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# I ain't got no home in this world anymore: sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union

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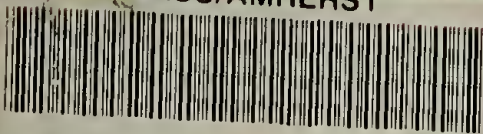
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**I AIN'T GOT NO HOME IN THIS WORLD ANYMORE: SHARECROPPERS,  
TENANT FARMERS, AND THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMER'S UNION**

**A Thesis Presented**

**by**

**JAMES D. ROSS JR.**

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

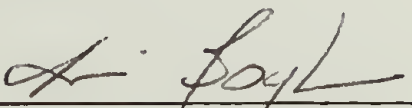
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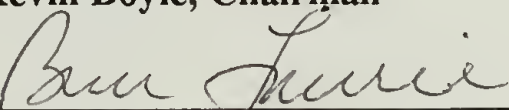
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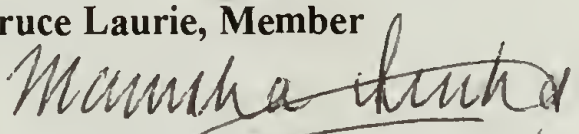
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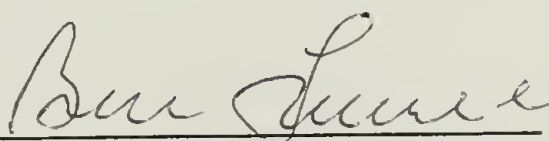
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	v
LIST OF CHARTS .....	vi
Chapter	
INTRODUCTION .....	1
I. "THINGS NOT GOING LIKE IT OUGHT SOMEHOW;" CHANGES IN THE LAND .....	11
II "I WANT ONLY A CHANCE TO MAKE MY OWN LIVING;" JOINING THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS' UNION.....	34
III. "A HARD WAY TO GO;" THE CAUSES OF THE DEMISE OF THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS' UNION .....	71
EPILOGUE .....	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	103

## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Percentage Growth Of Tenant Farms 1880-1920 .....	17
2	Population Growth 1880-1930 .....	18
3	Decrease In Tenant Farms 1930-1950 .....	28
4	Percentage Growth Of Tractors 1930-1950 .....	29

LIST OF CHARTS

Chart		Page
1	Cotton Price Per Pound 1877-1914 .....	22
2	Cotton Price Per Pound 1910-1919 .....	23
3	Cotton Price Per Pound 1919-1935 .....	26



## INTRODUCTION

By the time Issac Shaw stood, in 1934, to address a group of eleven white and black sharecroppers and tenant farmers from the Norcross plantation he had already lived a full life. In 1919 Shaw was in his late forties or early fifties and was living in Elaine Arkansas, a small town in Phillips county. He had joined with a group of sharecroppers and tenant farmers and founded a union to try to get a more fair price for their cotton. Cotton that year was at an all time high, yet landlords were not giving their tenants a better share. Before the union had really gotten off the ground it was involved in a shoot-out with the sheriff. In the end many blacks lost their lives at the hands of whites.

Issac Shaw's life before these events in Elaine is lost in the shadowlands of forgotten memory. None of his children, now in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, can even remember him talking about his past.<sup>1</sup> From his age we can ascertain that he was born sometime shortly after the emancipation of the slaves, but after that he disappeared from the historical record until 1919. In the Elaine massacre we do not know what he did, we only know he was there because he mentioned it to H. L. Mitchell, who luckily recorded it. By 1934 Shaw was living north of Elaine on the Norcross plantation. That year he was evicted from the plantation and he and ten other men, both black and white, met at the Sunnyside school to establish the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union [STFU].

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<sup>1</sup> In 1992 none of Shaw's children knew of his involvement in the 1919 union nor the STFU. They also thought that no pictures existed of their father, until I gave them a copy of H. L. Mitchell's book with their fathers story and a picture of him sitting on the front porch of the family's old home place.

The discussion that hot July night revolved around how to organize their new union. A group of white farmers wanted to organize two unions, one white and the other black. But Shaw remembered 1919 when white farmers had shot and lynched black farmers, he remembered how the racial divisions in the union had crippled the black men and black women who were struggling for justice in Elaine. With his solid white hair, Shaw slowly stood, his body exhausted by fifty years of toil, to address the group. Slowly, but with great passion, he reminded the group,

We colored people can't organize without you and you white folks can't organize without us. Aren't we all brothers and ain't God the Father of us all? We live under the same sun, eat the same food, wear the same kind of clothing, work on the same land, raise the same crop for the same landlord who oppresses and cheats us both. For a long time now the white folks and the colored folks have been fighting each other and both of us has been getting whipped all the time. We don't have nothing against one another but we got plenty against the landlord. the same chain that holds my peoples holds your peoples too. If we're chained together on the outside we ought to stay together in the union. It won't be no good for us to divide because there's where the trouble has been all the time. The landlord is always betwixt us, beatin' us and starvin' us and makin' us fight each other. there ain't but one way for us to get him where he can't help himself and that's for us to get together and stay together.<sup>2</sup>

The men at the meeting voted to organize the union on an interracial basis. The union's interracial composition was always very important to the union leaders and many of its

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<sup>2</sup> David Boling, "Sharecroppers For Civil Liberties," *Southern Historian* 10 (1989), 53-65.

members, but the men and women who joined the union, if their letters are any indication, were more concerned with meeting their basic needs and guaranteeing themselves a permanent place on the land.

The union existed from July 1934 until it closed its office in Memphis in 1945. What follows is not a detailed institutional history of the union. Instead, this is consciously a social history. The first chapter will briefly examine the development of sharecropping and tenant farming from the end of the Civil War until World War II. Specifically it will examine the social changes that were sweeping through the Arkansas Delta and forming the context in which men and women founded and joined the STFU. The second chapter will allow the sharecroppers and tenant farmers to speak in their voices as it examines the multiplicity of reasons they joined the union. When these men and women of the Arkansas Delta joined the STFU they brought with them their traditional rural Protestant worldview. This chapter will also examine the way in which these people used this culture to shape the union to their own needs. Finally we will examine why the union disintegrated in so short a time. In the final analysis the union was a failure. This final chapter will examine the complex reasons for this tragic failure.

Historians have wrestled with the meaning of the STFU since the 1960s. Many scholars concerned with the growth of unions and social movements have been drawn to the union because of its seemingly bizarre story: a Socialist led union in the heart of a traditionally conservative area. The historical interpretation of the STFU has gone through two phases. In the 1960s a group of New Left historians accepted as fact the



interpretation that the union's Secretary, H. L. Mitchell, was propagating. In this view the union was a radical force pushing the New Deal to the left. A newer group of historians flipped the interpretation around, viewing the New Deal as progressive in the context of Southern history and the STFU as a conservative force trying to stay in the past.

H. L. Mitchell attempted first to write a history of the STFU. A socialist and a businessman, Mitchell began to write a history of the union in the 1940s, but laid it aside for the more pressing work of organizing and managing the union. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Mitchell began to lecture about the union's past and developed a history of the STFU that viewed the union as a radical force that had a chance to make a new America in the southern cotton fields. According to Mitchell the union was a precursor to radical groups developed out of the South in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>3</sup> He wanted the union to be remembered for its radicalism and what he called its interracial quality. Mitchell was so caught up in his own commitment to socialism and anti-racist organizations that he at times forgot that the sharecroppers and tenant farmers expressed themselves in different ways from their leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequent works on the STFU by new left historians, repeated Mitchell's view of the union.<sup>5</sup> The majority of these authors stressed the heroic action of the union's leaders in the face of horrific violence. The union was portrayed as a Socialist critic of the New

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<sup>3</sup> The example that Mitchell always used was the civil rights movement.

<sup>4</sup> H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union* (Montclair, N. J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Although Mitchell did not publish his book until the late 1970s, he was sought out and used as a source for information by every historian who wrote on the STFU.

Deal, and the STFU was seen as offering an alternative vision for the South. One enthusiastic proponent of this perspective went so far as to argue,

Beginning as a critic of the New Deal agricultural programs, [the STFU] grew into a mass movement which aimed at the reconstruction of southern agriculture along socialist lines and the elimination of the political and educational disabilities which made poor white and black passive observers of their own exploitation.<sup>6</sup>

These works are good sources for the large events of the union, and they also tend to explain fairly many of the views of the STFU's leadership, but when it comes to examining what the rank and file were saying they are inadequate.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1980s the STFU was reinterpreted in a new light. Historian Pete Daniels argued that the STFU was a conservative reaction to the radical upheaval caused by the changes New Deal policies wrought. Daniels argues that the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were better off with the death of the sharecropping and tenant farming system. This is undeniable, but it begs a central question: what did the ending of the sharecropping and tenant farming system mean to the men and women who joined the union? This newer interpretation is inadequate because it, like the earlier interpretations, does not examine the rank and file's thoughts at that pivotal moment of change.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Naison, "The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the CIO," *Radical America* 2, (1968) 36.

<sup>7</sup> M. S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (September 1960); Jerold Auerbaeh, "Southern Tenant Farmers: Socialist Critics of the New Deal," *Labor History* 7 (Winter 1966); Donald H. Grubbs, *A Cry From The Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Pete Daniels, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 121-122.

These two schools, one which sees the STFU as essentially radical and the other which sees it as essentially conservative, share a common fallacy by not considering the views of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. None of these works examine the thousands of letters in the STFU files from the union's rank and file. Only by examining these letters can we begin to get a glimpse of what many sharecroppers and tenant farmers were thinking and feeling when they joined the union.

This thesis, while deeply influenced by Pete Daniels' work, attempts to add the voices of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who worked to make the STFU their organization. In examining the letters of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers I have found that the conservative/radical paradigm is not sufficient to explain why the sharecroppers and tenant farmers joined the union and subsequently what the union meant to them. I believe that we must see the STFU in the light of the long history of southern radicalism beginning with Reconstruction and moving through the Alliances and the Populists. This southern radicalism was not socialism, nor was it communism. Instead, it held to the idea of fighting for individual property rights with collective action. The former slaves struggled together to secure land to farm; white and black farmers in the 1880s and 1890s fought the interests of capital that they believed were attempting to steal their land.

These movements were linked by the members' commitment to private land ownership. The idea that only a man who owned land was a free man died hard with these poor southerners, white and black. The men and women who joined the STFU sought two goals. First they wanted their immediate needs met. They could not live without food and



without shelter. They had always attempted to help one another. The union helped focus this tradition of reciprocity into a mass collective action. They also had a vision for their own future. These sharecroppers and tenant farmers wanted to own their own land. They repeatedly made this clear to the union leadership.

This thesis will also attempt to examine the rural Protestantism that the sharecroppers and tenant farmers brought with them to the STFU. This rural religion was the language from which these men and women drew to attack the injustices of the plantation system and to offer solutions to these injustices. The language of the Bible was like the oxygen around them, they could use nothing else in analyzing their world. As we will see in chapter II this rural Protestantism was extremely important to them.

This thesis is based mainly upon the letters of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. While these sources are rich in detail they limit us in a number of ways. Most importantly I will not be able to analyze the racial composition of the members of the union, nor will I be able to ascertain how race effected the development or the demise of the union. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers simply did not, as a rule, inform the union leaders what their races were. There is some internal evidence that suggests the union composition was sixty percent white and forty percent black, but this is unverifiable, because it is a parenthetical comment in a report comparing the Sharecroppers Union of Alabama to the STFU. It is hard to know if the writer of this report was basing this

number on data that has subsequently been lost or if he simply was using a figure that he had concocted.<sup>9</sup>

We know that there was some racial tension within STFU locals. As we saw, the original members were strongly committed to the racial integration of the union, but soon after the union began to expand problems arose. In November 1935 H. L. Mitchell wrote to Nathan Wiley to remind him that “it is very important that we organize the whites as well as the Negroes.” In the letter Mitchell is insistent that the union be integrated. Donald H. Grubbs argues that when the union reached the large towns where blacks and whites did not have such intimate contact it was impossible to organize interracial locals<sup>10</sup> This is the extent to which I have been able to find race in the files of the union. Where I include race it is from the census or from my personal knowledge of former sharecroppers and tenant farmers I have met. Race is important, and I would in no way argue that it was not. I am just unable to be sure of the race of the men and women I am talking about. In future studies I hope to expand my focus from the sharecroppers and tenant farmers to examine the STFU in the midst of the greater society. At that point I believe I will be able to integrate race as an important analytical tool.

One last word on race is appropriate. If the document above that places the racial composition of the union at sixty percent white and forty percent black is accurate then this thesis adds a small chapter to the story of “Dixie’s forgotten people,” its poor whites,

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<sup>9</sup>“Report on the Alabama Sharecroppers Union, 1935, Reel One, H. L. Mitchell, *The Official Papers of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union* ( Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1973) [Hereafter cited as STFU].

<sup>10</sup> Donald H. Grubbs. *Cry From The Cotton*, 66-68.

who in a society of haves and have nots suffered great injustice at the hands of white planters. The story of poor African-Americans in the south has been told in some detail, but poor whites' story is less well documented. This is not to suggest that the oppression of whites and blacks was qualitatively the same. While quantitatively hunger was experienced in the same way by all human beings, the qualitative side of oppression made African-American's suffering more severe. Not only did they meet the oppression of white planters but they also had to face the racism and violence of many poor whites. Our history of the south must be balanced on the issue of race. I have attempted to strike a balance between the races.

The second caution of this thesis comes in regards to the sources. It could be argued that the letters that I am using come from the most desperate of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. While this may be true, in a moment of history that must in and of itself be defined as desperate for anyone trapped in this system, these letters may actually be more representative than I originally thought. Nevertheless, there are some weaknesses in the letters as a source. I do not have a letter from every sharecropper and tenant farmer who joined the union. Thus I only know about those men and women who wrote to the union or who in latter years spoke to me. I do not believe that this negates this study. I believe that the letters offer a window into the world of the rank and file of the union.

This study is by far not the last word on the STFU. In the future there needs to be a new history of the union that can integrate my work on the union rank and file with the federal, state, and local government's policies. We need to know how this union effected



the decision makers at all three levels. We also need a new interpretation of the union's leaders, placing each of them in the political and ideological context from which they developed. We also need to know more about their changing positions. Finally we need a reexamination of the union's devastating relationship with the CIO and how this effected its political and organizing strength. But these must wait for the future.

At the end of his life Herbert Gutman was concerned about the trend of some social historians who had produced minute and romantized studies of working people's lives. In one of the last pieces he wrote Gutman warned historians not to "argue that exploited and subordinate men and women make history, but [to see that] they regularly participate in and help shape significant historical processes."<sup>11</sup> It mattered that men and women joined the STFU. Restoring their voices to the history of the 1930s is imperative if we are to understand the full development of the south during the Great Depression.

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<sup>11</sup> Herbert G. Gutman and Donald H. Bell, ed., *The New England Working Class and the New Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), xiv.

## CHAPTER I

### **“THINGS NOT GOING LIKE IT OUGHT SOMEHOW:” CHANGES IN THE LAND**

When Irene Robertson of the Works Project Administration [WPA] writing staff caught up with John Wells in the late 1930s he was in his early eighties, but his memory seemed strong as he recalled his childhood in slavery. He was born in Edmondson, Arkansas, on Henry Edmondson's farm in the mid-1850s. Wells recounted that as the Civil War approached Arkansas he and the other Edmondson slaves were sent to Texas where they worked on the farm of one of Edmondson's associates. After the war he and the other former slaves migrated back to Edmondson and found that their former master and his family had died in a yellow fever epidemic that swept over the Arkansas Delta. The former slaves settled on the land that had formerly been their master's and over the years it became theirs. But in the early 1930s most of these black landowners had lost their land to a large white landowner from a nearby town. In just a few short years after the depression of 1929, these former slaves turned landowners entered the rank of sharecropper and tenant farmer. Wells told the interviewer that day that "things not going like it ought somehow."<sup>1</sup>

Ida Davis was born in 1906 in an old lumber camp to which her father had migrated in 1899 from the Indian Territory. Before moving to the camp, William Davis

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<sup>1</sup> George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* Series Two, Volume Seven (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1972), 85-87.

had farmed as a small land owner. The Davis's had been, so Ida told it, on the move almost every generation. If one traced that Davis family back along the male line, one would eventually come to John Davis who lived in Virginia in the 1790s and owned eight slaves. In the 1930s Ida Davis was a long way from the yeoman farmer and the small plantation landowners who were her ancestors. She had been married at sixteen and by 1935 had five of her six children. She and her husband Silas tenant farmed on land owned by her father, Bill Davis, who was an unscrupulous man willing to do anything to protect his property and wealth. In later years he would even have Ida's husband, his son-in-law, murdered because he had campaigned for a man running for sheriff who had not been approved by Bill Davis, and because Silas wanted to move his family to another farm.<sup>2</sup>

John Wells and Ida Davis both lived through times of great change. From slave to landowner to sharecropper, John Wells exemplified these massive changes as they were experienced by a generation of African-Americans. Ida Davis also exemplified changes as they were experienced by rural whites. She carried deep within her the memories of large landownership, yet she spent her days working as a tenant farmer only wanting to achieve what her ancestors had before her.

At the end of the Civil War, men and women found themselves sharecropping and tenant farming for very different reasons, reasons that were usually contingent upon the color of the family's skin. For African-Americans sharecropping and tenant farming developed over time as a compromise between landownership, their most prized goal after

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Davis by author, January 4, 1984 and February 7, 1985.



the Civil War, and the labor needs of their former masters. As Northern troops moved through the plantation areas of the South, many slaves joined with the troops either to fight for their freedom or to find safety for themselves and their families. These former slaves began almost immediately to try to get land for themselves and their families, believing that because they had worked the land for so long it was rightfully theirs. After the Union troops gained control of more of the South, some slaves began to take the land that their former masters had abandoned as they fled the advancing Union troops. These freed people divided the land among themselves and then planted gardens to support themselves and their families. When the war ended, however, Southern plantation owners returned and took control of their land from their former slaves. The new landlords immediately attempted to install a gang labor system, but the freed people were never happy with this system of labor because it reminded them too much of the system of labor they had endured under slavery. Most freed people therefore refused to work in gangs. The new landlords and their former slaves both needed a way to make a living and were therefore forced to make compromises. The former owners needed someone to work their expansive fields and the former slaves needed a way to support their families. The former slaves and the plantation lords thus experimented with a number of different ways to organize work. In his study of Freedom Bureau reports and labor contracts between freed people and plantation owners, Ralph Shomowitz has found that there were at least seven ways the two parties attempted to organize their work: standing wages, share of the crop, sharing of time, standing rent, wages in kind, money payment per task, and various explicit incentive

schemes. As freedpeople and the new landlords struggled over how to best organize labor in the cotton fields the country was entering a period historians call Radical Reconstruction. During this time the former slaves continued their struggle for control of their lives, they even passed laws that gave sharecroppers and tenant farmers priority on liens and rent over landlords and merchants.<sup>3</sup>

By 1880 the options had narrowed severely: sharecropping and standing rents became the dominate forms of labor organization in the plantation South. In the formation of these two labor systems neither tenants nor landowners had completely gained what they had sought. The landlord gained field workers who would be legally bound to share

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<sup>3</sup> Ira Berlin, et. al., "The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor, 1861-1865" in *Slaves No More: Three Essays in Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 79-186; Ronald L. F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1982); Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 131-206; Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, Pub., 1988); Thavolia Glymph, et. al., *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985); Robert Higgs, *Cooperation and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Jay R. Mandle, *Not Slave, Not Free: The African American Economic Experience Since the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); Donald Nieman, ed., *From Slavery to Sharecropping: White Land and Black Labor in the Rural South, 1865-1900* (New York: Garland Press, 1994); Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Labor in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965); Jeannie M. Wayne, Ed., *Shadows Over Sunnyside: An Arkansas Plantation in Transition, 1830-1845* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993); Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Harold D. Woodman, *New South New Law: The Legal Foundations of the Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).



the risk of planting the crop. The former freedmen who had struggled for these two forms of labor organization after they realized that land redistribution was not going to occur gained a certain amount of freedom from their former masters.

Whites, meanwhile, came to sharecropping and tenant farming by two different routes. In their research on Georgia, Frederick Bode and Donald Ginter have shown that many white southerners were involved in tenant farming in the antebellum period. Their research shows that tenant farming was widespread in Georgia before the Civil War. They found that in 1860 tenancy rates were lowest on the older cotton lands of Georgia's lower Eastern piedmont and in the yeomanry dominated regions of the wiregrass. On newer cotton lands to the west antebellum tenancy rates averaged in the upper twenty percent range. Tenancy rates rose to thirty percent and more on the cotton frontier of the southwest and on the cotton fringes of the upper Piedmont. And in the higher mountains and on the palmetto flats along the Florida border tenancy rates exceeded forty percent.<sup>4</sup> They conclude from their study of the population and agricultural census of 1860 that "a substantial number of white farmer did not own their land." From Bode and Ginter's research we can the ascertain that many late nineteenth century tenants simply persisted from the antebellum period.<sup>5</sup>

Steven Hahn has located another route that whites took to tenant farming. In his research on the Georgia upcountry Hahn found that many whites descended from yeomen farming to the devastating position of tenant farming or sharecropping. Hahn found that

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Bode and Donald Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census in Ante-bellum Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), introduction.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 90.



with the coming of market relations the debts that had traditionally linked upcountry white yeomen together in an “intricate network of social relations” began to “provoke tensions and conflicts.”<sup>6</sup> In the financial upheaval of the Reconstruction period, Hahn explains, creditors began to call in their debts, even going so far as to use the auction block to sell the land of the small yeomen farmers who could not pay their debts. As the staple crops moved upcountry former small landowners soon became landless sharecroppers and tenant farmers on the land of large plantation owners.<sup>7</sup>

As more conservative elements brought an end to Radical Reconstruction, Southern politicians began to rewrite laws that advantaged sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Lien laws were quickly overturned to give the advantage on the lien to the land owner. Sharecropping and tenant farming began to lose the degree of freedom that made it attractive to many African Americans. For many whites it was quickly changing from a stepping stone to landownership into a permanent position. Because of the laws of the Redeemer governments the tenant system was reduced to a system of oppressive debt peonage.<sup>8</sup>

There was an explosive spread of tenant farms across the South from 1880 to 1920. Table 1 shows that tenancy was on the increase nation-wide, but as can be seen the South experienced an astonishing growth. As the laws passed by the Redeemer governments began to take effect and the staple crop of cotton began to spread, more and

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 74.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 156 & 159.

<sup>8</sup> Woodman, *New South, New Law*, 67-94; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 565-601.

more small farmers become sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The 1,231,144 sharecropper and tenant farms that existed in 1900 made up about forty-seven percent of all the farms in the South and about twenty-two percent of all the farms in the United States. Tenant farms outside of the South in the same year made up about fourteen percent of all farms in the United States.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage Growth of Tenant Farms**  
**1880-1920**

South	187.28
Non-South	83.47
United States	139.59

Source: Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present

As tenancy began to grow in the South its center shifted. Around 1910 cotton production moved from the eastern cotton growing areas to the west. Pete Daniels has show that between 1910 and 1930 Texas and Oklahoma doubled their cotton acreage, Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana increased theirs by forty percent, while Alabama, Georgia and South and North Carolina only increased their cotton acreage by five percent. Daniels shows that in the eastern cotton belt production declined from twelve million acres in 1910-1914 to 8.8 million in 1922. In the west, in the Mississippi Delta, acreage rose from 6.6 million in 1921 to 11.1 million in 1930.<sup>9</sup> This movement west was caused by the promise of fresh land uncorrupted by years of planting without proper fertilizer or erosion

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<sup>9</sup>Pete Daniels, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 15-16, 22.

control. The boll weevil also contributed to this move west; as the boll weevil entered the east from south Texas it made much of the land unprofitable. But as Pete Daniels has shown the boll weevil did very little damage in the Mississippi Delta regions, leaving this land safe for profitable cultivation.<sup>10</sup>

The state of Arkansas benefited from this move of the center of cotton production to the west. From 1880-1910 the population of Arkansas grew by a little over ninety-six percent; from 1910 to 1930 the state's population grew by almost one-hundred-seventy-eight percent. A comparison of the national and the southeastern population growth, for the same period, shows that Arkansas' population grew far faster than both.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Population Growth**  
**1880-1930**

	<b>ARKANSAS</b>	<b>SOUTHEAST</b>	<b>UNITED STATES</b>
<b>1880-1910</b>	96.18%	33%	83.55%
<b>1910-1930</b>	177.86%	23.55%	33.31%

Source: Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present

If the cotton growing delta counties in Arkansas are compared to the state's nondelta counties, we can see that the vast majority of the growth in Arkansas from 1910-

<sup>10</sup> Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> United States Department of Commerce, *Tenth Census of The United States: 1880* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1882); *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1892); *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1902); *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1912); *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1922); *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1932).



1930 occurred in those counties washed in the deep soil of the Mississippi river. Non-delta areas grew by a mere six percent, while the delta counties grew by thirty-three percent.<sup>12</sup>

During the nineteenth century the upper counties in this delta region of Arkansas had for the most part been a swamp land. The improved farm land for these ten upper counties in 1900 stood at 807,897 acres. From 1900 to 1910 improved land in these counties increased a little more than fifty-seven percent, and from 1910 to 1920 it increased by almost another twelve percent.<sup>13</sup>

What had prepared these Arkansas counties for such an amazingly large growth? One of the main reasons was the drainage work done by Auther E. Morgan. Morgan was born in Ohio in 1878. Shortly thereafter his family moved to St. Cloud, Minnesota where John Morgan, Auther's father, opened a small engineering business. At an early age Auther went to work for his father digging ditches. According to Morgan's biographer, Roy Talbert, Morgan's father taught Auther how to "shoot elevations with a transit and to lay lines for ditches and levees."<sup>14</sup> This was all the training Morgan had when he decided to become a hydraulic engineer. He was soon working for the federal government in the conservation movement that Theodore Roosevelt had promoted, and in 1908 Morgan took over a government drainage project that ran from Missouri to Louisiana.<sup>15</sup> Two years

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<sup>12</sup> United States Department of Commerce, *Thirteenth Census; Fourteenth Census; Fifteenth Census*.

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of Commerce, *Twelfth Census, Thirteenth Census; Fourteenth Census*.

<sup>14</sup> Roy Talbert, Jr., *FDR's Utopian: Arthur Morgan of the TVA* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 9, 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-27.

later he completed his work on the upper Arkansas delta.<sup>16</sup> “I had dreams,” Morgan wrote in 1972, “of that rich land becoming the site of prosperous homes for many farmers.”<sup>17</sup> Morgan’s dream of small farms dotting the Arkansas delta region was never fulfilled. As he recognized in 1972, “lumber interests” had bought up most of this profitable land and turned it into large plantations made up of thousands of tenant farms. Between 1910 and 1930 the number of tenant farms in the Arkansas delta increased by a little over seventy-seven percent. In the counties that would eventually have STFU branches the number of tenant farms increased by a little more than sixty-eight percent. And in the five counties that would eventually have the largest number of STFU locals tenants farms increased by more than one-hundred-thirty-seven percent. With what must have been a lifetime of regret, he confessed, “You can imagine my disappointment at seeing this outcome of my drainage work.”<sup>18</sup>

As the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were streaming onto the lands in Arkansas and the other states west of Alabama, the western world was plunging into a World War. Before 1914 the South faced two foes: the boll weevil and the tendency of farmers to produce more cotton than the world market could sustain. Between 1890-1920, as the boll weevil moved across the South, it left behind it a trail of devastation “wider than Sherman’s army.”<sup>19</sup> Farmers stood by and watched helplessly as a lifetime of work

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<sup>16</sup> H. L. Mitchell, *Mean things Happen in this Land: The Life and times of H. L. Mitchell Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Auther E. Morgan to H. L. Mitchell, November 30, 1972. H. L. Mitchell, *The Official Papers of the Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; United States Census Office, *Thirteenth Census; Fourteenth Census; Fifteenth Census...*

<sup>19</sup> Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads*, 11-12.

was destroyed by a tiny insect. Both state and federal governments failed to respond. As Pete Daniels points out, “state governments refused to quarantine infested areas, and the federal government proved loath to interfere with interstate commerce, even the possible ruin of it.”<sup>20</sup>

Bad economic choices likewise devastated the region. One of the eternal curses of the cotton South had been the farmers’ assumption that the way to make more money when cotton prices were up was to plant more cotton. The reality was overproduction, which drove the price of cotton down. From 1876 onward, cotton prices had remained below fifteen cents per pound.<sup>21</sup> Chart One shows the movement of the price of cotton per pound from 1869 to 1914.

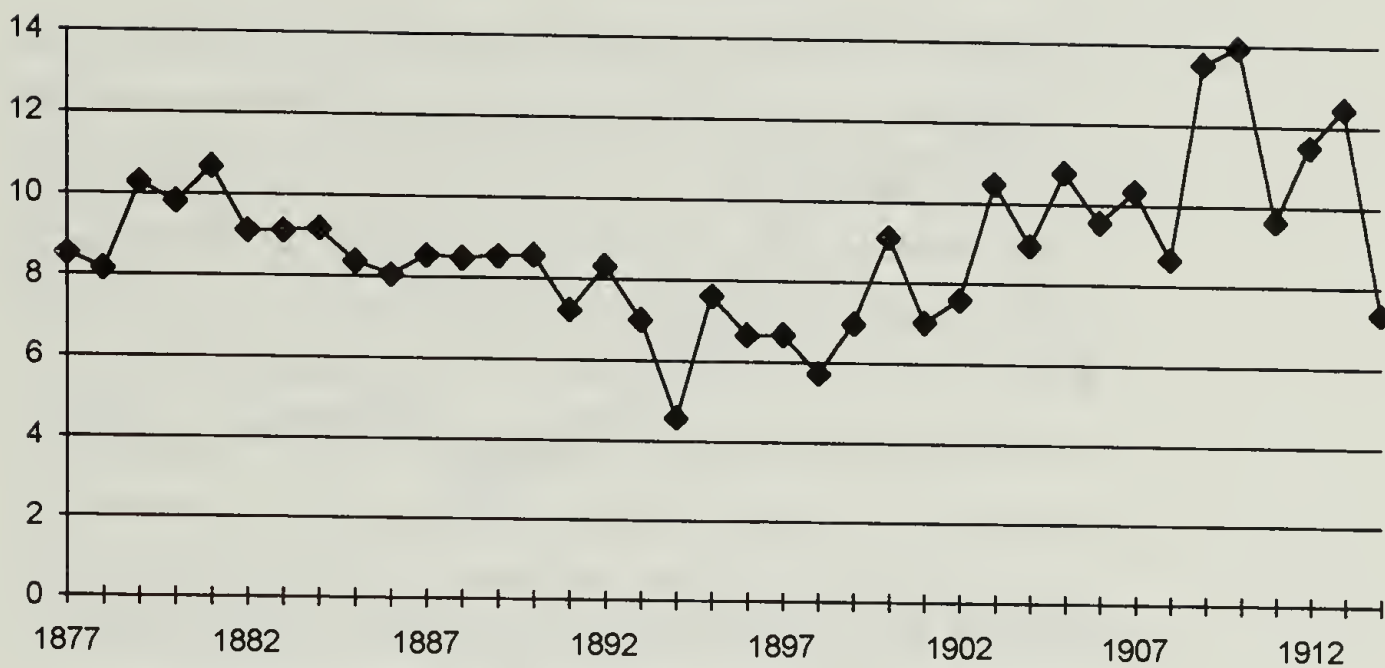
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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas D. Clark, *The Emerging South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 40-56; *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (Stamford: Fairfield Publishers, Inc., 1965), 301-302.



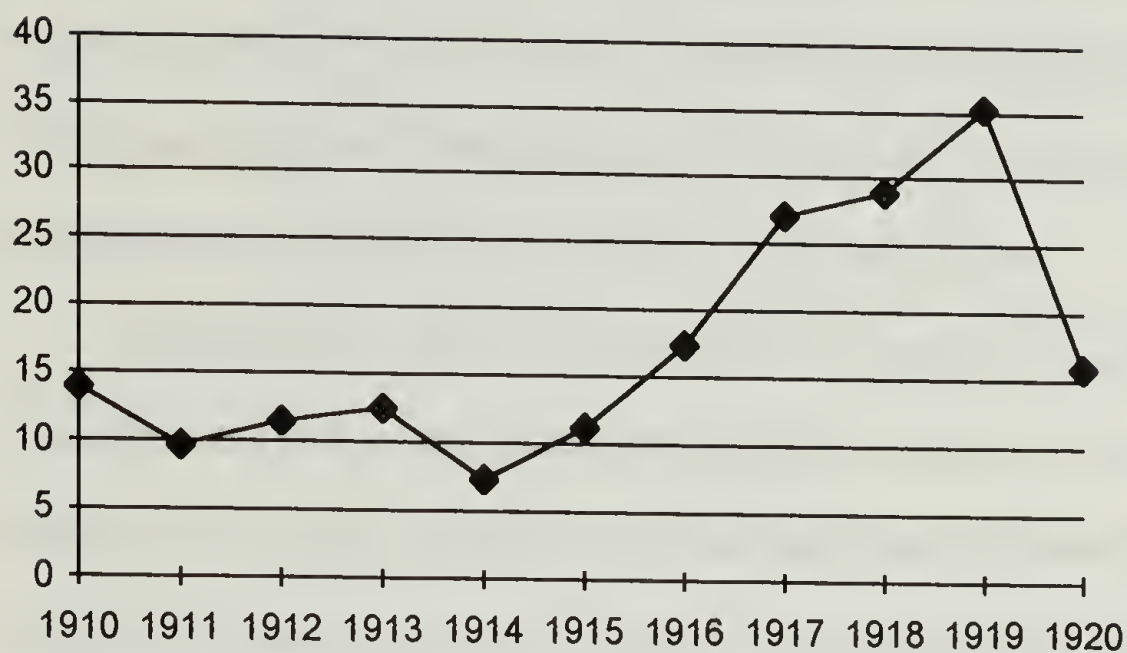
**Chart 1**  
**Cotton Price Per Pound**  
**1877-1914**



Source: Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present

For several of these years before 1914 the price of cotton was even below the cost of production, but all of this quickly changed in 1914. The war in Europe created an overwhelming demand for cotton as international cotton production ground to a halt just as the countries at war needed increased amounts of cotton for clothing. It fell to American farmers to fill the void in the international market. The six years between 1914 and 1920 consequently were a very profitable time for cotton producers. As Chart Two shows, cotton rose from 7.35 cents per pound in 1914 to 35.34 cents per pound in 1919.

**Chart 2**  
**Cotton Price Per Pound**  
**1910-1919**



Source: Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present

With this new money cotton farmers invested in new land, some took on new tenants, and a few even invested in machinery. Farmers were also able to get mortgages on their lands for investments in new lands. But the war could not last forever.

Southern cotton farmers had increased production each year of the war, but in 1920 the bottom fell out of cotton prices. That year the price of cotton per pound plummeted to 15.89 cents, a drop of a little over fifty-five percent, and although the price went up in the mid-1920s, it soon plummeted again.<sup>22</sup> Historians have generally acknowledged two reasons for this decline. After the world war ended international cotton producers could once again begin planting and trading cotton. This new cotton glutted the world market and began to eat into Southern farmer's profits. DuPont and Celanese

<sup>22</sup> *Statistical History of the United States*, 301-302.

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Corporation of America, moreover, began to produce synthetic cloth made from chemicals. These synthetic materials proved to be as durable as cotton and, as historian Thomas Clark has noted, they “knew no drouth, no insects, no ravaging plant diseases.”<sup>23</sup> This double punch particularly devastated small farmers, many of whom had taken loans and new mortgages based on anticipated growth in the price of cotton.

With this drop in cotton prices the number of cotton farm owners began to decline. From 1920 to 1930 there was a decrease in Southern cotton farm ownership of a little over fifteen percent. During this same period tenant farms grew by almost thirteen percent. In the cotton producing states west of Alabama, where the majority of cotton production was moving, the tenant farms increased by a little more than fifteen percent, while farm ownership fell by a little more than fifteen percent.<sup>24</sup>

Then, in the late 1920s the cotton South was rocked by two cataclysmic events. The first occurred in 1927 when the flood waters began to pour over the levees that had been built to protect the rich croplands. It began raining in April and by the time it ended the Mississippi River “formed a vast yellow sea over one-thousand miles of land, and in places fifty miles wide.”<sup>25</sup> These raging flood waters covered thirteen percent of the state of Arkansas. William Faulkner describes the flood in a fictional account called “Old Man,” in which a group of prisoners are brought from the Mississippi State Penitentiary to help rebuild the levees. The narrator of the story observes,

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<sup>23</sup> Clark, *The Emerging South*, 41-42.

<sup>24</sup> United States Census Office, *Fourteenth Census; Fifteenth Census...*

<sup>25</sup> Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 11.



Now there was water on both sides of the road and now, as if once they had become aware of movement in the water seemed to have given over deception and concealment, they seemed to be able to watch it rising up the flanks of the dump; trees which a few miles back had stood on tall trunks above water now seemed to burst from the surface at the level of the lower branches like decorative shrubs on barbered lawns. The truck passed a Negro cabin. The water was up to window ledges. A women clutching two children squatted on the ridgepole, a man and a half grown youth, standing waist-deep, were hoisting a squealing pig onto the slanting roof of a barn, on the ridgepole of which sat a row of chickens and a turkey...then the road vanished.<sup>26</sup>

The flood of 1927 devastated much of the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta. Three fourths of a million people were driven from their homes. Granville Whittiker of Edmonson, Arkansas remembered that the flood had been so bad that he and his father and been forced to sleep on a raft they made when they attempted to save some of their belongings.<sup>27</sup> Property damage from the flood was \$220 million dollars area wide, with \$14,936,000 in damage in the Arkansas delta.<sup>28</sup> The damage was so severe that one eyewitness stated, "Whole towns were swept away; plantations became lakes; cattle and stock were lost by thousands."<sup>29</sup>

Southern farmers were still cleaning up from the devastating flood waters when the stock market crashed in 1929. The depression effected farmers in a number of ways. As banks collapsed farmers had trouble getting credit, and without credit many farmers had trouble paying their mortgages. Cotton prices plummeted sixty-one percent between

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<sup>26</sup> William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 63-64.

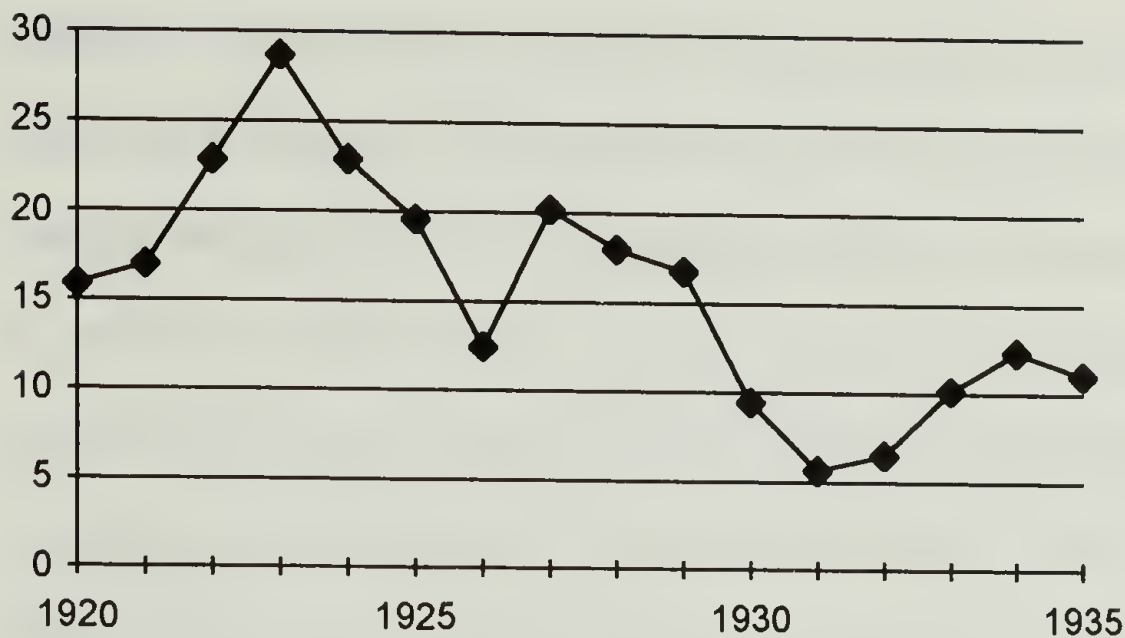
<sup>27</sup> Interview Granville Whittiker, August, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> The National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Condition of the South* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 15; Holly, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Crichton Alexander, *The Arkansas Plantation: 1920-1942* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 24.

September 1929 and September 1932, and in 1933 cotton reached an all time low of five cents per pound.<sup>30</sup>

**Chart 3**  
**Cotton Price Per Pound**  
**1919-1935**



Source: The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present

Both the bank collapse and the drop in the price of cotton made paying debts and mortgages almost impossible. The federal government did little to attempt and alleviate the suffering of the farmers. Herbert Hoover and his administration revolted against any crop and price reductions.<sup>31</sup> Hoover believed that local communities should help one another and if that was not enough they should turn to organizations like the Red Cross.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Statistical History of the United States...*, 301-302.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander, *The Arkansas Plantation...*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads...*, 11-12.

Farm owners and tenants thus stood on the brink of disaster when Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1933.<sup>33</sup>

In the face of this crisis, landowners began evicting tenants and sharecroppers en masse. The decrease of tenant farms from 1930-1940 was astounding. As Table Four shows, from 1930-1940 tenant farms fell by nineteen percent for the entire South. In the same period sharecropper and tenant farms in counties with STFU locals decreased by almost twenty-eight percent. In rough terms this equaled about ninety-thousand people for the counties with STFU locals.<sup>34</sup> Most historians attribute this decline to three factors. First, the world market for cotton was becoming more and more competitive. International competition grew through the 1920s to the extent that in 1933-34, foreign sources produced and sold more cotton than domestic cotton growers. This lead many farmers to finally begin to think about growing more profitable crops.<sup>35</sup> As farmers began to experiment with other crops many of them began to dismiss their tenants.

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander, *The Arkansas Plantation*, 25-29; Donald Holley, "The Plantation Heritage: Agriculture in the Arkansas Delta," in Jeannie Whayne and Willard B. Gatewood, ed. *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, 261.

<sup>34</sup> United States Census Office, *Fifteenth Census; Sixteenth Census of the United States*.

<sup>35</sup> Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, *And Their Children after Them* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), xv-xix.



**Table 3**  
**Decrease in Tenant Farms**  
**1930-1950**

	<b>30-35</b>	<b>35-40</b>	<b>40-45</b>	<b>45-50</b>	<b>30-40</b>	<b>40-50</b>	<b>30-50</b>
<b>South</b>	13.58	6.36	19.60	22.31	19.07	37.53	49.44
<b>West of Al.</b>	.029	21.52	25.81	25.01	27.46	44.37	56.35
<b>STFU Counties</b>	8.31	21.23	11.76	16.67	27.77	26.44	46.87

Second, historians have found that more and more landowners were beginning to replace sharecroppers and tenant farmers with tractors. Though the mechanization of cotton production would explode in the post-World War II period, in the 1930s many landowners began experimenting with tractors. Table 5 shows the astounding increase of tractors in the counties with STFU locals. If we compare those to the Southern states west of Alabama we see that the counties that would have STFU locals experienced a great growth of tractors which replaced many tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

**Table 4**  
**Percentage Growth of Tractors**  
**1930-1950**

	1930-1940	1940-1950	1930-1950
<b>UNITED STATES</b>	67.93	119.68	268.91
<b>WEST OF ALA.</b>	118.39	176.87	504.65
<b>STFU COUNTIES</b>	182.63	340.59	1145.26

Source: Fifteenth through the Seventeenth Census

These early tractors were mostly “all-purpose” tractors that performed many different tasks. They allowed the landowner to work larger areas of land himself and eliminate costs that he traditionally incurred in providing furnishes for sharecroppers and tenant farmers. But these early tractors were not equipped to pick the cotton. Therefore many of these sharecroppers and tenant farmers who were displaced by the tractors would still be needed to work as day laborers during cotton picking time.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> C. Horace Hamilton, “The Social Effects of Recent Trends in the Mechanization of Agriculture”, *Rural Sociology* (March, 1939).

Third, much of the cotton land was taken out of production because of the reduction programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Act [AAA]. Although the AAA contracts prohibited owners from evicting their tenant farmers and sharecroppers, some still used this opportunity to rid themselves of the financially burdensome sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The vast majority of owners no longer needed as many sharecroppers and tenant farmers to farm less land, thus they simply dismissed their tenants.<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, we must add the thousands of tenant farmers and sharecroppers who were driven from their land by landowners who decided to keep their government money. As we will see in the next chapter the papers of the STFU contain hundreds of letters like which describe in heart breaking detail planters who refused to give their tenants their share of the AAA money.

Franklin D. Roosevelt realized that “bold, persistent experimentation”<sup>38</sup> had to be used to fix the economy and restore farmers to their land. Immediately after his inauguration, the Roosevelt administration in conjunction with the Congress began to experiment with solutions for the crisis that agriculture had been facing since the mid-1920s. On May 12, 1933, the President signed the Agricultural Adjustment Act into law. This act created the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) whose main purpose was to “increase the purchasing power of . . . farmers.”<sup>39</sup> The AAA was charged with

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<sup>37</sup> Pete Daniels, *Standing at the Crossroads*, 120-124.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1938), 646.

<sup>39</sup> Rosenman, *The Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 2, 74. By February 1933 the purchasing power of farmers had fallen to fifty percent of what it had been before the World War. Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1982), 48.



eliminating the surplus of certain crops, including cotton, in the hope of bringing production of these crops in line with the worldwide demand at a price that would bring farmers' purchasing power to pre-World War I rates.<sup>40</sup> Cotton farmers already had large crops in the field by the time the act was passed. To offset a huge decline in cotton prices because of a surplus crop, the AAA paid farmers to plow up every third row of their cotton. In return for the plow-up the AAA paid the farmers on average about eleven dollars per acre for 1933.<sup>41</sup> Many landowners accepted the AAA payment plan because it gave them immediate access to cash, something most of them had not had for some time. But tenants and sharecroppers did not qualify for direct aid under the AAA. Many of the landowners had their tenant farmers and sharecroppers plow up their cotton, then took the government money as their own. By doing this many landowners were able to double dip: they received the government's money for the plow-up of their tenant's and sharecropper's land, plus they received the money they could make from selling the remaining crops. Because they ended the year without a crop many tenants found themselves on the side of the road without money, home or food. Pressured by Norman Thomas and others, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration added Section 7(a) to the cotton reduction contracts the next year. The section stated,

The producer shall endeavor in good faith to bring the reduction of acreage contemplated in this contract in such a manner as to cause the least possible amount of labor, economic and social disturbance...<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Saloutos, *The American Farmer*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Rosenman, *The Public Papers and Addresses*, vol., 2, 258-259. Total expenditure for 1933 was \$110,000,000.00

<sup>42</sup> H. L. Mitchell, *Mean things Happening*, 42.

Under the influence of landowners like Representative Joe Robinson of Arkansas, the Administration relied upon the “good faith” of the landowners to reduce their cotton production without abusing the tenant farmers and sharecroppers. When Howard Kester, a Christian Socialist who would later be one of the STFU’s national spokespersons, saw section 7(a) of the AAA contracts he called the Act an “economic monstrosity and bastard child of a decadent capitalism and a youthful Fascism.”<sup>43</sup> Section 7(a) did not work, and by the summer of 1934 thousands of sharecroppers and tenant farmers were forced off the land that they had worked for many years.<sup>44</sup>

From the 1860s to the 1930s the South experienced massive change as the old plantation system withered away. From a Civil War that devastated the agricultural economy, to a political battle over who would control the land, to devastatingly low cotton prices, to the crushing of the hope of financial gain after World War I, to floods, and the Great Depression, the road from plantations to large scale agribusiness enterprises seemed be almost predetermined. In the seventy years after the Civil War, sharecroppers and tenant farmers found themselves at the bottom of society. Like most Southerners, they had been taught from childhood that to own a piece of land, to work that land, and to support a family was the duty of every man. But reality has a way of grinding ideals into dust. In the midst of massive economic and personal upheaval, a group of white and black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who had recently been evicted from their homes on the Norcross Plantation met at the Sunnyside school in St. Francis county, Arkansas to found

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<sup>43</sup> Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969 [1936]), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening* 41-43; Saloutos, *The American Farmer*, 34-49.

the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. These men saw the changes all around them and realized they had to do something to protect their way of life and to feed their families. It is to these men and women that we now turn.



## CHAPTER II

### **“I WANT ONLY A CHANCE TO MAKE MY OWN LIVING:” JOINING THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS’ UNION**

Granville Whittiker sat pensively in his torn and tattered chair in front of a window in his dilapidated house looking out over the old Main street of Edmondson, Arkansas. Main Street, which at one time had been bustling with businesses and people, was now empty. The road squeezed in between tiny rundown houses and expansive soy bean fields. As he sat in his home, on that hot and blustery summer day in 1992, Granville Whittiker was proud that he had never been farther than ten miles from his home. At eighty-six years of age, he was happy to have his forty acres and to have his family around him. But times were still hard and he was barely able to make ends meet, as each year he rented his land to a man who planted soy beans on it.

Granville had lived long enough to see many wondrous and many tragic events in the life of this little town. Although he could not remember the exact day in 1911 when the town of Edmondson was incorporated, his father had told him many times of the excitement of that day when a few hundred black men and women who had been buying up the land since the 1880s finally had enough land and people to become a town. Because it was so susceptible to flooding these former slaves and their children were able to buy this land cheap by working any job available to them. In the early days of the twentieth century their gamble paid off when the federal and state governments set up the levee systems that kept the White and the Mississippi Rivers from overrunning their banks.

Granville remembered back seventy years when all the men and women in this completely black Delta town owned and operated the businesses on its bustling Main Street, and when they owned and farmed the fertile land around it. Cotton was in the last days of what had once been a very profitable kingdom, and these men and women were on top of the world.

Granville remembered when that world began to come apart. He recalled the mid-1920s, when Hal Weaver, a white man from Proctor, Arkansas, made a deal with Anthony Flemming of the Edmondson Home Improvement Corporation. The black men and women who owned their land were not welcome in the County Seat of Marion, where they had to pay their annual property and poll taxes, so Weaver offered to take their money to the tax collector for them. Granville remembered the late 1920s and early 1930s when the landowners realized that Weaver had not used their money for taxes, but instead had bought their land which the state had declared delinquent for failure to pay taxes. Granville Whittiker also remembered the day C. A. Withers and Issac Shaw told the new tenant farmers about the coming of the Kingdom of the Lord and His new instrument of mercy, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). The Kingdom of the Lord -- "And you shall take possession of the land and live in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it."<sup>1</sup> -- this became Granville Whittiker's hope. Whittiker wanted to only be able to take care of his family and to hold onto his land. He joined the STFU with great hope, believing that the union would help him and his friends control the changes sweeping through the town. Eventually Granville Whittiker became disillusioned with Withers and

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 33.53.

“that crowd.” “They meant well,” but the white man from Proctor was willing to shoot union men, and the union never had a chance. It was the late 1960s before Granville Whittiker was able to buy back his forty acres. Today he rents it to Hal Weaver’s son, who continues to live in the legacy of racism and hatred that his father left him. Granville Whittiker’s experience was the exception. He found a way to regain the land. But the majority of black and white men and women who were trapped in the sharecropping system were not so lucky. Like Whittiker, many of them shared a longing, a dream: to go into the land and take possession. They also wanted a way to support their families and to give their children a better life than they had had. These dreams, for most, were not only deferred, they were destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will attempt to fill a significant gap in the historiography of the STFU. In particular it will examine how the union’s members responded to the social change that was occurring all around them. To this end, this chapter will examine two questions that probe the thinking of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers as they expressed themselves in the thousands of letters found in the archives of the STFU. The first question is a simple one: why did thirty-six thousand men and women join the STFU? What were the factors that led them to this union? Second, what did the union mean to these men and women? This question will require the examination of the religious culture they brought to the union. This chapter will also explore how they used this culture to

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Granville Whittiker, August 1992, by author.



understand the massive social changes going on around them and how they attempted to change their lives based on this culture.

Men and women, white and black, joined the STFU for a multiplicity of reasons. Within the first year and a half of the union's existence its headquarters was receiving hundreds of letters a month from sharecroppers and tenant farmers. From these letters we are able to see nine reasons why the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were willing to join the union.

Most obviously, men and women joined the STFU in hopes of meeting their immediate needs. Finding food and clothes was a constant struggle for many of these families. Writers of the period were shocked at the nature of the food eaten by sharecroppers and tenant farmers, whose basic diet consisted of salt meat, corn or flour bread, and sorghum. Very few locally grown vegetables were available because cotton production consumed most of the land. The average sharecropper and tenant lived on an advance of thirteen dollars per month, and this money had to be used for food, clothes, medicine, and all other family needs. In a 1933 survey of purchases made by sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Arkansas commissaries, T. J. Woofter, Jr., coordinator of Rural Research for the Works Project Administration [WPA], found that monthly sharecroppers and tenant farmers spent 64.4 percent of their money on food and 14.2 percent on clothing. This left 21.4 percent of their monthly advance for other needs.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> T. J. Woofter, Jr., *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation* (Washington D. C.: Works Progress Administration, 1936) 102.

In real dollars the sharecroppers and tenant farmers spent \$8.37 a month on food and \$1.86 a month on clothing, leaving only \$2.77 dollars for other needs and emergencies.

The letters in the files of the STFU are painful reminders of what these figures meant to the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Issac Shaw, one of the founders of the union, told of a family in Earle, Arkansas, that was forced to collect food from the highway after it had been accidentally killed. He reported that the family had found a pig that had been run over in the middle of the road and had taken it home just to be able to survive. He also reported that the husband of this family had later come across a snake with a dead turtle in its mouth. After chasing the snake away, he carried the turtle home for his wife to prepare.<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of moving from one landlord to another, Will Washington wrote to H. L. Mitchell asking if the union could “let me have some groceries. Am without food an no monie to by...”<sup>5</sup> Although many men and women wrote in for themselves and their families, the vast majority of letters concerning food were from friends writing for friends. Ammie Love, the secretary of the Earle, Arkansas, local wanted to know if the union could help Longo Burns who had broken his leg and could not get any help buying food. And Nathan Wiley of Widner, Arkansas wanted to know if anything could be done to get food

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<sup>4</sup> *The Disinherited Speak*, 3, Reel Two, H. L. Mitchell, *The Official Papers of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union* [Hereafter cited as STFU] (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1973). When I showed this letter to Issac Shaw's son in 1992, he told me that he believed that the man in Shaw's story had to be Shaw himself. Shaw's son reported that even in the 1940s Issac Shaw was forced by poverty to bring home strange and suspect food to support his family. I have decided to leave all quotes from the sharecroppers and tenant farmers in their original form without the obtrusive “sic”.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Will Washington to H. L. Mitchell, January 28, 1936, Reel one.

to Arch Xollie, his wife, and their six children who had “already had to sell what he had around him to get something to eat.”<sup>6</sup>

Not only did sharecroppers and tenant farmers need help getting food they also needed help finding clothing. When the STFU appeared many turned to the union for help. Charlie and Rosie Clayton believed the union would help them get clothes for their seven children when they wrote to the STFU in 1935. They provided both the gender and the sizes of the children.<sup>7</sup> One anonymous sharecropper wrote from Altheimer, Arkansas in 1937 to say that he wanted “better living.” He reported to the Union,

I am naked, at this rate I owe a big debt, now, I have 4 children and myself went naked all winter and sure hope some way can be fixed [so] we can get some clothes to wear.<sup>8</sup>

Etia Glen wrote from Forrest City, Arkansas, complaining, “now a few of us are in real need of clothing.” She wrote about herself and her husband, plus another man, Charlie Rodgers. She insisted that the union had to help them because they had each produced cotton that year. She believed that because they had worked, and worked hard, that they deserved to have their needs met.<sup>9</sup>

Letters concerning the necessities of life filled the files of the STFU. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers needed food and clothes in order to live. It therefore seems that most of the men and women who wrote to the union were simply trying to find a way to support their families. Even Etia Glenn, who argued that she and her husband

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<sup>6</sup> Ammie Love To H. L. Mitchell, August 12, 1937, STFU, Reel Five, and Nathen Wiley to H. L. Mitchell, no date, Reel One.

<sup>7</sup> Charlie and Rosie Clayton to H. L. Mitchell, August 9, 1935, STFU Reel One.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous to H. L. Mitchell, March 15, 1937, STFU Reel Four.

<sup>9</sup> Etia Glen to H. L. Mitchell, January 3, 1938, STFU Reel Seven.



deserved help because they had worked hard, were still only trying to support themselves and their family.

As was suggested in Chapter One, many sharecroppers and tenant farmers were being evicted from the land so that their landlords could receive more money from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. As more and more people were made homeless they turned to the STFU for help. William H. Stultz reported desperately to the union that he, his wife and their six children were “destitute” on the highways in Cross County, Arkansas. They had no home, no money, no property, and no secure work. Stultz reported that he had first been evicted from his home on a plantation near Parkin, Arkansas, in February 1934, in the dead of winter, and he and his family had wandered from place to place for over a year desperately trying to find lodging.<sup>10</sup>

Henry Peters, head of the Wynne, Arkansas local, told Mitchell that ten families had asked him to find them houses for the winter. Peters reported that the families were “well perpard for food the jess want help fare out of the weather.”<sup>11</sup> Clayton Thompson wrote that thirty-two families had been “put off the Chapman Dewey place” and wanted to know if the union could help them find a new place to live.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Hays Perry reported to the union that after his wife died he had been “put off” the Bunch place near Roundpound, Arkansas. Perry had not worked in his fields for a few days because he had gone to bury his wife, and when he returned, Perry discovered to his horror that he had been evicted. In desperation he wrote to the union begging them to “please tell me what to

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<sup>10</sup> Affidavit of William Stultz, Parkin, Arkansas June 27, 1935, STFU Reel One.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Peters to H. L. Mitchell, January 20, 1936, STFU Reel One.

<sup>12</sup> Clayton Thompson to H. L. Mitchell, August 4, 1937, STFU Reel Five.

do as I dont no.”<sup>13</sup> These requests for assistance were different from other requests for land. This was a desperate plea, not a call for land redistribution. As word of the union spread many desperate men and women hoped the STFU would finally be their salvation in this moment of profound crisis.

Though these immediate needs were obviously very important to the sharecroppers and the tenant farmers who joined the STFU, they also joined the union because the traditional services that their landlords had provided were no longer being provided. Though contracts differed from place to place, landlords typically promised to provide land, housing, fuel, tools, work stock, feed for the work stock, seed, and one-half of the fertilizer. The tenant, in return, promised to provide labor and one-half of the fertilizer. The crop would then be split between the plantation owner and the tenant based upon an agreed percentage. The percentage would be slightly different for the sharecropper who was legally only a wage worker. The sharecropper provided only labor and then took as his wage an agreed upon percentage of the crop. The sharecropper, like the tenant, would be provided with “furnishings” either in the form of money or food, that would then be deducted when at season’s end it came time to settle accounts.<sup>14</sup> Usually the landlord would repair houses and the barns and make sure his tenants had a doctor when they were sick. With the cataclysmic changes occurring in the agricultural south in the 1930s, however, the landlords found it less in their interests to take care of the sharecroppers and tenants. One sharecropper complained that the “landlord haven’t fixed the

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<sup>13</sup> Hays Perry to H. L. Mitchell, August 2, 1938, STFU Reel Five.

<sup>14</sup> *U.S. Department of Commerce, Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Agriculture* (Washington D. C. Government Printing Office, 1922), 131.

barn yet nor have he fixed the house just might as well be living out of doors.”<sup>15</sup> Another cropper complained from Marked Tree, Arkansas that when he was sick his landlord “would not pay my doctor bill.”<sup>16</sup> In desperation she wrote, “I am tired [of] working for nothin it is worser now than it was [under] slavery -- the[y] woad give us close an food but know thy just give us a hard way to go.”<sup>17</sup> As the plantation system died the services that the landlord had traditionally provided also died. To many sharecroppers and tenant farmers this change was completely unacceptable and they wanted the union to fight for these services, which they felt were their rights.

Another major reason the sharecroppers and tenant farmers joined the STFU was to get the government money that had been promised them by the Agricultural Adjustment contracts that they had signed. One local leader wrote that his members had gone to collect their money. Each member was ushered into a dark room where the owner sat at a table between two of his riders who had guns in their belts. The tenants were given the option of leaving the land or signing over their government money to the landowner. The STFU leader cried, “we didnt get justers.”<sup>18</sup> A member wrote from Altheimer, Arkansas in 1937, to tell how his landlord had stolen his money by having him sign a contract turning over his parity check. He wanted the check placed in his hand and not that of his landlords.<sup>19</sup> Other sharecroppers and tenant farmers wrote with the same complaint and the same demands. Ansley Garrett wrote,

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<sup>15</sup> Member 28559 to Headquarters of the Union, March 15, 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>16</sup> “Disinherited Speak...”, 7, STFU Reel Four.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Member 28559 to Headquarters of the Union, March 15, 1937, STFU Reel four.



Dear Secretary, these few lines to let you here from local 104.  
Lisen, 12 men hir on Mr. Linzie Bringforth place, Duneyhue  
Plantation, south of road 50 and Black Fish binge, lisen, we  
12 men have never got but 1 paritie, no plow up money,  
no rental payment 1935. Paritie has not come yet, so he say.  
Let me here from you at once, can we get this money?<sup>20</sup> (24)

Abe Glenn wrote from Turrell, Arkansas to complain that he had not yet received his parity check for 1935 and wanted the union to help him. In complete outrage he declared, "It is unjust."<sup>21</sup>

Sharecroppers and tenant farmers by definition walked that thin line between just barely making ends meet and starvation. Not receiving money for a season's work therefore was cataclysmic. In many of their letters when the sharecroppers and tenant farmers talked of money they spoke about the injustice of their situation. By justice most did not mean equal distribution of land or the even control of the surplus value of the crop. They meant the timely distribution of the money that was rightfully theirs as sharecroppers and tenants under the New Deal plan, plus the right to farm the land as they had traditionally done.

Throughout the 1930s landowners began to replace sharecroppers and tenant farmers with day laborers. Day laborers worked for much lower wages and did not require the furnishings provided to the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The landlord also had no legal obligation to provide laborers houses or services. Day laborers were simply wage-hands without claim to a portion of the crop. Many sharecroppers and tenant farmers saw the trend toward day laborers as a serious threat to their security and wanted to use

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<sup>20</sup> "The Disinherited Speak...", 19, STFU Reel Four.

<sup>21</sup> Abe Glen to H. L. Mitchell, January 3, 1937, STFU Reel Four.

the union to take action. In August 1937, for example, the local in Earle, Arkansas, claimed that the planters in the area had made a deal to transport day laborers from Tennessee by railroad. The local,

Circulat[ed] a petition to the govenor of Arkansas to see if he can stop the labor from coming out of Tennessee in to Arkansas forcing our labor here at Earle to work for nothing or starve to death.<sup>22</sup>

Two weeks later the same local wrote back to Mitchell calling for a strike to stop the influx of day laborers.<sup>23</sup>

Of all the reasons that men and women joined the STFU the primary motivating force seems to have been concerns about the availability of land. This concern took two forms. First, sharecroppers and tenant farmers were concerned with finding land to work the next year. Second, they were concerned about their long term desire to own and farm their own land.

The short term desire for land may seem strange: why would people want to stay in an obviously oppressive system? But the letters in the union files suggest that many of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who joined the STFU were bound to this system by habit and by memory and were not willing to give it up to go into wage labor.

Nelson Parker wrote to H. L. Mitchell from Earle, Arkansas saying that he and his wife were “ragady and hungry” because they had not had any land to farm on in 1935. Parker had tried to find day labor but such work was hard to secure because of the massive

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<sup>22</sup> C. J. Spaulding to H. L. Mitchell, August 14, 1937, STFU Reel five.

<sup>23</sup> C. J. Spaulding to H. L. Mitchell, August 26, 1937, STFU Reel five.

competition in his area. He was having to depend on his twenty-five year old daughter, a school teacher, but recently she had lost her position. Parker requested that the union help him get land to sharecrop in 1936.<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Pettigrue of Wabbaseka, Arkansas was the head of a women's local. She was concerned about a number of needy families in her area who had not had a crop and could not get one. She wanted to know if the union would "please tell me how to go about [finding them land]."<sup>25</sup>

Many of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were also concerned with a more long term issue. The dream of land ownership had a long history in both black and white cultures in the South. From the earliest days of emancipation freedpeople expressed a desire to own their own land. As Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch point out, "In an agricultural society the possession of land [was] the key to affluence, the source of economic security, and the basis of an estate to be passed on to one's children."<sup>26</sup> The former slaves offered a number of reasons why they had the right to land ownership. Some believed that land ownership would complete their independence; others believed that the land was the birthright of those who had worked; still others believed that they had a right to land ownership by Divine right; and others argued that they had made the ultimate sacrifice to save the nation by fighting in the Union army and should be rewarded with land ownership.<sup>27</sup> Many former slaves shared the sentiments of Reverend Garrison

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<sup>24</sup> Nelson Parker to H. L. Mitchell, January 8, 1936, STFU Reel one.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Pettigrue to H. L. Mitchell, April 16, 1936, STFU Reel Two.

<sup>26</sup> Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: the Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 81.

<sup>27</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988) 104; Phillip Foner, *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865-1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press) 88; Joseph P. Reidy, *From*



Frazier when he spoke to General Sherman and Secretary of War Stanton in 1864, “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor...”<sup>28</sup>

Like the former slaves, nineteenth century white farmers had learned from an early age to respect, work, and own the land. From the earliest days of the Republic there had existed an ideology that gave land ownership a divine sanction. Thomas Jefferson claimed that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God...”<sup>29</sup> Steven Hahn, in his study of the white yeomen farmers in Georgia, found that this ideology persisted through the antebellum period. The yeomen farmers, Hahn demonstrated, held to a republican ideology in which freedom, independence, and self-sufficiency were all tied to landownership.<sup>30</sup> Thus, both white and black farmers had a long term commitment to the ideal of land ownership. Both believed that the life of independence and self-sufficiency was the only way to live with honor and dignity, and both believed that that this life was tied to the ownership of land.

In the 1930s these ideas persisted in the worldview of the men and women, both black and white, who joined the STFU. Although the sharecroppers and tenant farmers

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*Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 142 & 195; Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 81; Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 96.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> Willard Sterne Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993) 119.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 29, 40, Chapter 2 passim.

were mainly concerned with how they were going to survive from day to day, they also wanted to be sure they would always be able to support themselves and their families. The local at Marked Tree, Arkansas passed a resolution in 1935 stating, "We want jobs--not charity. We are willing to work we want work."<sup>31</sup> Other members wrote in asking for farmland of their own. Chester Wright wrote to Mitchell from Dixie, Arkansas in the fall of 1935, wanting to know about the "land problem." He reported, "We is goin to need a Home." He wanted the Union to do all it could to help him find a place to live.<sup>32</sup> While asking for more membership books for the new sharecroppers that were joining his local, similarly, Austin Williams wrote H. L. Mitchell for land. Williams reported that he had lived on the same farm for eight years, but his landlord was now trying to evict him. In a postscript to his letter Williams stated that he was trying to get a "place to farm" and "want[ed] to rent or bye from the government and if you can help me out pease do so."<sup>33</sup>

Another sharecropper, J. W. Washington, wrote to Mitchell in late 1935 from Earle, Arkansas looking for "justice." He had worked for years as a "shear worker" struggling to "try to start [himself] with out mules and tools." He reported that he could not make it on his own, and wanted the union to supply him with land, mules, and tools. Because his wife was sick he wanted to "get placed as early as I can..."<sup>34</sup>

In 1935 the union also sent out its first questionnaire to discover the goals of the rank and file on the issue of land. The union leaders had been in contact with government

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<sup>31</sup> "Resolution adopted by the Beth Council at Marked Tree", March 6, 1935, STFU Reel One.

<sup>32</sup> Chester Wright to H. L. Mitchell, September 28, 1935, STFU Reel One.

<sup>33</sup> Austin Williams to H. L. Mitchell, October 21, 1935, STFU Reel one.

<sup>34</sup> J. W. Washington to H. L. Mitchell, November 27, 1935, STFU Reel one.

officials who were trying to decide the best way to solve the farming crisis and wanted input from the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The rank and file were instructed to choose from four plans the ones they liked "best and second best." The first plan would have continued the present system of sharecropping and tenant farming with the government as the landlord. The second plan would have made the government the owner of the land, with tenants and sharecroppers renting from them. Under this plan the government would have made available low interest, long term loans to help the tenants between payments. Each person would work for himself under the government's supervision and would own any improvements made to the land. The third plan called for cooperative farming. The machinery, land, and crops would have been owned collectively by the people, with profits divided according to the proportion of work done by each family. A family would also have been given a garden plot of their own. The fourth plan called for individual ownership of the land. Farmers would have been given a piece of land large enough to support their family, financed by a twenty or thirty year mortgage which they would then have repaid to the government. This plan, in the words of the questionnaire, was "every man for himself."<sup>35</sup>

The results of this questionnaire are revealing. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers overwhelmingly supported plans four and two. Plan four, individual land ownership, received fifty-eight percent of the "first choice" votes, and twenty-five percent of the "second choice" votes. Plan two, government ownership, received nineteen percent

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<sup>35</sup> "Questionnaire on Rehabilitation", STFU Reel One.



of the “first choice” votes and sixty-seven percent of the “second choice” votes. These two plans offered the sharecropper and the tenant farmer the greatest autonomy. Plan four would have taken the tenant out of the sharecropping and tenant farming system and placed him and his family on their own farm, where they could prove themselves. Plan two would have moved the sharecroppers and tenant farmers up in the tenant system to the higher position of renter. This plan would have moved these families out from under the landowners whom most felt to be dishonest and evil. Under this plan the sharecropper and tenant farmer would also have more control over any improvements he might make to the land.

The overwhelming losers in this survey were plans one and three. Plan one, continuing the system as it was under government ownership, received six percent of the “first choice” votes, and one percent of the “second choice” votes. Plan three, the cooperative farming system, received sixteen percent of the “first choice” votes, and five percent of the “second choice” votes. If we look at plan one we see that it began with the words “Continue the present sharecropping and tenant plans.” This was probably enough for those involved in the present system to vote against it. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers also voted against plan three, which was the plan that the union’s leaders, who were members of the Socialist Party, promoted. In this survey the rank and file sharecroppers and tenant farmers decidedly came down on the side of private ownership and autonomous living, reaffirming their long held belief in the dignity of individual landownership.

In early 1936 a rumor floated around the Arkansas delta that the government had taken over the Twist plantation, one of the largest farms in Arkansas. The rumor turned out to be false, but some sharecroppers and tenant farmers became so excited by this news that they wrote in wanting a piece of the land. William Johnson wrote very excitedly to J. R. Butler, the president of the union, for himself and two other sharecroppers, when he had heard that the government had placed the land under the control of the STFU. Johnson wanted to make arrangements to place the three of them on the land as quickly as possible.<sup>36</sup>

The vast majority of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers had farmed all their lives. Many of these men and women loved farming and only wanted to move up the agricultural ladder. W. G. Wellshad signed a three year contract on a farm but was evicted in 1937. When he turned to the WPA he found that the agency would not or could not give him a job. He wrote, "I feel like I am in title to sum Relief bad as iny body in the world." He loved his work and wanted the union to know that he would be the "prodest man on arth[earth] if I could only get good little hom by the government on a long time pay. I be happy and work hard."<sup>37</sup> George Bostick wrote from Gilmore, Arkansas that he had been a sharecropper but now had no job. He wanted the union to help him get a picee of land because he was getting old and "did love to farm."<sup>38</sup>

In 1937 Lula Parehman wrote to H.L. Mitchell, to explain her situation. She had been farming on the J. H. Blunt plantation since 1933, and in a period when there was no work to be

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<sup>36</sup> William Johnson to J. R. Butler, January 7, 1936, STFU Reel one.

<sup>37</sup> W. G. Wellshad to H. L. Mitchell, January 17, 1938, STFU Reel seven.

<sup>38</sup> George Bostick to H. L. Mitchell, February 30, 1938, STFU Reel seven.

done on the plantation she planted a corn crop in a vacant lot across from her house. Wesley Jackson, the plantation boss on the Blunt Plantation, plowed up the corn because he wanted to rent the lot to someone else. In the midst of this she exclaimed, "They don't regard my rights at all."<sup>39</sup> The word "rights" in this exclamation obviously refers to the right to farm, unmolested by a landlord. She then went on to say,

I want only a chance to make my own living and  
not the other get the profit of my labor and I suffer.  
The chance to live independent I don't want what  
belong to others. I only want the portion due me for  
comfort.<sup>40</sup>

Here in the most direct language possible, Parchman affirmed her desire to live an independent life.

The men and women who joined the STFU joined for a multiplicity of reasons, but these were all held together by one continuous thread: the desire to make sure they and their families were secure. Whether it was trying to get food and clothing or a place to live, making sure that their boss provided the traditional services they had grown to expect, fighting for their rightful share of the government money, fighting day laborers who they believed were stealing their work, or trying to get land, the overriding concern of these men and women was the security of their families and their neighbors.

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<sup>39</sup> Lula Parchman to H. L. Mitchell, April 5, 1936, STFU Reel two.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



In studying the values and worldview of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers there are certain limits to what the historian can know. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers made statements from which we can attempt to draw out their values and worldview; they did not make grand pronouncements that articulated their values and worldview with great clarity. The historian is therefore limited, but from their letters we can see something of the culture they brought to the union and how that culture shaped their struggles. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers brought to the STFU a deeply held commitment to a rural Protestantism. Although some were Baptist, Methodist, Holiness, or Pentecostal they held to certain core beliefs which they drew upon to create not only the way in which they viewed everyday events in their lives, but also to form and fashion the STFU. This worldview called upon members of the union to analyze their situation in the light of scriptures, to fight against injustice, and to care for one another.

In January 1936, J. W. Washington wrote to H. L. Mitchell to inquire about membership books he had requested. He also reported that the previous Friday at his local's monthly meeting a group of planters and their overseers had broken into their meeting and beat and shot at some of their members. He said the trouble began when "we had just begun to get in the mids of a big time." They had started the meeting, in the normal fashion, with songs. In the midst of describing the euphoria that swept the meeting when they sang "I shall not be moved," Washington said, "That song I do believe sprung from our lips with the music of God. It [rolled] my mind back to the time when Moses was leading the children of Irsell."<sup>41</sup> It is

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<sup>41</sup> J. W. Washington to H. L. Mitchell, January 19, 1936, STFU Reel one.

unknown whether Washington was black or white, but in both the African-American and rural white churches the story of Moses was of primary importance. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers who wrote into the union tended to believe that a personal God had spoken in the Bible. They seemed to have believed that the stories in the Old Testament and the New Testament were there for their instruction and their encouragement. To be able to use a figure like Moses, who they believed to be the historical liberator of God's oppressed people, to frame their own beatings and shooting had to have been a very powerful weapon.

The majority of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who wrote into the union refused to see their religion as a theoretical construct. Instead they saw it as something that had to be used. Some time in late 1937 or early 1938, Rebecca Cline wrote to the union with a brief statement of her core values. She began by telling the union leaders that the "peril of Religion" is "that we shall think of religion as a matter of merely of saving our own souls." She believed that this narrow view of religion made the soul wanting to be saved absolutely worthless. After speaking out against unused religion Cline then retold the story of Good Samaritan. "You recall the story of Jesus used of the poor man who had been beaten and robbed." Then she told the story,

The priest and Levite came along and passed by on the other side. They were merely trying to play safe. Let some one else help the poor man and furnish the money necessary to care for him. Jesus told the story because that was the current Idea of religion at that day.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rosie Cline to H. L. Mitchell, 1937 or 1938, STFU Reel 6.

We do not know what led her to tell this story, although it is known that many of the city churches worked with the planters to keep sharecroppers and tenant farmers out of the STFU. She may well have been responding to one of these churches. It is interesting that she does not finish the story as it is told in the Gospels. In the Gospels the Good Samaritan comes along the road and gives aid to his sworn enemy, the Hebrew. Instead of telling this part of the story Cline began to tell the union leaders that she and her local were doing all they could to raise money for the poor in their local. It seems, although we can not be sure, that she saw herself and her local as the Good Samaritan. The religious people around her were the “priests and Levite,” but here was a group of poor men and women doing what Jesus had told them to do, taking care of one another. Cline’s story reveals two things: first, it shows us the way in which the religious culture in which these people were submerged was used to justify and solidify union support. Second, this story again shows how the religious culture motivated the sharecroppers and tenant farmers with confidence. Never in this letter does Cline say, “We’re so poor and beaten we give up.” She and those around her drew upon their religious faith, wearing their religion like eyeglasses through which all the world was held in focus and made clear.<sup>43</sup>

In 1938 the members of local eleven decided that they had to get the attention of someone in power or their situation would never change. So they enlisted their local president, Henry Peters, to write a letter on their behalf to Senator Hattie Carraway. The letter began by asking Carraway to consider the condition of the sharecroppers. Peters told Carraway that

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<sup>43</sup> Luke 10.25-37.



many of their members were on the side of the highway without food or shelter, and he blamed this condition upon selfish and greedy planters who did not care what happened to the poor. He then asked Carraway to please read the third chapter of Malachi and the fifth chapter of James. Peters then appealed to her to help the poor and to convince the farmers in Cross county to also help.

Malachi 3 and James 5 both address the rich and powerful's responsibility to the poor and to workers. Malachi 3.2-5 reads in part,

But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiners fire... And I will come near to you to judgment, and I will be a swift witness against...those that oppress the hireling in his wages...

And James 5.1-6 reads,

Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are motheaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days. Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the Earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in the day of slaughter. ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you.

The sharecroppers and the tenant farmers in this local were using their religion in two ways. First they were looking at their world and critiquing the oppression they experienced

through their God's eyes. In these verses their God is telling them that he hates oppression of labor and the poor. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers latched onto this analysis and used it to understand their own world. But, they were also using these verses to warn Carraway. She represented the rich and powerful and, if she did not consider the poor she would be condemned on the "day of his coming." The sharecroppers and tenant farmers were sincere in their belief that vengeance was God's and they believed that if Carraway did not help them she would be damned. This empowered them again in two ways. It told them that they were on the right side and at the end of history they would win. But, it also allowed them to pressure Carraway and the planters, to shame them into helping the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Since the landowners and politicians came from the same religious world as the sharecropper and tenant farmers they probably would not want to be thought of, nor have to think of themselves, as less than firmly committed to God's word.

The sharecroppers and tenant farmers brought with them values that arose from a deep and abiding religious world view, which was reflected in the everyday uses of religious language and stories. Religion, for these men and women was not a theoretical construction, nor was it abstracted from their daily life. For the sharecroppers and the tenant farmers Jesus was as real as the plow they followed down the fields. As a region the south was almost completely evangelical.<sup>44</sup> Divisions did exist, some were Methodists, others Baptist, there were even a few Presbyterians. Holiness and Pentecostal churches competed with the Assemblies of God and Christian Churches, but these divisions, which were very real, do not

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<sup>44</sup> On the origins of this uniformity see Wayne Flynt, "One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh: Southern Evangelicals" in David E. Harrell, Jr., ed., *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1981).

completely explain the South.<sup>45</sup> In the rural areas, where the STFU members lived, there tended to be fewer churches than one would find in the cities. The reason for this is simple. Most of the denominations above required the local congregation to raise the money to sustain a preacher or a building. Since sharecroppers and tenant farms did not, as a rule, have money they usually had to rely upon traveling ministers. A Baptist might attend a Methodist service one Sunday and a Holiness meeting the next. Ida Davis was a Methodist who regularly attended Holiness, Baptist, and Assembly of God services.<sup>46</sup> The men and women who wrote into the STFU held to six broad based principles which their ministers might squabble over, but which were the fundamentals which made up the ideological basis of the STFU's rank and file. From the letters of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers we see these six principles in use.<sup>47</sup>

It is important to remember that these six components made up the lens through which these sharecroppers and tenant farmers saw their world, and it was also the arsenal from which they drew their weapons to criticize the society in which they lived. First, reality was divided into two spheres, the natural and the supernatural. These spheres were not separate: what occurred in one sphere had real repercussions in the other sphere. They held to an abiding faith that their God was ever present and always there to aid his children. God was a personal God.

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<sup>45</sup> No sharecropper or tenant farmer wrote to the union to express their view of baptism or whether or not there should be clapping in church. In no interview that I have done was anyone concerned with these issues. This leads me to believe that the issues that divided Protestant sects were more important for the ministers. The person in the pew, tended to be more concerned with pleasing Jesus, or praying for relief from sin, suffering, or oppression..

<sup>46</sup> Interview Ida Davis, August, 1983.

<sup>47</sup> For other uses of broad principles in Southern evangelicalism see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al, *Like a Family: the Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 175-179; Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century* ( New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 8.



He knew their names, he had even taken the time to write their names in the Book of Life and one day this God, the creator of the Universe, would call their names and say to them, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." This personal God was a God who spoke. God's word could be made manifest in many ways, depending upon the denomination in which the sharecropper or tenant farmer had been raised. The primary place to find God's word was in his Bible, which to these men and women contained in the actual words the message God had for them. But God might also speak through prophets, through dreams and visions, and for some the message of God came in the ecstatic utterances of tongues. Not only could God speak to men and women, but he could also be spoken to, and they believed he took time to listen to them. Any problem, from rebellious husbands to rain to food for the table could be taken to God in prayer. These men and women lived in a universe in which God provided every good thing. God was their provider and friend who desired to take care of his people if they would only turn to him in prayer. But their God was also a large and mighty God and they also believed very strongly in his sovereignty. If a flood came it was God's will. If someone found a dime it was God's will. The good and the bad were all seen as God's divine will. The good was a blessing that was to be met with great rejoicing and praise and the bad was to be contemplated and endured until God had taught the lesson He intended to teach. But, these men and women also believed in human responsibility. The universe was not closed; their choices and actions mattered. They were commanded by the word of God to "Hate evil and do good." And for many of them this meant fighting to change the evil that they saw around them. In their fight they had to battle on two fronts. They first had to fight the supernatural battle, because as the

book of Job taught them, every bad thing was really a test allowed by God to show the devil that the person receiving the bad thing would trust in God and not despair, so they had to pray. But they were also called upon by the prophets and judges of their Old Testament to fight evil as it manifested itself in their communities. And in the New Testament the Apostle Paul had told them to “Overcome evil with good.”<sup>48</sup> This then was the worldview the sharecroppers and tenant farmers brought with them to the STFU. It was this worldview that they drew upon to fight against the planters.<sup>49</sup> To any observer in our moment of history or in the midst of the 1930s it is almost impossible to view the sharecropping and tenant farming system as anything but an extremely hopeless situation. But one senses in the letters of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers the absolute confidence that these men and women felt. They somehow knew they were going to overcome their situation.

The sharecroppers’ and tenant farmers’ religious worldview shaped their analysis of the change going on around them. It also allowed them to have a powerful and persuasive vocabulary to try and shame the leaders of their country into helping them. It also gave them a worldview that allowed them to help one another. Although we might argue that community help was never enough when they were facing structural injustice, to the sharecroppers and tenant farmers the religious worldview they brought with them to the STFU taught them that the battle on the temporal sphere had to be fought on two fronts: they had to stand against evil people who were trying to destroy them and their families, but more importantly they had to

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<sup>48</sup> Romans 12.21.

<sup>49</sup> Robert L. Hall and Carol B. Stack, ed., *Holding on to the Land and the Lord: Kinship, Ritual, Land Tenure, and Social Policy in the Rural South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1982); Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads*; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family*; Wayne Flynt, “One in Spirit.”

take care of one another. In one of the most amazing documents in all of the STFU's files, a play written by one of the rank and file, this sense of community is communicated with great passion and conviction.

Mrs. Flotine Hodge lived in Morton, Arkansas. She was a rank and file member who sat down and wrote a play that she hoped would be acted out in all of the STFU's locals. Although I have not found any record of the play being used, the fact that it is in the files makes it significant. Hodge was attempting to get people to join the union and to stay committed. In that regards it was obviously a propaganda piece. Its story makes the union seem larger than it really was. The play had neighbors "wearing slightly better clothes because they were union members," while the non-union members were "poorly clothed." From the play I believe we can see something of how Hodge used her culture. The play was entitled, "Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Forever." Within its simple story we see how one union member used the union to bring hope to her world and her community. We also see how these men and women valued community. In the story John and Mary Jones are sharecroppers on the Smith plantation. John and Mary have a young son named Johnnie who is sick with tuberculosis and may die if he does not soon get healthy food and a doctor's care. John goes to Mr. Smith, the plantation owner, expecting him to act like a decent man and help those in his community. John asks for money to get a doctor and groceries, but Mr. Smith is a selfish man who will not help John. Smith tells John that if he helped him he would have to help everyone on his place. The conflict is clear-cut in the writer's mind. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers expect the rich man to do his Christian duty and help his neighbors, but Mr. Smith rejects the role. The Jones'



neighbors, Jess and Elizabeth Taylor, are members of the STFU and have attempted to persuade the Jones' to join the union, but Mary is scared and will not allow John to do so. The Jones family eventually join the union when the union leader brings the doctor and the food to little Johnnie.

Mary- I see now where I was wrong. We'll have money now to buy Johnnie medicine and the kind of food he needs. I sure do thank you all for this help. Maybe Johnnie will pull through now. (Wipes eye)

Jimmie- Don't thank us. Thank the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. It was the Union that made it possible.

John- (Goes to Mary and lays arm on shoulder.) You see Mary. You see.

Mary- Yes I do and I am going to join that Union.

(They face the audience and say together)

Mary & John- The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, forever!<sup>50</sup>

The message is clear. The Christian values that sharecroppers and tenant farmers held most dear were no longer found in the rich and mighty, but instead were found in the lowly STFU. We do not know how men and women responded to this message, but it must have been a very powerful response.

The men and women who joined the STFU did not abandon their culture at the front door when they entered the union. They brought it into the union and developed what we call its movement culture. This movement culture acted in four ways within the union. First, it gave

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<sup>50</sup> "The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Forever," STFU Reel six.

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them a great sense of confidence as they were assured that good would triumph over evil. Secondly, it allowed them to place the changes going on around them into a moral framework and see it as a conflict with evil. Third, it gave them the language to condemn the evil that they saw around them and to really fight back. And finally, it gave them a strong sense of community and responsibility to one another.

No one better exemplifies the reasons why men and women joined the STFU and how they used their culture to work within the union than Stephen Seys.<sup>51</sup> In many ways Seys was not a typical member of the union. He did not live in the delta but resided in a mountain county high in the Ozark Mountains. He was also very forceful with his opinion, writing very long and detailed letters, the longest of which ran to twenty-seven pages. He was an ordinary man who wrote extraordinary letters. Only seven of his letters persist but each letter is packed with information that gives insight into his life. More than any other rank and file member Seys was attempting to explain and justify himself and his actions. By looking at his life we can see something of one man's reaction to the massive changes brought about by the Great Depression and secondly, we can see something of why an extraordinary rank and file member joined the union and what the union meant to him.

Stephen Seys was born and raised in Zion, Illinois, "a little town between Chicago, Ill. and Milwaukee, Wis." Although he does not tell us why he left Zion, by July, 1933 he had left his home and hit the road. Seys joined that growing group of Americans wandering around the countryside looking for a way to support themselves and their families. Seys ended up in

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<sup>51</sup> Pronounced "Sice."

Tennessee, where he worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority on dams, as a contractor for cement work. From Tennessee Seys moved to Arkansas, where in Pine Bluff he first worked for Joe Robinson and Co. on the sewers "beyond the fair grounds out by the southern Railroad yards." When the job ended in November 1934 Seys moved to North Little Rock, where he got a job "cutting cord wood for Justen Mathews... for 50 cents per cord." In North Little Rock he lived in a "Hoo Boo jungle" that had been set up in the woods. He slept on the ground and cooked his food in tin cans, owning only a shirt, shoes and a pair of overhauls.

After these experiences Seys settled in Newton County, Arkansas, near Jasper, the county seat of Newton County. When Seys arrived in Jasper he went to work for Fred Palmore. Seys worked for his room and board, clearing lumber off land Palmore owned. Palmore offered Seys four acres of land for his personal use and promised a mule if Seys could clear the four acres. Seys cleared the land but Palmore took back half of the four acres and never allowed Seys to use the mule. Seys would not be stopped, however, and he got seeds from his "folks in Ill. - NC - and Texas" and he raised a garden. Seys quit Palmores' farm when Palmore would not let him work his garden on Sundays, telling Seys, "If any crop work is done on Sundays it would be done on my crops!!!!"

Seys went to work next for C.W. Twyman, the "Newton County cow king." He worked for board and two dollars a week. When he quit Twyman's place he went to work for Austin J. Harrison, laboring for seventy-five cents per day. He was promised an eight or nine hour day, but two weeks after he started Mr. Harrison had Seys working from daybreak until



one hour after dark for fifty cents a day. Seys says that he lived on “garden stuff - sepperrated goats milk and cow feed cooked in a mush.”

In the midst of this, with the help of his mother, Seys made enough money to put down a payment on eighty acres of land. He had no cabin to live in, so on his first night he made a log fire which he slept by for days until he built a “split shingle roof.”

Seys did not say how he heard of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, but he did say that the government relief agent in Jasper, Alvin Phillips, told him that he was “not supposed to get ahead...only supposed to get by.” By 1936, Seys had secured a charter for local number 203 and was the chief organizer for Newton County.<sup>52</sup>

Like all union organizers Seys encountered antiunion feelings. Seys says that “some feel that it [the union] is the mark of the beast - and some do not want to join a gang of outlaws...”<sup>53</sup> A man Seys calls Uncle John Waters promised to take him around Newton County to introduce him to the people. Waters had sold nursery stock in the county for over forty years and was well known and respected. Even with this influential man’s backing the leaders of the county still threatened to kill Seys. One day when he went to pick up his mail, the post master and another man were talking about a railroad strike near Harrison where the union leaders had been hung. The post master asked Says, “how I would like to be strung up like they did the RR union heads in Harrison?”<sup>54</sup>

Seys had been given permission by J.R. Butler, the president of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, to organize lumber workers as well as sharecroppers. Seys would set out to

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Seys to Southern Tenant Farmers Union, no date, STFU Reel four .

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, May 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, No Date, STFU Reel four.

organize with his pack mule, his fishing pole and all of the labor newspapers he could carry. In describing the conditions of the people working part time in lumber Seys said,

The living conditions are much worse in the US. Forest where timber companies have bought up cheap timber and labor fines himself dependent on and at the mercy of Mr. Timber King.<sup>55</sup>

Again Seys reported,

What do we find - a tippicle Hoo Boo Jungle - anything for shelter old tin sign boards - mill waist slabs - old rotten canvas poles - the men have not time to split shingles and build the hill folks style cabins - here are the children without schools of any kind - women give berth to their babys in no more or less than Hoo Boo Jungle camps - improvised shelter - their hill billy homes are gone - they must work for what ever the timber company is willing to pay - buy from the timber companies commasarry - the mountain stores are gone.<sup>56</sup>

Seys blamed such misery upon the New Deal programs. The New Deal relief agency in the county was controlled by one of the mill owners, Alvin Phillips, who was also the brother-in-law of Austin Harrison, one of the wealthiest landowners in Newton County. Seys said with anger, "Yes there are those how have made lots of money by the New Deal," but the "farm and timber labor of all kinds are worse off then before the New Deal."<sup>57</sup>

Though he believed that New Deal was to blame for the hardships of the poor, Seys joined the Union for really only one reason: he wanted to farm and to not have to be dependent on any other person, and he wanted everyone to have the chance to get land. Seys had some amazing dreams for a man of his education. He dreamed of a more fair, more productive way

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, April 5, 1937. STFU Reel four.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, May 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Seys To STFU, No date, STFU Reel four.

of farming. Seys had been reading a book on Japanese farm methods and wanted to write a book on "a new and better hill farming."<sup>58</sup> He had learned that the

typical Japaness farm is a 2 acre mountain side - stone wall terraced - here he raises all that he eats - not a cash crop to sell as Dixes King Cotton - these Japs takes 3 dayly papers - electricke lighty - and 4 pool bathes a day and after super feels good anuf to write a poem and hang in the cherry tree.<sup>59</sup>

Seys wanted farmers to plant trees and grow them as a cash crop. He also wanted each farm to be self sufficient: "we should as far as we can raise on each farm everything we can that is used on that farm."<sup>60</sup> There is an obvious idealism in that notion, but mixed with this is a nostalgia for a way of farming he saw in the "golden past."

Yes go back 100 years or more in our ideals - raise what we use and use what we raise as far as we can but with new and better methods.<sup>61</sup>

Seys wanted people to have a fair shot at making it in life. Seys saw evil and called it evil, then he proposed a plan, idealized as it was, to give people control over their lives.

Stephen Seys' world was inundated with Christianity; it was the air that he breathed. He used the Bible to organize, quoting a verse that said, "He how providest not for his own is worse than an infadal."<sup>62</sup> Seys came under the influence of a local Methodist pastor. The pastor began one of his Easter sermons with the words,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, May 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid..

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, No Date, STFU Reel four.



The grate multitudes of people are labor and the minority is those how do not have to work and we find our Lord on this particular ocation talking to a group of perhaps all the labor class.<sup>63</sup>

By identifying Jesus with the laboring class it helped reaffirm that Jesus, who they believed to be God, was truly in their side, and it gave them real confidence. The Lord was on their side, and as Seys said, all the laborers were "God's children - 'the least of these.'"<sup>64</sup> Because of the sharecroppers religion there was hope, and in the end they had the assurance that they would win the battle before them.

From his religion Seys expected people to be concerned about their neighbor and to care for one another in the community. The "culture of community" was a way of life, a mind set, that stands in opposition to what Christopher Lasch identifies as the modern "culture of Narcissism." Seys felt a strong responsibility for the people around him. As we have seen above he was deeply moved by the plight of the timber workers. Again, Seys blamed the New Deal for the loss of community when he says,

The US [government] has did away with the little hillbilly schools and churches- the mountain store - the community - then she [the government] sells this timber for less - far less than it costs to raise timber...<sup>65</sup>

Seys stated that because of this lose of community and the growing dependence of the people on large land owners, the government agencies and the timber companies "there are those with no land and no work - no relief - no food no feed and no seeds!!!!!!!"<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, April 5, 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, No Date, STFU reel four.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, May 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>66</sup> STFU Reel four.

Seys was outraged by what he saw as the lack of compassion in the relief agency head, Alvin Phillips. Seys was told that he could not receive aid because he was a single man. Seys writes with such passion and disbelief that we can almost feel his anger and remorse. "If that is true why is it that Joe Dee Morgan an old man and his wife and boy can not and has not got relief????!!WHY??!"<sup>67</sup> Seys' compassion was great. John Holt had been a strong timber worker with a wife and a number of small children. He was diagnosed with cancer and began that slow and painful death. Seys attempted to get him aid, but was unsuccessful. When Holt died Seys and other union members made him a casket, and buried him "under a red cedar in a grave yard on a hill below the mountain and above the river."<sup>68</sup> It is obvious that Seys loved humanity and was totally confounded by the changes going on around him.

Seys appeared in the letters of the STFU suddenly in 1935. Just as suddenly he disappeared in 1938. He ended one of his marvelous letters by saying "something should be done..."<sup>69</sup> This sums up his view of life, and that of the vast majority of the STFU's rank and file. Something had to be done.

In a poem called, *The Hills of Newton County* there is a line which reads,

If you are weary of endless prattle, empty words, harsh noises,  
selfishness, people so engrossed in their ego, that they cannot see the  
loneliness and emptiness of anothers life... if you seek refuge  
where there is peace and joy come to me...<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> S.C. Seys to STFU, Feb. 6, 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Seys to STFU, April 5, 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> R. Millicent, *A Touch of Newton County*, Los Angeles: Harbor House Pub, 1963, 1.

Stephen Seys came seeking refuge and peace but found only turmoil, pain and oppression, and in the end he simply faded away, a forgotten man.

Men and women joined the STFU for a multiplicity of reasons. they came to the union from a world submerged in rural Protestantism and they used this religion to shape the STFU. These men and women were experiencing the capitalization of agriculture and were horrified at what they saw occurring to them and their neighbors. They demanded that the union help them meet their immediate needs, but they also had a longer vision of what they wanted their future to be. Many of these men and women wanted land of their own to farm. In standing against the movement of agriculture towards agribusiness the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were being radicals, but not socialists. They stood in that long line of opposition in the south that began with the freed people in the 1860s and 1870s and moved through the populist party. Their radicalism was informed by their Christianity, which gave them a tool to analyze the injustices they found and the power to articulate another vision for the south. Their Christianity which had always told them to care for one another was given an avenue for action within the union.

We thus are left with a far more complicated story. The men and women who joined the STFU were concerned with practical and realistic needs in their struggle to sustain their families, but they were also concerned with the struggle over power, over who would control agriculture, capitalist organizations or individuals. Here we catch a glimpse into the nature of the STFU. These sharecroppers and tenant farmers were not socialists nor were they conservative traditionalists. Instead the STFU rank and file used their Christian culture to fight on two fronts: to sustain a traditional world, and to stand against the changes that were coming



to agriculture as it broke free from the death grip of the plantation system and broke into the age of capitalist agribusiness. These men and women stood against the movement of the dominant culture, wanting only to bring salvation to their world and help to their neighbors. In the end they were defeated, crushed by changes set in motion after the Civil War.

## CHAPTER III

### **“A HARD WAY TO GO:” THE CAUSES OF THE DEMISE OF THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS’ UNION**

Henderson Bently, secretary of the local in Tyronza, Arkansas, in Poinsett County, had joined the STFU in its early days while he was working on the Norcross plantation. He wrote to the union president J. R. Butler in 1937 in desperation, wanting the union to know that he had always been faithful, had diligently followed the union leadership, even going on strike when he knew it would cost him his home. He wrote that he had been evicted because of his membership in the union and had a “hard way to go.” Bently reported that he had not had land to farm since 1934. He expressed complete disbelief that his interests were not being looked after and suggested that non-union men were doing better than he was. He wrote:

...I have roat to the govenor for some place [even] if it  
in the woods so I can make me a livin I am tied [tired]  
trying to work by the day from sun up tell sun down  
for 75 cents I want to crop. So I will hafter stop looking  
to the union far help far I see it is now I am worst shape  
and them whoo ant union for they don't be evicted on the  
count of the union no help from the union it two bad.<sup>1</sup>

In 1937 many men and women just like Bently began to leave the union. By 1938 the union's membership had fallen almost forty-nine percent from its 1937 high of 34,374 to 17,621.

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson Bently to J. R. Butler, February 18, 1937, H. L. Mitchell, *The Official Papers of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1973), Reel nine [Hereafter cited as STFU].

In two more years it would plummet to 3000 members. By 1940 the union had lost ninety-one percent of its total membership.

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, as Michael Harrington stated, must not be viewed as a "left-wing western in which the good guys always win"<sup>2</sup> The STFU was defeated. Its members had attempted to stand against the land owners in the Arkansas delta and had been squashed. The union's demise must be attributed to a diverse number of factors, external and internal to the union, which worked upon one another. The union faced the increased mechanization of cotton farming, and also found their attempts to organize met by growing violence. As important as these two external causes were, the demise of the union must also be attributed to an internal force. The union leaders, although firmly committed to fulfilling the agenda of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers, were unable to fulfill the agenda and goals of the rank and file. We can not be sure which of these factors was the most important, and I am not attempting to argue for one over another. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers do not tell us why they left, they simply left. I offer these events as possible reasons why the union floundered.

In September 1935, at picking time, the union launched a strike to pull all the cotton pickers out of the cotton fields. Their goals in the strike was to get higher wages for cotton picking next year. The landowners were caught off guard as hundreds, maybe thousands, of sharecroppers and tenant farmers left the cotton fields in protest. Not wanting to lose their valuable crops most landowners agreed to the wage increase. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Harrington, Forward in *Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union*, Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979, ix-x.



significant that the union leaders did not portray the cotton pickers' strike as a strike for their own land or for the right to farm cooperatively, but instead went for an immediate need, "higher wages."<sup>3</sup> In 1935, the average sharecropper or tenant farmer was making 40 to 65 cents per hundred pounds of cotton picked per day. The union went on strike to guarantee one dollar per hundred. The landowners had believed for so long that the sharecroppers and tenant farmers had lost their will to fight, that when they finally went on strike the landowners were surprised. George Stith, a member of the STFU, who later became an organizer, remembered that the landowners were "scared to death." Although landowners would not sign a contract with the union, they began to make deals with individual sharecroppers and tenants.<sup>4</sup>

The strike of 1935 astounded the planters, but in early 1936 they began a reign of terror that would prove fatal for the union. Handling personal and social conflict through violence had a long established history in the south. From the south's earliest days through slavery's end, violence permeated society. The ruling class used duels as a common way to settle disputes, while the lower classes settling feuds with guns or knives. This violence did not abate after the Civil War. As Edward Ayers has remarked, the South had the highest murder rate in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The southern ruling class and many poor whites who felt threatened by the rise of blacks to positions of power reacted with violence, lynching, and murders. But as C. Van Woodward points out, Southern racial violence

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<sup>3</sup> "Why Cotton Pickers Strike", September 1935, STFU Reel One.

<sup>4</sup> James Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 424-425.

<sup>5</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 155.

must be seen as a part of the “general milieu of Southern violence.”<sup>6</sup> When the southern ruling class encountered a union of sharecroppers and tenant farmers, they drew upon this tradition of violence to attack the union’s members and leaders with vengeance.

Initially acts of violence were usually committed around the union’s headquarters in Marked Tree, Arkansas. The union’s leadership and its chief organizers were the primary targets. In June 1935 Arthur Brookings, a member of the union since August 1934 and a member of its executive Council, reported that a group of “night riders” had been organized to “break up the union.” He stated that as he and his family slept, “at about two in the morning a gang of five or more men started shooting into [his] house.”

Although the initial violence was directed at leaders, planters soon learned which of their sharecroppers and tenant farmers were union members and began to use violence to intimidate them.<sup>7</sup> J. E. Cameron wrote to H. L. Mitchell in November 1935 to report that he had organized a meeting of his local in Heath, Arkansas. More than two hundred men and women showed up to join the union. In the middle of Cameron’s speech three men drove up in two cars and began to curse and “abuse” the crowd. When the men got to Cameron they said to him, “What in the hell are you doing here you son of a bitch shut up or I’ll knock your brains out you damned bastard.”<sup>8</sup> Another tenant wrote from Widener, Arkansas to tell Mitchell that his landlord was “tryin to stell my life.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990 [1951]) 159-160.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, *Mean things Happening*, 81-83.

<sup>8</sup> J. E. Cameron to H. L. Mitchell, November 23, 1935, STFU Reel one.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous to Mitchell, January 14, 1936, STFU Reel one.

The landlords had proven that they were willing to use any means necessary to discipline their work force, including murder. This viscous backlash taught the union leaders that they could not fight the landowners without some power behind them.

Coupled with this growing violence, but unrelated, was the tractor revolution. Because many southern farmers had little money to invest in machines to help their production the New Deal's plan to pump money to landowners through the AAA came as a great boost. For the first time many farmers had the money they needed to invest in machines. Chapter One demonstrated that the use of tractors grew at an astounding rate in the 1930s. Between 1930 and 1940 the number of tractors in counties that had STFU locals grew by 182.63 percent. In 1937 alone, southern landowners bought more tractors than had been enumerated on the census in 1920.<sup>10</sup> Southern farms had been slow to mechanize. Prior to the 1930s the mechanization of cotton farms was retarded by a number of factors. The most important factor was the large supply of cheap labor available to prepare the land, plant the seed, hoe the weeds, and pick the cotton. In addition tractors were very expensive. Most farmers lacked the capital to buy tractors, and most banks were wary of loaning farmers money to buy tractors. The early machines, moreover, did not have the ability to weed and pick the cotton. A study of three Arkansas Delta counties from 1932 to 1938 discovered that tractors were most commonly used for plowing, disking, and cutting cotton stalks. Tractors, in other words, were used simply for seedbed preparation.<sup>11</sup> The landlord would still have to sustain a labor force to plant, hoe, and

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<sup>10</sup> C. Horace Hamilton, "Social Effects of Recent trends in the Mechanization of Agriculture," *Rural Sociology*, 4 (March, 1939), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 153.



pick the cotton.<sup>12</sup> It would be after World War II that the cotton picker was introduced to southern farms on a mass scale.

Before World War I the United States Agricultural Department, agricultural colleges, agricultural experiment stations, and editors of farm magazines had encouraged the use of tractors to increase efficiency and profitability.<sup>13</sup> The aversion of farmers to tractors had slowly begun to abate during World War I when International Harvester's promotional efforts had introduced many farmers to the new farm machines.<sup>14</sup> Mechanization had begun in the west and over the years slowly move across the south. When the New Deal arrived and introduced AAA money many farmers began to invest in tractors as a result of this earlier propaganda.<sup>15</sup>

Gilbert Fite has suggested that mechanization meant "much more than simply buying a two-row or four-row equipment." It meant "reorganizing farm operations and changing relationships between land and people."<sup>16</sup> The most important social transformation that occurred with the coming of the tractor was the displacement of large numbers of tenants and the increase of day laborers. C. Horace Hamilton reports that "the displacement of three to five families by one tractor [was] not uncommon."<sup>17</sup>

The tractor pushed the sharecroppers and tenant farmers out of their traditional jobs and down to the level of day laborer which for many was a humiliation. Mitchell explained to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 150-152.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>14</sup> Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 175.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 152.

<sup>17</sup> C. Horace Hamilton, "The Social Effects of Recent Trends in the Mechanization of Agriculture." *Rural Sociology* (1939).

the Committee on Interstate Migration in 1940 that because of mechanization the union's membership had changed through the years. "In 1934, ninety percent of the members . . . were either tenant farmers or sharecroppers, but by 1937 sixty percent of the members became day laborers and today [1940] over seventy-five percent are working for wages."<sup>18</sup>

In 1936 the union attempted to call another strike, but this time the landowners were prepared. The STFU started this strike in May; almost immediately the landowners began to strike back. In Crittenden County the landowners opened what the union leaders called "Concentration Camps," arresting sharecroppers and tenant farmers and holding them in a stockade near Earle, Arkansas. The union charged that the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were then forced to work in cotton fields at gun point. In September 1936 a federal grand jury indicted the Deputy Sheriff of Crittenden County, Paul Peacher, for "aiding and abetting in holding in slavery" a group of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who belonged to the STFU.<sup>19</sup> Despite the indictment the violence against white and black sharecroppers continued. That year C. A. Withers reported from Edmondson, Arkansas, that he had been threatened with flogging because he was in communication with the union. The local landowner had discovered the union in Edmondson because the local post-mistress was reporting to him every time a sharecropper or tenant farmer received a letter from the union.<sup>20</sup> Withers also reported that the local could not have meetings

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<sup>18</sup> "The Source of the Grapes of Wrath", H. L. Mitchell, August 14-16, 1940, STFU Reel fifteen.

<sup>19</sup> Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and The New Deal* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 117.

<sup>20</sup> The post-mistress was Dorothy Weaver, Hal Weaver's wife. Hal Weaver had taken control of the land in and around Edmondson in the late 1920s. (See Chapter 1 for brief details) In 1992 she said if they had just "hanged some of those niggers, we wouldn't had no problem from that damned Union." Interview with author. August 1992.

because the members were afraid of additional violence from the landowners. He wanted the union to help end this violence and allow the sharecroppers and tenant farmers to meet in peace.<sup>21</sup>

In May 1937, W. B. Moore of Blythville, Arkansas wrote to J. R. Butler to report that county officials were attempting to scare union members out of the union by displaying “thire guns and black jacks.” He reported that many of his members were scared and some were leaving town.<sup>22</sup> This violence continued until the union was finally forced to stop organizing in 1938. By then the union was a shell of itself, having been defeated by force of arms. Faced with mechanization and with violent suppression, men and women packed up their meager belongings and left the cotton lands.

As a part of the “reign of terror” that followed the 1935 strike many of the landowners began an organized movement to remove any member of the STFU from their land.<sup>23</sup> Daily the union received letters from sharecropper and tenant farmer families that reveled how widespread the evictions were. In the midst of this “reign of terror” the Union leaders began a desperate search for help from the left wing of the New Deal.

The demise of the union, however, cannot be solely attributed to outside force. The union also faced serious internal problems. Historians have noted that the union had internal difficulties. But they usually focus on the conflict between the socialist and communist leadership that culminated in the discovery that Claude Williams, one of the union’s most trusted leaders, was working to place the union under the control of the

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<sup>21</sup> *Disinherited Speak*, 9, STFU Reel Two.

<sup>22</sup> W. B. Moore to J. R. Butler, May 26, 1937, STFU Reel four.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 80-81.



Communist party.<sup>24</sup> Although this is interesting, there is no evidence that the majority of the union's rank and file were ever concerned with this event. The discussion of the STFU's internal conflicts needs to be shifted from factions and fighting among the leadership to the conflict that existed between the aspirations of the rank and file and the goals and agenda of the leadership. What follows this should not be taken as an argument that would see a necessary split between an unerring rank and file and a devious leadership. The leadership of the STFU, both socialist and communist, were firmly committed to the goals and agendas of the rank and file, most of the time. The leadership wanted these men and women to get ahead and have economic security. We can see this in the area of the immediate needs of the rank and file. As we saw in Chapter II the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were concerned about food, clothing, and a place to live. When they wrote to the leadership trying to get help the leadership almost always wrote back and the letters that survive show the leaderships as very compassionate people. An example of this is found in J. R. Butler's reply to Henderson Bentley's letter that begins this chapter. The very day that he received the letter Butler responded,

I would like to help you. I would like to help every  
poor person in the world but I can't. I am poor too.  
The union can not help for as I told you we do  
not have the money to help with.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 171-177.

<sup>25</sup> J. R. Butler to Henderson Bentley, STFU Reel 9.

Obviously the union's leaders were interested in helping, but they could not because of lack of funds. As it became painfully obvious to them that the central tendency of the New Deal agricultural policy was not going to be helping the sharecroppers and tenant farmers the union began to appeal for cooperative farming. This act placed the leadership in opposition to the long term wishes for land ownership of the majority of the rank and file. This must be discussed as a possible reason why the men and women left this union in droves.

There are two areas in this internal conflict. The union's rank and file had joined the union with a set of goals, but by 1937 it was obvious that these goals could not be met. Many sharecroppers and tenant farmers had joined the union only wanting their immediate needs met, but the union never had the funds to help. Moreover, many union members had joined to fulfill their long term goal of land ownership, but over time the union betrayed this goal.

The union leadership's call for cooperative farming did not come out of the blue but had a long history in American radicalism. The majority of the union's leaders were members of the Socialist party.<sup>26</sup> In the late nineteenth century with the dramatic growth

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<sup>26</sup> On radicalism and socialism; Richard J. Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken: The Autobiography of Oscar Ameringer* (Norman: the University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1991); Paul Buhle, *A Dreamer's Paradise Lost: Louis C. Fraina/Lewis Corey (1892-1953) and the Decline of radicalism in the United States* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995); Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Harvey J. Kaye, ed., *The American Rebel* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994); Milton Cantor, *The Divided Left: American Radicalism, 1900-1975* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Phillip S. Foner, ed., *The Social Writings of Jack London* (Secaucus: Citidel Press, 1964

of the factory system in the North and the growing tension between farmers, railroads, and banks, workers and farmers launched open revolts against the factory system and the power held by railroads and banks. Workers and farmers had many strategic options to chose from: Greenbackism, the single tax plan, cooperatives, the Farmers Alliance, and socialism. Each of these options found their origins in an earlier republican ideology that held that men should be independent, hard working, and virtuous. Workers and farmers had used this republicanism to critique changes and to offer alternatives to capitalism. For many American workers republicanism became a nonsocialist alternative to capitalism.

American socialism developed in two strains, immigrant and native. Immigrant socialists struggled to appeal to the native born American public in an American political idiom, but for the most part they failed. In 1874, for example, the Workingman's Party of Illinois and the Social-Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America were defeated in state elections when the party presented a ticket completely dominated by German speaking candidates.<sup>27</sup> The immigrant socialists tended to use the language of European radicalism rather than that of the republican tradition.

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[1947]; Phillip S. Foner and Sally M. Miller, ed., *Kate Ricahrds O'Hare: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Baton rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Phillip S. Foner, *The Workingmen's Party of the United States: A History of the First Marxist Party in the Americas* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1984); John Graham, ed., *"Yours For the Revolution:" The Appeal To Reason, 1895-1922* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 1990); James R Green, *Grassroots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985); Bruce Laurie, *Artisan Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989.); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Paperbacks, 1955).

<sup>27</sup> Phillip Foner, *The Workingmen's Party*, 25



A native socialism was also developing alongside the immigrant line. Initially non-Marxist, this nativist socialism grew out of the diverse ways Americans had dealt with change. Eventually some of these socialists would become Marxists, but others traced their radical origins back to Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, spiritualism, and to the New Testament. Oscar Ameringer is a case in point. Ameringer was born in Germany, but he had immigrated to the United States at an early age and spent his years of intellectual development in the United States. Ameringer later stated that he discovered industrial unionism, Jeffersonian democracy, and Mark Twain's humor before he studied Marx. These ideas, according to James Green, contributed to his development as a socialist. The Marxist ideas came after his radicalism was established<sup>28</sup>

Radical groups, from the populists to the socialists, had to develop a position on the "land question." Socialists' plans for restructuring agriculture were essential tools for gaining votes in national and local elections. In 1912 alone, four agricultural states, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas, gave Eugene Debs one-tenth of his national vote.<sup>29</sup> If the Socialists were going to win elections, they realized, they would have to win more of the agricultural states.

The American Socialist party decided at the turn of the century that it could not continue to hold to Marx's idea that farmers were simply capitalists; instead they proposed that farmers were workers whose interests could best be met by the Socialists.<sup>30</sup> The 1912

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<sup>28</sup> James Green, Introduction to Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, xxiii.

<sup>29</sup> Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, xi.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, "The Cooperative Commonwealth and Other Abstractions: In Search of A Democratic Premise," *Marxist Perspectives*, (1980).

party platform reflected this principle when it stated that the socialist party would encourage the development of farming cooperatives.<sup>31</sup> This cooperative idea persisted through the next twenty-five years and was still the socialist party position in 1934. Norman Thomas, who would greatly influence H. L. Mitchell and the other leaders of the STFU, held that cooperatives would save the American South.<sup>32</sup>

The leaders of the STFU, all members of the Socialist Party, fully accepted the cooperative principles. When the group of sharecroppers and tenant farmers met in a school house that hot summer day in 1934, they had invited two non-farmers to their meeting, H. L. Mitchell and Clay East. Henry Leland Mitchell was born in Tennessee in 1906. He loved to say that his family had “descended down the agricultural ladder.” His grandfather had owned land, and his father was a tenant farmer who owned a team of mules and farming tools. Mitchell had worked as a tenant and then had descended to the level of day laborer before eventually leaving farming.<sup>33</sup> In the early 1930s Mitchell moved to Tyronza, Arkansas, in Poinsett County, where he opened a dry cleaning store on Main Street. Mitchell had been “converted” to Socialism, as he used to say, in Moscow: Moscow, Tennessee. He had very little faith in the ballot box, and like many younger socialists of his day, he believed that the “cooperative commonwealth” would be brought

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<sup>31</sup> Graham, *Yours for the Revolution*, 155.

<sup>32</sup> Norman Thomas *America's Way Out: A Program for Democracy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931); *The Choice Before Us* (New York: Arno Press, 1970); *Human Exploitation in the United States* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1934).

<sup>33</sup> Sue Thrasher and Leah Wise ed., *No More Moanin': Voices of Southern Struggle* (Chapel Hill: Institute for Southern Studies, 1974), 13.

about only by organizing a class conscious labor movement.<sup>34</sup> Clay East's family had been some of the first settlers in eastern Arkansas. In 1934 East owned a gas station next to Mitchell's dry cleaning business. After many months of debate, Mitchell had converted East to socialism. East quickly became one of the most ardent proselytizers for socialism in east Arkansas.<sup>35</sup> Joining with a group of Debsians from the early socialist movement in the Arkansas Delta, Mitchell and East had organized one of the fastest growing Socialist movements in the United States by the 1930s. When Mitchell looked around the Arkansas Delta for his militant working class he found only sharecroppers and tenant farmers, so he spent the first three years of his time in the Delta trying to get the sharecroppers and tenant farmers to join the Socialist Party. Some sharecroppers and tenant farmers did join the party, but the majority kept their distance. Many of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers did begin to trust Mitchell, however. On the basis of three years of trust building, when the sharecroppers and tenant farmers created their union they called upon Mitchell for help in running it.<sup>36</sup>

The union grew quickly after its founding in July 1934, moving swiftly from Poinsett county to the surrounding counties. The Union spread by word of mouth from plantation to plantation. By February 1935 the Union would claim a membership of 5000

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<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 44 and Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985[1977]), 49-86.

<sup>35</sup> H. I. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 27-33.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 27-31 and 43-50. Clay East was the gun of the Union, but he soon left the Union. It appears that he could not take the threats against him and his family.



members, in September 1935 11,636 members. By the time it entered the CIO in 1937 it would claim 34, 374 members in five states.<sup>37</sup>

The men and women who joined the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union seemed to know what they wanted, and within the first year and a half of the Union's existence its headquarters was receiving hundreds of letters a month full of suggestions and demands from the sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

The union leadership was overwhelmed by the amount of work that faced them when they entered the Arkansas Delta in 1934. An examination of the documents they produced in 1934 and 1935 show that there were very few references to "land for the landless" or to "cooperative farming" as would be seen in documents in later years. Mitchell had spent the summer and fall of 1934 traveling around the cotton growing counties of Arkansas attempting to learn all he could about the demands of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and what he saw overwhelmed him. Their living conditions were abysmal, they ate poorly, and they had no rights except those given to them by the bosses. If they tried to appeal to outside forces like the police or the courts they were laughed at and told to go back to work or to the penitentiary. Many of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Poinsett County knew that Mitchell could be trusted, and they quickly laid out what they wanted. This 1934 trip through the cotton country and the deluge of letters from sharecroppers and tenant farmers that were streaming into his business in Tyronza, Arkansas were reflected in the first Program of the STFU found in

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<sup>37</sup> Membership reports, STFU Reel One, Three, and Seven.

the membership book that was given to each sharecropper and tenant farmer when he or she joined the union. Mitchell was concerned that the potential members, know in simple words what the union's "sole purpose" was. Mitchell was not concerned with cooperative farming at this point, only in "securing better living conditions through decent contracts and higher wages for farm labor"<sup>38</sup> This would have sounded like a standard union contract for any industrial group had he not placed the words "farm labor" at the end. There was no promise of no cooperatives, just the hope of a better life.

Not only did the Union's early program reflect the views of the rank and file but in practice the Union in 1934 was also actively attempting to support those sharecroppers and tenant farmers who were evicted and not given their share of the Agricultural Adjustment Act parity money. In November 1934 the Union set up a Legal Defense Fund to support "all members of the Union who [were] threatened with eviction from the land."<sup>39</sup>

By 1935, the STFU was growing rapidly. By the winter of 1935 the union had established an eleven-point program:

1. All farm labor, sharecroppers, renters, etc. be given representation on all boards of control designed to aid agriculture.
2. Enforcement of all government contracts, specifically section 7 of the AAA plan with payments being made directly to the Sharecroppers and Tenant Farmers.
3. Eviction from the land to be stopped.
4. Free schools and busses to transport our children to school (and textbooks)
5. Right to unionize with protection.
6. Decent wages, hours and conditions for all farm labor.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., "Membership Book", 1934, Reel One.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., "Report from Executive Committee", November 1934, Reel One.

7. Adequate cash furnished during the farming season at a legal rate of interest, with privilege of trading were we want.
8. Pay at prevailing wages for all improvements on property of owners.
9. Decent houses for each family, with right to use part of the land for free for growing food-stuff.
10. Access to woodland owned by landlord, to secure fuel wood for personal use.
11. Right to sell cotton at market price and to whom we please.

These demands reflect most of the immediate demands that the sharecroppers and tenant farmers made to the union leaders in 1934 and 1935. It is important to note here that there was no demand for land redistribution for those sharecroppers and tenant farmers who would work it collectively. Instead the demands of this program would have kept the sharecropping system in place, but it would have given the sharecroppers and tenant farmers greater control over their lives, which is one of the things they demanded in the questionnaire sent out in 1935.<sup>40</sup> But the STFU leadership was already beginning to move away from the practical program. In 1935 the union also produced its first constitution in which the term “cooperative society” is found. After stating that the aim of the union was to “protect our rights and interests as individuals by collective action,” it announced that the STFU wished to “establish a co-operative society.” Mitchell did not explain what he meant by this term but he hinted at his future position when he said, “The earth is the common heritage of all, we maintain that the use and occupancy of the land should be the sole title.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> On questionnaire see Chapter Two pages 36-39.

<sup>41</sup> “Constitution of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union”, 1935, STFU Reel One.



In 1935, J. R. Butler made the STFU's first contact with a government agency to attempt to articulate the union's position on the situation in the cotton south. J. R. Butler wrote to Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, who had recently been placed in charge of the Rehabilitation Administration. This Administration was responsible for lending individual farm families money so they could purchase tools, seed and livestock. As Donald Holley has said, "The objective of the program was to take farm families off relief rolls, put them back on farms full-time."<sup>42</sup> Butler wanted Westbrook to know that there was an organization in the south that was interested in what happened to the growing number of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who were being evicted. He also wanted Westbrook to know that the STFU would support any plan devised to aid the dispossessed farmers. Butler presented a plan that he wanted the Administration to take under consideration. He called for people who "own a home" to be given a track of land sufficient for them and their family to live comfortably. The government would guarantee that "as long as they occupy and use the land they will be protected in its possession" and the government would hold the title to the land "forever."<sup>43</sup> In this proposal Butler was offering plan two of the questionnaire discussed earlier: sharecroppers and tenant farmers would have become renters, a higher stage of tenant farming that guaranteed a certain amount of autonomy. It is significant that the landowner was to be expelled from the land and that the new landlord was to be the government. Throughout the letters of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers, there is a recurring theme that the government would make a better landowner

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<sup>42</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> J. R. Butler to Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, 1935, STFU Reel One.

than the individuals who then controlled the land. This was a step away from sharecropping toward individuals working their own land for their own profit.

None of the plans offered in 1934 and 1935 embodied the cooperative impulse that would be found in the programs of the Union in upcoming years. The programs of the Union in 1934 and 1935 grew out of observations by the leadership of the immediate needs of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers and the persistent demands of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers themselves. These programs and the strike were an attempt to humanize the sharecropping and tenant farming system without overthrowing it. However, the needs of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were changing rapidly. With more and more farmers were being thrown off the land, the attempt to humanize the sharecropping system was becoming more untenable with each passing month.

For the first half of 1936, the union leaders continued in the same manner as they had in 1934 and 1935. The leaders were planning another strike for September. But by November 1936 matters had changed. Howard Kester became the leading force in the leadership and had radically redirect its position on the land question.

In the early summer of 1936, after the cotton had been “laid by,” the union leaders again stated that their only aim was to “improve the living conditions of the farmers in the South.”<sup>44</sup> During the summer the union leaders had decided that it was time for another strike. Again they planned to strike when the cotton was ready for picking, hoping that the planters would have to negotiate with the sharecroppers and tenant farmers as they had in

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<sup>44</sup> “Flyer of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” 1936, STFU Reel Three.

1935. In a letter written in May 1936 Mitchell stated that the demands of the strike would be:

1. A unified contract guaranteeing legal rates of interest on furnishings, payment in full of a government subsidies, parity, etc., wage rates not less than \$1.00 per 10 hour day, 15 cents per hour for overtime day labor.
2. Right to form a union and not to be discriminated on account of Union membership.<sup>45</sup>

The strike of 1936 utterly failed. Word of the strike leaked to the landlords, who were ready and willing to use vicious intimidation tactics of the previous year to keep their laborers in the fields.<sup>46</sup> With the defeat of the 1936 strike, mass evictions intensified. Facing a profound crisis, the union leadership was desperate for fresh help and new ideas.

This fresh help came from Howard Kester, a fiery young Christian Socialist. Kester was born in Martinsville, Virginia in 1904. As a young man he decided that he wanted to become a minister and began to pursue his "calling." Kester believed that with modern science and the Christian faith humankind could establish the Kingdom of God on the Earth.<sup>47</sup> Kester had taken a long hard look at the economic situation of the American South and by late 1936 had an analysis that he believed would begin to create this heavenly Kingdom on Earth. In 1936 Kester was chosen by the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union leadership to represent them before the Arkansas Governor's Commission on Farm Tenancy. There Kester presented a passionate and sometimes vivid description of the horrendous living conditions of sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and was also able to

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<sup>45</sup> Mitchell to unknown, May 21, 1936, STFU Reel 3.

<sup>46</sup> Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 427 and Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 86-103.

<sup>47</sup> Orville Vernon Burton, "Howard Kester (1904-77)" in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas ed., *Encyclopedia of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 401-402.



describe the violation of the civil rights of the STFU members. At the end of his presentation Kester began his analysis of the cotton South. His main fear was the coming of the cotton picking machine. He saw that this new machine, first tested by the socialist Rust brothers, meant “the expulsion from the land of hundreds of thousands of men whose jobs will be performed by the machine.” In a recent test, he reported, the cotton picking machine had picked in one day the amount formerly picked by forty people in a day.<sup>48</sup> Kester also reported that the most recent census data revealed that tenancy was declining in the South. These tenants, Kester reported, were not moving up to independent farm ownership but were being forced down to day labor.<sup>49</sup> The landlord had no legal or customary obligation to the day laborer, as he did with the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The day laborer worked for 35 to 75 cents a day and had to find a place to live and a way to feed their families on this wage. As King Cotton fell from its throne, Kester demanded to know, “What will become of the millions of men, women and children” who were losing all they had ever known?<sup>50</sup> Kester had a nine-point plan that he believed would lead to “a more wholesome life in Arkansas.”

1. Education must be increased. Education for children and adults and for blacks and whites.
2. Protection of all civil rights.
3. Right of labor to organize.
4. Strengthen the State Department of Labor.
5. Protection against misuse of the lien system and give croppers the right to sue if they feel they are being used.
6. Abolish the plantation commissary and allow tenants to trade wherever they chose.

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<sup>48</sup> Howard Kester, “Testimony Submitted to the Governor’s Commission on Farm Tenancy”, 1936, STFU Reel Three.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

7. Enforce the legal rate of interest.
8. Abolish the poll tax.
9. Co-operative farming.

This plan sounded like the programs that the union had offered in 1934 and 1935. The desire to meet the immediate needs of their membership was still the leadership's controlling impulse. The radical difference was obviously point nine, cooperative farming. The rank and file members had rejected this way of farming in 1935 and had continued to write letters stating that they wanted autonomy and their own land. Clearly the union leaders had taken a first step away from the rank and file on this issue of long term solutions for the sharecropper and tenant farmer situation.

In 1936 Howard Kester also wrote a book, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, in which he told the story of the STFU's struggles. In the last few pages he discussed what it would take to heal the cotton South. He called tenancy a "cancerous growth" and argued that "nothing short of a major operation will suffice to rid us of its evils."<sup>51</sup> The operation he had in mind was the ending of absentee landlordism and the tenancy system. He based this argument upon the idea we saw in embryo earlier, the land should belong to those who occupy it and use it.<sup>52</sup> Kester suggested that the government establish a National Land Authority which would have the power to purchase land for the purpose of establishing farms for those who would use the land not for those who would simply speculate on the land.<sup>53</sup> Kester made it clear that the Land Authority should not establish small

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<sup>51</sup> Kester, *Revolt Among The Sharecroppers*, 91.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

independent farms. He believed that in a changing economic world in which mechanization and expanding world competition were raising the cost of farming, small farms would lead to the creation of a "peasant class of farmers."<sup>54</sup> Instead he argued that only cooperative farms can people bring together the resources need to be engaged in large scale "modern" farming.<sup>55</sup>

Kester was again arguing for cooperative farming in the waning days of 1936. In a speech, "The Human Side of Cotton Tenancy," Kester argued that "tenancy is itself an evil. . . that must be abolished."<sup>56</sup> He argued that a new type of communal farming must be developed in its place. Kester provided a list of economic and moral advantages that cooperative farming would have had over the present system and over small scale individual farms. For Kester the idea of cooperative farming made good economic sense. It allowed for economic and agricultural experts to plan for crop rotations and for control of erosion. Cooperative farming also allowed for the use of tractors that individual farmers could not afford. It allowed the workers to buy food, clothes, and farming supplies in bulk, which lowered the cost for individuals and raised the quality of the goods. One of the great dangers of small farming, Kester believed, was that in hard times the farmer only had his good name for support, a collateral that lenders were not willing to trust. Kester believed that if run well cooperative farms would have a better chance of surviving the hard times.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>56</sup> Howard Kester, "The Human Side of Cotton Tenancy," December 29, 1936, STFU Reel Three.



Far more important than these economic arguments, for Kester, were the moral arguments. The cooperative system of farming would allow people to utilize their natural skills in different areas of the farm through the division of labor. The cooperative farms would also bring people closer in communal villages. Whereas under the current system of tenancy the sharecroppers and tenant farmers were spread out over a large area of land, the cooperative system that Kester envisioned saw people living together in groups of one hundred or less. Most important of all, for Kester, the cooperative vision would begin to undo the individualist myth that had enveloped farming in America. "A group spirit of accomplishment would replace individual pride," he wrote.<sup>57</sup>

As 1936 ended, the union leadership had come a long way from its original program of immediate humanization of the sharecropping and tenant farming system. The program of the STFU still reflected these immediate demands, but whenever the Union leaders appeared before government commissions or petitioned government agencies they were stressing the cooperative farming, not the immediate needs of the rank and file. The union leaders who were firmly committed to the idea of cooperative living preached this idea to every government commission, while the rank and file members were demanding independent farmsteads that would have allowed them to live autonomously.

The cooperative impulse found in the STFU leadership flowed from four sources. First, the Socialist impulse of the Union's leaders was finally working its way out. The second impulse came from the Christian Socialism of Kester and Claude Williams. All

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

men and women were seen to be brothers and sisters because they shared a common creation. Although Kester and Williams would have a violent break over whether or not Williams was a communist, both believed that all men and women, black and white, were created in God's image and that the Earth was created for all people to use equally. Flowing from these theological presuppositions these two men encouraged the union leadership to continually petition the government for a more just form of farming, which to Kester and Williams was the cooperative method.

The third impulse that led the union leaders away from their memberships' views on the land was the move in 1935 of the Union's headquarters from Tyronza, Arkansas, to downtown Memphis, Tennessee. In one sense this move was necessary and helpful. Mitchell and the other Union leaders were under constant death threats while they were in Arkansas. By moving to Memphis they faded into the tapestry of people that flowed in and out of Memphis on a daily basis. On the other hand, this move put the leaders out of direct daily contact with the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who used to come by the office when it was in Tyronza, Arkansas. This spatial distance was a strong influence in moving the leaders away from the rank and file. The leaders simply could no longer listen to the rank and file as easily as they could in the unions early days.

The last impulse that began the division between the sharecroppers and the tenant farmers and the leadership of the STFU was the leadership's reaction to the Bankhead Bill that had been introduced to the United States Senate by Senator John H. Bankhead of Alabama. This bill, which was still being debated in 1936, would have established the

Farm Security Administration to provide low interest loans to landless farmers.<sup>58</sup> To the leadership of the STFU this bill contradicted the principles of cooperative farming, to which they were so strongly committed. In reaction to the individualist position of the Bankhead bill, the STFU leadership believed that

“through co-operative farming a new altogether type of rural life may be developed in the South. By drawing groups of farmers together into a co-operative community they may have at their disposal all of the resources of modern civilization.”<sup>59</sup>

For a number of reasons 1936 must be seen as the year that the Union moved away from the desires of the rank and file members.

The union leaders were not deaf to the cry from the cotton fields. Each was a compassionate person who simply failed to understand the desires of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers on the issue of land.<sup>60</sup> Of all the leaders H. L. Mitchell was the one who tried hardest to articulate the rank and file's position. In early January 1937, H. L. Mitchell spoke before the President's Special Committee on Farm Tenancy in Dallas, Texas. Mitchell's speech was a long and passionate appeal to the hearts of his listeners. He described the despicable living and working conditions of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. He also laid out the union leader's solution for the tenant farming problem. Unlike the program written by Kester, this plan called for two forms of farming -- cooperative and individual farming but these two were not seen as equal: the cooperative

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<sup>58</sup> Louis Cantor, *A Prologue To the Protest Movement* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1969), 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>60</sup> This does not mean that the Union leadership was not honest in wanting to solve the immediate needs of the rank and file. They undoubtedly were.



was to be stressed over the individual type of farming. The union leadership called on the government to educate the people in the efficiency of collective farming. Thus even Mitchell swung away from the rank and file's agenda.

In March 1937 Mitchell helped the Oklahoma Southern Tenant Farmers Union formulate its legislative program. In it the union leadership stated that "the great mass of people can no longer succeed by individual effort." The program again called for both forms of farming, with a major stress on cooperative farming. This program shows how Mitchell reconciled the two programs: large cotton growing areas would be made up of cooperative farming groups and small isolated tracts of good farmland in the highlands would be utilized for individual farming.<sup>61</sup> With this program the union leadership tried to communicate its vision for the cotton growing South and to placate the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who wanted their own land.

Although the STFU leadership never stopped including immediate needs in the proposals they made to government commissions and agencies, the sharecroppers and tenant farmers knew that they were still without food, decent clothing, and a house to live in. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers also still believed that they were being singled out for eviction because of their union membership. It was obvious to many sharecroppers and tenant farmers by 1937 that the union could not help them with these immediate needs. But the rank and file also found that their long term goal of land ownership would not be met. Feeling betrayed because the union's leaders seemed to be spending all their time,

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<sup>61</sup> "Program of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union of Oklahoma" March 1937, STFU Reel Four.

and money, fighting for cooperative, a method of farming that sharecroppers and tenant farmers had already rejected, many of the rank and file became frustrated with the union and left. This growing frustration among the rank and file erupted at the STFU convention in 1938 when a delegate named J. E. Clayton rose to complain, "I don't think the national office is paying enough attention to some of the complaints about relief grants." J. R. Butler, the president of the union, rose, obviously confused at this attack, and rambled out a reply that the leadership had worked night and day to help the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Clayton obviously was not convinced and left the Union.<sup>62</sup> Henderson Bently and J. E. Clayton were some of the myriad of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who moved into the limelight of history and then faded out to make history in the shadows. Their stories were a recurring one in the history of the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union, people who had placed all their hope on meeting their dreams in a Union, who in the end were left feeling betrayed and alone.

The Southern Tenant Farmer's Union was a skeleton of its former self by 1940. There were few sharecroppers and tenant farmers who still placed their trust in the organization. Although the Union would continue to have an organization in the Arkansas Delta until 1945, it had essentially died by 1940.

The STFU was born in a time of great change. The union came into the Arkansas delta knowing they could win. But by January 1936, the backlash of violence had begun, coupled with the introduction of tractors which displaced sharecroppers and tenant

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., "Report on STFU Convention", 1938, Reel nine.

farmers. The mechanization and the violence probably would have destroyed the union on its own. But the unions was also faced with an internal crisis.

The sharecroppers and tenant farmers and the union leadership ultimately held two different visions of how society should be organized. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers wanted their immediate needs met and they wanted land to call their own. The leaders, on the other hand, shifted their vision throughout the years. In the early days of the STFU, the leaders attempted to articulate the demands and the vision of the rank and file, but over time their position began, in an attempt to survive, to change and the leaders began to demand a way of farming that the sharecroppers and tenant farmers had rejected. In the end this shift in the policy of the STFU's leadership, and its inability to provide for the basic needs of the rank and file would be important causes for the union's demise.

The STFU came to a swift end. H. L. Mitchell shocked the seventh annual convention of the STFU in 1941 when he announced that he saw "no basis for trade unionism in southern agriculture." In that one sentence Mitchell admitted defeat. Although the union would continue on for four more years it was really only a name. In 1945 the union closed its office in Memphis for good, quietly leaving the Delta.



## EPILOGUE

This thesis has attempted to bring the sharecroppers and the tenant farmers to the forefront of the story of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. These men and women mattered in history, and it is a tragedy that their story is now all but forgotten. These men and women, both black and white, believed that they could appeal to the government and to the land owners to see that their Christian duty lay in helping the poor in their midst. To this effect they created the STFU to act as their collective voice. These men and women joined the STFU looking for a way to provide a better and richer life for their families. Instead they found themselves thrown out of the world most of them had known their whole lives. They drew upon Christianity to analyze the world around them and to provide a solution to their problems. Their world was a moral world in which men and women were judged on the basis of how they loved God and helped their neighbor. Within the union they took care of one another and with the union they attempted to change the personal agenda of landowners and the political agendas of New Deal leaders. As we have seen they failed to gain either of their short term or their long term goals on the land. Although they failed in their agenda, they remained faithful to their view of the world, and to them this was of extreme importance.

One historian of the Union believed that if you stopped your car out on the edge of Highway 63 near Marked Tree, you could hear voices singing in the distance the grand

organizing song of the union -- "The Union is a-marching, we shall not be moved..."<sup>1</sup> By this he wanted his readers to leave his book with the understanding that this was a defiant union, that although it was beaten, the reader could learn a lesson about organizing people to fight for justice. I have no argument with this, but as I stand out on that same stretch of highway I also hear another song flowing in over the dark and deserted cotton fields,

Well I was farming shares and always I was poor.  
 My debts the were so many they wouldn't go around.  
 Drought got my crop and Mr. Banker took my home.  
 ---I ain't got no home in this world any more.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who lost their farms would eventually find jobs in the war industries that would develop with the United States' entry into World War II. Many left the rural worlds they had known forever and eventually learned to live in new environments, while some even prospered in California and Chicago. Many others did not prosper and many of these men and women still sit in the Delta, with their children and grandchildren. Many have been able to get a small house, some even a tiny piece of land. But most simply made it from day to day. In the town of Birdsong, Arkansas I came across a group of men and women looking out over the fields they and their fathers had once hoped to own. A large cotton picker did the work it would have taken a family a week to do in a single day in the 1930s. No one really grieves the loss of the sharecropping system. The despair one finds in some in the Delta is the despair of dreams betrayed and of hopes crushed. These men and women that hot August day in

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Grubbs, *Cry From The Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 192.

<sup>2</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Dust Bowl Ballads," Folkways Albums No. FH5212, (New York: Folkway Records, 1964.)

1991 sat in a circle of chairs under a large oak at the edge of an old cotton field and told stories. They laughed at the old times, they raged at their losses, and cried for the injustices they had endured. In the end they passed the bottle around the circle one more time and with a silent sorrow they realized that they had failed to possess the land.



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