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Review of *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900 - 1940* By Rebecca Sharpless

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Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900 - 1940. By Rebecca Sharpless. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. Maps, illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. xxiii + 319 pp. \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

The examination of farm women's experiences offers new perspectives on American agricultural communities. Rebecca Sharpless adds to our knowledge with this book on the women who worked the cotton fields of the east Texas Blackland Prairies in the first four decades of the twentieth century. The six chapters about family relations, housekeeping, food production, field work, communities, and the decline of the rural population spare no detail of poverty, racial discrimination, or the hopeful but constant and unrewarding migration of tenant families. Written with warmth, Sharpless's account is not at all romantic or sentimental. The organization suggests patterns that framed the lives of farm women everywhere, but the rich detail drawn from oral histories and personal interviews creates a clear picture of cotton farm life and women's roles distinct from those of women in other types of agricultural economies.

The appeal of *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices* nearly obscures some flaws. Sharpless tries to include the perspectives of white landowners and white, African American, and Hispanic tenants, but it becomes evident quickly that the resources do not adequately address the history of African American tenant families; and Hispanic tenant families are nearly invisible. Though landownership makes

a great difference for these women, the stories of landowning women are entwined with those of the tenants, resulting in the blurring of class and race distinctions that were not only more visible, but often painful to the women of the tenant classes.

Sharpless's chapter on women's field labor is her best. Here she demonstrates that women's field work enabled tenant families to make a living, unveiling as she does so the ways women justified field work and violations of the gender concepts of their own race and class. This labor is portrayed in an apparently static economy, however. The reader with a general understanding of agricultural history will ask how a fluctuating farm economy and changing agricultural technology affected women's lives on cotton farms, a matter raised only briefly in the final chapter.

Detailing relationships among women of varying social groups, Sharpless reveals the bonds formed between women who could seldom count on finding the same neighbors down the road from year to year as well as the racial and class barriers that prevented women from offering friendship to one another. This perhaps is the characteristic that distinguishes cotton farm culture in the Blackland Prairies from other farming groups: multiple layers of division along lines of race and class in spite of ties of gender in a common economy and community.

Sharpless concludes with an assessment of migration to towns and cities. The children of tenant farmers and landowners found city life and paychecks more appealing. Their parents often moved to town at retirement as well. In spite of new opportunities to earn money, there was also a sense of loss, which Sharpless mentions but does not elaborate. She seems to favor the move to the city as relief from the hardships of cotton farming and the crop-lien system, but gives little consideration to the difficulties of urban life and work.

This well-written history of women who were an important part of a little-known subculture of Great Plains agriculture complements the growing body of literature on women

in agricultural communities that is illuminating and changing our understanding of American social and economic history.

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