

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF
OKLAHOMA TENANT FARMING, 1890-1940

By

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Preface

Though Oklahoma has historically been one of the most identifiable states with rural communities, its tenant society has been largely forgotten, especially before 1930. This interesting phenomenon developed because of the perception of pre-World War II Oklahoma is based on the novel and movie *The Grapes of Wrath*. Though Steinbeck put in a great deal of research and interviews with Okie and Arkie migrants, he had never been to Oklahoma when he wrote his book. Therefore, the American public is influenced about the ideas of Oklahoma by a man who was not even familiar with the way that tenants actually lived.

The primary motivation for this study is to look at the three basic phases of Oklahoma tenancy and show the evolution from a communal ownership to an exact opposite form of land ownership where the wealthy owned the land in only fifty years time. In the first phase, 1890-1910, I will examine the origins of the Oklahoma system and why it is unique. Growing from a much different tradition than the Southern tenant system, Oklahoma tenancy was born from a system of the exploitation of the legal system and the dispossessing of the Native Americans and their previously communal homelands. The second phase of the tenant system exists from roughly 1910-1930. These artificial watersheds are imposed because allotment and sale of excess land was nearly complete by 1910 and the tenancy system was in place and mimicked the southern system very closely by this time. The date 1930 is used because the United States had fallen deeply into the Depression by this time and many social and political leaders were

looking for someone or something to alleviate the problem. The final phase of Oklahoma tenancy discussed in this project is largely confined to the 1930s. By this time, Americans were clamoring for relief, both on the farm and in the city. The government became involved extensively in the agricultural economy and finally began to search for a way to help the tenant farmer purchase a farm.

This is not meant to be either an indictment or justification of the tenancy system. It is merely an attempt at an objective look at how the lives of the tenant farmers of Oklahoma were influenced by the economic surges and recessions of the agricultural economy and how the United States and Oklahoma governments reacted to this situation. I will explore the rise of tenancy and the development of the system and how and why it was unique in comparison with the other regions of the United States.

This study focuses on tenancy as it pertains to Oklahoma over a fifty-year period. Though some may claim that Oklahoma tenancy is similar to tenancy in the South, this is only partly true. Rather than coming out of the slavery system as Southern sharecropping, Oklahoma tenancy began as a direct result of the sale of Indian land at the turn of the twentieth century. Out of an era with virtually no prior tenancy, tenancy in Oklahoma emerged to take on an increasingly southern look, especially in the cotton growing region. The emergence and growth of tenancy on wheat farms in western Oklahoma also gives it a unique aspect. Here, mechanization and climate made tenancy a difficult but viable form of existence. This division makes it impossible to generalize about Oklahoma in terms of a Great Plains or Southern state; it was both. The other primary way that tenancy differed in Oklahoma from tenancy in the South was in the ethnicity of the tenants. In the Deep South, the main group classified as tenants were

African-Americans, whereas in Oklahoma, the vast majority of the tenants were white. Despite their racial differences, Oklahoma tenants shared more in common with the former slaves mired in sharecropping than they did many of the white Southern owners. Despite the unique aspects of tenancy in Oklahoma, it took on a very Southern appearance by 1910 and Oklahoma's tenant farmers, especially cotton tenants, shared a great deal of their economic and social struggles with those of the Deep South. Some of these problems were self-inflicted, while others were completely beyond the control of the renter.

This paper uses a combination of social, political, and economic sources to get the entire picture of how the system actually worked. I have tried to use social sources that have largely been forgotten by many historians on this issue. By looking at the letters written to governors, private collections, and using taped and transcribed interviews with actual tenant farmers, I have gained perspective on what the tenant farmers thought instead of relying solely on advocates for their cause to tell the story. The leading agricultural newspapers contemporary to this time serve as the leading non-tenant advocate in many cases. Therefore, I have also used several of these newspapers to help relate the story. Economic and political sources include reports from the Extension Service, the papers of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, and reports by the land grant college Oklahoma A & M.

Several basic assumptions employed during this research are fundamental ideas linked to the history of tenancy in Oklahoma. One fundamental assumption is the importance of the cotton to the tenant. Many tenants in Southern Oklahoma depended almost entirely on cotton for their income. Therefore, any phenomenon that affected the

cotton harvest, yields, or economy had enormous impact on the tenant community. Also, small farm owners often faced similar economic woes as tenants though they owned their own farms. The fine line that existed between them was only the fact that they had a mortgage they would most likely never pay off. In both social and economic situations, they were more similar to the tenant than the large-scale owner. It is also vital to understand that the agricultural economy influenced the tenant much more than the national economy. Their prosperity followed the booms and busts of the cotton and wheat market and only through coincidence followed that of urban America.

In this study, Chapter One will serve as a basic introduction, focusing on tenancy in a broad sense and discussing the historiography of the topic. Chapter Two will look at the origin of the tenant system in Oklahoma. This chapter will discuss tenancy during the era when the Five Tribes controlled the land, the effects of Indian allotment on the system, and how speculators used the legal system to defraud the Indians of their land to set up a system of sharecropping in Oklahoma. Chapter Three will focus on the economic and political factors during the period 1910 to 1930 and how they affected the tenant. Chapter Four will focus on New Deal Programs that inadvertently hurt the tenant when trying to help, before finally installing programs to assist the tenant improve his economic situation and to help a few buy their own farms. Chapter Five will serve as the concluding to chapter to summarize the findings of this study.

This project would not have been possible without the help of members of my committee. I would like to thank Dr. L. G. Moses for never turning me away when I had questions too countless to be answered, with assistance in revising and editing, and advising when needed. Dr. Elizabeth Williams sets high standards and provides a strong

role model for all graduate students to follow and also offered constructive criticism for the completion of this project. Dr. Bill Bryans also served as a valuable critic of this project despite the late date at which he was added. Dr. Richard Rohrs pushed all the graduate students to strive for excellence in his classes and has also been a valuable member of my committee. I would also like to thank members of several libraries who went to the deepest, darkest vaults known to historians to retrieve dusty material that had not seen the light in decades. These include Special Collections and Government Documents librarians at Oklahoma State University, librarians at the Archives of the Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma State Archives, and the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Tenancy in Oklahoma during the first half of the twentieth century is often overlooked by historians. Overshadowed by Indian allotment, statehood, World War I, Socialism, and the Great Depression, the voices of tenant farmers have been muffled by other issues. In every census taken between 1910 and 1940, over fifty percent of all farmers reported that they were tenants, thus making them a majority within the agricultural community. It is also important to challenge the popular perception that most tenants joined the great migration out of Oklahoma during the 1930s. This stereotype suggested that the farmers were dispossessed of their land after residing there for generations. The primary agents of dispossession were bankers, creditors, and the Dust Bowl. Despite the inaccuracy of popular perception, mainly due to *The Grapes of Wrath*, tenancy remained the form of agricultural organization in Oklahoma before and during the Great Depression.

A study of tenancy also acts as a unifying theme that holds together the history of Oklahoma from the 1890s to the 1930s. Oklahoma tenancy was sired by the Dawes Commission and given birth by the Curtis Act, thus tying it to Indian allotment and land speculation. After its inception, tenants experienced the same economic triumphs and struggles as other farmers from 1910 to 1929; but they showed completely different characteristics and lifestyle and their woes were often much more pronounced than those of the farm owners. Their farming practices and family lives differed from that of the owners, but went largely ignored by the Progressive era reformers. During the 1920s,

farmers suffered more as a group than many other classes but were left to their fate as corporate America dominated the decade after World War I. In the 1930s, the tenant saw the first signs of government concern as they New Deal finally came to help them but not before the rest of the agricultural community received its aid. Therefore, the history of tenancy in Oklahoma is a somber story about a people mired in debt, caught in the creditor's web, and struggling against mechanization. They had internalized the yeoman ideal of ownership but were destined to remain landless. What is more, many one-time landowners joined the rising tenant class during the late 1920s and 1930s due to events they could not control.

Surprisingly, very little attention has been given to the subject of tenancy in Oklahoma during this period, and even more distressing, the voice of the tenants is missing from those histories. One study provides a very good general discussion of tenancy in Oklahoma from 1925 to 1935. However, because of its contemporary nature, it lacks historical perspective. It sought more to look in a very broad sense at tenancy rather than to focus on any particular aspect.¹ Another thesis studied the leasing patterns between landlords and their tenants focusing on the economic factors that influenced the type of lease contract between the two parties. It found that owners in the western and eastern parts of the state had much different leasing patterns.²

The primary work on related issues in Oklahoma deals with the 1930s. The Okie migration to California during the decade is one topic that directly relates to the issue and received more attention than any other in regards to tenancy. Many of the tenants in

¹Tom Moore, *Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma 1925-1935*. MA Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1938.

²Kenneth Lewis Hobson, *Leasing Patterns and Landlord-Tenant Relationships by Selected Tenure Status Groups in Southwestern Oklahoma*. MA Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1951.

southern and eastern Oklahoma were forced off of their farms and moved west in search of jobs and better working conditions. One such book focuses on the consequences of the migration and how the Okies formed new societies in California.³ Another key work looks at the conflicts that occurred in California between the migrant Okies and the resident Californians. Beginning after the Okies' arrived in California, the work explains the conditions surrounding the social upheaval brought on by the mass influx of population.⁴ A look at New Deal farm policy by Paul Maris reveals how government policy and legislation improved the lives of both tenants and owners.⁵ A work by Donald Worster, generally regarded as a classic in the history of the Great Plains, describes the Dust Bowl that ravaged the southern plains and drove tenants and owners alike from their homes because they could no longer make a living for their family.⁶

Numerous works have been written on Southern tenancy and the history of poor farmers in the South. The beginning of southern tenancy is a topic of some debate but it is generally considered an extension of the plantation system by most scholars. They differ somewhat on who benefited the most from the system but basically agree that it came from a combination of compromises by both freedmen and former plantation owners.⁷ The most renowned work on the social history of poor whites, Hispanics, and

³James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University, 1989).

⁴Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973).

⁵Paul V. Maris, *"The Land is Mine": From Tenancy to Family Farm Ownership* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

⁶Donald Worster, *Dustbowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, Oxford University: 1979).

⁷Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press: 1993).

African-Americans in Texas shows an interesting look at how multiple ethnic groups struggled for survival in cotton growing Texas.⁸

Before discussing the events, movements, and factors that affected tenants, a definition of tenants must be established. A tenant is anyone who rents his home. In this study, only tenants residing on farms will be discussed. Therefore, a farm tenant is any person who rents his or her farm and the house their family resides in and owns none of the land. However, they can own some implements, livestock, or improvements but not the actual farm or house.

There are also several different types of tenants as recognized by both scholars and the Bureau of the Census. Typically, the term tenant refers to a renter.⁹ A renter pays a fixed amount of rent, usually in cash, at the beginning of each calendar year or crop year. This is a predetermined amount and does not depend on the crop or market. A sharecropper pays his lease with a certain percentage of the crop, typically on one-half or one-third shares depending on what types of crops are raised and how much livestock and equipment the sharecropper will supply.¹⁰ Landowners typically make more money off of a sharecropper than a renter. The risk is spread between two parties, making it preferential to both owner and “cropper” when growing cash crops. Sharecropping is usually done when a cash crop, such as cotton, is the crop of choice because of the potential for high loss. This makes for a fairly unpredictable, yet very prosperous possibility for the owner and tenant when the crop prices are high. Renting is the

⁸Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997).

⁹I will use the term tenant to refer to all persons who do not own their farms or homes regardless of the type of lease they have, whether it be renting or sharecropping. When needing to make a distinction between sharecroppers and renters, I will use these terms but usually both lease types are affected by the same events and ideas.

¹⁰Royce. *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, 185.

contract of choice when safer crops, such as corn, hay, or other feeds, or livestock are the commodity. This is the method of choice of the northern United States because fewer cash crops can be grown there.¹¹ However, most historians and contemporary sources agree that renters made more money on average than sharecroppers. One theory suggests that renters tend to work harder to produce better yields because they stand to make more profit and do not have to divide their money with the landowner.¹² As expected, this leaves the economic condition of the average sharecropper below the income of most tenants, and occasionally even below the status of the wage laborer.¹³ Typically, in Southern society, tenancy or renting has been more prevalent among poor white farmers, and sharecropping has been the dominant contract with the poor black tenant.¹⁴ Likely, the primary motivating factor behind this fact is that land owners trusted their white renters more, due to racial prejudice, and forced sharecropping on the black farmers because landowners were skeptical of the work ethic and productivity of their black tenants. Owners were often forced to rent to people without full knowledge of their backgrounds or qualifications; therefore, they made their decision on which type of tenure status to give the farmer based on preconceptions. Factors that led to these were the obvious ones: gender, race, appearance, and education. Outward appearances, mostly race, determined the type of lease the individual was given.¹⁵ Because of the lack of knowledge about their renters, sharecropping helped the owner offset, according to

¹¹William Hallagan, "Self Selection by Contractual Choice and the Theory of Sharecropping" *The Bell Journal of Economics* 9 (Autumn 1978): 344-345.

¹²Ibid, 353.

¹³Moore, *Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma*, 29.

¹⁴Royce, *The Origin of Southern Sharecropping*, 186.

¹⁵Hallagan, "Self Selection by Contractual Choice," 348.

Mariam Wells, “the rising cost [of seed, mechanization, and land] and uncertainty of labor.”¹⁶

The definition of an owner can also be a confusing discussion. For the purpose of this study, the Census definition is the least complicated. An owner will be any person who owns part or all of the land they farm. Even though the owner may rent some land and possibly even the majority of his farm land, he owns his own home and cannot be evicted by a landlord. This definition is not without its drawbacks. The farmer who rents the majority of his land faces much the same problems as the tenant except that he cannot be forced out of his home. It is also a “self-defined” class as ownership is based solely on how the farmer answers the Census. Therefore, farmers could skew the results of the Census somewhat by marking the incorrect answer or simply lying in his response.

Historians and sociologists recognize a certain natural progression that agricultural tenure tends to follow. Historically, farmers began as wage laborers and worked until they earned enough respect to become a sharecropper. After sharecropping for a certain time, they were then given renter status because they proved they could manage a farm and make it profitable for the owner. Next, a period of renting and saving money led the farmer to embrace the yeoman’s ideal through land ownership.

Typically, the higher up the tenant ladder the farmer rises (excluding ownership), the less capital the owner must invest. For a wage laborer, the owner paid the worker for the amount of work done. With a sharecropper, the owner typically provided the land, the seed, and the tools for raising the crop, while the farmer only provided the manual labor required to make the crop. With a renter, the farmer provided the manual labor, the

¹⁶Mariam L. Wells. “The Resurgence of Sharecropping: Historical Anomaly or Political Strategy?,” *American Journal of Sociology* 90 (Spring 1984): 3.

machinery, and usually the seed, while the owner was only responsible for providing the land.¹⁷

The rise in tenancy in Oklahoma is also linked with the growing interest in making Oklahoma into a cotton producing state. Areas where cotton is grown tend to have a much higher tenancy rate than areas that rely on some other form of agriculture to drive the economy. This leaves the eastern half of the state, former Indian Territory, and the southern tier of counties with a much higher rate than the western half of the state. However, by the 1920s, tenancy in the wheat growing regions was rapidly gaining ground on the cotton regions. Tenancy still remained much higher in former Indian Territory, and just as in the rest of the South, was tied very closely to cotton farming because of the cash crop influence.

Several existing theories have been advanced about why tenancy rose sharply in Oklahoma after 1910. One theory claims that the rise in tenancy was due to the dying out of pioneers in Oklahoma. Because their children moved away from the farms in search of jobs, a void was left and the only people who could afford to buy these former homesteads were speculators and banks.¹⁸ Many farmers during the early 1900s had no choice but to begin by renting because they did not have the capital to purchase their own farms.¹⁹ The dying pioneer theory only explains the rise in tenancy in the wheat belt of Oklahoma. The majority of the cotton growing regions, areas formerly occupied by the

¹⁷Royce, *The Origin of Southern Sharecropping*, 187; Hallagan, "Self Selection by Contractual Choice," 345.

¹⁸Moore, *Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma*, 29.

¹⁹Gilbert C. Fite, "The Agricultural Trap in the South," *Agricultural History* 60 (Winter 1986): 46.

Native Americans and broken up to be sold by allotment, were never opened up for white homestead. Therefore, dying pioneers would not cause the increased rise in tenancy in southern or eastern Oklahoma because there were no pioneers other than Indians. It is much more likely that in the cotton regions of Oklahoma tenancy was caused by rising land prices and a poor agricultural economy that was out of the control of the tenant.

Chapter II: Origins of Oklahoma Tenant Farming, 1890 to 1910

Tenancy in Oklahoma is different in its origin than in any other part of the United States. This is probably because Oklahoma history is radically different during its territorial phase than any other state. The unique situation in early Oklahoma includes the allotment of Indian lands, the rapid settlement of Oklahoma by white settlers, the passage of the Curtis Bill in 1898, and the decision of the courts that allowed white speculators to defraud the Indians of their lands. The Curtis Bill and the establishment of the Dawes Commission roles will serve as the watershed whereby tenancy was completely changed. Before the Curtis Bill, Native Americans were in control of the land of Indian Territory. Non-tribal members were not allowed to own land in the region. They could only live in Indian Territory with special permission of the tribal governments and usually had to pay a fee to do so. After the passage of the Curtis Bill, much of the land shifted from Native-American ownership to white ownership.

Before the passage of the Curtis Bill, tenancy was very different from tenancy after the act. It differed not in the practice, but who was administering it. During this time, virtually all white men farming in the countryside were tenants. They could not own land and therefore had to pay rent to the Indian Nation for permission to live and farm the land. Much of the land was rich and fertile, not worn out by too many seasons of hard use. One tenant explains “all we had to do was put the seed in the ground and

plow it about once and let it go and we sure used to make a bumper crop.”¹ Later tenants struggled with soil fertility, which forced them to boost its productivity with soil enhancing crops, natural fertilizer, chemical fertilizer, or a combination of all three. Thus, the early tenant was battling depleted soil as the twentieth century farmer.

Prior to 1900, land in Indian Territory belonged to the Indian tribes, greatly influencing early tenancy in Oklahoma. The communal ownership of the land was, just as it had been since pre-contact times, the basis of their entire economic, political, and social structure. Though there were a few more formalized rules, the laws were very liberal and relaxed when dealing with whites. Originally, an Indian could fence however much land he could control and use it for farming and grazing “and not be made to vacate.”² The livestock was raised on open range with no fences keeping the animals in or out. As long as the Native American did not infringe upon his neighbors, no laws were broken.³

The few laws and customs that Native Americans followed in regards to land tenure were very simple, but varied slightly from one nation to another. In most instances, only a farmer or rancher of Native-American birth could use as much land as he could plow or fence. In the Choctaw Nation, a farmer could plow one furrow with his team around a vast tract of land and was then allowed to use this land as his own for farming, grazing, or subleasing to white or African-American farmers.⁴ There was no way, or need, to limit the holdings of the individual farmer because land was fairly

¹Interview with W.R. Berryhill by Johnson H. Hampton (March 29, 1938). *Indian and Pioneer History Collection* (104) pg. 63, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK. Hereafter cited as *IPH*.

²Interview with Charles W. Lofton by W.T. Holland (September 28, 1937). *IPH* (33), 351.

³Interview with W.I. Worley by L.W. Wilson (April 29, 1937). *IPH* (11), 574.

⁴Interview with Joseph Uray Lattimer by Amelia F. Harris (September 23, 1937). *IPH* (33), 80.

abundant. The Cherokee Nation had slightly different rules that became more widely adopted by 1890 as the population grew because whites began to move into Indian Territory. Here, an individual Cherokee could hold a claim and make improvements for one-quarter of a mile in all directions, using the homestead as the center point.⁵ Another source asserts that the Creeks were much different in their landholding than other accounts. This tenant states, "Because the land was held in common, there was only one way to rent land. The white farmer could make an agreement with the first Muskogee-Creek tribesman he encountered."⁶ It is very likely that many white tenants who came to the area were actually living there illegally because of the lack of formal rules, liberal ideas, and limited governmental control. As time progressed, and the Native-American governments became increasingly worried about the white invasion, they governed more strictly those that they allowed to reside on their land.

One report tells that the Delaware Indians living within the Cherokee Nation had a slightly different method in claiming their land. This method much more resembled the traditional pioneering way of staking a claim. First, the farmer cut a tree and carved his name, date, and the word "claim" on the sapling and drove it into the ground. Then he cut four logs and laid them in a square. This served as the foundation for his log house. This act alone held the claimed land for thirty days. He then came back at the end of this time and added a few more logs and plowed a few acres to show that he was indeed farming it. Later, in an informal contract, the Delaware farmer could sell his improvements if he wished, but never the land because it belonged to the entire tribe.⁷

⁵Interview with William Burd by O.C. Darrow. *IPH* (1), 480.

⁶Interview with O.C. Sellers by Billie Byrd (August 10, 1837). *IPH* (44), 156.

⁷Interview with Isaac Secondine by Alfred Hicks (April 28, 1937). *IPH* (9), 193.

Because the land was held in common before 1898, no taxes were paid on the land by anyone whether they were Native American, white, or black. Both whites and African-American renters often had to pay license fees, royalties, annuities, or leases to the respective tribal government in order to dwell within that particular nation, but no land taxes.⁸ Cattle ranchers were permitted to graze their herds in the Creek Nation but the Creek government became much more strict on what parties they allowed to rent within their territory. Many cattle companies, including the Muskogee Development Company, lost enormous sums of money when their contracts were terminated.⁹ However, cattlemen could get around the new laws by registering their herds in the name of a tribal member and paying him to go along with the plan.¹⁰ The fees paid by incoming tenants, and the few ranchers who were allowed to stay, were used to pay for schools, tribal governments, and everyday expenses of the nation.¹¹ There was also a marriage fee in many of the Indian nations. “The fees for a white man to marry a Choctaw girl ranged from \$50 to \$100.” This lofty sum was set so high to discourage the trend and protect the Indian lands from poor whites interested only in acquiring land. These laws also applied to any African-American man who desired to marry a Choctaw woman.¹² Many of these laws directly affected tenants because virtually all white farmers in Indian Territory at this time were tenants. Most could not afford the marriage fee so they either became renters or illegal squatters.

⁸Interview with R.Z. Dugan by L.W. Wilson, *IPH* (3), 282.

⁹Interview with D.H. Middleton by Ella Robinson. *IPH* (7), 197-201.

¹⁰Interview with John T. Barr by Raymond Jantz (January 13, 1938). *IPH* (90), 47-50.

¹¹Interview with R.Z. Dugan by L.W. Wilson, *IPH* (3), 282.

¹²Interview with Lucy Cherry by L.W. Wilson (November 26, 1937). *IPH* (79), 162.

By 1890, Indian Territory began to see a rapid rise in whites coming in hopes of receiving farms.¹³ Because whites were not allowed to own farms themselves, they fell into two classes: those who married Indian women and those who were tenants. Despite the high fees of some tribes for whites to marry an Indian girl, the practice was infrequent but not impossible. They could then use their new tribal connection to move to the countryside and carve out a farm just as any other tribal member. It stands as reasonable to speculate that a good percentage of these men were merely taking Indian wives so that they could have a farm of their own because land was not yet open to non-tribal members without special permission. These men were able to escape tenancy through this method.

Individual Indians sometimes controlled vast expanses of land because they could use as much as they could control. At this point, they would rent parts of their land to whites for cash or in exchange for a portion of the crop.¹⁴ The leases were very stable and often lasted for periods of five to ten years. Occasionally, these leases were nearly a mutual lifetime agreement renewed in the same manner as the original agreement, a handshake. These liberal contracts made it much easier for white farmers to move into Indian Territory.¹⁵ They were informal agreements, with no contracts, and resulted in a very stable and permanent farming class that did not exist in other regions of the south because of the sharecropping system that entrenched itself in Southern society after the Civil War. Tenants in the South were an extremely mobile class, just as twentieth-century tenants would become.

In some cases, the lease resulted in no money actually changing hands. Zack Redford described one such agreement in the Chickasaw Nation. In this instance, the

¹³Interview with John T. Barr by Raymond Jantz (January 13, 1938). *IPH* (90), 47-50.

¹⁴Interview with Joe M. Grayson by Grace Kelley (December 17, 1937). *IPH* (26), 367-368.

¹⁵Interview with Mr. and Mrs. J.S. Ryan by Harry M. Freyer (April 5, 1937). *IPH* (9), 135.

Chickasaw landholder agreed to pay twenty-four dollars an acre to the tenant if he would live on the land, build a house and barn, dig a well, and fence in the cultivated land with hog proof rail fence. The white man agreed to pay one dollar an acre per year to live on the farm. Thus, the agreement basically became that the renter was allowed to live on the land for a period of twenty-four years for no rent if he made the required improvements.¹⁶

Many of the rent agreements where no money actually changed hands were not nearly as complex as the one mentioned above where the parties actually figured how to make the agreement come out even. In some cases, the agreement was simply that the tenant cleared the land and put it into cultivation, and kept all of his earnings for a period of five years.¹⁷ James Givens entered into such an agreement with his landlord, Mr. Ryan. Mr. Ryan married a Choctaw woman and controlled about eight-square miles by plowing a furrow around the perimeter showing his intent to farm it. He allowed Givens to live on a small farm for three years in exchange for clearing the timber and beginning cultivation.¹⁸ This was a very typical, simple, yet effective way of settling non-monetary rental agreements.

The Indian claims could exchange hands, both to a renter or another Indian during this time. Usually, permanent exchange was not the typical course of action between a renter and a tribal member, but occasionally the Indian might want the land a white tenant inhabited. In this situation, it was possible during this very liberal era of communal tenure in Indian Territory to trade the original claimant some ponies or other items for the rights to the claim. Though they were still not legal heir to the land, the tribal citizen or

¹⁶Interview with Zack Redford by Grace Kelley (December 12, 1937). *IPH* (41), 268-269.

¹⁷Interview with J.D. Baker by Maurice R. Anderson (October 26, 1937). *IPH* (13), 143.

¹⁸Interview with James Abraham Givens by Ethel B. Tackitt (March 9, 1938). *IPH* (84), 192-193.

renter who lived on the land first had the right to farm and use the land for as long as he wished or until he sold his improvements and moved.¹⁹

When whites came to Indian Territory, they were not allowed to own the land but they did own any improvements made on the land. Improvements included such items as houses, barns, fences, wells, windmills, or any other type of permanent structure built to increase the farm's value. Anything the tenant built was owned unless otherwise specified in the agreement. Even when the land was leased from an individual and not the nation, the improvements were the tenants unless it was stipulated in the rent agreement. "Then," according to Joe M Grayson, "they belonged to the Indian."²⁰ When a prospective tenant planned to move to a new farm, he could purchase the improvements of the farm if the former tenant was willing to sell. They still did not own the actual land, but they were leasing it from the tribal government or an individual Indian even though they now owned the improvements of a previous tenant.²¹

Improving the farm also included cultivating virgin land and fencing the newly plowed fields away from the livestock. One description of a fenced field demonstrates how the Native Americans felt about the open range and communal ownership of land. "All of the fields were fenced with rails, and the fencing was made hog tight. Instead of fencing a pasture for the hogs as we do now [1930s], we fenced the cultivated or field land away from the hogs and cattle."²² This still allowed livestock to roam where they wanted but protected the crops.

¹⁹Interview with Frank Harris by John F. Daugherty (August 14, 1937). *IPH* (63), 404.

²⁰Interview with Joe M. Grayson by Grace Kelley (December 17, 1937). *IPH* (26), 367-368.

²¹Interview with John C. Robinson by Harry L. Rummage (June 2, 1937). *IPH* (8), 523.

²²Interview with Lorena Simerson by James R. Carselowey (May 21, 1937). *IPH* (101), 354.

Even though this was a fairly stable tenant system, some movement of tenants did occur but not at the rapid rate that it did after statehood in Oklahoma. Often, when a renter decided to move claims, parts of their old house would be dismantled and used as the beginning of a structure on the new place. If no one could be found who was willing to buy the improvements, and the Indian who controlled the land did not want to buy them, the capital invested in the structures would be lost if they were not taken along. Rather than lose the structure and its value, tenants would dismantle the barns and houses, or take up the fences, and move them to the new farm.²³

Some of the tenants in Indian Territory before the Curtis Bill were black. Many of these were former slaves and descendants of slaves brought by the tribes during relocation; others were migrants who came to the territory for much the same reason as prospective white farmers. One such former slave was Rich Elick, who was supposedly adopted by the Indians with a type of honorary member status. He was much more prosperous than the typical African-American farmer in the region, and was probably even more prosperous than the average white farmer of this time. Near present-day Purcell, Elick controlled nearly four thousand acres and, ironically, his renters included many white tenants who came hoping to find land. He was nicknamed “Rich” because of the vast expanse of land he controlled.²⁴

During this era of tenancy in Indian Territory prior to 1898, tenant farmers focused more on the aspect of self-sufficiency than they would in later years. This informal and relaxed system did not stress cash crops as the only source of survival. Many of the tenants and non-tenant farmers grew or raised a wide variety of crops and

²³Catalina Prater Questionnaire. *IPH* (76), 362-363.

²⁴Interview with William B. Dwiggins by Jasper H. Mead (May 17, 1937). *IPH* (3), 319.

livestock including corn, wheat, hay, hogs, cattle, poultry, and some cotton. This form of tenancy was nearly as favorable as the yeoman dream of ownership. They had more economic and social freedom, were not nearly as transient, and often lived on a farm for a minimum of five years. The passing of the Curtis Act and the allotment of the Indian lands would mark the end of this form of tenancy where they rented from the tribal governments or an individual Indian landholder. This act served as the beginning of the descent into the same trap that held poor whites and blacks in permanent tenancy in the Deep South as large land speculating companies flooded into Oklahoma, buying Indian land and renting it to the farmers, making tremendous profits.

In 1898, the watershed event occurred that changed the relations of tenants and landowners as Indian Territory began to look toward statehood. The passage of the Curtis Act completely changed the complexion of the ownership of Indian lands in the eastern half of what would soon become Oklahoma. This congressional act forced the allotment of Indian lands after the Dawes Commission had previously surveyed the land and thus began the process of placing the Indians on their homesteads by formally making each member enrolled in the tribe a landowner. Although some resistance occurred, most Native Americans accepted the allotment with little fighting as they realized this was their only chance to get any type of settlement from the process.²⁵

This act had several key characteristics that made it important to the tenancy system. Of primary importance, it abolished tribal courts, allowed for the allotment of the surveyed land, and appointed town site commissions to organize the growing

²⁵Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1940), 32-33.

municipalities.²⁶ A small portion of the allotment to each individual served as the Indian's homestead. The surplus, the area allotted in excess of the homestead, could be sold at any time after the restrictions were removed. According to Angie Debo, the purpose of the allotment was two fold. One was to integrate the Indians into white society by surrounding them with white neighbors, the second purpose was probably the most important driving force behind the act. It also served to satisfy the land hungry whites, eager to open the area to settlement and development.²⁷

First, the land had to be surveyed in order for it to be allotted. "The land of the Cherokee Nation appraised from \$.50 to \$6.50 per acre and no citizen was entitled to have more than \$325 worth of land."²⁸ The homesteads were set at forty acres for the Cherokees, one hundred sixty acres for the Choctaws and Chickasaws, and forty acres for the Creeks and Seminoles.²⁹ The homestead served as the central site where the Indian would supposedly dwell and could not be sold for a period of several years varying by age and "blood quantum". However, the excess land could be sold once the restrictions were removed.³⁰

As white settlers began to clamor for more land, Congress began to remove restrictions and allow sale on the surplus land, primarily the land received in excess of homesteads. In 1904, Congress removed the restrictions on half-blood Indians who appeared before a court official in a competency hearing. If deemed competent, Indians could sell their excess allotments immediately. By 1907, Congress removed the

²⁶Interview with Bill Simon by L.W. Wilson (April 13, 1937). *IPH* (10), 254.

²⁷Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 36.

²⁸Interview with S.S. Cobb by L.W. Wilson (January 27, 1938). *IPH* (104), 357-358. See Table One.

²⁹Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 90-91.

³⁰"Restrictions" are the common term used to refer to the restriction by the United States government on Native Americans that does not allow them to sell their land until permission is granted by a special court.

restrictions on the sale of freedmen and all but minor “half-bloods.”³¹ Full-blood Indians were still unable to sell their land according to the agreement under the existing legislation. Because of the custom of tribal ownership, full-bloods and minors were seen as incompetent in land matters because they had never owned individual farms before, and needed protection. Therefore, they were not allowed to sell their homesteads for a period of twenty-one.³² However, many Indians controlled much more than their allotted amounts of land. They often took their wives and children in to file on other parts of their land but usually still could not get title to their entire farm. This opened up thousands of acres for immediate sale and began the tenant system because the wealthy companies and future landlords could easily outbid common farmers.³³

Many different groups were anxious to have the restrictions removed on the full-bloods as well so that the land could be sold to interested parties. The wealthy elite, such as great landowners, bankers, merchants, and even government officials, hoped to gain large amounts of land and then sell it as the middleman for large profits. Small farmers also wanted the remaining restrictions removed. They erroneously believed this would break the monopoly of the large landowners who were buying up the excess allotments of the half-bloods recently put on the market.³⁴ The final group that wanted restrictions removed were some of the Indians themselves. The reason many wanted to sell their surplus land is because their allotments were not in one connected tract. One Native-American allottee reported that her family was allotted seventy acres in Nowata County, twenty acres in Muskogee County, and ten acres at Illinois Station in Cherokee county.

³¹Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 89-90.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid, 143-144.

In order to meet the monetary quota of each roll member, the Native Americans were often forced to take small parcels of land in several counties. This seems the most likely reason why some were anxious to rid themselves of these excesses.³⁵

Upon removing the restrictions on the Indian land, a very serious problem arose in Indian Territory. In 1890, tenancy in the Indian tribal lands was virtually non-existent. Estimated as low as one percent, very few whites were renting from the Oklahoma tribes.³⁶ By 1900, tenancy was rising rapidly but still lagged far behind the national average for each state. However, this marked the beginning of the rapid growth of a tenant class that made up over fifty percent of the farmers in Oklahoma by 1910 and were mired in the economic depression that plagued the agricultural class for the next forty years. The liquidation of Indian lands brought in vast numbers of land speculators who used both legal and illegal means to deprive the Indians of their allotments and make a fortune by either reselling the land or renting it to tenants.

Wealthy white businessmen came up with numerous ways to take the Indian lands in order to establish their large landed empires. Through these schemes, they would come to be the landlords in the tenant system and used their power to defraud the Indians of their land, forcing the former allottees and surging numbers of white landholding hopefuls into the role of tenant. Many of the primary swindlers of Indian lands were creditors, merchants, land companies and court officials.³⁷ It was estimated by one source that as many as ninety percent of the Native Americans had their land taken by land speculators for inadequate sums, “or to put it more bluntly, most of them were

³⁵Interview with Ellen Cunningham by Alene D. McDowell (July 14, 1937). *IPH* (65), 365.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 114-120.

robbed by the local grafters.”³⁸ Grafters definitely benefited more than the Indians in many of the Indian land sales. Often whites were appointed as guardians to full-blood Indians, minors, or any other Native American deemed incompetent by a local jury. In one such case, Munnie Bear, a full-blood Creek, was declared incompetent because she had saved nearly \$2500 in a bank. Because she had a large savings account, over two thousand dollars worth of livestock, and a Ford truck, she was declared incompetent on the grounds that she did not know the value of money. Even though it was later overturned, this is one example of the ruthless manner used to steal the land from Indians.³⁹

The release of the surplus land freed up over one and one-half million acres to be available for sale by 1904, making court appointed guardianship a productive career choice.⁴⁰ The guardians often could purchase their position from a judge for as much as five thousand dollars and had almost total control of the estate of his or her ward.⁴¹ The presence of minerals and oil also heightened the stakes for the grafter and would-be landlord. One attorney reportedly made \$35,000 from his ward and client and never had to appear in court on behalf of the Indian.⁴²

Fraud on small tribes land was not immune to grafters when one court ordered trustee stole land from the Kickapoo reservation. Martin J. Bently claimed to be buying land for the Kickapoo Indians in Mexico as he sold off their reservation to speculators and landlords. He collected on the land at a forty percent profit and hoped to move the

³⁸Gertrude Bonin, Charles H. Fabens and Mathew K. Sniffen. *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft and Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes – Legalized Robbery* (Philadelphia: Office of the Indian Rights Association, 1924), 9.

³⁹Ibid, 18.

⁴⁰Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 114-120.

⁴¹Bonin, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians*. 11-12.

⁴²Ibid, 6.

tribe to Mexico and out of the protection of the United States government where he could likely take an even larger share of the money. Attorney John Embry was successful in stopping this fraud and also activities of the Chapman, Grimes, and Conine Company which was also hoped to profit from Kickapoo land sales.⁴³ Even though these groups were stopped, the defrauding of the Indians by men hoping to make a huge profit went on largely unchecked until much of the Indian land was taken and redistributed.

Another case shows how Indians sold their land and the speculators made a profit very quickly. Lucy Carney, a full-blood Chickasaw, sold her allotment of 155 acres for \$1600 to a white landholder. Three days later, the purchaser mortgaged the land for \$2100. At this time, most trust companies would not lend more than forty percent of the total value of the farm, thus making the actual value of the land \$7300.⁴⁴ This systematic exploitation of land would serve as the basis of the coming tenant explosion in Oklahoma as landowners accumulated small land empires.

Not only were the merchants, bankers, and creditors trying to profit from the Indian allotment craze, but many prominent members of the government were as well. In fact, almost every member of the Dawes Commission and most of the high-ranking members of the Department of the Interior owned stock in one or more of the land companies and several even served on the board of directors. Many of them recognized the profits that could be gained from such a business venture and likely had inside information on the current state of Indian land affairs.⁴⁵

⁴³John Embry to the Attorney General of the United States (March 4, 1908). *John Embry Collection*, Box 1 Folder 10, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

⁴⁴Bonin, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians*, 13.

⁴⁵Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 118.

In another interesting and disturbing development, several prominent Oklahomans of the early twentieth century were involved in the acquisition of land as well. Governor Lee Cruce, a lawyer in eastern Oklahoma, was accused of stealing town plots and money from Indians in Muskogee.⁴⁶ Also, Robert Lee Williams acquired a great deal of land from members of the Choctaw Nation. He and several business associates, bankers from Kansas, formed an informal land company and bought and sold surpluses to whites looking to move to the region.⁴⁷ Williams, a prominent lawyer, judge, and later governor of Oklahoma, found Indians to file on allotments while his partners provided the capital to lease the excesses until the allotments could be cleared by a court for purchase.⁴⁸ When the restrictions were removed, Williams bought the land and amassed an estate of over seven thousand acres.⁴⁹ It was a common practice at this time for land companies to pay the filing fee, transportation to and from the land office, the land survey, and money to hold the land for lease.⁵⁰ Because of his active political life, and more importantly because of his lack of interest in farming, Williams became an absentee landlord who visited his tenants only when he was home from performing his duties as a politician. Many of these speculators lived by a similar motto: that their money would “seem big to the Indian” and “still leave plenty for profit” for the speculator.⁵¹

⁴⁶Ibid, 189.

⁴⁷Letter from William Docking to T.J. Sexton (April 20, 1903). Box 14 File 2, *Robert Lee Williams Papers*, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Archives, Oklahoma City, OK.

⁴⁸Edward Everett Dale and James D. Morrison. *Pioneer Judge: The Life of Robert Lee Williams*. (Cedar Rapids, IA: The Torch Press, 1958).

⁴⁹Letter from William Docking to T.J. Sexton (April 20, 1903). Box 14 File 2, *Robert Lee Williams Papers*, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Archives, Oklahoma City, OK.

⁵⁰Letter from William Docking to T.J. Sexton (April 20, 1903). Box 14 File 2, *Robert Lee Williams Papers*, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Archives, Oklahoma City, OK.

⁵¹Ibid.

The significance of the land speculators is that they turned into the wealthy elite landowners in the early stages of Oklahoma tenancy. This establishes a pattern that they were mostly concerned with profiting from the land. Therefore, if they were interested in keeping their land, the only way these mock-plantation owners could mimic the plantation system was to keep their tenants from climbing the economic ladder to ownership. It has often been alleged that the tenant was primarily responsible for the depletion of soil and the ecologic disaster that came about in the 1930s, but the landowners, through their profiteering and hunger for money, stressed that tenants needed to grow cash crops and often discouraged them from planting crops that might have produced less money but built up the soil and replaced the used nitrates.

Oklahoma tenancy differs primarily from Southern tenancy in its origin. Tenancy in the South came about as a direct result of the closing of the Civil War. The sharecropping system came about as a result of the inability of either plantation owners or free blacks to gain a position of strength in their post-Civil War struggle for control. Freedmen wanted ownership, while plantation owners hoped for a gang-labor system.⁵² Plantation owners saved their plantations by sacrificing their plantation system. Blacks had no real way to challenge white control. Because of this standoff, sharecropping was, in the view of some historians, the best compromise.⁵³ Poor whites in the South fell into much the same trap. They could make enough money to survive but almost never acquired their own land. They were not well enough educated to understand how to manipulate the capitalistic system to their benefit. Their primary downfall was the

⁵²Royce, *The Origin of Southern Sharecropping*, 17-22.

⁵³*Ibid.* 212-214.

inability to generate sufficient income.⁵⁴ Other, less optimistic historians claim that the advent of southern sharecropping and tenancy was just an extension of antebellum plantation system created by black codes and forced the freedmen into the same situation they thought they escaped.⁵⁵

Whether one believes that southern sharecropping was a result of the plantation owners or the freedmen compromising to get the best deal possible, it was still a compromise caused by the newly emerging situation. Oklahoma's tenancy system came about because of the cry for the opening of Indian Territory to settlement. The Civil War did have some bearing on this issue as the Five Tribes were forced to give up their slaves and lost a great deal of their political autonomy due to their relationship with the Confederates. However, the tenancy system in Oklahoma was driven directly by the call to organize Oklahoma and Indian Territories for statehood. The Curtis Act made this land available for sale, and the future landed elite gladly purchased large tracts and began to rent them to white, Native-American, and African-American tenants.

⁵⁴Fite, "The Agricultural Trap in the South," 41.

⁵⁵Harold D. Woodman, "How New was the New South?" *Agricultural History* 58 (Winter 1984): 529-545.

Chapter III: Applying the System, 1910 to 1930

After tenancy originated in Oklahoma, it was perfected from approximately 1910 to 1920. Out of the unique origin, landlords began to practice the same mock-plantation style absentee farms that landlords in the South were running. Landlords used the system to build their empires by exploiting the inability of tenants to save enough money to purchase their own farms. These means of exploitation, both legal and illegal, forced the tenant into a life of renting. Though there were a few years of economic prosperity during World War One, much of the 1910s and 1920s was spent by the tenant trying to survive while scraping together enough for a down payment to purchase a farm. Though the tenancy rate declined slightly before the 1920 census, it exploded again before the census of 1930. This suggests that World War I allowed some tenants to get enough money together to buy farms, but that many lost their farms during the next decade and were then again back in the system struggling to buy their own farm. Another reason for the rise in tenancy is the plowing up of new lands in western Oklahoma. This area saw the sharpest rise in tenancy during the 1920s and counteracted the decrease in tenancy in eastern Oklahoma. As new lands were put under cultivation in western Oklahoma, tenant farming became a much more widely practiced method of tenure on the Great Plains.

The problems afflicting the tenants during the 1910s can be broken down into major subheadings of economic, political, and social. The economic problems range from banking and credit practices to types of crops grown, and cycles of boom and bust in the economy. The tenants had no control over many of these problems. They did not understand economic market trends and were forced to participate under the rules

established by those in control of the system. Political issues were in some ways the tenants' attempts to help themselves but were largely unsuccessful because of their inability to mobilize the masses and the need for many of them to keep their landlords happy. Tenants were probably the most overlooked group by social reformers at this time. Economic hardships, the tenants' lack of stability, and their constant mobility led to numerous problems within their rural communities.

For many Americans, the 1920s were an economic boom period as the nation returned to "normalcy" following World War I, but the agricultural sector of the economy saw no such recovery. World War I was a time of economic stability for farmers. Farm products such as wheat and cotton were in high demand throughout the world. When World War I ended, this also ended the need of European countries to import large amounts of American goods. Adding to this misery, the Great Depression further devastated the agricultural community and left the tenant clinging to the hope of survival rather than farm ownership.¹

By the twentieth century, farmers in Oklahoma faced problems never seen before. These included both scientific and natural phenomena that made farming difficult. Without the aid of expensive irrigation projects, much of the remainder of the land, some of this in Oklahoma, would prove to be a gamble on whether or not it would procure a crop. During a wet year, much of Oklahoma could grow wheat, corn, and cotton. However, during dry years, which were fairly numerous in western Oklahoma, farmers would suffer greatly and be forced into deeper debt. Yet, the Oklahoma weather was not the only reason for difficulty of tenants in Oklahoma. As one historian put it:

¹United States Farm Security Administration, *Security for Farm Tenants* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), pg 3.

Undoubtedly the end of cheap land, the lack of adequate rural credit, land speculation, and the prices demanded for land were factors causing some of those without land to remain landless, but these have to be viewed against the background of industrialization and its effects.²

This means that the tenant also had to face the idea of being pushed off his farm by mechanization as well. They lacked a sufficient knowledge of science and business to minimize their expenses as new machinery made farming an increasingly large-scale operation.³

Several factors contributed to the rise of tenancy. Land prices increased, making the amount of starting capital an impossible sum for a young farmer. Younger men did not have the capital to invest in land; this forced them into longer periods of tenancy.⁴ The unavailability of cheap land also left very little land to be purchased; most of the land had already been bought by speculators.⁵ By 1880, there was a limited amount left to give away and often this was in marginal farming areas, thus ending the American safety net that allowed farmers to move west and gain new farms with minimal expense.⁶

The growth of absenteeism after the allotment of Indian land was brought on by the idea of investing in land rather than stocks. It can be said that landlords, even absentees, made their living in farming as well. Though they did not raise crops or livestock, many people during the 1910s and 1920s said that landlords “farmed the farmers.”⁷ Even those men who originally resided on a farm and then moved to the city

²William W. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974), 131.

³Ibid, 8.

⁴John D. Black and R.H. Allen, “The Growth of Farm Tenancy in the United States,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 51 (May 1937): 413.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Benjamin H. Hibbard, “Tenancy in the North Atlantic States,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 26 (Nov 1911): 116.

⁷Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1923* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1976).

stopped selling their farms because they were a safe investment and could not be destroyed.⁸

One study, published by the United States Department of Agriculture, looked at the characteristics of owners and percentages of absenteeism. This study showed that 6% of farms in Oklahoma were owned by persons not living in the state or in an adjoining state.⁹ It also found that in the Great Plains states, of which Oklahoma was considered a member, 83% of the farms were purchased, 8% were inherited, 2% were acquired through marriage, and 8% were homesteads, a much higher number than elsewhere but mostly because of opportunity.¹⁰ This study also found that 66% of farm owners, landlord or farmer, resided on the farm in Oklahoma. In the South, this number was similar at 67%, while in the North only 37% of the farmers resided on the land.¹¹ It also showed that in 1920, almost 93% of the landowners lived in the same county as their farm, while the percentage of owners living outside the state dropped from 6% in 1900, to about 2.1% by 1920.¹² These findings suggest several very interesting trends. Despite the rising tenancy rate, owners of the farms likely lived nearer their tenants, and thus absenteeism may have been on the decline. Despite the decline in absentee landlords, tenancy continued to climb. In south-central Oklahoma, only 12.5% of the landlords owned three or more farms, yet they controlled 36% of the farms, 34% of the acreage, and 36% of the farm value in 1920. Compared to the nationwide study, only 9% of the owners had three or more farms and controlled 38% of the farms, 23% of the acreage,

⁸J.W. Froy and Beaman Smith, *A System of Tenant Farming and its Results* Farmers Bulletin no. 437 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1911), 3.

⁹H.A. Turner. *The Ownership of Tenant Farms in the United States* USDA bulletin no. 1432 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1926).

¹⁰Ibid, 39.

¹¹Ibid, 27.

¹²Ibid, 21-22.

and 22% of the value.¹³ These studies show very few positive outlooks besides the fact that out of state ownership and absenteeism were dropping.

One flaw with this study is that Oklahoma is categorized with the Great Plains states in many aspects, possibly taking a cue from the Census, but then it studies cotton growing regions of the state instead of wheat farms. Oklahoma is unique state in regards to the variety of crops raised. The western parts of the state tended to grow more wheat because it required less rain. The southern part of Oklahoma grew cotton and virtually no wheat. This makes an all inclusive look at Oklahoma very difficult as tenancy rates follow these same lines. Therefore, any study of Oklahoma agriculture cannot be broadly applied to the entire state because the state is so different in terms of climate, crop, soil, and even in many ways, history.

Despite the drop in absentee farm ownership, much of the public thought that the landlords were nothing more than grafters. Still, other than the tenants themselves, the only real critics of the system were the newspapers. Several of the “farm papers” tried to stay as neutral as possible when commenting on the state of landlord-tenant relations, but they occasionally expressed an opinion that could not be mistaken. *The Oklahoma Farmer* believed that speculation should be discouraged through high taxes on land not farmed by the owner.¹⁴ Others wrote and expressed the opinion that farmers should be able to buy their land at a fair price at any time during the lease from the owner.¹⁵ In one column, *The Oklahoma Farmer* blasted the speculators by saying:

The land-grafter is usually a tenant-skinner, and Oklahoma is cursed with thousands of them. Some are lawyers who have systematically accumulated title to land by defending ignorant negroes, Indians, and

¹³Ibid, 9.

¹⁴*The Oklahoma Farmer* (Oklahoma City, OK), January 10, 1919.

¹⁵Letter from Robert Dutcher printed in *The Oklahoma Farmer*, January 10, 1925.

white men against petty criminal charges often trumped up for the purpose. Some who call themselves bankers have pinched and squeezed men out of their land. All of them justify what they have done by saying that they merely took advantage of their opportunities. And they tell the truth. The pity is that the opportunity existed.¹⁶

There is probably much more truth in the moderate opinion. "Dishonesty and rascality" were not confined to owners or tenants.¹⁷ In order to save money, tenants would employ such tactics as putting posts farther apart, often so far apart they could not keep animals in their pen. Tenants did not always work as hard as they should and evaded their duties, and owners did not keep their improvements in very good condition.¹⁸

Leases during the 1910s and 1920s were usually informal and contained no written documentation. They were usually one-year leases, which gave flexibility to the owner and gave the renter less responsibility.¹⁹ This type of system, though it had its advantages, could lead to misunderstandings between owner and renter. With no long-term or written contract, numerous issues could arise. For instance, the number of livestock could come into contention or the type of crops that the tenant should be planting. Also disagreements often arose about the improvements and who the responsibility should belong to on matters such as the upkeep of houses, barns, and fences.²⁰ Tenant farmers often could not rotate their crops as they needed because landlords would not lease to tenants on a multi-year basis. Therefore, tenants had to

¹⁶*The Oklahoma Farmer*, August 25, 1910.

¹⁷Letter from J.E. Duncan printed in *The Oklahoma Farmer*, September 10, 1918.

¹⁸E.B. Elzey to Robert Lee Williams. *Robert Lee Williams Collection*. Governors Papers, Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries: Oklahoma City, box 1 file 3.

¹⁹*The Oklahoma Farmer*, January 10, 1917.

²⁰D.P. Trent, *A Suggested System for Oklahoma Cotton Farms* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College and the United States Department of Agriculture, likely 1927), 3.

maximize their profit rather than protect the soil. This system led to quick soil depletion and poor living condition for the renter and his family.²¹

Unfortunately, tenants became the victims of the system and their lack of efficiency was usually due to the restrictions put on them by their landlords rather than their own inadequacies as farmers. The renters were usually under equipped or using outdated farm equipment and were often restricted on the use of livestock or pasture, thus forced to exploit the land to survive.²² They had no more rights on the land if they spent one year or twenty and they were always at the mercy of the landlord.²³

However, some people at this time argued that tenants actually were in a better financial situation than a small owner. They claimed that based on the interest an owner must make on his land payment, the tenant actually had less expense on a \$1,000 dollar investment in equipment than the owner with the same investment and the same size farm. With a six percent loan, Harold Robinson figured that the owner paid about \$2,210 in expenses while the renter paid only \$1,695 with a \$500 rent on a quarter section of land. Here are the figures he sent to *The Oklahoma Farmer*.²⁴

Table 1 Projected Expenses of Owner and Renter

Owner	Renter
expense. \$1,000	expense. \$1,000
6% interest 810	6% on equipment 30
depreciation 150	depreciation. 150
taxes. 8	taxes. 10
repairs. 150	repairs. 150
insurance. 20	cash rent. 500
total \$2,210	total \$1,695

²¹William H. Harbaugh, "Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil-Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions," *Agricultural History* 66 (Summer 1992): 102-103.

²²*The Oklahoma Farmer*, January 10, 1916.

²³Rupert Vance, *Farmers Without Land*, Public Affairs Pamphlet no. 12 (Public Affairs Committee: New York).

²⁴*The Oklahoma Farmer*, January 10, 1916.

Despite these numbers, the owner is an owner for an obvious reason. He saved enough money to make a down payment on a farm at some point in his life where the tenant had not. Most tenant farms of one-quarter section were not worth the same amount as an owned farm of the same size. The owner usually made better improvements, therefore, his land is worth more than the average tenant farm. Tenants also had to split their earnings with another party, the landlord. Though the owner had to split his profits with the government in the form of taxes, it was not nearly as high as the fifty percent many sharecroppers had to pay. Tenants often had to haul the crop and sometimes, as in the cultivation of cotton, had to pay the ginning fee out of their own expenses as well, depending on the nature of the contract. Owner-operated farms in Oklahoma were also usually larger than the tenant farm further discrediting these figures. The average size of a tenant farm in 1920 was only about 128.3 acres while an owned farm was closer to the size of the actual quarter section.²⁵

The need for the tenant to diversify and grow several different types of crops, as well as have livestock, was a very important issue stressed by newspapers and extension services. The growing of cowpeas, broomcorn, sorghums, sudan grass, kafir corn, milo, soybeans, canes, alfalfa, peanuts, wheat, rye, barley, and livestock were the most popular suggestions offered by experts and tried by tenants. They believed that farmers who did not diversify and find alternate ways to make money, other than cotton, “will never get beyond the renter days of a cotton farmer.” Many of these crops, such as kafir corn, could be eaten but never really emerged as a staple of the human diet. They were very

²⁵Turner, *Ownership of Tenant Farms*, 7.

effective to use as feeds and pasture for livestock and proved very beneficial in that regard.²⁶

Several major complications arose for the tenant farmer in regards to diversifying. The first was in terms of capital. Each new crop that came to Oklahoma took new methods and equipment in order to make the crop. Tenants rarely had enough money to buy the new equipment that each crop needed. It also took knowledge of the crop and the ability to match it to the correct soil type to achieve maximum productivity. Because of the constant mobility of the tenant, great diversity of crops would hardly be feasible. One agriculture newspaper at the time noted: "If there is anything more unprofitable than growing only one crop, it is trying to grow too many crops."²⁷

Some of the suggested crops had an adverse effect as found out by many farmers and the Experiment Stations. Many of the new sorghums planted in Oklahoma became poisonous during dry years. When they molded during late summer, these new feeds produced hydrocyanic acid that killed any livestock who consumed it. These crops included sorghum, kafir, Johnson grass, sudan grass, and various types of corn. The state of Oklahoma even passed a law prohibiting the planting of Johnson grass in the state, carrying a stiff fine at the time of \$25 to \$100.²⁸

The other way for tenants to diversify was by raising livestock. Owning a few chickens and cattle could give the tenant family milk and eggs, with some left over to sell in town and help offset living expenses. Though these suggestions sound appealing, livestock was not the answer for most tenants either. Lack of investment capital to start

²⁶*The Oklahoma Farm Journal* (Oklahoma City, OK), January 1, 1901; November 1, 1909; June 1, 1914; August 25, 1914; November 25, 1914; January 15, 1915..

²⁷*Ibid*, November 1, 1908. On the mobility of Oklahoma tenants, see pp. 40-41 below.

²⁸*The Oklahoma Farmer*, February 25, 1915.

the livestock operation was a huge problem. They would have to borrow any money from the expensive creditors for the starting flock. Landlords were also a major obstacle. He likely would not let tenants run livestock because the tenant would not be necessary for this type of operation. This would defeat his purpose of leasing out the land. Instead, the landlord was interested in turning a profit as quickly as possible without concern for the tenant.²⁹

Another popular way tenants made extra money for their families was by trapping animals and selling their furs to “fur buyers.” Often advertised in the newspapers “Cash for Skins,” tenants trapped raccoon, mink, skunk, muskrat, marten, fox, wolf, lynx, and other furs. Though they could not make a living trapping, it was a good way to make extra money for their family to survive during the winter months when income was scarce.³⁰

The biggest complaint of the tenant during this time was not the unfairness of the lease or dislike of the landlord, but unfairness of the credit system. They wrote numerous letters of protest to their politicians and newspapers. The credit system was most taxing on the small farmers, especially tenants, because they did not have a great deal of collateral to get good loan rates. Therefore, they had to pay high interest rates on any money they borrowed.

There were basically two types of loans available to the farmer at this time. One was the longer term note for purchase of a farm. The other was a short term loan that lasted only a few months. This type of loan was usually given by a creditor, merchant,

²⁹Ibid, March 10, 1915; April 19, 1915.

³⁰*The Oklahoma Farm Journal*, December 1, 1908. Nearly every rural and small-town newspaper and all agricultural newspapers and newspapers at this time had numerous advertisements calling for furs.

bank, or landlord using the crop as collateral. The tenant often used the money from the short term loan to pay for food, seed, clothes, or other materials to survive. Interest rates on these types of loans were very high, making the tenant feel that they were unfair and that the lending party was making an extremely high profit off of their work.

Interest rates varied according to what party was lending the money. Government loans were the best type if one was fortunate enough to qualify, for these loans were only at 10% interest. However, only an owner would qualify because they could put up the necessary security. Loans from merchants were often the most unfair type of loan charging 16% or higher. These types of loans were basically a tab that could be charged against and paid at the end of the crop season. Many farmers and farm advocates began to believe that buying on credit was the worst business practice because merchants would drive the prices up on those who paid with credit rather than cash.³¹ Bank loans were also unfair. Interest rates varied according to location and bank policy based on factors such as loan history, race, and collateral. The national average for bank loans was about 15 percent; but many Oklahoma banks charged much higher rates.³² According to one report by the Comptroller of the Currency John Skelton, Oklahoma had the second highest number of banks charging over 10% interest to their borrowers. With 300 of the 350 national banks in Oklahoma charging high interest, only Texas had more with 317. Of these 300 banks, 131 charged from 15 to 24% interest, 60 charged from 25 to 60%, 22 charged from 60 to 100%, and 8 banks charged from 200 to 2000% interest on their loans.³³ With interest rates as high as these, farmers became irate. One farmer writes, "Now there is [sic] two types of Bank Robber, one is with guns and the other is with

³¹*The Oklahoma Farmer*, March 25, 1915.

³²Vance, *Farmers Without Land*, 16-17.

³³*The Oklahoma Farmer*, November 1915.

pencils.”³⁴ *The Oklahoma Farmer* often printed letters written by disgruntled farmers who echoed the idea that the tenant was being robbed. An anonymous writer states:

A great deal of fuss has been made about getting a law passed to protect the banks against robbers and bandits, but I think there should be another law passed on the other side of the bank question. We need a law that will prevent some of these banks from robbing the poor man. They make us pay a high rate of interest and if we don't choose to be robbed, they tell us we can do without the money.³⁵

One government official writes,

After a canvas of the farmers and laboring men. . . . I find that the one thing that is wanted more than another is the passage of an anti-usury law which will be effective in stopping the robbery of the people by the collection of usurious interest. They want the collection in excess of the maximum declared a felony.³⁶

In 1915, the State House of Representatives defeated the Glasco Usury Bill by a vote of 52 to 38. This would have regulated banks and forced them to charge much lower interest rates than the 18 to 24% that was common. Many officials claimed they did not vote for this bill because it would have put 200 small banks out of business almost immediately. Despite the relief this law could have given all farmers, the usury law was defeated and left the tenant with only two equally distressing choices, take the loans with high interest rates or not take the money at all.³⁷

Possibly, the most defining characteristic of tenancy was the mobility of the tenant family. This phenomenon distressed both tenants and activists for many years as

³⁴John White to Robert Lee Williams (January 22, 1917). *Robert L. Williams Collection*, Governors Papers, Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, box 1 file 5.

³⁵*The Oklahoma Farmer*, February 10, 1915.

³⁶Owsley Lonergan to Robert Lee Williams (October 26, 1914). *Robert L. Williams Collection*, Governors Papers, Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, box 1 file 1.

³⁷J.T. Sanders, *The Economic and Social Aspects of Mobility in Oklahoma* bulletin no. 195 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, August 1925), 5.

mobility rose just as sharply as tenancy rates. In 1909, one report showed that Oklahoma tenants moved more frequently than any other state's tenants. By 1924, Oklahoma tenants were moving at a rate of 33% per year, the third highest rate in the nation.³⁸ In a poll by J. T. Sanders, 2,075 Oklahomans were asked why they were moving. Fifty-four percent answered that they changed residence for economic betterment in the guise of larger or better farms. Social and domestic betterment represented by improved housing and schools were cited as reasons by only 7% of the respondents. Economic reversal on the property garnered support from 18%, while the unclassified reasons, such as "just to move" or "no reason," was the answer of an astounding 20% of those tenants who changed residence.³⁹ This seems to suggest that most were seeking economic prosperity in their moves; but these men were only trading marginal farms away themselves.

The advantages of moving were two-fold: tenants might gain a better lease on their newly rented land, thereby helping them save capital, or they might be able to expand their business by becoming more efficient.⁴⁰ Many of these farmers were probably just moving to other marginal lands because those with the good contracts and land would not likely give them up. It also takes a certain amount of time and money to move to a new farm. If a tenant suffered through a drought year, they gained nothing by moving and likely had to use all of their savings to pay their debts to the creditors, leaving them in worse condition than they were a year before.

³⁸J.T. Sanders, *The Economic and Social Aspects of Mobility in Oklahoma* (bulletin no. 195). Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, August 1925, 5.

³⁹*Ibid*, 34.

⁴⁰Moore, *Oklahoma Tenant Farming 1925-1935*, 48.

Many of the tenants moved voluntarily, but others were forced off the land by their owners. One renter reported that he was on his farm for four years and just beginning to understand the advantages of each field. In the fifth year, the owner terminated the lease.⁴¹ This would make such methods as crop rotation and soil conservation nearly impossible. As new tenants arrived each year, they did not know the practices of the previous tenant and likely did not have the capital to invest in soil building practices anyway.

By 1924, one-half of all tenants in the United States and one-third in Oklahoma were on new farms to begin the crop season. Several characteristics are common of the stable farmer, whether tenant or owner. The stable farmer had more money, more equipment, and more livestock than the farmer who moved frequently. Stable farmers were more desirable to some landlords because they were less risk and often operated on a cash rent rather than a sharecroppers lease.⁴²

The roaming lifestyle also took its toll on the children of the tenant farmers as well. Frequent moving forced children to attend different schools each year and caused many to fall behind in their studies. If they were on a crop-year lease, they would leave their homes before planting season in the spring which was during school sessions causing children of tenants to fall further behind.⁴³ In 1929, an estimated 65,000 of 197,218 farms changed operators. This forced 325,000 people to migrate; of this number, approximately 50,000 were children.⁴⁴

⁴¹*The Oklahoma Farmer*, November 25, 1915.

⁴²Sanders, *Economic and Social Aspects*, 2-3.

⁴³Vance, *Farmers Without Land*, 10-11.

⁴⁴O.D. Duncan, "Some Social Aspects of Tenancy and Moving in Oklahoma," *Current Farm Economics*, (December 1929).

The effect of tenancy on domestic life was immeasurable. Many of the domestic needs of tenants were not being met by the landlords or the government. These included: a house to protect the family from the weather, pure and plentiful water, market road improvement, social environment (both school and church), and the right to vote.⁴⁵ In many cases, houses were run down and nearly uninhabitable. Roofs often leaked, windows barely kept out the weather, and there were no indoor amenities until the 1940s or after in many of these leased houses. In a study of home conditions, Grace Fernandes, a member of the Experiment Station at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical School, found tenant houses to be the poorest in both condition and furnishings.⁴⁶ In her questionnaire, the following answers were reported:

Table 2 Comparing Homes of Owners and Renters

Condition	Owners	Renters	Furnishings	Owners	Tenants
Excellent	4.8%	.8%	Very Comfortable	24%	4
Good	42.6	21.3	Comfortable	36	19
Fair	36.9	37.0	Adequate	32	47
Poor	12.4	33.7	Poor	8	24
Very Poor	3.2	7.0	Very Poor	-	6

From Grace Fernandes, *Church Activities of Farm Women and Their Families* bulletin no. 197 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station).

The problem with such a questionnaire includes the subjectivity of each category. There is no hard definition to these categories and no control was used to determine the meaning of each term which allows for considerable variation in the returns. Nonetheless, Fernandes's questionnaire suggested that the renters thought their possessions to be of much less value both in home condition and furnishings.

⁴⁵*The Oklahoma Farmer*, October 25, 1914.

⁴⁶Grace Fernandes, *Church Activities of Farm Women and Their Families* bulletin no. 197 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station). 7.

Migration and mobility also affected the social lives of tenants as they were less likely to participate in community social events than owners. Church membership reflected the instability of the larger tenant community. When questioned about their membership, 67% of farm owners reported that both the husband and wife were members of the church. Renters reported that only 51.1% of both husband and wife were members of the church.⁴⁷

This persuaded some that tenancy would lead to the moral decay of the farm communities. An unorganized grassroots uprising, known as the Country Life Movement, did spring up encouraging American absentee farmers to return from the cities and take up their old jobs. However, it had limited success because it did not gain widespread acceptance among the masses and even helped lead to the downfall of the tenant in many ways. The leaders of this movement stressed scientific management of farms and urged farmers to use machines and scientific improvements to increase productivity. Despite the urging, tenants could not afford to bear new expensive modernizations and continued to use the horse-drawn plow to do their work. Because of this process, many tenants continued to be forced off the land.⁴⁸

By late 1916, the government was beginning to listen to the voice of the farmer to some extent. Tenants and owners alike called for an immediate improvement in road conditions so they could better get their crops to market which would lessen both time and expense. The Good Roads Law, passed by Congress, gave \$85,000,000 to various states to assist with building roads. One historian challenges this notion, believing that roads actually contributed to the demise of agrarian America. William Bowers claims

⁴⁷Ibid, 9.

⁴⁸William W. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974).

that rural communities came in increasingly closer contact with the city contributing to the demise of the rural church as the center of social life because people could travel to town for social engagements much easier.⁴⁹

As tenancy grew, renters had no political voice until a party emerged to take up the issues of the laboring class. Where the Populists garnered support from farm owners, the Socialist Party in Oklahoma definitely had some impact on the tenant farmers of Oklahoma, but the extent is difficult to determine. The height of Socialism in Oklahoma was between 1910 and 1916. It began to distinguish itself from the Populist movement by 1907 and actually outlived its forefather.⁵⁰ Socialists began to take on many of the platforms important to tenants like an end to usury, state provided loans, insurance protection at cost provided by the state, and pensions for the poor and old.⁵¹ They advocated “state banks and mortgage agencies, crop insurance, elevators and warehouses” to allow farmers a greater chance at cutting costs.⁵² Rural Oklahomans embraced Socialism as a way to fight the wealthy landowners. This movement worked hand-in-hand with Christianity to suggest, according to Garin Burbank, that farmers were to fight an “Armageddon with the upper class, and after, they would be saved and able to take their rightful place at the top of society.”⁵³

Historians disagree slightly on the center of Socialism in Oklahoma and where it was strongest. One historian, James Green, believes that the center of Socialism was in Johnston and Murray counties in south-central Oklahoma where Eugene Debs garnered

⁴⁹Ibid, 132.

⁵⁰James R. Green, *Socialism and Southern Class Struggle, 1898-1918: A Study of Radical Movements in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas*. PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1972. 1.

⁵¹Von Russell Creel, “Socialists in the House: The Oklahoma Experience (Part 1).” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 70 (Summer 1992): 148.

⁵²Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 9.

⁵³Ibid, 14-49.

nearly 80% of the vote in the 1912 election.⁵⁴ This area is in the heart of the Oklahoma tenant belt. Both counties had almost 80% tenant rates according to the 1910 Census. If one focuses on presidential elections this is the largest Socialist stronghold in the state. But if one focuses on the number of elected officials to the Oklahoma State House of Representatives, then the peak was in 1914 when five members of the Socialist Party from Dewey, Major, Roger Mills, Beckham, and Kiowa Counties were elected. These Western counties were among the most rapidly rising counties in tenant percentage by this time, but were still below the state average in all but Kiowa county. Though they were unable to pass much legislation, the Socialists showed the rising discontent of the farming community, and especially the tenants.⁵⁵

Two major factors contributed to the crushing of the Socialist Party before the 1920s began. The first factor was that the landowners waged war on anyone they believed to be Socialists. Many would not rent to a tenant they suspected of being a registered Socialist. To many landowners, being a Socialist was the ultimate form of Anti-Americanism.⁵⁶ Landowners believed that “Socialism seemed to embody filth, laziness, and blackness, everything that decent white people were not to be.”⁵⁷ The other reason for the fall of the Socialist Party was the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, and even more revolting to Americans, their pulling out of World War I. This, more than anything else, made it extremely unpopular to be a Socialist.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Green, *Socialism and Southern Class Struggle*, 53-54.

⁵⁵Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 5-9.

⁵⁶Robert Lee Williams to William Utterback, *Robert Lee Williams Collection*. Governors Papers. Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, OK, box 3 file 2.

⁵⁷Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 9.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

World War I affected the tenant farmer much more directly than just ending the Socialist movement. While prices on farm commodities reached all-time highs, the draft drew farm labor from the farms, leaving many renters and owners short-handed in the cotton and wheat fields during picking season and harvest. This left farmers torn between the elation over high farm prices and the idea that their sons were being sent to war.

During this time of warfare in Europe, the United States government called on farmers to feed the armies of the allied forces. Farmers were encouraged to plant as many acres of food items and vegetables as they could spare so they could “Fight Germany with your gardens” and “Till the Land and Win the War.”⁵⁹ Farmers were asked to stop fighting for farm and tenancy issues, and to concentrate their efforts to produce food. Most tenants at this time did put aside their bitter feelings because the economy was booming. They were finally becoming prosperous.⁶⁰ They did not realize that as soon as the war ended, the farm prices would come crashing down as quickly as they had risen.

By 1917, both children of farmers and farm laborers were being conscripted as the United States needed more men to fight the Central Powers. This labor crisis led many tenants to call on Governor Robert Williams to see if he could get some of their children deferred. Williams had no choice in the matter as he regretfully replied to each letter that he could not offer exemptions for their children.⁶¹ School teachers also called for something to be done because many children were skipping school to pick cotton because

⁵⁹*The Oklahoma Farmer*, June 25 1917.; John H. Burnett to Robert Lee Williams (September 12, 1918). *Robert Lee Williams Collection*. Governors Papers, Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City OK, box 2 file 4.

⁶⁰*The Oklahoma Farmer*, June 25 1917.

their fathers did not have enough workers to plant, thin, and pick cotton.⁶² Some members of the community began to suggest that trustees and prisoners of the local jails be paroled, or at the very least used as gang labor, to alleviate the farm labor shortage.⁶³ By March of 1918, *The Oklahoma Farmer* reported that the selective service would defer some of the farmers because the government believes “the war will be won on food.” This deferment allowed them to contribute to the war effort with their greatest expertise.⁶⁴ Luckily, the war was over quickly for the United States and this matter was only an issue for a short time.

The war did bring a brief but prosperous time for the Oklahoma tenant farmer as the entire agricultural economy was booming. Cotton, wheat, and corn prices were at record highs and continued to rise throughout the war. Unfortunately, J. A. Whitehurst made a prophetic statement in a manuscript written to the governor intended for public announcement. In this speech he said, “There will never again be a time as favorable as right now to become the owner of a farm in Oklahoma.”⁶⁵ After the war, agricultural prices plummeted to record lows. Wheat prices fell from \$2.59 a bushel in January 1920 to \$1.69 by the end of the year. November 1920 was the last time the tenant farmer would see \$2 a bushel for wheat until well into the New Deal. Cotton fell from 42 cents per pound in April 1920 to 15 cents per pound by the close of the market in December. The corn market collapsed from \$2.03 a bushel in May to \$.78 a bushel by December

⁶¹Thomas Land to RLW (May 22, 1918); George Burrows to RLW (May 21, 1918); Mrs. E. Widner to RLW (May 20, 1918); R.H. Lebow to RLW (May 20, 1918); C. Rankin Glass to RLW (May 13, 1918); Jesse Highland to RLW (May 18, 1918), *RLW Governors Collection*, box 2 file 3; and Mrs. Gelanal Poe to RLW (August 27, 1917), box 2 file 1.

⁶²George L. Miller to RLW (September 21, 1917), *RLW Governors Papers*, box 2 file 1.

⁶³R.B. Boone to RLW (June 18, 1917), *RLW Governors Papers*, box 2 file 1.

⁶⁴*The Oklahoma Farmer*, March 10, 1918.

⁶⁵J.A. Whitehurst, “Oklahoma Makes Good.” *JBA Robertson Papers*, Governors Collection, Archives, Oklahoma State Department of Libraries, box 1 file 8.

1920.⁶⁶ This left the three most widely grown crops in complete disaster for the next twenty years. By the time the Great Depression hit at the end of the decade, most tenants were so poor they barely noticed the recession.

Tenant farmers in the 1920s existed in much the same fashion as they did in the previous decade. They continued to be exploited by their landlords and had very few rights as tenants. The government did very little to help them, basically leaving tenants to survive on their own resources or move to the city. One thing that did develop in the cotton culture of Oklahoma was the use of cooperative marketing by the farmers. From 1915 to 1925, agricultural cooperative marketing associations jumped in number from 48 to 147, with 15 to 20% of Oklahoma farmers being members of a co-op.⁶⁷ Though it was mostly run by the large-scale owners who had the money to fund the organization, tenants did benefit from the use of the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association. However, cotton farmers saw much more fluctuation in crop prices than other commodities depending on the holdover from the previous year. In years where the world supply was not exhausted, there was a massive carry-over of bales into the next year. This, more than any other factor, determined the price of cotton for the next year.

One of the biggest problems facing cotton growers in Oklahoma, many of them tenants, was the boll weevil. The boll weevil entered the United States from Mexico in 1891. By 1905, this pest reached Oklahoma and, along with improper planting and cultivation, was keeping yields down. Spread by flight, automobiles, and hauling contaminated loads of cotton, the boll weevil infested the entire cotton growing areas of

⁶⁶National Bureau of Economic Research. www.nber.org/databases/macrohistory. Accessed on June 8, 2004.

⁶⁷W.W. Fetrow, *The Farmer's Part in Cooperative Marketing* bulletin no. 174 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, March 1928), 3.

Oklahoma by 1921.⁶⁸ That year, the United States lost an estimated 6.2 million bales of cotton to the boll weevil.⁶⁹ It took a concerted effort by all state agencies of all the cotton producing states to come up with a way to kill the boll weevil. By the 1920s, there were several suggestions but no way to eradicate the pest. Remedies included cultivating land earlier to kill habitat, waiting until after the first frost to plant so that most survivors were killed, and burning brush around the edges of fields so they had no place to hibernate. Artificial means to kill the boll weevil were also tried. Several popular poisons were Calcium Arsenate, a mixture called Molasses Arsenate, Nicotine Arsenate, and a popular poison called Weevil Worst. These were often very expensive and did not bring a high enough yield to pay for the poison.⁷⁰

The Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association, a very successful marketing and selling corporation, helped maintain more stable prices during the 1920s. They hoped to unify the cotton farmers behind the idea that isolated farms disrupted supply and demand because they were not aware of economic trends and have no unity in their farming and marketing practices.⁷¹ The notion of an association began with the cotton producing southern states, which called for an American Cotton Association to be formed in May of 1919. Oklahoma sent 21 delegates to the First Annual Meeting in April 1920 in Montgomery, Alabama.⁷² The Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association formed one year later. The membership requirements included a seven-year contract where the farmer had

⁶⁸C.E. Sanborn, *Boll Weevil in Oklahoma* bulletin no. 157 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, February 1926), 2, 15; *The Oklahoma Farm Journal*, June 1, 1910; *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, July 25, 1922.

⁶⁹*The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, October 19, 1922.

⁷⁰C.E. Sanborn, *Destroy the Boll Weevil* circular no. 239 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, likely from 1927), 7-19.

⁷¹*The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, June 5, 1922.

⁷²W.W. Fetrow, *Attitudes of Oklahoma Farmers Toward the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association* bulletin no. 178 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, likely 1928), 4-5.

to sell through the association, a no-withdrawal clause, an eleven member board, and a ten-dollar-per-year membership fee. Under the agreement, members delivered cotton to the association and received about sixty percent of its estimated value. The cotton was classified by grade, pooled with similar qualities, and sold in bulk to large buyers. The remaining balance was paid to the individual farmers after the cotton was sold and the expenses were paid.⁷³

Several problems existed with the OCGA, leading to some friction between the farmer, especially the tenant farmer, and the organization. Though the OCGA allowed for the splitting of the profits from a bale between two parties, like a tenant or landlord, landlords often wanted money immediately and did not care to be a part of the organization. Thus, the tenant had to buy the landlord's part of the bale if he wished to sell through the OCGA. Tenants often could not afford to buy the landowners' share of the bale after paying ginning and hauling fees and were forced to violate their contracts by selling on the open market, making tenants disloyal members of the association.⁷⁴ Also, many uneducated farmers were experiencing cooperative marketing for the first time and had no idea of what to expect. This led to the dissatisfaction of many members, especially small farmers, because they were encouraged to join the OCGA with unrealistic or "exaggerated statements of possibilities."⁷⁵ Another reason for displeasure with the OCGA was the mandatory seven-year contract. When asked if members should be able to withdraw from the association, 67% of tenants and 57% of owners claimed that

⁷³Ibid, 5-6.

⁷⁴W.W. Fetrow, *Economic Conditions of Farmers in Oklahoma as Related to Membership in the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association* bulletin no. 186 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, likely 1928), 10.

⁷⁵Fetrow, *Attitudes of Oklahoma Farmers*, 47.

long-term membership was unfair.⁷⁶ Forty-six percent of those renters and forty-two percent of owners responded that they would not sign a new contract.⁷⁷

Despite the shortcomings of the OCGA, most of its members were loyal supporters. An overwhelming 82% of owners and seventy-one percent of the tenants agreed that the OCGA did help cotton farmers. Similar numbers believed that the organization also bettered the price of cotton by 1928.⁷⁸ This same poll finds that tenants who were members of the OCGA were more stable than those who were not. They received nineteen percent higher return on their crops. Their farms contained an average of 98 acres to only 79 for the non-members. Their accumulation of wealth was nearly double and they were less likely to move.⁷⁹ The average stay on a farm by a non member was 3.4 years, while that of a member of the OCGA was 4.3 years, difference of almost one year.⁸⁰

W. W. Fetrow's research, however, did not illuminate the effect of the OCGA on cotton tenants. He seems to suggest that the OCGA improved profits for the cotton farmer, which is likely true to some extent. However, it is also reasonable to suggest that because of their more stable tenure on the land, more prosperous tenants were drawn to the OCGA because they could afford the membership dues more easily and they were also more educated and successful. Because of their capabilities, the landlords of flourishing tenants may have been more lenient and allowed these tenants to sell their crops as they wished. His research also does not look at lease contracts which could affect the study. If cash tenants were more likely to be members of the OCGA, this could

⁷⁶Ibid, 31.

⁷⁷Ibid, 16.

⁷⁸Fetrow, *Cooperative Marketing*, 27.

⁷⁹Fetrow, *Economic Conditions*,

⁸⁰Ibid, 11.

skew the results if measured against all tenants because the majority of cotton tenants were sharecroppers who were typically given less freedoms than the cash tenant. Therefore, it is equally likely that the association had more appeal to the prosperous farmer, rather than making a prosperous farmer out of one who was not.

Cotton growers felt the need to organize to help control the cotton prices, but they had a difficult time controlling the amount of cotton each farmer produced which directly affected the cotton price. They could hold their cotton until they thought the market was high enough to sell, but during years when the market was flooded with cotton, there was little hope of substantially increasing their profit. This made the cotton market extremely unstable during the 1920s.

After World War I, the cotton market collapsed. Between July 1920 and January 1921, the price of cotton plummeted from \$.41 per pound, an all-time high, to \$.12 per pound, the lowest since the United States entered the war.⁸¹ This left the tenant farmer in distress. Two primary reasons for the unstable cotton market in the 1920s were overproduction by farmers and over-speculation by merchants.⁸² The drop in price caused the agricultural advocates to call on cotton growers to voluntarily reduce the number of bales they produced. To some degree this worked. The reduction of over 5 million bales in 1921 helped the country to use up the supply they had in stock and create a rebound in the market that lasted until the market was again flooded in 1924.⁸³ In January 1924, the cotton market reached \$.34 per pound, the highest mark since August

⁸¹National Bureau of Economic Research. www.nber.org/databases/macrohistory. Accessed on June 8, 2004.

⁸²Brown Brothers to JBA Robertson, January 23, 1919. *JBA Robertson Papers*. Governors Collections, Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, box 25 file 19.

⁸³*Speakers Summary for Oklahoma Cotton Acreage Reduction Campaign* (circular no. 235). Stillwater, OK: Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, [1927], 4.

1921. The down trend that followed the peak of January 1924 lasted through 1926, again forcing the state to call for a decrease in production as the market bottomed at \$.13 per pound in January 1927.⁸⁴ Oklahoma and Texas were largely responsible for this enormous growth in cotton production. Between 1910 and 1925, these two states doubled their acres of cotton production.⁸⁵

In 1926, Oklahoma reached its peak cotton production turning out 1,760,644 bales. Good cotton prices from 1921 to 1924 caused the rise in the planting of more acres of cotton in Oklahoma.⁸⁶ Oklahoma farmers increased their cotton production seventy-seven percent from 1921 to 1926, contributing to an unstable market and creating a surplus.⁸⁷ American cotton consumption was estimated at about 15,500,000 bales per year. The carryover from 1926 to 1927 was seven million bales, leaving the estimated need for bales of cotton at only 8,500,000 bales to fulfill the needs of the United States and the export they could handle.⁸⁸ After 1927, the cotton prices recovered somewhat to just over \$.20 per pound in 1928, but cotton growers never again saw the high prices they experienced in the mid-1920s.

The cotton economy was a huge factor in the lives of Oklahoma tenant farmers. Many of the cotton growers of Oklahoma were tenant farmers. Tenancy rates were much higher in the counties where cotton was the cash crop. When cotton rates suddenly dropped, many tenants who had mortgaged their crop were left with nothing to sell to pay

⁸⁴National Bureau of Economic Research. www.nber.org/databases/macrohistory. Accessed on June 8, 2004.

⁸⁵*Speakers Summary*, 2.

⁸⁶Roy A. Ballinger and R.C. Soxman, *Some Economic Problems of Cotton Gins in Oklahoma* bulletin no. 231 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, October 1936), 3-4.

⁸⁷Bradford Knapp, *Safe Farming for 1926* extension circular no. 22 (Stillwater, OK: Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, 1926), 4.

⁸⁸*Speakers Summary*, 3.

their creditors. Though the OCGA did help its members, the cotton market remained unpredictable and unstable, and farmers did not help the problem by overproduction. The rise in cotton prices was too tempting an occurrence for most farmers to sit idly. Instead, when many of the farming newspapers and experts noted that too much cotton production was not beneficial to the cotton farmer, most ignored the warning. Many of the tenants were pressured by their landlords to plant more cotton, but most probably saw the allure of a larger payday and did not understand the economic theory of supply and demand. Left with little choice, cotton farmers continued to raise more cotton because the only way to increase profit was to increase acreage. When cotton prices fell, the only way to make up the lost money was to raise more cotton.

Despite the attempts of cotton growers to organize and stabilize the cotton market, factors beyond their control made this nearly impossible. Unfair usury laws, rise in mechanization, and a migration away from rural communities kept the tenant in a position they could not rise above. With the coming of the Great Depression, farm commodity prices plummeted, further complicating an already fragile agricultural land-tenure scale. These factors would be the focus of the New Deal advocates who emerged to help the tenants in the 1930s.

Chapter IV: Modernization, The New Deal, and the Tenant, 1930 to 1940

In the 1930s, tenant farmers began to fight a new battle against familiar foes.

Rather than just worrying over poor prices and high interest rates, now the tenant fought to remain a farmer. With the start of the Great Depression in 1929, the entire country plummeted into a crisis and the agricultural economy fell even further. Earlier problems of tenants became magnified. Mechanization, lack of credit, and poor living conditions left the tenant with two terrible choices: either leave Oklahoma in search of employment elsewhere or stay on the land, if the landlord allowed, and hope for the economy to recover. With the advent of the New Deal, the distribution of relief reached tenants later than many other sectors of the agricultural economy. This unfortunate circumstance was hardly a coincidence as the government made conscious decisions to give relief to land owners and made the tenants wait. Despite these shortcomings, the government did try to help the tenant farmers by the end of the 1930s in ways other than just giving them a subsidy. With the advent of the Farm Tenant Homes Corporation, the government actually helped a few tenants purchase farms. The 1930s marked the only time when the government tried to reverse the situation of tenant farmers by extending them credit to buy farms. This help did not come until late in the decade, but it did increase the likelihood that the tenant could remain on the land, and possibly then own.

In the 1920s, it was thought that tenancy was useful and acceptable as a step in the ladder theory of land ownership. However, by the early 1930s, most activists and economists realized its inefficiency and began to reject it. This progression was formerly

recognized as the natural way that farmers moved to land ownership.¹ Before the depression, Progressives focused much of their reformist zeal on the problems of the cities. They focused on monopolies, corruption, immigration, and urban slums but neglected the problems of the agricultural community, especially among the tenants. Perhaps this was because the Progressives were themselves urbanites. Many of the reformers lived in the cities and had not traveled to rural communities unless they were passing through to other cities. No matter the reason, tenants shared similar circumstances with city dwellers such as inadequate housing. Tenancy historically produces “rural slums, breeds poverty, illiteracy, and disease.” Their houses were poorly constructed, often with no windows. They seldom had indoor plumbing or electricity, even by the late 1930s.² The tenants also had no one to champion their cause against the corruption of landlords, merchants, and banks.³

Activists also began to recognize that tenancy in the South was not just an African-American problem. However, tenancy in Oklahoma had always been a problem for poor whites as much as poor blacks. In cotton growing states, it was not uncommon for a majority of the tenants to be African-Americans, often freedmen or their descendants. In Oklahoma, this was not the case. The Census records of 1930 show that only ten counties had an African-American farmer population of over five hundred. Most of these counties were in the old Cherokee and Seminole nations where African-

¹Rupert Vance, *Farmers Without Land* Public Affairs Pamphlet no. 12 (Public Affairs Committee: New York), 1.

²Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler and E.L. Kirkpatrick. *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture* (Social Research Report no. 8). Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and The Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1938.

³William H. Harbaugh, “Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions,” *Agricultural History* 66 (Summer 1992): 96.

Americans served vital roles in earlier histories. African-Americans were formerly slaves on Cherokee plantations and some were tribal members of the Seminole. Most of these counties had very low tenancy rates, and none were higher than the southern tier of Oklahoma counties. For example, Bryan County had a tenancy rate of about seventy-five percent, but an African-American farming population of only about ten percent. If every single black farmer in Bryan County were a tenant, this left sixty-five percent of the tenants classified as white by the Census of 1930.⁴

This is a very interesting phenomenon that can only be explained by examining other aspects of Oklahoma history. The lack of a category for Native Americans on the Census definitely inflated this number, so the more appropriate statement might be that the majority of tenants in Oklahoma was not African-American. However, Oklahoma did have a higher population of white Americans than most other cotton growing states, especially those deemed as the Deep South. Even most of the counties bordering the Red River, where cotton was easily the most harvested crop, had African-American farm population rates near ten percent. This tends to separate Oklahoma from the South because of the ethnic identity of the tenant farmers.

By the 1930s, activists, such as Tom W. Cheeks, recognized the unfairness of tenancy and called for help. State governments, local politicians, agricultural newspapers, and farmers' organizations led the movement and tried to bring about reform so that the tenant might have a chance to own his own farm. Cheeks, President of the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, became an ardent supporter of tenants' rights. During one speech in 1937, he stated: "Every Nation's strength is measured by its home owning

⁴These statistics were computed from information gathered by the University of Virginia at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu>. Accessed on February 17, 2004.

citizens. Our home owning citizenship has decreased from 93% in the last 30 years to 27.5%. This menace is threatening the very foundation of our Republic.”⁵ By calling for reform, these groups committed themselves to lessening the burden on the tenant. They called for home ownership, improved roads, and a better lifestyle, where the rural communities could flourish. They hoped to reverse the flood of children drawn to the cities because they could find no opportunities on the land.

The Census of 1930 showed that tenancy rates in the United States were soaring. The national average reached forty-two percent. Oklahoma saw a rate much higher than this at just over 61% ranking it seventh in the nation. The surrounding states of Texas and Arkansas saw tenancy rates of 60.88% and 63% respectively. Two-thirds of the rented land existed in the sixteen southern states.⁶ The distinction of the highest tenancy rate belonged to Mississippi with 72% of the farmers in the state being tenants, followed by Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. All of these states relied on cotton as one of the primary agricultural exports of the state economy.⁷

⁵“The Evils of Farm Tenancy,” March 27, 1937. *Tom W. Cheek Collection*. Special Collections and University Archives, Oklahoma State University Libraries.

⁶John D Black and R. H. Allen. “The Growth of Farm Tenancy in the United States.” *The Quarterly Article of Economics* 51 (May 1937): 397.

⁷University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>. Accessed 2-17-2004.

Oklahoma tenancy patterns tended to follow the national trend with cotton producing regions showing higher rates than wheat or livestock producing areas. Southeastern Oklahoma, known as the cross-timbers region, had a 70% tenant rate in most counties. The cotton growing counties of the southern prairie and the Ozarks usually showed tenancy rates between 60 and 70%. The wheat producing region of Oklahoma, found on the high plains of the northwest, had between 40 and 60% tenancy rates, still above the national average.⁸ By 1935, Oklahoma showed the second highest tenancy rate, climbing from seventh in only five years. The only state with a higher tenancy rate was South Dakota, which was not even in the top eight in 1930s census bureau statistical study.⁹

Several reasons exist for the rise in tenancy during the fifty years prior to the Great Depression. Low farm incomes, land speculation, and over-evaluation, expense and productiveness of mechanization, drought, lack of city employment, and population pressure were primary contributors. The lower incomes plagued the farmers throughout the 1920s causing them to fall even farther into debt. Extended periods of drought greatly exacerbated an already fragile economy. Depression did not allow for employment opportunities in the cities to take up the excess labor force from the farms.

⁸Tom Moore, *Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma 1925-1935*. MA Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1938.

⁹Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler and E.L. Kirkpatrick. *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture* (Social Research Report no. 8). Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and The Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1938.

Finally population pressures forced many people to be dependent on the farm for their means of survival causing a labor surplus.¹⁰

Table 3: Tenant Farms as a Percentage of all Farms

	Oklahoma	United States
1880	NA	25
1890	1	28
1900	44	35
1910	55	37
1920	51	38
1930	61	42
1935	61	42

Adapted from Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler and E.L. Kirkpatrick. *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture* (Social Research Report no. 8). Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and The Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1938.

The rise in population pressure was becoming more alarming as the birth rate of tenant farming women was much higher than that of farm owners' wives. Owners' wives averaged about 2.4 children, whereas tenant wives about 2.7, and farm laborers' wives about 3.3 children. The percentage of those children who entered agriculture as an occupation is also surprisingly opposite of what one might expect. One could surmise that tenant and croppers children would look for some other type of job because they stood no chance of inheriting any land; but this study seems to prove exactly the opposite trend. Fifty-four percent of farm owners' children become farmers, 59% of tenant children become farmers, and 63% of sharecroppers and laborers children enter agriculture as a means of earning a living.¹¹ Several things could explain this trend. Because of the migratory nature of tenancy, the children might not have been exposed to

¹⁰United States Farm Security Administration, *Security for Farm Tenants* (Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1918): 5-7.

¹¹Taylor, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 44.

different ways to earn a living and may have had lower expectations because of their lack of experience. Less educated classes have historically experienced higher birth rates than those with more education. To these classes, children represent free labor. Without land to inherit, children – if they remained farmers – were destined to lives as tenants. They too had to become tenants if they wished to remain farmers. One study from 1938 looked back at the situation and sadly exclaimed, “more and more, in the future, some men will be tenants because they are sons of tenants.”¹²

The failing world economy was the key motivator for the Great Depression. Because it hit rural communities even harder than the cities, the Depression devastated Oklahoma’s farm economy. Falling farm prices, foreclosures on farms, mounting operating costs, taxes, and a rise in mechanization and commercialization made this time extremely difficult for all farmers, but especially tenants because they could ill afford to pay rising costs when their income was declining.¹³

Wartime expansion of acreage and increased production through mechanization during World War I was largely responsible for the over production that deepened the Depression almost ten years later. Two factors, brought on by the end of World War I, were largely responsible for overproduction. A decrease in consumer demand and the ability of foreign farmers to renew their pre-war practices led to an increase in world-wide cotton production; but the United States cotton farmer continued to grow more cotton. Mechanization influenced this production as fewer farmers were necessary to plow more acres. The tractor displaced the need for many horses and mules, causing the land needed to raise feed for the animals to be put under the plow. The depression in the

¹²Ibid, 40.

¹³*Current Farm Economics*, October 1931: 5-7.

overseas market made consumer nations cut back on their purchasing of American farm products leaving the farmer with high carry-overs and no market to sell them on.¹⁴ There was also a disparity between agricultural and non-agricultural products that devalued the farmers' goods. As nonagricultural goods became more expensive, the price for most farm commodities fell sharply, forcing the farmer to buy at inflated prices and sell at low prices.¹⁵ By November 1, 1932, prices for many agricultural commodities reached the lowest since the turn of the century. Wheat prices were at their lowest price since 1894, with corn and hogs at their lowest since 1896.¹⁶ Cotton, the commodity that most affected the tenant, reached its lowest wholesale price since 1898.¹⁷ As illustrated in the table below, wheat and cotton made up approximately 50% of the cash incomes for Oklahoma farmers making the economic crisis especially difficult to Oklahoma farmers. This meant economic ruin for many mortgaged farm owners, forcing them into tenancy when the bank foreclosed. Though tenants had no farm to lose, they had their dignity, and more importantly the health of their family, as they could barely afford to feed their children, pay the creditors, find a new place to move for the next season, and buy seed and necessary materials to make a crop the next year.

¹⁴Carry-over refers to the excess agricultural surplus in certain commodities that were not used up before production began the next year. This often led to a surplus which lowered prices because the demand was easily met. Cotton was especially susceptible to a carry-over because it was often held by farmers to raise prices and the market became saturated forcing prices downward.

¹⁵*The Oklahoma Farmer Stockman*, August 1, 1932.

¹⁶*Ibid*, November 1, 1932.

¹⁷National Bureau of Economic Research. Available: <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroeconomy/>. Accessed 6-8-2004.

Table 4: Cash Incomes of Agricultural Commodities in Oklahoma (1924-1938)

Cotton	34.9%
Wheat	16.2
Livestock	14.5
All other crops	9.5
Dairy	10.1
Poultry	5.6
Hogs	4.8
Other	0.8

Adapted from *Current Farm Economics: Oklahoma*, February 1939: 7.

Some claimed that tenants had it better than owners during the drought years of the 1930s. In years of a near total crop loss, like 1934 and 1936, tenants paid on the basis of their crop by paying their “halves” or “quarters.”¹⁸ Many farmers could raise enough to eat, but then they could not make the mortgage payment on their farms.¹⁹ Despite the statements of owners that it was easier being a tenant, many tenants were struggling just as terribly as owners. The Depression shattered the dreams of owners and tenants alike; owners were losing the farms to creditors as they foreclosed on the land they had worked and saved so hard to buy; and tenants saw their dreams of ownership vanish as they recognized for the first time there would be no farm to call their own.

The rise in mechanization during the 1920s was very controversial among progressive farmers and ruralists. The obvious advantages can be seen by reading any agricultural newspaper contemporary to the time. Increased productivity with less invested time was a temptation too promising for most owners to ignore. The tractor

¹⁸W.W. Boies to Frank C. Carter (May 2, 1938). *Frank C. Carter Papers*. Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma: Norman, OK, box 1 file 1.

¹⁹Mrs. Frederick Fay to William H. Murray. *Murray, William H.* Governors Papers, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, State Archives: Oklahoma City, OK.

could plow as much ground as three teams of mules or horses and self-propelled combines were equally more efficient than the horse-drawn threshing machines. But these devices were much more common to the wheat farmer in western Oklahoma who owned his land than the tenant in southern Oklahoma. The tractor would have been very beneficial to a cotton farmer but most tenants would have struggled to buy a horse if one died, let alone a new and modern piece of machinery.²⁰

Many people at this time recognized that the tractor added to the overproduction that plagued the farm economy. Scientific farming and power machinery improved the ability of the farmer to grow excess yields during the 1920s while the consumption of wheat by Americans was dropping significantly. Headlines reading “Too Many Machines Cause Over-Production” were common and caused the primary ally of the tenant, the agricultural newspapers, to cry loudly for the slowing of mechanization. They saw machines, tractors in particular, to be the root of the growing surpluses that plagued the economy.²¹ Perhaps even more distressing to those who wanted to save rural communities, the new mechanized farming method made it possible for farmers to live in town rather than on the land they were tilling. One-crop farmers often had no livestock and could live in town where their families could experience modern conveniences and they could interact more closely with the community.²²

Not only were the tractors causing a rise in yields, but they were important in dispossessing the sharecropper and tenant of farms because they made draft animals obsolete. Mechanization reduced the number of horses and mules from twenty-six

²⁰*Current Economics*, October 1932, 78.

²¹*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, July 15, 1930.

²²*ibid*, March 15, 1939.

million in 1920 to sixteen million in 1937. It also reduced the number of acres needed to feed these teams by nearly forty million, freeing this land to be put into production of wheat or cotton. The lack of productivity of draft animals in comparison to the tractor was an omen of the new age of modern agriculture.²³

Not only were the machines disrupting a way of life, but they were forcing farmers to modernize in order to produce the number of bushels per acre necessary to compete successfully. Modernization meant buying new tractors, which ultimately meant buying on credit. Machinery debts became the new plague of wheat owners and tenants in western Oklahoma. Whether the farmer owned the land or rented, if he had no tractor, he was raising less than his neighbors on a per acre basis. As yields began to rise and prices began to fall, it became increasingly difficult for wheat farmers in western Oklahoma, both tenant and owner, to meet their mortgages and other debts.²⁴ Many tenants, according to Robert T. McMillan, could not afford much more than a “plow, harrow, cultivator, and a wagon.” They still relied on a horse to compete as best they could, using more hours to make up for the lack of resources and tools, to make as productive a field as they could from their depleted and eroded soils.²⁵

The modernization of agriculture affected tenants in more ways than finding credit to buy a tractor. By the end of the 1930s, the tractor was making the renter obsolete because the landlord could plow and plant himself or hire one or two farmhands to work the same amount of land that several tenants had planted. If he employed this

²³Ibid, July 1, 1938.

²⁴Ibid, July 15, 1931.

²⁵McMillan, Robert T. *A Social and Economic Study of Relief Families in Ottawa County Oklahoma, 1934*. Technical Bulletin No. 2. Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, July 1938.

method, the landlord did not need to split his profits with anyone, making it a very economical practice. This practice began the displacement of the tenant that would extend throughout the 1930s.²⁶

Much like in the 1920s, the primary complaint of the farmers in the early 1930s was still the credit system. With low prices for farm commodities, the farmer customarily still paid 10 to 30 percent on borrowed money.²⁷ By this time, the high interest was not as big an issue as the inability to get the money. Because of the banking crisis of the early Depression, farmers could no longer get money on their ability to farm but only on collateral. By 1932 *The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman* reported that inadequate collateral made it nearly impossible for tenants to find any sort of loan from a bank. They had virtually no assets and their farming capabilities were no longer enough for a bank to extend credit. This left only one option. The tenant still relied on the local creditor who had the highest rates of any attainable loan.²⁸

Borrowing habits at this time were very poor, making the transition to the new borrowing system which required more collateral very difficult for the tenant. "Since money could be borrowed in early spring with which to buy food and feed, no real effort was made to grow these [food and feed]. With knowledge that money could be borrowed to meet emergency needs, little effort was made to save against the rainy day."²⁹ This left tenants shocked when they were no longer able to borrow from their local banks just as they always had. A reported sixty-nine percent of tenants used credit for living expenses,

²⁶*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, September 15, 1933.

²⁷*Ibid*, December 15, 1938.

²⁸*Ibid*, August 1, 1932.

²⁹*Ibid*.

while only twenty-four percent of owners relied on credit to survive. Owners used their credit to buy livestock and machinery, making them a less risky client because they actually had something to show for their borrowed money. Moreover, owners had the collateral to back up their promissory notes and tenants usually did not, hence the higher interest rates.³⁰

Tenants also used seasonal loans to “make a crop”. Eighty-six percent of cotton farming tenants and sixty-five percent of owners used seasonal credit to produce their crop. One-fourth of these loans were procured at local stores, the most unsatisfactory type of loan. Local merchants charged 32.5%, while banks averaged about 11.3%. A farm mortgage loan, not available to the tenant, was the most preferable at about 7% interest. Because of the decrease in availability of bank loans and new security requirements, most tenants had no choice but to take the higher interest credit loans from local merchants and stores. This problem continued to reduce their ability to save money making it unlikely that they would ever be able to buy a farm.³¹

Some economists at this time claimed that tenancy might not be the worst circumstance for young farmers. From 1930 to 1934, a reported 750,000 farm families lost their farms to banks and mortgage companies.³² This left some saying that tenancy might not be as bad as farm ownership because tenants could not be charged the exorbitant interest rates on their farm mortgages. New Deal agencies were trying to lower farm mortgages but these were not available to the tenant at this point. Despite this

³⁰Arthur N. Moore and J.T. Sanders, *Credit Problems of Oklahoma Cotton Farmers with Special Reference to Garvin, Jackson, and Pittsburg Counties* Bulletin No. 198 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, October 1930): 18.

³¹*Ibid*, 2.

³²*Security for Farm Tenants*, 4.

idea, farm ownership was still the goal of most farmers. They wanted the opportunity to live on their own farms, determine their own acreages, and most importantly, enjoy the independence and happiness that came only from working for oneself and not the extortionist landlord.³³

The heavy reliance on cotton was still one of the primary factors burdening the tenant well into the 1930s. Because of this fact, cotton farmers had few alternatives for making money during poor cotton years.³⁴ Yet many tenants knew of nothing else. They had limited knowledge of other crops and no means to finance the equipment to pay for their planting. *Current Economics* reported that 95 to 98% of the cropland in Oklahoma was used to produce only six primary crops: cotton, wheat, corn, oats, sorghum, and hay. Truck farming was only an afterthought, as few tenants relied on it for any type of income. This is important for several reasons. The lack of diversity left the tenant farmer with only one way to earn a living, usually from cotton. In an unstable economy, his poor earning years were just as frequent as the years when he saved money from his sale. Also, as draft animals became obsolete, more land was put into cotton production because oats and hay became less important as livestock numbers decreased. Most important, when the Depression pushed the economy downward, tenant farmers were left with no way to feed their families. Cotton and wheat were worthless and many tenants had no gardens to help make it through the difficult times.³⁵

Despite a drop in yield per acre every year since 1905, cotton production in number of bales produced grew rapidly. In 1905, cotton yielded 240 pounds per acre but by 1930 this was reduced to only 135 pounds per acre. Factors decreasing productivity

³³*Current Farm Economics*, October 1932, 78.

³⁴Moore and Sanders, *Credit Problems*, 21.

³⁵*Current Farm Economics*, October-December 1939, 124.

included the planting of marginal land to cotton, using short staple cotton varieties which were resistant to dry weather, and the depletion of the soil. This leaves only one explanation for the rise in cotton production, the planting of vastly more acres than previously unplanted. Like the late 1920s, this meant an enormous carry-over in bales of cotton as the world's cotton farmers grossly exceeded the demand. 1931 saw the second largest carry-over of cotton in history, once again forcing the agricultural industry to call for a reduction in acreage by its farmers. One of the first to call for a reduction was one of the United States's primary competitors. Egypt passed a law that prohibited its farmers from planting more than 40% of the individual farmer's land to cotton in many areas.³⁶

The call for the reduction of acres began to work as cotton growers went to the fields. In 1930, farmers reduced by 8%, in 1931 by 17%, and in 1932 they reduced by another 17%. According to the Bureau of Agriculture, this made the 1932 crop the smallest since 1923. Down almost 3 million bales, the United States and Egypt were primarily responsible by persuading their farmers, most of whom were tenants, to reduce their acreage and diversify. By late 1933, the cotton prices were slowly beginning to rise, but never reached much higher than thirteen cents per pound before the close of the decade.³⁷ With such terrible commodity prices, by 1932 tenants and owners alike called for government relief from the terrible depression that threatened to destroy the only life they knew and any chance for tenants to achieve ownership.

³⁶*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, November 15, 1930; January 1, 1931; *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, November 25, 1931..

³⁷*The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, December 25, 1931; *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, December 25, 1932; National Bureau of Economic Research, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available: <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroeconomy/>. Accessed 6-8-2004.

With low farm prices, the farm economy needed relief as badly as the rest of the nation and eagerly awaited Roosevelt's New Deal. Government programs began to put men back to work, and the Roosevelt Administration also tried to stabilize the agricultural economy. The Agricultural Adjustment Act gave federal subsidies hoping to revive the agricultural economy. But the inadequacies of the New Deal soon became evident as farmers received aid based on the size of their farm rather than their amount of need. This caused many social advocates and farmers themselves to cry that the government was still helping those who needed help the least.

Initially, the AAA gave money mostly to grain and cotton farmers. The subsidy went to farmers who held land out of production hoping to increase the demand for cotton and wheat. "The Farmer," according to *The Oklahoma Farmer Stockman*, "can not grow any crop on contracted land for sale, directly or indirectly." He could grow crops or feed for home consumption or to feed the livestock, or soil improving crops to be plowed under but not for sale.³⁸ *The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman* also summarized the Agricultural Adjustment Act and its three main goals: to reduce the acreage under cultivation, to increase prices, and to contract equivalent amount of cotton stock for reduced acreage.³⁹ These lofty goals were somewhat successful as acreage did decrease, prices did rise somewhat, and cotton futures rose from 5.3 cents per pound in June of 1932 to 12.3 cents in June of 1934.⁴⁰

The Bankhead Bill was the portion of the AAA that was designed specifically to reduce the surplus of American cotton. In 1934, it set a ten million bale quota for the

³⁸*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, September 1, 1934; February 1, 1934. ³⁷*Ibid.*, June 1, 1933.

³⁹*Ibid.*, June 1, 1933.

⁴⁰National Bureau of Economic Research, <http://www.nber.org/databases/macrohitory/>. Accessed 6-8-2004.

farmers and paid another subsidy to those who grew only the allotted amount. Its sole purpose was to revive the cotton economy by decreasing supply. However, terrible drought nearly wiped out the cotton crop in many parts of Oklahoma and threatened to destroy the tenants because they lost their entire crop in many cases. If a tenant was not signed up for this particular program, he was assessed a tax on all cotton not sold under the new government program.⁴¹

The AAA was administered under the Extension Service in Oklahoma in 1934. They issued tax exemptions and assisted in getting the payments into the hands of the Oklahoma farmers. This marked the first time that all seventy-seven counties in Oklahoma had an agricultural extension agent and a home demonstration agent. By calling on state agencies to help with administration, the United States government shifted some of the burden to local agents who best knew how to handle individual situations to assist the tenant and small owner in getting government aid.⁴²

Despite the successes of the government subsidy program, it was not without its drawbacks and critics. Other than the obvious complaints about the lack of help for tenants and sharecroppers, many livestock owners criticized the government as well. One complaint that emerged was that the stockmen and dairy farmers needed help as much as any farmer and the government did not yet have a subsidy for them. They were left behind by the government when it came to giving out a subsidy.⁴³

⁴¹*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, May 1, 1934; March 15, 1934; October 1, 1934; *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, February 15, 1934.

⁴²*Twenty-first Annual Report of the Extension Division* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College and the United States Department of Agriculture, 1934): 5, 11.

⁴³*The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, March 15, 1935.

The biggest problem of the AAA was that it was the pallbearer of the tenant system, in many cases trading renters for tractors. This unintended effect was more the fault of landowners once again using the legal system to their advantage. Government subsidies went primarily to owners despite the protests of most agriculture advocates. Subsidies were supposed to be split between the owner and the tenant and the AAA even required that owners “make good-faith efforts to continue to employ tenants whose land was removed from production.”⁴⁴ To increase their own government checks, the landowners began to displace tenants from their homes forcing them into a migratory limbo.⁴⁵ The primary advocate of tenants in Oklahoma, *The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, responded with this statement:

Maybe the plan is all right for the big cotton plantations where the cotton is raised by Negroes who are told what to do, how to do and when to do it. But out west here, where there is left a little fighting spirit, an effort to force the plan through will make life mighty interesting for those on the firing line.⁴⁶

In Oklahoma, and no doubt in the South as well, landlords began to take advantage of the relief offered to cotton growers by demanding the subsidy. This left many of the neediest people without assistance and forced into other New Deal programs which focused on city slums.⁴⁷

⁴⁴David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 209-210.

⁴⁵Warren C Whatley. “Institutional Change and Mechanization in the Cotton South.” *The Journal of Economic History* 44 (June 1984): 616.

⁴⁶*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, September 15, 1933.

⁴⁷Ibid, August 1, 1933; August 15, 1933; June 1, 1935.

As the Supreme Court struck down many parts of the New Deal, the first AAA was a casualty as well. But, the Roosevelt administration did not leave the farmers without aid and by 1936 the government constructed a new Agricultural Adjustment Act based on the premise of soil conservation rather than surplus control. Despite this fact, the same problems emerged as before because the owners and tenants were supposed to split the checks on the same proportion that the crop was split, but many owners did not. Instead, the subsidy made tenants obsolete and the owner recognized the benefit of having no tenants very quickly. The owner could simply buy a tractor with his government subsidy check, kick the tenant off the land, farm the land for himself, and pocket the entire amount rather than split it with a man of lesser class, little education, whom he deemed lazy and worthless simply because he was not fortunate enough to save money and buy his own farm.⁴⁸

In their attempt to help the tenant, the Agricultural Adjustment Act succeeded only in unintentionally forcing many of them off of their land. This act led to many more farm evacuations during the 1930s than the Dust Bowl of western Oklahoma. The AAA unsuspectingly aided the wealthier group, the landlords, by giving them an excuse to force tenants off the land. These dispossessed families knew nothing but the farm and had little choice but to look for jobs in the only place where agricultural jobs existed. Like the Joad's of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, many tenants went west, just as previous generations had done, only this time they were not seeking land. These unfortunate pioneers sought jobs.

Grass roots movements among tenants occurred in Oklahoma but not with the same success they saw in other parts of the South. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union

⁴⁸Ibid, April 1, 1936; December 1, 1937.

organized a branch in eastern Oklahoma under the leadership of a Cherokee Indian named Odis Sweeden. Despite his charismatic leadership style and the need for reform, poor membership dues and ultimately the Okie migration nearly wiped out the membership within a few years of its creation. By 1937, it had all but died in Oklahoma.⁴⁹

From about 1936 to 1939, the California migration of Okies reached its peak as tenants were driven west by a failing economy and the eviction from their homes.⁵⁰ Popularized by *The Grapes of Wrath*, this story is partial truth with some details embellished to make their plight seem even more horrendous to the reader. The tenant families “had been victims at home too of an exploitative agricultural system of tractors, one-crop specialization, tenant insecurity, disease, and soil abuse.”⁵¹ These factors caused approximately 257,000 tenants, many from Oklahoma and Arkansas aptly nicknamed “Okies” and “Arkies,” to search for jobs in California picking fruit.⁵²

John Steinbeck portrayed the Joad family as innocent refugees forced off their land by dust storms and mechanization. Steinbeck wrote: “If the dust only wouldn’t fly.

⁴⁹Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and The New Deal* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press): 177-178; David Eugene Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 173.

⁵⁰The scope of this movement is far too detailed to discuss in great length. For more on this movement see James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1973).

⁵¹*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, June 1, 1939.

⁵²Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 61.

⁵³John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1939), 43.

If the top would only stay on the soil, it might not be so bad.”⁵³ This is partially true as the growing use of machines to do farm labor was supplanting the tenant. However, the abandoning of farms by tenants because of dust storms is almost entirely myth. Only two to three percent of the migrants going to California were actually from the seven counties affected by the Dust Bowl. The vast majority of Okie migrant farmers, at least ninety-seven percent, came from eastern Oklahoma where there was a much higher concentrations of tenants. An astounding fifty-one percent of all Oklahomans moving to California were tenant farmers.⁵⁴

The Grapes of Wrath also portrays the tenants of Oklahoma as a stable population with families residing on the same farm for decades when in actuality this was far from the truth. The typical Oklahoma family lived on four to five farms, and only forty percent remained within twenty-five miles of their original farm.⁵⁵ This class of Oklahoma farmers was extremely mobile and historically moved every three years on average. Steinbeck’s portrayal served as a much more heart wrenching scene as he wrote:

Grandpa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes. Then a bad year came and he had to borrow a little money. An’ we was born here. There in the door – our children born here. And Pa had to borrow money. The bank owned the land then, but we stayed and we got of little bit of what we raised. . . . Sure, cried the tenant men, but it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That’s what makes it ours-

⁵⁴Gregory, *American Exodus*, 264.

⁵⁵Ibid.

being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a piece of paper with numbers on it.⁵⁶

This statement, though it served its purpose well, is filled with historical inaccuracies. First, it is very doubtful that in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, Grandpa had to drive off any Indians to take possession of the land. The only options he had for taking possession of the land were to be on the Indian rolls and get it as part of the allotment, buy an allotment from an Indian, or lease the land from a landlord. It was impossible to drive off all the Indians and hold the land considering that he was in the heart of the Cherokee Nation. Most likely, being a tenant family, they would have borrowed money from banks and creditors frequently, if not every year, just to survive. However, the land was not theirs to mortgage. They may have paid extremely high interest rates on their loans, even as high as 200%; but the bank could not force them to give up the land they did not own.

In this book, Steinbeck implies that the Joad's owned their land then lost it to the bank. The Joad's could not have homesteaded this land because it was Indian allotment land unless they acquired it from an Indian, contradicting the idea that Grandpa fought the Indians away. In that regard, Steinbeck confused Oklahoma history with some other "frontier" history. This sounds much more like a way to claim land in Kentucky or Tennessee in the late 1700s, but never in Oklahoma. Grandpa Joad would have been an Indian fighter of mythical status had he been able to hold the entire Cherokee Nation.

Steinbeck's portrayal of the migration was probably more accurate than their lives in Oklahoma. This is probably because he knew the story of their migration better than

⁵⁶John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 45.

the facts about Depression era farming in Oklahoma. Many people who observed the Okies on their westward migration said that those who passed by looked just as the families Steinbeck described. With their jalopies piled high and every possession they owned strapped to the top of the car, the former tenants loaded up and headed west to the fruit picking industry of California.⁵⁷ As is too often the case, historical accuracy in *The Grapes of Wrath* serves as the sacrificial lamb for a good story line.

Though the Dust Bowl did not affect the majority of the tenant farms in Oklahoma in the late 1930s, several almost Biblical plagues threatened to displace the Oklahoma tenant farmer. Though they were not touched by the “Dust Bowl,” droughts did affect much of Oklahoma, hurting the tenants of both cotton and wheat growing regions. Drought struck several different areas of Oklahoma during different years. The Oklahoma panhandle was struck by a severe drought in 1933, and the government acted by making loans up to \$250 available for thirty counties in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, southwest Kansas, southeast Colorado and northeast New Mexico.⁵⁸ Eighteen counties received emergency drought relief in 1936 in southwestern Oklahoma, eastern Oklahoma, and one county in the panhandle.⁵⁹ Another drought in 1939, accompanied by a grasshopper epidemic in the western half of the state, made planting extremely difficult.⁶⁰ The only thing many farmers could do without government aid was to leave the stubble from previous crops to provide some wind cover and refrain from

⁵⁷Marsha L. Weisiger, “The Reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Oklahoma: A Reappraisal.” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 70 (Winter 1992-92): 400.

⁵⁸*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, July 1, 1933.

⁵⁹July 15, 1936.

⁶⁰*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, May 1, 1938; March 15, 1939; December 15, 1939.

planting sub-marginal land. However, most people would not do anything “until the dust starts flying.”⁶¹

The first governmental help for the tenants did not occur until 1935. The AAA tried to help but had the unexpected effect of driving the tenants off the farm rather than helping them when the landlord wanted the government check. The continued clamor to help the tenant, and the rising awareness of many agricultural leaders of the government, led to several hearings to find out what could be done to help tenants and sharecroppers. This marked the first time that a concerted government effort was made specifically to help relieve the tenancy situation and possibly help them toward achieving home ownership.

Hearings began in 1935 in the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry to look into forming a Farm Tenant Homes Corporation. The difference between the AAA and the Farm Tenant Homes Corporation was that the AAA was a temporary relief program and the FTHC could serve as a “long-range, 50 year program.”⁶² This particular program would buy land from willing sellers at fair market prices and then loan the money to tenants who passed a strict screening process. It did not help the tenant who was already forced off his land and into towns, but focused on the farming class tenant who still struggled to survive.⁶³ As the country began to recognize that sharecropping was not a “negro problem,” it became alarmed. By 1935, one million of 1,793,783 tenant families in the cotton and tobacco belts were white.⁶⁴

⁶¹“How to Stop the Dust Storms.” *H.H. Finnell Collection*. Special Collections and University Archives, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK.

⁶²Statement by Senator Bankhead. “To Create the Farm Tenant Home Corporation” (United States Congress. Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. Washington, D.C. United States Government Printing Office, 1935): 71.

⁶³*Ibid*, 11.

⁶⁴Testimony by Mr. Gray, *Ibid*, 15-18.

This hearing found several reasons for the need to help the tenant, but not without some reservation. The members agreed on the most basic premise that the “shiftless gypsy type of person that is produced by tenancy” was not an effective contributor to the society.⁶⁵ They also found that the highly scientific methods espoused by extension agents were not effective for the tenant. They did not have the knowledge, or more importantly the money to grow soil improving crops suggested by the Agricultural and Mechanical schools.⁶⁶ The primary reservation of some experts testifying before the committee was that the program would be administered improperly. Using the money of the public in a bureaucratic debacle could discredit the FTHC and waste funds at a time when the public had no money to waste.⁶⁷

In 1937, President Roosevelt assembled the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy to explore the problem and make a recommendation to both him and Congress about what could be done to relieve the situation. This committee, headed by Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, agreed with the perception of other advocates at the time that the major problems with farm tenancy were the use of sub-marginal lands, no opportunity for young farmers, high migratory numbers, and the unproductiveness of small farms. The committee ultimately recommended that the purchase of land by speculators and non-farmers be discouraged through limiting governmental loans and a high capital gains tax. It also focused on the idea that tenants be helped to own their own farms so they could improve their lives both socially and economically.⁶⁸

⁶⁵Testimony of Mr. Rankin, *Ibid*, 33.

⁶⁶Testimony of Mr. Gray, *Ibid*, 19, 30.

⁶⁷Testimony of Mr. McRae, *Ibid*, 63.

⁶⁸“Report of the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy” (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, February 1937).

Under the charge of the Farm Security Administration, the Farm Tenant Homes Corporation began to help tenants buy their own farms. In 1937, Congress passed a bill that allotted \$10 million for the purchase of tenant homes. They only chose those tenants they believed could serve as successful subjects in the first phases of the program. This very selective group included only a few farms in Oklahoma in only eleven counties. The number of tenants per county was also set at a very low number and they were restricted to certain types of farming. The following counties were eligible for farms in the first year: Major County received five wheat and livestock farms, Washita and Caddo received seven cotton farms each, Cleveland and Lincoln also received seven farms each for cotton and general farming but set aside for African Americans, Okfuskee and Okmulgee got six farms, Mayes received eight general farms, LeFlore and McCurtain got five self-sufficient farms, and Atoka got six livestock and cotton farms.⁶⁹

The success of the FSA farm purchasing program allowed for twenty-seven Oklahoma counties to be eligible for tenant farm loans in 1938 and 1939. One hundred ninety-four tenants got their farms on a forty year note at three percent interest. The counties eligible for the second year of the program were Major, Washita, Caddo, Lincoln, Okfuskee, Okmulgee, Mayes, LeFlore, McCurtain, and Atoka from the previous year. Only Cleveland County could not “redesignate” because of oil inflated land prices. New counties that could become part of the program included Bryan, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Garfield, Grady, Haskell, Hughes, Johnston, Kiowa, Logan, Osage, Pittsburg, Pottawatomie, Rogers, Sequoyah, and Woods.⁷⁰ In 1939, the list grew to thirty-seven counties and 264 farms. They included Adair, Alfalfa, Beckham, Blaine,

⁶⁹*The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, August 1, 1937; January 1, 1938.

⁷⁰*Ibid*, August 1, 1938.

Canadian, Carter, Coal, Comanche, Cotton, Custer, Dewey, Garvin, Grant, Greer, Harmon, Jackson, Jefferson, Kay, Kingfisher, Love, Marshall, McClain, McIntosh, Murray, Muskogee, Noble, Nowata, Pawnee, Payne, Pontotoc, Pushmataha, Seminole, Stephens, Tillman, Wagoner, Washington, and Woodward. This program marked the first real assistance designed exclusively to help the tenant.⁷¹

The state government of Oklahoma also recognized the need to help the farmer and became involved under the leadership of Governor E. W. Marland in 1937. Marland called on over one hundred agricultural leaders from across the state to establish a state committee after the one created by President Roosevelt. The Oklahoma committee established a Landlord Tenant Relationship Department and announced a Landlord-Tenant Day to be held in 1938. Other than these small gestures toward helping the tenant, the state government gave little assistance to the tenant.⁷²

The 1930s were a difficult time for all Americans, including farmers, but especially the tenant farmer. The tenant farmers fought against the system with no real allies, it seemed, except for the agricultural newspapers to which they subscribed. When activists and political leaders finally realized that the tenant farmers were also in trouble, they tried to help them in the same program used to assist the small owner, the AAA. The AAA only succeeded in displacing the tenant because it gave the largest subsidy to the owners on a per acre basis, making the tenant no longer necessary. This further relegated the tenant into second-class status and put him onto relief rolls and into the work camps of the other New Deal agencies making them an even larger burden on the country. When the government decided it was time to help, it still took three years for

⁷¹August 1, 1939.

⁷²Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 124-125.

the program to get established and begin to help tenants buy the farms they desperately wanted. This finally helped some of the tenants to own their own land; but in 1940, tenancy rates in Oklahoma were still very high and ranked among the highest in the country. Only in the cotton belt of Oklahoma in the 1940 Census was tenancy dropping. However, in almost all the wheat raising counties, tenancy rates were higher than they were in 1930. This phenomenon could partially be explained by the assistance to cotton farmers, but also the devaluation of wheat as well.

By 1940, the economy was beginning to look upward as the United States could once again produce at high levels because the European nations were again involved in war and desperately needed the products of American factories and farms. This did not end the days of the tenant farmer but it did call many of them, especially those displaced and living in California, into the wartime industries and the draft. The tenant farmer finally had a friend in the government, a decent economy, but still not enough land for all farmers to achieve the dream of owning their own farm.

Chapter V: Conclusion

The history of tenancy in Oklahoma and throughout the greater South is a sad story with few times of economic prosperity. Though they sometimes were in no worse a situation than the owner of a small farm, they were certainly never in a better situation. They struggled to live from year to year, often forced to rely on credit with interest rates that took any chance of making a profit. Their housing was inadequate, their children destined to the same life of poverty and drifting as their parents. Despite being the only life the children knew, their lack of education would not permit them to rise above the prescribed station given to them upon entering the world. Tenant farmers longed to achieve the American dream of land ownership, but they did not possess the means to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.”

In many ways the life of the tenant was no different than that of other disaffected and poor people within the United States. Urban slums developed because of the huge disparity of wealth, and urbanites, like tenants, stayed in their impoverished stations until World War II. Yet, there is one difference that sets the tenant farmer apart from other poor Americans. Tenants clung to a dying way of life, holding onto more hope than reason, yearning to own their own farms, but not realizing that this dream was slipping further and further away with every generation. They could not challenge the powerful banks, land speculators, and greedy creditors who, with disproportionate power, could manipulate the agricultural system to their advantage.

Though the origin of Oklahoma tenancy was different from that of the South, it was nevertheless an equally precarious existence for its practitioners. The defrauding of the Indians, and then the exploitation of the tenant class remain blemishes on the early history of Oklahoma. How often does one group of wealthy elitists get to steal from an uneducated minority and become rich by exploiting the new labor force and forcing them to work for a pauper's share of the wages? The unique situation in Oklahoma that surrounded statehood was an easy target for men with money to invest. As they built their mock plantations, the Oklahoma tenant system did not evolve as an understanding between two groups as Southern sharecropping did, but instead out of a ruthless plundering and forced renting system because of the desire of a laboring class to continue their rural, agricultural way of life.

The 1910s and 1920s saw times of economic prosperity, but these were followed quickly by a bust. Landlords, with the assistance of bankers and creditors, continued the age-old trend of robbing the poor for the benefit of the privileged through high-interest loans, short-term rent contracts, and inadequate housing and facilities. Though cooperative marketing tried to help the cotton farmer, it helped the large-scale cotton farmer more, thus leaving tenants to be helped only when it helped all cotton farmers. Cooperatives had no specific purpose to help the tenant. World War I did help the agricultural economy and tenancy shrank considerably by the 1920 Census; but the 1920s were not the best time to be a farmer, let alone a small owner, who could see his dreams vanish just as quickly when, unable to meet mortgage payments, the bank foreclosed on the farm. Cotton, wheat, and livestock prices plummeted leading into the Great Depression that forced many owners out of their homes and into tenant status. This may

be the only time in United States history that the tenant was actually better off than the owner because he already had nothing to lose.

The 1930s were simply an extension of the 1920s hardships until the New Deal programs began to relieve the farmers. In many ways, these relief programs and government subsidies caused more grief for the tenant as they were kicked out of their homes by owners who no longer needed them because the land was being held out of production. A government subsidy was guaranteed; a cotton crop was a gamble taking more time, effort, and had too many variables, like rain, weevils, and labor force, to be an absolute. There was no gamble on whether the government check would come; it always showed up in the mail box – for the owner; not the cropper or tenant.

Despite unique origins and development of Oklahoma tenant farming, the life of the Oklahoma renter greatly resembled that of the Southern tenant in several key ways. Enslaved by poverty, the Oklahoma tenant had a life of frequent moves, little social life, and inadequate housing. Every member of the family, father, mother, and children -- contributed when called upon, especially during planting in the spring and picking in the fall. This kept children out of school and caused them to slip further behind each year. Because of this trend, tenancy grew until the government stepped in to relieve some of the burdens of tenancy, such a constantly moving. Experts agreed that the wandering farmer was less stable and thus a burden on the economy so the government tried to assist. By 1940, however, it was still not enough to solve the problem.

Victims of an increasingly capitalistic system, tenants were not lazy as many people thought; they were simply those unfortunate people who borrowed money unwisely. This was the ultimate sin that sent them down the road to debt peonage. They

either secured a loan to buy a farm, or in most cases, simply to live through the winter. Without the money from the banks and merchants, the tenant could not survive, let alone purchase a farm. With no real rights to the land, and frequently little more than an eighth grade education if they were lucky, tenants who borrowed money were unable to clear a profit because the high interest rates took almost their entire share of the crop. If they did not need to borrow to live and make a crop the next year, they were lucky. But most continued in this cycle because they knew no other way and clung to the agricultural way of life they loved rather than resigning to the fact that they could make a better living in the city working at a factory or some other occupation.

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