



Sharecropping

Source: PBS website for *American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till*
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peopleevents/e_sharecrop.html

A Tough Place for Blacks

The [Mississippi River] Delta may have been beautiful, but work there was hard. Slavery and cotton production became synonymous with the Southern economy and Mississippi. Since the Mississippi Delta was the last area of the South to be settled, after the Civil War, the state became among the most reactionary and repressive states for African Americans. Blacks lived with the daily and ever-present threat and reality of violence.

Locked into Poverty

Although blacks outnumbered whites, the sharecropping system that replaced slavery helped ensure they remained poor and virtually locked out of any opportunity for land ownership or basic human rights. The system grew from the struggle between planters and ex-slaves on how to organize production. Planters wanted gang labor, like they had used under slavery, to work the fields; freed people wanted to own and work their own land.

How Sharecropping Worked

Under the system, the sharecropper rented a plot of land and paid for it with a percentage of the crop -- usually 30 to 50%. Sharecroppers would get tools, animals, fertilizer, seeds and food from the landlord's store and would have to pay him back at incredibly high interest rates. The landlord would determine the crop, supervise production, control the weighing and marketing of cotton, and control the recordkeeping.

Hard Work and Low Pay

"We'd get \$12 per bale and we had to pick hard in order to have money to buy food during that season," said Mississippi State Senator David Jordan, whose parents were sharecroppers. "If we had a rainy week where we couldn't pick at all, then we would have no money. We would have to go get food and substances on credit."

At the end of the year, sharecroppers settled accounts by paying what they owed from any earnings made in the field. Since the plantation owners kept track of the calculations, rarely would sharecroppers see a profit.

"Some came out in the hole five or six times and they never did get out of the hole," Jordan said. "So what happened, they caught the midnight train or bus and headed to Chicago and they never found 'em, 'cause that was the only way to get out of that miserable situation."