

Resource:

*Sharecropping in a Depression*

**Background**

In the years after the Civil War and the end of slavery, sharecropping became an integral part of Southern agriculture. In a sharecropping system, landlords provide tenants with parcels of land on which to plant, cultivate, and pick crops. In exchange, tenants pay for seeds, tools, and housing provided by the landlord and split the profits from the crops with the landlord.

The life of a sharecropper was difficult. Even in the best of situations, sharecropping families lived in a house and on land that was not their own. At any time, they could be evicted by their landlord. In the worst situations, tenants could be forced to pay exorbitant fees and split profits in an unfair way. Some tenants were part of a vicious cycle in which they constantly owed their landlord money.

Despite the hardships of sharecropping, over 1.8 million Americans were tenant farmers by 1930. Both Black and white families were part of this system. In 1935, 50 percent of all white farmers and 77 percent of all Black farmers were sharecroppers.

Because a sharecropping family’s survival was dependent on a successful harvest every year, every member of the family contributed. But expectations fell disproportionately on women. On top of helping to plow fields and pick crops, women were responsible for maintaining the home. Wives cooked, cleaned, gardened, and raised children. The work was constant and exhausting.

The Great Depression spurred the beginning of the end of the sharecropping boom, which left many families in challenging situations. New Deal policies intended to help both landlords and tenants ultimately hurt tenants. Landlords often used government
funds to purchase equipment or eliminate crops that were no longer profitable. As landlords mechanized and downsized, evictions increased. When landlords ended their relationship with tenants, those tenants lost not only their source of income but also their homes.

The sharecropping system declined quickly through the 1930s and ’40s. Many sharecropping families relocated to urban communities as opportunities dried up. The face of American agriculture changed dramatically toward a more mechanized, industrial, and impersonal system.

About the Image

Between 1935 and 1944, photographers working on behalf of the federal government took over 175,000 pictures of everyday Americans. The Farm Security Administration (FSA) was particularly interested in images of sharecroppers. FSA photographers were an essential part of the government’s research. Their photographs were used by economists, sociologists, and other social scientists to study the Depression and the impact of the New Deal and to gain public support for the FSA’s programs.

Vocabulary

- **Farm Security Administration**: A government agency that focused on supporting and ending rural poverty. The agency hired photographers to document the lives of rural workers.
- **landlord**: Someone who owns land or property and allows others to use it in exchange for payment or rent.
- **New Deal**: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s national program for stimulating the American economy during the Great Depression. Included employment, housing, and social service support systems.
• **sharecropper**: A farmer who works on land owned by someone else and shares the profits with their landlord.

• **tenant**: Someone who rents land or property from someone else.
Discussion Questions

• What is sharecropping? What do you learn about the lives of sharecropping women from these pictures?
• Where were these images taken and what crops are described? What does this tell you about the extent of sharecropping in the United States in that era?
• What kind of work do you see women doing? What does this tell you about the role of women in sharecropping households?
• What do you notice about the women’s surroundings and clothing? What does this tell you about their economic status and the challenges they might have faced?
• Which images do you think were posed? Which do you think were candid? Why do you think this? What does this tell you about the choices photographers made and the messages they were trying to convey?
• Look at the image of the tobacco sharecropper’s wife wearing white shoes. Why do you think the caption includes a note about the shoes? What does it tell us about this woman that she put on her best dress and shoes before being photographed?
• Notice that the captions describe the women as the “wives” of sharecroppers. What does this say about the status of the women? What assumptions does it make about the dynamic of the household? Are these assumptions accurate?
• Compare the images based on race. How did the lives of white, African American, and Mexican sharecroppers seem to differ in the images?