

VIEWS FROM THE CO-OP: RECONSIDERING DELTA COOPERATIVE FARM

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## ABSTRACT

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In the decades after the 1930s, millions of farmers left the southern countryside as mechanized, capital-intensive farms employing ever-shrinking numbers of waged day laborers replaced plantations that relied on the work of sharecroppers. Those who worked at and supported Delta Cooperative Farm (Delta) resisted this process. This study analyzes why and how they did so.

When Delta opened in 1936, the founders and the former sharecroppers whom they recruited to work on the farm agreed that the status quo in the cotton South was unjust. For much of the farm's history, this shared understanding—not to mention the many advantages that Delta residents enjoyed compared to sharecroppers—allowed the farm to achieve a measure of success. But life at Delta was marked by an underlying ideological tension that led to conflict: the founders of Delta insisted that large-scale cooperative farming was the best way forward for the South. The members of Delta disagreed. As they saw it, their problems would be solved if they could own land and farm as they liked.

No one at Delta achieved their aims. When the farm closed in 1942, all who had invested their hopes in the cooperative were forced to come to terms with a southern countryside that had no room for them.

Questions of inevitability are, of course, metaphysical, not historical, and I would prefer not to touch them with a ten-foot hoe. Yet because inevitability implies a certain organic or God-given naturalness and rightness in historical developments, the construction demands response... By 1933 southern farmers... had but one question before them: would they accept expensive but labor-saving agricultural science, government regulation, and subsidies, or would they perish? It was no question at all. By that late date mechanization and depopulation did indeed seem inevitable.

Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*

Since the inevitable is “almost always unpleasant,” C. Vann Woodward once remarked, it “needs all the opposition it can get.”

Barbara J. Fields, “Dysplacement and Southern History”

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## INTRODUCTION

When the Reverend Sam Franklin and his allies opened Delta Cooperative Farm (Delta) in Bolivar County, Mississippi in 1936, they hoped to usher in a new era of southern history. “My mind is so full of what I have seen I can scarcely stop to sleep,” Franklin wrote to his wife Dorothy that summer. “Today, I set foot for the first time upon *our land*—2100 acres, waiting for the cooperative commonwealth to be born upon it!”<sup>1</sup> The founders of Delta wanted cooperative farms like it to spread across the South, replacing the existing system of plantation sharecropping with a “cooperative commonwealth” in which farmers would collectively own land and the means of production, thereby freeing themselves from the vicious grip of sharecropping and benefitting from the mechanization of farming. Six years later, Delta closed. The founders’ breathless hopes for a socialist agricultural South died along with it. Instead, a different kind of farming—highly capitalized and employing waged day laborers rather than sharecroppers—replaced the old system and transformed southern life.

Between the mid-1930s and the 1960s, the economic arrangements that had dominated the plantation South since the end of Reconstruction collapsed. Large-scale mechanized plantations employing day laborers replaced labor-intensive farming cultures that had relied on sharecroppers. As this shift took place, millions of farmers left the southern countryside. The scale of this demographic revolution was remarkable. On the eve of the New Deal, the South was overwhelmingly rural; every former state of the Confederacy had a rural majority, and all but two were more than two-thirds rural.<sup>2</sup> By 1960, only six southern states had rural majorities left.<sup>3</sup> As

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Franklin to Dorothy Franklin, August 16, 1936, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 3, Sam and Dorothy Franklin Papers 1910-1994, Burke Library Special Collections at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, New York (hereafter SDF papers).

<sup>2</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 275.

<sup>3</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 257.

these changes dawned in the 1930s, southerners struggled to shape the future of the countryside to their liking. The people at Delta Cooperative Farm envisioned a future countryside distinct from both the collapsing system of sharecropping and the nascent pattern of casual day labor on highly capitalized plantations.

Most historians argue that the New Deal programs of the 1930s marked a turning point in twentieth-century southern farming.<sup>4</sup> In 1933, Congress established the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (generally known as the Triple-A). The Triple-A aimed to raise prices of agricultural commodities (the prices of which had been depressed for more than a decade) by reducing supply. The Triple-A successfully raised commodity prices by paying landowners not to cultivate certain key agricultural commodities. With fewer acres under cultivation, landlords needed fewer laborers to work their land and they began evicting scores of tenants beginning in the winter of 1933 and 1934.<sup>5</sup> Landowners used cash payments from the Triple-A to invest in labor-saving technology, first tractors and then mechanical crop pickers. America's entry into World War II reinforced these dynamics by pulling labor into the war effort and away from the farm. Thus began the mechanization of farming in the South and an exodus of farmers from the land that continued for decades.<sup>6</sup> Many contemporaries, not least among them the evicted sharecroppers, resisted this process.

The history of Delta Cooperative Farm offers a new view of this process. It reveals an organized movement whose leaders foresaw that the Triple-A and the impending mechanization

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<sup>4</sup> The three works that advanced this interpretation in the 1980s (sometimes called "The Old Testament" by historians of southern farming) have (unlike the books of the Hebrew Bible) received no substantial revision. Adrienne Petty, *Standing Their Ground: Small Farmers in North Carolina Since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7. For concise statements of each work's analysis of the Triple-A, see Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 56-79; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 292-293; Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984), 138-162.

<sup>5</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> This brief discussion of the Triple-A is drawn from the three sources referred to in footnote 5.

of farming not only threatened the livelihoods of sharecroppers, but also precluded the possibility of an agricultural South dominated by small land-owning farmers. The socialist founders of Delta argued that cooperative farming was the most humane and practical way forward for southern farmers. They hoped that “by large scale collective production, mechanized agriculture, diversified farming and industries... [and production of] garden crops, poultry, meats and dairy products for cooperative use,” they could “avoid the prevalent evils of the collapsing system of cotton tenancy” and point “the way toward the solution of technological unemployment in agriculture.”<sup>7</sup>

The history of Delta also reveals how sharecroppers understood the changes taking place around them. Their actions at Delta reinforce a claim common among historians of the nineteenth and twentieth-century South: southern farmers had few higher aspirations than to farm their own land. Most historians of the South regard the desire for small-scale, independent production (whether called Jeffersonian agrarianism, agrarian producerism, or something else) as a kind of common sense shared by most southern farmers from the antebellum period to the upheavals of the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> It might seem that farmers deciding to join a cooperative farm founded by socialists contradicts the view that they wanted nothing more than to farm their own land. However, the story of how farmers ended up at Delta and what they hoped to achieve there reveals neither that they were socialists nor that they were particularly devoted to cooperative

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<sup>7</sup> “Foundation Principles of The Delta Cooperative Farm,” memo, May 1936, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 4, SDF papers.

<sup>8</sup> For a formulation by Jefferson, see Thomas Jefferson *Notes on the State of Virginia* in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D Peterson, (New York: Penguin, 1997), 216. For white farmers’ desire to own land in the antebellum and postbellum period, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 2-3. For former slaves’ desire to own land, see Thavolia Glymph, “Introduction,” and Barbara J. Fields “The Advent of Capitalist Agriculture: The New South in a Bourgeois World,” in Thavolia Glymph and John J. Kushma, *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy* (College Station, Texas; Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 6, 83, 88-89. For the religious significance of farming on one’s own land, see Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Land and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 4-7.



farming. Rather, it shows that some farmers preferred working at Delta to sharecropping. But the grievances voiced by farmers at Delta demonstrate that many of them came to see the cooperative farm as a barrier to their highest aims— independence and land of their own.

The few historians who have studied Delta have not explained how the founders and the members of Delta viewed southern farming; instead, they have focused their attention elsewhere. Jerry Dallas, the first historian of Delta, described the farm as a rare example “of interracial cooperation and ethical commitment” in the 1930s South.<sup>9</sup> The next, Fred Smith, took a gloomier view. In a book chapter, he interpreted Delta as one of many New Deal projects that failed because poor southerners refused the demeaning terms on which they were offered assistance.<sup>10</sup> In the most recent study of Delta and the only book-length one, Robert Hunt Ferguson analyzed the farm as part of an international cooperative movement and as an early episode in what historians have called The Long Civil Rights Movement. Ferguson wrote the rosier picture of the farm, arguing that Delta was “always on the verge of ushering in new racial and economic orders to southern society.”<sup>11</sup> These historians have not given due weight to the primary motivations of either the farmers who lived and worked at Delta or the farm’s founders.

Historians of Delta have not adequately analyzed the founders’ reasons for starting a cooperative farm. Fred Smith suggested that no analysis at all led to the cooperative farm’s founding, writing that the eviction of sharecroppers alone was enough to “inspire... in Amberson [one of the founders of Delta] the notion of a cooperative farm.”<sup>12</sup> Robert Hunt Ferguson argued that the farm was inspired by traditions of what he called “cooperative communalism” in

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<sup>9</sup> Jerry W. Dallas, “The Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms: A Mississippi Experiment in Cooperative Farming and Racial Cooperation, 1936-1956,” *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3, (Summer 1987), 308.

<sup>10</sup> “Liberals” is Smith’s term, not mine. Fred C. Smith, *Trouble in Goshen: Plain Folk, Roosevelt, Jesus, and Marx in the Great Depression South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Hunt Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South: Interracialism, Christian Socialism, and Cooperative Farming in Jim Crow Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 175.

<sup>12</sup>Smith, *Trouble in Goshen*, 122.

America, Japan and Russia. He thus explained where Delta's founders got the idea for a cooperative (from American socialists, from Englishmen in Rochdale, and from Japanese advocates of cooperatives), but not why they advocated for cooperative farming in the 1930s South.<sup>13</sup> Jerry Dallas best explained why the founders chose to start a cooperative farm. He argued that they wanted "to demonstrate that a collective cooperative farm was a better system of labor relations than the oppressive landlord-tenant arrangement."<sup>14</sup> They hoped, he argued, to bring about "the replacement of the plantation system with socialized cooperative agriculture."<sup>15</sup> Dallas's recognition of the founders' ultimate aims points in the right direction, but still does not explain in detail why Delta's founders thought that cooperative production could solve the problems facing southern farmers.

Historians of Delta have also failed to account for how farmers at Delta understood their predicament, why they joined Delta, and why they were dissatisfied with the farm. When discussing the motivations behind Delta, Jerry Dallas referred only to the goals of the founders.<sup>16</sup> While Robert Hunt Ferguson correctly argued that sharecroppers lacked a commitment to cooperative farming, he explained neither why many of them stayed on the farm for as long as they did nor why they disliked specific features of Delta. Fred Smith has best accounted for the views of Delta's members. Smith demonstrated that members' dissatisfaction shaped the history of Delta by pointing to a few key moments: the refusal of some women at Delta to chop cotton, the "indignation meeting" members held in 1937, and members demanding to take over control of the cooperative from their non-farming supervisors in 1939. Smith argued that Delta failed in part because "plain folk [his term for poor southerners]... refused to sacrifice dignity for

<sup>13</sup> Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South*, 16-44.

<sup>14</sup> Dallas, "Delta and Providence, 284.

<sup>15</sup> Dallas, "Delta and Providence," 286.

<sup>16</sup> "The immediate aim of the project," he wrote, "was to provide a refuge for the evicted and harassed sharecroppers of northeast Arkansas." Dallas, "Delta and Providence," 283.

security.”<sup>17</sup> In a sense he is correct; members of Delta resented the cooperative even as they enjoyed a higher standard of living than sharecroppers because it denied them autonomy. Nevertheless, “dignity” and “security” are too vague descriptions.

In this study, I offer a more detailed answer, arguing that the members understood southern farming differently than the founders did. The members of Delta, like most sharecroppers, understood their landlessness to be the root of their problems. The founders of Delta disagreed. They argued that sharecroppers’ problems were fundamental to capitalist agriculture and could only be solved through cooperative farming. This disagreement, which historians of Delta have not remarked upon, defined the farm’s history. The evolution of these divergent views and the consequences of them is the subject of the chapters that follow.

It is not difficult to discover how the founders of Delta understood their endeavor; they left behind ample published material, official records, and archived correspondence laying out their views. Discerning the views of members at Delta is a more difficult task. Most members of Delta (like most southern farmers) were illiterate. They left behind few records of their own. To understand how they saw Delta, I have analyzed records written about them rather than sources in which they describe their views themselves. Most of my evidence about Delta’s farmers comes from the records of the farm’s manager, Sam Franklin. When Franklin’s records fail (as they often do), I have inferred how members of Delta might have understood the cooperative given their experience as sharecroppers. Although some points of my argument about how farmers viewed Delta are necessarily speculative, my evidence has allowed me to draw a clear conclusion about the history of Delta: the farmers at Delta understood what they were doing at the cooperative differently than the founders did.

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Trouble in Goshen*, 6.

In order to understand why farmers ended up at Delta and how they viewed the cooperative, historical context is needed. In chapter one (“Landless, Landless Are We”), I analyze the ideology of sharecroppers in general and members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in particular. I argue that members of the STFU, like sharecroppers across the South, valued autonomy above all else. Their analysis of sharecropping led them to believe that owning land would grant them the autonomy they desired.

In chapter two (“The Socialist Analysis”), I consider how those who founded Delta understood southern agriculture. The leaders of the American Socialist Party and the STFU argued that the cause of sharecroppers’ misery was capitalist agriculture itself. They dismissed individual land ownership as a half-way measure and argued that cooperative farms offered sharecroppers the best way out of poverty and dependence.

In chapter three (“Cooperatives, Conflict and Ideology at Delta Cooperative Farm”), I analyze the brief history of Delta. The evicted members of the STFU who ended up at Delta found much to like about the farm. Unlike most sharecroppers and tenant farmers, they had a voice in farm decisions, had personal gardens, and could buy goods at market prices and get loans at market rates. However, the farmers found some of their old problems in new forms at Delta: they did not exercise personal control over their farming and they did not own land of their own. The managers and trustees of Delta were blind to members’ criticism of them, interpreting their non-cooperation as irrationality, stupidity, and immaturity. These conflicts contributed to Delta’s demise.

This thesis is informed by a conviction held by my historical subjects: things could have gone differently. In the conclusion, I consider the circumstances under which the people at Delta

could have achieved more for themselves and the South. I close with a brief comment on the consequences of their failure.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Landless, Landless Are We

Understanding how farmers viewed Delta starts with understanding what they made of their lives as sharecroppers. Most of the farmers who ended up at Delta were evicted sharecroppers from northeast Arkansas. Like other sharecroppers, they assailed their position as unjust and insisted that there was a simple solution to their problems—land. When owning land proved impossible, as it often did, they had other ambitions: to own their implements and household goods, to stay out of debt, and to exercise managerial control over their work.<sup>18</sup> When the connivance of landlords and the administrators of the Triple-A began to threaten the livelihoods of sharecroppers, they resisted. The farmers from eastern Arkansas who ended at Delta were members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), which they joined to protest the implementation of the Triple-A and to achieve autonomy.

#### *The Ideology of Sharecroppers*

Anyone who has witnessed a conflict between a boss and their subordinate knows that people can interpret the same social reality in remarkably different ways. Understanding the history of Delta, which was full of such conflicts, means accounting for the divergent interpretations of the people involved; ideology is a convenient shorthand for those divergent interpretations that need to be accounted for. Ideology refers to the language people use to understand their social reality and their position in it.<sup>19</sup> I do not use ideology (as others might) as

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<sup>18</sup> Jason Manthorne, “Hoover Days: The South’s Landless Farmers in the Great Depression” (Masters thesis, University of Georgia, 2006), 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara J. Fields defines ideology as “the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence through which people make rough sense of the social reality they live and create from day to day... It is the interpretation in thought of the social relations through which they constantly create and recreate their collective being.” Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” in Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012), 134.

a term of abuse for overly abstract analysis, false consciousness, or dogmatism, although some ideologies may lead to those sins.<sup>20</sup> Rather, I use ideology to describe an understanding of the world that is often shared by a historical group of people.<sup>21</sup>

Through their personal experiences of a shared social position, sharecroppers came to hold a common ideology. This is not to say that all sharecroppers understood the world in the exact same way, nor that there were no ideological differences among sharecroppers. But sharecroppers across the South described their condition in remarkably similar ways. They grasped their problems and proposed solutions through a shared ideology.

All sharecroppers cultivated land in exchange for a payment—in effect, a wage—that represented the value of part of the crop (usually half) that landlords paid them at the end of the harvest. Although sharecroppers lived on someone else’s land and were often referred to as tenants, their status differed markedly from actual agricultural tenants, who paid landowners for the right to live and farm on their property. Tenants rented under a variety of contracts, but they all legally owned the crop they cultivated. By contrast, sharecroppers were employed to cultivate crops that belonged to the landowner. Sharecroppers owned no part of the crop and thus had no legal right to make decisions about crop management or land use. Sharecroppers were wage workers whose employers provided them with housing, mules, tools, seed, and credit for living expenses (often dishonestly and at usurious interest rates, as I discuss below).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 153-157.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Foner defines ideology as “the system of beliefs, values, fears, prejudices, reflexes and commitments—in sum, the social consciousness—of a social group, be it a class, a party, or a section.” Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> See page 13. Manthorne, “Hoover Days,” 16-17. Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 140-41.

Sharecroppers would have farmed their own land if they were able, but they owned little or no property and were thus compelled—like other propertyless people in capitalist systems—to sell their labor in order to survive.<sup>23</sup> Most slaves were emancipated without property and, after a failed bid to gain a measure of autonomy in their work, had no choice but to sharecrop.<sup>24</sup> The tools of compulsion that planters had developed to control the labor of former slaves slowly but surely ensnared white farmers, an increasing number of whom faced the same predicament as freedpeople and their descendants in the decades following emancipation: cut off from the land, the means of production, and the resources they needed to survive, they had no choice but to sharecrop, which often meant relinquishing control over their work and living in perpetual debt.<sup>25</sup>

Landless white farmers sometimes assailed their lowly status in racist terms. Before the Civil War, the white yeomanry, as many historians call them, lived in self-sufficient communities not reliant on international markets. Male heads of households commanded the labor of their families and safeguarded their independence by growing food crops first and cash crops second, usually on land that they owned, and acquiring the necessities of life from their kin and neighbors within local markets of exchange.<sup>26</sup> After the Civil War, as more and more white farmers slipped into the dependency that they had long associated with black southerners, they grasped for language to describe the injustice of their new position. Racist language did the trick.

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<sup>23</sup> In the words of Barbara J. Fields, legally free persons in capitalist systems “not only *may* sell their labor power—because they own it and it is therefore theirs to sell; but they *must* sell their labor power—because they own nothing else, and therefore can acquire the necessities of life only by working for a wage.” Fields, “The Advent of Capitalist Agriculture: The New South in a Bourgeois World,” in Glymph and Kushma, *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of how sharecropping resulted from freedpeoples’ failed attempt to secure their idea of freedom—the right to access land, freely sell their labor, fish and hunt as they pleased, and control the labor of their families—see Thavolia Glymph, “Freedpeople and Ex-Masters: Shaping a New Order in the Postbellum South, 1865-1868,” in Glymph and Kushma, *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy*, 48-72.

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of the process by which white yeoman farmers in upcountry Georgia lost their grip on land, other property, and their customary rights to subsistence, see Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, 137-239.

<sup>26</sup> Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, 64-70. Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the USA” in Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 113.



One Texas politician decried the need for white women to work in the fields by condemning the social proximity that fieldwork engendered between white women and black men. He expressed his racist disgust at “the sight of a sweet white girl hoeing cotton on one row and a big, burly negro in the next row.”<sup>27</sup> White farmers’ racist assertions that it was unjust for them to sharecrop, a status that they associated with black farmers, reveals how racism inflected landlessness and how landlessness inflected racism.<sup>28</sup>

As black farmers understood things, racism and class power were inseparable. In response to a survey question asking farmers in Arkansas cotton country what class of people was worst off, most black farmers responded that black people were.<sup>29</sup> While this answer might seem contradictory (black people are not a class), it shows that, for black sharecroppers, racism and the exercise of class power were often one and the same.<sup>30</sup> The sharecroppers who responded that black people were worst off could have pointed to their increased likelihood of being lynched and the discrimination they faced under Jim Crow laws.<sup>31</sup>

Landlords’ unscrupulous tactics did not respect the color line; trapped in the same position, sharecroppers black and white had a common view of their situation. Black and white farmers alike despised their landlords, and they moved often in search of better arrangements.<sup>32</sup> They tried to avoid sharecropping, preferring instead to be cash or share tenants in order to

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<sup>27</sup> Cyclone Davis, quoted in Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 46.

<sup>28</sup> In her analysis of C. Vann Woodward’s *Origins of the New South*, Fields follows Woodward in arguing that racism and Jim Crow were “more a symptom of white people’s exploitation than a remedy or compensation for it.” Barbara J. Fields, “Origins of the New South and the Negro Question”, in Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 160.

<sup>29</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 239.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> C Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 351.

<sup>32</sup> Kirby argues that planters were just as determined to control white sharecroppers as black sharecroppers. Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 147.

control their work and have a better chance to accumulate cash, capital, and—eventually, many hoped—land.<sup>33</sup>

Sharecroppers insisted that their landlords cheated them out of a fair reward for their labor. They had good reason to accuse their landlords—who used a number of tools to gouge their sharecroppers—of unfair practice. Landlords prevented sharecroppers from viewing accounts of their debts, and sharecroppers complained that landlords dishonestly debited them for more than they had received as advances. Having no legal recourse, they were forced to accept whatever debts their landlords saddled them with. When sharecroppers shopped on credit at plantation commissaries or country stores, they paid ten to forty percent more than cash customers.<sup>34</sup> Landlords charged their sharecroppers usurious interest rates. A survey conducted in the cotton south between 1934 and 1937 revealed average interest rates of thirty-seven percent.<sup>35</sup> At settlement time, landowners deducted advances they had made during the year from what they owed sharecroppers, often leaving them with nothing or even further in debt than they had started. A former black sharecropper from North Carolina summed up his reasons for not wanting to sharecrop as follows: “Livin’ on another man’s land, takin’ his orders about a investment that’s half ours, subject to get movin’ orders any time, and havin’ to accept a settlement we know ain’t right... No, I wouldn’t sharecrop if I didn’t have to.”<sup>36</sup>

Landless men often described their condition as an affront to their farming skill and their place at the head of their households. Male sharecroppers resented that landlords could dictate how they farmed, and they insisted that they could manage their affairs better than their

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<sup>33</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 142. Manthorne, “Hoover Days,” 76.

<sup>34</sup> In one Arkansas commissary, Kirby found even higher markups for credit business: thirty percent for lard, eighty percent for potatoes, 100 percent for smoking tobacco, and 200 percent for baking soda. Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 145, 149-150.

<sup>35</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 145, 149.

<sup>36</sup> Kirby quotes from an interview that a white landowner’s wife conducted with a sharecropper in North Carolina. Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 240.

landlords.<sup>37</sup> The male heads of sharecropper households also resented that, because of landlords' demand for the labor of their families, they often had to call on their wives and children to work in the fields.<sup>38</sup> Most landless men had to send their wives and children to work. In rural North Carolina, for example, seventy percent of white children and seventy-five percent of black children worked in the fields.<sup>39</sup> The results of such widespread child labor are unsurprising. According to a 1934 survey of cotton country, one quarter of white adults and half of black adults had "no schooling at all."<sup>40</sup> In one southern cotton county, more than eight in ten women performed some kind of farm work.<sup>41</sup>

While women took pride in their labor, they also reported that their role in the household was exhausting. Men expected their wives to bear and raise children, take care of domestic tasks, and work in the fields.<sup>42</sup> One tenant farming woman reported that, just two days after her wedding, her husband made her chop cotton for ten hours and then told her as she was preparing their mid-day meal that she "might as well get used to it." He then took a nap.<sup>43</sup> White women rarely worked outside the home, but most black women worked for white families as domestics. Whenever women worked outside the home, their wages were a crucial source of income for their families.<sup>44</sup> A substantial number of women, most of them widows, were the head of farming households.<sup>45</sup> One woman summed up the burden of sharecropping women succinctly: "man works from sun to sun, but woman's work ain't never done."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> "Sharecroppers... seem almost universally to have regarded their chief woe as lack of managerial authority," Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 143. Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 58.

<sup>38</sup> Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 5, 44-5.

<sup>39</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 155-156.

<sup>40</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 146.

<sup>41</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 60.

<sup>42</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 60-61. Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 61. Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 157.

<sup>45</sup> Fite, *Cotton Fields*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 61.

In the 1930s, more southern farmers than ever were landless, poor, and sharecropping. Southern farmers took big gambles on the world market during and immediately after World War I, when agricultural commodity prices were high.<sup>47</sup> When war-time demand collapsed, prices fell and stayed low well into the 1930s. By the middle of that decade, more than fifty-five percent of southern farmers were sharecroppers or tenants living in abject poverty.<sup>48</sup> In cotton-growing regions, the proportion was even higher; in the Mississippi Delta, for example, more than eight in ten farmers worked someone else's land.<sup>49</sup>

The desperate state of agriculture in the South seems not to have dissuaded landless farmers from wanting to farm land of their own. It is true that, never having experienced a good farming economy, some southerners who came of age during the hard times of the 1920s had no desire to work the land, preferring instead to find industrial jobs. Some older farmers, too, resented farm life and longed for a way out.<sup>50</sup> But those who had given up on farming were the exception. Wanting to own a farm was a ubiquitous theme in the testimonies of landless farmers during the Great Depression. "What I rather have more than anything is a home and a farm o' my own. I wouldn't care about a big one, just so it was mine," said a share-renter. One woman offered a simple analysis of the predicament of landless farmers and the solution to it: "Dat's all dey is to expect—work hard and go hungry part time—long as we live on another man's land... I'd be willin' to eat dry bread de rest o' my life if I had a place I could settle down on and nobody could tell me I had to move no more."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 144.

<sup>48</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 29-30. For an inventory of their poverty, see Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 30-47.

<sup>49</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 29.

<sup>50</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 69-70.

<sup>51</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 74.

*The Depression, the Triple-A, and the STFU*

After more than a decade of depression in the rural South, the federal government passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. The principle behind the legislation was simple: raise key commodity prices, including southern staples like tobacco and cotton, by reducing supply. Southern advocates of crop control argued that there was simply too much tobacco and cotton. They insisted that all growers would benefit from higher prices if they agreed to produce less. To achieve that end, administrators of the Triple-A signed contracts with landowners that paid them to take acres out of cultivation. In the first year of the program, landowners signed their contracts after planting, so farmers had to plow under the crop. In following years, landowners signed contracts before planting time.<sup>52</sup>

At first, southern farmers seemed to welcome the crop control programs of the Triple-A. They supported artificially raising the cost of agricultural commodities, a scheme that influential southerners had long called for to ensure that farmers received fair prices for their crops.<sup>53</sup> Landowners in cotton-growing states, where more than seventy percent of land was under Triple-A contract, seemed especially well-disposed.<sup>54</sup>

Thanks to the Triple-A and the actions of their landlords, many sharecroppers soon found themselves homeless and out of work. Landlords were supposed to divide their payments with tenants but not sharecroppers. They were, however, expected to allow sharecroppers to continue living on their land. Many landlords disregarded both expectations, cheating their tenants out of the money they owed them, manipulating the terms of their tenancy contracts so as to owe them less money, and evicting sharecroppers whose labor they no longer needed. Reports from tenants

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 92-93.

<sup>53</sup> Manthorne, "Hoover Days," 33.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 93. For small farmers' mixed views of the Triple-A in North Carolina tobacco country, see Adrienne Petty, *Standing Their Ground: Small Farmers in North Carolina Since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99-123.

and sharecroppers about the dishonest actions of landlords flooded Triple-A offices. Most letters demanded that the Triple-A ensure landlords meet their obligations to tenants and sharecroppers.<sup>55</sup> For the most part, they did not question the principle of crop reduction.

A letter from a Georgia cotton tenant farmer shows both the extent of many landless farmers' support for crop reduction and their sense that the Triple-A served the interests of their landlords. In a letter to the Secretary of Agriculture, the tenant farmer suggested that the government destroy existing supplies of cotton by burning them or dumping them into the ocean. Destroying existing surpluses, the farmer argued, was a better way to raise prices than plowing under crops because it ensured that landless farmers would still have a way to earn money. "By paying for and destroying cotton already on hand, instead of that in the fields," explained the farmer, "you would reduce the crop just as much, but leave a great amount of money to be paid for laborers who need it, and would earn it by picking, ginning, hauling, etc."<sup>56</sup> No such plan ever materialized.

In the summer of 1934, eighteen men founded the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in response to a wave of evictions that followed the signing of Triple-A contracts in Arkansas. Eleven white men and seven black men, several of them recently evicted sharecroppers, founded the STFU in July 1935. H. L. Mitchell and Clay East, Memphis socialist party members and soon-to-be leaders of the STFU, were founding members.<sup>57</sup> Petitioning the government to fairly enforce the Triple-A accounted for many of the STFU's early activity.<sup>58</sup> By 1936, the union claimed more than thirty-thousand members, most of whom were black

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<sup>55</sup> Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 101.

<sup>56</sup> Dawson Kea to Henry Wallace, June 22, 1933, quoted in Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 95.

<sup>57</sup> Michael K. Honey, *Sharecropper's Troubadour: John L. Handcox, The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and the African American Song Tradition*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 52.

<sup>58</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 62.

sharecroppers from Arkansas.<sup>59</sup> Like most plantation regions of the South, farm tenancy was at an all-time high in Arkansas. Sixty-three percent of Arkansas farmers in 1930 were tenants. Just a generation earlier, fewer than half of Arkansas farmers had been tenants.<sup>60</sup> Sharecroppers on Arkansas plantations were subject to a high degree of supervision and—like most southern farmers—moved regularly in search of better farming arrangements.<sup>61</sup>

Like sharecroppers across the South, the members of the STFU considered landlords their biggest problem and land ownership the obvious solution.<sup>62</sup> STFU member Lula Parchman echoed the sentiments of most southern sharecroppers in a letter to union leadership, writing that all she wanted was “a chance to make my own liveing and not the other get the profit of my labor and I suffer.” She was “tired of being drove from place to place and being denied of the chance to live independent. I dont want what belong to others. I onley want the portion due me for comfort.”<sup>63</sup>

The STFU song “Raggedy, Raggedy Are We” illustrates how union members understood their predicament. STFU members frequently sang the songs of John Handcox, a black Arkansas sharecropper and union member, at their meetings, protests, and strikes.<sup>64</sup> “Raggedy, Raggedy Are We” attacked landlords for reaping the benefits of their sharecroppers’ labor while keeping them impoverished and preventing them from farming how they liked. The song opened with the following lines:

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<sup>59</sup> Jason Manthorne, “The View from the Cotton: Reconsidering the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Agricultural History* 84.1, (January 2010), 21, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Donald Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1971), 1.

<sup>61</sup> T. C. McCormick, “Recent Increases of Farm Tenancy in Arkansas,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, XV (June, 1934), 38-40.

<sup>62</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 242-243. Manthorne, “View from the Cotton,” 24. Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 91.

<sup>63</sup> Manthorne, “View from the Cotton,” 28-29.

<sup>64</sup> Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 97. The title of H. L. Mitchell’s memoir, discussed below, refers to a song by John Handcox.

*Raggedy, raggedy* are we, just as *raggedy* as *raggedy* can be,  
 We don't get nothing for our labor,  
 So *raggedy, raggedy* are we.<sup>65</sup>

Union members repeated the verse, changing *raggedy* to a different word each time. *Raggedy* became *hungry, landless, and homeless* until the final verses denounced landlords as the cause of the sharecroppers' misery.

*Cowless, cowless* are we, just as *cowless* as *cowless* can be,  
 The planters don't allow us to raise em,  
 So *cowless, cowless* are we.<sup>66</sup>

STFU members closed by condemning the *hogless* and *cornless* condition that their landlords reduced them to.

The members of the STFU had clear aims. They wanted to earn a fair reward for their labor and they argued that their landlords prevented them from doing so. They wanted their landlords to share the spoils of the Triple-A with them, they wanted control over their farming, and they wanted land. The leaders of the STFU, however, had other aims.

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<sup>65</sup> John Handcox, "Raggedy, Raggedy, Are We," 0:00-0:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbtK6U3ozuo&t=17s>.

<sup>66</sup>Handcox, "Raggedy, Raggedy, Are We," 0:50-1:42.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Socialist Analysis

The leaders of the STFU, along with other socialists who analyzed southern farming, argued that cooperatives could solve landless farmers' woes.<sup>67</sup> They viewed southern farmers' dire circumstances—their poverty, the erosion of their livelihood caused by the Triple-A, and the devaluation of their labor threatened by mechanization—as inherent features of capitalist farming. Socialists insisted that cooperative farms could improve the lives of southern farmers by reorganizing agriculture along non-capitalist lines. They had a decidedly vague idea about the exact structure these cooperatives should take, but they hoped that cooperative farms would spread across the country and deliver farmers from the perversities of capitalist agriculture. Despite little supporting evidence—and some that was plainly contradictory—the managers and planners of Delta believed that sharecroppers would embrace cooperative farming.

#### *The Plight of the Sharecropper*

As early as the spring of 1934, socialists in Arkansas discussed forming cooperative farms to help sharecroppers out of their miserable condition.<sup>68</sup> In February 1934, H. L. Mitchell and Clay East, founding members of the Socialist Party local in Tyronza, Arkansas and soon-to-be founding members of the STFU, led Norman Thomas, the leader of the American Socialist Party, on a tour of the Mississippi Delta. After Thomas returned from his visit, he asked Mitchell to keep him informed about developments in the Delta, and they struck up a

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<sup>67</sup> I submitted earlier versions of parts of this chapter as a final paper for Professor Elizabeth Blackmar's "Landscapes of American Modernity" seminar.

<sup>68</sup> The disordered chronology of Mitchell's memoir makes it difficult to date exactly. "Before the STFU was formed [in July 1934]," he wrote, "there had been proposals for establishing in Arkansas a cooperative farming project." H. L. Mitchell, H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Co-founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 124.

correspondence. At the National Convention of the American Socialist Party a few months later, Mitchell and Thomas secured money from the League for Industrial Democracy to support a survey of the Triple-A's impact on sharecroppers. William Amberson, a member of the Memphis Socialist Party who later worked closely with the STFU and served on the board of Delta, directed the survey.<sup>69</sup> The results of the survey were published later that year in a pamphlet that also included an argumentative essay by Thomas.

In the pamphlet, Norman Thomas argued that scarcity was a general feature of capitalism that the cotton reduction program of the Triple-A accentuated. Scarcity, he argued, was born of the difference between effective demand, which capitalist production responded to, and real need, which it did not. "Capitalism and its price system were both born of scarcity," he wrote. America "has overproduction only in terms of effective demand, not of need... We shall never overcome the economy of scarcity and truly accept the economy of abundance until we think not in terms of what people now can pay, but of what collectively we might have in terms of our needs and our resources."<sup>70</sup> He argued that the efforts of the Triple-A "to restore prosperity by the return to scarcity" did next to nothing for cotton cultivators. Plowing under the cotton crop while the sharecropper could not "afford proper underclothes for his children or sheets and towels for the family" nor grow "a decent garden" demonstrated to Thomas the perversity of the prevailing system and its tendency to maximize agricultural profits at the expense of the needs of cultivators.

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<sup>69</sup> It is unclear exactly how Amberson came to direct the survey. Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 45, 124. C.J. Braun, secretary of the Tennessee Socialist Party and owner of an impressive library of socialist and theosophist books, introduced Mitchell and East to Amberson at a 1933 meeting of the Memphis Socialist local. Mitchell and East were more impressed with Amberson than they were with his elderly Jewish comrades, who hosted the meeting in their Workingmen's Circle building. *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>70</sup> Norman Thomas, *The Plight of the Sharecropper* (New York: Marstin Press, 1934), 18.

Thomas argued that in addition to underscoring the tendency of capitalist agriculture to neglect the needs of workers, the Triple-A threatened sharecropping as such. No matter how much protection the government offered sharecroppers or how well sharecroppers organized themselves, he wrote, “in the long run... the compulsory reduction of cotton production will mean the removal of literally hundreds of thousands of families from their normal employment without as yet any other work remotely in sight.” Farmers forced out of sharecropping would end up in “the even more precarious plight of day laborers” making “50 to 75 cents a day without any right to even such miserable ‘advances’ as the sharecropper gets.”<sup>71</sup> According to Thomas, even perfectly written and enforced Triple-A contracts could not prevent such dislocation. Under the prevailing system of production, a reduction in crops would mean a conversion of sharecroppers into wage workers or unemployed and homeless persons.

Thomas condemned the open racism of white officials in the cotton South while insisting that white and black sharecroppers faced a common predicament. Both black and white sharecroppers, he insisted, were not “really citizens” given that “many of the white ones are disfranchised as effectively as the Negroes by the poll tax.”<sup>72</sup> There was not “much difference in the treatment of white and colored sharecroppers,” he wrote, “except that the whites can be called Mister and perhaps that the whites are a little less likely to be shot by some planter in cold blood with complete impunity.”<sup>73</sup> He called on the Secretary of Agriculture “to encourage organization... of white and Negro sharecroppers together.”<sup>74</sup>

Thomas argued that mechanization would soon erode the livelihoods of sharecroppers on an even larger scale than the Triple-A did. “Tomorrow they [cotton sharecroppers] may be the

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 37.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 15.

victims of the mechanization of agriculture which has long been delayed in the cotton country,” warned Thomas. “One trembles to think of the immediate effect of the sudden introduction of a successful and economical mechanical cotton-picker. It would effect [sic] the lives of millions of workers.” Capitalism, he continued, could neither “manage this shift in occupations without enormous suffering” nor could it “indefinitely stabilize a backward and inefficient method of cotton culture for the sake of those engaged in it.”<sup>75</sup>

What, then, was to be done? A few things. At a minimum, the government had to make their crop reduction program work fairly. Thomas demanded that the government enforce the letter of the law and ensure that tenant farmers get their fair share of government subsidies. To level the playing field, he insisted, landless black and white farmers—not just white landlords and merchants—had to be on the local boards of the Triple-A that managed crop reduction contracts. He also recommended organizing. “Far and away the most important protection the sharecroppers can have now or in the future,” he wrote, was a union.<sup>76</sup>

### *Towards the Cooperative Commonwealth*

Thomas hoped not just to get the government to improve the Triple-A, but to strike at what he understood to be the root of the problem. His analysis led him to the conviction that it was impossible to cure the problems facing sharecroppers “under capitalism.” He sought an alternative system.<sup>77</sup> Unions offered workers the means to improve their living and working conditions under the prevailing conditions, but ultimately Thomas hoped they could help bring about an altogether different system. The sharecropper’s precarious status, thought Thomas, was

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<sup>75</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 15-16.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 18.

an opportunity rather than a barrier in the struggle for socialism. The sharecropper's "very lack of landed property," he argued, "may make it easier to organize him, despite his present individualism, in support of the cooperative commonwealth."<sup>78</sup>

By reorganizing production, cooperatives promised to alleviate the ills Thomas diagnosed. Because cooperatives provided members a measure of refuge from capitalist markets, cooperators could produce to meet the needs of their members, diversifying away from the cotton cash crop that landlords, lenders, and merchants often demanded from growers.<sup>79</sup> Thomas believed that cooperative farms were better for evicted sharecroppers than small individual tracts insofar as their scale made them more productive, more amenable to "expert" management, and thus more durable than small family farms. He criticized a bill sponsored by Senator John H. Bankhead II to settle agricultural laborers on small farms of their own as inadequate, deriding its probable outcome as "at best a subsidized peasantry."<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, cooperatives offered a solution to the disruption that mechanization threatened. Thomas thought that the "relentless march of the cotton picking machine" was inevitable, but he insisted that, depending on the circumstances, the introduction of the picker could lead either to the ruin or the rescue of the sharecropper. Only "social control of the machine" could prevent the wide-scale dislocation that private ownership of mechanical cotton pickers by individual landlords would surely cause.<sup>81</sup> Thomas celebrated the potential emancipatory power of the picker, which promised to free cotton cultivators from "such arduous

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 12. The use of the term "cooperative commonwealth" in the South goes back to at least the late 19th century. According to Steven Hahn, southern Populists "held out a vision of a cooperative commonwealth of producers to be realized through public regulation of production and exchange." Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 16-17.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 39.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 39.

and monotonous toil as cotton picking.” There were, he thought, “other and better things” than cotton picking “for human beings to do in a properly organized society.”<sup>82</sup>

Thomas was vague about the details of how exactly cooperatives should work. He defined them less by their positive features than by what he hoped they would negate: the divergence between need and demand under capitalist agriculture, the perilous existence of small landowning farmers, and the social disaster that private ownership of mechanical pickers by landowners promised soon to cause. He hoped Congress would support the establishment and management of cooperatives.

Thomas’s view of cooperative farming in the South aligned closely with that of the STFU leadership. H. L. Mitchell also argued that the Triple-A laid bare the irrationality of capitalist farming. In his view, the Triple-A policy of “burning corn and wheat and killing little pigs made even less sense” than the cotton plow-up.<sup>83</sup> This put him at odds with most of the rank and file, two-thirds of whom (according to a 1935 survey) supported continuing the cotton acreage reduction program.<sup>84</sup> Mitchell wrote that he was “looking forward to the future when the whole South can come under the Collectivist Farm system” and he condemned any measures short of cooperative farming as “purely palliative.. half-way measures.”<sup>85</sup> Howard Kester, a preacher who started working for the union full-time in early 1935, outlined the union’s position on cooperatives in his 1936 history of the STFU.<sup>86</sup> His arguments for cooperatives mirrored Thomas’s both in the specific problems he hoped cooperatives would solve and in the fuzziness of the cooperative concept itself. “The effort [by some in the federal government] to establish

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 42.

<sup>84</sup> The survey is also referenced below, on page 27. “Questionnaire [sic] to Members,” tabulated up to 9th of July, 1935, STFU papers, reel 1.

<sup>85</sup> Manthorne, “The View from the Cotton,” 28.

<sup>86</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 64.

small independent farmers on land which they are to buy... will get us nowhere except to establish a peasant class of farmers whose conditions will not be any better at the end of the experiment than at the beginning,” he wrote. “We believe that only as we push forward toward a cooperative society based on production for use and not for profit will we solve the problems of our day.” Furthermore, Kester argued, cooperatives would facilitate collaboration with agricultural experts, allow for much-needed diversification, and give secure land tenure to farmers. Just like Thomas, Kester hoped cooperatives would allow sharecroppers to benefit from the mechanization of cotton picking. Also like Thomas, he declined to offer specifics about how these cooperatives should be organized, writing that “to thoroughly explain all that we [the STFU] have in mind would require another volume... We have suggested in barest outline what course we believe should be followed.”<sup>87</sup>

### *The Human Material*

In early 1935, the STFU leadership conducted a survey of the union’s two thousand members to determine whether there was substantial support among the rank and file for cooperative farming.<sup>88</sup> The survey presented four options and asked members to mark a first and second choice. The first option was to continue as a sharecropper or tenant farmer on the terms of their current contract, to be renegotiated after its term ended, with the government as a landlord and “honest bookkeeping.” Next, members were given the choice of long-term leases from the government, with furnish given only in the first year and the farmer to own whatever improvements they made to the land. Their third choice was cooperative farming. The survey described “cooperative groups working large tracts of government land” with “machinery owned

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<sup>87</sup> Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Covici-Friede Publishers, 1936), 92-93.

<sup>88</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 125.

by the group and income divided in proportion to the amount of labor.” Each family was to have a garden plot, receive furnish the first year, and pay a rental fee “according to crop.”<sup>89</sup>

Respondents’ final option was to purchase a home with a twenty year mortgage and receive furnish in their first year. The STFU received 672 total replies, of which 193 were thrown out because every question was answered “yes,” leaving 479 tabulated replies. The results are below (see table 1).<sup>90</sup>

Table 1: Results of Survey

	Plan 1: Sharecropping With Government as Landlord	Plan 2: Long Term Leases From Government	Plan 3: Cooperative on Government Land	Plan 4: Twenty Year Mortgage
First Choice	28	91	77	275
Second Choice	7	318	22	118
Total Votes	35	409	99	393

Source: “Questionnaire [sic] to Members”, tabulated up to 9th of July, 1935, STFU papers, reel 1.

Members overwhelmingly favored the twenty year mortgage plan, with long term leases as their second choice. Like most southern farmers, they wanted to own land and, when that proved impossible, to farm as independently as possible. Working in cooperatives was decidedly unpopular, receiving just over ten percent of first choice votes, about five percent of second

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<sup>89</sup> I am not sure what “rental according to crop” means. I assume it means rental prices would vary according to the current price of the crop members planned to cultivate.

<sup>90</sup> “Questionnaire [sic] to Members,” tabulated up to 9th of July, 1935, STFU papers, reel 1.



choice votes, and ten percent of all votes cast. On the whole, members preferred cooperative farming only in comparison to sharecropping.

Somehow, union leadership interpreted the results as a mandate to pursue cooperatives. Howard Kester insisted that the results contradicted the view that the South's landless farmer was "a super-individualist with a great longing for the land" who would never submit to cooperative production. He appealed to the survey to counter that claim. "Certain efforts have been made by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to discover what the sharecroppers and tenants actually think," he wrote. "The plan so briefly suggested above is partly determined by what we discovered to be their wishes."<sup>91</sup> At best, this characterization is obtuse.

Mitchell's misrepresentation was even greater. In his memoir, he presented results different from those found in the STFU papers. According to him, fifteen percent of members (seventy-two individuals) chose collective farming as their first choice while two-thirds (318 members) ranked it second. There seem no likely transcription errors Mitchell could have made when copying the results of the original survey. Unless Mitchell is referring to another survey (I have not found one), he either misstated the results or relied on a faulty memory in writing his memoir. Mitchell, like Kester, described the survey "as a mandate to replace the plantation system with a new type of farm operation."<sup>92</sup>

So the union moved ahead on cooperatives. In January 1936, the STFU brought in the Reverend Sam Franklin to give a presentation about cooperatives. H. L. Mitchell, John and Mack Rust—brothers and socialists who were developing a mechanical cotton picker—and a few other STFU affiliates attended the presentation in Memphis.<sup>93</sup> Franklin, born and raised in Tennessee,

<sup>91</sup> Kester, *Revolt*, 92.

<sup>92</sup> In Mitchell's account, the plans are a bit different. His plans are less detailed and plan 1 and plan 4 are swapped. Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 125.

<sup>93</sup> Sam Franklin, "Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm," unpublished book, 1980, series 7, box 2, folder 11, SDF papers, 8.

had just returned from a Christian mission in Japan, where he had worked closely with unions and cooperatives.<sup>94</sup> He drew on this experience and his recent visit to a Soviet cooperative farm in his discussions with the STFU leaders.<sup>95</sup>

Franklin recognized much the same promise in cooperatives as Thomas and Kester had.<sup>96</sup> In a speech describing his visit to the Soviet Union in 1935, he celebrated the diversified farming he saw, remarking that “the farm was organized to provide all those goods which the agricultural experts in this country teach are possible but which are seldom realized in practice.” As he saw tractors and threshers at work, he “couldn’t help but feel that the machine was becoming a servant of man, and not a tyrant to tyrannize him, at last.”<sup>97</sup> His most ecstatic prose was reserved for the religious significance of the farm’s abundant harvest, which he interpreted as a sacred negation of the perverse state of farming in capitalist countries. Franklin recounted feeling “a deep religious overtone” in what he saw in Russia. He “felt it deeply down on the farm where the new 90 million bushel crop of grain is not a cause for sorrow, as it would be in a capitalist country, but a cause for rejoicing.” Echoing Thomas, Franklin criticized the Triple-A crop reduction programs and longed for a system where such a measure would never be needed. He wrote that “the sacramental significance of the yeeld [sic] of the earth, which we have so profaned with our waste and intentional destruction, was being restored.”<sup>98</sup>

A month later, Amberson asked Franklin for help running a cooperative farm. “We may be on the verge of an interesting new experiment in the cotton fields,” Amberson wrote. He reported that over a hundred families in Eastern Arkansas had been evicted by their landlord

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<sup>94</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 6.

<sup>95</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 8.

<sup>96</sup> I would not be at all surprised if Franklin had read *The Plight of the Sharecropper*, but I have no direct evidence of this.

<sup>97</sup> Sam Franklin, “Russia” speech, circa 1936, in series 2, box 4, folder 1, SDF papers, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Franklin, “Russia,” 4.

because of their membership in the STFU. The union's leadership, he continued, was discussing "using the evicted families as the human material" for a cooperative farm. He asked Franklin to be "a sort of education director, lecturing to these people on the types of organization and methods of agriculture which have been found feasible in cooperative communities."<sup>99</sup>

Amberson insisted that Franklin was "probably the most competent and enthusiastic leader for this venture."<sup>100</sup>

Franklin responded excitedly, but insisted that he could not manage the whole operation. He envisioned the farm as "a center of education, from which in time members of the disinherited class can go out and take the lead in organizing their class all over the South in the struggle for justice." He wanted to take on "religious and educational work" in addition to publicizing and winning support for the farm. He insisted, however, that he "could not take on responsibility for management" as he was "not qualified to handle the technical problems that would arise in a collective agricultural enterprise of this kind." Franklin offered to ask his father, a farmer, if he would be interested in managing operations. Evidently he was not, as Franklin became the resident director of the farm.<sup>101</sup> His first task was recruiting farmers.

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<sup>99</sup> William Amberson to Sam Franklin, February 6, 1936, in series 2, box 1, folder 2, SDF papers.

<sup>100</sup> William Amberson to Sam Franklin, February 11, 1936, in series 2, box 1, folder 2, SDF papers.

<sup>101</sup> Sam Franklin to William Amberson, February 13, 1936, series 2, box 1, folder 2, SDF papers.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Cooperatives, Conflict and Ideology at Delta Cooperative Farm

The members of the STFU who ended up at Delta found much to like about the farm. Unlike sharecroppers, they enjoyed some control over their work, had personal gardens, could buy goods at market prices and get loans at market rates. They also had their fair share of frustrations with Delta. Although all adults participated in the democratic management of the farm, members resented the control that the trustees and elected governing council of Delta exercised over them. Black members correctly perceived that white members' racism prevented them from attaining leadership positions, and they protested. Sam Franklin, Delta's resident director, interpreted farmers' non-cooperation as irrationality and stupidity. In fact, these conflicts reflected ideological differences between the socialist leaders of Delta and the farmers who worked the land. While Franklin and the board of trustees insisted that cooperative farming and collective ownership of land was the only viable way forward, the farmers at Delta wanted independence.

#### *Desperation and Recruitment*

No matter what they thought of cooperative farming, farmers given a chance to live at Delta had every reason to accept the invitation.<sup>102</sup> In the winter of 1936, C.H. Dibble, a planter in eastern Arkansas, evicted more than fifty sharecropping families to punish them for joining the STFU. The families, having no place to stay and unable to find work because neighboring planters had blacklisted them, lived in tents bought with government relief funds.<sup>103</sup> According to

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<sup>102</sup> In the words of Robert Hunt Ferguson, the choice to move to Delta was "born of desperation." Ferguson, *Remaking*, 54.

<sup>103</sup> William Amberson to Sam Franklin, February 6, 1936, series 2, box 1, folder 2, SDF papers.

extant records of Franklin's recruitment drive among the Dibble refugees, no one turned down his invitation. Watching their children shivering and starving in the snow, how could they have? Although moving to Delta meant uprooting their lives in Arkansas to gamble on cooperative farming in Mississippi, the evicted sharecroppers had few other options. Because there was not enough room at Delta for all the evicted farmers, Franklin had to decide whom to extend an offer to. He left few records of how he made those choices, noting only that he tried to exclude syphilitics.<sup>104</sup> The group of thirty families that worked on the farm in its first year, he wrote, "varied considerably in ability, skills and degree of education."<sup>105</sup> Franklin gave the families who had sharecropped for the previous owner of the land the opportunity to stay; some became members and others left.<sup>106</sup>

Farmers across the South who heard about Delta understood working at the farm to be, as one farmer put it, "something like tenant farming": a place to live where they could control their farming and earn a fair reward.<sup>107</sup> During the farm's first winter, a fifty-five year old woman wrote to Sam Franklin asking for a place at Delta. She opened her letter by declaring, "I am quite interested in your plan for cooperative farming and think it the greatest forward step in southern development." She tried to prove that she would be a valuable addition to the farm, pointing to her two years of experience tenant farming with a tractor, her victory in the 1934 Plant to Prosper contest in Crittenden County, her husband's experience as a contractor, and the family labor at her disposal—three sons and two daughters. Her landlord had refused to renew her contract and she was looking for "any work" at all. She understood the arrangement that cooperators at Delta

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<sup>104</sup> Sam Franklin to Dorothy Franklin, March 15 or March 29, 1936, series 2, box 1, folder 3, SDFP.

<sup>105</sup> Sam Franklin, "Early Years," 14.

<sup>106</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 13.

<sup>107</sup> Unknown to Sam Franklin, January 28, 1936, Folder 3, Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina. (Hereafter Delta Papers.) [https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/03474/#folder\\_3#1](https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/03474/#folder_3#1)

worked under to be “something like tenant farming” and was desperate to join.<sup>108</sup> The author of a 1936 letter pleaded for a place to settle down and work for fair compensation:

We are tired of Drifting from Place to Place and from Land to Land... All of us is shearcroppers and work hard Every year the New Year comes in we are in the Same Rutt with no clothes and no furd and no money all doe we work hard ever day so you see... it [is] a ded cat on the Line... All of us hope we will make this move the last one we not have to make but one more we can move in a home we cann call our own Home.<sup>109</sup>

Petitioners were drawn to Delta because it seemed to be a place where they could settle down and earn a living farming. But the former sharecroppers who became members of Delta quickly learned that the cooperative had little in common with tenant farming.

### *The Structure of Delta*

To understand how members viewed Delta, it is necessary to understand how their lives differed from those they had led as sharecroppers. The only historian of Delta who has considered the question in any detail argues that working at Delta was similar to sharecropping. According to him, the “only differences” between farming at Delta and sharecropping were that Delta residents had more say in farm management and a higher income than most sharecroppers.<sup>110</sup> He is mistaken on three counts. First, management and compensation at Delta were hardly insignificant enough to merit the conclusion that working at Delta was little different than sharecropping—conflicts about management and compensation decisively impacted the farm’s history. Second, management and compensation were not the only differences between cooperative farming and sharecropping. Among other important distinctions, members enjoyed easier credit and cheaper prices for basic goods than sharecroppers did. Most importantly, many

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<sup>108</sup> Unknown to Sam Franklin, January 28, 1936, Delta Papers.

<sup>109</sup> Unknown to Sherwood Eddy, late 1936, quoted in Franklin, “Early Years,” 16.

<sup>110</sup> Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South*, 62.

of the differences between farming at Delta and sharecropping were more qualitative than quantitative; work at Delta was organized differently enough from sharecropping that judgements of “more” or “less” control and income are misleading. In a sense it is true that farmers at Delta enjoyed more control over their work and received more income than sharecroppers. More to the point, though, farmers at Delta managed their work and were compensated for it in altogether different ways than sharecroppers—or, for that matter, any southern farmer.

Unlike farmers throughout the South, members of Delta managed their work collectively and semi-democratically. The trustees (none of whom lived or worked at Delta) owned the Farm and managed its finances through Cooperative Farms, Inc., a registered Mississippi non-profit.<sup>111</sup> Under the trustees’ authority, a five-person council elected semi-annually in a blind vote by all adult members governed Delta.<sup>112</sup> No more than three council members could be “of the same race,” and the council usually had three white members. Sam Franklin attended every council meeting as the representative of the board of trustees, to which he reported; he held no council vote but did have the unilateral power to veto council decisions, which he claims he rarely used. Once a month, all members of the farm met to review the actions of the council, any of which could be overruled by a two-thirds vote of the members.<sup>113</sup>

The council was responsible for any and every possible decision at Delta. In Franklin’s words, the council made decisions “about how the land was farmed, how income was divided, what land was cleared, what timber processed, what meat, vegetables, milk, etc., was produced... and how it was distributed.” The council decided “what kind of houses should be built where and

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<sup>111</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 27. “Certificate of Incorporation of Cooperative Farms, Inc.,” circa May 1936, folder 168, Delta Papers.

<sup>112</sup> “Organization Papers of Cooperative Farms, Inc.,” 8, folder 169, Delta papers, 8.

<sup>113</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 27.

by whom,” who lived in what house, what improvements had to be made to the farm and by whom, whether and when cooperative equipment for breaking land could be used in individual gardens, and so on.<sup>114</sup> The council’s first decision was that white families and black families would live on opposite sides of the road running through the middle of the farm.<sup>115</sup> The council also oversaw Delta’s three cooperatives—the credit cooperative, the consumer’s cooperative (which members called the cooperative store), and the producer’s cooperative.

Members of the cooperative enjoyed easier credit than sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. Residents could join the farm’s credit cooperative by depositing at least five dollars into its capital stock. Once farmers reached the five dollar minimum, they became members and could borrow any amount up to the value of their investment at will. If a member wanted to borrow more than their investment, they needed others to use their own stock to supply the loan. The cooperative charged members a twenty-five cent handling fee and what Franklin called “normal interest” on loans.<sup>116</sup> Creditors in the Mississippi Delta charged sharecroppers at least 25 percent interest on their loans.<sup>117</sup> Although I found no extant records documenting the interest rates at Delta, it is fair to assume that “normal interest” at the cooperative was lower than the outrageous interest that most Mississippi sharecroppers paid. Members most often used loans to pay for medical care, dental work, and glasses.<sup>118</sup>

At the farm’s cooperative store, members could buy staple goods and farm supplies at better prices than sharecroppers could. All the residents of Delta (along with some of their neighbors) belonged to the cooperative store. The store sold dry goods, fuel, clothing, tobacco,

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<sup>114</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 22.

<sup>115</sup> Smith, *Trouble in Goshen*, 127.

<sup>116</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 26.

<sup>117</sup> William Amberson, “Report of Survey: The Social and Economic Consequences of the Cotton Acreage Reduction Program,” in Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 21.

<sup>118</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 26.



simple drugs, candy, fertilizer, seeds, and farm equipment, all of which the store bought at wholesale prices and sold at market rates. At the plantation commissaries where many sharecroppers shopped, goods were always marked up by at least ten percent. Because sharecroppers shopped on credit from their landlord, the high prices they paid at commissaries compounded over the course of the year.<sup>119</sup> Thus landlords and store owners (who were sometimes the same person) used their power as creditors and sellers to gouge sharecroppers and drive them into debt. Through the cooperative store, members of Delta could accrue property and stay out of debt more easily than sharecroppers could.

Members also made money from the cooperative store. The store's profits were set aside as reserve capital, which members held as stock in proportion to how much they had spent at the store. They could withdraw their equity in an emergency or before leaving the farm, but as long as they held their stock they received an annual patronage dividend proportional to it. Members of Delta usually received between eight and ten percent patronage dividends from the store.<sup>120</sup> Needless to say, sharecroppers had no such source of income. Members' only complaint about the cooperative store was that they had to pay for cups to drink water, which they considered theft.<sup>121</sup>

Through the producer's cooperative, the council organized the labor of members to meet the farm's collective needs. To that end, the council aimed as much as possible to produce goods for members' own use. In Franklin's words, the farm was its "own market" for most of the goods it produced. Members of the producer's cooperative grew cotton, ran a sawmill, cared for dairy cows, made clothing, and raised pork, chicken, and vegetables to be eaten by farm residents.

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<sup>119</sup> Amberson, "Consequences of the Cotton Acreage Reduction Program," in Thomas, *Plight of the Sharecropper*, 22.

<sup>120</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 25.

<sup>121</sup> Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South*, 62.

Early on, the council decided that they needed a foreman in the field to manage the daily operations of the farm. The council regularly selected a member to be the executive, who was responsible for assigning work crews, managing equipment, and supervising labor.<sup>122</sup>

Members often fought about who would serve as the executive and what his (the executive was always a man) proper role was. Members complained that the executive enjoyed his leisure while those he was tasked with supervising worked.<sup>123</sup> The most qualified man was never chosen to be the executive because of white members' racism. George Smith was universally regarded as the most skilled farmer and carpenter at the cooperative. Having worked Delta's land as a sharecropper under the previous owner, Smith knew more about the property's soil and climate than anyone else. Nevertheless, he was never chosen as the executive.<sup>124</sup> Franklin admitted that this was probably due to the racism of white members, who refused to take orders from a black man.<sup>125</sup> As white members' complaints about the farm's many white executives show, they disliked taking orders from white men too.<sup>126</sup> To limit disputes between members about the executive role, the council eventually hired a non-member farmer to fill the role.<sup>127</sup>

Through the democratic system of management at Delta, members had more control over their labor than sharecroppers. They were free from the personal domination of a landlord who enjoyed the legal right to dictate what and how they farmed. By contrast, farmers at Delta democratically decided what to cultivate and how. Heads of households at Delta, though, still had little direct control over the labor of themselves and their families. At Delta, the council

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<sup>122</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 23-24.

<sup>123</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 32.

<sup>124</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 15.

<sup>125</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 22.

<sup>126</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 22.

<sup>127</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 22.

decided who performed what labor when. Delta's democratic apparatus thus stripped household heads of their authority over family labor and vested that power in the council.

Although the heads of households at Delta had little authority over their family's labor, they were able to achieve some of their longstanding aims for their families. The council banned children under twelve from working in the fields, electing instead to pay them as babysitters.<sup>128</sup> With less time spent working, children at Delta were better educated than their peers across the South. Black children in particular benefited by spending eight months in the cooperative school, almost twice as long as the legally mandated four and a half months of schooling for black youth in Mississippi.<sup>129</sup> The council also protected residents' rights to farm individual gardens, which few sharecroppers enjoyed.

Members of Delta were paid hourly wages in cash and scrip. At the beginning of each week, members received an advance for the work they were assigned to do in the coming week. Advances at Delta were made partly in cash and partly in scrip, which members could use to buy goods, including those produced on the farm, in the cooperative store.<sup>130</sup> The council voted to compensate labor according to a graduated scale of hourly wages. Determining this scale proved time-consuming and contentious. Although the council regularly revised it, they never deviated far from a skilled-unskilled distinction. Hours spent working as an executive, as a manager of the various agricultural enterprises, or as a tractor driver brought the highest wages, while time spent plowing, chopping, weeding, and logging merited less.<sup>131</sup>

Members of Delta were compensated for their labor in altogether different ways than sharecroppers. While sharecroppers advanced their labor to their employer and received

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<sup>128</sup> Ferguson, *Remaking*, 67.

<sup>129</sup> Smith, *Trouble in Goshen*, 128. Dallas, "Delta and Providence", 299.

<sup>130</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 24.

<sup>131</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 23. Dallas, "Delta and Providence," 296.

compensation at the end of the year, members of Delta received weekly advances before performing their labor. Members thus had cash in their pockets at the beginning of every week—a luxury sharecroppers would have envied. While sharecroppers were compensated according to the size of the crop they harvested, members of Delta were paid according to the time they spent working and the kind of work they performed.

Farmers at Delta were also in the unique position of having landlords who offered them an explicit, albeit never realized, path to land ownership. One of the so-called “basic principles” of Delta Cooperative Farm was the “gradual purchase of the farm by members.” Cooperative Farms, Inc. bought the land and made initial capital investments with money raised by the trustees. Every year, farm members were supposed to use part of their income to repay the initial investment of the trustees. Once the members paid their debt, they would own the farm collectively. Each member’s share of ownership would be proportional to the value of the labor they had put into Delta and the amount they paid the trustees to purchase their share.<sup>132</sup> Franklin later noted that “since none of this was ever realized, the subject of equities remained largely an academic matter.”<sup>133</sup> The subject of equities, though, was hardly academic. Every year, the residents collectively paid the trustees to reduce their debt to them and move closer to collective ownership of the land. In 1936, the farm’s first full year, the thirty families at Delta paid the trustees a total of \$1,000.<sup>134</sup>

Delta’s first year was an economic success for members; the thirty families at Delta made more than the average family of sharecroppers. Even an economist who took a skeptical view of Delta admitted that residents made “slightly more” than their sharecropping neighbors, who he

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<sup>132</sup> Author unknown, “Some Principles of the Delta Cooperative Farm,” circa November 1936, Folder 166, Delta Papers.

<sup>133</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 34.

<sup>134</sup> Smith, *Trouble in Goshen*, 126.

calculated made an average of \$122 a year.<sup>135</sup> According to the board of trustees, resident families made an average of \$327.<sup>136</sup> The actual figure was probably somewhere between these two extremes. Perhaps because they were making more money than they could have at neighboring plantations, most members elected to stay at Delta for a second year. Three black families were ejected from the farm for mysterious reasons and a few other families left at the end of the first year.<sup>137</sup>

Trustee Reinhold Niebuhr speculated that some members left because they had worked harder than the average sharecropper. Having been asked by the council to build twenty-five houses, a community center, general offices, and sidewalks, it is probably true that residents worked harder than they would have as sharecroppers.<sup>138</sup> While sharecroppers could choose to work less during the slack times of cotton cultivation, the council assigned residents of Delta hourly work throughout the year. In an article written after Delta's first year, Niebuhr reported that one black member who left the farm explained his departure only by saying "I need a rest." Niebuhr understood that residents may not have liked the amount of work they had to do, but he insisted that they were making a mistake by leaving. Given their workload, he wrote, it was "no wonder that a few yearn for the fleshpots of Egypt, though those fleshpots contained nothing but fat-back and cornmeal."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> T.J. Woofert, quoted in Dallas, "Delta and Providence," 302.

<sup>136</sup> Dallas, "Delta and Providence," 302.

<sup>137</sup> Dallas, "Delta and Providence," 295.

<sup>138</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Meditations from Mississippi," *Christian Century* 54, issue 6 (February 10, 1937), 184.

<sup>139</sup> Niebuhr, "Meditations from Mississippi," 184.

*Cotton, Conflict, and Ideology*

In May of 1937, most of the cooperators worked hard. In early spring, heavy rains swelled the Mississippi River, which seemed on the verge of breaking through its levee and flooding the farm. Worried that their homes might be swept away in an instant, the council ordered the men to tend the farm while the women and children waited out the storm in Memphis. The levee withstood the test, but the heavy rains and high Mississippi waters soaked the farm's soil. When the river retreated and the skies cleared, cotton and weeds alike grew rapidly in the nutrient-rich ground. To save the cotton crop from being strangled, members had to hoe every weed out of the soil. Across the cotton South, weeding cotton—called “chopping”—was an annual process. During the chopping season, day-labor wages in cotton country rose as planters supplemented the labor of their sharecroppers with that of men, women, and children hired from nearby towns and farms. During the 1937 chopping season, the men of Delta weeded all day, had dinner, and then went back out to work until midnight. The council also called on the women to chop, some of them working despite physical disability.<sup>140</sup>

Several women refused.<sup>141</sup> They sat on their porches and declared that they would not work for the sixty-six cents a day that Delta was advancing to them; one of the women picked blackberries for herself instead of reporting to the fields. The rest chatted on their porches.<sup>142</sup> When their protest failed to earn them a wage increase, the non-cooperating women chose two paths. Three or four, most of them white, went back to work in Delta's fields. The remaining three women, all of whom were black, went down the road and hired themselves out for a dollar

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<sup>140</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 42-44. Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, May 22, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11, SDF papers.

<sup>141</sup> Six or seven, according to Franklin. Franklin to Eddy, May 22, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11, SDF papers.

<sup>142</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 44. Franklin to Eddy, May 22, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11, SDF papers.

a day to a nearby planter whom Franklin described as the “chief critic and opponent” of the cooperative.<sup>143</sup>

Franklin viewed the women’s dissatisfaction as a failure on their part to grasp how the cooperative worked and to rationally pursue their interests within it; their preference for the highest possible wage showed, he thought, that they were stuck in the mindset of sharecroppers. Franklin tried to convince them that, although they may have had good reason to neglect a cotton crop in order to earn cash wages as sharecroppers, it was against their interests to do so as members of Delta. “This is your crop, not the Big Man’s,” he said. “If we don’t save it, all lose.”<sup>144</sup> Franklin wrote in a letter that the women seemed not to understand that their daily wage was only an advance and that all members of the farm would later earn equity according to the value of the farm’s crop. Their ignorance, he continued, reflected their “childish inability to wait for any returns and to demand that everything be produced on the moment.”<sup>145</sup>

He also thought that their actions might be explained by impropriety. He speculated that two of the women might have been looking “for an excuse to get away”; one never listened to her husband and was ready to leave him as soon as she found a new (fifth, he noted) spouse, while the other, he had been told “confidentially”, was cheating on her husband.<sup>146</sup>

Whether the rumors were true or not, the women seem to have had good reasons for demanding higher wages. If the rumors were true, the women were probably trying to leave their families before the crop was harvested. In that case, wanting cash in their pockets rather than equity they would never realize shows that they understood the cooperative perfectly well. If the womens’ rumored marital problems stemmed from the poor behavior of their husbands rather

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<sup>143</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, May 24, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11, SDF papers.

<sup>144</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 44.

<sup>145</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, May 22, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11, SDF papers.

<sup>146</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, June 1, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 12, SDF papers.

than their infidelity as wives, it made good sense for them to earn cash independently. Even if the rumors about their marriages were false, the non-cooperating women, not to mention every other farmer at Delta, would have benefitted by earning higher daily wages.

Perhaps not being compensated for their domestic labor contributed to the women's frustration. While everyone on the farm was compensated for the labor the council demanded of them, women were not compensated for their work at home. The diary of Sam Franklin's wife Dorothy reveals that, like farm women across the South, women at Delta had a tremendous burden of household labor. On a representative day in the summer of 1938, Dorothy woke up early to make Sam his breakfast, cleaned and hung out their baby's bedding, did the dishes, pickled peaches, made jam, canned applesauce, made stew for dinner, and washed a large stack of dirty clothes.<sup>147</sup> Earning no wage for their domestic work that kept the farm running, the women at Delta may have felt that, compared to the men, they were not fairly compensated for their contributions to Delta.

When two black men refused to work a few weeks later, Franklin again refused to consider rational explanations for their behavior, offering racist ones instead. He seethed that they demonstrated "the pathetic spectacle of members of an exploited race for the first time given a chance who become inordinately ambitious and think they run everything their own way." Franklin likened them to animals, writing that "if men are treated like beasts for generations one need not be surprised, when he starts to treat them like men, to have them behave like beasts still."<sup>148</sup>

The black members of Delta protested Franklin's public criticisms of non-cooperating members. They held what they called an "indignation meeting" to criticize Franklin's racist

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<sup>147</sup> Diary entry of Dorothy Franklin, Summer 1938, Series 6B, Box 1, Folder 19, SDF papers.

<sup>148</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, June 9, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 12, SDF papers.



treatment of non-cooperating black members. Franklin seems to have offered no response, except to instruct the assistant director of the farm not to tell the trustees about the meeting.<sup>149</sup> Franklin made no reference to the indignation meeting in his written history of the farm.<sup>150</sup>

The conflict between Franklin and non-cooperating members reflected differences not of intelligence, marital ethics, or race, but rather of ideology. The problem was not that the women did not understand the cooperative, but that they viewed the cooperative differently than Franklin. In a moment of clarity, Franklin came close to admitting that, because the structure of the cooperative had been explained to the non-cooperating women “countless times in many ways,” their dissatisfaction could not in fact be chalked up to their misunderstanding the cooperative.<sup>151</sup>

The ideology of Sam Franklin prevented him from understanding why members sometimes took issue with the cooperative. He held fast to the view that cooperative farming was the only solution to the problems southern farmers faced. The members’ lack of commitment to what he believed to be their salvation frustrated and bewildered him. Grasping for answers, he interpreted their disagreements with him as irrationality, stupidity, and racial inferiority. In this instance, Franklin’s ideology gave rise to false consciousness; his devotion to cooperative farming—for which he had sacrificed the opportunity to work for the church in far easier circumstances—prevented him from rationally accounting for members’ disagreements with him.

Delta members disagreed with Franklin because they found themselves unable to realize their highest aims at the cooperative farm. At Delta, they found many of their old problems in new forms. Although they influenced the farm’s management, they exercised less complete

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<sup>149</sup> Smith, *Trouble in Goshen*, 135.

<sup>150</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 43-45.

<sup>151</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, May 22, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11, SDF papers.

control over their farming than they would have as tenant-farmers or landowners. Male heads of households had limited power over their family's labor. Women shouldered a larger load than men while receiving no more compensation. Just as sharecroppers held a fictive share of a crop that landlords owned, members of Delta held fictive equity in a farm that the trustees owned; members of the farm also had little control over financial decisions, which the trustees made.<sup>152</sup> Even if residents had come to collectively own the farm, they would have had to contend with the democratic control that the council exercised over them. They would have preferred no such supervision.

In February 1939, William Amberson alleged that the trustees of Delta were mismanaging the farm's finances and cheating Delta's residents. Amberson declared—quite rightly, Franklin admitted—that Delta was losing money fast.<sup>153</sup> He pointed out that from 1937 to 1939, the farm had advanced almost twice as much money to members than it had brought in. In his view, Franklin and the rest of the board misrepresented the farm's financial status to potential donors. He further criticized the board for their aloofness towards farmers at Delta and their wavering commitment to sell them the farm. While the chair of the board insisted that morale at Delta was high, Amberson thought that members were “depressed... almost despairing” and gripped with “a feeling of futility.” According to him, many of the farm's most dedicated residents were considering leaving Delta because they did not believe they would ever be able to buy the farm from the trustees. Not wanting to be associated with Delta's failures, Amberson resigned from the board.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Smith, *Trouble in Goshen*, 132-133.

<sup>153</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 55-58.

<sup>154</sup> William Amberson, “A Statement to the Board of Trustees, Cooperative Farms, Inc.,” February 22, 1939, William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, Southern Historical Collection, Folder 20.

The population of Delta steadily declined from 1937 on. The farm opened with thirty families in 1936. By 1941, only thirteen families—five white and eight black—remained.<sup>155</sup>

*The Individual Plan and The End of Delta*

In the summer of 1941, perhaps sensing that their cooperative farming effort was bound to fail, the trustees proposed a new project. They wanted to use Delta as a base for “educational and religious work” among local black farmers. Most of the white members of Delta opposed their proposal. Franklin scolded them by declaring that their opposition “put them in the same class as the most reactionary type of planter.” Nevertheless, he took their views into account and presented the residents with two possible paths forward. First, Franklin proposed to set aside part of the farm for social work so that members opposed to or uninterested in the work could avoid it entirely. Members had no serious objections to this plan, but they were far more excited about his second proposal.<sup>156</sup>

The second option Franklin presented, which he called the individual plan, was for the trustees to take over and use part of the farm for their social work while the rest of the land would be divided up into private holdings. Under this plan, members’ current equity in the farm would serve as a down payment on an individual homestead which they would pay off over a few years. “There were immediate expressions of interest in the second plan,” reported Franklin, which “everyone seemed to regard... as fair.” One member said that he “would like to get some land of his own so he could show us how a man really ought to farm” while another expressed

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<sup>155</sup> Dallas, “Delta and Providence,” 305.

<sup>156</sup> Sam Franklin Memo to trustees Reinhold Niebuhr, Sherwood Eddy and Arthur Raper, “Cooperative Meeting,” August 18, 1941, Series 2, Box 4, Folder 9, SDF papers.

his strong desire to “get off on his own.” One member declared that “the cooperative didn’t do so much for us and we should try something else.”<sup>157</sup>

There was little criticism of the individual plan. One of the members in favor of the proposed social work said simply that she “would hate to see the cooperative broken up.” Her husband agreed with her. Another member, Wilburn White, opposed the individual plan because “the people had never been given a chance to run things [on the cooperative] for themselves,” perhaps referring to the trustee’s control over finances and Franklin’s veto power. Franklin thought that White’s view was an expression of his resentment that Franklin once “had to veto him” when he served as farm executive.<sup>158</sup>

Although Franklin was disappointed that moving forward with the individual plan would mean disbanding Delta’s “only true collective,” he thought it might be the best option. Creating four or five small farms of one hundred acres each (forty cleared and sixty uncleared) would leave the members with sizable holdings and the trustees with the necessary resources to carry out their proposed social work. Franklin still believed that members had a better chance of success as a collective than as individuals, but he also admitted that it made little sense “to maintain this collective if a majority of its members think they would do better under the individual plan.”<sup>159</sup>

The member’s enthusiastic embrace of the individual plan confirms that, although members of Delta enjoyed some advantages over sharecroppers, they still wanted their own land. The individual plan, it seems, was never realized. According to Franklin, the members and the trustees decided to sell Delta in 1942.<sup>160</sup> The trustees wanted to sell the farm in order to focus

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<sup>157</sup> Franklin, “Cooperative Meeting,” August 18, 1941, S2, B4, F9, SDF papers.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 79.

their social work efforts from another base of operations, also in Mississippi, called Providence Cooperative Farms.

Although the circumstances of the farm's closure are murky, this much is clear: both the founders and the members of Delta would have liked things to go differently. When Delta closed, the founders' dreams of a cooperative commonwealth died just as surely as the members' hopes for independence.

## CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, the disagreements between the founders and the members contributed to Delta's failure. But the ideological tension that manifested at Delta did not necessarily doom the farm from the start. Under different circumstances, Delta might have lasted longer and been more successful.

Delta might have succeeded in spite of ideological tension if the founders had better timing. They proved too early to effectively introduce a mechanical cotton picker on a cooperative basis. Although the Rust cotton picker was tested at Delta in 1936, the machine proved inadequate and never gained widespread use at Delta or anywhere else.<sup>161</sup> Mechanical cotton harvesters were not ready for widespread use until 1942, when Delta closed.<sup>162</sup> If the farmers at Delta had an effective cotton picker at their disposal, they would have spent less time picking cotton—not to mention fighting about it—and might have been more satisfied with their lives on the farm.

Delta also might have succeeded if the members and the founders had resolved their ideological differences. Three resolutions would have been possible. First, the founders could have convinced Delta's members that owning land in a countryside dominated by capitalist agriculture would ultimately have left most of them where they started: without property or power. Accepting that analysis, members would have faced a choice between continuing to farm at Delta or resigning themselves to casual wage work on a plantation or factory floor. Members would have seen that they enjoyed more security and control over their work at Delta than they

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<sup>161</sup> Louis Mazzari, *Southern Modernist: Arthur Raper from the New Deal to the Cold War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 149-150.

<sup>162</sup> Even so, most cotton in the Mississippi Delta was still harvested by hand until the early 1960s. Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 248.

would have as employees at plantations and factories; continuing to farm at Delta—though no major victory in their eyes—would have been the easy choice.

Alternatively, the farmers could have convinced the founders to help them get land of their own. They might have convinced the socialist founders that owning land would allow them to solve the problems the founders diagnosed. If they owned land and implements, they could negate the difference between effective demand and real need—which the founders diagnosed as the root of capitalism’s ills—by choosing to farm for their own use. Owning land would not only have prevented their evictions during the crop control program—it also would have allowed them to benefit from the Triple-A. With Triple-A payments in their pockets, perhaps they could have invested in the labor-saving technology that Delta’s founders feared would put sharecroppers out of work. Convinced by the members’ arguments, Delta’s founders would have raised money for members to buy their own land. If former members of Delta had become landowners, they would have had to contend with capitalist markets and federal policies that disproportionately benefited the owners of large, heavily-capitalized plantations. If the experience of small farm owners in North Carolina is any indication, some Delta members turned small proprietors would have become the owners of large, mechanized plantations. Most, though, would have left the land within a few decades.<sup>163</sup>

A more fruitful and perhaps more likely resolution of the ideological tension at Delta would have been a synthesis. The founders of Delta would have granted members more independence, recognizing that nasty conflict was bound to result from a system in which farmers, although they had a say in management, were forced to perform work that they did not wish to. To reduce such conflict, they would have allowed farmers to work individual plots of

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<sup>163</sup> Petty, *Standing Their Ground*, 9.

collectively owned land. For their part, farmers would have recognized that they could benefit from cooperatives. They would have embraced individual farming on collectively owned land, recognizing that collective ownership granted them more security than individual ownership. They would have retained the cooperative store and the credit cooperative, which always served them well. And, adopting the founders' insight that small farmers could not compete in a world of mature capitalist farming, they would have embraced cooperative pooling of machinery and cooperative marketing.

When Delta closed, all of these possibilities disappeared. The South became home to no cooperative commonwealth, no yeomen's paradise, and no hybrid child of the two. Instead, the members of Delta were swept into the now-familiar process often called modernization. Most left farming, becoming country commuters or urban dwellers working for wages.<sup>164</sup> As their spirited struggle shows, their exodus from the land hardly seemed inevitable to them. The founders of Delta, too, had imagined that they could bend the course of history to their liking. Although both the founders and the members had agreed that sharecropping and waged day labor were unjust, they could not achieve their aims. Their inability to resolve their ideological differences hindered them and the forces allied against them proved too powerful to overcome. For a brief time, the founders and members of Delta could glimpse a more humane southern countryside. After the cooperative closed, the hopes harbored by the people at Delta faded from view. In the end, they did not amount to much.

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<sup>164</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 353.



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