

The Southern Living solution: How the progressive farmer launched a magazine and a legacy.

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## **The *Southern Living* Solution: How The *Progressive Farmer* Launched a Magazine and a Legacy**

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

The Southern Living Solution: How The Progressive Farmer Launched a Magazine and a Legacy AZALEAS AND BEACHES, FRONT PORCHES AND FRIED CHICKEN—these are a few of the calm and leisurely icons depicting life in the South that have always filled the pages of one of the country's most popular and prosperous magazines, Southern Living. Some have questioned how such a publication could be born in Birmingham, Alabama, during the 1960s, a time when life was anything but tranquil in the world, the United States, or the region. It was a time when women were turning away from domestic lives and exploring new options for work

and self, and a time when minorities, predominantly blacks, were seeking equality and respect from the white majority. How, then—and why—was a magazine such as *Southern Living* conceived, a publication that so obviously depicted the region as a serene and happy place, where women kept the home and family, and blacks were rarely seen? One obvious answer, more than forty years since the magazine's launch in 1966, is that *Southern Living*'s founders sought to comfort and reassure the region's white, upper-class elite while reinforcing segregationist attitudes. Business correspondence from the company archives, however, reveals that the concept for the magazine was secondary to the innovative business ideas implemented regarding advertising and circulation issues. Ultimately, the creation of *Southern Living* saved the *Progressive Farmer* despite a declining agricultural population, produced growth for the publishing company with little additional risk, and rode the industry trend toward specialized magazines. The ultimate key to success proved to be capitalizing on an affluent, white audience that was desperately trying to hold onto its TRACY LAUDER Tracy Lauder is an assistant professor of mass communications at Emory & Henry College in southwest Virginia. This article is based on her dissertation, completed at the University of Alabama in 2004. JULY 2007 187 southern traditions and fearful of how social change would disrupt their way of life. By the early 1960s, the *Progressive Farmer* held the largest circulation of any farm publication in the South and lead in the amount of paid advertising space for all the nation's farm magazines. Since it was founded in 1886, this revered publication had been serving the various needs and interests of the South's farmers and their families. But as the country shifted from an agricultural to an industrial economy, and as the southern population became more urban and suburban, the magazine began to encounter declining advertising and readership figures. Eager to remain a robust publishing company, management at the *Progressive Farmer Company* sought ways to adapt to these changes. The publishers saw "sound and profitable" diversification as key to the company's future growth—but not "to the point that the magazine [*Progressive Farmer*] would suffer."<sup>1</sup> As early as the mid-fifties, the publishers began experimenting with additional sources of revenue that meshed with the needs of loyal, successful *Progressive Farmer* readers, including an accident insurance program to serve their rural readers and the purchase of a printing company near their headquarters in downtown Birmingham. By the early 1960s, the company's Diversification Committee explored new projects such as books, specialized magazines (in particular an outdoor publication focusing on southern pastimes such as hunting and fishing), an expansion of the already lucrative Birmingham Printing Division (one of the company's first diversification projects) to other cities, a supplement service for suburban newspapers, and the acquisition of other publishing companies. As the publishers and editors of the *Progressive Farmer Company* considered options for expanding their publishing empire, three key issues were forefront in their minds: attracting readers, luring advertisers, and overcoming an increasingly negative perception of the South.<sup>2</sup> The first major issue, circulation, became a problem for the *Progressive Farmer* by the end of the 1950s. The number of southern farms 1 Sam G. Riley, *Magazines of the American South* (New York, 1986), 176; "The *Progressive Farmer* Annual Report 1961," from the holdings of the Library Archives, Southern Progress Corporation, Birmingham (hereafter cited as Southern Progress Archives...

# The *Southern Living* Solution: How The *Progressive Farmer* Launched a Magazine and a Legacy

TRACY LAUDER

AZALEAS AND BEACHES, FRONT PORCHES AND FRIED CHICKEN—these are a few of the calm and leisurely icons depicting life in the South that have always filled the pages of one of the country's most popular and prosperous magazines, *Southern Living*. Some have questioned how such a publication could be born in Birmingham, Alabama, during the 1960s, a time when life was anything but tranquil in the world, the United States, or the region. It was a time when women were turning away from domestic lives and exploring new options for work and self, and a time when minorities, predominantly blacks, were seeking equality and respect from the white majority. How, then—and why—was a magazine such as *Southern Living* conceived, a publication that so obviously depicted the region as a serene and happy place, where women kept the home and family, and blacks were rarely seen?

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