

Sharecropping

(1860s-1950s)

Of all the images of economic backwardness, racial oppression, and social stagnation associated with the deep South in the post-Civil War decades, that of sharecropping has persisted most vividly as a defining symbol of a region held captive by the chains of poverty and tradition. Much of the relevant scholarly literature, and certainly public opinion, has stereotyped sharecropping as little more than a recast form of slavery, with even fewer protections than found under the “peculiar institution” and just as many opportunities for exploitation. There is a core of truth to this characterization, of course. As a labor system and way of life, though, sharecropping was much more complex than such a narrow description allows. Indeed, the term *sharecropping* itself tends to cloud the profound differences in land tenure and agricultural labor that existed from the 1860s until the 1950s. Still, no other phrase or expression is as effective in conjuring the spirit of this ultimately debilitating institution; hence its widespread, though often inexact usage.

The emergence of sharecropping, or more precisely “farm tenancy,” as the dominant form of agricultural organization in postwar Southern farmlands reflected the area’s deep economic crisis as well as its indelible bond to the cotton economy. Originating in the old plantation districts along the Mississippi and Red rivers, the sharecropping system represented a compromise between newly freed but landless Black American workers and impoverished white planters who lacked capital and credit. The former slaves provided the manpower needed for the struggling plantations, and in return they received housing, food, and a share of the cotton crop, along with considerable latitude in their daily lives. The planters maintained their dominant social position and, most important, the title to their lands, even while being forced to accept a new, decentralized labor structure.

While outsiders often perceived sharecropping as the collapse of the plantation system, it actually signified less a breakup of the old order than a dispersal of its functions. Planters gave up direct control over production in return for the convenience of a semi-autonomous but fairly stable labor force. Within the confines of the era, it appeared to satisfy the needs of each group. Yet as planters regained political and economic power in the 1880s and 1890s, sharecropping lost much of its elasticity and became a more impersonal institution. Landlords exercised considerable control over the lives of their tenants through the legal instrument of the “crop-lien” and the application of other means of leverage, including physical violence.

On the lowest rung of the agricultural ladder, day or wage laborers proved among the easiest to exploit. Essentially operating as hired hands, they worked at the direction of the plantation manager, who could use them for any number of tasks associated with cotton production or plantation upkeep. As part of their “contract,” they usually received a cabin

or shack for living quarters and collected cash wages. Occasionally these wages were paid in real currency, but more often were paid with paper “scrip” or cheap metal tokens known as “bronzeens,” redeemable only at the plantation store. As one might imagine, few bargains awaited the customer at such places.

One step up from the day laborer, sharecroppers farmed specific plots of plantation ground. These farmsteads ranged anywhere from ten to thirty acres in size, depending on the cropper’s expertise and the number of “hands” (wives and children) who could be deployed in planting, tending, and picking cotton. Planters usually supplied the necessary work stock, seed, fertilizer, cotton bagging, and equipment, along with a cabin and an account with either the plantation commissary or a local “furnish” merchant to meet day-to-day needs. The croppers primarily supplied their labor. Although nominally more independent than day laborers, these tenants nonetheless met with close supervision from plantation managers, who determined when to plant and harvest, and deducted from the croppers’ accounts any additional services such as plowing, dusting, or ginning. At the end of the season, croppers, as true share-tenants, received anywhere from a quarter to half the value of the harvested cotton and cottonseed (hence, the phrases “working on quarters” or “working on halves”). The landlord, however, retained control of the crop’s marketing as well as the settlement of accounts. This final reckoning of the plantation books rarely favored the cropper, who often cleared only \$50 to \$150 in a good season, and dipped further into debt during a bad one.

Tenants who owned a mule, had their own equipment, or were otherwise in a better financial position might arrange for a straight-cash rental or some mix of cash payments and crop-shares. These farmers maintained more control over their individual routines than either day laborers or croppers. Indeed, they often planted vegetable gardens and orchards, kept milk cows, and raised chickens or pigs. Because they led fairly self-sufficient lives, they reaped larger shares of the profits. Working on a “good” plantation during the 1920s, tenants who had their own mules and equipment cleared upwards of \$400 or \$500 a season, for example. But any sort of economic reversal—such as the death of a mule or a bad harvest—often sent these “renters” spiraling back down the ladder into cropper or laborer status.

Whatever the situation, sharecropping was a perilous existence. It also had deep social ramifications, especially as cotton culture expanded into new regions in the decades after Reconstruction. By the early 1900s, the cotton kingdom had grown to include most of the really fertile farmlands of the South. A great number of these areas could not be considered true plantation country, but the cotton regime took hold nonetheless, and with cotton came tenancy. In 1880 only a third of cotton farmers could be classified as tenants, but by 1910 this number had surged to 55 percent. By 1930, a staggering 67 percent of cotton farmers were classified as tenants, with the vast majority listed as share-tenants or croppers, rather than renters. White farmers, formerly the sturdy yeomanry of antebellum times, comprised a solid third of this tenant population. Driven by ruinous economic conditions and an expanding market, these landless whites, like their black counterparts, became enmeshed in the cyclically depressive cotton economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although trapped within this repressive system, sharecroppers were not bound to the land like feudal serfs, as is popularly imagined. Mobility, in fact, truly defined the lives of most tenants as they shifted about from plantation to plantation and region to region in search of better opportunities. In her memoir of life in cotton country during the 1930s and 1940s, Mozelle Partridge Chason recounts moving on an almost yearly basis, making a different agreement with each landlord. These agreements might include a more liberal “furnish” from the plantation store or associated country merchant, better living quarters, expanded acreage, less supervision from management, or any number of other factors. Sometimes, proximity to family or friends proved to be a major selling point.

Such mobility, though, had its costs. Children of tenant farmers, both white and black, had very little access to educational or medical facilities and suffered as a consequence. Likewise, stringent voting requirements worked against this vulnerable class of workers, who usually were not in one place long enough to establish residency and rarely could afford to pay the poll tax. In addition, black tenants were unable to exercise the franchise. Without a political voice, sharecroppers and their conditions were often ignored by the people in authority. Most simply drifted along with the ebb and flow of events far beyond their control.

Increasingly during the New Deal years of the 1930s, for instance, when the federal government sought to reduce cotton production through subsidized rent payments to farmers, plantation landlords balanced their accounts on the backs of their labor force, withholding the tenants’ portions of subsidy payments, limiting the amount of furnish, and demoting renters and croppers to day labor status. Pressed on all sides, tenants and their families had few choices. Many abandoned their farms, while others joined futile efforts like the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to help combat this exploitation. But the consolidation of the plantation that began in the 1930s continued unabated for the next several decades, leading to the further degradation of farm labor through the re-imposition of centralized management. Still, it was not until the mechanization of the cotton harvest and the emergence of chemical pesticides and herbicides in the post-World War II years that the need for hand labor in the cotton routine diminished and with it, the need for tenants themselves. Thus, after eighty years, sharecropping came to its end with a final clearing of rural people from the land.

Suggested Reading

Would you like to learn more about this topic from books and other reading materials?

Aiken, Charles S. *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Chason, Mozelle Partridge. *When Sweat Turns to Tears*. Nashville, TN: Vaughan Printing, 1996.

{This note once referred the reader to the author: *Call or write her for a copy: 140 Sage Avenue, Drew, MS 38737. Phone 601-745-2276*. Now that Mozelle is gone, I’m not sure if copies are available.}

Davey, Elizabeth, and Rodney Clark, eds. *Remember My Sacrifice: The Autobiography of Clinton Clark, Tenant Farm Organizer and Early Civil Rights Activist*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007.

Davis Ronald L. F. *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860–1890*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982.

De Jong, Greta. *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900–1970*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Duff, Lillian Laird, and Linda Duff Niemeir. *Sharecropping in North Louisiana: A Family's Struggle Through the Great Depression*. Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing, 2008.

Ransom, Roger L., and Richard Sutch. *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Wayne, Michael. *The Reshaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District, 1860–80*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983.

Wright, Gavin. *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.