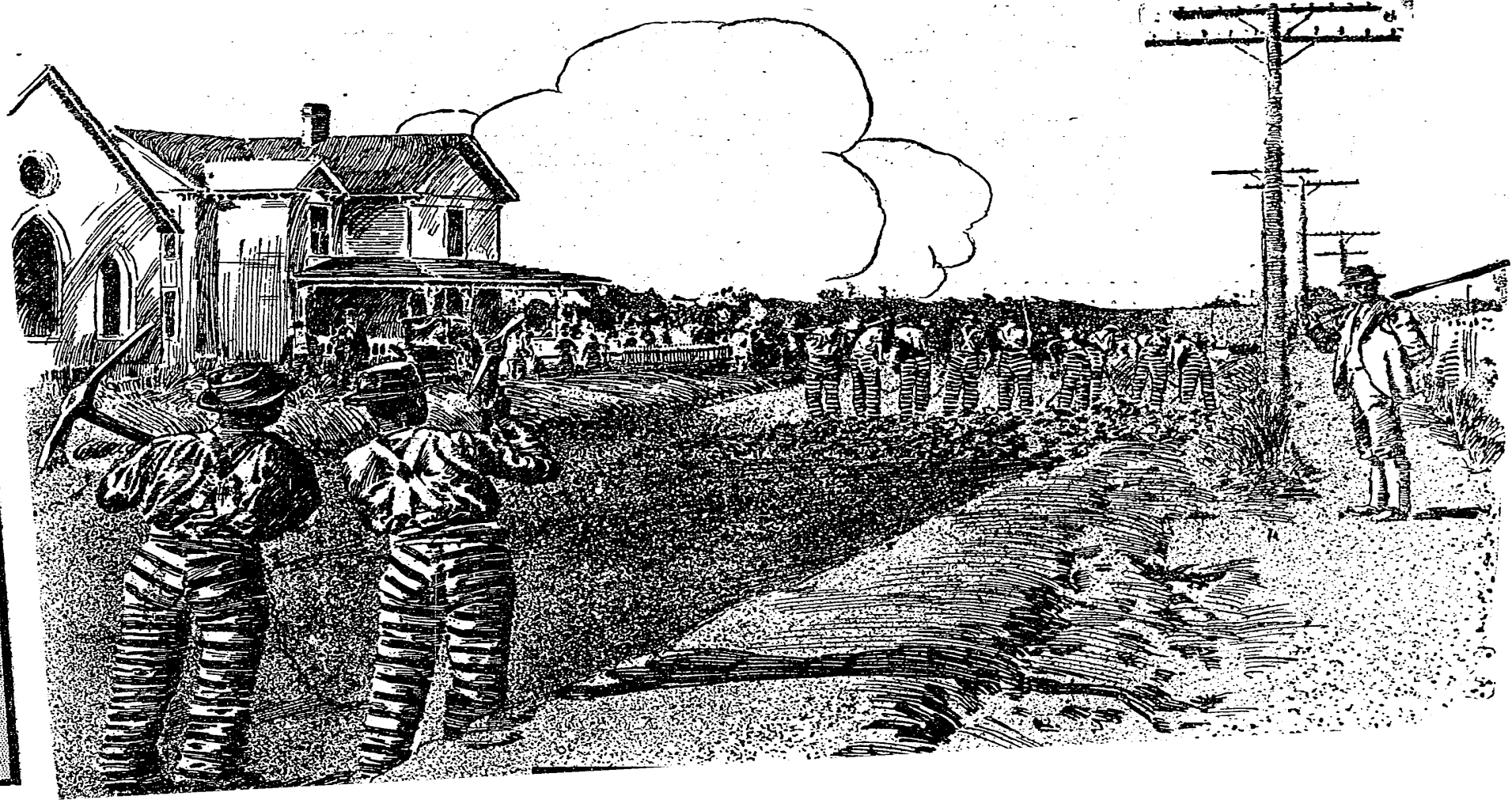


GEORGIA WOMEN FIGHTING THE CONVICT LEASE

Convicts at Work Under Lease System.



Gov. Hoke Smith of Georgia.



Owing to the Peculiar Conditions Surrounding the System the Fight for Its Abolition Is a Difficult One and Is Being Waged Through Secret Channels.

ASK any clubwoman in Georgia what she thinks of the convict-lease scandal that has stirred her State to the core, and opened fire from all quarters of the globe against the nefarious system of leasing convicts, and she will put her finger to her lips and say: "Sh-sh! Just you wait a little and we will have the system abolished. But we don't want the men to know it. We want them to think the fight originated with them, and that they are carrying it through without any aid from us."

And the men who are in the thickest of the fight and loudest in their denunciation of the system probably think that is what they are doing. But the clubwomen know differently. It is they who have been working for months for just this thing.

There are two reasons why the clubwomen of Georgia have not come out in the open and waged war against the convict-lease system, the first being their recognition of the fact that the men resent woman's interference in politics, and the second that the women themselves preferred to have the issue settled quietly without the attention of the world being focused on this sore spot in the shield of the Empire State of the South. It couldn't be, however, so the women are remaining quiet about their share in the exposure.

The hub of Georgia women's club work—the Atlanta Woman's Club—is about eleven years old, and the State Federation of Women's Clubs, of which it is the largest and most useful member, is several years younger. There are two or three clubs in the State federation older than the Atlanta club, but none has been more active nor far-reaching in its influence, by reason of the remarkable force and superiority of a dozen or more of the four hundred women who compose it.

Every man and woman in Georgia, if called upon, could probably name, without hesitation, the dozen women who are leaders. They are the wives or widows of Georgians who have been prime factors in bringing to their State much of its wealth and power and prestige. These women have, therefore, all along been the confidantes of the State's best interests, her struggles, and her victories. They have studied reform in all its phases and worked silently but swiftly and surely for the highest principles.

Working in Secret.

Most of the best work of the clubwomen has been done in secret sessions. True, they get up and talk in public about all sorts of things, and have men to hear them and to speak for them, but when they are trying to push a reform through, as for instance the prison reform, child labor, and the convict-lease system, they have worked silently, fearing to antagonize the City Council, the Commissioners of various organizations, and the Legislature.

Is there still a man who believes in his heart that woman cannot keep a secret? Or that she cannot work silently and continuously toward a definite end, and, winning, still keep silent? Let him heed:

Each year when the General Assembly of Georgia meets in social session by invitation of the Governor and his lady at the mansion, the leaders among the clubwomen are present. They begin their winter campaign, then and there. They know what they want—what the good of the State demands—better than most of these men who have been sent to the Capitol to represent the specific needs of their own little corner of the earth. And they go after it. They wear their prettiest gowns and attach themselves with finest grace and charm to the most impossible of the Governor's guests in a

way that sends the personal stock of every representative of his State skyward for weeks to come. They talk to all the legislators and Senators, young and old, the frankly deaf, the obsequiously attentive, the mildly indifferent. The strongest test is for the new members. They know to a nicety all the possibilities of the old ones, their frailties, and their strength; this one's liking for meat jellies with lots of tobacco thrown in; the ruddy farmer's weakness for ice cream, (he always gets two or three helpings along with the positive assurance that it is the first time); the anemic young man's craving for salads, and more of them; the old Senator's eagerness for five little cups of black coffee, none of them being more than a "swallow" to him who has been used to a thick cup big enough to baptize a young baby in. All of these things the woman in her knows instinctively; the politician in her crops out in the manner in which she leads him under the softening influence of these little attentions to talk about the things in which she is most interested.

Before the evening is over every clubwoman is able to point out to a man the legislators who are inimical and those who are friendly or tractable to the reforms or innovations that the club has planned to take up. These clubwomen are "The Third House"—and they catch their man when his mask is off and the curtain rung down on the political stage.

Feminine Diplomacy.

Later the legislator, who has to be educated up to certain ideals and beliefs, is invited to dinner, along with one or more genial souls who will smoke an after-dinner cigar with "husband" while the clubwoman-hostess takes the legislator to some restful corner a little apart and makes known to him his views on certain questions of radical reform. The legislator, being usually a silent sort of man from the woods or farm, is surprised at himself—he didn't know he was so strongly in favor of doing away with child labor; he had always been friendly with mill-owners, and believed they were a good sort. Neither did he know that he believed so abjectly in prohibition, and recalls with a blush a speech made a year before in favor of liquor licenses. As for himself, he had always been a temperate man about his toddies, and there was no trouble in getting the little that he wanted, prohibition or no prohibition. He didn't know also that he disappointed so heartily of the State's leasing her convicts to individuals until he so expressed himself to that pleasant little woman—his hostess—just now. By Jove! she was a good listener! He didn't know he could talk so well. Well, he was glad he had been so positive in his opinions—her eyes fairly glistened with approval.

The campaign begins this way with the clubwomen of Georgia, and it ends—well, the measures that they want most generally go through, and generally, too, the clubwomen are on hand at the finish to applaud the speakers in the House who think like they do about some things.

For a time the Georgia clubwomen were hampered in their work against the convict-lease system, for, curiously enough, the President of the City Club (who was afterward President of the General Federation of Women's Clubs) chanced to be the wife of the man whose methods of piling up his thousands through the leasing of the State's convicts had made the system stench in the nostrils of right-thinking people. He was the pioneer of the system. But Madame President was, personally, a remarkable leader, and was so recognized by the great organization of 600,000 women. She was a good worker—her money flowed, her

influence (all for the good) grew apace, and the members of the home club that she had helped to organize and set on its feet could not, in all decency, take up and fight an issue that involved all of her income, and her very home itself.

So they blinked at convict-leasing and took up other things—education; the needs of the Georgia mountain girls and boys; introduced arts and crafts into the country schools; carried the art of home-making to isolated homes; took flower seeds and books on floriculture and "the city beautiful" to the small towns and factory districts and settlements; collected magazines and books, old and new, and distributed them generously wherever needed; fought valiantly for better sanitation, for the kindergarten, for child labor, and for prohibition.

In the meantime another woman had succeeded the President of the General Federation, and yet another. The early President and co-worker went her way to a Northern city and was known no more in club circles, and the clubwomen began to put their fingers on public reform. Instead of creating new and alleviating conditions, they decided to reform some of the old systems that could not be discarded.

They had been trying for years to get inside the prisons and reformatories and convict camps on some day except Visitors' Day. They were not wanted. They made tours of inspection through the big factories and mills. These tours also were prearranged, and with such long-time notice that they felt they were not getting to the heart of things. But stories were brought to them of the bad influences brought to bear on the young boy miscreant who was put in chains and thrown into the society of older criminals, and they couldn't stand for this. They started out on a hunt for a probation officer, and established a juvenile court after the manner of the one in Denver. The Hon. Benjamin B. Lindsay helped them. He went down to Atlanta and made a speech that aroused the whole city—and the probation officer was a certainty from that moment.

Since that time youthful offenders have not been thrown into companionship with older and hardened criminals. They are watched over and shown the right way and put on their honor like human beings with real hearts and real sensibilities. The probation officer reports to the Woman's Club every little while, and when the boys are released from the watchful and fatherly care of the probation officer, the clubwomen go down to the court in a body and meet the boys, congratulate them on their good behavior, and tell them if they want help in future to bring their troubles to them and they will help untangle them. Every boy of them feels a new pride and responsibility in himself, and in very few cases have they been known to offend the second time.

Lady on Peachtree Street.

It's something to have not only a bowing acquaintance but a personal friendship with "a real lady what lives on Peachtree Street," and the honor is one that the youthful offender against the law is not apt to take chances on losing—once he has it in his possession.

But on the convict-lease system question the clubwomen of Georgia have had to work silently. It is a scandal now—a public scandal—because the legislative investigating committee had to report in public, and it got into the papers, and has spread like a forest fire. But it is not new. It is thirty-odd years old. There is not a man, woman, or child in Georgia that has not heard, from time to time, mutterings of discontent from the nearest camp where the convicts were em-

ployed by private individuals to help pile up private fortunes. No man in Georgia who has ever leased or subleased these convicts claims to have done it with a perfectly clear conscience, though they do all claim to have kept within the letter of the law. No beneficiary of the results of convict labor has ever flaunted his or her fine raiment in the face of the public without exciting unflattering comment. It has always meant a "black-eye" socially for the men who made their money in this way, and the taint of the money thus accumulated has left its foul imprint in the home of every man of them. The inside history of the fortunes and families of the men who have made their thousands out of convict leasing would pile up a score sufficient to supply sensational ministers food for sermons for months and years to come.

Two "Convict Queens."

Two lovely young Georgia women, one of them particularly winsome and brilliant, have been known throughout the South within the past fifteen years as "Convict Queens." They reigned among the moneyed class of society. They did not hold themselves responsible for the manner in which the money that they spent so lavishly was accumulated. They possibly never gave it a thought. But the fact was never forgotten in the inner circles of the homes to which they were so cordially admitted, for their own sakes. It was a stigma to be known as "a convict queen," and while neither of them possibly ever heard the noxious name except as applied to the other, it followed them wherever they went.

Convict leasing is a subject familiar to all Georgians; or, rather, it is a fact that has lived in the consciousness of every generation for more than thirty years, but it has not been openly discussed. No Georgian has ever allowed his wife or daughter to speak of the convict lessees as "slave drivers" in the privacy of the home. He raises his hand in protest and tells them this is a State wound, on which it is not safe nor becoming to put the finger, and—the subject is changed, but not allowed to lie undisturbed. The women would get together and talk it

among themselves. They must devise some means of solving the problem without appearing to interfere.

They had put their fingers into most of the political and other kinds of pies made and baked especially for mankind, and were feeling grateful. Child labor and prohibition had both been carried through triumphantly, and the women had been rather more prominent in both issues than they had wished to be, and they did not wish to reveal themselves so soon in another important State question. So they had to work silently.

Cooks—especially negro cooks—are remarkable collectors and purveyors of news, and many rehearsals of the atrocities of the convict camps came into Georgia homes by way of the kitchen and were served to the master of the house judiciously. The clubwomen snooped around and discovered little discrepancies and asked questions, and talked and asked more questions, and then the men found at last that they had to look at things that they had heretofore found it more comfortable and convenient to blink at, for reasons of state, politics, business policy, friendships, and all that sort of thing.

All the clubwomen knew that the present term of convict lease expired soon, and more tales came from the kitchens; there were friendly and unexpected visits to some of the convict camps by clubwomen who couldn't see it all, but saw some; there were more embarrassing questions, and then, most unaccountably, a legislative inspection of the convict camps, and—the cat was out of the bag!

A Wise Governor.

Gov. Hoke Smith believes in women. He thinks they make finer distinctions between right and wrong than do men; that their intuitions are keener and their sympathies stronger, and when one of them tells him anything for or against State policies he gives her a respectful hearing. She generally knows what she is talking about, and he knows that she knows, and he loses no time in proving her right. Gov. Smith ordered a legislative investigation, and everybody got terri-

bly excited and torn asunder by the atrocities revealed.

"Horrible!"

"What a scandal!"

"Did you ever dream that such conditions existed?"

Such were some of the comments heard in the cars and on street corners. Well, maybe not—Rip Van Winkle sleeps are not as uncommon as would be supposed. The attitude of Georgians was not exactly indifference, but an indisposition to tamper with a "system." If the Empire State of the South saw fit to lease its convicts to individuals in order to get rid of the expense of keeping them and to bring more dollars to the treasury, surely it was no immediate concern of the State at large. And why should the individual who leased and subleased them bother about the morale of using this labor to his advantage. On the contrary, it was one way of getting "a good day's work out of a nigger."

In the North, when a man pays for a day's labor, he gets his money's worth.

Negro Laborers.

The Southern darky works only when he is driven. He is the most accomplished and the most conscienceless dawdler in the history of all peoples. It is his idleness that gets him in chains. He must have been the inspiration of the saying—"The devil finds work for idle hands to do"—and in the case of the Georgia negro it is generally the very arduous work given him by the lessees of State convicts. Curiously enough, the fear of the convict camp has been a premium on the good behavior of Georgia negroes. They are gregarious animals, and love to move in droves, and convict life would have had too little terror for them if they had not known what life in the convict camp was. Freedom and the privilege of shirking were Heaven-sent blessings by comparison. As to the treatment of convicts in the camps, it is absurd to give credence to the statement that all suffered hard usage. This sort of thing is gauged by the temperament and nature of the man who is made warden of the convicts. It is true, the warden usually chosen, or sought, is the born slave driver—the man who would lash a straining mule uphill; who would kick a lame dog, or even use the crutch of his lame son to beat him over the head with—a real Bill Sykes with the veneer rubbed off. This sort of man is hard to find, but some were found and put in charge of the convicts. All of them, however, were not Bill Sykeses, and not all camps are, or have been, conducted on inhumane principles.

There are convict lessees in Georgia

who would aid and abet their wardens in giving bad food to the convicts, in chaining them to their bunks, and in spiking their heels to prevent them from running away, but it must be borne in mind that even if a warden be three-fourths a brute, he is still a warden, and as such will be held responsible to the State for the escape of a convict in his charge; and the precaution of chaining and spiking their ankles was really done more to prevent their escape than through wanton cruelty or a desire to get the last stroke of labor possible out of them.

The Prison Commissioners claim that the system itself is radically wrong. They were no doubt relieved to make this admission, and have probably been aching to give it voice for years. The commission didn't know of the extra moneys received by the Inspectors and Wardens, and the members of the commission themselves had no connection with the distribution of convicts, but they have felt the incubus of the lease system all along, and they are willing to chop a big slice off the educational fund or any other old State appropriation in order to abolish the system.

Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars has been the annual fund poured into the State Treasury by the lessees of the convicts, and this fund was distributed among a hundred or more counties for the cause of common school education. The common schools needed it—do need it. Heaven knows, and the women are somewhat stunned over the costliness of their crusade. There was prohibition which depleted the income of the State Treasury to an alarming degree, and here is this \$250,000 that is to be taken away. And they have been working so hard for education!

But surely there is another way to provide education for the youth of the State than through liquor licenses and convict leases.

What the Women Want.

The silent forces—the women of Georgia—are hiding behind the breast-works, triumphant, yet somewhat appalled, wondering what to do next. They have shot holes through the armor of their State, but what are they going to substitute for it?

They don't want education for the children if it comes by the whiskey or convict-labor route. And anyway—nobody will blame the club women of Georgia. Why, there is not a man in the State who has had anything to do with prohibition or the fight to abolish the convict lease system who remembers to have been influenced in the least little bit by a woman!