

Tenant Farming in Mississippi

In Eudora Welty's short story "The Whistle," the main characters Jason and Sara make their living farming. However, they do not own their own land. They farm land owned by the character Mr. Perkins for a share of the crop. Their fictional situation is based in on the historical tenant farming system. This system evolved because of Mississippi's changing history. After the Civil War, the production of cotton continued to dominate Mississippi's agricultural economy. The method of growing had to change because the labor provided by slaves no longer existed, and the cash needed to plant crops was limited. Banks trying to recover from the devastating impact of the war were hesitant to loan money to farmers. In many places, local merchants supplanted the banks as a source of credit. They would loan what was necessary for the growing season with the agreement that the money would be paid in full when the crop was harvested. Farmers, large and small, had to borrow the money to grow cotton.

Planters with large tracts of land needed workers, so this system of tenant farming evolved. There were three types of tenant farmers: renters, share tenants, and sharecroppers. The differences in these three groups had to do with how much of the harvest was kept by the grower. Renters paid the owner directly for the use of the land, and therefore kept their entire harvest. Share tenants turned over a negotiated percentage of their harvest to the landowner in exchange for the use of the land. Sharecroppers were the poorest in this system. They turned over up to one-half or more of their harvest to the landowner, leaving them with little to live on or invest towards the next year's crop. The agreements between a landowner and these three groups were often verbal, could change from year to year, and were generally negotiated to the landowner's advantage. Though it was initially created as a way to grow cotton again with the potential of mutually benefiting all involved, the system actually failed the workers. It became a lifestyle little better than slavery. Dependency on the local merchant for credit combined with yearly declining cotton prices from 1866 to 1900 resulted in most tenant farmers becoming sharecroppers. In Mississippi in 1890, the state average for farming families listed as tenants was 62.27 %. This means that over half of Mississippi farmers at this time did not own their own land. These farming families were both black and white.

The system bound those caught in it, regardless of race, in a near hopeless cycle of poverty. The goods needed to grow cotton as well as the food and clothes necessary for one's family were called the "furnish" and were provided on credit at the beginning of the growing season. If a farmer was unable to repay the loan with his share of the crop at harvest time, credit had to be extended from one year to the next. This made it nearly impossible to dig out of such a debt load. In addition, the Mississippi legislature passed a state law called the crop lien law, which required workers to remain on the land until all

debts were paid. Low cotton prices and dishonest business practices on the part of some merchants meant sharecroppers found themselves bound to the land with little or no recourse. By the 1930's many small farmers lost their land to the merchants as payment for their loans, due to declining cotton prices, high freight rates to railroads, and elevated interest rates on debts to those merchants.

The living conditions for sharecroppers were harsh. Most lived in unpainted two to three room shacks near the fields with up to fifteen people living in one house. Their poor diets consisted primarily of cornmeal, salt pork, sorghum, and dry peas. Vegetable gardens were discouraged or prohibited by the landowner to force tenants to concentrate on growing the cash crop. Children worked in the fields with their parents. If they did go to school, it was usually for about six weeks a year. Homes were heated by wood or coal stoves with no indoor plumbing or electricity and usually no screens for the windows. Men wore denim overalls that they purchased, but shirts, dresses, sheets, and diapers were often home-made from feed and flour sacks.

From the details in "The Whistle," the reader can assume that Jason and Sara's tale takes place after 1907. During that year, the boll weevil destroyed cotton crops in the state; after that time many farmers grew other crops. In the story, Jason and Sara were growing tomatoes. Sara's dream about taking the tomatoes to the town of Dexter corresponds to small Central Mississippi towns like Utica and Crystal Springs, where tomatoes were loaded on train cars for shipping to other states. Today, Mississippi continues to grow cotton and other food crops as part of its economy.

For more information:

Mississippi: Conflict and Change, James W. Loewen and Charles Sallis, Editors

Mississippi, David G. Sansing

Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris, Co-editors

Discovering Mississippi: A Mississippi Studies Textbook, John Ray Skates, David G. Sansing, and Mary Ann Wells

Mississippi: A Portrait of an American State, Jesse O. McKee, Senior Author; Velvelyn Blackwell Foster, Dennis J. Mitchell, J. Jesse Palmer, Thomas J. Richardson, Stephen Young, and Daniel C. Vogt, Contributing Authors