

“WHERE THE GREAT PLAINS AND SOUTH
COLLIDE: A HISTORY OF FARM TENANCY
IN OKLAHOMA, 1890-1950”

By

KURT LIVELY

Bachelor of Arts in History
Northwestern Oklahoma State University
Alva, OK
2002

Master of Arts in History
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK
2004

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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. L. G. Moses

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Richard Rohrs

Dr. Elizabeth Williams

Dr. Brad Bays

Dr. A. Gordon Emslie

Dean of the Graduate College

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When thinking about the history of early Oklahoma, Native Americans, land runs, homesteading, and perhaps even John Steinbeck's Okie migrants come to mind. It is rather odd that these figures all symbolize the state because in many ways their histories are contradictory. Land runners and homesteaders settled upon the lands of the Native Americans, whereas many of the descendants of early Oklahomans became the migrants who fled the state during the Great Depression. As these stories have received significant attention from scholars, one group, a group far less romanticized, remains relatively unknown. The story of the Oklahoma tenant farmer has yet to be told. Even though the majority of farmers in Oklahoma from 1910 to 1940 were renters, Oklahomans celebrate the pioneering spirit of the land runs and the noble heritage of Native Americans while forgetting about farm tenants. Oddly enough, people think of the meandering Okies but do not recognize that these vagabonds were themselves displaced tenants.

These varying stories exist because Oklahoma has a strange mixture of southern and western culture. Amid the cowboy culture that has become so dominant in many parts of the state, including the naming of the Oklahoma State University mascot, are symbols commonly associated with the American South. Western culture is fairly

prominent in Oklahoma as the state hosts countless rodeos, including the International Finals Rodeo, and, at one time, the National Finals Rodeo. Country music blares from radios, Plains Indian culture remains visible at powwows across the state, and the bison is the state mammal. Oklahomans have somehow created a new identity from these two very different American cultural traditions. Yet, Oklahomans blend the “Okie from Muskogee” with southern rock anthems like “Sweet Home Alabama.” Southern fried chicken, cornbread, and mashed potatoes share popular status with the quintessential western foods of beef steak and brown beans. In reality, early Oklahomans survived more on a steady diet of turnips supplemented with seasonal foods such as turnips and garden vegetables, but a doctored cultural and historical memory is often more palatable than the actual past. Equally anomalous is the adoption by many Oklahomans of the ultimate symbol of anti-Americanism. Confederate battle flags adorn bumpers and license-plate frames. Somehow, conservative and presumably patriotic Oklahomans find little irony in what might be regarded as disloyalty! The point is that Oklahoma suffers from a kind of cultural bipolarism. Oklahomans’ blending of western Plains symbols and southern pride gives a unique perspective to many features of Oklahoma culture. Chaps and cowboy hats are much more romantic than burlap bags and torn overalls; but the fact remains that cotton, not cattle, was the predominant agricultural commodity from 1910 until the late 1930s. Despite the importance of cotton production, the story of the farmers producing the crop – the tenant farmers - remains largely untold. This study is meant to remedy that.

In this dissertation, I hope to tell the story of farm tenancy by using firsthand accounts of tenants whenever possible. Unfortunately, the voice of the tenant comes

from its advocates as tenants rarely left a personal record for the historian. The occasional interview with a WPA employee, a letter of complaint to a prominent politician, or even a letter to a tenant friendly newspaper provide the only firsthand accounts from farm tenants. However, a richer story can be reconstructed from disparate sources. In some instances, I have drawn on secondary materials of topics already examined by historians, but for the most part, this study uses primary materials including agricultural newspapers, manuscript collections, census records, and government documents.

Farming in Oklahoma has typically relied on the procurement of two primary cash crops – wheat and cotton. Because these crops were widely grown throughout the state, tenants and owners alike relied on the crops for their economic success. Wheat is an important crop in western Oklahoma and has become increasingly important over the years, but in the first four decades of the 1900s it was a specialty crop of the northernmost counties. It is difficult to imagine a time when Oklahoma was one of the leading cotton producers in the United States. But, before 1940, cotton was the unchallenged leader. In 2007, however, Oklahoma ranked twelfth of seventeen cotton-producing states with just over \$68 million in cotton sales. Cotton was no longer king in Oklahoma. It was not even a pretender to the throne. By 2009, Oklahoma farmers planted more acres in wheat, hay, corn, sorghum, and soybeans than in cotton. In an agricultural coup, the fall of the old monarch was swift and complete as livestock and wheat now rule the state.¹ The decline of farm tenancy and the decline of cotton production were mutually reinforcing events. The decline of cotton production contributed to forcing tenants from farms because cotton depleted the soil. Farmers

historically planted as much cotton as possible because it offered them the best chance at prosperity. However, farm fertility declined rapidly which contributed to the decline of farm tenancy. When tenants left farms, owners mechanized to keep growing cotton. Ultimately, however, cotton became less profitable and Oklahomans have increasingly looked to other crops for their livelihoods.²

Before moving the narrative further, a few definitions are required. Census takers have struggled in trying to say exactly what constitutes a “farm.” In 1850, census directors stated that any agricultural pursuit producing over \$100 in goods was a farm. In 1860, the census set no size or money restrictions. In 1870 and 1880, census takers defined farms as “considerable nurseries, orchards, and market gardens. . . . which are cultivated for pecuniary profit” but excluded family gardens. The 1890 census redefined farms again as anything over three acres or producing a profit of \$250. A farmer, by comparison, had “no definite and fixed compensation” for his work, thereby excluding laborers from the roll. Ten years later, in 1900, the government returned to the 1850 farm definition but added more legalese and obtuse wording.³ And, by 1910, a farm became “any tract of 3 acres or more used for agricultural purposes no matter the value of the product” or a unit less than three acres that produces over \$250 in agricultural goods. In addition, a farmer was defined in the vaguest sense as someone who “directs the operation on a farm.” Basically, any person except a hired farm worker was a farmer.⁴

As for technicalities about farm tenants, a few important distinctions about terminology are useful. The census of 1950 provided the simplest definitions for each type of agrarian worker. Each census altered or expanded upon the definition of categories of tenants but the basic descriptions remained the same. However, the census

did make several important distinctions about agricultural labor. *Full owners* owned the entirety of the farm, including the house, and did not rent any acreage from neighbors or landlords. Over time, especially in western Oklahoma, farmers came to own much of their own land but first they gradually expanded by renting from neighbors. This did not make them tenants. Instead, they became part owners. *Part Owners* owned their home and an acreage and rented some land from someone else. This could be a nominal amount or the vast majority of the farm. One problem with the census was that if a person owned 160 acres and rented one acre, he was a part owner, and vice versa. Though ownership was historically preferred over tenancy, owners actually had much more to lose than renters. As time progressed, a higher percentage of farmers relied upon borrowed money to purchase farms, thus increasing the indebtedness of the American farmer. However, as many farmers learned, one bad crop left an owner unable to pay the mortgage and forced thousands of farms into foreclosure, with the owners losing all invested capital, equity, and often livestock and equipment that also had been used as collateral for seasonal loans.⁵ Small owners were in many ways similar to tenants. Bad economic conditions affected both parties, but the small owner was in some ways more vulnerable because he had more to lose. In addition, tenants became small land owners and small land owners often became tenants. Therefore, when politicians sought to help one group, they were often helping both.

Another important figure to the census was the farm manager. *Farm managers*, according to the census, were “farmers who are conducting farm operation for the owner for wages or a salary.” An important distinction between a laborer and a manager was that the manager made the daily decisions while a laborer took orders from the owner or

manager and lacked decision-making authority. Though there were farm managers who oversaw and acted as intermediaries between tenants and owners.⁶

The census also made numerous distinctions about types of renters. *Cash tenants* paid a fixed sum each year according to a contract. Cash tenants provided their own draft stock, equipment, and financing for seed, food, and other items and the owner provided only the land. Cash tenants also had less oversight from owners or managers and planted whatever they chose – feed, seed, foodstuffs, cash crops – as the owner made the same amount of money whether the tenant grew food or cash crops. *Sharecroppers*, or croppers, paid the annual rent in a share of the crop, usually 50 percent. Croppers often received more oversight and were limited as to the amount of feed and foodstuffs they could grow because the owner dictated the contractual terms. Sharecroppers provided only the labor while the owner provided the land, draft animals, seed, house and improvements, and often seasonal credit. A *share tenant* was the most common type of renter in Oklahoma and on the Great Plains, but a distinction must be made between a share tenant and a sharecropper. Just as with the sharecropper, a share tenant paid the rent at the end of the season with a portion of the crop. However, a share tenant provided his own draft animals, tools and equipment, seed, and labor while the sharecropper provided only labor. The share tenant had more personal property and received a better crop split than the cropper. Share tenants usually paid one-fourth of the cotton and one-third of feed crops and grains whereas the sharecropper paid 50 percent.⁷

Historically, the general trend in the agricultural socioeconomic ladder has been a process where young farmers tried to better themselves by climbing one rung at a time. Initially, a farmer started out as a farm laborer and saved enough money to rent a farm.

Then, in theory, the farmer signed a cash contract with an owner, often a speculator or absentee landlord, and rented a farm while continuing to save money to purchase a farm. After saving enough to purchase a farm without a mortgage, the farmer spent the remainder of his life improving the farm, purchasing more acres if possible, and becoming a more prosperous farmer.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Oklahoma sits at a geographic crossroads of the United States. It can be placed in the West, Great Plains, Midwest, and even the South. Further complicating the issue, the South and Great Plains are both somewhat amorphous in their definitions. In *The Great Plains*, Walter Prescott Webb gave the region an identity, or at least a description, by outlining the physical boundaries of the region.⁸ Webb's definition was the treeless, flat, and arid region from the ninety-eighth meridian to the Rocky Mountains. He excluded the prairie of Iowa and Illinois but acknowledged the "level surface of the Prairie Plain" as exhibiting a timber line that separates the two regions.⁹ Since Webb's study, scholars have debated the boundaries of the Great Plains and still no consensus exists. Webb included almost all of Oklahoma and the majority of Texas in his description.¹⁰

Adding to the confusion was the emergence of another vaguely described region, the Midwest. Exactly what constitutes the Midwest and the Great Plains is also a matter of contention among scholars.¹¹ The term Midwest appears to be even more inclusive than the Great Plains. According to Allen Noble and Hubert Wilhelm, the consensus definition of the Midwest includes the Great Plains states, the Prairie states of Iowa and Illinois, as well as Indiana, Ohio, and southern Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.

They also conclude that only a small corner of the Texas panhandle and a fraction of eastern Colorado are part of the Midwest.¹² For this study, the Midwest includes Noble and Wilhelm's definition, plus the wheat growing areas of western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. More specifically, when referencing the Midwest, I will am referring to the Great Plains states of South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Prairie states of Iowa and Illinois.

Like the regional definition debate, scholars have struggled to find a consensus about farm tenancy in the Midwest. For the most part, farm tenancy rates rose steadily in the Midwest from 1900 to 1940. According to the Census, share tenancy made up a bulk of the leases in the Midwestern states. In 1910, share leases accounted for nearly two-thirds of the recorded contracts and by 1930 nearly 80 percent of tenants paid in kind. Some localized Great Plains states had an even higher proportion of share leases. North Dakota had the highest percentage with nearly 92 percent of the contracts reported as share leases.¹³ Historian Donald Winters questions these numbers, claiming that his own work found entirely different conclusions. In studying registered lease contracts, Winters found that cash leases constituted 80 percent of the rental contracts in some counties of Iowa.¹⁴ Winters believed that both figures could be skewed and the actual number probably lay somewhere in between. Census enumerators likely recorded any contract as a share contract if the tenant paid even a small portion of the rent with crops. Also, Winters noted that landlords likely only recorded cash contracts because they were more difficult to collect.¹⁵

According to Allan Bogue, an esteemed scholar of grassland studies, tenancy on the Plains occurred for several reasons. Some tenants moved to frontier areas and

purchased equipment and stock and, therefore, could not afford land. So the only choice was to rent from speculators until saving enough for a down payment. Non-speculating landlords also owned farms. Retired farmers and politicians who moved to the county seat provide two examples of landlordism on the Great Plains. According to Bogue, most owners were small holders of a few farms of less than a thousand acres.¹⁶ Paul W. Gates provided the most comprehensive study of renters on the frontier. He claimed that tenancy began on the frontier long before the Civil War as speculators secured land by purchasing failed homesteads, rented in the short term, and then sold a few years later causing a “malfunctioning of the land system.” According to Gates, the government failed in transferring land into individual hands by allowing speculators such a prominent role. Though, Gates offers no alternative government action, he blamed Congress for failing to write laws that carefully protected hopeful homesteaders and implicated court systems for allowing exploitation of loopholes and ignoring Congressional intent.¹⁷

SHARECROPPING

The efficiency of sharecropping is also a matter of debate. Initially, famed economist Alfred Marshall posited that sharecropping was a highly inefficient tenure system because the renter had no reason to maximize production when he only received half of the profits. Furthermore, lack of incentives associated with sharecropping slowed the growth of mechanization and held back technological progress.¹⁸ Since the 1970s, most economists have abandoned the idea that sharecropping was grossly inefficient. Steven N. S. Cheung stressed that competition between landlords helped tenants secure the best possible contracts. Furthermore, Cheung believed that owners and tenants worked together to make the best choices for the farm.¹⁹ Other scholars have used

empirical evidence to show that sharecropping was at least as productive as owned farms because of the monitoring and expertise of the owner.²⁰ I believe that rented farms were nearly as efficient as owned farms. Both parties were interested in profit so they usually worked together to maximize production to increase income. I also believe that farm tenancy was not preferable to ownership in most cases. Renting does not build long-term wealth. Because of inflation, owners increase net worth over time while renters do not. Instead, renters increase the net worth of the owner. Furthermore, tenants typically had a lower standard of living, operated smaller farms, and had less annual income than farm owners.

Land tenure in the Southern states developed much differently. The Civil War disrupted nearly every aspect of southern life. The war destroyed the southern economy and its ability to produce cotton because plantation owners lost the ability to compel the labor force to work in the fields. Despite the upheaval, there was no widespread alteration of ownership status. White planters owned the plantations before the war and they retained control after the war; there was no reorganization, no land for the freedmen, no “forty acres and a mule.” Instead, after Reconstruction, the Republican leadership of the North traded sectional peace, stability, and protection of the freedmen for the presidency.²¹ Sharecropping emerged in the southern United States as a solution to a problem. The freedmen had no money to rent the land, but they demanded more freedom than gang labor. Sharecropping allowed the renter to pay the rent at the end of the season with a portion of the crop. Though sharecropping was not invented in the South, it rapidly became the dominant form of renting in cotton-producing areas with rental percentages reaching 80 percent and in some locales even higher.²²

Sharecropping became inextricably linked to cotton and cash-crop agriculture in the postbellum South. Owners wanted croppers to plant as much cash crop as possible because cotton generated revenue. This allowed for only minimal acreage devoted to animal feed and gardens. Cotton remained profitable and sharecroppers had experience with cotton so there was no reason to diversify. Therefore, in the South, sharecropping emerged because of a labor realignment and the two became linked which made the replication of the plantation arrangement feasible and likely in the newer cotton-producing regions of West Texas and Oklahoma, especially when emigrant owners and tenants came from southern states.²³

In regards to farm tenancy in the United States, the most heated debate arises over the origin of sharecropping in the South. One group of historians believes that sharecropping emerged as a simple and agreeable solution to a labor shortage. Other scholars believe that sharecropping maintained social control, both racially and economically, to re-enslave the freedmen. The primary debate among these historians centers on the origins of sharecropping after the Civil War and its role in keeping the South rural and poor. The first comprehensive study of the rural southern poor was C. Vann Woodward's groundbreaking survey of economic influences in *Origins of the New South*. Woodward's classic interpretation describes a rigid race-based system that forced freedmen into a situation that resembled the slave plantation. Woodward explained that conservative industrial southerners allied with northern financiers to control the southern poor.²⁴ In the 1970s, scholars employed class conflict models to explain the southern agrarian labor situation after the Civil War. Economists Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch challenged Woodward's theory arguing that the labor situation was more of a

compromise than a battle. It was actually the merchant class using high interest rates on seasonal loans which forced tenants into poverty. Thus, the local merchant was as much the villain as the planter.²⁵ Numerous other scholars flocked to the class conflict interpretation throughout the 1970s to explain both the origin of sharecropping and the destitution that followed.²⁶

Challengers to the Marxist interpretation arose in the 1980s as historians used case-studies to show that generalizations about sharecropping were inaccurate. Price V. Fishback used census data to show that indebtedness actually declined in Georgia in the 1870s.²⁷ Ralph Schlomowitz concluded that agricultural workers in Louisiana actually benefited because the free labor market drove workers' wages higher when landlords competed.²⁸ Gilbert Fite, whose scholarship often addressed agricultural issues in the trans-Mississippi West, offers a variation on this explanation. He claims that southern tenant farmers remained poor because their farms were too small to provide a decent standard of living and that the credit system further enslaved tenants because there was no other source of credit available.²⁹

No comprehensive study of farm tenancy in Oklahoma yet exists. Though several studies assign tenants a very prominent role within the narrative, none focus on tenants as central characters. Tom Moore examined farm tenancy in Oklahoma and provided a good general account from 1925 to 1935. Moore believed that tenancy soared because of rising land and farm prices, but he failed to account for tenancy that existed earlier. Furthermore, he attributed the rise in landlordism to the dying of first generation pioneers whose descendants moved to the cities yet retained ownership of their farms.³⁰ Kenneth Lewis Hobson compared leasing patterns and economic conditions between farmers in

eastern and western Oklahoma, but he offered no observations about the lives of tenants.³¹

Other works on Oklahoma tenants focus on the lives of renters after they joined the ranks of the migratory “Okies,” thus making them no longer tenants but drifters looking for work in California and Arizona during the Great Depression. In *American Exodus*, James Gregory followed Oklahoma migrants westward where they transplanted “Okie” culture to many of the towns of the San Joaquin Valley in California.³² Walter Stein’s *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* examined conditions surrounding the social upheaval brought by the Okies seeking refuge in California.³³ And finally, many historians have studied the Dust Bowl phenomenon erroneously engraved into the historical memory by John Steinbeck as the force that pushed tenants westward.³⁴ The truth, however, is that the Dust Bowl actually displaced relatively few farm tenants as it only affected the Oklahoma panhandle and the extreme northwest counties.³⁵ Environmental and social historians have overlapped to learn much about the ecological disaster and the migrants it created.

Additionally, scholars have debated whether Oklahoma should be classified as a southern or a western state. The United States Census Bureau has historically classified Oklahoma as a southern state and grouped it with Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas in the West South Central sub-region. Oklahoma probably has as much in common with Arkansas and Texas as with other neighboring states so the classification is certainly justified. Cotton production and high tenancy rates made it easy for the Census Bureau to consider Oklahoma in this region. Yet, historians are a mixed lot when it comes to classifying Oklahoma with the South or the West. More often than not, both southern

historians, especially twentieth-century scholars, and western historians include Oklahoma when discussing their chosen region of study.

Following the lead of the census, many southern historians explicitly include Oklahoma in generalizations about the South. In *Dixie's Forgotten People*, J. Wayne Flynt has stated that the ante-bellum South contained the slave states, but that any discussion of poor whites in the twentieth-century South must include Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Kentucky as well. In his study of the economy and culture of poor whites, Flynt rarely mentioned Oklahoma specifically but included the state in his general comments.³⁶ Prominent southern historian C. Vann Woodward also included Oklahoma in his discussion of the twentieth-century South in the classic *Origins of the New South*. Woodward wrote, "by the South I mean the eleven Confederate States plus Kentucky, and, after it became a state, Oklahoma."³⁷ Because the constitution and legislators protected conservative and agricultural interests, Woodward believed that Oklahoma fell within the southern states. Oklahomans fought social evils like alcohol consumption and shared southern skepticism over Northeastern political bosses, machines, and railroads, so Woodward believed that "without any doubt, the Southern reformers could count Oklahoma in their column."³⁸ Other scholars included Oklahoma in the South but did not give it more than a cursory overview in associating the state with the region. Arthur Raper and Ira Reid, scholars and activists from the 1940s, mentioned Oklahoma in terms of cotton production, but gave the state little attention.³⁹ David Conrad also mentioned that the cropping system in Oklahoma was "peculiar," but Oklahoma does not figure prominently in his generalizations.⁴⁰

Remarkably, Gavin Wright failed to mention Oklahoma in his economic treatment of the southern economy in the seminal work *New South, Old South*. Wright discussed the independence of the southern labor market in the former Confederate States. He believed that the southerners developed a patriotic consciousness, but that they nevertheless participated little in the national economy. Wright did not really discuss his criteria for inclusion or exclusion, so it must be assumed that he focused on the former Confederate States. He could perhaps be correct in not including Oklahoma if regionalism of the local labor market is the sole criteria. Oklahomans sought out northern railroads and encouraged the expansion of spur lines into the most rural parts of the state. Oklahomans sought northern money to finance many business ventures and land dealings with Native Americans in the 1890s and 1900s. From Wright's viewpoint, it is difficult to determine if Oklahoma was in fact a southern state. Oklahoma certainly was part of the Confederate heritage as explained by Woodward, but Oklahomans actively sought out private investment and cooperated with northern business.⁴¹

Contributing to the confusion are western and Great Plains historians. Both groups have little trouble including Oklahoma in their respective region of study. The two most prominent general histories of the American West, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* and *The Oxford History of the American West*, prominently feature Oklahoma on many relevant western issues.⁴² In *American Agriculture: A Brief History*, R. Douglas Hurt included Oklahoma with the Great Plains largely because of the era in which it was settled. Oklahomans also exhibited many key features of western agrarians. They took homesteads, planted hard red winter wheat, and settled in ethnic communities

within the state.⁴³ Thus, general discussions of the West and Great Plains had no difficulty about including the state in related areas.

Great Plains specialists unequivocally pull Oklahoma into larger studies of the region by including western Oklahoma and excluding the eastern half of the state. Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* noted that western Oklahoma exhibited the three main characteristics of the Great Plains: it was relatively flat, there were with few trees, and low rainfall limited crop production.⁴⁴ Geoff Cunfer also included western Oklahoma in a study of the Great Plains environment and felt no need in justifying Oklahoma as part of the West.⁴⁵

Gilbert Fite proved to be the most enigmatic historian on the inclusion of Oklahoma into a geographic region. Fite discussed Oklahoma prominently in a number of books and articles. In his book *Agricultural Trap in the South*, Fite discussed southern agriculture including farm size and cotton production but never mentions Oklahoma while including Texas and Arkansas. Fite did include Oklahoma in his book *Farmers' Frontier*, which analyzed the growth of agriculture in the West. Fite devoted an entire chapter to Oklahoma signaling its inclusion as a western state rather than a southern one.⁴⁶

When discussing politics, the common perception is that Oklahoma has typically voted in agreement with other southern states in presidential elections but this phenomenon is much more recent than many realize. Historically, in terms of presidential elections, Oklahoma is a western state. From 1908 to 1980, Oklahoma voted with the South in three contested elections.⁴⁷ Only in the elections of 1924, 1940, and

1944 did Oklahoma vote in accordance with the South in a contested election where the South and West voted for different candidates. In the election of 1924, Oklahoma and the South voted for John Davis and Charles Bryan (probably because of the popularity of William Jennings Bryan in Oklahoma), and in 1940 and 1944 northern Great Plains states voted for opponents of Franklin Delano Roosevelt while Oklahoma and the South supported FDR. In the elections of 1920, 1928, 1948, 1952, 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, and 1976, Oklahoma voted with the West while southern voters cast their votes for other candidates. Only after 1980 and the rise of Reagan Republicanism did Oklahomans align with other southern states in presidential elections.⁴⁸

This dissertation has two primary goals. First, I examine the rise and decline of farm tenancy in Oklahoma from 1890 to 1950. In 1890, Oklahoma entered into the territorial phase and white settlement ensued at a rapid pace. Farm tenancy, like sharecropping in the South, was created from a unique historical circumstance. However, rather than stemming from solving a labor shortage, tenancy in Oklahoma was born of the allotment of Indian lands at the beginning of the territorial phase in 1890. The end date, 1950, also provides a convenient closing point. By the end of the 1940s, Oklahoma agriculture had undergone tremendous change. Farm tenancy basically ended due to numerous factors discussed in later chapters. Second, I argue that Oklahoma is both a southern state and a Plains State as a combination of two tenure systems. Tenancy in Oklahoma has characteristics found in each region by blending the production of cotton with share rental agreements from the Great Plains. Tenants throughout Oklahoma grew cotton in varying amounts just as southern sharecroppers; but Oklahoma's renters executed share-tenancy contracts which made the rental payment more similar to tenants

on the Great Plains and Midwest. Because of this elevated status and the propensity for Oklahoma tenants to own personal property, Oklahoma's tenant class, including those who grew cotton, executed more favorable rental agreements than southern sharecroppers. Furthermore, Oklahoma tenants had political rights and used their influence through militant organizations to enact protective measures for the renting class in Oklahoma. Tenants in Oklahoma had more clout than cotton farmers in the South because the agrarian rental class was strong enough that the legislature afforded Oklahoma more legal protection than tenants in the South received from state governments.

Furthermore, landlords made tenancy different. In the early years, the planter aristocracy and investment groups that owned or rented Indian land in Oklahoma constituted a migrant group (just like renters) with no familial superiority and no sense of social and even racial hierarchy comparable to that in the South. Since, landlords, like tenants, came to Oklahoma after 1890 and established holdings, there was no traditional landed class; it was created by newcomers. By the 1920s, the landowner class was also changing as insurance companies, children of homesteaders, widows, and other investors emerged as owners. For landlords in Oklahoma, landlordism was merely an occupation and an investment or a family inheritance. There was a less ingrained structure of social and economic superiority than in the South.

Because longstanding landlords had no social or cultural superiority, the wealthy did not resist poor farmers on ideological grounds in Oklahoma when they agitated for rights. Instead, the best way for wealthy Oklahomans to preserve the system was to placate poor farmers by dangling the tantalizing but rarely attainable promise of farm

ownership. To earn votes of farm renters, state politicians passed numerous laws from 1910 to 1940 protecting against such practices as high ginning fees and landlord evictions; they even offered state-backed farm loans. During the Progressive Era, Oklahoma politicians were fairly unprogressive in regards to the rural poor but became more progressive in the 1910s and 1920s as a reaction to the growing popularity of the Socialist movement. A coalition of tenants and laborers actually gained control of the Democratic Party in 1922, but, the short-lived movement evaporated thanks to poor leadership and the alliance of the two main political parties against the radicals. By the 1930s, Oklahoma's progressive nature became notably absent once again as "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, the one-time champion of the tenant under the old Indian Farmers' Union, became more interested in resisting New Deal influence than in helping Oklahomans.

The cause, however, was not entirely lost in the 1930s. As tenant migration increased due to a decline in the agricultural economy and miscalculations by New Dealers, the federal government investigated tenant problems and made sincere efforts to alleviate tenancy while Oklahoma politicians at least appeared as if they might offer some assistance. In reality, neither the federal government nor the state government helped tenants significantly. Instead, a series of events in a changing world brought about the rapid decline of farm tenancy in Oklahoma and the United States. Like generations of Americans before them, Okie tenant migrants loaded their belongings and sought refuge in the West. Unfortunately, just as previous pioneers hoped to find prosperity, Okie migrants found hardship until the widespread prosperity of the 1940s finally transformed many of the rural poor into urban workers. Tenancy was born from

Indian allotment, became prominent during the years affected by World War I, and ultimately succumbed to an increasingly entrepreneurial world by the 1940s. Business finally killed the tenant farmer with the lure of decent wages in the factories of California.

INTRODUCTION
ENDNOTES

¹ United States Department of Agriculture, *Census of Agriculture of 2007: United States Summary and State Data* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2009).

² Merle C. Prunty and Charles S. Aiken, "The Demise of the Piedmont Cotton Region," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62 (June 1972): 283-306; John Fraser Hart, "The Demise of King Cotton," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67 (September 1977): 307-322; and Gilbert Fite, "The Agricultural Trap in the South." *Agricultural History* 60 (Winter 1986): 38-50.

³ United States Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1910: Agriculture.*, Vol. 6. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office), xiv. The United States Census Bureau returned to the 1850 definition of a farm but the actual definition was much more detailed. The Census of 1900 stated: "A farm, for census purposes, includes all land under one management, used for raising crops and pasturing livestock, with the wood lots, swamps, meadows, etc., connected therewith, whether consisting of one tract or of several separate tracts. It also includes the house in which the farmer resides and all other buildings used by him in connection with his farming operations, together upon the land in which they are located. If the individual conducting the farm lives in a house located upon the land used by him, for farm purposes, and his chief occupation is farming, the house and lot on which it is located are a part of the farm. If, however, he devotes the greater portion of his time to some other occupation, the house in which he resides is not a part of the farm. If the land owned by an individual, firm, or corporation is operated in part by the owner and in part by one or more tenants or managers, or if the land is wholly operated by tenants or managers, the portion of the land occupied by each is a farm, and must be reported in the name of the individual or individuals operating it. No land cultivated under the direction of others is to be included in the report of the land operated by the owner. For census purposes, market, truck, and fruit gardens, orchards, nurseries, cranberry marshes, greenhouses, and city dairies are 'farms:' *Provided*, the entire time of at least one individual is devoted to their care. This statement, however, does not refer to gardens in cities or towns which are maintained by persons for the use or enjoyment of their families and not for gain. Public institutions, as almshouses, insane asylums, etc., cultivating large vegetable gardens, or carrying on other agricultural work, are to be considered farms."

⁴ Census Bureau, *Census of 1910: Agriculture*, Vol. 5: 22-24.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company), 1931.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid. See maps in preface to see the boundaries. Webb actually includes a vast percentage of the West as having a “Great Plains Environment.”

¹¹ Allen G. Noble and Hubert G. H. Wilhelm, *Barns of the Midwest* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 1. Noble and Wilhelm have an excellent discussion of the geographic boundaries of the Midwest.

¹² Ibid., 7-8. For alternative definitions of the Midwest, see Stephen Birdsall and John Florin, *Regional Landscapes of the United States and Canada* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1992); Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992).

¹³ University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, *United States Historical Census Browser*, ONLINE, 1998, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>. Accessed April-August, 2009.

¹⁴ Donald Winters, “Tenant Farming in Iowa, 1860-1900: A Study of the Terms of Rental Leases,” in James Whittaker, ed., *Farming in the Midwest: A Symposium on Midwest Agriculture, 1840-1900* (Washington, DC: Agricultural History Society, 1973), 136.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Allan Bogue, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 56-60.

¹⁷ Paul W. Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier: Studies in American Land Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 12.

¹⁸ Alfred Marshall, *The Principles of Economics, Book Four: The Agents of Production: Land, Labour, and Capital and Organization* (New York: MacMillan, 1890), Chapter 3.

¹⁹ Steven N. S. Cheung, “Private Property Rights and Sharecropping,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 76 (November-December, 1968): 1107.

²⁰ Martin A. Garrett and Zhenjui Xu, “The Efficiency of Sharecropping: Evidence from the Postbellum South,” *Southern Economic Journal* 69 (January 2003): 578.

²¹ For more on the end of Reconstruction, see C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²² For more on the development of sharecropping, see Jay Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978); Jonathon M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Dwight B. Billings, *Planters and the Making of the “New South:” Class, Politics, and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Ronald L. F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1865-1890* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992); Charles Flynn, *White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth Century Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Joseph Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993).

²³ Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*.

²⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951).

²⁵ Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 126-148. In Chapter 7, “The Merchant’s Monopoly,” Ransom and Sutch provide evidence that merchants worked with plantation owners, and to some extent each other, to create local credit monopolies throughout the South.

²⁶ Other examples of various class conflict arguments include: Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty*; Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South*; Billings, *Planters and the Making of the “New South;”* Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor*; Flynn, *White Land, Black Labor*; Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South*; Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*.

²⁷ Price V. Fishback, “Debt Peonage in Postbellum Georgia,” *Explorations in Economic History* 2 (April 1989): 219-236.

²⁸ Ralph Shlomowitz, “‘Bound’ or ‘Free’? Black Labor in Cotton and Sugarcane Farming, 1865-1880,” *Journal of Southern History* 50 (November 1984): 569-596.

²⁹ Fite, “The Agricultural Trap in the South,” 38-50.

³⁰ Tom Moore, "Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma, 1925-1935," MA Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1938.

³¹ Kenneth Lewis Hobson, "Leasing Patterns and Landlord-Tenant Relationships by Selected Tenure Groups in Southwestern Oklahoma," MA Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1951.

³² James Greogry, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³³ Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1973).

³⁴ John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1939).

³⁵ In this work, I do not discuss the Dust Bowl. Few tenant farmers were actually displaced because of the Dust Bowl. While some farmers evacuated from the panhandle counties, the dust storms actually evicted few tenants from eastern Oklahoma. For more on the Dust Bowl, see Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, (New York: Oxford University, 1979); R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl : An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981).

³⁶ J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 4.

³⁷ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, x.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 391.

³⁹ Arthur D. Raper and Ira De A. Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 20, 29, 31, 212. Raper and Reid mention Oklahoma sporadically throughout the book but seem to attach it to Texas as an afterthought.

⁴⁰ David Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers, The Story of the Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 6.

⁴¹ Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 1-36. Wright provides his criteria for determining the South in his introduction. There is never any mention of specific states or geographic parameters in his work. For more on railroads in Oklahoma, see Donovan Hofsommer, ed., *Railroads in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1977). Numerous articles in this book deal with railroads in the state; companies from outside Oklahoma built the major rail lines into Oklahoma.

⁴² Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Clyde Milner, et. al., *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴³ R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 179-183.

⁴⁴ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 3-9.

⁴⁵ Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ Fite, "Agricultural Trap in the South," 38-50; Gilbert Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 193-214.

⁴⁷ The elections of 1912, 1916, 1932, and 1936 were landslide victories for a single candidate so they do not factor into a discussion of regionalism in politics.

⁴⁸ Steven Jones, *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation*, (Enid, OK: Haymaker Press, 1974), 12-21. Jones describes Oklahoma as both a one-party system and a modified two-party system because the Republicans rarely took advantage of the national strength before the 1960s. Western Oklahoma voted Republican because of the presence of Republican governors before statehood because settlers from Kansas dominated the early settlement of this part of the state. Jones based much of his information on state politics, in which the Democratic Party dominated, but did not analyze presidential elections. For an overview of Oklahoma politics, see James Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); David Joyce, *An Oklahoma I had Never Seen Before* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

CHAPTER II

FARM TENANCY IN OKLAHOMA: AN OVERVIEW

Despite the scholarly debate over Oklahoma's geographic positioning, the federal government has no problem categorizing the state. The Census Bureau places Oklahoma within the South and more specifically the "West South Central" sub-region that includes Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana.¹ Historically, Oklahoma belongs within this category for several reasons. Many of the people who settled Oklahoma were southerners, including the Native Americans removed from the South. With these emigrants came Oklahoma's chief crop, cotton. Before 1940, the state's agricultural economy relied on the southern cash crop. At some point, farmers in nearly every county in Oklahoma experimented with cotton production, though wheat and livestock were much more important in the northern counties making this region more like the Great Plains. Western Oklahoma is also more homogenous as relatively few African Americans live there. Eastern Oklahoma, however, had a much more diverse mixture of Native Americans, African Americans, and whites.

To understand the history of farm tenancy in Oklahoma, a brief description of the distribution and concentration of tenants within the state is necessary. This chapter analyzes the trends in Oklahoma and compares those to the trends of tenancy within the United States. Western Oklahoma followed the general tendencies of the Great Plains and Midwest whereas eastern Oklahoma had tenancy patterns similar to the South. Therefore, this chapter argues that Oklahoma has tenancy distribution characteristics of both regions based on the historical and geographic similarities of the larger regions.

Statistics compiled by the Bureau of the Census illuminate some trends about farm tenancy. The Census provides the best statistical resource for many issues, especially before the increase in government studies of the 1930s. There is, however, some degree of fallibility in the system because of the potential for human error and miscommunication. The Census relied directly on the truthfulness of both the person filling out the questionnaire and the person offering answers. If a farmer was dishonest, or more likely confused, about tenure status, the numbers might be skewed slightly. Over time, questionnaires became more complicated, with an increasing number of tenant categories. Initially, the renter was either an owner, a partial owner, or a tenant but over time the categorization became more complex. By 1930, enumerators registered tenants as an owner, part-owner, cash tenant, sharecropper, share tenant, or share-cash tenant. The percentage of owners and tenants should be fairly accurate but the exact distribution of renter types is somewhat suspect. The Census was accurate enough that scholars have a reasonable estimate of static rental categorization with a high degree of certainty that the statistics represent the actual number and distribution of tenants and owners. In 1910, the Bureau of the Census acknowledged some of its shortcomings.

It is believed that most of the agricultural statistics secured by the method described are accurate enough for all general purposes. On the other hand, it can not be said that they are absolutely accurate. . . . Altogether [it] may be said to be as nearly accurate as can be expected under the present system of using large complicated schedules and employing temporary enumerators.²

Also, according to the Census of 1910, about 8 to 10 percent of the renters did not identify their tenure type. These incomplete returns were simply grouped as “unknown.”³

The Census divided tenancy into two major groups – cash and share. Cash tenancy, where the renter pays the lease with cash at the beginning of the contract, was the most common form of renting throughout much of the United States. Cash tenancy existed in the United States from the earliest expansion into western lands. In the early 1800s, speculators purchased western lands in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee soon after trailblazing explorers ventured into the area. Since the opening of Trans-Appalachia, farmers have complained about speculators driving up land prices and forcing tenancy on would-be homesteaders. Share tenancy, the payment of rent in kind, was the most common form of rental payment in the agricultural areas of the United States by the twentieth century. The South, Great Plains, and Oklahoma all had more share tenants than any other form.⁴

The Census of 1910 (the first to include Oklahoma) showed an obvious trend in the United States - tenancy rates had risen throughout the United States since the Civil War. According to the Census Bureau, tenancy increased in the five most important agricultural areas including the South and Great Plains. The only decreases occurred in New England, the Middle Atlantic States, the Mountain states, and the Pacific region where agriculture had become a secondary economy. Tenancy was highest in the South,

with South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, and Oklahoma all over 50 percent. Only Illinois had rates over 40 percent in the Midwest joining Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina from the Border States. Across the Midwest, tenancy rates remained in the 30 percent range.⁵

Table 2.1

Number, Percentage, and Rank of Farm Tenants by State, 1910

State	Number	Percent of Tenant Operated Farms	Rank of Tenant Percentage
Oklahoma	104,000	55	6
South			
Mississippi	181,000	66	1
Georgia	191,000	65	2
South Carolina	111,000	63	3
Alabama	158,000	60	4
Louisiana	66,000	55	5
Texas	220,000	53	7
Arkansas	107,000	50	8
North Carolina	107,000	42	9
Tennessee	101,000	41	12
Great Plains			
Nebraska	49,000	38	13
Kansas	65,000	37	15
South Dakota	19,000	25	23
North Dakota	10,000	14	34
Midwest			
Illinois	104,000	41	11
Iowa	82,000	38	14
Missouri	83,000	30	18

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

From 1910 to 1920, tenancy remained highest in southern states. Though tenancy rates and the total number of tenants declined in Mississippi and Alabama, the rates in most southern states remained fairly constant or rose slightly during the decade that included the prosperity of World War I. Many southern farmers lived on farms that were too small, often twenty to fifty acres, and prosperity was impossible. During World War I, cotton prices rose to nearly \$0.40 per pound according to the Bureau of Economic Research, but increased acreage and global production soon drove prices down. Still, in the late 1910s, American farmers in general prospered.⁶ The Census Bureau generalized about farm tenancy in the United States and recognized that farm tenancy had taken on a new image. For the first time, the United States acknowledged that tenancy in the South differed from tenancy in other places.

In the North and West the tenant farmer is normally working toward buying a farm and his tenancy thus represents merely a state on the way to ownership. In the South on the other hand, there are large numbers of tenants who do not look forward to ownership and for whom tenancy is the normal economic situation.⁷

The significant change in the United States regarding tenancy rates in the 1910s occurred in Midwestern States such as Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa as tenancy rates rose above 40 percent by 1920. The phenomenon known as “The Great Plow Up” was the primary impetus for the increase. Between 1909 and 1929, Great Plains wheat farmers plowed thirty-two million acres of previously unbroken land. During this era, “suitcase farming,” the ownership of a farm by a resident of another county or state, emerged as an important agricultural phenomenon on the plains.⁸ Regarding this pattern, the Census Bureau observed: “It is apparent, in general, that most of the increase between 1910 and 1920, both in the number of farms and the farm acreage, took place in those sections of the

country where there were still considerable areas of new land to be taken up and made into farms.”⁹

Table 2.2

Number, Percentage, and Rank of Farm Tenants by State, 1920

State	Number	Percent of Tenant Operated Farms	Rank of Tenant Percentage
Oklahoma	98,000	51	8
South			
Georgia	207,000	67	1
Mississippi	179,000	66	2
South Carolina	124,000	65	3
Alabama	148,000	58	4
Louisiana	77,000	57	5
Texas	232,000	53	6
Arkansas	119,000	51	7
North Carolina	117,000	44	9
Tennessee	104,000	41	13
Great Plains			
Nebraska	53,000	43	10
Kansas	67,000	40	14
South Dakota	26,000	40	16
North Dakota	20,000	26	22
Midwest			
Illinois	102,000	43	11
Iowa	89,000	42	12
Missouri	75,000	26	21

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

During the 1920s, farm tenancy rose throughout the United States. Sharecropping became more prevalent in the South and renting grew steadily in the Midwest. This can be attributed to several factors. Because of the general prosperity brought about by

World War I, renters across the United States expanded production and acquired debt through expansion loans and mortgages. Commodity prices declined in the 1920s as Europe began to produce foodstuffs in recovering from World War I. The demand that had made American farmers prosperous during the 1910s was, in the 1920s, a fading memory. The Depression hit the agricultural economy long before the stock market crash of 1929 signaled the widespread financial panic in the United States. Tenancy rates reflected the economic malaise as small farmers often could not pay their mortgages and lost their farms to foreclosure even before the Great Depression. “Suitcase farming” also continued in many Plains States as eastern capital expanded and local farmers contracted their acreage under production.¹⁰

Nearly every state saw a rise in farm tenancy in the 1920s. The rise was modest in the South, 2 to 7 percent, but sharecroppers made up 60 to 70 percent of southern farmers by 1930. Northern Plains States, like North and South Dakota saw tenancy increase as much as 10 percent. Other Midwestern states rose two to four percent. A few mostly northeastern states like Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut saw negligible decreases in the 1920s, but the general trend across the two major agricultural areas of the United States, the Great Plains and the South, saw a rise in farm renters. Alabama’s rate increased from 58 percent to 65 percent and added over 18,000 tenants during the decade while the number of tenants in Mississippi jumped from 179,000 to over 250,000 (an increase of 6 percent). Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma also had proportional increases in farm tenancy.¹¹

Table 2.3

Number, Percentage, and Rank of Farm Tenants by State, 1930

State	Number	Percent of Tenant Operated Farms	Rank of Tenant Percentage
Oklahoma	125,000	62	7
South			
Mississippi	225,000	72	1
Georgia	174,000	68	2
Louisiana	107,000	67	3
South Carolina	102,000	65	4
Alabama	166,000	65	5
Arkansas	153,000	63	6
Texas	301,000	61	8
North Carolina	138,000	49	9
Tennessee	114,000	46	12
Great Plains			
Nebraska	61,000	47	11
South Dakota	37,000	45	13
Kansas	70,000	42	15
North Dakota	27,000	35	17
Midwest			
Iowa	102,000	47	10
Illinois	92,000	43	14
Missouri	89,000	35	18

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

During the 1930s, tenancy rates varied from region to region. In the South, percentages declined by 5 to 9 percent in each state. In contrast, tenancy rates rose on the Great Plains and in the Midwest as rental rates in Nebraska and South Dakota soared to 53 percent and Iowa, North Dakota, and Kansas were also over 45 percent. This rise is not overly surprising considering the Depression of the 1930s. Even though some New

Deal programs attempted to alleviate the high tenancy rates, the federal government simply did not expend enough money to help all deserving tenants purchase farms. In fact, many southern tenants left farms during the depression which led to the decline of tenancy in the South.¹²

Table 2.4

Number, Percentage, and Rank of Farm Tenants by State, 1940

<u>State</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of Tenant Operated Farms</u>	<u>Rank of Tenant Percentage</u>
Oklahoma	97,000	54	7
South			
Mississippi	193,000	66	1
Georgia	130,000	60	2
Louisiana	89,000	60	3
Alabama	136,000	59	4
South Carolina	77,000	56	5
Texas	204,000	56	6
Arkansas	115,000	53	9
North Carolina	123,000	45	15
Tennessee	99,000	40	17
Great Plains			
Nebraska	64,000	53	8
South Dakota	38,000	53	10
Kansas	70,000	45	15
North Dakota	33,000	45	12
Midwest			
Iowa	101,000	48	11
Illinois	92,000	43	16
Missouri	91,000	26	19

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

By 1950, the United States economy underwent tremendous change and the agricultural economy, including farm tenancy, changed as well. The New Deal began the unintentional relocation of tenants to cities. Some landowners recognized the need for fewer sharecroppers as land was taken out of production through subsidy programs. New Deal programs even helped a few tenant farmers purchase farms in the late 1930s and 1940s through government-sponsored loan programs. Most of all, the return to full-scale employment during World War II aided in relocating unemployed rural Americans to cities with wartime industries. Tenant farmers were especially mobile and packed their things and headed to California, Michigan, or other growing industrial states to work in wartime industries. Add to these ingredients the further mechanization of agriculture and tenancy rates plummeted. By 1950, only Mississippi had a tenancy rate over 50 percent and only South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama had tenancy rates over 40 percent.¹³

The 1940s saw the most drastic change in the farm labor situation since Reconstruction as farm tenancy dropped dramatically. Tenant farmers, excluding sharecroppers, fell by 39.7 percent during and after World War II while the number of sharecroppers declined by 35.7 percent in only ten years.¹⁴ Also, the Census Bureau reported on the decreasing number of African-American tenants when it stated:

The tenure position of nonwhite farmers as a group improved markedly, even more than that of white farmers as a group in the period 1945 to 1950 in the South. Nonwhite owners increased 2.2 percent, comparing favorably with the 2.0 percent increase for white owners during this period. The decrease in tenancy among nonwhite tenants was 23.0 percent compared with 21.7 percent for white tenants. The number of nonwhite croppers decreased 26.7 percent, while the number of white croppers declined by only 15.6 percent.¹⁵

Finally, for the first time since the Civil War with the exception of the brief boom period associated with World War I, the American agricultural economy improved and farm ownership became a reality for some rural farmers while others simply moved to the city never to return.

Table 2.5

Number, Percentage, and Rank of Farm Tenants by State, 1950

State	Number	Percent of Tenant Operated Farms	Rank of Tenant Percentage
Oklahoma	45,000	31	11
South			
Mississippi	130,000	52	1
South Carolina	63,000	45	2
Georgia	85,000	43	3
Alabama	88,000	41	4
Louisiana	49,000	40	5
North Carolina	110,000	38	7
Arkansas	68,000	38	9
Texas	101,000	30	12
Tennessee	68,000	29	15
Great Plains			
Nebraska	42,000	39	6
South Dakota	20,000	30	13
Kansas	39,000	30	14
North Dakota	14,000	22	18
Midwest			
Iowa	78,000	38	8
Illinois	67,000	35	10
Missouri	46,000	20	20

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

OKLAHOMA

In some ways, Oklahoma is a microcosm of tenancy trends in the United States but in other ways, tenancy trends in Oklahoma were unique. Oklahoma is an interesting case-study for farm tenancy because the two primary cash crops of the United States collide within the state. Northern and western Oklahoma had much in common with the Great Plains. Geographically, northern and western Oklahoma have high, rolling plains and the dominant agriculture commodities have historically been wheat and livestock, in particular cattle. In this region of Oklahoma, just as in the Great Plains, tenancy started out at a lower percentage with a higher proportion of farm owners. Gradually, over the course of the twentieth century, tenancy rates crept higher and cash rental and share tenancy became important tenure statuses. Southern Oklahoma favored the South in terms of geography, climate, culture, and crops. The former Indian Territory had a more diverse mixture of peoples - Native Americans, Southern white immigrants, and a higher percentage of African Americans - and a higher proportion of sharecropping but share-tenancy remained the predominant rental agreement. Just as in the South, southeast and eastern Oklahoma saw a vacillation in tenancy rates during the first half of the twentieth century while tenancy rates in the Plains counties rose slowly until the 1940s.¹⁶

By 1910, when the first regular census was taken in Oklahoma, farm tenancy emerged as the dominant tenure type throughout eastern Oklahoma. The Civil War and the advent of sharecropping explained the high tenancy rates of the South while Indian allotment, the forcing of Indians to accept individual homesteads, and land speculation provide the answer in eastern Oklahoma. In only two decades, tenancy rates rose from virtually zero to over 50 percent. Oklahoma, having been a state for only three years and

open for settlement for only twenty, entered the United States and immediately ranked as having the sixth highest tenancy rate (54.7 percent) and the ninth most tenants (104,137) in the United States. Oklahoma's high tenancy rate was a result of three factors – tenancy rates were historically high in newly-settled areas because of land speculation, much of the land in Oklahoma's allotted areas could not be sold so rental was the only option, and the harsh climate in Oklahoma was suitable for growing short-staple cotton. Tenancy was a natural fit.¹⁷

Compared to farm tenancy in general throughout the United States from 1910 to 1950, Oklahoma had tenancy rates that resembled rates in the South. In fact, Oklahoma mirrored its neighboring states of Texas and Arkansas. Though historical circumstances were very different for Oklahoma and its two cotton-growing neighbors, the tenancy statistics were fairly consistent throughout the period. The only states with consistently higher tenancy rates than Oklahoma were the traditional southern cotton-producing states – Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana. Mississippi had the highest tenancy rate from 1910 to 1950 (except in 1920 when Georgia ranked first). Georgia typically had the second highest tenancy rate with South Carolina, Louisiana, and Alabama making up the remainder of the top five. Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas fell between six and eight, just ahead of North Carolina until the 1940s. (see Table 2.6)

As discussed in Chapter Three, Oklahoma was unique in terms of settlement. Renting developed as a result of the allotment process of Native-American land, not because of a labor issue. Areas of eastern Oklahoma that had traditionally been the homes of the Five Tribes, especially the lands of the Creeks and Chickasaws, had much higher percentages of farm tenancy than the lands of western Oklahoma that were opened

through homesteading and land runs. When Indian tribes of western Oklahoma took allotments, land became available for white settlement and the transformation from communal Native American ownership to individual white and Indian ownership proceeded rapidly. Western Oklahoma was more sparsely populated, and thus tenancy rates did not climb as high as tenancy rates in Indian Territory.¹⁸ In Indian Territory, where land had been allotted to member of the Five Tribes, tenancy rates soared over sixty percent in most counties. The Plains Tribes in western Oklahoma also took allotments, but there were fewer Indians so the number of homesteaders in Oklahoma Territory was much higher than in Indian Territory.¹⁹

Eastern Oklahoma had several unique issues that accompanied allotment. Opportunity for land speculation through the sale and leasing of allotments brought real estate agents into the territory. In addition to real estate agents, hopeful farm owners migrated to the territory as well. As these groups arrived, they found barriers to land ownership. Court restrictions on Indian land sales slowed the purchase of eastern Oklahoma farms but they did not slow the influx of white farmers seeking homes. Real estate agents found legal ways to rent Indian allotments in eastern Oklahoma and sub-lease these properties to tenants who could not find farms to purchase.²⁰

As early as 1910, a basic tenancy pattern emerged – there were more tenants residing in former Indian Territory than in former Oklahoma Territory. In addition, the former Creek Nation, Seminole Nation, and Chickasaw Nation had a higher concentration of tenants than the Cherokee Nation and the Choctaw Nation. The Cherokee Nation had a larger enrollment and took up more land so there was less excess land for sale.²¹ Through the sale and rental of Indian land, much of the land held by the

Seminole, Chickasaw, and Creek Nations were divvied up and sold by businessmen and real estate speculators in search of turning a quick profit. In terms of sheer number and percentage, eastern Oklahoma had far more tenants than western Oklahoma. Even though the gap closed somewhat over the next thirty years, the same basic pattern remained – eastern Oklahomans had tenants in a higher proportion than counties in the west.²²

Table 2.6

Number and Percentage of Farm Tenants in Oklahoma Counties, 1910

County	Number of Tenants	Percent of farms with Tenants
Oklahoma Territory		
Osage	1734	89
Comanche	2904	56
Jackson	1473	53
Caddo	2614	53
Pottawatomie	2494	52
Lincoln	2642	52
Pawnee	1161	52
Kiowa	1802	50
Greer	1030	50
Payne	1600	50
Cleveland	1195	49
Oklahoma	1404	49
Tillman	1159	47
Noble	916	45
Logan	1422	44
Washita	1657	44
Canadian	1100	43
Kay	1297	43
Harmon	763	43
Blaine	965	40
Kingfisher	1078	38
Grant	1108	37
Custer	1015	35

(Table 2.6, cont.)

Garfield	1116	35
Beckham	878	35
Alfalfa	574	32
Major	716	30
Dewey	708	27
Woods	614	23
Woodward	632	23
Roger Mills	511	20
Ellis	475	17
Harper	250	13
Texas	233	8
Beaver	286	8
Cimarron	33	3
Cotton	NA	NA

Indian Territory

Murray	1007	83
Love	1159	82
Haskell	1955	81
Creek	1525	80
Wagoner	2116	80
Marshall	1214	80
Johnston	1638	80
Hughes	2422	80
Le Flore	2706	79
McClain	1488	79
Coal	922	79
Bryan	2614	78
Garvin	2581	78
McIntosh	1077	77
Carter	2003	75
Jefferson	1412	75
Latimer	586	75
Atoka	1254	74
Pittsburg	2005	74
Tulsa	1412	74
Seminole	2376	72
Sequoyah	2370	72
Stephens	2032	70
Pontotoc	2137	70
Pushmataha	630	69
Grady	2035	68
Washington	544	68
Choctaw	1354	66

(Table 2.6, cont.)

Muskogee	2119	66
McCurtain	1266	64
Ottawa	1067	64
Cherokee	1183	59
Rogers	1038	58
Craig	1201	57
Mayes	1020	56
Okfuskee	2071	56
Delaware	841	49
Okmulgee	1501	49
Adair	574	46
Nowata	732	45

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Census of Agriculture of 1910.

Strangely, the percentage of farm tenants and the number of farms operated by tenants do not necessarily correlate. In terms of number of tenant farms, three of the top four counties in 1910 were in former Oklahoma Territory but none of the three were in the top ten in terms of percentage of tenants. All three counties (Comanche, Lincoln, and Caddo) were major cotton-producing counties with large land areas. Western counties had more farms, thus both more tenants and more owners because the counties as a whole were bigger.

During the 1910s, Oklahoma actually lost tenants as the number declined from just over 104,000 in 1910 to 97,836 by 1920. The tenancy rate in Oklahoma fell from 54.7 to 51 percent because of the general prosperity associated with the decade. In fact, the number of farm owners in Oklahoma increased from 85,404 to 93,217.²³

In 1910, Comanche County had more tenants than any other county because it was one of the largest counties in the state. Comanche County, the overwhelming leader in total number of tenants, had a somewhat misleading history and the number of tenants dropped drastically after the Census of 1910. Before 1912, Comanche County also included current Cotton County which made it one of the largest counties in the state. In 1910, Comanche County reported 2,904 tenants. In 1920, Comanche County reported 1,288 tenants and Cotton County reported 880. The total tenancy numbers dropped dramatically because the county was divided and the overall population – including the number of tenants – was roughly halved. Nonetheless, it appears that counties in former Indian Territory had a propensity to have a higher percentage of tenants than farms in western Oklahoma, whereas larger counties in cotton-producing regions of the West had more farms and more tenants. (see Tables 2.7 and 2.8)

From the 1920s through the 1940s, Lincoln and Caddo from former Oklahoma Territory, both major cotton-producing counties had high number and high percentages of tenants. In fact, Caddo County had more tenants than any other county in 1930, 1940, and in 1950. The Wichita-Caddo Reservation was one of the last allotted reservations in the early 1900s. The disposal of Indian land and the ability to grow cotton in volume likely accounted for the large number of tenants in the county.²⁴

Table 2.7

Number and Percentage of Farm Tenants in Oklahoma Counties, 1920

County	Number of Tenants	Percent of Farms with Tenants
Oklahoma Territory		
Osage	650	72
Kiowa	1464	57
Cotton	880	57
Comanche	1288	56
Caddo	2275	54
Jackson	1326	54
Cleveland	1132	52
Payne	1273	52
Lincoln	2291	50
Pawnee	803	49
Tillman	1108	49
Pottawatomie	2139	47
Kay	1215	47
Greer	879	47
Oklahoma	1358	46
Logan	1220	45
Noble	765	43
Garfield	1321	43
Alfalfa	974	42
Grant	1162	42
Harmon	620	41
Beckham	1001	40
Blaine	786	40
Canadian	904	40
Kingfisher	949	38
Washita	1260	38
Custer	885	37
Dewey	760	37
Roger Mills	594	33
Woods	693	33
Major	662	32
Woodward	545	29
Texas	641	28
Ellis	510	27
Harper	370	26

(Table 2.7, cont.)

Beaver	578	23
Cimarron	109	14
Indian Territory		
Creek	2111	76
Okfuskee	2195	71
Okmulgee	1333	71
Marshall	1166	67
McIntosh	2323	67
Haskell	1677	66
Johnston	1547	65
Seminole	2262	64
Jefferson	1049	62
Carter	1481	61
Hughes	1954	61
Le Flore	3000	61
Love	1043	61
Stephens	1738	61
Muskogee	2105	60
Pontotoc	1834	60
Atoka	1764	60
Bryan	2661	59
Murray	695	58
Tulsa	940	58
Choctaw	2177	58
Garvin	2223	58
Coal	1090	57
Sequoyah	2032	57
McClain	1317	56
Pushmataha	1321	56
Grady	1886	54
McCurtain	2416	54
Pittsburg	2073	54
Latimer	676	51
Wagoner	1678	50
Washington	365	50
Cherokee	1275	46
Ottawa	650	43
Mayes	938	42
Rogers	708	40
Nowata	429	39
Adair	573	38

(Table 2.7, cont.)

Craig	734	35
Delaware	666	31

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Census of Agriculture of 1920.

During the 1920s, tenancy rose in both percentage and number in Oklahoma as the agricultural economy faltered across the United States. The tenancy rate in Oklahoma lunged ahead from 51 percent in 1920 to 61.4 percent by 1930. The total number of tenants swelled to an all-time high in Oklahoma at 125,329 as Oklahoma ranked seventh in terms of total numbers of tenants and percentage according to the census of 1930.²⁵

By 1930, the trends in the state became even more apparent. The trend of higher tenancy distribution in the Creek Nation and along the Red River intensified, but the cotton-producing regions of western Oklahoma saw an increase in tenants as well. During the 1920s, the total number of tenants rose in sixty-eight of the seventy-seven counties in Oklahoma, but the most dramatic change was in the cotton-growing counties of Caddo, Grady, and McClain in southwestern Oklahoma. Caddo increased from 2,275 tenants to 3,914, Grady from 1,886 to 3,204, and McClain from 1,317 to 2,117 in ten years. Each of the three counties increased 12 to 14 percentage points and all were above 60 percent of all farms operated by tenants in 1930. Other southern counties increased from as much as 75 percent. The total number of tenants in the northwestern and northern counties increased moderately, sometimes as much as 10 percent, but total

numbers and percentages remained much lower than the cotton-growing regions of the state.

Table 2.8

Number and Percentage of Farm Tenants in Oklahoma Counties, 1930

County	Number of Tenants	Percent of farms with Tenants
Oklahoma Territory		
Osage	1660	75
Cotton	1394	74
Caddo	3914	73
Greer	1591	72
Logan	1726	70
Tillman	1673	69
Washita	2635	68
Lincoln	2868	68
Pawnee	1372	68
Payne	1824	68
Beckham	1946	67
Comanche	1790	67
Kiowa	2183	67
Harmon	1112	66
Jackson	1736	64
Cleveland	1199	63
Pottawatomie	2304	63
Noble	1134	63
Kay	1583	61
Canadian	1620	60
Blaine	1423	60
Dewey	1145	59
Garfield	1654	56
Grant	1338	56
Roger Mills	1173	56
Custer	1498	55
Kingfisher	1189	52
Oklahoma	1507	51
Major	964	50
Alfalfa	1002	50
Texas	750	43
Cimarron	308	41

(Table 2.8, cont.)

Woods	756	41
Ellis	614	40
Woodward	611	37
Beaver	627	34
Harper	373	33

Indian Territory

Haskell	1678	86
Wagoner	2428	85
Creek	2757	82
Okmulgee	2569	82
McIntosh	2764	85
Love	1173	80
Atoka	1325	79
Bryan	2808	79
Choctaw	2309	79
Johnston	1126	79
Okfuskee	2677	79
Hughes	2249	78
Muskogee	3208	77
Jefferson	1409	77
McClain	2117	77
McCurtain	3015	76
Marshall	964	75
Sequoyah	1923	75
Seminole	2034	75
Garvin	2457	75
Pittsburg	2509	74
Stephens	2011	73
Coal	1012	73
Grady	3204	73
Pushmataha	1125	72
Pontotoc	1837	71
Le Flore	2915	71
Latimer	782	66
Murray	629	65
Carter	1377	64
Tulsa	1504	64
Rogers	1289	62
Cherokee	1380	59
Mayes	1411	59
Nowata	791	57
Ottawa	903	52

(Table 2.8, cont.)

Washington	549	52
Craig	1102	51
Adair	813	47
Delaware	1000	41

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Census of Agriculture of 1930.

In the 1930s, the federal government decided that farm tenancy was an unfavorable form of land tenure and began to search for a remedy. However, a globalizing economy pulled rural Americans, especially tenants, into the cities for government relief and the lure of higher paying jobs. Tenants left farms in droves but more renters remained in the counties that had had high tenancy rates at the birth of Oklahoma in 1907. Between 1930 and 1940, nearly 40,000 Oklahoma farm tenants began the migration away from the farm.²⁶ In 1930, Oklahoma had 125,329 renters. Ten years later the number had declined to 97,821. The economic situation had not improved dramatically and the Farm Security Administration certainly had not helped many farmers purchase farms. Instead, many tenants left in search of economic opportunity elsewhere.²⁷

Table 2.9

Number and Percentage of Farm Tenants in Oklahoma Counties, 1940

County	Number of Tenants	Percent of Farms with Tenants
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Oklahoma Territory

Osage	1484	61
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(Table 2.9, cont.)

Caddo	2622	60
Lincoln	2205	57
Noble	924	56
Cotton	867	56
Payne	1386	55
Beckham	1316	54
Greer	900	54
Pottawatomie	1897	53
Logan	1244	53
Kingfisher	1053	52
Comanche	1069	52
Kay	1373	51
Harmon	607	49
Jackson	1006	49
Washita	1683	48
Kiowa	1408	46
Roger Mills	831	46
Tillman	952	45
Dewey	869	45
Pawnee	1041	45
Custer	1005	44
Garfield	1278	44
Grant	995	44
Major	934	43
Oklahoma	1458	43
Texas	616	43
Ellis	559	39
Alfalfa	789	39
Beaver	637	38
Harper	354	38
Woods	681	38
Woodward	567	37
Indian Territory		
Okfuskee	1833	69
McIntosh	1837	69
Haskell	1269	69
Hughes	1862	69
Creek	2113	68
Wagoner	1640	68
Atoka	1388	67
Bryan	2336	67
Love	934	66
Okmulgee	1834	65

(Table 2.9, cont.)

Muskogee	2346	65
Pittsburg	2238	65
Stephens	1644	64
Choctaw	1942	64
Marshall	796	64
Johnston	1086	63
Garvin	1981	63
Tulsa	1361	62
Seminole	1859	62
Jefferson	977	62
McClain	1394	62
Coal	963	62
Carter	1452	58
Pontotoc	1448	58
Le Flore	2268	58
McCurtain	2562	58
Grady	2187	57
Sequoyah	1430	57
Murray	515	54
Pushmataha	1027	54
Latimer	608	51
Rogers	1171	51
Cherokee	1274	51
Ottawa	983	50
Canadian	1123	46
Cleveland	1084	46
Craig	986	46
Nowata	801	46
Blaine	988	45
Mayes	1140	45
Cimarron	258	43
Adair	738	43
Washington	531	40
Delaware	1021	38

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Census of Agriculture of 1940.

By 1950, tenancy had declined throughout Oklahoma but remained highest in the former Indian Territory with the exception of a few western counties. In 1950, Kay and

Garfield counties, two of the top wheat producers in Oklahoma, followed the Great Plains tenancy pattern and climbed into the top ten in terms of number of farm tenants. Yet tenancy rates remained fairly moderate at 38 percent and 35 percent respectively. Counties with traditionally high tenancy rates from eastern Oklahoma in eastern Oklahoma still dominated in total number of farm tenants and in percentage in 1950. Overall, total tenant numbers in the state dropped dramatically. In 1940, the Census reported 97,821 renters in Oklahoma and by 1950, the number had fallen to 44,727 – a decrease of over 50 percent. The state tenancy rate had also declined from 54.7 percent to a much more modest 31.4 percent.²⁸

Table 2.10

Number and Percentage of Farm Tenants in Oklahoma Counties, 1950

County	Number of Tenants	Percent of Farms with Tenants
Oklahoma Territory		
Caddo	1679	46
Noble	603	42
Osage	739	39
Comanche	641	38
Kay	893	38
Logan	662	38
Washita	1061	38
Beckham	692	37
Canadian	762	37
Cotton	419	36
Grant	691	36
Greer	462	36
Kiowa	676	36
Tillman	612	35
Blaine	643	35
Garfield	872	35
Cleveland	529	34

(Table 2.10, cont.)

Alfalfa	540	33
Pawnee	477	33
Texas	415	33
Jackson	525	32
Kingfisher	619	31
Lincoln	846	31
Major	515	31
Pottawatomie	791	30
Harmon	312	30
Payne	567	29
Oklahoma	764	27
Dewey	384	27
Cimarron	158	26
Custer	486	26
Woods	379	26
Roger Mills	309	24
Harper	195	24
Ellis	251	22
Beaver	289	21
Woodward	235	19

Indian Territory

McIntosh	916	43
Okfuskee	711	43
Wagoner	748	43
Hughes	816	42
McClain	664	42
Creek	898	41
Jefferson	490	41
Grady	1186	38
Okmulgee	782	37
Garvin	839	36
Stephens	688	36
Bryan	898	35
Love	386	35
Muskogee	976	34
Seminole	744	34
Carter	640	33
Coal	345	33
Marshall	230	33
Haskell	531	31
Pittsburg	766	31
Atoka	559	30

(Table 2.10, cont.)

Choctaw	599	28
Ottawa	444	27
Pontotoc	492	26
Johnston	302	26
Latimer	259	25
Murray	171	25
Le Flore	728	24
McCurtain	876	24
Tulsa	598	23
Pushmataha	347	22
Rogers	454	22
Craig	416	22
Nowata	290	22
Cherokee	477	21
Adair	375	20
Mayes	439	20
Washington	204	20
Sequoyah	382	18
Delaware	378	16

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browse*, University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Census of Agriculture of 1950.

RACE

Regarding the relationship between race and farm rental, Oklahoma offers an interesting paradox. Oklahoma's population was overwhelmingly white while sharecroppers in the South were a mixture of descendants of freedmen and an increasing population of poor rural whites. In Oklahoma in 1910, 87.1 percent of the total population was white so roughly 13 percent of the population identified themselves as "negroes or non-white" to the Census enumerators. When comparing total population statistics to those of the Census of Agriculture, whites actually made up a slightly higher percentage of farm tenants than they did of the total population; 9.1 percent of tenants

reported to be non-white. So roughly 91 percent of farm tenants in Oklahoma were white as opposed to 87 percent of the overall population. Thus, Oklahoma was somewhat different from other southern states because of the racial make-up. Oklahoma tenants were overwhelmingly white while former slave states had more African-American tenants. By 1935, nearly two-thirds of southern tenants were white, but this still remained significantly less than white tenancy in Oklahoma.²⁹ In percentages, the top three states had a much higher concentration of African American tenants - 76.9 percent of Mississippi tenants, 68.5 percent of South Carolina tenants, and 55.8 percent of Georgia tenants in 1910. When compared to the neighboring cotton-producing states of Texas and Arkansas, Oklahoma had fewer black tenants as a percentage of the total renter population. Twenty-two percent of tenants in Texas and 45.6 percent of tenants in Arkansas were African American, both significantly higher than Oklahoma. In fact, only about 45 percent of African-American farmers in Oklahoma were tenants while 57.2 percent of white farmers in 1910 rented land.³⁰ Therefore, one of the primary differences in Oklahoma farm tenants compared to other southern states was racial composition.³¹

The highest concentration of African-American farms in Oklahoma was in the former Indian Territory with the heaviest concentration in the former Creek Nation. Behind the metropolitan counties, Muskogee, Okmulgee, McCurtain, Okfuskee, Wagoner, Logan, Creek, and Seminole counties historically had the highest numbers of African-American residents. Even though they did not necessarily have the most tenant farms (only Muskogee, McCurtain, and Creek counties ranked in the top ten), tenancy rates were fairly high in each of these counties. In all, twenty-six counties in Oklahoma had fewer than one hundred African-American farms - and Alfalfa, Beaver, Cimarron,

Jackson, Texas, Woodward, Harper, Ellis, Harmon, Grant, and Greer had fewer than ten. Woods and Harmon had no African-American operated farms according to the 1910 Census. Oklahoma tenant farmers remained overwhelmingly white throughout the course of Oklahoma history with only local exceptions.³²

Race influenced farm tenancy patterns as much as crop choice and geographic region. The “Black Belt” region of Oklahoma has a much higher concentration of tenant farms than any other section of the state. This was one of the most densely populated areas of the state with many small farms and a high concentration of African-American tenants. African-Americans made up thirty-nine percent of the total farmers in this region.³³

COTTON AND CONTRACT CHOICE

Unlike farm tenancy in other cotton-producing states, Oklahoma’s tenants were rarely sharecroppers. Instead, Oklahoma’s tenants who paid rent with a portion of the crop were overwhelmingly share tenants as they usually had some personal property and livestock. In 1910, all renters who paid in kind were classified together, with no distinction between share tenancy and sharecropping. Perhaps the most that can be said is that sharecropping contracts were more prevalent in the cotton growing areas of Oklahoma and the same remained true from 1920 to 1950. However, Oklahoma had significantly fewer sharecroppers than other cotton-producing states. In 1920, the Census measured sharecropping independently and only one county, Sequoyah, had over 20 percent of the tenants as sharecroppers and only nineteen had over 10 percent (all were eastern cotton-producing counties). As a whole, only 9 percent of Oklahoma’s renters

were sharecroppers. Out of the sixteen states that assessed sharecropping, Oklahoma had the second lowest percentage and the thirteenth fewest sharecroppers with 8,926. By 1950, Oklahoma had the lowest percentage of sharecroppers (4 percent) of the sixteen southern states and only 1,915 sharecroppers (thirteenth highest). Only cotton producing Jackson and Tillman counties had 10 percent of the tenants as sharecroppers and the arcane system was now relegated to the cotton-producing southwest corner of the state.³⁴

Overall, tenancy patterns in Oklahoma reflected the larger geographic region of which it is a part. Eastern Oklahoma, former Indian Territory, and a few Oklahoma Territory counties that bordered the former Indian nations, started out with very high tenancy rates because of the allotment process before 1910. From 1910 to 1950, the tenancy rates of eastern Oklahoma began to equalize and, by 1950, even dropped below other cotton-producing states. Western Oklahoma followed the pattern of the Plains States and the Midwest. Northern and northwestern Oklahoma counties started with extremely low tenancy rates, 20 to 25 percent in 1910, and slowly rose as more settlers moved to these counties and more virgin land was farmed past the natural limits in the 1930s before falling back to very low tenancy rates in the 1940s. Oklahoma provides an interesting case study for tenancy patterns because there are two distinct agricultural regions within the state and, even though the settlement of Oklahoma was unique, shared historical processes were easily identifiable in the number and percentage of farm tenants.

In analyzing the raw statistical Census data, historians can make several conclusions about farm tenancy in Oklahoma. First, Oklahoma, sits at the crossroads of multiple agricultural regions – the Midwest, Great Plains, and South – and exhibits

tenancy patterns of all three areas. Second, the Indian Nations provided an opportunity for speculators to grab land and sell or rent to investment companies or individuals which in turn created higher tenancy rates in areas with a high percentage of allotted land. Third, cotton production obscures the picture. It is difficult to ascertain how much of a role cotton played in the development of farm tenancy in the state. Cotton production was important throughout the state and farmers in both tenant predominant areas and owner predominant areas grew the crop on significant acreages. Finally, race had little impact on tenancy in Oklahoma but some correlation with tenure choice. Whites and African-Americans were farm tenants in roughly the same proportion to their total population percentage but African Americans were sharecroppers in much higher proportion than whites.

CHAPTER II
ENDNOTES

¹ United States Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1910: Agriculture* (Washington, D C: United States Government Printing Office, 1911), 5: 34.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ For more on the early history of renting in the United States, see Paul W. Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier: History of Public Land Law Development* (New York: Arno, 1970). For an environmental history of the Great Plains see Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005).

⁵ *Census of 1910: Agriculture*, 105.

⁶ National Bureau of Economic Research, <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroyhistory/>. Accessed April-August, 2009; R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 222-226.

⁷ United States Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1920: Agriculture*, "Farm and Farm Tenancy" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1921), 124.

⁸ R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 222-226; Leslie Hewes, "Suitcase Farming in the Central Great Plains," in Thomas Wessell, *Agriculture in the Great Plains, 1876-1936* (Washington, DC: Agricultural History Society, 1977), 23-37.

⁹ *Census of 1920: Agriculture*, "Farm and Farm Tenancy," 26.

¹⁰ Hewes, "Suitcase Farming," 24.

¹¹ United States Census statistics compiled by the University of Virginia, Fisher Library, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>. The Fisher Library has compiled the records of the United States Census from 1790 to 1960 into a database that allows easy manipulation and comparison of various statistics. Hereafter cited as *US Census Browser*.

¹² Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

¹³ *US Census Browser*.

¹⁴ United States Census Bureau, *Seventeenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1950: Agriculture*, "Farm Tenure – A Graphic Summary" (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1951), 5, Part 5: 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For more on race and ethnicity in agrarian Oklahoma, see: Bonnie Lynn Sherow, *Red Earth: Race and Agriculture in Oklahoma Territory* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004). For more on rental agreements on the Great Plains see Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier*; Allan Bogue, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Donald Winters, "Tenant Farming in Iowa," in James Whitaker, ed. *Farming in the Midwest: A Symposium on Midwest Agriculture, 1840-1900* (Washington, DC: Agricultural History Society, 1973), 130-150.

¹⁷ *Census of 1910: Agriculture*, 105.

¹⁸ *US Census Browser*. Census statistics from 1910 show that western Oklahoma was much more sparsely settled than counties in eastern Oklahoma. For more on the settlement of Oklahoma, see W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *The Story of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); Brad Agnew, "Voices from the Land Run of 1889," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 67 (Spring 1989): 4-29; Stan Hoig, *The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1984).

¹⁹ *US Census Browser*.

²⁰ There is more information on this in Chapter 3. See also, Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run, The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940).

²¹ Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 51. The Cherokee had only 73,000 acres unallotted, the Creek had 81,000, and the Choctaw-Chickasaw had over 3,500,000 million acres of land unallotted.

²² *US Census Browser*.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ For more on the Caddo Nation, see Howard Meredith, "Cultural Conservation and Revival: The Caddo and Hasinai Post-Removal Era, 1860-1902," *The Chronicles of*

Oklahoma 79 (Fall 2001): 278-287; for more on the interaction of Plains Tribes before allotment, see David La Vere, *Contrary Neighbors: Southern Plains and Removed Indians in Indian Territory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ In the early 1940s, over 350,000 migrant families registered at Farm Security Administration Camps in California; forty percent of these were from Oklahoma. Twenty-eight percent of Oklahoma migrants reported to be tenants; for more detail, see Chapter Six below.

²⁷ *US Census Browser*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) , 38.

³⁰ *US Census Browser*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ *US Census Browser*.

³⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER III

THE ORIGINS OF FARM TENANCY IN OKLAHOMA

From approximately 1890 to 1910, Oklahoma underwent a complete transformation in land ownership and distribution. Before 1890, Native Americans occupied Oklahoma and politicians saw it as a barrier to converting one of the last territories to statehood. Easterners clamored for the release of land that, as they saw it, was not being used to its fullest agricultural potential. Men like David Payne had tested the will of the government through various incursions into the territories. Even though the federal government forcibly removed Payne and his Boomers, the government could not halt the move toward the settlement of Oklahoma by white farmers. Succumbing to the pressure of hopeful homesteaders, the government opened the territories to settlement in the 1890s. However, when land was allotted and settlement began, an unintended consequence occurred. Oklahoma mimicked other southern states by developing high tenancy rates almost immediately. Despite having few tenants in 1890, by 1910 Oklahoma had one of the highest tenancy rates in the United States. Mishandled

government policy, land speculation, and restrictions on Indian land sales forced many potential home owners into positions as farm tenants.

Long before 1890, members of the Five Tribes were largely acculturated into white society. They spoke English, practiced Christianity, planted cotton, and some even owned slaves until the Civil War ended the practice.¹ When the Five Tribes relocated to Oklahoma in the 1830s and 1840s, communal land ownership did not dissolve; instead, the entire tribe retained ownership of all land. From the 1830s to the 1890s, individual Native Americans still did not own the land, but the tribe did recognize usage rights by allowing individual tribal members to live on the land, plow and plant crops, and even rent to white tenants. In other words, individual Native Americans did not technically own the land but each Indian was able to build a house, make improvements, practice husbandry, and use the land without interference or interruption from other Native Americans or the United States government. Wealthier Native Americans occupied better farmland on larger plantations, while poorer Indians often secluded themselves in the backcountry and remained disengaged from the mainstream market economy. As whites legally moved into the territories, early twentieth-century values did as well. Many whites saw Indian land as a potential business venture. Investors purchased land in the territories and held it in speculation or rented to other white farmers. In this respect, Oklahoma was not significantly different from other southern states. And, like other southern states, Oklahoma developed a hierarchy of land-owning aristocrats, a group of middle-class landowners, a large tenant class, and a credit system that kept renters mired in perpetual debt. Tenants did not remain idle and by 1910 the economically marginalized class had tremendous influence with the leading farm organization within

the state and used this weapon in an attempt to gain more rights from the state government.²

WHITE RESIDENTS BEFORE 1890

Whites had lived in Indian Territory legally and illegally for decades. Illegal whites drifted in and out of for a variety of reasons. Though David Payne was the most famous illegal resident, he certainly was not the typical white resident. Some whites wanted work and came to Indian Territory hoping to find employment as farm hands. Others used Indian Territory as a safe haven when trying to escape legal problems in neighboring states. Most drifters into Oklahoma, however, were hoping to make a permanent home as farmers within the legal jurisdiction of an Indian nation.

According to tribal law, individual Native Americans could claim as much land as they wanted though they did not actually own the land. Land was held in common and livestock often roamed on the open range. Possession of Indian land was fluid. Many Indians acquired large estates by claiming huge plantations while others remained on small family farms growing only the necessities. One Indian stated that “father could fence just any amount of land he wanted then and farm or graze it and could not be made to vacate.”³ Another Native American recalled that Indians would even swap pieces of land if another Indian wanted to live on a particular farm. In such an instance, Native Americans traded ponies or livestock for the rights to a claim.⁴

Before 1890, whites resided in Indian Territory in several capacities. Some were legal residents, but often, white residents were illegally residing on Indian land. Many

whites worked for the federal government as Indian agents or soldiers; while others were laborers and worked for the tribes or an individual Native American; still others rented farms from the tribe or from an individual tribal member. Before 1890, all whites were required to obtain occupation permits and pay a fee to the Indian nation to obtain the necessary documentation. Though this permit system remained in effect until the passage of the Curtis Bill in 1898, it was rarely enforced. Technically, it was illegal for individuals to rent land to whites but Indian land holders found ways to circumvent the laws. Individual Indians called the payment from the renter a salary and there was no rental contract. Contracts were simply verbal agreements that allowed whites unrestricted use of the land.⁵ One such white farmer was I. S. Underwood. On January 1, 1889, a United States probate judge signed a permit allowing Underwood to reside within Tobuskey County of the Choctaw Territory “for the term of twelve months” as a farm renter for W. B. Pitchlynn. Pitchlynn and other industrious Native Americans brought white tenants to live and work on their farms.⁶ Another permit, dated April 9, 1895, allowed K. S. Swearingen, a white laborer, to work for A. Whitelurney as a farmer in the Cooweescoowee District of the Cherokee Nation. For Swearingen to reside and work in the Indian Territory, either the laborer or owner had to pay the permit cost of \$1.50 each year. This particular permit stated that “no permit shall be issued for a longer period than December 31 of the year in which the permit is issued.”⁷

White renters were fairly common in Indian Territory though the number is impossible to guess. No accurate records exist and the borders between the Indian Nations and other states were extremely porous so whites drifted in and out of the

territory with little resistance. Gilbert Fite estimated that as many as twelve thousand white renters resided in Indian Territory in 1882.⁸

Tenants in Indian Territory actually had better lease contracts than tenants in other parts of the South because agreements were flexible and tenants often paid little in rent. Instead of monetary compensation, owners encouraged tenants to make improvements such as building a house, breaking virgin soil, building fences, and digging water wells. In exchange, renters often received a greatly discounted lease or even paid no money at all for a specified period, often up to five years. The tenant was free to leave at any time without any type of restrictions whereas southern tenants were legally required to stay on the farm through the end of the contract. Tenants could be fined and jailed for breaking a rental agreement. Upon leaving the farm in the territory, the tenant “could sell [improvements] at the end of the lease.” One source claims that his father even paid up to \$1000 for the improvements on a rental near Bartlesville in the Cherokee Nation – a substantial sum for the time.⁹

Regarding leases, it is difficult to ascertain the rental stipulations and requirements, which suggests that there was no norm from one place to another or even from one lease to another. In one circumstance, Zack Redford, a former tenant in Indian Territory, explained his situation. Under this contract, Redford agreed to build a house and barn, dig a water well, enclose crops with hog-proof fences, and reside on the farm. In exchange, Redford paid one dollar per year and renewed the contract in perpetuity. Upon vacating, Redford explained, the improvements belonged to the tenant and the incoming renter purchased the improvements from the tenant. Other renters told similar stories. One renter claimed that he moved to the Cherokee Nation in 1890 and simply

had to clear twenty acres of land for cultivation. In exchange, the farmers lived on the land for five years and paid no rent. James Givens claimed a similar rental agreement. His family rented land in the Chickasaw Nation and paid rent simply by clearing the land of trees.¹⁰ Other whites described different rental negotiations where the Indian bought the improvements from the vacating tenant instead of allowing the incoming tenant to purchase the improvements. If the improvements belonged to the Indian negotiating the lease, the new lease agreement became a cash rental or a crop-sharing agreement with the Indian owning the rights to the improvements. Joe Grayson, a tenant farmer, explained that, “sometimes they took money and sometimes the rent was paid by a portion of the crops.”¹¹ John M. Nichols, a white renter in the Chickasaw Nation, explained the types of rentals for farmers and cattle barons. He stated: “The white people who came to the Indian Territory would lease a tract of land from some Indians and would then fence it – put it in cultivation for the use of it for five to ten years.”¹²

Before the opening of white settlement in Oklahoma, cattle companies leased land from Native Americans for grazing rights. Though these tactics can be viewed with disdain as simply another exploitation of Native Americans by white businessmen, individual Native Americans and the tribes in general profited through these relationships.¹³ Though cattlemen negotiated with Indian tribes, many implored illegal means to circumvent tribal and federal law to gain more favorable rental agreements. One tactic was to pay Native Americans to claim ownership of cattle herds to keep rental fees as low as possible because tribes charged a larger fee for cattle owned by non-tribal members. Other leases were even less formal. These agreements were simply verbal contracts with local Native Americans for five to ten years, and “some for nearly a

lifetime, being renewed from time to time.”¹⁴ Another source described a range renting technique in some detail.

Cattlemen did not care to have a lease in the early days as they could get a permit from the Indian government to run say one hundred head of cattle on the open range and then turn loose probably from 500 to 1000 head to run at large on the good grass that covered the country at that time. A grazing permit cost 25 cents per head per year but as the cowman only paid on one hundred head he was the one who made the big money.¹⁵

DAWES ACT AND CURTIS ACT

By the 1880s, Congress realized that Indian lands in Oklahoma provided a valuable source of farm land for potential homesteaders. Bowing to the pressures of constituents, Congress decided that Oklahoma and Indian Territory should begin the process of statehood. One major barrier stood in the way of statehood. Tribes collectively owned the land in the future Sooner State which made white homesteading impossible until these methods were altered. In 1887, Congress formally began the process of destroying communal ownership through the General Allotment Act, more commonly called the Dawes Act. Just over a decade later, Congress again altered previous agreements with Native Americans by passing legislation known as the “An Act to Protect the People of Indian Territory,” commonly known as the Curtis Act. These two acts worked collectively to progress toward statehood by forcing Indians to sign tribal roles, accept allotments, end tribal governments, and prepare the territories for white settlement.

On February 8, 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Severalty Act to divide Indian Territory into individual farms for Native Americans making the excess land available for sale to whites. Allotments were generally made in 160-acre portions to Native-American

heads of household and 80 acres to minors and non-married individuals. Furthermore, Congress held the land in trust for twenty-five years so that Native Americans could not sell their homestead. Congress feared that unscrupulous white businessmen would swindle Indians out of their farms, leaving allottees with nothing. Finally, the law intended for Native Americans to become full citizens of the United States raising them from dependent status. The Dawes Act initially applied to all Indians except the Five Tribes and the Osage.¹⁶ Land that was not allotted to an individual Indian was declared surplus, taken by the federal government, and thus opened to white settlement.¹⁷ With this act, Congress hoped to revamp efforts to “Americanize” Native Americans by breaking communal habits, changing their professions to farming, educating children in boarding schools, and surrounding them with white neighbors who might act as good examples for the new American citizens. One prominent Native-American scholar summarized the actions succinctly. “Nowhere was the government’s future role in fostering ‘civilization’ spelled out; everything passed by implication.”¹⁸

In eastern Oklahoma, known as Indian Territory, the ownership system of the Five Tribes remained a barrier to the settlement even after the allotment of the Plains tribes.¹⁹ Initially, tribal land of the southeastern tribes was left intact, but Congress succumbed to the pressure from whites and in 1898 extended legislation to the Five Tribes. The Five Tribes resisted the efforts of Dawes Commissioners to allot land. Conservative elements encouraged other Native Americans to resist cooperation with white agents. In the Creek Nation, there was even an armed resistance that bullied other Creeks into non-compliance with the commission.²⁰ In 1898, Congress passed a bill entitled “An Act for the Protection of the People of Indian Territory.” Charles Curtis, a

Kansas Congressman with one-eighth Kaw ancestry, led movement to protect the 250,000 white residents in the territory. The Curtis Bill was designed to prepare Eastern Oklahoma for statehood. It abolished tribal governments and made all people of Indian Territory subject to the laws of the federal government. It gave the Dawes Commission access to Indian rolls and conferred the ability to use the legal system to punish those who resisted. And, it gave the Dawes Commission the ability to allot land when the tribal roles were complete.²¹ Within ten years of passing the Curtis Bill, land was allotted, settled, and statehood was obtained despite the gross injustices perpetrated against Native Americans.²²

Allotment was a very long and complicated process and each tribe had different conditions for allotment. Native Americans received allotments which varied according to tribe. Cherokee and Creek allotments totaled 160 acres per person. Seminoles received tracts of 120 acres. Chickasaw and Choctaw tribal members received 320 acre allotments. In the Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole nations, freedmen received allotments equal to tribal members. In the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations, freedmen received allotments of forty acres.²³ A Choctaw and Chickasaw allotment was made up of a central homestead of 160 acres, and an additional sum of land called the excess allotment which was often not connected to the central homestead. The restrictions did not allow Indian to sell the homestead for twenty-five years.²⁴

Many people were unhappy and wanted sales restrictions removed. White settlers erroneously believed that removing restrictions would allow them to purchase relatively inexpensive farms; lawyers hoped to secure guardianships of Native Americans; real estate speculators believed they could make a quick dollar through buying and selling;

and Native Americans themselves had no need for the excess allotments because this land was often several miles from the homestead making farming difficult.²⁵ Ellen Cunningham reported that her allotment consisted of a seventy acre homestead near Lenapah in Nowata County, twenty acres near Braggs in Muskogee County, and ten acres at Illinois Station on the Illinois River in Cherokee County.²⁶ Nannie Standley also received several non-adjointing homesteads in two ten-acre tracts and tracts of twenty, fifty-eight, and seventy acres appraised at \$1,028.89.²⁷

The excess allotments were released for sale within a few years judicial a legal process. Through various legal rulings the court system provided court-appointed guardians for orphaned minors or adults deemed incompetent to manage their own affairs. The guardians were charged with executing the estate of the Native American wards and looking out for their general well-being. This process became a way for grafters, the name given to perceived unscrupulous businessmen, to make money from Indian allotments. They negotiated contracts for allotment rentals but often charged an exorbitant fee for managing the affairs of Indian children. Congress removed restrictions on half-blood lands and African-American allottees through legislative action in 1904 and 1907, freeing up about one and a half million acres of land for sale and speculation.²⁸

Removing restrictions on Indian land caused many problems for Native Americans as whites saw Indian land as a source of speculation. While the Burke Act of 1906 allowed for the removal of restrictions on an individual basis through court hearings, the restrictions remained on the lands of many full-blood Native Americans. To remove restrictions, Indians or their guardians appeared before a judge and presented a case to remove the sales restrictions. Indians were especially vulnerable because

guardians could argue that the individual was incompetent and the Indian had little recourse or protection.²⁹ One source estimated that 90 percent of the Native Americans lost their land in business deals, “or to put it more bluntly, most of them were robbed by the local grafters.”³⁰ Munnie Bear was apparently declared incompetent by a court because she had nearly \$2,500 in a bank, owned \$2,000 in livestock, and a Ford truck. Because of her accumulation of wealth, Munnie Bear was deemed incompetent as she did not understand the value of money.³¹ In another instance, an attorney apparently received \$35,000 in fees from settling disputes over a ward’s estate and never appeared in court.³² Lucy Carney, a full-blood Chickasaw, reportedly sold 155 acres of land for \$1600 and three days later the purchaser mortgaged the land for 40 percent of its appraised value of \$7,300.³³ Other Native Americans lost control of their land but retained ownership when courts determined they were unfit. When this occurred, white court-appointed attorneys then rented the land to white settlers and charged high attorney fees.³⁴

Native Americans resisted allotment for several reasons. Obviously, many did not want to give up traditional communal ownership and believed allotment was a detriment to Indian heritage and that other harmful policies would soon follow. Native Americans understood that taking homesteads was the beginning of total assimilation. Others resisted for alternative reasons. Wilson Jones, a Choctaw Indian, and many other Native Americans prospered under the communal system of ownership. Giving up land meant a loss of income. Jones and others created huge cattle ranches within Indian Territory during the 1880s and 1890s and had relatively little competition from whites. Other Native Americans applied similar tactics and imported white tenants to create an agrarian renting class long before statehood. Several Indians, like Choctaw Robert Jones

and Cherokee Joseph Vann, controlled thousands of acres of farm land before 1890. Allotting land meant the end of this open-range system.³⁵ To put it simply, some Indians generated substantial wealth by controlling, farming, and renting vast amounts of land under the communal system. Therefore, they resisted allotment because it was a detriment to their personal abilities to make money.³⁶

Most historians argue that Native American land allotment was a failure both in policy and in practice. Bureaucrats mismanaged allotment and Native Americans often slipped into poverty as a result. Whether through bad business deals or simply not being capable farmers, Native Americans as a group did not assimilate into the agricultural system effectively.³⁷ Others historians see the failure from a somewhat different perspective. David Baird wrote that historians often blame grafters for Indians losing land but he also found “just as culpable were the Five Tribes people themselves.”³⁸ Baird noted that Indians had already accepted the practice of individual land usage but they merely had not converted to a system of individual ownership. To some extent, allotment was merely a formality that robbed Native-American land barons of their estates while forcing non-enterprising Indians into the clutches of white grafters.³⁹

WHITES AND THE EMERGENCE OF LAND SYSTEMS

Whites sought land in Oklahoma Territory for many reasons. Boosters’ propaganda described Oklahoma as a farmers’ paradise tempted whites to migrate to Oklahoma in search of homesteads. Indians had farmed in Oklahoma since the 1830s and those ventures were fairly successful, but, according to whites, growing crops in Oklahoma was a guaranteed success. Local newspapers were often vocal about local

prosperity. They wanted their area to grow rapidly so editors often embellished success stories. One paper wrote that “Oklahoma and Indian Territory are in the experimental state agriculturally. True, farming has been carried on for many years, but it was confined almost exclusively to cotton and corn, and approved methods were not applied even in these staples. The territory will produce a greater variety of crops successfully than any other country.”⁴⁰ And Oklahoma farmers certainly produced a wide variety of crops with farms that were diverse. Oklahoma quickly became a leading state for cotton and wheat production, and by 1910, Oklahoma farmers also grew alfalfa, potatoes, cattle, sheep, hogs, peanuts, corn, oats, barley, rye, broom corn, kafir corn, and most had hardens to help supplement their diet.⁴¹ Early settlers in Oklahoma corroborated these stories by bragging about the fertility of the soil and the lack of effort needed to grow crops. “All we had to do was put the seed in the ground and plow it about once and let it go and we sure used to make a bumper crop,” reported one settler, while others claimed that early Oklahomans sowed fifty acres in feed and fifty acres in corn and “made a wonderful crop the first year.”⁴²

With stories such as these, reality often seemed like a cruel hoax. Potential homesteaders loaded up their few belongings and supplies, often some flour, smoked bacon, and potatoes, and headed to Oklahoma to find free land. Flora Belle Simmons remembered her experience stating that her family came to Oklahoma with a few clothes, three horses, a mule, a dog, and a cow. But, reality was much more somber as Simmons recalled that many Oklahomans brought absolutely nothing. “Just imagine living like that – no nuthin! No horses, cows, chickens, or pigs – not even a house to live in and two dollars only between you and starvation.”⁴³

Farmers complained most loudly about businessmen who exploited them during times of economic instability. Farmers leveled complaints against railroads, banks and lenders, and real estate agents. Railroads charged unfair shipping rates to farmers, lenders charged interest rates that were unfairly high, and real estate agents drove land prices upward. In his study of twentieth-century reform movements, Richard Hofstadter claimed that farmers in this period suffered from status anxiety and that these were simply misplaced complaints from a disaffected people uneasy about the rapidly changing world. According to Hofstadter, farmers sought greater opportunity and claimed they deserved protection because of the agrarian origins of the United States. Hofstadter believed that “the goal of revolt tended to be neither social democracy nor social equality, but greater opportunity.”⁴⁴ Others have charged that Hofstadter’s appraisal of the Populists was unfair because he failed to treat the problems of farmers with any type of seriousness. By treating the Populist complaints as reactionary and backward, he failed to adequately account for their real complaints about the sluggish economy, perceived unfair shipping rates, and varying loan interest rates. Norman Pollack specifically claimed that Hofstadter unfairly applied “present values” of the 1950s to the Populists in branding the movement as radical.⁴⁵

When land became available in the territories, speculators perfected ways to subvert the law. Restrictions placed on Indian land prevented sale, so land speculators became very resourceful in finding legal but often unscrupulous methods to gain use of the land. After Oklahoma and Indian Territory were opened, eastern bankers and southern lawyers flocked to the territories and joined the frantic scramble to gain a piece of the lucrative land deal. Even before statehood, contemporary sources claimed that the

territories swarmed with lawyers, bankers, real estate agents, and middle men searching for a quick profit. As a prominent newspaper editor reminisced about the settlement of Oklahoma, he concluded that “the selling of the land marks the rapid wiping out of the vast wasted domains which have retarded the uniform development of the state and presages a new era of growth and development in the sections in which they lie.”⁴⁶

Real estate speculators spent significant amounts of time finding Native Americans to cooperate and then searching for available tracts of unclaimed Indian land. H.B. Moulton, attorney for the Choctaw Nation, explained the situation and the complexities that arose from Indian land allotment. Moulton wrote:

Some of them have been in possession of their said lands for years and have been raising cotton, tobacco, corn and other products thereon for the support and maintenance of their families and I understand it is to be the policy of the government to permit Indians to hold and retain lands so taken, occupied and used by them as are said.

These men are not sufficiently informed about the specific description of their land as to be able to give me the number of the sections held by them but all of this information must be in the possession of the Department or agent upon said reservation.

They now inform me that certain men claim to have rented, in some instances from the Indians, the said several tracts of land, the Indians, as I understand, having or claiming to have secured said lands and these men, some of them white and some of them Indians or half breeds, insist that they have to leave or quit the same and in some instances have constructed fences and take possession of the cultivated fields of the Indians who have lived upon said lands and cultivated them for some years.⁴⁷

Confusion was quite common during allotment and subsequent homesteading of Oklahoma as several groups sought to engage in suspicious practices. Speculators were not the only group hoping to make a profit from the system; many Native Americans sought a better deal and applied tactics learned from the speculators. Indians realized that

white speculators purchased land titles with little research so Indians printed false land titles or produced duplicate copies of titles to land previously sold. Occasionally, speculators even knowingly purchased and filed false titles to cloud and tie the actual title up in litigation. Dishonest speculators then took bribes from the actual land owners who sought to avoid lengthy and expensive court cases.⁴⁸ *Harlow's Weekly*, a prominent Oklahoma newspaper, commented on the situation.

A few decades ago it became a trite saying that when a white man and an Indian met, the Indian lost a little land. The inference was that the Red Man had been victimized in a real estate deal with his white brother. As the Indian came more and more in contact with his more shrewd brother he gradually learned some of the tricks by which the pale-face acquired wealth and then when an Indian and a white man met, the white man lost a little money.⁴⁹

Over time, farmers and businessmen gained title to the land. By the 1920s, most clouded titles had become less complicated and entangled leaving Victor Harlow, editor of *Harlow's Weekly*, to speculate that “the profession of the so-called ‘real estate sharks’ dwindled in number and finally followed the covered wagon and camp fire into oblivion.”⁵⁰

One such speculator was Benjamin LaFayette, a well connected businessman in Checotah, Indian Territory. LaFayette had many successful business endeavors including a general merchandise store known as LaFayette and Bro. General Merchandise, Cotton, and Livestock Company and operated a small cotton gin in Checotah, Indian Territory. LaFayette also bought and rented excess Indian allotments, gave chattel mortgages, and rented land to tenants with records extending from 1902 to approximately 1910.⁵¹

First, LaFayette secured the rights to Indian land which, in this case, was a very simple process. LaFayette approached local Indians and offered cash for excess

allotments or the entire homestead if the restrictions had been removed. Contracts varied significantly in terms and in price according to the improvements and other stipulations. LaFayette, it appears, signed contracts on an individual basis and negotiated the best possible terms in each deal.⁵²

In 1902, LaFayette secured the lease of the homestead allotment of Will Landrum for a sum of \$400 per year. The lease was renewed for the same amount in 1906. The contract, signed in September and effective November 1, allowed LaFayette to use the entire 330 acres owned by Landrum and his children Jesse, Minnie, and Reed. The contract stipulated that he had the right to “erect suitable houses” for tenants who would cultivate the land. LaFayette paid \$1.21 per acre per year but agreed to make considerable improvements to the land which significantly improved the value of the farm.⁵³

On other leases, LaFayette agreed to provide improvements on a property ranging from digging water wells to building tenant houses and even providing barbed wire fences. George Roberson, guardian for Hettie and Ella Roberson, signed an agreement whereby LaFayette rented 150 acres for \$62.50 for five years (\$0.42 per acre per year). As a provision of the contract, LaFayette provided a seven-wire fence and a house for tenants.⁵⁴

The Watson family signed a very different contract. Apparently, they owed LaFayette a substantial amount of money, but the exact reason for the debts is unclear. Thomas, Robert, and Ellen Watson entered into an agreement where LaFayette received usage of 445 acres for two years. In exchange, the businessman discounted \$2486.10

from the amount owed to LaFayette. LaFayette agreed to drill a water well and the proceeds collected from the rent absolved the Watsons of their indebtedness to LaFayette and Bro.⁵⁵

There seemed to be no continuity from one contract to the next as LaFayette secured different terms for each contract. Dick and Sarah Martin rented LaFayette 160 acres at a flat rate of \$1,200 for a five-year period which gave them an average of \$1.50 per acre per year. Bosie Scott's rental contract is very similar as she leased 320 acres for \$2,500 for five years and received \$2,500 in a cash lease, a sum of \$1.56 per acre per year. However, Ellen Bradberry received a somewhat lower amount for her farm, \$0.50 per acre per year for five years on a 160 acre farm, which totaled only \$400. Other Indians fared much better. Ada Chockey received a five year lease at \$2.50 per acre beginning in September 1902. The Evans family also received a five-year lease at \$2.50 for five years but they agreed to build houses and sheds on the property, suggesting that farms with improvements were worth considerably more to the white middleman because he did not have to invest in housing for prospective tenants.⁵⁶

It would be unfair, however, with the limited information at hand to accuse LaFayette of being dishonest because we do not know how much land was already under cultivation, how much of the homestead might have been unusable for agricultural purposes, or if a property might be covered in timber and therefore required clearing. The rent was anywhere from \$.50 per acre to \$2.50 per acre, which leads to two possible conclusions: either some of the land was significantly less valuable because of rocky soil, lack of improvements, timber cover, or other adverse conditions or LaFayette secured the most favorable terms possible through unfair negotiations. The truth likely

lies in between. Some allotments were obviously worth less than others, but LaFayette also secured the best possible terms as well.

During the process, Indians and businessmen often distrusted on another. Indians were often skeptical of the intentions of land owners and even manipulated speculators in a business deal. W. N. Redwine, a prominent attorney in Indian Territory, urged his partners into quick action to keep his Native-American connections placated. Redwine stressed that attorneys needed to contact the bank at Ardmore and “direct the Ardmore National Bank to at once wire the American National Bank here to pay said checks, as I have promised to pay my Indians tomorrow afternoon. . . and you know unless the Indian gets his money at once, he thinks ‘white man beat Indian.’”⁵⁷ Native Americans were leery of white land agents for good reason. Indians knew that unscrupulous agents employed a variety of tactics to defraud the landowners, so Native Americans proceeded with caution as well. The negotiation between Indians and real estate speculators was often intense as Indians wanted to maximize the amount of money collected from the real estate agent and agents wanted to pay as little as possible for the land. Stories of corruption were so rampant that advocates for Native Americans investigated the situation in the 1920s and described numerous injustices perpetrated by fraudulent white investors. By this time, however, there was little help available for swindled Indians.⁵⁸

Agents also competed against each other which complicated matters even further. Within each town, multiple land agents advertised in the local newspaper seeking Indians to file on land and offering legal counsel to Indians ready to sell or rent their land. In one such instance, F. E. Riddle complained to W.I. Cruce, a business associate, explaining the

situation of one particular deal and encouraged his partners to make a decision. Riddle wrote:

In regard to the purchase of a piece of land I was talking to you about I will say that my man has put me off until Saturday. My idea is that he is figuring with Henry Johnson's brother, Ed Johnson, and I fear he will not let me have the land; however, I believe if I would go to him Friday and offer him his price and tell him I had to close the deal that day or not at all that I would be able to get it. In case I do this we would have to pay him about \$1200 cash. I wish you would advise me if I can close this deal if I would be authorized to draw on you for one-half of this amount, say \$600 now. If we carry this deal through it undoubtedly would be a good deal and I think the property will be worth \$100 per acre inside of twelve months. Please let me hear from you by return mail.⁵⁹

This letter from Riddle to his partners shows the interesting dynamic at work. The Native American had stalled, making Riddle suspicious that another investor had placed a competing bid for the allotment. Riddle hoped to leverage the Indian into selling his land by offering less than the Indian wanted and limiting the length of the offer hoping that the promise of guaranteed but less money would outweigh the prospect of manipulating a slightly higher price. In addition, the letter shows the intense competition between land agents who fought to make a significant profit in a short amount of time.

Advertisements from competing land companies littered the pages of newspapers. Land companies sought to buy, sell, or lease land and targeted land owners, Indians, prospective tenants, or anyone wanting to deal in land. Most of the companies operated similarly. The Union Real Estate Company in Durant, Indian Territory advertised "Bargains in Five Year Leases." The ad read: "We have five-year leases on all grades of Indian lands. We can make you a lease on any size tract from 10 acres to one thousand

acres and at from \$1.00 per acre up. Improved or unimproved land on your own terms. We buy farm land and pay cash.”⁶⁰

Many real estate agents recognized that dead Indian claims were an important component of a successful operation because these lands could be sold almost immediately as most full-blood Indians and minor allottees could not sell for the specified twenty-five year period. Intermarried citizens, freedmen, and mixed-bloods could sell their allotments at any time. Also, the land of deceased Native Americans could be liquidated immediately with the money going to the legal heirs. Typically, a court-appointed guardian could have the restrictions removed, sell the land for the trustees, and, of course, keep a hefty commission for himself.⁶¹

In reply to a letter from a colleague, lawyers at Cruce, Cruce, and Bleakmore explained the process of dead Indian claims and the potential for short-term profit.

In reply to your favor of the 14th, I will say that the law provides that whenever an Indian dies his land descends to his heirs; and the general impression among the lawyers is that this land can be sold by the heirs immediately upon his death. This is the ‘dead Indian’ claim you have heard about. The law provides that these claims must be sold for not less than the appraised value, \$1050; but an Indian claim being 320 acres of average land, is worth much more than that amount of money. It would be necessary for you to be on the ground in order to hunt up the proper heirs of deceased Indians. Those who are looking after these matters and who are fortunate in getting claims will of course make money out of them, as the average claim is worth about five thousand dollars.⁶²

“Dead Indian Claims” were rewarding ventures but agents spent many hours on an individual case in hopes that the endeavor worked. The land agent had to find Indians who had died, search the rolls and land records to match deceased Indians to allotments,

and then find the deceased Indian's heirs. Then, once the relatives had been identified, the agents had to convince them to sell the land and make a court appearance to remove the restrictions. For his efforts, Cruce explained that an average farm was worth \$5,000 and many of the farms were worth considerably more than that.⁶³ Cruce's dealings with Native Americans were a lightning rod for criticism during his political career. The Oklahoma Farmers' Union refused to support Cruce as a candidate for governor in 1910 because of his interests as a land speculator, attorney, and a banker. One source claimed that Cruce's law firm had represented over a thousand Chickasaw and Choctaw claimants whom the Dawes Commission had refused to allot land because they had no Indian ancestry.⁶⁴

Another land company owned by a prominent Oklahoma politician left detailed records about the operation. Robert Lee Williams, attorney in Durant and later State Supreme Court Justice and Governor, ran a very complex land speculation business in the southern Choctaw Nation from 1903 to 1906.⁶⁵ Williams and several business associates formed a land trust company in Durant with Williams as the president. Williams used a local Native-American associate to find Indians to file on claims. Williams coordinated between the Indian middle man, the land office, and investors from Kansas who provided capital for the venture. Williams had connections to a larger network of financiers. He had knowledge of the legalities of lease negotiations and outright purchases from Indians. He coordinated at the local level as a savvy speculator and used his skill to acquire an impressive fortune over the entirety of his life.⁶⁶

This particular operation began at the ground level and had a hierarchy of conspirators ranging from locals to intermediaries to investment bankers from other

states. Williams went to the land office at Atoka, Indian Territory and found unclaimed tracts of land in the Choctaw Nation. He employed Thomas Sexton, a Choctaw, to match Native Americans with vacant allotments found by Williams. Sexton had instant credibility with other Native Americans that his white business partners did not. Indians were more likely to trust another Native American offering them a business venture than an unknown white land agent. After Sexton had made the initial contact, he then offered to rent the land in exchange for helping the Native American through the filing process. Often, Native Americans did not have the resources to travel to the office at Atoka and file on a claim. The land company paid the filing fee, title fee, transportation costs, and any other upfront cost associated with the transaction. In return, the allottee simply had to agree to rent the land to the land company. Even after paying all of these expenses for the allottee, this would “still leave plenty of profit.”⁶⁷ About the process, Williams wrote: “I am very anxious to have him gather up the Indians under contracts so we can get to work accomplishing something.”⁶⁸ Williams and his associates paid the Indians and knew that “the money would seem big to the Indian.”⁶⁹ From the letters between Williams and his associates, it is clear that the speculators stood to make considerable profits through this system of renting restricted land or selling unrestricted land to small farmers or local investors. Williams ran a very successful business, invested wisely in tenant farms, and became a small landed aristocrat in southern Oklahoma. He kept much of the land and created a tenant plantation that reached 2,573 acres in 1905 and almost 7,000 acres valued at over \$400,000 at the time of his death in 1948.⁷⁰

There was fierce competition between land agents to find Indians to file on these claims. Numerous companies employed similar tactics, often making it a race to see who

could pair willing Indians with open claims at the land office.⁷¹ One company in Ardmore offered similar benefits to the Indians and was one of the primary competitors to the Williams Trust Company. The company in Ardmore offered to “select the homestead where the Indian lives, and the balance in the Chickasaw Nation, pay their expense at the land office, survey and plot the land for them, free of charge, and in addition to this, pay each member of his family \$5 per month, and take a lease of their land in 5 years.”⁷²

Real estate agents purchased land as long-term investment and often retained title for a few years and leased the land to tenants, but speculators often looked to sell land quickly to potential farmers or even investors. Many local newspapers had advertisements from real estate companies offering to sell or trade land. Some advertisers even offered to trade for goods, merchandise, stocks of drugs, or even general stores. The Putnam Company Real Estate Exchange of Oklahoma City was a large company offering to sell sixty-two farms in such places as Roger Mills County in far western Oklahoma to Konawa in Seminole County. The manager, P. F. Peterson, bragged that “crop failure impossible, will net you 25 per cent on your investment” and even offered more boosterism in his sales pitch.⁷³

The reason why is because real estate is the best and safest investment on earth. It is a part of the earth itself. The size of the earth never increases. The number of people on earth is always increasing. That makes the value and the price. The law of supply and demand, an ever increasing need in demand; no increase in supply. Reason for yourself. Look about and see what they have done in the short space of twenty years with practically no capital with which to work.⁷⁴

Real estate agents catered to the potential farm owners by emphasizing the nobility and necessity of homeownership. The above advertisement appeared in *The Union Advocate*

Review, a prominent mouthpiece of the early Farmers' Union in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Farmers' Union was an ardent proponent of farm ownership so readers were also potential customers. The Putnam Company targeted its advertising dollars in a publication where hopeful farm owners were subscribers.

Other real estate companies operated from other states but employed agents in Oklahoma or Indian Territory to purchase and rent land from Indians and then sublet to white tenants or sell to potential owners. The Frisco System Land and Immigration Association based in St. Louis advertised to potential home owners and claimed to help settle Oklahoma by appealing to the patriotism of buyers. One advertisement read: "The Frisco System Land and Immigration Association is already turning its share of the southwestern tide of immigration to Oklahoma. . . . If you wish to sell your farm, town, or other property, or if you desire capital for functions. . . please address R. S. Lemmon" in St. Louis.⁷⁵ This company pushed the purchase of land in southwestern Oklahoma long before the region saw a cotton boom. This advertisement was probably not aimed at Indian allotments as this area was allotted and opened by lottery between July 9 and August 6, 1901. In this instance, real estate investors would have looked to purchase failed or unused homesteads and act as a broker in reselling an abandoned farm at some point in the future.⁷⁶

Land speculators were often ruthless in their dealings with Native Americans. Sometimes, the deceit was obvious but at other times it was more subtle. In one instance, Robert Williams leased land from a local Native-American boy who was too young to sell his land because of the restrictions. Williams paid \$30 per year for five years to lease 320 acres of land in two 160-acre noncontiguous tracts. One tract of river bottom land

was covered with trees could not be farmed. In a letter to a business partner, Williams explained his new scheme. The land, Williams believed, should not be cleared of trees so that when the lease came up in five years, it would be worth considerably less than improved and cleared land. Williams hoped that after the five-year lease, the Indian boy would then sell him the land because he could not lease it or farm it himself.⁷⁷

Not only did speculators have to placate local Indians but they also had to keep financiers and investors happy as well. Often, investors from other states became impatient because they did not fully understand the complexities of the situation at the local level. Financial backers often hounded real estate agents for details and became agitated when the reply was not quick enough. In response to a letter from an investor, Robert Williams explained the situation: “These Indians are enough to worry the life out of a man, writing him letters, coming in and harassing him wanting to borrow money, wanting to sell when they can’t sell, and then the next week comes a letter from you wanting me to go and give you a thousand details, so I am under cross fire from both ways.”⁷⁸

In another instance, Williams was caught between antsy investors and annoyed Native Americans. Bankers from Chicago financed a purchase and became impatient with Williams and his land company when it failed to close quickly. The Chicago investors threatened to back out of the deal if it were not completed promptly. For Williams to finish the deal, he bribed the Indians with an additional \$50. Though this is not a justification or an apology for real estate speculators, it is an acknowledgment that investors worked very hard and were doing business within the limits of the law. In their defense, considerable uncertainty existed in the process. Because of the competition

from rival land companies, agents often lost potential clients to better offers thereby losing numerous hours of work and potential paydays.⁷⁹

Even after the initial carving of Indian Territory, Williams and other speculators continued to purchase Indian land, homesteads, and excess allotments for years. Speculators often had long-term goals for making money and were not always fixated on the quick sale of Indian land. Often, speculators purchased land and held it for five to ten years before selling at an appreciated rate to another investor or farm owner.⁸⁰ Some local speculators built large tenant plantations either by buying and renting their own farms or by managing and collecting rent for absentee landlords. Williams bought 160-acre homesteads and allotment excesses of Choctaws and Chickasaws to divide into smaller farms, often forty to eighty acres. Thus, between 1890 and 1910, Oklahoma transformed from a communally-owned Indian reservation to a state where almost two-thirds of the land was owned by non-farmers. As investors like Williams, LaFayette, and others built large holdings by divesting Indians of their land, speculators continued to make money by renting their holdings to tenants. Speculators became landlords and gathered to them large estates. They divided their holdings into smaller farms to maximize their rental incomes. After all, a tenant could only farm a finite amount of land, so smaller farms meant more production capabilities and more rent because land was not left idle.

Land speculators and real estate agents often operated within the law; but many others, including Indians, renters, prospective home buyers, and even sympathetic newspaper editors referred to these men as “grafters.” One small newspaper found it ironic that Robert Lee Williams ran for governor on the platform “He loves Economy and

hates Graft.”⁸¹ The same newspaper, when listing the items it promoted for statehood, wanted to regulate the railroads, use whiskey and beer tax to improve roads, give women the right to vote, and allow “no man to own more than 160 acres of land and he must settle on that.”⁸²

Farmers in Oklahoma complained bitterly that the allotment process and restricted land sales was unfair to potential homesteaders. Tenants and small owners alike felt that the Department of the Interior crippled the ability to purchase farms at reasonable prices by allowing the grafters to continue to manage Indian land instead of opening it to settlement by whites. One newspaper sympathetic to the farmers explained:

As usual, the question of whether the United States government shall pursue indefinitely its policy of warding the Indian or at the earliest possible moment remove all restraint, declare the Indian to be a full-fledged citizen of the United States, and turn him loose to sink or swim is in controversy. Down in Oklahoma most persons would be pleased to see the Indian paddling his own canoe.⁸³

Farmers and their supporters believed that removing restrictions on land sales and passing legislation limiting land holdings would allow farmers the opportunity to buy land instead of renting.

Tenants and their advocates fought constantly against land speculators in the years immediately before and after statehood but the legislature offered no help. Instead, preoccupied lawmakers focused on the statehood convention, writing the constitution, and struggling over the capital removal bill which sought to move the state capital from Guthrie to Oklahoma City.⁸⁴ The falling economic situation of the farm renter went unaddressed in the early years of Oklahoma. By 1910, agrarians became increasingly discouraged with the land tenure in the state leading one Farmers’ Union newspaper to

proclaim that “Oklahoma leads in many things, but especially it is the land of the land grafter. Their game is to take the hide and usually the flesh from the bones, particularly the emigrant.” Land agents robbed the Indians, overcharged emigrants on rent, and often boasted of making \$1000 to \$3000 monthly profit.⁸⁵ Speculation drove land prices up. Farmers believed that the legislature would not protect them from corporatization using a graduated land tax. They proclaimed, “It is therefore up to the people, by referendum, to amend the law and make it what they want it.”⁸⁶

Prominent Oklahoma politician Campbell Russell published a pamphlet entitled “Indian Territory Conditions of To-Day from the Farmers’ Point of View” that he sent to Congress in 1906. Russell offered tremendous insight into the thoughts of the farmers.

He wrote:

The white citizen – the tenant farmer of the Indian Territory – whose industry, enterprise and thrift are in large measure responsible for the value of Indian Territory land, present and prospective! He whose sweetest dreams for years past have pictured him with the title to a portion of this land, on which to build a home for himself and family – he is having a rude awakening now – of a truth it was only a dream. He now sees his prospects as an independent home owner rapidly fading away.⁸⁷

Russell believed that Native Americans should sell their surplus land to farmers who owned less than two hundred acres and that these farmers must move there within six months. Russell also believed that the Indian agent should broker deals with farmers and hold the money to make the transaction immune to speculators. Many allottees needed to sell their land and many farmers wanted to buy but circumstances made it impossible to circumvent the middlemen.⁸⁸

CHATTEL LOANS

After signing rental contracts, tenants found they were economically vulnerable as credit was often difficult to obtain in Oklahoma and throughout the South. Tenants could rarely afford a down payment of 50 percent of the farm value so home ownership mortgages were impossible to obtain. Tenants often worked for decades to save enough money to buy a farm. The biggest problem for tenants was not their inability to get a loan but the short-term debt system that forced renters to use extra profits and savings to pay high interest rates. Often, tenants used seasonal loans to survive until they could sell the crop in the fall. If they experienced a minor setback such as the death or crippling of a draft animal, a drought, a late frost, or even the illness of a family member, the renter could not repay the loan. Survival became a more pressing issue than saving to purchase a farm. The tenant would borrow money to pay for such unexpected expenses such as more seed because of too much rain, or a doctor's bill because of an illness, or even everyday expenses like food and clothing.

One common type of loan for a tenant farmer was a chattel loan. A chattel loan was an agreement where a borrower used personal property as collateral to secure a loan from a merchant, bank, or other local lender. If the borrower failed to pay the loan, the lender took the collateral as payment for the debt. Most chattel loans had short terms of six to twelve months. Tenants who were already in a precarious financial situation could lose almost all of their personal property which could devastate a farmer and deprive his family of basic goods. If a farmer used milk cows to secure the loan, his children upon default would no longer have milk or butter. If the collateral was a plow, then the farmer would have to rent or borrow a plow the following spring when it came time to plant the

crop. Furthermore, failure to repay a loan could mean financial ruin by causing the channels of credit to stop which would be catastrophe for renters.

John Asahl, a hardware store owner in Ramona, Indian Territory at the turn of the twentieth century, was an example of a businessman who dealt in chattel loans. By examining the ledger of the hardware store, much can be learned about his dealings with farmers. On several occasions in the spring of 1903, farmers came to the store to purchase plows. He sold the plows on credit for \$14 with both notes due on September 1, 1903, about six months later. The ledger was somewhat vague about the actual loans. Asahl recorded in the ledger that chattel secured the loan for the new plows but does not specify the property. Large items, according to the ledger, were often secured by chattel with typically the balance due in a single payment at the end of the contract. However, not all of the loans had exactly the same payoff terms. W.B. Mackey purchased a saddle, bridle, and pad for his horse for \$40 in a transaction secured by chattel on July 13, 1903. In this instance, Mackey paid the first installment on September 13 and the final installment on December 13. Chattel loans varied from one customer to the next depending on the needs of each borrower, the amount of the item being purchased, and from one store to the next.⁸⁹

Ben LaFayette, general store owner and landlord, also dealt with a tremendous volume of chattel loans with a variety of stipulations. Between 1903 and 1906, LaFayette kept the contracts for 110 chattel mortgages. Many of the mortgages placed liens on livestock such as draft horses and cattle, but others placed liens on unharvested crops, tools and farm implements, and even personal effects. Some contracts were as simple as borrowing \$300 and placing a lien on one black horse, one bay horse, one brown horse, a

wagon, and “four cows all giving milch.”⁹⁰ Others were substantially more complex.

LaFayette seemed to encourage the tenant to put as much property up as possible, often substantially more than the value of the loan. J. J. and Elizabeth Hawkins owed \$51 to LaFayette and their mortgage read:

Thirty or more acres of cotton and ten or more acres of corn to be planted grown and cultivated by me or any one working for or under me during the year 1908 on the allotment of Emma Bruner. . . . and all plow tools in my possession. It is intended that this shall and does convey to LaFayette and Bro the entire products both rental and personal of the above or any other farm that may be cultivated by me or any one working for or under me including all rents and share crops for the year 1908, 1909, and each succeeding year until the above and any and all additional indebtedness that may be due said LaFayette and Bro shall have been paid in full.⁹¹

Liens often became very complex as lenders often required more than tools and crops as collateral. Unharvested crops were a gamble but livestock had a much more stable value. Lenders seemed more inclined to lend money for actual property than the prospect of a crop; therefore, whenever possible, most lenders secured loans with livestock, tools, and crops as collateral. LaFayette and Bro. most likely used all property and income available to the renter to secure the mortgage. William Sinclair signed a chattel mortgage on February 22, 1906 for \$199.47. The loan came due on November 1, 1906. His lien read as follows:

One light brindle Jersey cow about 5 years old branded S left hip, and increase. One pale red cow about 4 years old line back branded S on left hip, and increase. One dark brindle Jersey cow about 4 years old branded S on left hip, and increase. One dark red cow about 3 years old branded on left hip, and increase. One black heifer yearling about 1 year old no brands. One bay pony horse about 12 years and 14 ½ hands high branded HN on thigh. One bay mare about 8 years old and 15 hands high natural brand on right thigh C. One sorrel mare colt about 1 year old no brand. All the increase of the above mares. One 2 ¾ Studebaker wagon, one set double chain harness. All plow tools and implements consisting of breaking plows, double shovels etc. now in my possession or that may be

in my possession at the maturity of this mortgage. Fifteen or more acres of cotton and 6 or more acres of corn and 4 or more acres of oats or more of each to be planted grown and cultivated by me or any one working for or under me during the year 1906 on Addie Collins allotment situated in Section 9 and 10 Township 11, North Range 16 east located about 4 miles west and 2 miles South of Checotah, I.T. in the Creek Nation or on any other farm for the year 1906. It is intended that this shall and does convey to LaFayette and Bro the entire products either rental or personal of the above or any other farm that may be cultivated by me or any one working for or under me during the years, 1906, 1907 and each succeeding year until the above any indebtedness due LaFayette and Bro shall have been paid in full.⁹²

Terms appear to be uneven and unfair with no regulations governing loans and collateral. Hardy Manuel signed a mortgage for \$100 on May 3, 1905 and used five horses, one cultivator, one plow, farm implements and tools, and unharvested corn and other crops as collateral. Sam Owens signed the following property as collateral for \$298.59 on November 1, 1906.

One bay horse about 13 years old and 16 hands high branded Y on left shoulder; one gray horse about 11 years old and 15 hands high branded I on left hip; one 3' Mitchell Wagon, one set double chain harness, all plow tools and farming implements, 20 or more acres of cotton and 15 or more acres of corn to be planted by me or anyone working for or under me during the year 1906 on the W. H. Nance lease of the Roman Thompson allotment situated 16 miles southwest of Checotah and about one mile west of Burney, I.T. in the Creek Nation or any other farm for the year 1906. It is intended that this shall and does convey to LaFayette and Bro the entire products, either rental or personal of the above or any other farm cultivated by me or anyone working for or under me during the years 1906, 1907 and each succeeding year until the above and any and all additional indebtedness due LaFayette and Bro have been paid in full.⁹³

Farmers had few choices if they needed to borrow money. In many small towns, borrowing opportunities were limited to a bank, a merchant, or a landlord. If a farmer needed credit, he had to use the local merchant even if the terms were unfair. Mortgaging all livestock, draft animals, and other personal property was certainly not desirable; but if

the tenant desperately needed money to purchase seed, implements, or food, he had no choice but to accept the terms and hope for a decent harvest and a stable cotton market.

Clyde Pickard, a real estate agent near Norman, also dabbled in chattel mortgages. The vast majority of his mortgages came from his Dodge automobile dealership where the collateral for the loan was the vehicle itself, but Pickard also made loans to tenants on the farms he owned and managed. On one such farm, A. Gibbs borrowed \$450 and signed a mortgage where the collateral was:

All alfalfa raised during 1912 on above described land. One half of all other crops raised during 1912 on above described land including one half of all cotton, cotton seed, kaffir corn, and other crops of grain and hay and roughage. It being understood and agreed that if the mortgagor sublets the said land said lease is hereby notified that all the alfalfa covered by this mortgage and one half of all crop raised during 1912.⁹⁴

From the wording of the mortgage, it is apparent that Gibbs was a renter of some sort but it is difficult to ascertain whether he was a real estate agent who had leased the land from an out-of-town investor or if he was a tenant farmer who had a relationship with the landlord that allowed the flexibility to sublease the farm. Most of Pickard's lease contracts were fairly simple and not nearly as complicated as those executed by LaFayette. The majority of these leases were very similar to the one signed by R. M. Peacock who borrowed \$220 from Pickard. In exchange, Pickard put a lien on "1 three year old brindle cow, 3 red cows about four years old, 3 red and white spotted cows about five years old, 3 red 3 year old [cows]."⁹⁵ Pickard typically either put a lien on livestock or crops but rarely did he put a lien on both. What is obvious is that chattel mortgages varied significantly. Few generalizations can be made to encompass them all. However, most chattel mortgages were designed so that the lender would have more than enough

collateral to cover the loan. Tenants often stood to lose property far in excess of the original loan.

FARMERS' UNION

During the early years in Oklahoma, the legislature did little to help tenants. Yet renters were not alone in their struggle for survival and economic betterment. The Farmers' Union, organized in Oklahoma five years before statehood, became a powerful force capable of electing government officials and promoting farm issues. Throughout the first fifty years of statehood, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union remained the sole constant advocate for the rights of tenants and small farm owners. The union championed the rights of farmers and provided a platform for farmers to organize in an attempt to fight perceived evils in the state. Though the Oklahoma Farmers' Union was a proponent of all farm issues, economic issues of tenancy were at the heart of many of these debates. The primary goal of the Oklahoma Farmers' Union was to improve the economic situation of farmers and to help renters to become home owners. Between 1900 and 1910, the Oklahoma state organization of the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America, known as the Oklahoma Farmers' Union within the state, was the most vocal organized group that fought for the rights of farm tenants and the Union remained the most ardent supporter of the small owner and tenant until the creation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the 1930s.⁹⁶ One of the leading pro-Union newspapers in Indian Territory summarized its viewpoint succinctly – “We have built you a paper out of nothing and upon nothing except our love for the cause of the downtrodden.”⁹⁷

Throughout Oklahoma, farmers talked of cooperation and were somewhat successful in working together for the common good. The Farmers' Union was easily the most recognizable and powerful cooperative force in Oklahoma and Indian Territories. The union elected some prominent union members, like W. H. Murray and Campbell Russell, who were lifelong advocates of renters, but the organization also supported men like Robert Lee Williams, a union member who was also a notorious profiteer from his tenant empire. The Union was probably most successful in fostering cooperative selling, ginning, and storage with local unions. But in terms of influencing policy, the Farmers' Union was not very successful in passing a renter program until the late 1910s. The Farmers' Union recognized the dangers of indebtedness in western Oklahoma and the evils of high rates of farm tenancy in the east. According to the union, the bankers were the primary agent of the credit crisis. The banker had both prospective owners and indebted owners in "a death grip" and the union was unable to pass legislation to lessen the burden.⁹⁸

With a militant and unwavering tone, the Farmers' Union was often seen as radical by national politicians and more moderate farm organizations like The National Grange of the Order of the Patron's of Husbandry. The Farmers' Union stressed cooperation with other farmers, scientific education, and lobbying politicians for protection against perceived evils and unfair business practices. The union believed that "the farmer has been the victim of organized greed ever since greed was taught to organize – and unless he protests himself against the rapacity of those who fatten off his toil he will continue to be the victim."⁹⁹

Many newspapers throughout Oklahoma supported the Farmers' Union and often spoke for their locales even though there was no official connection with the state organization.¹⁰⁰ For pro-union newspapers, home ownership and patriotism formed an inseparable bond. According to the *Union Review*, "land ownership and patriotism go together."¹⁰¹ Several years later, the *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review* summarized union beliefs about tenancy:

The greatest interest of county life and state and nation is served in making the people a home owning people. In it lies the prosperity and vital existence of the nation. The white people are a home seeking race. Domestic comfort and happiness have always been its greatest desire and upon this as a foundation alone can a real and permanent improvement be considered.¹⁰²

Before the 1910s, reforming the tenant situation in Oklahoma had minimal support. The only group that advocated for the farm tenant was the Farmers' Union, but even then the organization seemed split between large owners in western Oklahoma and the small dirt farmers of eastern Oklahoma. The union, founded in 1902 in Point, Texas, quickly made its way to Oklahoma and boasted a membership of nearly 30,000 members in 839 locals while officially taking the name Indian Territory Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union to signify the alliance between Oklahoma and Indian Territory farmers as statehood approached.¹⁰³

The Farmers' Union focused on improving conditions for all farmers, including tenants. The organization advocated for credit reform, fair interest rates, education in scientific agriculture, controlling the supply of agricultural commodities, suppressing vice and immorality, and educating members in practical politics.¹⁰⁴ It also wanted to keep business meetings private and keep grafters out so the union limited membership to

farmers, farm laborers, county mechanics, school teachers, and preachers while excluding bankers, stock traders, and crop speculators. The union allowed newspaper editors to attend meetings if they obeyed the bylaws but they could not become full members.

The Farmers' Union excluded one large group that could have potentially been a large bloc of allies – African Americans. The union decided that African Americans should not be allowed into the organization and the only possible explanation is the endemic racism of the period. Eastern and southern Oklahoma was culturally part of the South and therefore a bi-racial alliance was impossible. Many Oklahoma residents had moved from Texas or other areas of the South and brought with them feelings of animosity and superiority toward African Americans. They decided that their organization should not allow black farmers.¹⁰⁵

Much of the early platform of the Farmers' Union concerned tenants and small farm owners – small owners, after all, were just one bad crop away from being tenants again. One of the primary goals was to help tenants become small owners. The Farmers' Union supported the controversial Graduated Land Tax that sought to limit landlordism by placing heavy taxes on estates over 160 acres. The eventual law, however, allowed a landlord to hold up to 640 acres with minimal taxation and up to 1240 acres at .0025 percent tax, a farce in the eyes of unionists. The union also believed that rural children should get the same educational opportunities as children of urbanites and that textbooks should be free for all students.¹⁰⁶

The Farmers' Union recognized the need to remain neutral in party politics to ensure support from both parties. Leaders stressed that the National Grange and Farmers'

Alliance had failed by becoming too politically partisan. Though the Oklahoma Farmers' Union remained apolitical, it often endorsed farmer-friendly candidates and fought against those it deemed a detriment to agrarian interests. According to the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, labor unions that became politically active and formed political parties to elect representation rarely succeeded. The Farmers' Union thought it best to influence existing parties rather than attempt another Populist movement.¹⁰⁷ Farmers' Union publications supported W.H. Murray almost unequivocally and saw him as a champion of tenants' rights. Murray was elected to the Constitutional Convention for supporting tenant causes such as the graduated land tax on excess holdings; disallowing non-residents of Oklahoma to own land within the state; stopping corporations from "buying, selling, or speculating in lands, or acting as land agents;" and prohibiting public service corporations from owning, leasing, or controlling mines, oil wells, farms, or pastures.¹⁰⁸ Conversely, the Farmers' Union lobbied against politicians it deemed enemies of the farmer. In the governor's election of 1910 between Lee Cruce and Joe McNeal, the Farmers' Union refused to endorse either candidate because both candidates appeared to have nearly identical interests and voting records despite their separate party affiliations. Both Cruce and McNeal were bankers and the union deemed them enemies of farmers; both were friends of railroads and big business with "no use for common man except for his votes;" both left banking to run for governor; both would return to banking when their political careers ended.¹⁰⁹ The Farmers' Union even remained skeptical of the state constitution and announced its recommendation to the membership:

The messenger is advocating the doctrine that if the constitution is written with corporate greed, then the people should veto it. The politicians advise us that this is wrong. Now, what do you think of that? If corporate greed should succeed in corrupting the constitutional convention we are

advised to swallow the dose. We say to a man No! No! in the spirit of 1776, no! Get what you want or use your veto power.¹¹⁰

The Farmers' Union feared corporate greed more than anything else and refused to support any candidate with any affiliation to banks, railroads, or any corporation.¹¹¹

The membership of the Indian Territory organization was too diverse to survive under a single organization. Indian Territory members, most of whom were tenants, accused the Oklahoma Territory membership, primarily owners, of hijacking the organization and forsaking the needs of tenants. The Indian Territory membership took advantage of the rift to establish a separate union that focused on helping the tenants directly.¹¹² Indian Territory farmers were largely cotton-growing tenants who believed seasonal credit loan reform should be a primary focus while the Oklahoma Territory farmers railed against mortgage rates. W.H. Murray proclaimed "I like the Indian Territory Union because it has no dude members" and attacked the Oklahoma Territory faction as a "dress parade" of men "wearing \$8 waterproof boots and \$5 Stetsons."¹¹³ The Oklahoma Territory membership saw themselves as struggling entrepreneurs in search of sophistication and dignity to blend into an increasingly scientific business world while Murray's faction shunned this notion, opting instead to fight middle-class grafters for driving land prices up and making interest rates on short-term loans too high.¹¹⁴

The two sides reconciled but power had begun to shift as tenants were still angry with union leadership. The membership from Indian Territory underwent a minor revolution of dirt farmers in 1906. This group attacked prominent members of the union by ousting Campbell Russell, President of the Executive Committee of the Union, from his local union for poor character and individualism. Charges against Russell included

calling President Theodore Roosevelt “Ted” at meetings, only giving more than half of the road to oncoming traffic if the oncoming load was heavier, using fertilizer to grow more than his share of corn, planting trees and purchasing superior livestock which fostered jealousy with neighbors, and supplying money to build a new school in addition to paying the teacher’s salary.¹¹⁵

By 1907, the Oklahoma Farmers’ Union had begun to mend the broken relationships. Dissident groups reunited in a single organization under the slogan “Reorganization, a clean slate, a new start.”¹¹⁶ Though the union barely survived the coup, it emerged and grew steadily to become a strong proponent of the farm tenant throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Other movements remained at odds with the Farmers’ Union on its policies. The Farmers’ Union often viewed the Grange and later the Farm Bureau as an elitist group but the Farmers’ Union continued to lobby for tenants and many of the union’s prominent members like Russell and Murray, both advocates for tenants, held prominent positions in state government for the next two decades. In the crusade for tenants rights, the union wrote that “Land is the source of life. Land is the mother, not the father. From it we derive our food and clothing, shelter, and fuel and from its productions, cities are built and supported. But without the farmer land has no value. Then where is the justice or wisdom in permitting a few men to won this source of life?”¹¹⁷

Several years later, Patrick Nagle, editor of *Tenant Farmer* and strongest voice of the Socialist Party, argued that the Farmers’ Union nearly failed because it did not help the tenant farmers enough. Even though the organization survived and continued to influence some politicians, Nagle outlined his concerns with the union. He believed that

special interests had infiltrated and nearly killed the union around the time of statehood. Bankers, editors, and landlords were allowed membership under the guise of helping farmers. Nagle also believed that discriminating against African Americans undermined cooperation because they had no incentive to hold their cotton and would sell it without pooling. The socialist leader also believed that the cooperative programs favored large owners who had nothing in common with the tenants in the first place.¹¹⁸ Thus, the union did not live up to its own promises that “the tricksters, the politicians or the distributor have no business in the union and should be kept outside.”¹¹⁹

By 1910, Oklahoma had emerged as a tenant state. Only three years after statehood, Oklahoma had over 104,000 tenants. Remarkably, there were more tenants in the state than owners as tenants operated 54 percent of the farms. Large landholders had successfully taken control of Indian land and converted the state into tenant plantations through purchase and subleasing. Oklahoma was already falling into Gilbert Fite’s “agricultural trap.” Farms in eastern Oklahoma were too small to support a decent living. The greatest concentration of small farms, those under one hundred acres, was in eastern and southern Oklahoma where tenancy rates were highest. Oklahoma had 70,491 farms under one hundred acres. Pottawattamie, Lincoln, Garvin, Bryan, Muskogee, Carter, Hughes, Sequoyah and Seminole counties all had over two thousand farms less than one hundred acres. All of these cotton-producing counties were in eastern Oklahoma and had high tenancy rates.¹²⁰

Speculators and real estate agents had rented Indian allotments and purchased available land. They then turned around and rented this land to the growing number of farmers lured to Oklahoma by the promise of prosperity. Unfortunately for the small

farmer, land speculators had arrived first with more money and organization which made it difficult for farmers with little money to compete for the land. Born of Indian allotment, the tenant system began to look like other areas of the United States. Oklahoma had a tenancy rate to rival most southern states, but renters in Oklahoma were different. Because there was no entrenched class of ruling aristocrats, tenants in Oklahoma organized sooner than tenants in other states. With a growing voice, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union emerged to fight for the tenant and continued this fight until the economic requirements of farming made tenancy impossible in the 1940s.

CHAPTER III
ENDNOTES

¹ For more on the Southeastern Indians and relations with slaves, see Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 444-451. Hudson discusses the relationship between slaves and Indians in the American South before removal. In some instances, Indians themselves were enslaved, but by the time of removal many Native American leaders had plantations with slaves of their own. After removal, Native Americans took their slaves and continued to plant cotton on plantations in Indian Territory, some having as many as a thousand slaves. For more on tribal ownership of slaves in Indian Territory, see Gilbert Fite, "Development of the Cotton Industry by the Five Civilized Tribes of Indian Territory," *Journal of Southern History* 15 (August 1949): 342-353; Murray R. Wickett, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

² For more on the ethnohistory of the Southeastern Indians before removal see Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*. For more on the interaction between the southeastern tribes and the plains tribes after removal, see David La Vere, *Contrary Neighbors* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

³ Interview with W. T. Holland by Charles W. Loftin, September 28, 1937, *Indian and Pioneer Oral History Collection*, 33: 351, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK. Hereafter cited as *IPH*. Many other Native American and early settlers of Oklahoma described their experiences to WPA employees during the 1930s.

⁴ Interview with Frank Harris by John F. Daugherty, August 13, 1937, *ibid.*, 63: 404. For other firsthand accounts, see: Interview with W. I. Worley by L. W. Wilson April 29, 1937, *ibid.*, 2: 574-575 ; Interview with William Byrd by O. C. Dawson, *ibid.*, 1: 480; Interview with R.Z. Dugan by L. W. Wilson, *ibid.*, 3: 282; Interview with O. C. Sellers by Billie Byrd, August 10, 1937, *ibid.*, 44: 156; Interview with Lorena Simerson by James R. Carselowey, May 21, 1937, *ibid.*, 101: 354.

⁵ Fite, "Development of the Cotton Industry," 349.

⁶ *Herbert Otho Boggs Papers*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

⁷ *Martha T. Swearingen Papers*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

⁸ Fite, "Development of the Cotton Industry," 351.

⁹ Catalina Prater Questionnaire, undated, *ibid.*, 76: 362-363; Interview of Evelyn Saugee by Alene D. McDowell, June 14, 1937, *ibid.*, 78: 83.

¹⁰ Interview with Zack Redford by Grace Kelley, December 31, 1937, *Ibid.*, Vol. 41, 268-269; Interview with J. D. Baker by Maurice R. Anderson, *Ibid.*, Vol. 13, 43; Interview with James Abraham Givens by Ethel B. Tackitt, March 9, 1938, *Ibid.*, Vol. 84, 192-192,.

¹¹ Joe M. Grayson interviewed by Grace Kelley, December 17, 1937, *Ibid.*, Vol., 26, 367-368.

¹² Interview with John M. Nichols by Ida A. Merwin, September 19, 1937, *IPH*, Vol. 102, 405.

¹³ For more on cattle ranching in Indian Territory, see William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association: Federal Regulation and the Cattleman's Last Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973); Jimmy M. Skaggs, ed., *Ranch and Range in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1978); Donald E. Worster, *The Chisholm Trail: High Road of the Cattle Kingdom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

¹⁴ Interview with Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Ryan by Harry M. Dreyer, April 5, 1937, *IPH* Vol. 9, 135; Interview with John T. Barr by Raymond Jantz, January 13, 1938, *IPH*, Vol. 9, 47-50.

¹⁵ Interview with John M. Nichols by Ida A. Merwin, September 29, 1937, *Ibid.*, Vol. 102, 405.

¹⁶ Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), 32-33; see also Kent Carter, *The Dawes Commission and the Allotment of the Five Civilized Tribes, 1893-1914* (Orem, Utah: Ancestry.com, 1999).

¹⁷ Leonard Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land: The Dawes Act and the Decline of Indian Farming* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 4-12. Carlson offers an outstanding succinct account of the history of the Dawes Act and its application in Chapter 1.

¹⁸ Frederick Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 77.

¹⁹ For the best account of the history of the Dawes act, see D. S. Otis, *The Dawes Act and the Allotment of Indian Lands* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1973). For a succinct account of allotment and its success in relationship to the goal of assimilating Indians into farmers, see Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*.

²⁰ Wicket, *Contested Territory*, 59-61.

²¹ Carter, *The Dawes Commission*, 33-38; Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 65, 86, 98-99; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* Vol. 2. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 748-749, 753-754.

²² Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 14-15.

²³ Prucha, *the Great Father*, 754.

²⁴ Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 90-91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 114-120.

²⁶ Interview with Ellen Cunningham by Alene D. McDowell, July 14, 1937, *IPH*, Vol. 65, 365.

²⁷ *Robert Lee Williams Collection*, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK, Box 14. Homestead Certificates no. 1233, 12514, 12542, 17643, 17644, and 17645.

²⁸ Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 89-90, 114-120.

²⁹ Carlson, *Bureaucrats, Indians, and Land*, 12-13.

³⁰ Gertrude Bonin, et al, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft and Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes – Legalized Robbery* (Philadelphia: Office of the Indian Rights Association, 1924), 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁴ For more on this, see Carlson, *Bureaucrats, Indians, and Land*; Bonin, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians*; Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*.

³⁵ Fite, "Development of the Cotton Industry," 347.

³⁶ W. David Baird, "Are the Five Tribes of Oklahoma 'Real' Indians?" *The Western Historical Quarterly* 21 (February 1990): 9.

³⁷ Leonard Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 4. Carlson examines the failure of the Dawes Act in relationship to Indian agriculture and the inability to assimilate Native Americans successfully. Carlson argues that allotment was actually

very successful in opening land but given a mixed review on the efficiency of the transfer.

³⁸ Baird, "Are the Five Tribes of Oklahoma 'Real' Indians?," 10.

³⁹ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁰ *Oklahoma Union Messenger and Independent Farmer*, October 25, 1906.

⁴¹ *Durant Weekly News*, February 9, 1906; *Harlow's Weekly*, October 18, 1924.

⁴² W. R. Berryhill interview by Johnson H. Hampton, March 20, 1938, *IPH*, Joseph Uray Littimer interview by Amelia F. Harris, September 23, 1937, *IPH*, Vol. 33, 80.

⁴³ *Flora Belle Simmons Ramsay Papers*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, File 15.

⁴⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 10. Hofstadter claimed that he had not attributed status anxiety to Populists while other historians, like David Potter, cited references in his book that seem to show otherwise. For more on Hofstadter's status anxiety thesis and the historical debate that ensued, see Robert M. Collins, "The Originality Trap: Richard Hofstadter on Populism," *Journal of American History* 76 (June 1989): 150-157; For a critique of Hofstadter, see Norman Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of 'The Age of Reform,'" *Journal of Southern History* 26 (November 1960): 478-500.

⁴⁵ Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism," 498-500.

⁴⁶ *Harlow's Weekly*, September 21, 1921. Within this study, numerous businessmen are used as examples of transplanted whites who speculated in Oklahoma after statehood. Prominent early Oklahomans like Robert Lee Williams, Lee Cruce, and William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray are a few examples of Americans who came to Oklahoma and established farms, businesses, and law firms.

⁴⁷ H. B. Moulton, Attorney for Choctaw Nation, to William A. Jones, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, March 30, 1903, *G. N. Belvin Papers*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

⁴⁸ *Harlow's Weekly*, September 2, 1921.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Hurshel Bailey Collection*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK. The collection has numerous warranty deeds, quit claim deeds, chattel mortgages, lease agreements for excess allotments, letters to investors, and lease agreements with tenants on mass produced lease forms.

⁵² Excess allotments were noncontiguous land allotments made in addition to the central homesteads allotments.

⁵³ Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Landrum Reed, November 1, 1906 *Bailey Collection*, Box 2, File 1.

⁵⁴ Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and George Roberson, February 22, 1905, *ibid.*, Box 2, File 4.

⁵⁵ Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Ellen Watson, January 6, 1903, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Dick Martin, January 1, 1903; Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Bosie Scott, September 29, 1902; Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Ellen Bradberry, October 8, 1902; Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Ada Chockey, September 25, 1902; Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Richard Evans and family, October 17, 1901, *ibid.* In this box, there are numerous contracts showing that LaFayette leased thousands of acres of Indian allotments and subleased it to incoming white tenants between 1901 and 1910.

⁵⁷ W. N. Redwine to Cruce, Cruce, and Bleakmore, August 19, 1903. *Cruce, Cruce, and Bleakmore Papers*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, Box 10, file 5.

⁵⁸ Bonin, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians*, 9-15.

⁵⁹ F. E. Riddle to W.I. Cruce, August 13, 1903, *Cruce, Cruce, and Bleakmore*, Box 10, File 5.

⁶⁰ *Blue County Democrat*, August 26, 1904. Blue County became Bryan county around the time of statehood and the newspaper became the Bryan county Democrat shortly before statehood.

⁶¹ Bonin, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians*, 11-12; *Blue County Democrat*, July 22, 1904. *Blue County Democrat* reports that full-bloods and minors had to hold their land in trust and that it could only be sold by order of the court. Guardianships could be purchased from the judge (a bribe) and stories of friends of judges making small fortunes from acting as Indian guardians and charging astounding fees are notorious.

⁶² Cruce and Cruce to G. H. Crider, August 18, 1903, *Cruce, Cruce, and Bleakmore*, Box 10, File 5.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *Farmers' Union Advocate*, July 21, 1910.

⁶⁵ E. E. Dale and James D. Morrison, *Pioneer Judge: The Life of Robert Lee Williams* (Cedar Rapids, IA: The Torch Press, 1958), 100.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 392-394.

⁶⁷ William Docking to T. J. Sexton April 20, 1903, *RLW*, Box 14, File 2.

⁶⁸ William Docking to RLW, April 27, 1903, *ibid.*, Box 14, File 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ RLW to State Auditor, Graduate Land License Tax Report, undated. *Ibid.*, Box 14, File 2; Dale and Morrison, *Pioneer Judge*, 97-100.

⁷¹ William Docking to T. J. Sexton, April 24, 1904, *ibid.*, Box 14, File 2.

⁷² William Docking to RLW, May 4, 1903, *ibid.*, Box 14, File 3.

⁷³ *Union Advocate Review*, March 3, 1910.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, November 11, 1909.

⁷⁵ *Fletcher Times and Comanche County Farmer*, March 8, 1904.

⁷⁶ For a brief history of land openings in Oklahoma, see W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *The Story of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 291-306. For a brief essay and map of land openings, see Danney Goble, "Land Openings of Oklahoma Territory, 1889-1906," in Charles Robert Goins, et al., *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 122-123.

⁷⁷ RLW to Docking and F. L. Williams, May 21, 1903, *RLW*, Box 14, File 3.

⁷⁸ RLW to William Docking, 6/2/04, *ibid.*, Box 14, File 4.

⁷⁹ RLW to T. L. Snygley, November 21, 1908, *ibid.*, box 14, file 19.

⁸⁰ RLW to W. O. Byrd, October 29, 1909, *ibid.*, Box 14, file 32.

⁸¹ *Durant Weekly News*, July 24, 1914.

⁸² *Ibid.*, January 12, 1906.

⁸³ *Harlow's Weekly*, January 18, 1913.

⁸⁴ For more on the removal of the state capital, see Fred Branson, "The Removal of the State Capital," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 31 (No. 1, 1953): 15-21.

⁸⁵ *Union Review*, March 27, 1908.

⁸⁶ *Union Advocate Review*, November 25, 1909.

⁸⁷ "Indian territory Conditions of To-day from the Farmers' View point." Letter from Russell to Congress, Prairie Stock Farm, OK, November 16, 1907, *Campbell Russell Collection*, Box 1, File 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *John Asahl Collection*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

⁹⁰ Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and James Gardner, undated, *Bailey Collection*, Box 1, File 1.

⁹¹ Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and J.J. and Elizabeth Hawkins, undated, *ibid.*, Box 2, File 6.

⁹² Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and William Sinclair, February 22, 1906, *ibid.*, Box 2, File 1.

⁹³ Contract between Benjamin LaFayette and Hardy Manuel, May 3, 1905, *ibid.*, Box 2, File 6.

⁹⁴ Contract between Clyde Pickard and A. Gibbs, January 27, 1912, *Clyde Pickard Papers*, Western Oklahoma History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

⁹⁵ Contract between Picard and R. M. Peacock, August 25, 1924, *ibid.*

⁹⁶ For a history of the Farmers' Union, see James Milligan, *Oklahoma Farmers Union* (Cottonwood Publications, 1997); see also, Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1999); Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of*

Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1923 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976). The Farmers' Union was a large and influential group in Oklahoma politics in the last years before statehood. Many influential Oklahoma politicians from the statehood convention, like Robert Lee Williams, Campbell Russell, and W.H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray were members of the Union.

⁹⁷ *Union Review*, October 11, 1905. The *Union Review*, located in Ardmore. Carter County had 2003 tenants according to the Census of 1910 (18th in total number) with a tenancy rate of 75 percent (17th highest). The *Union Review* claimed to be the only union newspaper in the Chickasaw Nation with a subscriber list of 1300 people. The *Union Review* writes, "Build up the paper that advocates your cause and leave the papers which are afraid to champion your claims to the tender mercies of capitalism, and we will soon have the editor of every local paper knocking at our doors for admission into the union" (September 8, 1905).

⁹⁸ *Union Review*, June 19, 1908; *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, January 14, 1909.

⁹⁹ *Indiahoma Farmers' Union Constitution and Bylaws*, Oklahoma Farmers Union Collection, Oklahoma Farmers' Union Headquarters, Oklahoma City, OK, 3-4.

¹⁰⁰ Several leading newspapers for the Oklahoma Farmers' Union included the *Indiahoma Union Signal* of Shawnee, the *Oklahoma Union Messenger and Independent Farmer*, and the *Union Review*. The *Farmers' Union Advocate* became the official organ of the Farmers' Union after 1910 when the Farmers' Union merged the two independent papers under a single editor and the paper was renamed several times at one point being called *The Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review* and the paper also underwent numerous managing editor changes as well as experiments with the format. The lack of continuity was likely a result of the turmoil experienced by the OFU in the years after statehood when the union barely survived an internal struggle. The *Oklahoma Union Messenger and Independent Farmer* was also a consolidated newspaper of several union supporting newspapers and printed a page of Oklahoma Farmers' Union news each week. The editor was also very congenial to the labor movement and began printing a page for the Organized Labor of Oklahoma. This paper had no official party but advocated for farm issues.

¹⁰¹ *Union Review*, June 16, 1906.

¹⁰² *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, May 6, 1909.

¹⁰³ Milligan, *Oklahoma Farmers Union*, 12-16.

¹⁰⁴ *Indiahoma Farmers' Union Constitution and Bylaws*, *OFU Collection*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 25-27. For more on race relations in Oklahoma see Norman Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas University, 1979); Jimmie Lewis

Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); Bonnie Lynn Sherow, *Red Earth: Race and Agriculture in Oklahoma Territory* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 2004.

¹⁰⁶ *Farmers' Union Advocate*, March 26, 1908; July 21, 1910; *Union Advocate Review*, 9/25/09.

¹⁰⁷ *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, March 25, 1909; *Oklahoma Union Messenger and Independent Farmer*, August 9, 1906.

¹⁰⁸ *Union Review*, April 3, 1908.

¹⁰⁹ *Farmers' Union Advocate*, July 21, 1910.

¹¹⁰ *Oklahoma Union Messenger and Independent Farmer*, August 2, 1906.

¹¹¹ *Farmers' Union Advocate*, March 26, 1908. *Farmers' Union Advocate* and other newspapers were always looking to spread propaganda and link the farm cause with patriotism. *Advocate* published the following song submitted by a member that should be sung to the tune of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic"

Hail! O hail the Farmers' Union

"There's a grand and noble army that is gathering for the fight,
And it soon will strike the victor's blow with courage and with might;
O, it marches on in Justice, Truth and Love to do the right,
To millions toiling on.
"Hail, O Hail the Farmers' Union (3 times)
For it is marching on."

¹¹² The Indianahoma Farmers' Union was undergoing a legal fight with the Postmaster General of the United States over the mail status of the official newspaper. The Postmaster General argued that the paper was propaganda, not a newspaper, which made it much more expensive to send to union members. The Indianahoma Union also had infighting over financial issues. For more on the plight of the Farmers' Union see Bissett, *Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus*, 57.

¹¹³ Letter from W. H. Murray to the editor, *Independent Farmer*, May 10, 1906.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, August 2, 1906.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, August 22, 1907.

¹¹⁷ *Union Advocate Review*, December 16, 1909.

¹¹⁸ *Tenant Farmer*, March, 1915.

¹¹⁹ *New State Farmer*, September 5, 1906.

¹²⁰ University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>. Accessed April-August, 2009.

CHAPTER IV

TENANTS AND GRAFTERS

Farm tenancy trends began to shift somewhat in the 1910s as farmers in eastern Oklahoma declined in farm tenancy. In addition, farm tenancy became less associated with the rental of Indian land. Instead, it began to correlate more with cotton production. Indian land rental was still a vital component as many full-blood Native Americans could not sell their land. Yet, when courts allowed some Native Americans to sell their homesteads, many eagerly sold their homesteads to farmers in the 1910s and 1920s which led to a decline in farm tenancy in Oklahoma after World War I. In both former territories, all major cotton-producing counties had farm tenancy rates over 50 percent but most saw significant decreases in the percentage of farm renters before the onslaught of farm mortgage in the late 1920s.¹

The lifestyle of the cotton tenant caused many unique problems. Tenants moved frequently, often every year, and this mobility caused children to miss school and become entrenched in the system because they did not have the education to escape it. For a variety of reasons, tenants could not save enough money to purchase farms, which destroyed any chance of building long-term wealth in the 1920s. The lack of savings

forced many tenants to survive on meager food supplies and restricted diets, which led to malnourishment and disease. To complicate the situation further, many tenants could not afford visits to the doctor. Tenant housing was crude because landlords refused to build adequate living structures for their tenants in hopes of saving money in an unstable economic climate. Thus, the system became self-perpetuating. Oklahoma tenants could not escape the dreary lifestyle which replicated as undereducated tenant children could not overcome their prescribed station. Tenants had many of the same problems as the urban slums, but Progressives overlooked the farm tenants and no muckrakers exposed the lives of the tenants until John Steinbeck in the 1930s. The misguided Country Life Movement sought to instill some pride in rural communities but the problems ran much deeper. Tenants believed the capitalistic system was at fault for many of their issues. This system promoted cotton production rather than diversification because the cash crop system offered the promise of greater profit for landlords. Thus, the circumstances associated with cotton production left tenants in poor health, with little savings, and in deplorable living conditions. Tenants believed landlords, banks, and railroads worked to keep farmers in perpetual debt through unfair lending practices, enslavement through contracts, and high shipping rates. And tenants occasionally tried to fight back but the government offered little in the way of assistance against the perceived evils. Rural tenants needed government assistance not encouragement.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COTTON IN OKLAHOMA

The story of the tenant farmer is deeply entwined with the history of cotton and its price fluctuations. As cotton prices rose and fell, the prosperity of the tenant vacillated

accordingly. When cotton prices were high, tenants saved enough money for a farm mortgage and tenancy in the South declined accordingly; but when cotton prices fell, marginal owners lost their farms to foreclosure and moved back into a rental status. The story of the Oklahoma renter was more problematic because tenant farms in Oklahoma were often more diverse. Instead of relying solely on cotton, most small farms in Oklahoma had small fields of hay, wheat, kafir, broom corn, or livestock to supplement their cotton acreage.²

Cotton has a long history in Oklahoma. It came to Oklahoma long before it was a state. The southeastern tribes introduced both cotton and slavery to the territory in the 1830s. Native-American cotton plantations produced numerous small fortunes before the Civil War. Even after the restructuring of the Civil War, Native-American planters continued growing cotton by using Freedmen and hiring white farmers from outside the territory on an annual basis.³

In the years following the Civil War, cotton production underwent technological improvements. In the field, cotton planters, better fertilizer distribution, cotton stalk cutters, plows, and harrows had improved the yield per acre of cotton farmers but picking and chopping cotton remained labor-intensive.⁴ Ginning also underwent an efficiency transformation to accompany production improvements. Before the Civil War, nearly every plantation had its own gin which hindered progress in mechanization. After the Civil War, professional public gins emerged and tenant plantations recognized that personal gins were not nearly as cost-effective as hiring a professional ginner to separate the lint.⁵ Because of the shift to professional ginneries, gins improved drastically in lint separation and radically increased the proficiency in separating the cotton from the seed.

The screw press also improved shipping and storage as bales were packed tighter and thus became significantly more dense. In 1800, the average cotton bale weighed 225 pounds; by 1899, the average bale of cotton had more than doubled to weigh 497 pounds. In just one hundred years, twice as much cotton could now be shipped on a single load.⁶

Perhaps because of the production increase, individuals began to look for new uses for the crop which helped propel prices upward in the early 1900s. By 1900, numerous industries relied on cotton for important staples. Lint and seed remained the most important uses. Seed was used for the next year's crop and the bulk of cotton lint was used by textile industries worldwide. However, novel uses also emerged after the Civil War. Cotton stalks were chopped and returned to the soil as fertilizer. Fiber from cotton stalks and roots became important in making bags, carpets, and rugs. And cotton hulls, long thought of as waste, now had a very important use as feed for cattle. Hulls, stalks, and roots, when mixed with water and meal, became a vital staple for cattle feed during the early twentieth century. The feed made from cotton hulls "ranks with the best flesh producers, and in the dairy no superior in the quantity of milk or butter produced." Even though cotton went through market cycles like all other agricultural commodities, by-products formerly thought of as waste made cotton more profitable which further encouraged cotton producers to maximize cotton acreage.⁷

The ramifications of the southern cotton dependency were not immediately obvious. First, it depleted the soil, which made growing crops, especially cotton, difficult in many areas of the South. Second, southerners even grew cotton to the point that they neglected foodstuffs and instead relied on the North and West to produce food. After the Civil War, it became more profitable to plant cotton and to purchase foodstuffs.⁸ The

Census wrote that “the cultivation of corn is less expensive than the cultivation of cotton, but at the lowest price that cotton has reached since 1860, it would ensure a greater gross income per acre than corn.”⁹ Cotton prices remained high after the Civil War until 1876, when overproduction drove prices downward from \$0.86 per pound in 1876 to \$0.13 per pound ten years later. Cotton growers still operated at a gain but profit margins became increasingly thin.¹⁰

New technology and new cotton strains after the Civil War also altered production of the crop. Because of the perfection of short-staple cotton separators, arid regions of the United States could produce cotton because there was now a cost-effective substitute for upland cotton.¹¹ After the Civil War, cotton grew in popularity and began to spread beyond the traditional southern piedmont and into new regions including West Texas, Oklahoma Territory, and Indian Territory during the 1890s. Texas and the Twin Territories were extremely successful in producing cotton. Texas and Oklahoma combined to gin over one million bales by 1900. Texas increased by 3,025,842 acres of cotton, Indian Territory by 371,987 acres, Oklahoma Territory jumped by 239,569 acres in less than ten years. This 3.6 million new acres accounted for 88.7 percent of the increased acreage in the United States during the 1890s. Cotton acreage soared in the 1890s in the future Sooner State because of the widespread settlement of the territories. As southerners flocked to Oklahoma, they found the climate of the state conducive to short-staple cotton and, when prices continued to rise, they continued to planting more acres.¹²

Because of the promise of profitability, early Oklahomans in nearly every county attempted to grow cotton. By 1910, cotton production became entrenched throughout the

state, even in areas with marginally hospitable climates. Though cotton production was heaviest in eastern and southwestern Oklahoma, experimentation across the state had occurred. Even in the panhandle counties, reports show that farmers raised cotton. In 1910, Beaver County farmers ginned twenty-nine bales of cotton and neighbors in Texas County produced thirty-three.¹³ Though the numbers remained modest, this proves that the lure of cotton production forced consideration in even the most arid parts of the state. Though cotton production in northwest Oklahoma never attained large ginning numbers, some farmers procured the crop well into the twentieth century. *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower* reported cotton receiverships in Woodward as late as 1931.¹⁴ This widespread production did not last and by 1940, farmers in peripheral counties had all but abandoned the crop in favor of other forms of agriculture. Farmers in northern counties like Garfield, Woodward, and Adair flirted with cotton but never grew the crop successfully.¹⁵

The 1910s saw vacillations for the cotton farmer because of the impending war in Europe. As the war began in the fall of 1914, the world was unsure of the agricultural situation and farm prices in general fell. Cotton prices declined even more drastically, from a high of \$0.14 per pound in June to \$0.08 per pound in October and continued to plummet.¹⁶ One Oklahoma source reported that some locals even saw prices as low as \$0.06 pound in mid-October.¹⁷ Bumper crops in 1913 and 1914 caused overproduction in the United States and prices declined as production exceeded spinners' demand.¹⁸ Some banks and merchants assisted by trading cotton bales for merchandise and debts, but farmers still could not get maximum value for their crops because of the low market prices.¹⁹ Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma erroneously diagnosed the impending

world crisis and offered a remedy that was unfeasible for cash crop farmers: “I believe the proper thing for the southern farmer to do is to hold back his cotton crop in the hopes that the war will come to a close within the next few months. But if war does continue, the only thing that will bring cotton back to its proper price is a decrease in production.”²⁰

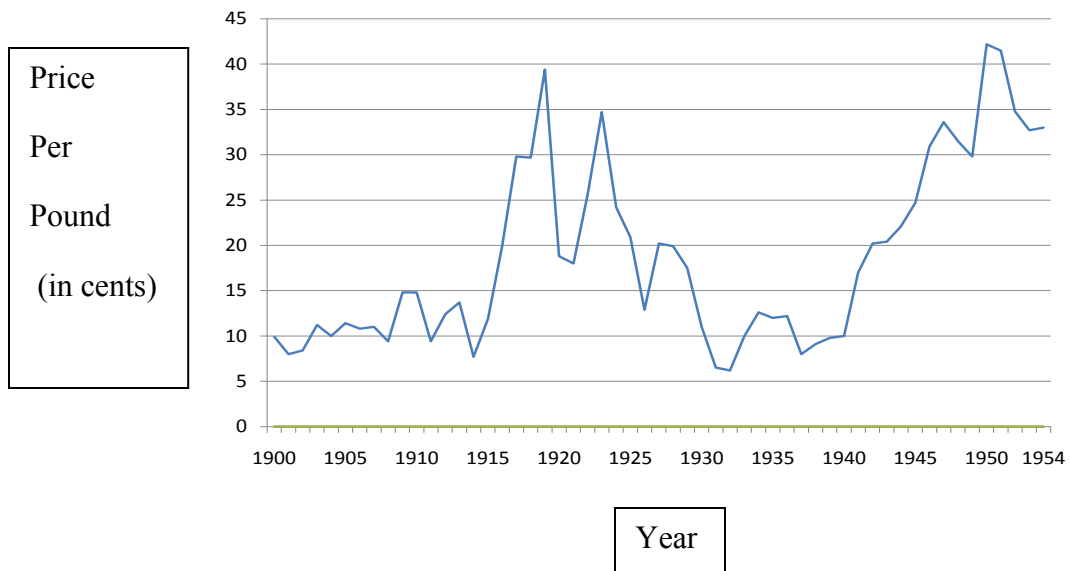
By the 1920s, the cotton production in Oklahoma shifted westward. Farmers in western Oklahoma began out producing eastern Oklahoma cotton farmers. The Boll Weevil and declining soil fertility forced eastern Oklahomans into planting more diverse crops or artificially adding nitrogen to the soil in the form of fertilizer. Western Oklahoma proved to be a more effective area for growing cotton. Western Oklahoma was more resistant to the Boll Weevil because of the dry climate; it had better subsoil phosphorous levels; and western Oklahoma farms were substantially larger, which meant greater mechanization and the ability to farm large tracts of land more efficiently. Though eastern Oklahomans raised a higher quality of cotton and picked rather than snapped, western cotton growers continued to increase acreage until the economic downturn of the 1930s forced the reduction of acreage.²¹

During the four-year duration of World War I, American farmers saw extreme fluctuations in commodity prices. World War I brought unparalleled prosperity to the countryside, but the end of the war brought an abrupt end to the high commodity prices. When European production declined, American agrarians arose to support the entire world and prices rose sharply as the war continued. The United States government encouraged the unrestricted production of cotton and wheat and the price of both commodities soared. As the war ended and prices collapsed, wheat farmers on the Great Plains plowed more land with using newly-acquired tractors in attempts to maintain the

same income and. Even without the assistance of tractors, southern cotton farmers also expanded their operations. In Oklahoma, the peak cotton production years occurred in 1924, 1925, and 1926 as Oklahomans ginned over 1.5 million bales of cotton (15 to 21 percent of the total crop). This excessive production contributed to an agricultural surplus and prices fell below \$0.15 per pound for the first time since 1914. The cotton surplus in the United States also rose from 1.5 million bales in 1925 to 3.5 million bales in 1927 and the carryover continued to climb until the peak surplus year of 1941. In 1941, the United States had a cotton surplus of over twelve million bales. Increased production, improvements in ginning, fluctuating prices, and the depression all contributed to the economic collapse of the cotton farmer in the 1930s.²²

Figure 4.1

Price of Cotton Per Pound, 1900 to 1954



Source: Bureau of Economic Research: <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroeconomy/>.

After 1910, one of the biggest problems affecting cotton farmers was the cotton surplus, known as the carryover. “Carryover” simply means the number of bales produced exceeding the number of bales used during a calendar year. The primary reason for the carryover was the increase in cotton acreage and production on an annual basis. Beginning in 1909 and lasting through 1960, United States cotton farmers produced a surplus every year. From 1909 to 1914, there was a carryover of between 1 million and 1.5 million bales annually which was substantially less than ten percent of the cotton produced by American cotton growers. During World War I and after, the surplus increased significantly. In 1915, the surplus more than doubled to 3.9 million bales (24 percent of the crop) and the carryover continued throughout the 1920s, averaging over 3 million bales per year. Then, in the 1930s, the surplus began to climb rapidly and an annual carryover of 10 to 11 million bales became the norm by 1940 (over 90 percent of the total crop). By the mid 1940s, cotton became less profitable and farms began to diversify, but a surplus of cotton remained ranging from 2.5 million excess bales in 1947 (30 percent of the crop) to just over 14 million excess bales in 1956. Even though cotton spinning and usage began to climb, the surplus grew as well.²³

Table 4.1

United States Cotton Production and Cotton Carryover in Millions of Bales, 1915 to 1950

Year	Bales Produced	Bales of Surplus
1915	15.9	4.0
1916	11.0	3.2
1917	11.4	2.7
1918	11.2	3.4
1919	11.9	4.2
1920	11.3	3.5
1921	13.2	6.5

(Table 4.1, cont.)

1922	7.9	2.8
1923	9.7	2.3
1924	10.1	1.5
1925	13.6	1.6
1926	16.1	3.5
1927	17.6	3.7
1928	12.8	2.5
1929	14.3	2.3
1930	14.5	4.5
1931	13.8	6.4
1932	16.6	9.7
1933	12.7	8.2
1934	12.7	7.7
1935	9.5	7.2
1936	10.4	5.4
1937	12.1	4.5
1938	18.2	11.5
1939	11.6	13.0
1940	11.5	10.6
1941	12.3	12.2
1942	10.5	10.6
1943	12.4	10.7
1944	11.2	10.7
1945	11.8	11.1
1946	8.8	7.3
1947	8.5	2.5
1948	11.6	3.1
1949	14.6	5.3
1950	16.0	6.8

Source: Bureau of the Census, "Cotton Production and Distribution, Year Ending July 31, 1960," Bulletin 197 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), 4; and Cotton Production and Distribution, Year Ending July 31, 1965." Bulletin 202. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1966, 23.

By the late 1930s, competition for the American cotton grower rose on an international level. By this time, the United States was no longer supplying the majority of the world's cotton and its percentage of the market was decreasingly quickly. Egypt,

the Soviet Union, and China increased cotton-production which decreased the market share of the American cotton producer. In 1939, the United States still supplied about 39 percent of the world's cotton but by 1960 the percentage had shrunk to 31 percent. Even though the United States increased cotton production from 11 million bales to over 14 million bales during the 1950s, farmers continued to lose overseas markets to foreign competitors.²⁴

In the wake of the collapse of the agricultural economy of the 1920s and 1930s, many Oklahoma counties that had once grown large cotton crops began to shrink from cotton in favor of other crops. Farmers in Comanche County had raised over twenty-five thousand bales in 1910 and nearly twenty-eight thousand in 1920 but by the 1940s the six-year average was only ten thousand yearly bales. Even Cotton County, with crops as high as 25,000 bales in 1932 and 1933, only averaged 9,422 from 1938 to 1943 partially due to acreage restrictions of the New Deal. From 1938 to 1943, the only county in eastern Oklahoma among the top ten cotton producers was Muskogee County with twenty-six thousand bales per year. After 1940, cotton production became a fixture only in the southwestern corner of the state. McIntosh and Okfuskee Counties still raised fifteen thousand bales apiece and ranked eleventh and twelfth but these statistics show the beginning of the recession of cotton production in Oklahoma.²⁵

By the 1950s, cotton production had drastically changed. Farm tenancy declined in the 1940s and the tenant farmer nearly became extinct by 1960. Because of the loss of the labor force, cotton production underwent a technological revolution during the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s, nearly every cotton farm had at least one tractor. Trucks had replaced horse-drawn wagons. New plant strains were genetically engineered for drought

resistance. Fungicides and insecticides increased yields by successfully combating boll weevils and other pests. Chemicals and fertilizers helped increase the yield of cotton farms.²⁶ One statistic from the Census Bureau illuminates general agricultural trends in the United States. In 1910, it took one farmer to feed two urban dwelling Americans; by 1950, one American farmer could feed five urbanites. After World War II, it became even more obvious that the United States was transforming rapidly from a rural agrarian society to an urban industrial power.²⁷

cotton production declined substantially throughout the fourteen cotton-producing states in the 1950s. In fact, many farmers began the transition to more profitable ventures like beef cattle and poultry production. Cotton even declined to the point that Geographers Merle Prunty and Charles Aiken described the South as a series of “cotton producing island communities” because the Piedmont region had largely abandoned the crop altogether.²⁸ To some extent, cotton production did not decline because of inefficient small farms as touted by Gilbert Fite.²⁹ Prunty and Aiken claimed that some small cotton producers continued to grow the crop and paid professional custom harvesters to assist with harvesting.³⁰ African American migration after World War I, boll weevil destruction, the Depression, and New Deal programs all played some role in the demise of the cotton belt throughout the South.³¹ However, rising technology costs in the 1950s seemed to be the most important factor in the decline of King Cotton in the South. Prunty and Aiken specifically blamed southern ginners more than individual farmers. Gins in the South failed to modernize to compete with gins in other regions of the United States. Though mechanization brought an increase in yields, it brought problems for gins. Excess trash and increased moisture in the bolls required upgraded

ginneries and many refused to invest the capital. When gins failed to modernize, southern farmers had little choice but to search for other crops because they could no longer compete with higher quality cotton produced in a more cost-efficient manner in other regions.³²

LIFE OF A TENANT

The life of a cotton-growing tenant was difficult. The farm was a family business and each member had a role to play. Cotton, a labor-intensive crop that required endless hours to plow, plant, thin, and pick, encouraged tenants to have large families. Children were a valuable source of labor for the overworked tenant. More children meant more workers; more workers meant more mouths to feed; and more children meant more future tenant farmers. Tenants tended to have larger families than owners. According to one study of the rural poor in 1938, wives of tenants had 2.7 children, whereas, wives of farm owners had 2.4 children. Tenant wives were more than simply domestic caretakers. Wives had more duties than any other member of the family. Wives were housewives, mothers, and field hands every day of the year.³³ The film *The Grapes of Wrath* correctly portrayed the role when Pa soberly stated, “You’re the one that keeps us goin’, Ma.”³⁴

Because of frequent moving, tenant life was unstable. That instability manifested itself in several ways for the tenants themselves, their children, and even their communities. The education of tenant children often suffered because of frequent moves. Children often missed school in the fall to help pick cotton. As social historian Elliot

West noted, the work of children provided an invaluable resource as they helped with nearly every imaginable task. Children often helped with household chores, hunting, plowing, planting, and harvesting which often led to an increased responsibility and negative memories of growing up in an impoverished environment.³⁵ In addition, tenant families also attended fewer social gatherings than families of farm owners. They did not value long-term social relationships because mobility brought new neighbors and communities almost every year. Tenant families were much less likely to attend church, the primary social event in most rural communities. Grace Fernandes, a researcher for the Experiment Station at Oklahoma A & M, found that 68 percent of owners attended church while only 51 percent of renters attended. Also, in counties with a higher number of tenants, church attendance decreased rapidly while counties with predominantly owned farms had much higher attendance rates.³⁶ Because of these circumstances, children of tenants remained uneducated and were much more likely than other farm children to become tenant farmers themselves. Women, who held dual roles in the home and field, often became crippled at an early age from years of hard labor planting and picking cotton. Tenants remained mired in a system that was nearly impossible to escape due to lack of education, a broken social support system, and the inability to save money due to a volatile economic system.³⁷

Farm tenants also had more health problems than other groups because of their lower standard of living. The living conditions in rented homes were often deplorable. Even though the State Department of Health reported in 1914 that public health in Oklahoma had generally improved, the same was not true for rural renters. Among tenants, malnutrition, tuberculosis, and pellagra were often rampant. Even though the

state reported a general health improvement, tenants still suffered from curable diseases that disappeared with a slight increase in the standard of living.³⁸

Nutrition was also a significant problem for tenant farmers. During times of prosperity and high cotton prices, tenants ate well and had access to a variety of foods. The basic diet of many tenants consisted of fatback, cornbread, molasses, and sweet potatoes, supplemented with vegetables grown in the garden. The majority of tenants had a milk cow but this often became a disposable item in times of economic decline. Times of economic hardship forced tenants to survive on meager diets. One tenant complained that he and his wife had lived on a tenant farm for five years and had been unable to save enough money to buy a cow. The tenant observed, "We never have any but the coarsest grub."³⁹ H. H. Schultz, a statistician in the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture attributed pellagra outbreaks of the late 1910s to the low price of cotton, which forced farmers to conserve even more on food. When cotton prices were high, farmers had "a variety of food." But when prices fell, according to Schultz, tenants must "live on hog, hominy, and molasses, with the hog often missing."⁴⁰

Tenants complained most about living conditions in the hovels and shanties erected by landlords. According to Grace Fernandes, only 22 percent of the tenants responded that their home was in excellent or even good condition. Thirty-four percent stated that their homes were in poor condition. Seven percent found their home to be in very poor condition. Tenant housing was often little more than poorly constructed lean-tos with no doors or windows, leaky tin roofs, and often without floors. In the same study, 70 percent believed that the furnishings in their homes were adequate, meaning that tenants believed that the landowner was not providing adequate housing but that the

tenants were content with the things they provided in the home.⁴¹ Rural sociologist Rupert Vance stated in a pamphlet that “tenant housing is the poorest in the nation, often consisting of two or three room unpainted shacks with but one thickness of boards.”⁴² Though some sources claimed that landlords began building nicer homes in the 1920s to entice good renters to remain on the farm, the fact remained that most tenants were not content with their living conditions.⁴³ Although much of the countryside had electricity by the late 1930s, most tenants remained without indoor plumbing and electricity.⁴⁴ Living conditions had improved little in southeastern Oklahoma. Houses remained small. Few had plaster or wallboard. Only 5 percent had a kitchen sink, 10 percent had indoor bathroom facilities, and only 2 percent had indoor plumbing.⁴⁵

In addition to being underfed and poorly housed, tenants were often also poorly clothed. During lean years, tenants purchased basic necessities on credit, which made clothing an infrequent purchase. Clothes were often homemade and patched to the point of being unrecognizable. Clothes were homemade from gingham and burlap, patched when necessary, and rarely purchased at the local merchant shop. In addition, children went without shoes - the lucky ones wore shoes with holes.⁴⁶

The most important day each year to the tenant farmer and his family was “movin’ day” which, according to state law in Oklahoma, was January 1. Every farm contract expired on December 31. Tenants who had not secured another annual lease with their current landlord had to find a different farm for the upcoming year. Tenant farmers loaded personal possessions into a wagon and took to the rural roads hoping to find a farm that offered more economic opportunities. *The Tenant Farmer* reported:

The momentous day in the life of the tenant farmer is not the day of his marriage or the birth of his children. It is not Christmas or the Fourth of July. It is a day fixed by the statute. It is "Movin' Day." On this day, it is so ordered by his landlord, he must put all his earthly effects in a wagon with his wife and children – take to the highway and hunt for another "home" – a wagon tramp.⁴⁷

Reports on the number of annual tenant migrants vary between sources. J. T. Sanders, a rural sociologist at Oklahoma A & M College, estimated that one-half of all tenants and one-third of all Oklahoma farmers were on new farms beginning January 1, 1924. In the northwest quadrant of the state, the estimate was 14 percent; in southeast Oklahoma where tenancy was rampant the number was likely closer to 60 percent.⁴⁸ *Harlow's Weekly*, a leading political commentary journal, guessed that the number was close to forty thousand of the state's one hundred thousand tenants on January 1, 1925. "Nearly enough farm people to equal the combined population of Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Muskogee, and Okmulgee, will move this winter, such action being indicated in a report made by the school of agriculture."⁴⁹ *Harlow's* cited another study at Oklahoma A & M estimating that 40 percent of tenants moved annually. The figure probably lies somewhere in between, meaning that, with an average family size of five persons per tenant farm, an estimated 212,000 people made the annual trek to find new homes.⁵⁰

The average length of stay on a particular farm was also a source of contention. The most reliable study produced to date offered the peculiar finding that tenants who were members of the Oklahoma Cotton Growers Association remained on their farms for an average of 4.3 years whereas non-member tenants stayed for only 3.4 years. Exactly why tenants who belonged to the OCGA remained longer is difficult to assess. Likely, OCGA member had more money because membership required annual dues to the cooperative. Perhaps OCGA tenants recognized the advantages of remaining longer.

This could suggest that these tenants had a better relationship with their landlord because it was difficult for a tenant to be a member of a cooperative and hold his cotton with a non-member landlord dictating ginning and selling instructions. At any rate, tenants stayed on the farm for an average of approximately four years.⁵¹

Each year, the mobile tenant uprooted his family to search for a better farm and several criteria inspired the move. First, a farmer considered the physical characteristics of the land. Such things might include possible production increases, better improvements, water availability and convenience, and the availability of a garden. Economic advantages were also important. The tenant pondered rental agreements, access to better roads, and, probably most important, which landlord offered enough opportunity for a tenant to thrive. Better contracts, land productivity, and crop preference also played a key role in choosing a farm. Some tenants weighed the advantages for his family of closer proximity to schools and churches, but the most common reason for tenants to move was economic betterment.⁵² Over half of the tenants, 54 percent, reported that the promise of a larger and better farm, or a better rental agreement, was the primary factor in whether a tenant moved or stayed. Dissatisfied farmers moved because they believed another farm was more fertile or desirable but often found that the new farm was no better than the last one. Only a few renters, 7 percent, claimed social and domestic betterment as the reason for moving. But an astounding 20 percent moved for “no reason” or “just to move.” If this is correct, this study underscores the idea that one in five tenants were little more than wandering annual vagabonds with no real connection to any place. These drifters settled for a year or two, raised a crop, and moved on to the next farm to repeat the annual cycle.⁵³

“Movin’ Day” for some may have offered a chance to begin anew; for most, however, the occasion was rarely joyful. This was a day that many tenants dreaded because a large percentage of them had not yet secured leases. They nevertheless had to vacate their farms which meant living in wagons alongside the road. One source wrote, “Moving day has arrived for farm tenants and all roads are lined with moving wagons. . . . All are hoping for good crops and better prices.”⁵⁴ Unfortunately, most of the farms were similar to those vacated. Years of over-farming depleted the soil. Houses were often of the crudest and cheapest kind. Contracts remained verbal. Verbal contracts stipulated that the tenant must plant cotton while limiting acreage of corn primarily for feed to the draft animals, perhaps allowing a few acres for grains and a small plot for a garden. For many tenants, twelve months after he signed this agreement, or more likely shook hands with the owner, the perpetual cycle of renter rotation began. Once again, Oklahoma tenants drifted from one farm to the next searching for annual leases.

THE CONTRACT

After acquiring land through the purchase or leasing of Indian land and failed homesteads, the final step for the owners was executing a rental contract and establishing terms to govern the farm. Contracts varied significantly. The length of the standard contract was often for one year but some owners allowed multiple-year contracts. Some contracts were written but it was not uncommon for the parties to have a verbal agreement, especially after the first year. Payment was often a negotiated issue based on the amount of livestock, tools, and capital the tenant could provide.

According to the contracts, renters paid in two basic ways – cash or share. Under a cash lease, the tenant paid a specified amount to the owner at the beginning of the season. This was often viewed as the preferable rental agreement in Oklahoma because the owner received an income regardless of the harvest. A share contract, often described by historians and economists as a less preferred lease for a variety of reasons, usually specified the percentage of the crop to be given as payment.⁵⁵ In the cotton fields of southwest Oklahoma, sources describe the prevailing system as a share system, but one that seemed to be more favorable than the system described in the South. According to sources, cotton farmers in southwest Oklahoma provided their own seed, tools, teams, and labor and paid the owner one-third of all grain harvested and one-fourth of all cotton picked. In much of the cotton-producing South, the predominant contract stated that renters provided only the labor for procuring the crop while the owner provided the seed, tools, and teams and the crop was split in half.⁵⁶ Strangely enough, share tenancy seemed to be the predominant rental choice on the Plains as well. By 1910, for example, only 324 tenants in North Dakota out of 10,664 reported that they paid in cash. Though the other Plains states were not as extreme in this trend, share tenancy actually existed in higher proportion on the Great Plains than anywhere else in the United States.⁵⁷

The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman, a progressive newspaper that reflected the views of owners, supplied contracts for a fee of \$0.10. Each contract spelled out the customary agreements between parties. The contracts were standardized where the owner and tenant simply filled-in the stipulations and provided signatures to avoid confusion. Livestock was usually split evenly if the parties purchased stock and feed jointly; but if the owner supplied the livestock, feed, and tools the profits were split sixty-

forty in the owner's interest. Hogs, the most common livestock on tenant farms, were split evenly, with the feed crops raised on the farm being fed to the hogs. Separate contracts were available for sheep, beef cows, and poultry. Alfalfa was split on halves if the tenant cut, baled, and hauled all hay and paid the expenses. "Third crop rent" and "fourth crop rent" contracts were available and specified rent for all crops; contracts could also be provided that specified for gardens, fruit, and truck crops. Provisions were also made for fences and buildings as well with the terracing and improvements typically being cared for by the renter. A standard cash-rent contract was the simplest agreement as the owner and renter only filled in names and amounts. On the standard sharecropper form in Oklahoma, the sharecropper provided the labor while the owner provided seed, tools, improvements, a garden, and allowed for a few chickens, hogs, and milk cows.⁵⁸ On leased wheat farms, *The Oklahoma Farm Journal* stated, the customary share lease was 50 percent if the landlord supplied the seed and between one-third and two-fifths if the tenant purchased the seed.⁵⁹

Rental contracts, though formal and legally binding, ranged from strictly written contracts signed in front of witnesses with stipulations for acreage, crop type, length of agreement, care of improvements, and other details, to verbal agreements made with a handshake. Contracts such as the one signed by R. J. Swearingen in the rural community of Ramona north of Tulsa stated that leases were renewable each year if the renter paid cash on January 1.⁶⁰ One source claimed that "most lease contracts with negro tenants on cotton farms [and other tenants as well]. . . . are verbal, annual, and renewable."⁶¹ And not surprisingly, another source declared that "most of the misunderstandings and

disagreements between landlords and tenants are caused by incidents that were not covered in the original agreement.”⁶²

The contracts of Ben LaFayette of LaFayette and Bro. illuminate the various rental contracts executed by a single business between 1902 and 1910. LaFayette and Bro. used a typed contract form, with specific spaces for major stipulations about condition of the home, share of the crop or amount of cash required for the rent, and various other agreements by the parties in question. It is unclear if LaFayette typed the contracts personally or had them mass produced because of the large volume of executed contracts within the collection. It was not uncommon for LaFayette to make changes to the typed forms. For instance, an agreement with F. A. Thomason called for a cash payment, so LaFayette simply struck out the section that discussed crop splits and instead wrote in the cash amount.⁶³ However, during the same time period, LaFayette hastily scribbled rental agreements with tenants on standard sheets of lined paper using pencil to record the transaction and signatures. Even the handwritten agreements were extremely professional, typically using identical wording to the contract forms. The handwritten contracts seem out of place because LaFayette kept meticulous records for his other businesses. Perhaps, LaFayette had used all of his contract forms and did not have time to type more contracts; or possibly the agent was in the field, needed to secure a rental agreement, and wrote a contract hastily and conveniently to avoid a return to the office. Whatever the reason, LaFayette’s case proves that owners and businessmen were adaptable and that farm lease contracts were not uniform within a single agency let alone across the state.⁶⁴

Land companies and real estate agents often had much stricter rental guidelines than local owners. Individual owners often acted under a verbal contract so the exact terms of contracts are unclear. It is likely that the owners with verbal contracts placed limitations and restrictions on the tenants and influenced the acreage amounts for each crop and oversaw the execution of the contract. One contract for a sixty-five acre farm stipulated that the tenant plant twenty acres in cotton and the remainder in corn to feed the livestock.⁶⁵ According to law, all contracts expired on December 31 of the same year, the dreaded “Moving Day,” and almost all leases also adhered to the common share split in Oklahoma of one-third of the grain crops and one-fourth of the cotton.⁶⁶

Many leases were restrictive regarding a variety of issues which limited the tenant’s choices of where to do business. One particular lease ordered that J. Burgess, who rented forty acres from LaFayette in the Cherokee Nation, must not damage the house, fence, or improvements and was liable for any damage. Furthermore, LaFayette mandated that Burgess deliver both the owner’s and renter’s cotton to the gin specified by LaFayette and sell at the same gin which, coincidentally, LaFayette owned.⁶⁷ This was not an uncommon practice. Most owners stipulated the cotton delivery point and the renter’s responsibility to haul the owner’s cotton, but many enterprising owners also had other businesses and forced the tenant to use other services provided by the owner as well.

Clyde Pickard, a real estate agent who owned Clyde Pickard Real Estate and Farm Loans near Norman, Oklahoma, executed contracts in stark contrast to LaFayette. Pickard’s contracts were much less restrictive and allowed farmers to preside over their own affairs with little oversight. Most of the contracts had the same rental stipulation

entitling the landlord to “one fourth of all cotton and rebate, one third of all corn, kaffir corn, milo maize, or any other crop raised on said land in the year [of the contract].”⁶⁸

Pickard was also an agent for owners who executed contracts and collected rent. The following contract, by which Leon Privett rented an unspecified acreage from Millie Simpson, serves as an example of a typical Oklahoma renter’s contract. The parties entered into an agreement on November 3, 1930, and the contract expired on December 31, 1931:

Beginning at the Northeast corner of said quarter section, thence run south 1716 feet, thence west 495 feet, thence north 713 ½ feet, thence west to US Highway No. 77, thence in a northwesterly direction along the east line of said highway to the section line running along the north side of said quarter section, thence east to the place of beginning.

¼ of all cotton raised on said farm delivered at market. 1/3 of all corn delivered at market. Second party to put in not more than 5 acres of corn and the remainder of cultivated land to be planted in cotton. Second party agrees to give first party possession of improvements and pasture land on said property on sixty days written notice in the event of sale of said property, and also to give first party possession of any tract that is in cultivation in the event of a sale, provided however that first party is to pay second party for any crops or work which he may have done on such tract.

That second party is to move into improvements immediately and is to tend orchard and take good care of all improvements and that second party is to mow pasture twice during the summer, and not keep more than five head of livestock in the pastures. [underlined portion handwritten into contract]⁶⁹

According to many tenants, the contracts provided the primary source of complaint against landlords. *The Tenant Farmer*, a socialist newspaper and leading voice for farm renters, provided one of the best insights into the attitudes of tenants and the literature that influenced them. Editor of *The Tenant Farmer* Patrick Nagle called on renters to send copies of contracts for publication under the title “Here is a Sample of a Contract that Peonizes the Farmer.” J. J. Jackson sent a copy of his lease and wrote “I

had no trouble with the old gentleman and have nothing against him only he is a landlord.”⁷⁰ Jackson rented 120 acres from his landlord near Altus in Jackson County, a southwestern cotton-producing area. The contract specified that he plant ten acres of oats, forty acres of cotton, fifteen acres of maize or kaffir, and five acres of corn. Jackson agreed to pay one-fourth of the cotton, one-third of the feed crops, and one half of the oats as rent, a fairly typical Oklahoma share-agreement. The contract stipulated that plowing begin by January 10 “unless freezing weather hinders. All crops shall be planted, cultivated and harvested in due season in a workmanlike manner” and the contract expired on December 31, 1914, “or sooner provided all crops are gathered.” This clause is particularly troubling and its intent elusive. There is little doubt that all crops would be harvested long before December 31. Nagle believed that a tenant with a large family would have the cotton picked sometime in early November and grain crops harvested months earlier. Therefore, the owner could be allowing the renter to look at other rental opportunities provided his work was complete, which gave the tenant a significant advantage over other relocating tenants. Or, the owner, according to the contract, could actually force the tenant from the farm as soon as the cotton was picked, which is also strange because Oklahoma law affixed January 1 as “movin day.” The meaning is unclear and the ramifications could be disastrous to a tenant if he were removed from the farm with winter rapidly approaching and no place to stay.⁷¹

Nagle also reproduced a “Standard Texas Lease Contract” and claimed that these contracts were the reason Texas had more tenant farmers than any other state and most lived in deplorable conditions. In Texas, “movin day,” as specified in the contract was November 1. Furthermore, the Texas contract stated that the tenant must farm “in the

manner and with the crops designated by the landlord” whereas Oklahoma renters negotiated the crop terms. This particular contract, apparently emblematic of the typical Texas lease, stated that four-fifths of the land must be planted in cotton. According to Nagle, “this is the clause that sends the landlord’s sons to Saint John’s Military College, dressed in white, with a tennis bat in his hand and a check book in his pocket and it is the clause that sends the tenants son to a country school for a few months so that when the time comes for him to give chattel mortgages he will not be compelled to sign his name with a saw buck.” Landlords also used clauses to entrap tenants by limiting ability to borrow money and forcing them to borrow from the landlord further ensuring dependence on the owner. Furthermore, this contract forced the tenant to use the owner’s gin, which weighed the cotton and often shorted the tenant on weight and cleanings. It also required the tenant to sell to the owner’s cotton company. By using a multitude of tactics, landlords manipulated tenants into submission and controlled more than crop splits.⁷²

GRAFTERS

Tenants and their supporters complained most loudly about “grafters.” Grafter was a fairly ambiguous term applied to any person the farmers disliked, especially those who prospered without farming. Though the term implies some sort of licentious behavior, many so-called grafters operated within the law. Tenants and their newspaper supporters complained loudly about groups who made money from their toil. They often compared these groups to parasites that drained resources from the countryside. In the view of agrarians, farmers generated enough wealth to feed parasites, send them on

expensive vacations, allow their children to attend college, purchase expensive houses, and drive automobiles by stealing profits from farmers.⁷³

Grafters included any number of professions. Bankers, merchants, real estate agents, landlords, and railroad executives were the most egregious offenders because they had direct contact with tenant farmers, sometimes on a daily basis. Other grafters, however, were secondary figures who attached themselves to the obvious parasites and indirectly prospered from farmers. *The Tenant Farmer* identified the banker who charged high interest rates as the primary parasite but other leeches included the newspaper editor who allowed the banker to advertise, the building owner who rented to the newspaper, the insurance agent who insured the buildings, and the mechanic who fixed their cars. This large conspiratorial ring sucked the money from the agricultural coffers and allowed urbanites to prosper.⁷⁴

The most common grafter the tenants fought was the landlord. Landlords understood how to manipulate the land system through speculation and rental contracts. Often landlords were lawyers and real estate agents who purchased land and held it for several years in hopes of selling to make money from the appreciation. Others simply kept the land and allowed the invested capital to supply immediate cash-flow by renting to tenant farmers. Increasingly, speculators saw farm land as an investment opportunity and, in many cases, viewed land as a preferential investment because of the instability of the stock market. Land was a relatively safe investment because it could not be destroyed and usually increased in value whereas the stock market fluctuated more frequently. Also, one source speculates, that the children of farmers began inheriting farms and

instead of liquidating their inheritance chose to become landlords which further increased rates of farm tenancy.⁷⁵ *The Oklahoma Farmer* stated:

The land-grafter is usually a tenant-skinner, and Oklahoma is cursed with thousands of them. Some are lawyers who have systematically accumulated title to land by defending ignorant negroes, Indians, and white men against petty criminal charges often trumped for the purpose. Some who call themselves bankers have pinched and squeezed men out of their land. All of them justify what they have done by saying that they merely took advantage of their opportunities. And they tell the truth. The pity is that the opportunity existed.⁷⁶

Tenants often accused landlords of “farming the farmers,” thus making them a first-degree parasite.⁷⁷ By the 1920s, most Native Americans had liquidated unwanted land and the plantation system had developed in Oklahoma. After purchasing the land, landlords carved the 160 or 320 acre allotments into smaller units, often 40 to 80 acres, rented to tenants and sharecroppers, and oversaw the production of the farm. Landlords maximized profits by forcing the continual growing of cotton to the neglect of land fertility. The landlords made few improvements to reduce the overhead so tenant housing remained crude. Instead, a rickety and cheaply constructed shack served as the home for tenants.⁷⁸

Landlords and tenants had differing opinions of one another. Landlords believed that tenants required careful observation because they were lazy, uneducated, and shiftless. Without constant supervisions the farm would fail. Even well-intentioned landlords believed tenants needed close direction to complete even the most menial tasks. The landlord often dictated the exact stipulations in the rental agreement and made sure that the tenant followed the agreement. The renter complained about the oversight, lack of crop diversity, and inability to save money. A leading farm paper summarized the

situation succinctly: “I must say that dishonesty and rascality combined caused more trouble than anything else on farms. And neither tenants nor landowners have either of them cornered.”⁷⁹

Tenants often charged the landlords with a variety of intolerance from mild abuse such as scolding to more violent behavior. In many parts of the South, owners used illegal tactics when dealing with their African-American sharecroppers. In the 1920s, groups like the Ku Klux Klan acted as a social and political control, but Oklahoma tenants were largely white so these tactics were relegated to a relatively small area of eastern Oklahoma where the African-American population was much higher than elsewhere.⁸⁰ Instead, landowners manipulated and bullied tenants with tactics ranged from “cussing” and verbal abuse to the occasional threat of violence.⁸¹ One tenant claimed that his landlord, a prominent citizen in Greer County, “took his shot gun and drew it up on me” and forced the tenant and his family to leave the farm and leave behind the tenant’s share of the crop.⁸² Owners dictated what crops to grow and when to plant and harvest using the contract and threat of eviction as the primary weapons of compulsion. Owners also specified what gins tenants could use, which stores could extend temporary credit, and many other aspects of tenants’ lives. For example, H. L. Owens approached his landlord, Robert L. Williams, about purchasing a mule team from a neighbor. Williams, attempting to control the tenant’s indebtedness, refused to allow Owens to purchase the mule team because Williams had advanced Owens seventy-five bushels of corn for which Owens still owed a balance. Williams eventually allowed Owens to purchase a mule team, but required that Owens had to buy the livestock from Williams, not a third party.⁸³

Even though tenants and their proponents railed against absentee ownership, the case might have been somewhat overstated. It is true that many farm owners did not reside on the farm but the vast majority of landlords lived in Oklahoma and most within the county. In 1926, a United States Department of Agriculture study showed that only 5.3 percent of owners lived in other states in 1900 and by 1920 the number had decreased to 2.1 percent so the overwhelming majority of owners lived in the state and most lived close enough for oversight. In 1920, 92.5 percent of farm owners lived in the same or the adjoining county, a statistic that increased from 78.8 percent in 1900. In the 1920s, 34 percent of Oklahoma farm owners did not live on their farms but most lived in a relatively close proximity.⁸⁴

Howard Turner, a contemporary scholar writing in 1927, observed that absentee land ownership in the United States was minimal because Americans believed that land speculation was wrong. Turner found that the majority of absentee owners in the United States were the parents of the tenants and these tenants had a reasonable chance to inherit the property in the future.⁸⁵ This explanation may hold true for northeastern farmers but the likelihood that westerners rented from their parents is somewhat suspect, especially in Oklahoma. The West, as identified by the census, had the highest rate of absenteeism at 34 percent while the South Atlantic and South Central States were significantly lower at 17 percent and 16 percent. In fact, the vast majority of landlords lived within the same county and certainly the same state where they owned the farms. Owners in the South lived close enough to oversee their farms as 67 percent actually lived on the farms but had divided the holdings into smaller farms for tenant occupation.⁸⁶

In Oklahoma, absenteeism affected the rental agreements. Landlords who lived within the state were much more willing to accept a share contract while absentee landlords were more prone to a cash agreement. Twenty-eight percent of cash rent farms had absentee owners. However, only 13 percent of share contracts allowed were executed by non-local residents. Absentee owners were less likely to accept crops as payment for several reasons. First, it was inconvenient to deal with a perishable form of rent for absentee owners. Second, cash was a more stable payment choice. Cash rent was not dependent upon a good harvest or a hard-working tenant. Sharecropping contracts were more precarious and more feasible for local owners with a higher risk tolerance. Owners could make more money from sharecropping but owners with a vested interest in the crop outcome were often more vocal about the crop choice, farming techniques, and work ethic of tenants. Most owners of sharecropped farms visited on a regular basis, demanded that tenants plant cotton on all available acres, that foodstuffs be kept to a minimum, and supervised daily activities, especially if a tenant was suspected of being lazy.⁸⁷

However, most landlords in Oklahoma and the South in general were more like Robert Lee Williams. Williams lived on the farm, monitored the daily activity, and played an active role in its production. According to one tenant, William “knew his property and knew where the improvements were on his farms and knew the land descriptions, and. . . went to his farms each week.”⁸⁸ Most landlords, as high as 92 percent, lived close enough to monitor the farms and cared about the production value of their investment.⁸⁹

By 1910, landlords looked to build plantations through failed homesteads in addition to buying allotments. Because of homestead failures, foreclosures and sheriffs auctions became vehicles for acquiring land. According to Patrick Nagle, landlords in southwest Oklahoma focused on buying failed homesteads and turned the cotton fields of this region into a “paradise for parasites” as tenancy rates soared with the gradual increase in cotton production. Nagle noticed that most newspapers in southwestern Oklahoma had numerous advertisements for auctions as banks divested foreclosures to the public by liquidating failed farms. Nagle wrote of banks that “it is just as necessary for live farmers to be fed to the system as for live rabbits to be fed to a boa constrictor.”⁹⁰

Nagle saw capitalism as the source of tenancy claiming that agriculture was undergoing the same process of corporatization as other industries. Nagle and other Oklahoma socialists attacked corporations as merciless entities that abused small farmers by purchasing large tracts of land and forcing hopeful owners into tenancy. “There is an apparent tendency toward the increase of these large estates, and the greatest abuses may be expected if they are allowed to develop unchecked.”⁹¹ Nagle wrote:

The day of the Big Farm Corporations is near at hand. There is increasing evidence that the farm industry is to pass through the same process that all other industries have passed through, that of centralization and monopolization through the power of large capitalization. The great mass of small farmers are destined to become either tenants or farm laborers.⁹²

Nagle even attached the name of prominent Oklahoma politician Robert L. Williams as a prime example of the evils of farm tenancy. Nagle accused Williams of consolidating too much land and farming none of it himself. In mid-1915, Williams owned eighteen hundred acres divided into eleven farms with seventy-seven total tenants. Though Nagle praised Williams in some ways, admitting that he encouraged diversity, gave spare dimes

to children, and did not force tenants to move, Nagle still believed that consolidation and capitalization were wrong. Nagle wrote of the socialist stance: “We are not fighting Williams the man – we are fighting the system for which he stands and the accepted standards [of] system in the matter of ‘morals,’ ethics,’ and ‘right.’”⁹³

In the mid 1910s, another prominent Oklahomans recognized other causes for high rates of farm tenancy. Victor Harlow of *Harlow’s Weekly* correctly identified the role of Indian land as the culprit but he also blamed the state government for not allowing potential homesteaders access to school land. By keeping these sources of land restricted for sale, the land was often rented and then subleased to tenants.⁹⁴

Small farm owners and renters believed they could not successfully compete with consolidated farms and fought to keep these farms from taking over the state. Oklahomans feared that the Bonanza craze – the growth of single crop corporate farms -- from the Dakotas would expand to Oklahoma and force farmers out of a rapidly changing market economy. Oklahomans believed that the emergence of hundred thousand acre Bonanza farms could turn both small owners and tenants into meandering transient wage laborers.⁹⁵ Editors of newspapers combined Jeffersonian patriotism and Biblical metaphors to explain the necessity of ownership and the destruction of corporate farms.⁹⁶ First, farmers did not consider industrialists or investors to be farmers. In response to the question “who is a farmer?” one farm newspaper answered:

The Bible definition is that a farmer is a plowman, a breaker of clods, a sewer and reaper. We learn, then, from the Bible, that a farmer is a man who works. The English definition, one who farms. . . one who cultivates a farm. . . A man who owns thousands of acres of farm land and does not cultivate it with his own hands is not a farmer. . . Thousands of good men

and politicians claim to be farmers but they haven't a single characteristic of the farmer.⁹⁷

Up to 1910, tenants fought speculators but the 1910s saw tenants and their proponents fight corporate interests more than any other group. The most vilified corporations were national banks and railroads that drove interest rates and freight rates as high as possible. Owners and tenants alike complained incessantly about corporate interests because large companies consolidated holdings, including farms, which hurt farmers economically. Farmers feared that corporate interests decreased the possibility of home ownership because corporate interests controlled politicians who made laws benefitting capital wealth. S. O. Dawes, executive president of the Oklahoma Farmers' Union used a Biblical metaphor to denounce the capitol removal bill and other bills dealing with railroad rates in 1910. "It is true that Herod ruled while the sun grew dark and the earth trembled and Christ was crucified, and often in this country legislation has rattled like thirty pieces of silver to the ear of the industrial people."⁹⁸ In the views of small farmers, politicians were the corruptible Judas who sold their souls for kickbacks and campaign contributions while forsaking the voters.

The primary voice of the poor farmer, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, spoke with considerable venom when attacking industrial interests in the state. The organization accused industrialists of avoiding taxes, raising passenger rates, and "knocking holes in the constitution" by influencing the federal court system to overturn state laws.⁹⁹ In fact, the union believed that the president neglected his promises to control predatory wealth and that "Mr. [Theodore] Roosevelt, posing as a trustbuster, left his high office without a single busted trust to his credit – seven years of rant and pyrotechnics."¹⁰⁰

Among the primary enemies of the Farmers' Union were the captains of industry. Farmers railed against insurance companies, banks, railroads, and holding companies claiming that capitalists had monopolized wealth and thus left less opportunity for others. According to the union, 10 percent of the population owned one-fourth of the wealth, the factories, the workers, and manufactured one-third of the world's products. The Farmers' Union also charged that bankers such as J. P. Morgan possessed an inordinate amount of influence with Congress. Morgan, according to the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, had a fortune of six billion dollars in 1910 which equated to about one-fifteenth the wealth in the United States. The union charged that the twelve top American monopolies controlled 80 percent of the national wealth. The Farmers' Union was uncompromising in its contempt for Morgan and his conglomerate, writing that "two great insurance companies, thirteen of the biggest banks, four industrial trusts, twelve railroads, one steamship trust and two other companies in all of which the 'One Man Power' J. P. Morgan is supreme evidence the rapid drift toward centralization of the nation's wealth."¹⁰¹

Small Oklahoma farmers believed they could not compete with corporations and feared the loss of their independence. Thus farmers crafted an argument built on the cultural underpinnings they clung to most heartily –religion, patriotism, and agriculture – with a newly-emerging political philosophy. *The Union Review* crafted the argument most eloquently in stating that "the farmer cannot successfully compete with his gigantic neighbor. He will inevitably be swallowed up. . . we are following in the wake of Babylon, Egypt, and Rome, and... if the monopolization of land is not checked, the speedy destruction of our faint imitation of a republican form of government will soon

follow.”¹⁰² Within a few years of this publication, socialism became an important movement among tenants and many called for the destruction of the corrupt capitalist system. But tenants relied heavily on two ideas that would have contradicted basic socialistic philosophy. Tenants, like other early twentieth-century agrarians, clung to religion and the ownership of private property. Oklahomans simply wanted a more equitable division of the wealth, not destruction of the system. Oklahoma agrarians picked socialist arguments that most suited their needs and discarded the incompatible ideas. Oklahoma socialists, for instance, called for government ownership of banks, railroads, and other public utilities. But renters and owners alike wanted expanded opportunity for land ownership for farmers, not the end of private property. Farmers wanted to use the government to protect their economic interests while limiting the investment opportunities of those unfairly influencing the government. The Socialist Party in Oklahoma believed that individuals should only own as much land as they could use. Oklahomans did not want to reorganize all private property, only unfairly held property. For Oklahoma Socialists, blending the yeoman tradition of ownership and the redistribution of unequal wealth were congruent ideas.¹⁰³

Prominent Oklahomans were especially hostile to the complaints of socialism. Some rushed to defend captains of industry and perpetuated the moneyed agenda. Governor C. N. Haskell, while railing against large corporations when speaking to constituents, allegedly told a group in St. Louis that Standard Oil was welcome in Oklahoma, causing *The St. Louis Report Dispatch* to label Oklahoma “less populist than any other state in the Union.”¹⁰⁴ Victor Harlow also had an interesting opinion about the issue. Harlow believed that all Oklahomans depended on agriculture so

businesses and politicians needed farmers to thrive. Instead of encouraging corporate interests to help farmers, Harlow insisted that corporations and politicians already helped farmers because it was in their best interest.

In a state like Oklahoma, the agricultural problems are by far the greatest problems which appear. The banker, businessman, professional man, is each just as dependent upon the prosperity of agriculture for his well being and is just as much interested in seeing the agricultural resources of the state develop and the methods improve, as the man who farms for his livelihood.¹⁰⁵

But farmers continued ranting that investors unfairly targeted renters and small owners because these poor classes had little recourse against wealthy capitalists. Instead, farmers believed that men who depended upon agriculture for their livelihood but did not work the land themselves were parasites who drained money from rural Oklahoma.

Tenants also believed that the credit system played a role in keeping tenants poor and banks were the worst parasites because of the high interest rates on farm loans. High interest rates hurt farmers in two ways. Interest on short-term notes meant that farmers paid immediate dividends, which hampered their ability to save money and remain independent of the credit trap. Farmers believed that high interest rates on farm mortgages kept them from being able to purchase farms; therefore, they often blamed local creditors with charging excessive interest rates. Though some banks were entirely financed by local money, many banks had connections to larger lending institutions in other parts of the United States. Farmers believed that these lenders had no understanding of agriculture. “The average New York financier . . . is hard as iron and as cold as ice. . . . He will console you on the death of your grandfather, while his lawyer is out foreclosing a mortgage on the house the old man died in.”¹⁰⁶ Because of the

perception of high interest rates, farmers called upon legislators to remedy the problem but the Oklahoma state legislature did relatively little to help them keep interest rates manageable. The Oklahoma state legislature frequently debated usury bills but these bills rarely garnered serious attention from legislators.¹⁰⁷

Farmers believed that bankers saddled borrowers with usurious interest rates that were illegally or immorally excessive. Tenants tried to save money for a mortgage down payment which was usually about 50 percent of the loan with the balance due in five to ten years. When the new owner could not pay the remaining mortgage at the end of the period, the bank moved to foreclose, leaving the former owner with few options except returning to tenancy. In reality, the circumstances were difficult. A new owner, often on marginal land, relied on cotton or wheat as a cash crop. They needed to make as much money as possible. One bad year due to drought, boll weevil, or an early or late frost, and the path to foreclosure was nearly guaranteed and the banks, especially if answering to corporate bosses from another state, evicted and repossessed the home of the farmer and sold to other owners to begin the process again. One tenant summarized the agrarian perspective stating “there is [sic] two types of Bank Robber, one is with guns and the other is with pencils.”¹⁰⁸

It is difficult to ascertain the interest rates banks actually charged to farmers because rates varied significantly from one borrower to another and one lender to another. Most tenants and their advocate publications agreed that banks charged high interest rates that hindered the growth of home ownership because interest on loans absorbed available money for a down payment. Initially, the Farmers’ Union argued most loudly against usury stating that “the development of our state, particularly the

agricultural interests, is greatly retarded by the usurious rates of interest charged.”¹⁰⁹

Farmers believed that usurious banks charged according to the individual. One outraged farmer wrote a letter complaining that banks lend to some farmers at 8 percent and others at 24 percent while only returning 4 percent on savings.¹¹⁰ Another tenant complained that tenants often paid from 18 to 36 percent interest in his locale.¹¹¹ *The Union Review* claimed that banks charged anywhere from 12 to 50 percent but borrowed from the United States government at 1 percent per year.¹¹² Rupert Vance’s study claimed that the government loaned money to farmers at 10 percent but refused to lend to tenants because tenants lacked assets to use as collateral.¹¹³ Still others claimed that interest rates were closer to 15 to 16 percent.¹¹⁴

The *Oklahoma Farm Journal* blamed a usurious credit system for slowing the growth of western Oklahoma saying that banks charged 24 percent interest on loans to farmers when Oklahoma law set the legal rate at 10 percent.¹¹⁵ Politicians attempted to help farmers contain usury by passing laws to regulate interest rates. In 1910, Oklahoma passed House Bill No. 69 which set the interest rate at a maximum of 10 percent with a contract and 6 percent without a contract. If the law was violated, the lender forfeited double the charged interest as a penalty.¹¹⁶ A similar bill had failed the previous year because, according to *The Farmers’ Union Advocate and Union Review*, politicians needed the support of banks and merchants and could not afford to deal with the political backlash that followed supporting a usury bill.¹¹⁷ One reader of *The Oklahoma Farmer* attacked the system and vented his frustration by asking politicians to take up the mantle for rural borrowers.

A great deal of fuss has been made about getting a law passed to protect the banks against robbers and bandits, but I think there should be another law passed on the other side of the bank question. We need a law that will prevent some of these banks from robbing the poor man. They make us pay a high rate of interest and if we don't choose to be robbed, they tell us we can do without the money.¹¹⁸

With sources ranging from 6 to 36 percent, it is impossible to determine what actual interest rates farmers paid without a more detailed study. And even though the state passed laws protecting consumers from usury, the laws appear to have been ignored more often than enforced. It appears that lending was a local phenomenon with very little regulation despite the legal protections afforded by the state legislature. In small towns, credit options were limited to one or two banks so farmers who needed immediate credit had little choice but to pay the rate required by local lenders. In short, there was no norm for interest rates as sources vary widely on the interest rates at local banks in the 1910s and 1920s in Oklahoma.¹¹⁹

One renter recounted a story of potential consequences when crusading against local lenders. Robert H. Oury alleged that he had protested against the usurious local banks because of the extremely high interest rates in his hometown. Because of the tenant's actions, the banks refused to lend him money. He resorted to begging from neighbors because he could not secure a seasonal loan to buy food and supplies claiming "these two years have been the hardest of my life."¹²⁰ Tenants were in an impossible situation. If tenants did not borrow money at high interest rates, they often could not survive the summer months when money became tight until the harvest infused much needed revenue. The Farmers' Union urged its members to "free yourself from the credit habit" which could save farmers 10 to 20 percent by paying cash for implements, food,

and other goods, but tenants rarely had the resources or thriftiness to budget and survive the summer months without credit.¹²¹

Banks and merchants were not without allies, both in the government and in the press. A bill introduced by R. M. Johnson in 1908 stated that, if violated, a penalty would carry a misdemeanor of \$500 and make the guilty party responsible for financial loss to an institution. The failed bill would have enacted a harsh penalty on vocal opponents of the banks.

Any person who shall willfully and maliciously make, circulate, or transmit to another or others any statement, rumor or suggestion written, printed, or by word of mouth, which is directly or by inference derogatory to the financial condition or affects the solvency or financial standing of any bank, banking institution or trust company doing business in this state, or who shall counsel, aid, procure or induce another to start, transmit, or circulate any such statement or rumor shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.¹²²

During this fight, *The Oklahoman*, the leading newspaper in the state, defended the financial institutions claiming that usury “is simply another name for interest,” not a term for illegal lending practices. *The Oklahoman* also believed that the banks were not at fault because lenders operated within the parameters of the present law.¹²³ For the Farmers’ Union, however, this simply meant that *The Oklahoman* was “unalterably opposed to killing the goose which lays the golden egg.”¹²⁴

Tenant farmers and small owners also accused crop speculators of making tremendous profit from their labor. Cotton speculators purchased cotton from gins and farmers after picking in the fall when prices were at their lowest. It appears that cotton prices typically dipped in November and December as many farmers rushed to sell their cotton immediately after ginning.¹²⁵ Cotton farmers typically picked the crop late in the fall, often in October and November in Oklahoma, and immediately sold to agents of

spinners or even gins to settle mortgages or crop liens. Owners also complicated the issue because they owned a portion of the cotton and were ready to sell at the end of picking. Thus, the tenant often had little choice but to sell even if he wanted to hold. Often, at the end of harvest, spinners already had enough cotton and were unwilling to take on more cotton at a premium price when demand was low. Therefore, cotton farmers had to sell when prices were lowest. Speculators often emerged at this point and purchased excess bales from farmers at a low price and held until the surplus was nearly exhausted and then sold at a higher price.¹²⁶ Most farmers, tenants included, hoped to make trading agricultural commodities on the boards of trade illegal believing that it was unfair to allow non-farmers to manipulate the price of cotton. A leading farming newspaper said of stock trader James Patton: “He never made a dollar in his life. He got a hold of his wealth by playing the game of the gambler, who, like the thief, takes from others and gives nothing in return.”¹²⁷

Cotton farmers constantly sought ways to fight speculators but only saw limited success. For example, in 1907, speculators offered to pay \$0.11 or \$0.12 per pound, with a market fluctuating between \$0.12 and \$0.13 (\$65/bale at thirteen cents).¹²⁸ In this instance, the Farmers’ Union urged its members to hold cotton and force prices up by constricting the cotton availability. As was often the case, speculators refused to buy the cotton in an attempt to break the resolve of farmers and refused to pay even \$30 for six bales (\$0.01 per pound) until the union capitulated. The union urged members to stand fast saying “it will take time and patience. It will require careful management.” Time and patience were luxuries hungry and indebted tenants often did not have and farmers did not have the financial means to compete.¹²⁹ In rare cases, farmers found political allies to

help fight crop speculation such as J. V. McClintic, a United States Representative from Kiowa County, Oklahoma, who proposed legislation to prohibit speculation in agricultural products but the success of such legislation was doomed from the outset.¹³⁰

DIVERSIFICATION

The primary advice offered to farmers about breaking the cycle of dependency on cotton and credit was simple – diversify. Newspaper editors, Oklahoma State University Experiment Station circulars, and occasionally even landlords urged cotton farmers to grow a variety of crops to become independent of the cash crop system. Progressive elements of the farmers’ movement, often those with more economic resources than tenants, constantly preached to tenants about how to end their plight. The remedy nearly always began with converting cotton fields into other crops. Cotton in Oklahoma, as in Texas, was a relatively new crop and offered the promise of high returns so tenants who wanted to diversify were often hesitant because cotton production offered the hope of prosperity. For most tenants, lack of funds, instability of contract length, and the need to pay creditors forced renters to continue planting cotton.

Newspaper editors offered opinions on successful farming techniques even though they tilled no land of their own. *The Oklahoma Farm Journal*, a Progressive agricultural publication, offered the advice that “the farmer who raised cotton exclusively and buys his meat and bread supplies from the stores will never get beyond the days of a cotton farmer. Diversified farming is the only way for the farmer to get profits out of his labor.”¹³¹ Other editors also encouraged tenants to plant a variety of crops to avoid

cotton price fluctuations. Broomcorn was one popular suggestion because it grew well in Oklahoma's unpredictable climate. Planting cowpeas improved nitrogen in the soil. Kafir was a new crop in the state and a primary ingredient in some breads, while sudan grass, a type of sorghum, was easy to harvest.¹³² Oklahomans planted a variety of crops throughout the state but the belief in cotton remained constant. "It is in cotton that Oklahoma's greatest chance of returned prosperity rests at this time" remained the battle cry of many Oklahomans while others noted that "cotton is still the king in agricultural Oklahoma."¹³³

Scientists offered more complicated solutions and required more planning by farmers; but there was a potential for salvation if farm tenants applied these methods. J. W. Foley and Beaman Smith of the United States Department of Agriculture recommended a four-field rotation in wheat areas that included corn and manure, wheat and fertilizer, clover, and wheat and fertilizer – a complicated and expensive endeavor.¹³⁴ D. S. and Merle Woodson of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture suggested that cotton farms only plant cotton every other year and rotate with oats, wheat, cowpeas, kafir, or milo. According to Woodson, "it is an exceedingly bad plan for the same land to be planted in cotton more than two years in succession and it is better to use land that has been planted in some other crop."¹³⁵ Livestock also provided a lucrative option for tenants and landlords but the owner would usually need to supply the financial backing. One tenant decreased cotton production by half and supplemented with kafir corn to raise hogs on halves with the landowner. The owner provided the capital to purchase the hogs and provided the fences to keep them penned. The tenant provided the labor for the kafir, cared for the hogs, and split the profits evenly.¹³⁶

Good landlords also often encouraged tenants to diversify. Tenants were enjoined to raise a variety of crops and livestock because variety created a better farm. Happier tenants were more likely to stay for longer periods. This arrangement probably created a stable landlord-tenant relationship as well. Robert L. Williams stated, “I always encourage my tenants to raise hogs, chickens, turkeys, poultry and the like but I don’t want them to have more than two or three cows of their own because I can’t furnish pasture for them.”¹³⁷ Another of Williams’s tenants raised chickens as part of the rental agreement. Williams bought the feed and chickens and the tenant provided the labor and the two parties split the earnings on halves.¹³⁸ A letter from Williams to A. M. Mullins, a tenant on one of his farms, summarizes his point of view succinctly.

I am assuming that you want to stay on the place next year and if so, it is my intention to arrange for you to stay there. Have you got a milk cow and have you got some hogs? You want to get a good brood sow and if you have not get one and raise your own meat and get a good cow and raise your own milk and butter and about a dozen good hens and raise your own eggs. By this means you can take enough butter and eggs to town every Saturday and sell them to buy your sugar and coffee with the other things like that. This is the only way to make a success in farming.¹³⁹

Livestock was not nearly as dependent upon soil quality. Animals provided natural fertilizer and were not nearly as labor intensive as cotton. The biggest hurdle for the tenant raising livestock was financing the venture. The only real possibility in many cases was for the owner to finance and split the earnings as was customary in joint livestock ventures in Oklahoma.¹⁴⁰

Even though diversity sounded like a feasible plan, most cotton tenants simply could not effectively wean themselves from the crop. First, cotton grew nearly anywhere in Oklahoma and most tenants already had experience with cotton production. One

bulletin published by the Oklahoma A & M College Extension Office entitled *Cotton in Oklahoma* stated that “cotton succeeds in all types of soils in Oklahoma, and withstands drought better than corn, wheat, oats, and quite as well as grain sorghums” – a message that seemed to undermine the cry for diversification.¹⁴¹ *The Oklahoma Farm Journal* also contradicted its own musings about diversification. The editor stated, “If there is anything more unprofitable than growing only one crop, it is trying to grow too many crops.” This progressive paper, though a leading proponent of diversity, insisted that each crop required its own equipment and knowledge so a farmer who was too diverse invested too much money in equipment and spent too much time learning new agricultural methods.¹⁴² A third reason diversity did not take hold was Oklahoma’s semi-arid climate. By the early 1920s, scientists had discovered that some of the previously touted cash crops became lethal in times of drought. Oklahoma A & M College found that sorghum was poisonous when it molded because it contained hydrocyanic acid and other crops such as sorghum, kafir, Johnson grass, Sudan grass, and corn occasionally underwent a similar process. In fact, Oklahoma passed a state law prohibiting the planting of Johnson grass with fines ranging from \$25 to \$100.¹⁴³

However, the primary reason that diversification failed was that cotton was too profitable for both tenants and owners. Owners often forced tenants to farm the land to its greatest cotton producing capabilities to maximize profits. Tenants often had one-year leases with a landlord option to renew so there was no guarantee that the tenant would have the same farm the following year. Therefore, tenants had no vested interest in rotating crops or planting cover crops to protect the soil; they simply wanted a quick return. Tenants were often underequipped and worked from sun up to sun down beside

their wives and children to make as much money as possible every year because there was no guarantee past moving day. Cotton culture created a perpetual annual cycle of exploiting the soil, hoping to break even, and moving on to the next farm to begin the same process all over again. Tenants could not diversify without the cooperation of the landlord. Annual leases remained a major obstacle to improving farm quality. Most tenants simply raised cotton and accepted the fact that there was a good chance of finding a new home at the end of the year and operated without regard for the long-term productivity of the farm. Until landlords realized that the production of the farm was vital and that cotton farming ruined soil fertility, neither owners nor tenants saw much need to grow crops that sustained farmers for long periods.¹⁴⁴ One renter believed that it took several years to learn a farm's capabilities and understand which crops grew best in the different soils on each farm. In the fourth year, the renter had experimented with each field and finally understood which soils supported crops. Then, however, just before the fifth year, the owner evicted the tenant and rented to someone else.¹⁴⁵ The system unfortunately was to blame for the lack of diversification and destined the tenant to a repetition of failure.¹⁴⁶

Diversity was slow to come to cotton areas of Oklahoma; in fact, it did not really come at all during the tenant farming era. Tenants continued to grow cotton in most areas of eastern and southern Oklahoma because it was profitable and the system was self-perpetuating. As *Harlow's Weekly* lamented, "cotton has been called the poor man's crop. This is proved by statistics to be a good name inasmuch as it is true that not only is it a weed that will grow upon the smallest patch of ground of the poorest tenant or landholder, but it keeps coming nearer making more men poor and keeping them in that

condition than any other crop.”¹⁴⁷ Tenants and cotton remained inextricably linked throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Tenants never really diversified to any extent in Oklahoma.

Tenants lived a mobile and mundane life, often struggling to survive. They occasionally saved enough money to purchase a farm and began scaling the agricultural ladder. Too often, the problems facing a tenant were simply too difficult to overcome. The credit system, chattel mortgages, and unsecure crop prices made survival difficult. Despite the odds and low standard of life, poor Oklahomans pressed on, moving from one farm to another, leaving their children uneducated, but still hoping to break the cycle themselves by catching a lucky break during a time of prosperity.

CHAPTER IV
ENDNOTES

¹*Harlow's Weekly*, November 7, 1914. Cotton producing counties identified by *Harlow's* included Atoka, Bryan, Coal, Haskell, Hughes, LeFlore, Love, Murray, Seminole, and Johnston in former Indian Territory and, in Oklahoma Territory, counties included cotton-growing counties of Caddo, Comanche, Cleveland, Greer, Jackson, Lincoln, Oklahoma, Pawnee, Payne, and Pottawatomie. Most other counties of eastern Oklahoma also had tenancy rates over fifty percent. In fact, the only region of Oklahoma with tenancy rates consistently below fifty percent according to the Census of 1920 was Northwest Oklahoma and eight counties of northeast Oklahoma in the old Cherokee Nation.

²United States Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States in the Year of 1900: Agriculture 6* (Washington, DC: United States Census Office, 1901), 406; Gary Nall, "King Cotton in Oklahoma," in Donald E. Green, ed. *Rural Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1977), 37-56. Nall provides a good summary of cotton production in Oklahoma but a more detailed analysis of the subject is definitely needed.

³For more on cotton production in Indian Territory see Gilbert Fite, "Development of the Cotton Industry by the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory," *Journal of Southern History* 15 (August, 1949): 342-353.

⁴ *Census of 1900: Agriculture*, 409-410.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 409-410.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 406.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 407.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 407.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 408.

¹² *Ibid.*, 412; Nall, "King Cotton in Oklahoma," 38. Nall links the rapid expansion of cotton growth to the influx of whites after 1890, many of whom were southerners.

¹³ United States Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1910: Agriculture* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1910), 380-387; *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, August 8, 1931.

¹⁴ *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, August 8, 1931.

¹⁵ United States Census Bureau, *Sixteenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 158-174.

¹⁶ National Bureau of Economic Research. Available: <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroeconomy/>. Accessed April-August, 2009.

¹⁷ *Harlow's Weekly*, October 10, 1914, October 17, 1914.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, May 24, 1913, August 8, 1914.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, September 12, 1914, October 3, 1914.

²⁰ Senator Thomas P. Gore quoted in *ibid.*, September 12, 1914.

²¹ Albert Rolland Conley, "The Economic Advantage of Cotton Production in Southeastern Oklahoma as Compared to Southwestern Oklahoma" (MS Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1941), 102. Conley's thesis is an excellent economic comparison of cotton production in eastern Oklahoma and western Oklahoma. Ultimately, he concludes that cotton in the two regions must be viewed as two separate commodities. Cotton grown in southeastern Oklahoma was a higher quality of cotton and the primary market was high grade spinners in the United States. Most western Oklahoma cotton was of an inferior grade and thus shipped to Japan for spinning.

²² United States, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, "Cotton Production and Distribution, Year Ending July 31, 1965," Bulletin 202 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1966), 23.

²³ United States, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, "Cotton Production and Distribution, Year Ending July 31, 1960," Bulletin 197 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), 4.; Census Bureau "Cotton Production and Distribution, Year Ending July 31, 1965," 23; National Bureau of Economic Research, Available at <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroeconomy/>.

²⁴ *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, December 25, 1932; Census Bureau, "Cotton Production and Distribution, Year Ending July 31, 1961," 71.

²⁵ *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, August 8, 1931; United States Census Bureau, *Census of Agriculture of 1930*; United States Census Bureau, *Census of Agriculture of 1940*.

²⁶ The technological revolution in cotton production is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

²⁷ United States Census Bureau, *Seventeenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1950: Agriculture*, "Farm Tenure, People," Section III, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1950), 49.

²⁸ Merle C. Prunty and Charles S. Aiken, "The Demise of the Piedmont Cotton Region," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62 (June 1972): 291.

²⁹ Gilbert Fite, "The Agricultural Trap in the South," *Agricultural History* 60 (Winter 1986): 38-50.

³⁰ Prunty and Aiken, "The Demise of the Piedmont," 292.

³¹ John Fraser Hart, "The Demise of King Cotton," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67 (September 1977): 308.

³² Prunty and Aiken, "The Demise of the Piedmont," 301.

³³ Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler and E.L. Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture* Social Research Report no. 8 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and The Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1938), 44.

³⁴ John Ford, *The Grapes of Wrath* (20th Century Fox), 1940.

³⁵ Elliot West, *Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 73, 176.

³⁶ Taylor, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 44; Grace Fernandes, *A Critical Study of Periodical Reading in Farm Homes* Bulletin No. 176 (Stillwater: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Experiment Station, May 1928), 9.

³⁷ W. G. Masterson (superintendent of McAlister schools) to RLW, October 2, 1917, *Robert Lee Williams Collection*, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK, Box 2, File 1 8 (Hereafter cited as *RLW*); Rupert Vance, *Farmers Without Land* Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 12 (New York: Public Affairs Committee), 10-11; Taylor, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 40. Taylor's study showed that 54.6 percent of owners' children

became farmers while 59.2 percent of cash tenants' children became farmers, and 63.3 percent of sharecropper's children entered into farming.

³⁸ Reprinted report by Dr. J. C. Mahan, State Commissioner of Health, *Harlow's Weekly*, May 2, 1914.

³⁹ *The Tenant Farmer*, September 1915.

⁴⁰ *New Farmer*, June 11, 1921.

⁴¹ Grace Fernandes, *A Critical Study of Periodical Reading in Farm Homes*, 9.

⁴² Vance, *Farmers Without Land*, 10-11 .

⁴³ *The Oklahoma Farmer*, August 25, 1929.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 38.

⁴⁵ Robert T. McMillan, "Farm Housing in Southern Oklahoma," Bulletin B-290 (Stillwater: Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, November 1945), p. 5-6, *O. D. Durant Rural Sociology Collection*, Oklahoma A & M College, Box 1, file 60.

⁴⁶ Vance, *Farmers' Without Land*, 19; Frank P. Walsh, "On the Condition of Farmers" in *Tenant Farmer*, January 1916.

⁴⁷ *Tenant Farmer*, October 1914.

⁴⁸ J. T. Sanders, *The Economic and Social Aspects of Mobility of Oklahoma* Bulletin No. 195 (Stillwater: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, August 1929), 2-3.

⁴⁹ *Harlow's Weekly*, October 25, 1924.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Victor Harlow estimated that a family of five per tenant farm would equal roughly 212,000 tenants per year.

⁵¹ W. W. Fetrow, *Economic Conditions of Farmers in Oklahoma as Related to Membership in the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association* Bulletin No. 186 (Stillwater: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, undated), 11.

⁵² *Oklahoma Union Farmer* October, 15, 1941. The *Oklahoma Union Farmer* offered a questionnaire to help tenants decide if they should move from one farm to another. The table had twenty questions about "Physical Values of Farms," "social and educational advantages," "economic advantages," and "other considerations." The paper

encouraged farmers to check “yes” or “no” on the twenty question table and if the “yes” checks outnumbered the “no” checks, then the farmer should “think of one more good reason why you should move, and very likely you will be doing the right thing.”

⁵³ Sanders, *Economic and Social Aspects of Mobility*, 5, 34.

⁵⁴ *New Farmer*, January 8, 1921.

⁵⁵ For more on this debate, see Steven N. S. Cheung, *The Theory of Share Tenancy: With Special Application to Asian Agriculture and the First Phase of Taiwan Land Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Alfred Marshall, *The Principles of Economics, Book Four: The Agents of Production: Land, Labour, and Capital and Organization* (New York: MacMillan, 1890), Chapter 3.

⁵⁶ Walsh, “On the Condition of Farmers,” *Tenant Farmer*, January 1916.

⁵⁷ University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>. Accessed April-August, 2009.

⁵⁸ *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, September 1942. From analyzing other contracts, these conditions seem to have been the most common rental stipulations long before the newspaper began offering standardized contracts.

⁵⁹ *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, September 14, 1910.

⁶⁰ Contract between R. J. Swearingen and Will Springwater, signed on October 23, 1915, *Martha Swearingen Records*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

⁶¹ Early Vernon Wilcox, *Lease Contracts used in Renting Farms or Shares: A Study of the Distribution of Investments, Expenses and Incomes Between Landlord and Tenant* Bulletin of the USDA No. 650 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1918), 3.

⁶² D. P. Trent, *A Suggested System for Oklahoma Cotton Farms* (Stillwater: Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, undated), 3.

⁶³ *Hurshel Bailey Collection*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, Box 2 File 1. There were two separate contracts between LaFayette and F. A. Thomason that provided for a lease from 1901 to expire at the end of 1903. Thomason rented 320 acres for \$2.50 per acre or \$1.25 per acre per year.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Contract between B. H. Sawyer and LaFayette and Bro., signed on Feb 19, 1908 and terminated on December 31, 1908, *ibid*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, Box 2, File 5.

⁶⁷ J. Burgess contract with LaFayette and Bro., *ibid*.

⁶⁸ Rental contract between Pickard and Hugh Houston signed March 14, 1914 and expiring on December 31, 1914, *Clyde C. Pickard Papers*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, Box 7. Pickard also owned a Dodge automobile dealership named McDaniels and Pickard. The Pickard Papers contains hundreds of farm lease agreements, mortgages, and contracts for land sale.

⁶⁹ Contract between Leon Privett and Milile Simpson, November 11, 1920 to December 31, 1921, *Pickard Papers*, Box 7.

⁷⁰ *Tenant Farmer*, July, 1915.

⁷¹ "Here is a Sample of a Contract that Peonizes the Farmer," *ibid*.

⁷² *Ibid*, September, 1915.

⁷³ "Interlocked Parasites," *ibid.*, October 1914. This is a reprinted pamphlet entitled "Interlocked Parasites: Robbery of the Farmers in the Electric Light Towns of Oklahoma."

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

⁷⁵ J. W. Foley and C. Beaman Smith, "*A System of Tenant Farming and its Results* Farmers Bulletin no. 437 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1911), 3.

⁷⁶ *The Oklahoma Farmer*, August 25, 1918.

⁷⁷ Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1923* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976), 46; *Tenant Farmer*, "Interlocked Parasites," October 1914.

⁷⁸ *The Oklahoma Farmer*, September 25, 1918.

⁷⁹ Letter from J. E. Duncan to *The Oklahoma Farmer*, October 10, 1918.

⁸⁰ For more on African Americans in Oklahoma see Norman Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of the University of Kansas, 1979); Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982). For more on the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma see Charles

Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

⁸¹ S.R. Anderson testimony in the matter of the Estate of Robert Lee Williams Supreme Court Case Estate (February 1951), *RLW*, Box 31, File 7. In the testimony, one tenant accused Bob Williams of “cussing” tenants but admitted that Williams was actually a very good landlord who attempted to help his tenants whenever possible.

⁸² W.F. Oar to RLW, November 5, 1918; M.H. Mills to RLW, November 9, 1918, *ibid.* Oar wrote to Governor Williams that his landlord John Henderson had assaulted and threatened to kill Oar, evict him and his family from the farm, and refused to give the cropper a share of the crop. The County Attorney of Greer County did not believe a conviction would be possible.

⁸³ RLW to H.L. Owens, November 21, 1916, *ibid.*, Box 1, File 4.

⁸⁴ Howard A. Turner, *The Ownership of Tenant Farms in the United States* USDA bulletin no. 1432 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1926), 9, 21-22, 27, 47. This study has a major problem in terms of methodology. Turner described Oklahoma as a Great Plains state and compares Oklahoma to the other states on the plans probably because Oklahoma was settled in a more similar manner at approximately the same time by homesteaders. However, Turner fails to recognize that Oklahoma had much more commonality with the South in terms of tenure and crop choice. Many of the comparisons are faulty but the numbers still offer some insight into the period.

⁸⁵ Howard A. Turner, “Absentee Farm Ownership in the United States,” *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics* 111, 1 (1927), 48.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 58; Louis Ferleger, “Sharecropping Contracts and Mechanization in the Late Nineteenth Century South,” *Agricultural History*, 67(Summer 1993), 31-46.

⁸⁸ George C. Pendleton testimony in the matter of the Estate of Robert Lee Williams Supreme Court Case Estate; Dr. Charles Lynch testimony in the matter of the Estate of Robert Lee Williams Supreme Court Case Estate, February, 1951, *RLW*, Box 31, File 7.

⁸⁹ Turner, “Absentee Farm Ownership,” 56, 58.

⁹⁰ *Tenant Farmer*, July 1915. *Tenant Farmer* was a propaganda piece more than a newspaper. The paper was edited by Socialist Party leader Patrick Nagle. Nagle used funds from his law firm in Kingfisher, Oklahoma to support the deficit incurred by the paper and keep it running.

⁹¹ Ibid., January 1916.

⁹² Ibid., November 1915. Nagle notes that Wilson Land and Grain Company of Acade, New York bought 180,000 acres near Mills, New Mexico.

⁹³ “He is Deeply Engrossed in the System,” Ibid., October, 1915.

⁹⁴ *Harlow’s Weekly*, November 7, 1914.

⁹⁵ *Union Review*, March 20, 1908.

⁹⁶ Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1999), 66.

⁹⁷ *Union Review*, May 15, 1908.

⁹⁸ Speech by S. O. Dawes, Executive President of the Oklahoma Farmers’ Union, *Farmers’ Union Advocate*, May 12, 1910.

⁹⁹ *Farmers’ Union Advocate*, April 21, 1910, July 14, 1910. *Farmers’ Union Advocate* had some grievance against “special interests” in Oklahoma through an ordeal with the post office whereby the paper had to pay a higher postage. The paper claimed that the capital removal interests and railroad conglomerates forced the Post Master General to deny postage in an attempt to kill the newspaper.

¹⁰⁰ *Union Advocate Review*, January 26, 1909.

¹⁰¹ S. O. Dawes, “One Man Power,” *ibid.*, September 16, 1909, February 24, 1910.

¹⁰² *Union Review*, March 20, 1908.

¹⁰³ Bissett, *Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus*, 66.

¹⁰⁴ *St. Louis Post Dispatch* reprinted in *Farmers’ Union Advocate*, March 19, 1908.

¹⁰⁵ *Harlow’s Weekly*, August 17, 1912. *Harlow’s Weekly* was not a farm paper, and in fact it was often quite the opposite. Harlow seemed to take the elitist standpoint in many instances urging farmers to stop planting cotton, deriding any support for the Socialist Party, and pithily attacking people who took other points of view.

¹⁰⁶ *Comanche County Farmer*, February 20, 1903.

¹⁰⁷ Owlsey Lonergan to RLW, October 26, 1914, *RLW*, Box 1, File 5; *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, April 1, 1915; *Oklahoma Farmer*, March 25, 1915.

¹⁰⁸ John White to RLW, January 22, 1917, *RLW*, Box 1, File 5.

¹⁰⁹ *Farmers' Union Advocate*, March 26, 1908. The Farmers' Union executive committee issued a statement condemning high interest rates.

¹¹⁰ C. L. Harkins to editor; R. E. Lewis to editor, *Farmers' Union Advocate*, February 27, 1908.

¹¹¹ *Tenant Farmer*, August, 1915.

¹¹² *Union Review*, June 5, 1908.

¹¹³ Vance, *Farmers Without Land*, 16-17.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*; *Oklahoma Farmer*, April 1, 1915.

¹¹⁵ *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, February 15, 1914.

¹¹⁶ *Union Advocate Review*, April 5, 1910.

¹¹⁷ N. T. McAllister to editor, *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, March 25, 1909.

¹¹⁸ W. S. Law to editor, *The Oklahoma Farmer*, February 10, 1915.

¹¹⁹ For more on banking in the West, see Lynne Pierson Doti and Larry Schweikart, *Banking in the American West: From Gold Rush to Deregulation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). For more on banking in Oklahoma, see Norbert R. Mahnken, "No Oklahoman Lost a Penny: Oklahoma's State Bank Guarantee Law, 1907-1923," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 71 (Spring 1993): 42-63; and James Smallwood, *An Oklahoma Adventure: Of Banks and Bankers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979).

¹²⁰ Robert H. Oury to RLW, December 1, 1913; December 5, 1913; January 5, 1914; January 8, 1914, *RLW*, Box 1, File 1. Williams loaned Oury \$35 so that he would not have to sell his cow in order to buy a wagon to move.

¹²¹ *Union Advocate Review*, July 19, 1910.

¹²² *Farmers' Union Advocate*, April 9, 1908. Bill reprinted in newspaper.

¹²³ *The Oklahoman* reprinted in *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, February 4, 1909.

¹²⁴ *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, January 1, 1909.

¹²⁵ Statistics from the Bureau of Economic Research show a decline in cotton prices in November and December of most years. National Bureau of Economic Research. Available: <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroeconomy/>

¹²⁶ *Oklahoma Union Messenger and Independent Farmer*, October 26, 1906.

¹²⁷ *Union Advocate Review*, March 13, 1910.

¹²⁸ Farmers and speculators alike did not realize that the peak cotton price in 1907 of \$0.13 per pound in August would be the highest price for cotton until October of 1909.

¹²⁹ *Oklahoma Union Messenger and Independent Farmer*, October 25, 1906; *Union Review*, November 9, 1907; *Farmers' Union Advocate*, March 5, 1908.

¹³⁰ *Harlow's Weekly*, December 15, 1923.

¹³¹ *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, January 1, 1910.

¹³² *Oklahoma Farmer*, August 15, 1915, January 1, 1914, December 10, 1914; *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, November 1, 1909, September 13, 1911.

¹³³ *Harlow's Weekly*, July 19, 1924; July 30, 1919.

¹³⁴ J. W. Foley and C. Beaman Smith, *A System of Tenant Farming and its Results* Farmers Bulletin no. 437 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1911), 8.

¹³⁵ D. S. Woodson and Merle Woodson, "Manual of Farm Crops and Allied Subjects," *Quarterly Report of the Oklahoma State Board of Agriculture* (March 31, 1913): 19, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture Papers, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, OK.

¹³⁶ *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, January 15, 1915.

¹³⁷ RLW to W. C. Jamison, September 12, 1918, *RLW*, Box 2, File 4.

¹³⁸ Fannie Decker testimony in the matter of the Estate of Robert Lee Williams Supreme Court Case Estate, February, 1951, 27, *ibid.*, Box 31, File 7.

¹³⁹ RLW to A. M. Mullins, September 20, 1916, *ibid.*, Box 1, File 4.

¹⁴⁰ *Oklahoma Farmer*, March 10, 1915.

¹⁴¹ Glen Briggs, *Cotton in Oklahoma* Circular no. 32 (Stillwater, OK: Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, June 1923), 4.

¹⁴² *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, November 10, 1908.

¹⁴³ *Oklahoma Farmer*, February 25, 1915 and an issue whose date was illegible.

¹⁴⁴ *Oklahoma Farm Journal*, May 15, 1909.

¹⁴⁵ *Oklahoma Farmer*, November 25, 1915.

¹⁴⁶ Foley, *A System of Tenant Farming*, 4; William H. Harbaugh, "Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions," *Agricultural History* 66 (Summer 1992): 102-103; *Oklahoma Farmer*, January 10, 1916; *Daily Ardmoreite* reprinted in *Harlow's Weekly*, November 28, 1914.

¹⁴⁷ *Harlow's Weekly*, July 30, 1919.

CHAPTER V

POLITICS AND COOPERATIVES

Before 1930, the American public, including their political representatives largely ignored farm tenancy. Progressivism lingered until the onset of World War I, but the United States then shifted attention toward Europe and then focused on business growth in the following decade. World War I refocused attention from social reform toward the war effort. The war also brought about widespread agricultural prosperity when the government called for increased production in cotton, wheat, and other staples. However, the government's urging of increased production came with consequences which proved to be the downfall of agriculture when war-time production created post-war surpluses which drove prices downward. Many farmers purchased extra acreage, hired more laborers, and bought more machinery based on wartime prosperity, which cost farmers dearly with the price collapse of the 1920s.

In the United States, politicians focused on non-agrarian policies but in Oklahoma, quite the opposite was true. Not only was the Oklahoma legislature protecting farmers in general, but many of the laws pertained to the growing tenant class as well. Oklahoma politicians passed laws protecting farmers against usury, unfair

railroad shipping rates, and high ginning prices. While the national government failed to recognize tenancy as a problem until the 1930s, the Oklahoma legislature attacked farm tenancy and worked to eradicate it using state funds even before 1920. Success of tenant protection varied, but politicians acted to help the semi-cohesive voting bloc of the Oklahoma farm renting class.

By the mid 1910s, politics and farm tenancy became intertwined and opinions varied widely on the topic. When radical political groups matured within the state, newspaper editors of both major parties recognized that farm tenancy provided a potential vehicle to Socialism. This prospect alarmed influential men like Victor Harlow, a self-proclaimed independent political commentator, and forced him to rethink the political repercussions of farm tenancy. Other editors, like Patrick Nagle, hoped that increased farm tenancy might lead toward solutions offered by the Socialist Party. Harlow attempted to remain nonpartisan, but Nagle made no such attempts and sought to bring his party to the forefront of Oklahoma politics. Oklahomans in general, especially prosperous landlords, feared the Socialist Party and sought to discredit the movement because socialist rhetoric elevated workers to a prominent place in politics and society. Eventually, the rising socialist forces mandated that Democrats and Republicans placate renters because the rural vote was necessary to win elections. As Oklahomans began to take note of the growing tenant number, politicians recognized the potential for tenant revolt and sought to forestall rebellion.¹

Many farmers remained unconvinced that the government sought to help correct their problems. Before 1910, Oklahoma politicians focused on issues surrounding the growth of the new state. Oklahoma progressives passed prohibition laws while industrial

interests brought the capital removal bill, but until the late 1910s the Oklahoma farmer saw only empty gestures such as the Good Roads Bill and other insignificant legislation.² Farmers lamented that politicians had expressed the desire to help but that little had actually been done. The *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review* succinctly summarized the position of the neglected farmer: "If these pretend friends of farmers are sincere, and if they are honestly interested in improving the condition of farm life, let them prove their sincerity by assisting the farmers in vitalizing the constitution on usury, and by preventing through an effective graduated land tax, the monopolization of the lands of this state."³

By the 1910s, the political landscape of Oklahoma changed as tenants became more politically involved and vocal. One primary difference between farm tenancy in Oklahoma and sharecropping in the South was that renters in Oklahoma had political rights while in the South farmers, even whites, had no strong voice in politics. Throughout much of the cotton South, sharecroppers were descendants of freedmen and could rarely vote, let alone use the same facilities as the ruling class. As white tenancy rose throughout the South, and by 1935 white tenants made up two-thirds of southern tenants, poor southern whites also lost their political voice. Poll taxes and literacy tests reinforced the emerging caste system in the South in the 1900s. By the 1930s, according to Wayne Flint, poor southern whites played virtually no role in southern politics because of "apathy, lack of education, and rural isolation, [but] they faced the more specific hurdle of the poll tax." The white tenant "was economically and politically powerless," Flynt wrote, "and like the black man, he learned to get along, to hold his tongue."⁴ In Oklahoma, quite the opposite was true. Renters in the Sooner State had rights; they were

registered voters; and radical farm organizations agitated on their behalf. Tenants in Oklahoma wielded their collective vote, forcing politicians to listen, whereas southern sharecroppers remained outside the political arena.⁵

Tenants in Oklahoma influenced politics in each of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Renters provided much of the support for the original Farmers' Union that backed the Democratic Party and bullied Republicans into submission at the 1907 statehood convention. In the 1910s, tenants exerted influence through the socialist movement as Oklahoma had a more influential Socialist Party than any other state. Tenants also influenced politics in the 1920s as prospective governors courted the tenant voters and enacted legislation such as state-funded home loan programs, free textbooks, and industrial regulation. Oklahoma's renters were different than southern tenants because, as voters with power, they would actually influence policy.⁶

Discontented farmers joined the labor movement in the 1910s and 1920s to push for legislation favorable for both groups. In each instance, the alliance could not survive because interests were too different and farmers and workers ultimately had less in common than they initially believed. Both labor and farmers fought similar perceived enemies and constructed the alliance around the struggle against credit and capital. Farmers and laborers organized against railroads, banks, and large corporations. Labor sought safer working conditions, higher pay, and shorter work days whereas farmers wanted lower freight rates, easier credit, and higher agricultural prices. Basically, labor wanted to reform capitalism, farmers, as small entrepreneurs, wanted to harness capitalism and gain a larger share of the wealth.⁷

The politics of farm tenancy began just before the statehood convention with the original Shawnee Demands of 1906. This coalition was sponsored by the leading farm organization, the Farmers' Union, and the leading voice of organized labor, the Twin Territories Federation of Labor. The alliance began for the sole purpose of electing delegates to the statehood convention and to secure legislation favorable to both organizations. The coalition was indeed successful in electing members to the convention and to the state legislature, and ultimately many of the Shawnee Demands were simply absorbed by the Democratic Party platform.⁸ The labor unions wanted an eight-hour day and safety regulations while farmers wanted an end to crop speculation, a homestead exemption law, and an elected Commissioner of Agriculture.⁹ Progressive reforms like the recall, initiative, and referendum and free textbooks were meant to help all Oklahoma families. Supporters of the Shawnee Demands played a significant role in the early statehood movement. Of the 124 delegates to the Oklahoma Statehood Convention, 77 Democrats and 3 Republicans pledged their allegiance to the Shawnee platform. At the convention, the demands achieved mixed results. The Democratic Party, the party firmly in control of state politics, wrote many of the twenty-four planks into the state constitution. The election of the Commissioner of Agriculture, however, met with defeat.¹⁰

The Shawnee Demands did not advocate a single plank directed at farm tenancy, as this was a time of plantation building within the state. Many of the leaders of the Farmers' Union and the Democratic Party were affluent Oklahomans who dealt in Indian land.¹¹ The convention was important, however, for establishing a relationship between farmers and laborers. With statehood, the previous cooperation would bear fruit. The

Shawnee Demands were fairly progressive. Later alliances, like the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League, focused more directly on farm tenants, and thus, were seen as radical by the Democratic Party. Key party leaders refused to support these coalitions. The Democrats largely accepted the premises of the Shawnee Demands but rejected later programs asserted by the farm-labor movement.¹²

SOCIALISM

The alliance between tenants and laborers that arose in the 1910s spawned one of the strongest Socialist movements in United States history.¹³ Socialism came to Oklahoma for a variety of reasons. Garin Burbank argues that rural Oklahomans embraced socialism to fight wealthy landlords in an “Armageddon” so as to take their rightful place at the top of society. Burbank also stresses that Oklahomans were far from doctrinaire but adapted the ideology to the local and regional circumstances. Oklahoma farmers accepted a hybrid form of socialism that included the possibility of cooperation to fight corporate interests but remained “ambiguous” toward private property.¹⁴ Jim Bissett claims that socialism drew on the organizational efforts of the pre-statehood Farmers’ Union and used the experience to launch the Socialist Party. Farmers fused their understanding of the Jeffersonian tradition with socialist rhetoric to form a cohesive party. Instead of rejecting evangelical Christianity, Bissett claims, socialists used the connection with a strong Christian tradition to resonate with farmers. Thus, individualism from the Jeffersonian agrarian tradition combined with an indictment of capitalism to stress a moral critique of capitalism.¹⁵ James Green believes that the

Socialist Party in Oklahoma grew out of a void left by the Populist Party. Still, Oklahomans could never fully embrace many aspects of socialism.¹⁶ Each author, implicitly or explicitly, agrees that Oklahoma socialists never sought to destroy private property. Rather, they constructed an argument around the belief that all farmers should own their own land and that corporations should act more fairly by charging fair shipping rates and lowering interest rates on all forms of credit. Socialists in Oklahoma differed, however, in the internalization of Christianity into their basic political arguments. In fact, one historian believed that the mixture was “pivotal to its success.”¹⁷ The Christian message, according to Bissett, was a more palatable challenge of the social and economic hierarchy than the abstract writings of Karl Marx. Socialist leaders often gained forums in churches; socialist newspapers employed biblical metaphors of Christ mingling with paupers; and Jesus Christ was himself born of humble working origins. The socialist message resonated with Christians and the masses had little trouble reconciling their economic persuasion and their faith.¹⁸

Socialist success in Oklahoma has been attributed to a wide variety of agricultural issues. Without agricultural support, socialism could never have gained a foothold in Oklahoma politics. Low farm values, high tenancy rates, slow population growth, and dependence on wheat and cotton left Oklahoma farmers feeling helpless as the world changed around them.¹⁹ In addition, a history of cooperation with labor, as exemplified in the Shawnee Demands of 1906, led disgruntled farmers into a coalition with the workers for a second time in state history. This time, however, many of the farm leaders were men like Patrick Nagle, a prominent attorney from Kingfisher, who believed that

the state's poor farmers deserved more help than either the Democrats or Republicans offered.²⁰

Oklahoma's rural socialists had much different rhetoric than non-agrarian socialists. The Socialist Party in Oklahoma railed against the problems faced by disaffected tenants.²¹ The Oklahoma Socialist Party only vaguely resembled more radical groups from other states because of the agrarian origins. Rural socialists advocated change; but instead of direct action, with the possibility of violence, Oklahoma socialists wanted to use the ballot box to restructure capitalism.²² *The New Farmer* described the belief of Oklahoma's socialists.

The principles of Socialism on the state and national platforms of the Socialist Party emphasize that the right to own land should be dependent upon the ability to use it. Any farmer would be allowed to own as much as he could cultivate; no one would be allowed to own farm lands for speculative purposes nor to own it for purposes of leasing it and thereby derive an unearned profit from the labor of others.²³

Agrarian socialists in Oklahoma did not stress the confiscation of private property but instead believed in a more equitable distribution of the wealth.

In the presidential election of 1912, the Socialist Party attacked the Democratic and Republican parties as proponents of the capitalistic status quo. Socialist rhetoric labeled Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft as extensions of the same plutocracy that protected the interests of the wealthy. Socialists viewed Republicans as the party of northern industry and wealth that had controlled the United States since the Civil War. Both Taft and Roosevelt hailed from northern moneyed interests and the "Great Machine System" of the Republican Party. The Democratic Party, according to tenant supporters, bowed to southern interests that had actually

changed very little since the Civil War and still controlled schools, preachers, and newspapers through the southern party apparatus.²⁴

Oklahoma's rural Socialists also compared capitalism to slavery and hoped to throw off enslavement through the political system. Most of the rhetoric put forth by agrarian socialists focused on class unity and inequality. Patrick Nagle urged proletarian unity saying "if you refuse to join the party of your class, you will die a peon and a serf."²⁵ The Socialist Party platform appealed to tenants through measures calling for the redistribution of wealth. Socialists wanted state-operated banks to provide low-interest loans to farmers and the working class. They supported woman's suffrage, old age pensions, free textbooks for all children, and strict usury laws.²⁶ The Socialist Party also advocated a program that spoke directly to the needs of the farmers. The platform included: renting public domain to tenants at reasonable rates; state owned grain elevators and warehouses; free agricultural education; cooperatives to buy land; fertilizer and machinery; state sponsored crop insurance; property tax exemptions on estates with less than one thousand dollars; a graduated land tax; a state program to purchase absentee landlord holdings; and a state sponsored rent-to-own program for tenants. Socialist leaders also stressed racial equality, stating that the party "stands for the entire working class – not part of the working class."²⁷ In regards to socialistic tenacity, *The Tenant Farmer* gallantly argued that "the only people the plutocrats fear and respect are the Socialists. They cannot be bought, bulldozed, or bamboozled" and to some degree the paper had a point.²⁸

Socialists feared that Democrats would disfranchise poor whites and started a poster campaign in 1915 entitled "Threatened Disfranchisement of the Tenant Farmer by

the Democratic Machine.” Democrats had introduced the Taylor Election Law and socialists feared the law was meant to disfranchise poor whites. The proposed law would force voters to disclose their party to an inspector, take a literacy test, and pay a poll tax. In addition, this proposed law would have had property ownership requirements for voting privileges. Any of these provisions, tenants feared, could strip them of the right to vote. Tenant voices claimed that Democrats had disfranchised poor whites through restrictive legislation in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana. Even though voters defeated the law in 1915, Nagle and others feared that the two major parties would unleash a political attack to kill the socialist tenant vote.²⁹ Despite the denial from Governor Robert L. Williams that the law “would not have disenfranchised a single white person,” socialists remained skeptical of any law that resembled voter restriction because the disfranchised voters were likely socialist sympathizers.³⁰

By 1918, socialism had declined rapidly in Oklahoma and the party soon died within the state. World War I had made it increasingly unpopular to be a socialist. By abandoning the allied war effort in World War I in such an abrupt manner, the Bolsheviks, the only government at the time associated with Marxism, had deserted the United States. Ardently patriotic rural residents wanted no part of European traditions, especially those that betrayed the United States. The Socialist Party had also opposed entry into the war, which undermined its credibility even before the war ended. Also, general prosperity during World War I eroded the economic planks on which the party stood. Rural folk lost interest in the perennial class struggle as farm income rose in the late 1910s.³¹ When cotton jumped from \$0.05 to nearly \$0.40 per pound and wheat

jumped from near \$1.00 to just over \$2.30 per bushel, the farm economy was healthier than it had been in decades.³²

Most authors link the high rates of farm tenancy and the socialist phenomenon.³³ Garin Burbank has shown that tenancy was highest in counties with cotton production along the Red River in Marshall, Johnston, and Pontotoc counties and also in the western cotton-producing counties of Roger Mills, Beckham, and Kiowa where the socialist gubernatorial candidate in 1914 polled 35 percent of the vote.³⁴ Other counties with high tenancy rates also voted for the Socialist Party in larger proportion than non-socialist counties of northwestern and northern Oklahoma. But, one problem in claiming that socialism was the party of tenants is that eastern Oklahoma counties did not flock to the socialist movement. Counties with the highest proportion of tenants continued to vote for the Democrats but five counties in western Oklahoma (Dewey, Major, Roger Mills, Beckham, and Kiowa - all with increasing tenancy but still dominated by owners) supported the Socialists and elected Socialist officials to the state legislature.³⁵ Johnson and Marshall counties, both with 80 percent tenancy rates, voted in the highest proportion for Eugene V. Debs in the presidential election of 1908, which seems to be the primary justification for the claim that socialism was strongest in counties with high tenancy rates.³⁶ Counties with high tenant percentages also voted for Socialists in greater numbers, but Socialists never garnered a majority in a single eastern county. It is undeniable that socialism resonated with tenants, but most tenants still voted for majority parties. Most counties with a high percentage of tenants continued to vote for the Democrats. Rising commodity prices and the “moral debacle” of European Socialists in World War I destroyed any chance the party had to thrive in the United States.³⁷ Garin

Burbank noted that “it cannot be argued that *either* repression or prosperity killed the Socialist Party of Oklahoma; *both* did.”³⁸

FARMER LABOR RECONSTRUCTION LEAGUE (1920s)

When the Oklahoma Socialist Party died, progressive Oklahomans were left to their own devices. Soon the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League emerged to champion the radical cause. The league began as a cooperative political union, a successor to the defunct Socialist Party. The league supported state ownership of utilities and minimum price supports for commodities. Because of the obvious similarities to Socialist planks, the league had difficulty convincing prominent Oklahomans to support the cause.³⁹ The radical elements left the league searching for a voice within mainstream politics. The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League never evolved into a true third party like the Socialists, but the coalition became an influential political voice within the Democratic Party in the early 1920s.⁴⁰

Conservative elements of the agricultural movement stayed clear of the Farmer-labor Reconstruction League and focused on agrarian and moral issues.⁴¹ The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry remained aloof from politics and stayed as apolitical as possible. The Grange did not speak for tenants or sharecroppers at all. Instead, the Grange raised awareness about rural electrification, temperance, railroad rates, and cooperation among farmers but never had any platform dealing with farm tenancy. The organization complained about trivial issues like daylight savings time, condemned the early payment of army bonuses, and made the prohibition of alcohol a

yearly plank in the state platform. Even after the repeal of prohibition, the Grange continued to fight for abstinence from alcohol, stating that it would “rob children of the necessities of life, lead to drunken debauchery and to corruption of government.”⁴²

While the Grange stayed out of politics, a member of the Farmers’ Union cried “let us go into politics; use the ballot box freely, earnestly, and judiciously, but cast the party politician aside.”⁴³

By the early 1920s, farmers and industrial workers became increasingly discontented across the United States. A movement toward cooperation once again manifested in Oklahoma as labor and farmers organized to fight common enemies. Tenants believed that “the landlord, banker, the merchant and all other property owners are vocal in their demands for selfish legislation when the legislature is in session, and in many instances the benefits they obtain through legislation are accompanied by further inroads upon their less fortunate fellow citizens.”⁴⁴ Farmers became increasingly agitated because income had dropped significantly after World War I. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, a non-profit organization that studied the American economy, the average price of cotton in the United States declined from \$0.40 a pound in 1919 to under \$0.20 two years later. A jump in 1923 brought prices back close to \$0.35, but that increase marked the last time in the 1920s that cotton prices rose above \$0.20.⁴⁵ Once again, Oklahoma farmers saw a decline in farm income. In 1921, farmers in Oklahoma dealt with many issues that had provoked a response from agrarian socialists. Wheat production had declined dramatically. Cotton production was high, but prices plummeted. Taxes rose substantially over the previous decade. Credit was nearly impossible to obtain and farm tenancy was on the rise. While laborers sought higher

wages and better working conditions, from an agricultural perspective, farmers saw laborers as potential allies struggling against the same enemies. Once again farmers were willing to cooperate with any group that expressed a community of interests.⁴⁶

The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League evolved from the growing dissatisfaction of the American Federation of Labor and the state organization of the Farmers' Educational and Co-operative Union (Farmers' Union). The Farmers' Union had remained apolitical since the Shawnee Demands and through the socialist era of Oklahoma politics, but in the 1920s state President John Simpson supported cooperation between labor and farmers in hopes of improving the agricultural economic situation. The two sides met in Shawnee in 1923 and officially formed the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League and elected Simpson as the president. The coalition included representatives from multiple organizations such as: the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America (Farmers' Union); The Farm Labor Union of America; the Order of the Railway Conductors; the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen; the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen; the Brotherhood of Maintenance Waymen; the Oklahoma State Federation of Labor; United Mine Workers of America; the Reconstruction League; and the Nonpartisan League. The League denied entry to the Workers' Party, a communist group seen as too radical. Yet, despite the eviction of the communists from the League, other radical elements remained. The ties to the deceased Socialist Party remained as radicals like Patrick Nagle, George Wilson, and other socialists found political refuge in the coalition.⁴⁷

The League had much broader appeal than just to tenant farmers, but it became the next group to take up the cause for the renters because of the prominence of the

Farmers' Union within the coalition. The organization tempered or rejected some of the old socialist reforms, but others became the core of the League platform. In fact, the Farmers' Union wanted to remain unaffiliated with the former Socialist movement and tried to avoid any policies that seemed "red" or even "pink."⁴⁸ The meeting at Shawnee in 1921 created a list of grievances that came to be known as the Shawnee Demands, echoing a similar set of complaints issued at the time of statehood. Farmers wanted state operation of many services including gins and grain elevators, the closer regulation of railroads, and a state-owned bank. Farmers also lobbied against state and federal money for roads believing that counties and locales should provide the funding.⁴⁹ The most important demand, at least for farm renters, was a state-sponsored home-ownership program where the state would provide low-interest loans to tenants and sharecroppers making home ownership a possibility. Labor issued several demands concerned with improving working conditions and shortening the work day. Both sides also advocated free textbooks, but the primary Socialist stamp on the agreement was the complaint against militarism as an indictment of United States involvement in World War I.⁵⁰ The planks underwent various changes and revisions during the period, especially in 1924, when another meeting redefined goals and renamed the list of demands the El Reno Platform. The only significant change was the omission of the most radical idea - a state-backed credit system.⁵¹ According to *Harlow's Weekly*, the League elected 14 of 107 members of the state house in 1921 and 3 state Senators.⁵²

The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League had some political success. It helped to pass laws amending workmen's compensation, regulated cotton grading, strengthened laws governing railroads, allocated money for textbooks, and achieved several other

minor reforms. The League showed its power by electing a governor almost singlehandedly. The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League officially endorsed Jack Walton, the Democratic candidate for governor in the election of 1922. Most members of the League belonged to a staunch but radical strain of Oklahoma Democrats who backed Walton and his charismatic style even though he was a friend of labor more than an agrarian reformer. Walton was quoted by the *Oklahoma Union Farmer* as stating, “I stand for the farmer and for the laborer. . . and if elected governor of this state – may my right hand wither and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I forget the cause for one single hour.”⁵³

During the election, Walton claimed to stand “irrevocably upon the Shawnee Platform” and drew almost every major idea of his own platform from the meeting at Shawnee.⁵⁴ Walton wanted to lend money to farmers using state funds, to construct storage facilities and warehouses at state expense, and to build a state cement factory to assist in such endeavors. Walton also claimed that his constituents mandated an end to tenancy in Oklahoma, stating that “the greatest menace to a representative form of government is the homeless man, and the tenant farmer is a homeless man.”⁵⁵ Walton promised to continue free textbooks, enhance the rights of women, improve the conditions of labor, and promote good roads within the state, all platforms of the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League and the Oklahoma Socialist Party before that.⁵⁶ In November 1922, Walton won the gubernatorial election largely on the votes of the tenant farmer backed Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League even though mainstream Democrats bolted to support the Republican candidate because the Shawnee Demands were simply too radical. Despite this mass defection, Walton still won the race by over thirty-three

thousand votes.⁵⁷ The organization boasted a membership of 75,000 to 80,000 votes, enough to make a significant contribution in a closely contested election.⁵⁸

Though unrecognized at the moment of election, Walton's failure as governor was inevitable as he had angered too many important Oklahomans throughout his career. His enemies aligned for political attack. E. K. Gaylord, editor of *The Oklahoman*, disliked Walton from his days as mayor of Oklahoma City and helped turn public opinion against the governor, while powerful figures, like John Whitehurst, Campbell Russell, and Wesley Disney, attacked Walton because of his alleged misuse of power. Walton was accused of using his pardon and parole powers excessively, giving political patronage to friends, interfering with a special election, and using the National Guard to enforce martial law.⁵⁹ Walton also hurt his popularity in some locales through an extensive war waged on the Ku Klux Klan. Ironically, many accused the governor of using illegal practices in this battle. Ultimately, Walton's gubernatorial term could not survive the allegations of scandal and as he was impeached by the legislators of Oklahoma for placing Oklahoma under martial law during the battle with the KKK and for abusing his pardoning powers.⁶⁰ Walton remained popular with many Oklahomans and continued his political career by running for several state offices and successfully campaigning for a seat on the Corporation Commission even though his governorship lasted only eight months.⁶¹

Opponents of the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League argued that the "unnatural marriage" between farmers and laborers would actually help the farmers very little. Farmers wanted high commodity prices, but workers needed farm prices to remain low because they consumed agricultural products. High farm prices meant that workers spent

more money on food so the two sides had very different needs in actuality. Moderate Oklahomans also warned that the “cloven hoof of Socialism” had too much influence on the Shawnee Platform and that the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League would ultimately fail irreparably damaging agrarian credibility. According to Victor Harlow, “the experience in the last few years with Socialism all over the world has made all thoughtful people very suspicious of it in any guise, especially when as little disguised as this particular program.”⁶²

The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League had a brief and turbulent life from 1921 to 1925. Most notably, the Farmers’ Union split from the League clarifying that the alliance had drifted too far from its original purpose. John Simpson, president of the Oklahoma Farmers’ Union, briefly allied with the labor movement and when “they went too strong for him in 1922,” Simpson wrote, “and he realized that such kingdoms were not planned for him nor his friends, nor for the farmers. They were planned for organized labor and their friends.” Simpson also claimed that the union was not “married to any other organization” but allied with any organization willing to cooperate. As the League drifted further toward labor, Walton maneuvered a leadership coup within the organization and appointed George Wilson, a longtime supporter and close friend, as the president of Oklahoma A & M College.⁶³ When this occurred, Simpson pulled the Farmers’ Union out of the political coalition which robbed the League of one of its most cohesive and largest voting blocs. Largely because of Walton’s unpopularity and the increasing association with radicalism, the Farmers’ Union abandoned the group. During the legislative session, some of the planks of the Shawnee Demands received attention

from the legislature. Those affecting the farmers did not and the momentum for the state-assisted farm purchasing program soon withered.⁶⁴

The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League showed its power by electing a governor, convincing other politicians of new stances on issues like farm tenancy, and passing legislation that was integral to the original Shawnee Platform. But, the elections of 1924 spelled the end of the Farmer-Labor Progressive League, as the name officially changed after the Farmers' Union left the conglomerate. J. Luther Langston, a longtime radical Socialist, became the state manager of the reorganized group in its waning days but could not revive the organization's broad appeal. The League remained strong in some locales, but statewide League candidates lost in fourteen of fifteen races as the group passed into history.⁶⁵

LEGISLATION AFFECTING TENANTS

Between 1910 and 1930, Oklahoma politicians passed laws to benefit farm tenants. Two possible explanations arise for the protection of farm tenants in Oklahoma. First, tenants made up a large percentage of the rural population so politicians placated renters with legislation to win elections in some locales. Candidates often had platforms and plans for specific legislation built into their campaigns to garner support from tenants. C. H. Hyde, in a letter to *Harlow's Weekly*, stated that "ever since I have been old enough to remember, every candidate for a state or legislative office was born on a farm. He always wanted to be elected 'so as to help the farmer.'"⁶⁶ With the overwhelming majority of Oklahoma voters living in the countryside (over sixty percent

in 1920), and over half of those being tenants, state politicians needed the votes of this disaffected minority.⁶⁷ Politicians also saw tenants as socialist sympathizers and teased tenants with home ownership possibilities to stop the movement toward socialism. Politicians needed rural votes to win elections but helping poor farmers prosper was a worthy goal because economic prosperity deterred socialism.

Legislation usually targeted broad farm issues, not just those affecting tenants. A complaint of farmers from statehood through the 1930s was road conditions. Successive legislatures debated appropriations to develop a road system so that farmers could more easily get their crops to market. The issue was a matter of constant debate and urbanites often stalled bills claiming that rural areas received an unfair amount of money to build roads.⁶⁸ In 1912, Oklahoma had only twenty-three miles of “improved roads,” the least in the United States.⁶⁹ In 1919, road improvements were an important issue again as the legislature proposed \$50 million for paving roads and allowed voters to determine the issue. Proponents of the bill believed that the roads would be extremely advantageous to Oklahoma farmers. Investing in the infrastructure would yield much more than the initial investment. Opponents feared that the project would cost much more than the allocated \$50 million and that the state would eventually spend much more for an adequate road system.⁷⁰ When Oklahomans voted, the road bond failed because western Oklahoma farmers believed that eastern Oklahoma would receive a disproportionate amount of the money. No county in old Oklahoma Territory voted in favor of the bill, with some counties voting nearly twenty to one against the proposal. Across the state, the bill met with disaster as only 69,917 voted in favor of the legislation whereas 171,327 Oklahomans voted against it.⁷¹

Other legislative programs focused more directly on the tenants. In 1915, the state senate passed a home ownership fund that loaned up to \$2,000 to an individual family to purchase a farm home. The mortgage was a twenty-three year loan at 4 to 6 percent interest. Borrowers remained skeptical because the bill required a 50 percent down-payment, an amount almost impossible for a tenant. Senate Bill 109 raised money by selling “Home Ownership Bonds” to the public in increments of \$25, \$100, \$500, and \$1,000. This fund allowed tenants to purchase a farm, refinance an existing mortgage, or make permanent improvements to a current farm.⁷²

In 1919, the legislature voted to extend the Home Ownership Bill and appropriated more money for the purchase of farms. The McNabb Home Ownership Bill, properly known as House Bill 249, created a fund by appropriation and tax levy to lend money for the same reasons as the 1915 legislation - to allow landless tenants to buy farms, owners to refinance existing mortgages, or to make improvements to farms. This law offered a twenty-year mortgage at 8 percent interest but the tenant still needed 50 percent for a down payment. The bill initially proposed \$850,000 in start-up capital with \$250,000 already collected by the Corporation Commission from various activities, and \$100,000 from the Game Warden’s fund. The bill also called for a \$1 poll tax to generate an additional \$500,000 for the program. Eventually the poll tax was stricken from the bill because it was too controversial and a potential violation of the state constitution. This bill was also slightly more restrictive than the previous legislation. A borrower must have resided in Oklahoma for two years and the farm had to be a minimum of forty acres. Furthermore, the state appointed county loan boards to recommend borrowers based on “moral character, integrity, industry, and the ability of the applicant.”⁷³ The bill was

wildly popular among farmers. The Secretary of the Land Office reported receiving forty to fifty inquiry letters per day, but the state could not finance nearly this many loans.⁷⁴

House Bill 249 had varying success. The program loaned money to farmers in 1919 and 1920 and allowed a few farmers to purchase a home. There were thousands of applicants for the loans and committees were very selective in determining which farmers received state assistance. According to a report circulated to newspapers, there were 162 total loans made under the bill in 1921. Of the 162 loans, sixty-two were in good standing, twenty-seven were delinquent one payment, twenty-two were behind two payments, twenty-eight were three payments behind, twelve owed the state four payments, and eleven were in foreclosure. As the agricultural economy spiraled downward, only 38 percent of the loans were in good standing by February 1923. The main reason many of the loans had become delinquent was due to falling real estate prices. Farms that appraised high after World War I did not hold their value through the agricultural recession of the early 1920s. Nearly all of the delinquent loans, according to A. S. J. Shaw of the State Land Office, were farms that had been fully financed by taking second mortgages.⁷⁵

Oklahoma also passed laws that gave farmers an advantage in dealing with cotton gins. In 1915, the legislature declared that the Corporation Commission would determine ginning rates to protect Oklahoma cotton growers from unfair rates, thus making gins public utilities.⁷⁶ In 1909, the legislature passed a law requiring gins to submit accurate bale reports twice per month, but Senate Bill 286, the bill that made gins public utilities, was far more restrictive. According to the statute, ginners also had to apply for a license from the Corporation Commission and pay a one dollar annual license fee.⁷⁷ Each fall,

the Corporation Commission conducted hearings and considered many factors in setting the ginning rate. Crop size, crop quality, insect damage, and the previous year's profit margin all affected the rates set by the Corporation Commission. The Corporation Commission also hired field agents who traveled the state and tested scales for accuracy to ensure that gins were not cheating the farmers. In 1925, the state legislature restricted gins once again. According to this law, gins must apply to the Corporation Commission to construct, remove, or move a gin. Furthermore, a cooperative gin required the signature of one hundred local individuals to prove that a gin was necessary in a particular locale.⁷⁸ In 1933, a bill died in committee that would have deregulated cotton gins but the Corporation Commission continued to set rates well into the 1940s.⁷⁹ Owners of gins constantly complained that rates barely covered operating expenses even though ginning rates in Oklahoma were often higher than rates in neighboring states.⁸⁰

Legislators passed bills attempting to protect farmers from unfair practices and helped a few tenants purchase homes. Ginning rates were probably a more widespread success in helping cotton farmers and tenants by fixing the rates that gins charged for their services. The farm loan program was progressive in 1919 and 1920, but it was not until the early 1930s that national politicians began to think of assisting tenants. State-sponsored home loans were an extremely noble and novel idea, but the state did not appropriate enough money to decrease farm tenancy on a large scale.

COOPERATIVES

Though tenants and their organizations fought through political means, the most effective form of combating perceived ills was through cooperation. Using legislation, Oklahomans improved the state's infrastructure and actually helped a few tenants purchase homes, but the legislation did little to improve the economic situation for the majority of farmers. Through cooperatives, groups of farmers united for collective action to help fight economic disparity and actually raised local commodity prices, forced gins into more favorable rates (before the Corporation Commission set the price), induced speculators into accurate grading, and created a system where farmers stored crops until prices rose.

From 1915 to 1925, cooperative marketing saw a boom in Oklahoma. Organizations increased dramatically in number and an estimated 20 percent of farmers joined a cooperative association to help with marketing. Local cooperatives like the Farmers' Union Cooperative Gin Company organized to aid farmers in localized areas in dealing with gins, banks, merchants, and railroads. In fact, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union called for cooperatives even before statehood claiming that shippers and speculators robbed the farmer through improper weighing, classifying, and paying low prices.⁸¹ The Farmers' Union urged members to:

Stick till the last armed foe expires,
Stick with your brothers, your wives, and sires,
Stick to your principles, stick to your vow
And never again to speculator have to bow."⁸²

Local cooperatives emerged to fight problems in isolated locales. One such union organized cotton farmers near Temple and Walters by building a gin, a cotton house, a

seed house, and an office building to serve local farmers. The cooperative organized by selling stock at eight dollars per share with fifteen original and swelled in number to include over fifty active participants. They collaborated to raise cotton prices and secure more favorable marketing strategies by eliminating middlemen such as ginners and store houses.⁸³ Other Farmers' Union Cooperative gins sprang up around Oklahoma cotton communities. Most major cotton-producing centers had a union gin. *The Oklahoma Union Farmer* listed thirty-one cooperative gins by the 1930s and a survey of agricultural newspapers of the era shows the existence of numerous others.⁸⁴ A cooperative organized in Ellis County and saved 20 percent on groceries and forced a bank to lend to the farmers at a 10 percent flat interest, a far cry from the 20 to 40 percent available in other areas.⁸⁵ As early as 1907, Ardmore farmers organized a cotton gin and yard to fight local monopolies. But cooperatives often met with significant resistance. Speculators attempted to break the union by hiring experts to mislead farmers about the warehouse and even refused to purchase cotton from farmers weighing at the union cotton yard.⁸⁶

The purpose of cooperation was to fight ginners who negatively affected the price of the cotton crop. Even though regulated by the Corporation Commission, ginners affected ginning rates in numerous ways. Farmers often complained that ginners lied about the weight of the ginned cotton by charging for gross weight which contained dirt and waste. Ginners responded that the dirt and waste caused wear on machines and adjusted the price accordingly.⁸⁷ Farmers also believed that they lost money through incorrect classification by cotton buyers. One farmer claimed that cotton farmers lost several million dollars per year through improper cotton classification. Tenant farmers often lacked the sophistication and knowledge of classifying cotton into its seven grades:

low ordinary, ordinary, good ordinary, low middling, middling, good middling, and middling fair. According to one farmer, “lowering the class of cotton is one of the favorite tricks of the cotton buyer and on account of the farmer’s lack of knowledge affords the greatest avenue for fraud.”⁸⁸ Oklahoma A & M College offered “The Cotton School” as a one-week course for farmers to learn grading, but most farmers, especially tenants, could not afford either the time or money to attend the school. Even though the state offered a cotton grading school, farmers had to look elsewhere to find solutions to these problems.⁸⁹ The only hope, according to most prominent agrarians, was organizing to fight against enemies and working collectively to leverage middlemen, speculators, and gins into cooperation.

By the 1920s, the fashionable suggestion for the future success of farmers became industry-wide cooperation. Cooperation was not a new idea and Oklahoma farmers had been cooperating on a small scale for years. The most typical cooperative included farmers in a locale pooling resources to secure favorable shipping rates from railroads by shipping in bulk, by leveraging local cotton buyers into higher prices by collectively holding the crop, and ordering from merchants in large quantities for a volume discount. Members of the Farmers’ Union had even cooperated to build ginning houses, local stores, warehouses and elevators to combat various issues they faced on a local level; but, the only way to immediately improve conditions was through a statewide organization.⁹⁰

The American Cotton Association organized in May 1919 and held the first meeting in Montgomery, AL in 1920. Twenty-one delegates from Oklahoma attended the first organizational meeting with the hopes of spreading the organization to the Sooner State. In contrast to the small local cooperatives that sought to fight middlemen

at the local level, the ACA acted as a national marketing company, a selling agent, and helped with exportation.⁹¹ The Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association met in May 1922 in Oklahoma City and elected officers, appointed committees, and wrote a constitution for the purpose of increasing the volume of business for cotton growers.⁹² By 1923, the OCGA boasted a membership of over fifty-two thousand cotton growers, many of them tenants, and by 1924 the organization reported fifty-five thousand members with nearly 20 percent of Oklahoma's cotton growers organized into a single organization. Many owners also saw the benefit of the OCGA as raising cotton prices meant more money for landlords as well. J. L. Bryant, a landowner near Muskogee, helped his eighty tenants enroll in the OCGA because he believed tenants could make more money as members of the cooperative.⁹³

By 1920, the idea of cooperation had spread to Oklahoma. J. A. Whitehurst, President of the Board of Agriculture, called for a state organization similar to the American Cotton Association. Whitehurst believed that middlemen drove the price of cotton down as much as \$0.10 per pound. By pooling resources, farmers hoped to hold cotton in warehouses until prices rose and sell at a more opportune time. Basically, farmers themselves needed to act as speculators.⁹⁴ In June 1921, members of the State Board of Agriculture organized a meeting among cotton producers to assess the viability of a statewide organization. Cotton producers and administrators from thirty-two Oklahoma counties agreed that such an organization could play a key role in disseminating information and helping farmers cooperate for higher prices. Almost immediately, the organization hired a secretary to assist in the office and field agents to distribute information about the association and to organize a membership drive. By

1921, the OCGA emerged as an important unifying force among cotton growers by enrolling thirty-four thousand members.⁹⁵ An extension of the larger organization the American Cotton Growers' Association, the OCGA sought to help cotton growers raise the price of cotton through a collective effort by encouraging farmers to pool money and resources.⁹⁶ The OCGA specifically used collective money to store cotton, to leverage gins and other businesses into favorable prices, and to hire professional marketers and salesmen to negotiate higher prices.⁹⁷

The OCGA sought to raise cotton prices by controlling supply. Cotton farmers typically sold their crop at the end of harvest when cotton prices were at the lowest point. Supply exceeded demand so prices fell, but tenants sold because they needed money. The primary goal of the OCGA was to allow farmers to hold cotton until spinners' supplies ran low. Farmers, especially uneducated and easily manipulated tenants, were simply unaware of the remedies that might help improve prices and unable to hold cotton because tenants had to pay the landlord, the gin, and the short-term creditor.⁹⁸ Mass production of cotton had led to annual surpluses and controlling and managing surplus was the key to increased prices.

The OCGA operated efficiently but also set strict limits on membership. Farmers purchased memberships in seven-year contracts and agreed to deliver cotton to the association. After picking, cotton growers delivered the crop to a collection point near a railroad where an OCGA employee classified and pooled cotton according to grade. Members received 60 percent of the value of the cotton immediately. The farmer received another check around Christmas, a third payment in the spring, and a final payment in the fall when harvest of the next crop approached. The organization had a no

withdrawal clause that penalized the member \$0.05 per pound on all undelivered cotton.⁹⁹ The OCGA even allowed for the splitting of bales and crops between two entities so that tenants and owners could easily divide the income. This eased the burden if one party wanted to hold and the other wanted to sell. The major problem for the OCGA was convincing landlords to participate. Landowners often wanted money immediately and were less likely to join the OCGA, especially if they were not farmers. Therefore, tenants had to buy the bale from the landlord to participate if the owner refused to join the cooperative. Tenants often could not afford to pay the ginning fees and purchase the cotton so they often had little choice but to violate OCGA contracts by selling elsewhere. For this reason, tenants were not loyal members of the OCGA.¹⁰⁰

Many tenants were unhappy with the arrangements set forth by the OCGA, most likely because they joined in response to “exaggerated statements of possibilities.”¹⁰¹ Farmers did not know what to expect and erroneously believed that the OCGA would bring immediate economic improvement when in fact short-term gains were relatively modest. The organization also preached acreage reduction and diversity which puzzled many farmers. Tenants failed to comprehend the changing economic conditions of increased global production and cotton surplus that led to a need to plant fewer acres when just a few years earlier the government begged farmers to plant more cotton. These actions led to feelings of betrayal toward the OCGA and some tenants abandoned the cooperative before their contracts expired.¹⁰² Nearly a majority of tenants stated that they would not sign a new cotton contract with the OCGA and two-thirds believed that members should be able to withdraw from the organization at any time.¹⁰³ By 1927, the OCGA became less strict and offered more flexible contracts in five-year periods where

the farmer could increase or decrease cotton production at any time and could even opt out entirely if necessary.¹⁰⁴

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association started a pooling system that offered a variety of choices for growers of all tenure status. There were three basic programs in which cotton producers participated in the OCGA. The first and simplest was the Immediate Fixation Pool. In this pool, the farmer simply notified the association that he was ready to sell the cotton. The client could sell at any time, even on the day of delivery, and the OCGA settled the payment immediately and in full upon the sale of the cotton; members who chose this option usually sold upon delivery. A second option was the Call Pool where the owner received a temporary settlement from the association as an advance but did not immediately fix the price of the cotton; instead, the owner stored the cotton and paid the association to hold the crop until the time of sale as determined by the owner. The third option was the Seasonal Valuation Pool. In this pool, the OCGA classed the cotton and stored it with other samples of similar color, grade, and staple and sold throughout the season. Initially, the owner received an advance from the association for a percentage of the cotton. After the entire pool was sold, the grower received the final payment.¹⁰⁵

Over time, the OCGA underwent drastic changes in structure but remained committed to the cause of the cotton farmer. *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower* summarized: "This organization belongs to cotton farmers and it is fighting your battles. The more cotton you deliver to it the better it will serve you."¹⁰⁶ By the 1940s, the association became even more flexible in offering services to its members. The OCGA changed its name to the Oklahoma Cotton Cooperative Association in the summer of 1941 and began

assisting farmers with the increasing complexities of the government loan programs.¹⁰⁷ When various loan programs came about, the cooperative helped farmers complete government paperwork and acted as intermediaries with the loan programs. The cotton crop was typically used as collateral for the government loan and held by the association. Upon sale of the crop, the association also assisted with paying the government, which made the process as simple as possible for farmers. To reduce further the cost to members, the cooperative dropped its annual membership dues but still required a membership agreement where the cotton producer promised to deliver the cotton to the association.¹⁰⁸ The OCGA was a successful marketing organization and a helpful tool for the Oklahoma cotton farmer, but the cooperative never sold even a majority of Oklahoma cotton in the first half of the twentieth century. The OCGA handled an average of 142,000 bales of cotton per year according to its own newspaper, typically reaching somewhere around 20 percent of Oklahoma grown cotton. The association claimed to raise the profit of the farmer from \$4 to \$10 per bale which certainly was a minor victory for the cotton farmer.¹⁰⁹

The overall success of the association from 1920 to 1950 is difficult to measure, especially in terms of helping tenants. Tenants participated in the organization during its early years but became discontented with its structure during the Depression. Renters participated in the cooperative throughout the life of the organization but as tenancy decreased in the 1940s, the percentage of tenants in the organization likely declined as well. The OCGA was not designed to help the tenant specifically, but it did encourage renters to join the cooperative and even removed many restrictions that had kept renters from joining and remaining members. Even though success was limited and the OCGA

was not designed specifically as a tenant organization, it was an organization that needed participation from renters, at least early in the life of the organization, and brought higher prices for all cotton growers, including some tenants.

The power of farm tenants to fight their perceived enemies should not be overstated. Tenants only indirectly influenced politics through their most ardent advocate, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, and also by becoming active as members of the Socialist Party. Tenants were not the motivating forces behind these groups but, they did make up a large contingent of the voting supporters and varying political alliances tailored platforms to their needs. Without tenants, these movements would have had less success. Tenants did not provide the leadership or the rhetoric. Instead, they provided votes in larger numbers for which these politicians could fight. In terms of cooperatives, tenants also were not the leaders of the groups but, like the political movements, made up the membership base of local and state cotton cooperatives. Both political parties and cooperatives fought to help tenants and had a vested interest in their well-being and in helping agriculture in general, but the results of these activities, at least for tenants, were mixed at best.

CHAPTER V
ENDNOTES

¹ Victor Harlow published *Harlow's Weekly*. This was a journal that commented on politics and current events throughout the state. Though Harlow tried to remain somewhat apolitical, his political views often influenced the commentary. Patrick Nagle, a well-known Socialist politician, expressed many of his viewpoints in *Tenant Farmer*. This particular newspaper was avowedly socialistic and encouraged farmers, especially tenants, to band together and fight the system. These two editors provide excellent contrasts as to the deep division of rhetoric in Oklahoma during the 1920s.

² For more on prohibition in Oklahoma, see Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Born Sober: Prohibition in Oklahoma, 1907-1959* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

³ *Farmers Union Advocate and Union Review*, May 6, 1909.

⁴ J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38, 78.

⁶ For more on the relationship between tenant farmers and the early Farmers' Union see Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 40-57. for more on Socialism and the appeal to tenant farmers, see Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976), 6-7, 48-49, 161; for more on the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League, see Gilbert Fite, "Oklahoma's Reconstruction League: An Experiment in Farmer-Labor Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 31 (November 1947): 535-555.

⁷ *Harlow's Weekly*, January 1, 1923, March 3, 1923, April 31, 1923, July 1, 1923, March 22, 1924. Victor Harlow actually made a very good argument for the differences between the two movements and nearly every issue of the paper in 1923 and 1924 treats this issue; John Simpson also acknowledged that the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League became too radical, providing the impetus for the removal of the Farmers' Union from the coalition in 1922. John Simpson to editor, *Harlow's Weekly*, June 1, 1922.

⁸ Danney Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 196-197. Currently there is no focused study of the Shawnee Demands of 1906. Several works have discussed the topic in general in relation to larger works. Goble recognized the importance of the Shawnee Demands and the influence in writing of constitution. Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma*, 16, 196-197, 228-229.

⁹ References to homestead exemption laws in primary documents were relatively vague. In Oklahoma, farmers wanted homestead exemption laws to protect from unfair foreclosures and excessive property taxes. These laws, in their various manifestations, pertain to reducing or even dismissing the taxes on homesteads.

¹⁰ Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma*, 16, 181, 196, 208, 218.

¹¹ For a List of the Shawnee Demands, see Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma*, 228-229.

¹² *Ibid.*, 196-197, 228-229.

¹³ Socialism in Oklahoma is one of the most researched topics of early Oklahoma history. For a complete account of Socialism, see Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*; James Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Ellen Rosen, "Peasant Socialism in America?: The Socialist Party in Oklahoma before the First World War" (PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1976); Von Russell Creel, "Socialists in the House: The Oklahoma Experience (Part I)," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 70 (Summer 1992): 144-183; Von Russell Creel, "Socialists in the House: The Oklahoma Experience (Part II)," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 70 (Fall 1992): 258-331; Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*.

¹⁴ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, xv, 14-19.

¹⁵ Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 5-9.

¹⁶ Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, xx.

¹⁷ Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

¹⁹ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 5-6.

²⁰ Patrick Nagle edited *Tenant Farmer* (Kingfisher) from 1912 to 1916. Nagle claimed that "this is not a newspaper; I simply prepared the matter herein for propaganda purposes in Kingfisher County" (September 1912). Initially, *The Tenant Farmer* had no advertisements and was only published during political campaigns but in May of 1915, *Tenant Farmer* became a monthly newspaper and began to have advertisements to help offset the printing costs. The newspaper is definitely a Socialist newspaper with many of the themes focusing on class unification and awareness.

²¹ *Tenant Farmer* and *New Farmer* were agrarian newspapers that supported the Socialist Party while editors loyal to the Farmers' Union did not wholeheartedly cast their support in favor of the new party but did support it on some of the issues. Union papers

would not have been able to openly support Socialism because many of the state's prominent politicians, like Robert L. Williams, Campbell Russell, and "Alfalfa Bill" Murray were Democrats and carried too much influence to be spurned for a third party.

²² Rhetoric can be seen in *Tenant Farmer* throughout its publication history from 1912 to 1916.

²³ *New Farmer*, December 11, 1920.

²⁴ *Tenant Farmer*, September 1912. *The Tenant Farmer*, June 1915. Henry M. Tichenor wrote a poem entitled "Cute Mr. Plute" as follows for the September 1912 edition.

For games that are cunning and ways that are cute,
There's nothing on earth that can equal the Plute.
He can fool you and skin you and fool you once more
And each time he fools you, it's worse than before.
With high tariff, low tariff, free trade or protection,
He works the shell game at every election;
And now that you tumble to,
Mr. Plute comes along with a fresh bag of wind,
And starts a new shell game, with Teddy the Tough
To fill up your noodles with more bunco stuff.
With three stings to his bow Mr. Plute ahs a graft
He can sting you with Teddy, Wilson, or Taft.

²⁵ *Tenant Farmer*, July 1915.

²⁶ Creel, "Socialism in the House," 148; Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 9.

²⁷ *The Tenant Farmer*, September 1912, October 1912. Renters' and Farmers' Program of the Socialist party reprinted in *Tenant Farmer*, October, 1912. Even though the official position of the Socialist Party was racial equality, further study of the issue is needed. I find it unlikely that the vast majority of Oklahoma's renters would actually have take this position. After all, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union refused to allow African Americans into its ranks.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, September 1912.

²⁹ *Tenant Farmer*, June 1915, December 1915.

³⁰ Robert Lee Williams Collection to J.W. Anthony, August 15, 1916, Robert Lee Williams Collection, Box 35, File 8, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

³¹ *Harlow's Weekly*, September 4, 1918, November 13, 1918. The Socialist Party that had polled over fifty thousand votes for governor in 1914 only cast 5,700 in the gubernatorial primary of 1918, thus ushering in the end of the movement.

³² National Bureau of Economic Research,
<http://www.nber.org/databases/macrophistory>.

³³ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 6-7; Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism*, 10-12.

³⁴ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 7.

³⁵ Creel, "Socialists in the House" (Part I), 146. Beckham and Kiowa counties were cotton growing counties that had high numbers of tenants but Roger Mills, Dewey, and Major counties had many fewer renters both in total number and percentage.

³⁶ James R. Green, "Socialism and the Southern Class Struggle, 1898-1918: A Study of Radical Movements in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas" (PhD dissertation, Yale University), 70.

³⁷ Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*, 187.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 174-176.

⁴⁰ Fite, "Oklahoma's Reconstruction League," 542.

⁴¹ Fite, "John Simpson: The Southwest's Militant Farm Voice," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 35 (March 1949): 563-584. Fite credits John Simpson, President of the Oklahoma Farmers' Union and eventually the National Farmers' Union, for championing radical farm policies as the successor of the Populist movement.

⁴² "Twenty-first Annual Session of the Oklahoma State Grange, December 1-3, 1936," Oklahoma State Grange Collection, Western History Collection, Norman, OK.

⁴³ Letter from a member of union no. 36 in Driftwood, Oklahoma to the editor, *Farmers' Union Advocate*, March 19, 1908.

⁴⁴ *Harlow's Weekly*, December 12, 1917; March 17, 1923; February 17, 1923.

⁴⁵ National Bureau of Economic Research,
<http://www.nber.org/databases/macrophistory>.

⁴⁶ Gilbert C. Fite, "Reconstruction League," 535-537. Fite provides an excellent overview of the coalition between farm and labor with many details as to the operation and organization of the movement.

⁴⁷ *Oklahoman*, July 01, 1923.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, January 15, 1924.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Fite, "Reconstruction League," 538-546.

⁵¹ *Harlow's Weekly*, March 22, 1924. Victor Harlow reprinted the El Reno Platform and noted the changes from the old Shawnee Platform – most had no real effect.

⁵² *Oklahoman*, July, 1, 1923; *Harlow's Weekly*, April 21, 1923, March 22, 1924, August 4, 1925. Fite, "Reconstruction League," 537-538. The AFL was not an officially Socialist organization but many prominent Oklahoman's claimed that the same forces that drove Socialism in the 1910s also drove the Reconstruction League. Oklahomas Socialist movement was not a labor movement but mostly an agrarian movement that cooperated with industrial Socialist leaders.

⁵³ *Oklahoma Union Farmer*, 1922; Fite, "Reconstruction League," 549; *New Farmer*, December 18, 1920. The Oklahoma Farmers' Union had supported the labor movement to some degree for several years and had often advocated and even collaborated at times by condemning entities that did not support worker reform.

⁵⁴ *Harlow's Weekly*, January 13, 1923; February 3, 1923.

⁵⁵ Governor Jack Walton, "State of the State Address," January 8, 1923, p. 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, November 8, 1922.

⁵⁸ *Oklahoman*, July 1, 1922.

⁵⁹ *Harlow's Weekly*, January 19, 1924. For more information on Jack Walton see Thomas Isern, "John Calloway Walton, Governor of Oklahoma, 1923," in LeRoy H. Fisher, ed., *Oklahoma's Governors, 1907-1929: Turbulent Politics*, (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1981). Walton remained extremely popular after his impeachment and ran for Senate in 1924, securing the Democratic nomination for the United States Senate seat from Oklahoma before losing to W. B. Pine in 1924. Walton was one of the few Oklahoma politicians who actively spoke against the Ku Klux Klan, which is one reason for his widespread support.

⁶⁰ For more on Walton's war with the Klan, see Howard A. Tucker, *A History of Governor Walton's War on [the] Ku Klux Klan, The Invisible Empire* (Oklahoma City: Southwest Publishing Co., 1923).

⁶¹ As of yet, no complete biography of Jack Walton exists. Isern, "John Calloway Walton," provides detail about the governorship of Walton.

⁶² *Harlow's Weekly*, September 16, 1921, September 23, 1921, October 21, 1921, December 29, 1923.

⁶³ *Oklahoman*, June 6, 1923.

⁶⁴ John Andrew Simpson Papers, "A Wonderful Tribute to the Farmers' Union," reprinted in *Harlow's Weekly*, February 1, 1924, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, Box 1, File 22.

⁶⁵ *Harlow's Weekly*, March 22, 1924, August 9, 1924.

⁶⁶ C. H. Hyde, "What's the matter with the Farmer," *Harlow's Weekly*, February 17, 1923.

⁶⁷ Census Browser, University of Virginia, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

⁶⁸ *Comanche County Farmer*, May 8, 1903. The paper stated that "Life in a section of country where the roads are poor and ill kept is a life of loneliness and isolation."

⁶⁹ *Harlow's Weekly*, December 21, 1912.

⁷⁰ *Harlow's Weekly*, April 23, 1919, April 30, 1919. *Harlow's Weekly* and some agricultural newspapers supported the bill, while city newspapers like *Ardmorite*, *Tulsa Democrat*, *Oklahoman*, and the *Oklahoma City Times* did not support the measure. Also, *Oklahoma Farmer Stockman* and *Oklahoma Farmer*, both newspapers printed in Oklahoma City, did not favor the bill.

⁷¹ Newspapers from statehood to the 1920s shows that the most common complaint among farmers was the lack of decent roads but when given the chance in 1919, farmers voted overwhelmingly against spending money to improve Oklahoma roads. For an excellent account and commentary on the Good Roads Bill debate in 1919 see *Harlow's Weekly*, March 26, 1919; April 23, 1919; April 30, 1919; May 7, 1919; May 28, 1919.

⁷² *Harlow's Weekly*, October 31, 1917; Oklahoma State Session Law, Senate Bill 109, February 19, 1915 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co), 38-41.

⁷³ Oklahoma State Session Law, Senate Bill 109, March 28, 1919 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co), 270-273.

⁷⁴ *Harlow's Weekly*, January 15, 1919, February 16, 1919, March 26, 1919, April 2, 1919, June 25, 1919.

⁷⁵ *Harlow's Weekly*, February 10, 1923; *New Farmer*, January 15, 1921.

⁷⁶ House Bill 423, March 1909 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co), 15-16.

⁷⁷ For a full list of rules and regulations governing cotton gins in Oklahoma in 1917, see Oklahoma State Corporation Commission, *Corporation Commission Laws of Oklahoma, 1917* (Oklahoma City: State of Oklahoma, 1918), 162-167.

⁷⁸ House Bill 45, February 4, 1925 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co), 157-158.

⁷⁹ *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, December 25, 1932, August 25, 1932, February 15, 1933, September 15, 1933, September 15, 1934, September 15, 1941.

⁸⁰ Senate Bill 286, March 22, 1915 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co), 291-293; Roy A. Ballinger and R. C. Soxman, "Some Economic Problems of Cotton Gins in Oklahoma," Bulletin no. 231 (Stillwater: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Experiment Station, October 1936); Roy A. Ballinger, "Results of Regulation of Cotton Gins as Public Utilities in Oklahoma," Bulletin no. 230 (Stillwater: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Experiment Station, May 1936).

⁸¹ *Union Review*, October 11, 1905. The Farmers' Union had been calling for cooperation and successfully organizing local cooperatives before statehood.

⁸² *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, May 20, 1909.

⁸³ *Farmers' Union Cooperative Gin Company Collection*, Western History Collection, Norman, OK.

⁸⁴ *Oklahoma Union Farmer*, November 15, 1937.

⁸⁵ Letter from J. R. Duncan, farmer from Ellis, County, OK, to editor, *Farmers' Union Advocate*, March 5, 1908.

⁸⁶ *Union Review*, October 17, 1907; November 2, 1907.

⁸⁷ *Harlow's Weekly*, August 27, 1919; *New Farmer*, December 4, 1920.

⁸⁸ Letter from E. A. Calvin to editor, *Union Advocate Review*, October 29, 1909; *Farmers' Union Advocate and Union Review*, April 8, 1909.

⁸⁹ *Farmers' Union Advocate*, June 18, 1908.

⁹⁰ W. W. Fetrow, *Attitudes of Oklahoma Farmers Toward the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association* Bulletin No. 178 (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, undated): 4.

⁹¹ Fetrow, *Attitudes of Cotton Growers'*, 4-5; *Harlow's Weekly*, July 30, 1919; October 28, 1919.

⁹² *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, May 26, 1922.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, September 25, 1923; April 10, 1925; *Harlow's Weekly*, June 28, 1924; August 2, 1924; September 8, 1924.

⁹⁴ *Harlow's Weekly*, July 23, 1919; *New Farmer*, October 23, 1920.

⁹⁵ Louis L. Bernet. "The Origin and Development of Cotton Growers' Associations with Special Reference to Oklahoma" (MA Thesis, Oklahoma State University), 1926. Bernet offers an excellent treatment and contemporary examination about the origin of the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association.

⁹⁶ Louis L. Bernet. "The Origin and Development of Cotton Growers' Associations with Special Reference to Oklahoma." Oklahoma State University, MA Thesis, 1926. According to Bernet, many other states had cotton organizations very similar to the OCGA but many had Farm Bureau connections while the OCGA remained somewhat detached from other specific farm organizations. The Farm Bureau did not organize in Oklahoma until the early 1930s. Other state organizations included Arizona Pima Cotton Growers' Association, Texas Farm Bureau Cotton Growers' Association, Arkansas Cotton Growers' Association (a Farm Bureau sponsored group), Arkansas Farmers Union Association, South Carolina Cotton Growers' Association, Georgia Cotton Growers Cooperative Association, Alabama Farm Bureau Cotton Association, Louisiana Farm Bureau Cotton Growers' Cooperative Association, Mississippi Farm Bureau Cotton Association, Tennessee Cotton Growers' Association, Missouri Cotton Growers' Association, and the Illinois Cotton Growers Association.

⁹⁷ *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, April 10, 1925; June 28, 1928.

⁹⁸ *Harlow's Weekly*, March 8, 1924.

⁹⁹ Fetrow, *Attitudes of Cotton Growers'*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁰ W. W. Fetrow, *Economic Conditions of Farmers in Oklahoma as Related to Membership in the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association*, (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma

Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, undated), 10; *Harlow's Weekly*, September 8, 1924.

¹⁰¹ Fetrow, *Attitudes of Cotton Growers*, 47.

¹⁰² *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, February 10, 1924.

¹⁰³ Fetrow, *Attitudes of Cotton Growers*, 16, 31.

¹⁰⁴ *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, January 10, 1927.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, November 35, 1932, August 15, 1937, September 15, 1942.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, November 15, 1934.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, June 15, 1941. Even though the association changed names, the newspaper kept the same title.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, August 15, 1941, October 15, 1941.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1931, November 15, 1934, January 15, 1935, September 15, 1947.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEMISE OF FARM TENANCY

After 1930, farm tenancy swelled until 1935 and then declined fairly rapidly over the course of the next fifteen years. In the 1930s, federal government officials and the general public recognized that permanent farm renting was becoming a life-long condition that needed remedy. As government relief roles swelled and mass migration ensued, the plight of the rural poor became a public problem. No longer were tenants, their supporters, and a few rural politicians fighting to make Americans aware of the plight of tenants. By the 1930s, the United State government finally noticed the widespread suffering in rural America as the rural poor became a fixture on the relief roles. This era saw token gestures from Oklahoma politicians; but the federal government began pouring money into agricultural programs designed specifically to assist tenant farmers with immediate relief and eventually long-term solutions. As Tom Cheek, President of the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, proclaimed in a speech entitled "The Evils of Farm Tenancy:" "every nation's strength is measured by its home owning citizens. . . This menace is threatening the very foundation of the republic." By the 1930s, the government finally agreed.¹

Oklahomans had railed against tenancy since statehood, but the condition persisted and even rose in the 1930s. The Oklahoma Farmers' Union had initially taken up the mantle claiming to "oppose the present tendency of the tenant landlord system" as early as 1910.² Some Oklahomans even believed that tenancy was a magnet for socialism. "Oklahoma has been cursed with landlordism and is still cursed with. Landlordism in Oklahoma is responsible in great measure for the Socialist Party in this state – the landlordism that cinches down upon the tenant for the last penny that is due and will accept nothing else," wrote one prominent newspaper in 1917.³ By the 1910s, Oklahoma politicians recognized that tenancy had ill effects on the state. Several governors and state politicians promoted platforms to decrease farm rental within the state. Governor J. B. A. Robertson believed that "the ownership of a home is the surest antidote for anarchy and its legitimate spawn, more familiarly known as the I.W.W., Bolshevik and red card socialism."⁴ Robertson's platform in the 1920s promoted home ownership for farm tenants. Other politicians -- S. O. Dawes and "Uncle Sam" Hampton (prominent members of the early Farmers' Union), president of the Board of Agriculture John Whitehurst, Socialist leader Patrick Nagle, Corporation Commissioner and former Governor Jack Walton and numerous others -- had campaigned for various bills to help tenant farmers from statehood through the 1920s. In the 1930s, William J. Holloway acknowledged that tenancy was undesirable, William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray had been a lifelong supporter of the tenant farmer since his days in the early Farmers' Union, and E. W. Marland appointed a commission to study the system. But, by the 1930s, the most ardent supporter of tenant farmers was Campbell Russell. Russell served as a legislator and member of the Corporation Commission from statehood into the 1930s. Russell

believed that the government should help tenants purchase homes and that loan companies, banks, and large land owners should assist with the problem. The biggest challenge, according to Russell, was that a young man did not have the money to start a farm and “as a result he drifts into the city, becomes a tramp on the highway or goes into crime.”⁵ Russell hoped to make large landholding unprofitable for individuals or groups. According to Russell, “home ownership is the setscrew in life’s balance-wheel that can stabilize government and maintain our civilization.”⁶

Despite the commotion from Oklahoma politicians in the 1920s, only the federal government had the resources to combat such a large issue. The state tried various methods in the 1920s and even made half-hearted overtures during the 1930s, but the most significant attempt at reform came from New Deal liberals. Tenants themselves started an organization but the cohesion of the group never really materialized and the Oklahoma branch of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union died in its infancy. It was not until the relief roles swelled and California became a haven for the homeless that New Dealers sought to help farm tenants overcome a variety of problems. The most extensive assistance the government provided was in the form of actual programs to eliminate tenancy by helping tenants purchase farms. Even though the Agricultural Adjustment Act probably had more to do with the decline of tenancy in Oklahoma and the South than the Farm Security Administration, the government helped some tenants purchase farms until the conservative agricultural groups choked the New Deal into submission.

TENANTS AND THE DEPRESSION

When asked about the condition of the tenant farmer in Oklahoma at a hearing before the Interstate Commerce Commission at Kansas City, Missouri in 1926, Oklahoma Farmers' Union President John Simpson simply replied, "it is deplorable."⁷ Simpson recounted the plight of the farmers in the years before the Depression. The situation of the renter in Oklahoma was especially grave. During these troubling economic times, tenants plowed under their share of the cotton or even gave it to the owners because ginning costs exceeded the value of the crop. Simpson testified that the Oklahoma Farmers' Union insured 4200 homes but that "only three were modern, having light, heat, sewerage, and hot and cold water systems."⁸ During this hearing, members of the Interstate Commerce Commission peppered Simpson with questions and greeted his answers with disbelief. The Farmers' Union president refused to admit that conditions in Oklahoma were not as dire as described. Some members of the committee likely remained unconvinced as to the appalling conditions in which tenants lived; but in a few short years, the federal government realized that agrarian renters had little hope of improving this situation without help.⁹

As Oklahoma entered the 1930s, founding father and favorite son of the Sooner State William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray served as governor. The governorship, like the rest of Bill Murray's life, was a strange period for the Oklahoma executive office. Like the rest of the United States, Oklahoma was locked into the Depression and many Oklahomans struggled to survive. In the early statehood era, Murray had fought for tenants as a member of the Farmers' Union but, during his tenure as governor, "Alfalfa Bill" focused more on tax reform, which helped small owners more than tenants. In

addition, Murray issued executive order 1709-1714, which declared a temporary moratorium on mortgage foreclosures. Even though the state Supreme Court eventually overturned the decree, the moratorium temporarily stopped farm losses. Many of Murray's efforts were spent resisting the New Deal because the governor believed the state should control relief money. During Murray's term, tenants had no state help and the only assistance came from federal relief roles as the governor resisted Civil Works Administration and Federal Emergency Relief Administration funding.¹⁰

The depression exacerbated and magnified problems that had plagued tenant farmers for decades. Lack of affordable credit, poor health, and inadequate housing existed in the 1920s, but an increase in mechanization and a further decline in farm prices led to a drastic reorganization in tenancy rates. From 1920 to 1930, the tenant population in Oklahoma rose from 97,836 to 125,329, increasing in all but nine counties in the state.¹¹ Tenants simply could not overcome the economic problems that accompanied the depression.

Clarence Roberts, editor of the *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, claimed that "too many machines cause overproduction" which ultimately pushed tenants from the farms.¹² While it is true that tractors became more accessible in the 1920s, cotton acreage and tenancy declined rapidly only after 1932, the year in which Roberts made the above statement. Numerous other factors became apparent as well. Roberts was correct that machinery hurt wheat tenants in western Oklahoma. Also, other countries, like Russia and Australia, were producing more wheat as well. The increased yield from efficiency of tractors and the increased global production forced prices downward in the 1930s to less than \$0.50 per bushel.¹³ By the end of the decade, the *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*

touted a different idea. “The renter should note that the tractor isn’t yet being used to grow vegetables, truck crops, and fruit. It hasn’t been adapted to milking cows, feeding a bunch of goats, caring for ewes, or fattening calves. . . . This, we repeat, is the way out for him.”¹⁴

Another problem for tenants in the 1930s remained the economic woes tied to lending. Credit was tight, interest rates were high, and most tenants still relied on seasonal credit to survive. According to one study, 86 percent of tenants and 65 percent of owners on cotton farms in Oklahoma relied on seasonal credit to “make a crop.”¹⁵ Farmers still gambled on the future and hoped eventually to repay the loans. The average interest for seasonal credit in 1930 was 16.4 percent in Oklahoma. Banks charged 11.3 percent on these short-term loans while merchants averaged 32.5 percent for seasonal credit. Farm mortgages by comparison averaged 7 percent but were very difficult to obtain during the depression.¹⁶ *The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman* offered its views as to why tenants relied on credit: “Since money could be borrowed in early spring with which to buy food and feed, no real effort was made to grow these. With knowledge that money could be borrowed to meet emergency needs, little effort was made to save against a rainy day.”¹⁷ In fact, 69 percent of the money borrowed by tenants went toward paying daily living expenses while owners only used 24 percent for daily needs. Owners still used credit but their goal was to increase production through purchasing equipment and livestock.¹⁸ Whether it was lack of planning, entrapment in an unfair credit system, or simply bad business, tenant farmers used seasonal credit with high interest rates that absorbed profits and, even worse, put their personal property at risk as collateral on loans. In addition to credit, tenants were already at an economic disadvantage because they

made significantly less money than owners. A 1943 study from the Oklahoma A & M College Experiment Station showed that the average home owner had an income of \$4,300 while the average tenant earned only \$500 per year.¹⁹ These statistics were certainly skewed to some degree by large farms in western Oklahoma, but the fact remained that tenants on average made less money and relied on short-term credit.

Other problems that plagued Oklahoma tenants in the 1930s dealt directly with cotton. Because renters relied too heavily on cotton production, their fortunes rose and fell with the crop price. Considering that cotton production had dropped from 240 pounds per acre in 1905 to 135 pounds per acre in the 1930 because of soil exhaustion, cotton farmers in general were in dire economic straits simply because farm production had declined.²⁰ W. M. Osborn conducted soil tests at the Experiment Station at Lawton and confirmed a decline in soil fertility and acreage yields. Intensive cultivation, lack of “organic matter” in the soil, insects, and poor stewardship led to a gradual decrease in yields after 1910. In 1914, the study notes that the tested plot yielded 177 pounds per acre and declined to 141 pounds per acre by 1928.²¹ Farming marginal land using short-staple cotton produced greater amounts of lesser-quality cotton. Throughout the 1930s, the United States cotton surplus rose rapidly and contributed to the decline of cotton prices. In 1932, the cotton surplus in the United States rose to 9.6 million bales (75 percent of the cotton ginned) and prices plummeted to near \$0.06 per bale. After 1932, the cotton surplus declined each year and by 1937, the surplus was only 4.4 million bales (36 percent of the crop) and prices rose to near \$0.10.²² Despite the fluctuations in the market and acreage restrictions imposed by the government, tenants remained wedded to cotton production because there was little capital investment and renters had less

experience growing other crops.²³ Cotton robbed the soil of nitrogen and phosphorus and the crop did not provide enough cover to stop wind and water erosion. Horace J. Harper, a soil specialist at Oklahoma A & M, even concluded that “cotton is the king – of the soil ravaging crops.”²⁴

Many people, especially landowners and even the government, presumed that tenants were lazy and inefficient farmers. One United States government report noted of southeastern Oklahoma that “the people, as a whole, are very inert, lazy, and shiftless. A large proportion of the population was Indians and half-breeds. Making moonshine liquor is one of their favorite pastimes and chief sources of outside revenue. Opportunities for rural education and moral training are very limited.”²⁵ In all actuality, poor Oklahomans were malnourished and physically ill because their farms were unproductive and they lacked money for basic needs and health care. Farms were too small to be efficient. The inhabitants survived on federal relief but many people, even government officials, failed to connect the sickness of the countryside and the conditions of poverty.²⁶ Others, however, noticed that the bad health of tenants was more likely the cause of their poor work habits than simple laziness. W. W. Alexander, administrator of the Farm Security Administration, noted that possibly hundreds of thousands of southerners suffered from curable diseases which actually kept them in economic distress. Alexander noted “I have no doubt that many of these people were described shiftless or lazy, when actually, they were sick.”²⁷

By 1935, the agricultural situation in the state was bleak. A study by the National Resources Board identified much of Oklahoma as unfit for agriculture.²⁸ Southeastern Oklahoma suffered the most from low farm productivity. Houses and buildings were

dilapidated and “the whole area is practically void of any kind of modern conveniences.” Farm land had virtually no topsoil. Erosion forced farmers to abandon farms in this mountainous corner of the state. Farms were small, irregularly-shaped, and farmed by a one-mule operation. Ben Duncan, the author of the study, recommended that the federal government purchase the farms and the area should be “turned back into permanent pasture.” The study also recommended other areas across the state for drastic changes in the agricultural system or complete abandonment altogether. The Cookson Hills and Ozark Mountains, famous for “moonshine liquor and bandit refugees” with its population of “Indians, half-breeds, and Negroes,” was unfit for any activity except grazing and forestry. Other regions, like those near Muskogee, were badly gullied and should be returned to grazing and timber even though 75 to 80 percent of the people there still farmed cotton. Many areas of western Oklahoma were described as too desolate for social activity because of the lack of rural population. While farm enlargement and mechanization provided one alternative, some farms should be “entirely abandoned for crop purposes” as the sandhills are “probably best adapted to the production of jack rabbits and prairie chickens.” The prognosis for southwestern Oklahoma was not quite as discouraging. The soil was too sandy in some areas for any crops except wheat but with proper farm enlargement, more than 160 acres, an adequate farm living was a possibility. Caddo County, the county with the most tenants and tenancy rates near 70 percent, once had a decent standard of living but erosion had led to a decline in income so the infrastructure was slowly depleting and gullies on some farms were forty and fifty feet deep.²⁹

Life for many tenants became more difficult in the 1930s. Less productive farms and falling farm prices led many tenants to take drastic measures. With the addition of tractors and government subsidies, tenants could not afford to stay on the farm and either headed for the relief roles of the cities or, as Americans had done for centuries, headed west in search of economic opportunity. Yet, Okie migrants suffered the same cruel fate as numerous western migrants of previous generations. The western safety net for Okie migrants was merely an illusion. Instead of fruit picking jobs, they found migrant Farm Security Administration camps and government relief checks.

OKIE MIGRATION

During the 1930s, many Oklahomans left their farms in search of economic opportunity in other parts of the country. Many of the sojourners were tenant farmers from Oklahoma; but regardless of state of origin, observers dubbed transients collectively as “Okies.” Transitory Oklahomans, Missourians, Arkansans, and Texans left their homes in search of fruit-picking jobs in California. Some had been “tractored” off the land as described by John Steinbeck. Others had left because their tenant farms were no longer productive and falling prices combined with declining productivity had an impossible situation. Some tenants left because their owners accepted AAA subsidies. These subsidies were payments from the federal government meant to reduce agricultural surplus by limiting the acreage of the major agricultural commodities; fewer tenants meant fewer subsidy splits. Other unfortunate farm owners lost farms to foreclosures in the Depression onslaught as banks foreclosed on an estimated ten percent of all

Oklahoma farms between 1931 and 1933.³⁰ “Migration,” according to a Farm Security Administration advisor, “is a symptom of deeper economic and social adjustment.”³¹ By 1950, Oklahoma had lost nearly 55 percent of its farm labor force because of emigration.³² The exodus lasted for nearly twenty years as Okies who left in the 1930s sought to escape depression conditions and those leaving in the 1940s sought jobs in wartime industries.³³

Most scholars have concluded that loss of farm employment was the primary cause of the mass migration in Oklahoma. In *American Exodus*, James Gregory blames the Agricultural Adjustment Act more than any other force for the dislocation of tenant farmers from the Southwest. According to Gregory, landlords needed fewer tenants because of acreage reduction which actually ran contrary to the intentions of New Deal. Furthermore, landlords used subsidy money to purchase tractors which displaced even more tenants.³⁴ One government study suggested that each tractor may have affected as many as five farm families.³⁵ Mechanization likely had some impact though it was not until the 1950s that cotton production modernized. A researcher at Oklahoma State University underscored this theory of the Okie migration. Otis Duncan, Professor of Rural Sociology, believed that the population of Oklahoma declined steadily because of the loss of employment in Oklahoma. Ninety percent of Okie migrants reported unemployment as the reason for moving.³⁶

The migration displaced roughly 350,000 American families during the 1930s (almost one million people) though sources conflict somewhat as to exactly how many Americans left their homes. Most displaced farmers from Oklahoma went to California in search of jobs.³⁷ An estimated 40 percent of the California migrants hailed from

Oklahoma.³⁸ The number of Okie migrants, let alone farm tenants, was impossible for government officials to measure, but all agree that Okie migrants outnumbered migrants from all other states. From migrant camp registrations, government reports were insightful as to the home states of the migrants. From January to June 1935, 2,633 Okie families registered at transient camps. Most migrants did not relocate because of the Dust Bowl. Instead, most Okie refugees were from the more heavily populated cotton-producing counties, not the Dust Bowl areas as Steinbeck had claimed. Caddo County registered 131 families in California, Muskogee had 118, Tulsa had 111, and 97 families arrived from Grady County. All of these counties had high tenant populations and percentages. It is no coincidence that these three agricultural counties, had the largest tenant populations in the state and, therefore, the most migrants, suggesting that tenancy led directly to Okie migration. Caddo had 3,914 tenants, Muskogee had 3,208, and Grady had 3,204.³⁹ All three counties had tenancy rates over 60 percent.⁴⁰ Of the reporting migrants, 68 percent were farm laborers, 17 percent reported tenancy as their occupation, and 11 percent reported they were sharecroppers. The majority were from the traditional bottom rung of the agricultural ladder, farm laborers, but 28 percent of Okie migrants were tenants or sharecroppers.⁴¹ A separate study estimated that 23 percent of the farm migrants were tenants, 15 percent were sharecroppers, 60 percent were wage laborers, and less than 3 percent were farm owners.⁴² In 1938, over thirteen thousand migrants left Oklahoma for California and in 1939 the migrants totaled more than fifteen thousand. Many of these migrants fled bad rental situations on Oklahoma farms. The conservative estimate of displaced Okie tenants who went to California was

slightly less than forty thousand during the 1930s. Countless others left for other parts of the United States or relocated to Oklahoma City or Tulsa.⁴³

Once in California, displaced Okie migrants sought to find work in farming, the only industry where they had any expertise. The most readily available jobs were in the fruit-picking industry. Seasonal work was unpredictable but large farms employed as many as five hundred laborers for one to two weeks harvesting lettuce, cotton, peas, hops, potatoes, oranges, or apples.⁴⁴ Migratory labor was not a new phenomenon; in fact, it was a staple of the fruit picking industry, and Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Mexican, and Filipino workers flocked to the California fruit fields and orchards before the migration. But by 1940, 85 percent of the seasonal picking force was white and many of these were Okie tenants.⁴⁵

When migrants arrived in California, they often found that earlier migrants had already taken the jobs in the fruit-picking fields. Earnest E. Scholl, Director of Oklahoma A & M College Extension Services, sent a letter to all white extension agents that stated “there is a large over-supply of agricultural workers in California at the present time and every possible effort should be made to discourage further migration.”⁴⁶ By April 1939, Oklahomans from seventy-six of seventy-seven counties registered in California during the first three months of the year and only Woods County in northwest Oklahoma lacked confirmed representatives.⁴⁷

In addition to missing out on the jobs in the San Joaquin Valley, migrants also found there was no place to live. To remedy the situation, the United States government built migrant camps for the refugees to provide temporary housing for new arrivals who

had yet to find work or accommodations.⁴⁸ Under the Farm Security Administration, the federal government established twenty-six permanent camps by 1940 to accommodate fifteen thousand families. Each camp had a clinic, a mechanic shop, and a church for refugees. Initially, migrants made their temporary houses from gunny sacks, cardboard boxes, and scraps of tin with no flooring.⁴⁹ The government soon realized that these conditions were worse than those the tenants had fled so camps adapted and built large wooden platforms so that migrants had floors in their make-shift homes. Eventually, the refugee camps developed mobile trailers so that government workers could dismantle and move camps quickly as migratory workers followed the fruit harvest of California. Within a few hours, an open field could transform into a transient camp.⁵⁰

Otis Nation, a founding member of the Oklahoma Tenant Farmers' Union, recognized that the drought was not the cause of the migration as many had charged but instead that a multitude of factors conspired against Oklahoma's renter class. Nation, himself a former Okie migrant, stated that the drought was a key component, but that the tenant system itself was broken and the federal government needed to correct the problem. Two problems were the rental agreement and credit system. Tenants needed credit to survive through the lean summer months and often paid 10 percent interest or more on loans with no assurances of success. Any number of conditions could cause total crop failure, but the tenant still had to repay the loan. Share-tenants paid one-third of the feed crop and one-fourth of the cotton crop, while sharecroppers paid one-half of the crop to the landlord while paying 10 percent interest on seasonal loans. In addition, farmers sold their crop immediately after harvest when demand was low, which mean

prices were also low. Rent payments, high interest, unstable prices, and crop failure made farming in Oklahoma a difficult venture.⁵¹

The Oklahoma Tenant Farmers' Union also proposed suggestions on how the federal government should solve the problem. The organization believed that government intervention was the only solution to protecting tenants and focused on enlarging government programs. The Oklahoma Tenant Farmers' Union hoped to extend the wage and hour law to agricultural workers, provide unemployment compensation to farm laborers, lower AAA payments to \$500 so owners needed more tenants, provide 3 percent loans to tenants, offer long-term mortgages, enact a national graduated land tax, and purchase cooperative farms for five hundred farm families in Oklahoma. Even though these measures sounded radical, the OTFU sought to assist tenants in any way possible and called for the enlargement of the government's role in agriculture.⁵²

Even though the government finally noticed rural migration, the phenomenon was hardly new. The only unique feature about the Oklahoma migration of the 1930s and 1940s was that tenants left the state. Tenants had always been a mobile class, with conservative estimates guessing that 35 percent of tenants moved on an annual basis and most finding that nearly half of all tenants moved annually. The federal government did not concern itself with tenant migration until it became an interstate phenomenon. When tenants flocked to the West Coast and drained the New Deal resources of other states, the federal government decided that curbing agricultural transients' mobility was a necessity. By siphoning relief funds in California and forcing the government to erect mobile camps, Okie migrants forced the federal government to take notice of the desperate situation. With assistance from novelist John Steinbeck and Works Progress

Administration photographers employed by the federal government to document the migration, Americans finally became aware of the drifting, poor agrarians. Ultimately, the loss of population was not the biggest concern for the state. As University of Oklahoma sociologist Leonard Logan warned, the loss of soil and capital were a much greater problem for the state than losing population.⁵³

The federal government examined the problem of migration in 1940 by appointing the House Select Committee to Investigate Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. The Committee interviewed a variety of experts to find the root of the problem that plagued migrants. During the investigation, the committee realized that Depression-era problems continued into the 1940s, as destitute Americans sought jobs in wartime industries. The federal government continued the study by recommissioning and renaming the study Select Committee to Investigate National Defense Migration from 1941 to 1943.⁵⁴

Before the 1930s, Americans believed that tenancy was an acceptable step in the agricultural ladder. The natural progression for farmers was from laborer, to share tenant, to cash tenant, and eventually to farm ownership, but it became increasingly clear that the traditional hierarchy was no longer an upward movement. Instead, more farmers descended into tenancy by 1930, as the number of tenants rose by 28,000 in Oklahoma.⁵⁵ While cities had monopolies, corruption, immigration, and urban slums, farm tenancy produced “rural slums, breeds poverty, illiteracy, and disease.”⁵⁶

SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS UNION

In response to the increasingly poor living conditions, tenants created a formal organization to help fight perceived injustices. The most prominent and controversial national group to lobby specifically for the tenant farmer was the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union.⁵⁷ In 1935, the STFU organized in Tyronza, Arkansas, a cotton farming community in the northeastern corner of the state. Sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Arkansas, led by H. L. Mitchell, became disenchanted with the Agricultural Adjustment Act, seeing it as an unfairly administered pro-owner organization. The AAA did not intentionally discriminate against the cotton tenant; instead, the problem lay with administering the acreage reduction payments. The AAA had intended that the payments be split according to the rental agreement between the landlord and the tenant but, according to the STFU, many landlords demoted sharecroppers to wage labor status to skirt the law and kept the government subsidies for themselves. Unintentionally, the AAA drove sharecroppers and tenant farmers from the land because unscrupulous landlords did not abide by administration intentions.⁵⁸ Soon, the STFU garnered the ire of landlords and politicians because it sought political cooperation with a natural ally, the Socialist Party.⁵⁹ Modeled after the National Farmers' Union with a constitution based on ideas of Oscar Ameringer from his newspaper *The Guardian*, the STFU became the first bi-racial farm labor organization in the United States as it fought for the rights of sharecroppers.⁶⁰

In Oklahoma, the STFU organized somewhat slowly. Odis Sweeden, a charismatic Cherokee Indian from Muskogee, was the sole individual responsible for the success of the Oklahoma branch. Sweeden convinced blacks, whites, and Indian tenants

to join the cause. The STFU gave Sweeden complete autonomy and authority within the state so the organization became dependent upon his personality and ability. The STFU was always weaker in Oklahoma than in other states and collapsed when Sweeden moved to Arizona after a rift with organization leaders. In addition, financial issues constantly plagued the Oklahoma Tenant Farmers' Union as many members refused to pay dues to support the cause.⁶¹

Scholars have made few generalizations about the OTFU through limited information. The organization apparently acted more as a social club with poor funding and possessed little strength as an advocate group. There are likely several reasons that the STFU did not organize on a large scale in Oklahoma as the organization never grew beyond a few thousand members and those numbers were likely inflated.⁶² First, the state recognized tenant issues long before national politicians. Throughout the 1920s, Oklahomans legislators took measures to placate farm renters and attempted to help them purchase farms through various programs. Also, Oklahoma already had strong farm organizations. The Oklahoma Farmers' Union had been operating with a strong contingent since 1902, and championed important tenant issues like farm ownership, lower interest rates, better shipping rates, and good roads. The Farm Bureau organized in Oklahoma in the early 1940s and, even though it was a business-focused organization, it provided another outlet for farmers. Also, in Oklahoma tenants were not political outcasts with no political rights and the major parties had not stripped the voting rights of tenants as was the case in many southern states. Finally, the Oklahoma branch of the STFU depended too much on Odis Sweeden. When he left the organization because he believed they did not appreciate his efforts, the state STFU fell apart.⁶³

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union faded into history in 1944 as it became the National Farm Labor Union and affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Eventually, the CIO purged the National Farm Labor Union's successor, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) for becoming too closely affiliated with the Communist Party. Unfortunately, like many large labor organizations, the UCAPAWA became too large with too many interests so that sharecroppers became less important. As World War II approached, tenants had no real voice as they packed up and headed to cities looking for industrial jobs.⁶⁴

It is unclear just how much the STFU affected legislative policy and executive decisions. Portions of the New Deal directly addressed the tenancy problems including the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act of 1937, and the Farm Security Administration. Scholars will continue to debate whether national legislation was a direct reflection of the pressures and visibility of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union; but with certainty Franklin Roosevelt's administration addressed the issue and at least tried to redress many of the ills brought about by farm tenancy. Government actions never had the chance to develop more fully because of World War II, which transformed the farm labor situation in the United States.

In Oklahoma, the influence of the STFU is also difficult to gauge. The state government was much more proactive than others, which suggests that policy precedent existed before the STFU organized in the state. Likely, Oklahoma politicians of the 1930s were swayed by other influences more than the agitation of the state union. Also, the Oklahoma Farmers' Union advocated for tenants long before the existence of the STFU so tenants had no real need to join another organization. Perhaps, the state

government's proactive approach curbed the growing tide of the STFU within the state and passed much of the legislation and undermined the influence of the radical organization during the 1930s.

NEW DEAL

Initially, New Dealers tried to help the agricultural economy recover. The goal of farm legislation during the 1930s was to make the rural population self-supporting, but the programs met with mixed review. The most comprehensive initial piece of legislation was the Agricultural Adjustment Act passed in 1933. The primary goal of the AAA was to establish a price parity and production limit on major farm commodities to force prices upward. One tactic was to reduce planted acreage. Government subsidies paid farmers to remove land from production to assist with surplus reduction. Ten million acres were removed from production across the United States and this move helped cotton prices rise to just under \$0.12 in 1934 from a low of \$0.05 per pound in 1932.⁶⁵ The AAA had several inherent contradictions that troubled many Americans, contemporaries, and historians alike. By reducing surplus, farm prices would rise, but the only way to reduce surplus of crops already planted was to plow under rows of cotton and wheat and even to kill livestock. In theory, landlords and tenants were to split the subsidy on the same percentage as the crop. Unfortunately, many southern landowners learned that fewer tenants meant fewer parties to split the checks. Landlords forced tenants from farms throughout the South, but no precise data exist on the number of tenants displaced by these actions.⁶⁶

In Oklahoma, just as in the South, tenants claimed that landowners “chiseled” them off the farms to gain the entire AAA subsidy check. The most devious was simply to evict farmers and force them to find a new home. Also, landlords reduced the status of a tenant from resident renter to wage laborer which ended the claim to subsidy checks as agricultural workers had no protection under the legislation. Owners also tampered with rental agreements by adding supplementary clauses where tenants forfeited any cash payments, were charged a higher rent on feed, or even had a surcharge levied at the end of the year based on the tenant’s portion of the government subsidy. D. P. Trent, Regional Director of the Resettlement Administration, warned that unfair practices could lead to the cancellation of subsidies, but the government was virtually powerless to stop the process because proof was difficult to obtain.⁶⁷

The first federal loans available for developing infrastructure for farm tenants were provided by the Rural Rehabilitation Loans under the Resettlement Administration in 1935. Rehabilitation loans were intended to refinance small amounts of debt and purchase livestock or equipment to improve a farm’s production capacity. The typical rehabilitation loan was \$300 to \$400 and intended only to help with short-term debt.⁶⁸ The Resettlement Administration also purchased farms throughout the United States and resettled tenants on these collective cooperative farms. One of the collective farms in Oklahoma was the famed 101 Ranch near Ponca City. The John Hancock Life Insurance Company obtained the ranch through foreclosure proceedings and sold the property to the federal government, which converted the estate into a tenant plantation. The government divided the ranch into thirty-four tracts of land and rented to tenants in sizes varying from forty to eighty acres.⁶⁹

Other life insurance companies held large tracts of land in Oklahoma and tenants constantly complained about these holdings. Some life insurance companies financed home mortgages in the 1920s and foreclosed on delinquent payments; other companies had simply bought farms as investments and rented to tenants as a potential investment; and still others purchased farms or did not liquidate due to mineral rights ownership. Milton B. Williams, Manager of the Southwestern Farm Land Department and Aetna Life Insurance Company, claimed that his company liquidated repossessed farms in as orderly a fashion as possible. Aetna, according to Williams, owned several hundred farms in the state at any given time and sold to prospective buyers at 5.5 percent interest over a period of twenty years. During testimony at an Oklahoma sponsored tenancy meeting, Williams claimed that his company sold ninety-nine farms in Oklahoma in 1935 and another 135 the following year.⁷⁰ According to farmers, insurance companies and other corporations amplified the problems with the farm subsidy program. Large corporations made significant sums of money from AAA payments meant to help farmers. The Oklahoma Farmers' Union claimed that the AAA paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to fourteen different corporations in 1939, with Delta Pine and Land Company, Prudential Insurance Company, and Metropolitan Insurance Company being the largest. Each made over \$35,000 in subsidies in a single year.⁷¹

During the 1930s, the United States government passed legislation to help farm tenants purchase homes. This marked the first time since perhaps the Homestead Act that the federal government specifically designed legislation to help the rural poor rise from renter status to that of homeownership. D. P. Trent summarized the program's intent in attempting to remove farmers from the relief roles:

I am not saying that something should be arbitrarily taken from some and given to somebody else. I am saying that the national welfare requires that people who live on the land, who till the soil, and who produce the food and raw materials which the nation requires have the inherent right to own the land which they till and have a right to acquire ownership without having to compete with investment interests. . . . If the ideals of pioneers are to be realized; if rural life and rural society are to become satisfying; if the United States is to be a great progressive and democratic nation which its founders conceived, something must be done to bring these things about.⁷²

In 1937, the legislature made a “modest attempt,” according to the *Washington Post*, to help tenants purchase farms of their own.⁷³ In 1937, both the House of Representatives and the Senate introduced legislation that allocated money for this process. Representative Marvin Jones of Texas introduced House Bill 7562 and Senator John Bankhead of Alabama introduced Senate Bill 106 to assist tenants in purchasing farms. On July 22, 1937, President Roosevelt signed the law (known as the Bankhead-Jones Act) which allowed the Secretary of Agriculture significant latitude in creating programs to assist in farm purchase programs for tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers. The legislation read: “AN ACT To create the Farmers’ Home Corporation, to promote more secure occupancy of farms and farm homes, to correct the economic instability resulting from some present forms of farm tenancy, and for other purposes.”⁷⁴

The Bankhead-Jones Act eventually resulted in the Farmers’ Home Corporation where the government loaned money directly to tenants. The FHC resided under the jurisdiction of the Farm Security Administration until 1944, when the program was absorbed into another agency. The government program gave amortized loans to farmers at an interest rate of 3 percent over a period of forty years and the government secured a first mortgage. The government appropriated ten million dollars for farm loans in 1938,

twenty-five million dollars for 1939, and fifty million dollars in 1940, and each subsequent year. In addition to home loans, tenants also borrowed money to refinance loans and build improvements, which increased the farm value and living standard.⁷⁵

Because of the limited availability of loans, the tenant program selection process was extremely rigorous and meant to aid only the most deserving tenants. Each county had a selection committee made up of three farmers who recommended worthy tenants for the loan programs. Tenants had to have a low income, good credit, and sub-standard housing to receive consideration. Furthermore, committees supposedly selected ambitious tenants who were good prospects for a quick rehabilitation.⁷⁶ Initially, the FSA was very selective about the farms and only eleven Oklahoma counties were eligible to receive loans in 1938. Farmers in Major, Washita, Caddo, Cleveland, Lincoln, Okfuskee, Okmulgee, Mayes, LeFlore, and Atoka were eligible with Bryan, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Garfield, Grady, Haskell, Hughes, Johnston, Kiowa, Logan, Osage, Pittsburgh, Pottawattamie, Rogers, Sequoyah, and Woods added to the list later that year. In 1939, thirty-seven Oklahoma counties became eligible for farm purchases by tenants.⁷⁷

The FSA and its successor, the Farmers' Home Administration, loaned money to Oklahoma tenant farmers from 1937 to 1951. By March 1951, 2,696 tenants had purchased farms for \$16,882,292, but only 143 tenants had purchased homes through the FHA after 1946. Loans to tenants made up \$17 million of the \$19 million loaned during this period.⁷⁸ The program assisted farmers in becoming much more efficient, especially those in Oklahoma. Of the 3,502 tenants who borrowed money from the FSA, 44 percent were paid in full by 1951, 12 percent were on schedule, 33 percent were ahead of schedule, and only 11 percent were behind schedule – all better than the national and

southern averages.⁷⁹ The programs also helped farmers prosper economically. Farm size increased from 166 acres in 1935 to 219 acres in 1951 and farm income increased from \$371 to \$1,485 for the same families. Economic improvement during World War II certainly helped, but the low-interest loans also provided opportunity which had never before existed.⁸⁰ The success of Oklahoma FSA borrowers in repaying their loans left Regional FSA Director C. M. Evans pleased with the program. He said, "It is evident, therefore, that our tenant purchase borrowers in Oklahoma as a group are justifying the faith the government placed in them when it made them a 100 percent loan to buy farms on their own."⁸¹

Ultimately, the FSA could not sustain its loan programs and by 1944 conservative elements in Congress and business-minded farm organizations succeeded in killing the program. In the 1940s, some actors in the complex agricultural economy became dissatisfied with the FSA and one controversial program proved its undoing. Under the Rural Rehabilitation Administration, the FSA had purchased farms in several states and rented collectively to tenants with no intention of selling. Members of the Farm Bureau, bankers, and the National Cotton Council fought against the FSA calling for its dismantling. The National Farmers' Union remained the most ardent ally of the struggling FSA and denounced the Farm Bureau as an organization for elitist farmers and wealthy landlords who did not want tenants to purchase farms because it robbed landlords of their work force. The *Oklahoma Union Farmer* wrote that "the Farm Bureau seeks the destruction of the only agency of the government that has given any help to the little man on the land."⁸² The union told its readers, "if lower prices and high interest rates is what you want you should join O'Neal's [the National President of the Farm

Bureau] group.”⁸³ The Byrd Committee, organized to look into the activities of the FSA, found that the federal government had indeed become the largest landlord in the United States by purchasing collectivized farms and believed that rental programs violated the spirit of the Bankhead-Jones Act.⁸⁴ Soon after, Congress dismantled the FSA by restructuring it as the Farmers Home Administration and reorganized the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administrations and their loans under the new agency along with numerous other programs. “By 1946, it was generally concluded. . . that some old Resettlement programs were no longer justified, others could be improved, and new programs would be needed in the postwar period.”⁸⁵

The successes of the FSA loan programs were somewhat mixed. During the eight years of the programs, the government assisted over thirteen thousand tenants with their purchases of homes through lending programs.⁸⁶ In addition, a total of over 37,547 tenants received loans for various upgrades from an applicant pool of over 854,894 tenants. Less than 0.5 percent of those who applied for loans purchased a home through the government. However, there were some successes. The majority of persons receiving loans from the government were ahead of repayment schedule in 1951 so the program found candidates and converted them into successful home owners.⁸⁷ The tenant loan programs certainly had a noble goal – to help the rural poor become home owners – but the \$335 million was simply not enough money to help all deserving tenants. The program continued under the Farmers’ Home Administration created in 1946 and loaned money to farmers through private lenders with government insured loans but only a handful of farmers participated in the later program.⁸⁸

In 1936, President Roosevelt appointed a committee to investigate the conditions of the tenant farmer. When the Presidential Committee on Farm Tenancy announced its findings the following year, the administration learned what tenants and their proponents already knew – that living conditions were terrible, rental agreements were unfair, and there was widespread suffering among the rural renting class. The committee called newspaper editors, agricultural scientists, and other experts to testify in an attempt to devise a recommendation for farm policy in the late 1930s.⁸⁹

The goal of the committee was to hear testimony from agricultural experts and recommend a course of action to the president. Experts testified that tenancy was extensive throughout the tobacco and cotton regions of the South and that this was not simply a “negro problem” but one that engulfed rural white families as well. Testimony revealed that the Department of Agriculture had preached diversity to farmers and that cotton farmers complied when prices were low but that moderate price increases often drove tenants back to increasing their cotton acreage again. Tenants and sharecroppers also benefited relatively little from the scientific teachings of the Extension Service because they could not afford “better sires, winter legume seed for soil improvement, or pasture seed.”⁹⁰ Also, farm laborers existed in too high a proportion and many were migratory vagabonds drifting across the United States as seasonal laborers from one harvest to the next. The committee also found that rural youth had very few opportunities and most stayed near their parents and became entrapped on the same sub-marginal land as the previous generation. Experts also showed that farms were too small and unproductive to yield a decent living; tenants and sharecroppers never escaped the cycle of seasonal debt.⁹¹ By the end of the investigation, most agreed with the testimony of

Mr. Gray, the editor of the *Southern Agriculturalist* when he said “I don’t think any argument is necessary to convince [you] that a landowner, a home owner, is a better citizen than the shiftless gypsy type of person that is produced by tenancy and the so-called ‘sharecropping’ system.”⁹²

Ultimately, the commission made several recommendations but the course of action was somewhat disappointing. The committee recommended that the government discourage the purchase of land by speculators and non-farmers by limiting government loans and charging capital gains taxes to non-farmers. Another recommendation was that Congress enact the Farm Tenant Home Corporation Bill to help tenants who had already been forced from the land and into the cities. At the time of the hearings, tenants who had already fled the system had no assistance from the government in purchasing a home. Finally, the committee strongly encouraged the government to pass and administer a program to help tenants purchase farms so that renters could improve their lives and communities.⁹³

OKLAHOMA’S RENTER PROGRAM

In 1936, a champion of Oklahoma tenants’ rights arose from an unlikely source. Wealthy oil baron E. W. Marland, elected governor in 1936, focused on the problems in Oklahoma. Oklahoma politicians had been reluctant to embrace the New Deal. Marland, however, believed that Oklahoma should embrace federal assistance by bringing in CCC and WPA projects. His economic plan of road improvements, government projects, and controlling the state deficit, became known to Oklahomans as the “Little New Deal.”

This program entailed a combination of more actively seeking federal assistance and increased legislation to raise revenue. Increased sales taxes and taxes on the oil industry were meant to raise immediate revenue to fund the state's obligation for New Deal projects.⁹⁴ In addition, the oil baron understood that a healthy Oklahoma needed recovery for the farmer. Marland proposed a sales tax to assist with school funding, relief programs for the poor, a Homestead Exemption law, and a tenant-landlord relations board along with other liberal programs that dealt with general problems.⁹⁵ To analyze state needs, Marland created the Oklahoma Planning Board to "develop plans and programs for the conservation and better utilization of these resources."⁹⁶ Marland also believed that the Oklahoma Housing Board would promote rural home ownership and rural rehabilitation by assisting tenant farmers purchase and repair existing homes, outbuildings, and other necessary improvements.⁹⁷ Unlike his predecessor William H. Murray, Marland was a New Dealer who supported FDR's programs and hoped to use federal and state money to assist Oklahomans in economic recovery.

Marland began the investigation of tenant issues with a conference held at the state capitol on October 22, 1936. He convened the Oklahoma Farm Tenantry Conference and invited eighty-three farm experts to present research and suggest ways to improve the economic condition and standard of living of farm tenants. Members included President of Oklahoma A & M College Henry Bennet; Professor of Economics at Oklahoma A & M College Morris Blair; Professor of Rural Sociology at Oklahoma A & M College O. D. Duncan; President of the Oklahoma Farmers' Union Tom Cheek; Farm Editor of the *Tulsa World* R. P. Mathews; State Secretary of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union Odis Sweeden; editor of the *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman* Clarence

Roberts; Oklahoma State Secretary of the Communist Party Robert Wood; the regional and state heads of numerous New Deal programs; eleven members of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union; and eight members who listed tenant farmer or farmer as their vocation.⁹⁸ At the conference, Marland had several goals. First, the governor presented facts of the farm tenant problem as discovered by the Oklahoma State Planning Board over the previous eighteen months. The Planning Board conducted an exhaustive study into population distribution, population increase and decrease, illiteracy, farm conveniences, crops, tax delinquency, erosion, and land usage. This study offered numerous conclusions, most of which were already obvious to contemporaries of the 1930s. Tenancy was highest in eastern Oklahoma and lowest in the Panhandle. Low soil quality and farm tenancy seemed to have a direct correlation. Cotton farms had higher rates of farm tenancy than general farms. Share tenancy, not sharecropping, was the prevalent rental choice. Tenant farms were smaller than farms operated by owners. And, some tenancy was actually good. In many cases, tenants were progressing toward farm ownership.⁹⁹ Second, Marland wanted to ascertain the growth of tenancy, which some experts had estimated at close to 62 percent in 1936. Third, he hoped that the committee could understand the root of tenancy so it could find a remedy. Finally, the governor discussed the evils of farm tenancy and made suggestions to end the rising tide of farm rentals in Oklahoma.¹⁰⁰ Marland succinctly described his thoughts on farm tenancy by noting that tenants received a disproportionate amount of relief money from the state and federal government, which made them burdens to tax-payers. He told the committee:

We have that problem now, and it seems to me that the taxpayers of the State will be just as anxious as we are to find a solution to this problem, because the taxpayers must find that million dollars a month that we are contributing now to keep the bodies. . . of these tenant farmers and

sharecroppers together. We are feeding the sharecropper and the tenant farmer for some absentee landlord. I just drop that thought in your lap to show that this is a problem worthy of very careful consideration by the tax payers of the state.¹⁰¹

The meeting saw a parade of experts who delivered reports outlining the problems of tenancy in Oklahoma. W. J. Griffin read a paper entitled “Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma,” which gave an overview of the problems of tenancy within the state. Griffin noted that rising tenancy was a problem throughout the United States but that the increase was greatest in the West South Central region of the United States – the region that included Oklahoma along with Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. In 1930, Oklahoma had 3.2 percent of the farms, 4.7 percent of the tenants, and 5 percent of tenant operated acres in the United States. Therefore, Oklahoma had a disproportionate number of tenants to the total number of farms, but Oklahoma tenant farms were larger than tenant farms throughout the United States. Griffin also noted that tenancy was highest in eastern Oklahoma, near 70 percent in some counties, and lowest in the Panhandle, closer to 30 percent. Since 1890, however, tenancy in eastern Oklahoma had fallen due to the removal of restrictions on Indian land but increased from a low of 6.9 percent in the Panhandle in 1910 to 32.4 percent in 1930.

Griffin also stated that tenure had a strong correlation with the type of farm. Cotton farms had tenancy rates near 75 percent, whereas tenants operated general farms in only 47 percent of the circumstances, 35 percent on fruit farms, and 21 percent on farms where livestock was the primary income. Griffin also noted an important trend that set Oklahoma apart from other areas of the South – only 17 percent of cotton farms were operated by sharecroppers. Thus, by the 1930s, the vast majority of rental contracts were

cash or share tenants so renters were in slightly better rental conditions than renters in the South.¹⁰²

Other experts discussed a variety of topics related to farm tenancy. Dr. Peter Nelson, Professor of Agricultural Economics at Oklahoma A & M College, found that farm tenants in Wales and Denmark had more legal protections than tenants in the United States.¹⁰³ J. R. Butler, President of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, spoke about tenancy in Arkansas and harangued that southerners were enslaved by "poll tax, the denial of civil liberties, rights in courts, voting, education for their children, and everything else that would still let them continue to exist and procreate enough to maintain a supply of cheap labor for the farms."¹⁰⁴ Other experts discussed absentee landlordism within the state, farm mortgage foreclosure and moratoriums, and the poor conditions in which farm tenants lived.¹⁰⁵ At the conclusion of the conference, Marland appointed a committee to study the economics of farm tenancy further. These members included Dr. Bennett, Tom Cheek, Odis Sweeden, H. J. Denton from the Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association; director of the state extension service E. E. Scholl; business manager of the *Durant Daily Democrat* Walter Archibald; and editor of the *Oklahoma Union Farmer* William Simpson.¹⁰⁶

This conference was little more than exploratory as no solutions emerged from the meeting. The conference did provide further evidence that tenant farmers in Oklahoma were not simply forgotten farmers with no proponents. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite was true. Even though Marland described renters as leeches on taxpayers, he was willing to address their plight and look for solutions for Oklahoma's largest relief

class. After all, as Marland stated, removing tenants from the relief roles would free up millions of dollars for a state that was well over budget and unable to pay its bills.¹⁰⁷

In 1937, the Oklahoma legislature heeded the call of reform. Several pieces of legislation and numerous resolutions hinted that Oklahoma legislators were more willing to support the Second New Deal. The Oklahoma Senate passed a resolution encouraging Congress to pass the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to help tenants buy farms and another resolution encouraged the adoption of the suggestions made by the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy.¹⁰⁸ The House adopted Concurrent Resolution No. 8 stating that Oklahoma City needed a Resettlement Administration instead of relying on the overworked agency in Dallas.¹⁰⁹ But the key piece of legislation proposed was Senate Bill No. 272, which sought to improve the relations between tenants and landlords by forming a Landlord-Tenant Department at Oklahoma A & M College. The Farm Landlord and Tenant Relationship Act passed both houses on April 28, 1937. The Act read: "An act to establish a closer working relationship between landlord and tenant; to encourage long-term tenancies; to encourage improvement of farms; to authorize the director of the extension department with the approval of the President of Oklahoma A & M College and the Board of Agriculture to supervise performances herein authorized."¹¹⁰

The goal of the state legislature was noble in attempt to improve the situation between the tenants and landlords. The act sought to help make rental contracts more equitable, educate owners and tenants about long-term programs, hold meetings between landlords and tenants, assist with knowledge about farm organizations, and hold arbitration hearings when necessary. The program became known as the Landlord-Tenant Department. It consisted of a supervisor, H. A. Graham, four statewide assistants,

and a secretary. The president of the college was to make the appointments. The legislature voted \$2,500 for the program in 1937, and \$12,500 for both 1938 and 1939.¹¹¹

In August 1937, the Farm Tenancy Department was organized at Oklahoma A & M College to improve relations between tenants and landlords.¹¹² In a survey conducted by the department, the biggest problem confronting tenants in the late 1930s was mobility, with an estimated 40 percent of tenants moving each year.¹¹³ The Farm Tenant Committee also reported that close to 80 percent of rental contracts in Oklahoma included some sort of share payment and only 15 percent were entirely cash. Written contracts were increasing across the state, but verbal contracts still remained a slight majority of rental agreements. Astonishingly, the committee also found that the condition of renters was relatively similar across the state and varied little from one region to the next.¹¹⁴

Other than the initial report on tenancy, the only other influence of the department was the first (and only) Landlord-Tenant Day in Stillwater on August 3, 1938 during the 21st Annual Farmers' Week held at Oklahoma A & M College. Astoundingly, three thousand participants descended on Stillwater from all regions of the state hoping to offer advice on rental conditions. Rogers County alone had over one hundred attendees, the most from any county. Many businesses and civic clubs financed buses from Oklahoma towns for anyone who wanted to attend the convention. The meeting had speakers and workshops on various aspects of farm life to teach both tenants and owners. Tenants and landlords alike voiced complaints and made recommendations about mechanization, soil fertility, and rental contracts and all parties left the meeting with a sense of accomplishment about bringing owners and renters together.¹¹⁵

Six months after the proclaimed success of the Landlord-Tenant Day, and slightly less than two years after the birth of the Farm Landlord-Tenant Relations Department, the department died at the hands of the legislature. On February 24, 1939, Senate Bill No. 82 repealed the act that created the Landlord-Tenant Relations Department and ordered that “all books, records, equipment, and property of every kind of the Farm Landlord and Tenant Relationship Department shall be delivered to the Board of Agriculture.”¹¹⁶ It is difficult to speculate as to why it ended so abruptly in 1939. In a state with significant budget shortfalls, the program was probably expendable, especially when considering that tenancy rates were obviously declining as migratory farm tenants fled to urban areas or left the state altogether. The department accomplished little except for a report that analyzed the conditions of tenant farms and a celebration of the state as a progressive agrarian reformer that sought to help tenants’ relationships with their landlords. As one historian noted, “clearly, anything Oklahoma’s tenancy program might lack in success it would make up in spectacle.”¹¹⁷

WORLD WAR II AND the 1940s

According to the Census of 1940, agriculture in Oklahoma had begun a tremendous tenure revolution and the changes continued throughout the decade. Tenancy dropped dramatically in the next ten years. Of the state’s 142,246 reporting farms, only 44,727 were tenants – a decline of 53,000 tenants and a decline in the percent of tenant farms from 54 percent to 31 percent of total farms. The numbers for the United States and the South declined almost as rapidly as the tenant was largely becoming a figure of

the past. Of the total number of tenants in Oklahoma in 1950, only 1,915 were sharecroppers - 4 percent of tenants and 1 percent of total farmers. The majority of Oklahoma tenants were still share tenants but cash contracts had grown to 29 percent of all farm lease contracts in the state.¹¹⁸

The decline of farm tenancy in Oklahoma was a result of numerous factors. During the 1920s, farm prices declined, the Depression started, and a series of events began which reduced tenancy in Oklahoma. The Agricultural Adjustment Act unintentionally forced tenants from the land because owners wanted fewer tenants with whom to share subsidies. The Okie migration displaced as many as a half-million Oklahomans with a significant percentage being tenants. World War II brought war-time industries to the state but, more important, rural Oklahomans fled to the coasts where factories needed more workers. Between 1940 and 1950, Oklahoma lost an additional 103,083 people, almost 40,000 more than left during the 1930s. Between 1930 and 1950, the population of the state declined by 162,698.¹¹⁹ Over this twenty-year period, Oklahoma also lost 61,620 farms. Thus, it appears that World War II was more important than the Depression in all but ending tenancy.

World War II actually contributed to the decrease of tenancy more than it has previously been given credit. The economy fundamentally changed when the government injected \$40 million into war industry and military bases and brought increased connectivity between the government and industry.¹²⁰ In addition to corporate profits, workers saw a dramatic upward shift in annual earnings that had never been seen before in United States History.¹²¹ Large corporations received the bulk of government money and farms began to undergo the same shift toward large corporations as well.

Small farms still existed, but after World War II, agriculture largely became agribusiness and the family farm started down the path toward extinction.¹²²

Many of the displaced Oklahoma migrants were likely tenants though exact do not exist. The decline in population in Oklahoma and the decline in tenant numbers suggests that many tenants moved to wartime industrial cities or went to fight in Europe or the Pacific. People left the traditional rural states of the South and Midwest, including Oklahoma, and the populations of states on the West Coast swelled as did the populations in Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Chicago. Stuart Bruchey explains, “around the time of World War II an agricultural revolution, comparable in many ways to the earlier Industrial Revolution, began to take place in the United States.”¹²³ Americans became mobile in the 1940s to an even greater extent than the previous decade. During World War II, twenty-five million Americans, or 21 percent of the population, relocated to industrial cities or joined the military whereas only 13 percent had moved during the depression.¹²⁴ David M. Kennedy noted the movement in his overview of the Depression and war entitled *Freedom From Fear*. “Not since the great surge of pioneers across the Appalachian crest of the early years of the Republic had so many Americans been on the move.”¹²⁵

COTTON MECHANIZATION IN OKLAHOMA

Because of the myths created by John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, the common perception was that tractors drove tenants from the farms in Oklahoma, but that was far too simple an explanation. Steinbeck described the mythic process eloquently.

Farmers had been forced to borrow money against their farms and when the owner could not pay the mortgage, the bank foreclosed but allowed the owner to remain as a tenant. Finally, the bank proclaimed: “The tenant system won’t work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don’t like to do it.”¹²⁶ Mechanization certainly played a role, but misguided and mishandled government programs, the lack of rural credit, and increasing industrial jobs in the 1940s also influenced the decline. World War II hurried mechanization on the Great Plains as the migration caused a labor shortage in many Plains states. Because of the shortage, landowners and harvesters paid premium wages to locals to harvest crops. According to one historian, seasonal workers from local areas made up 71 percent of the harvest workforce, an increase of 67 percent over the course of a few years.¹²⁷

Mechanization was slow to begin, but once it began, it occurred rapidly with many crops but not with cotton farming. One study proclaimed that “prior to World War I, about the same amount of labor was required to produce a pound of cotton as in 1860.”¹²⁸ By the 1920s, *The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman* recognized the growing revolution, stating “we must stop the tractor from putting tenants off our farms. Why not place a heavy tax on all land farmed by one man over half a section.”¹²⁹ And to some degree, this was true. Tractors displaced some farm tenants in western Oklahoma. From 1923 to 1934, the cost of tractors, especially large tractors, declined so that tractors became more affordable and many farmers purchased them.¹³⁰ But, mechanization in cotton growing areas was significantly slower than on the Great Plains where bonanza farms plowed thousands of acres on a single farm. In fact, mechanization had little effect

on Oklahoma farm tenants, especially those in cotton-producing areas because mechanized cotton pickers did not emerge on a large scale until the 1950s; thus manual labor remained the only viable picking method until the 1940s.¹³¹

Mechanization had minimal impact on the farm tenant until after World War II, but once cotton production became mechanized, the days of the few remaining tenants were over. Before the 1940s, there was no real reason for cotton to mechanize. In the 1920s, there were plenty of tenants and croppers to produce the crop while in the 1930s acreage reduction meant the need for fewer tenants. Also after 1930, cotton acreage in Oklahoma reduced drastically. The federal government paid farmers to keep cotton land out of production and other farmers found more profitable crops. In 1930, cotton was still the choice crop in Oklahoma. Oklahoma cotton growers planted 4,148,228 acres on 123,477 farms. The average cotton farm planted 33.6 acres of cotton. The decline in farms and acreage was steady over the next two decades. By 1940, cotton farmers planted 1,671,481 acres and on 86,889. By 1950, the trend became more obvious – cotton farmers were disappearing. In 1950, only 38,152 farmers planted cotton on 1,227,911 acres. In twenty years, the number of cotton growers had declined by an astonishing 85,325 farmers and acreage declined by almost three million acres (a reduction of 75 percent from the cotton producing peak). As southerners began to produce cotton again during World War II and the government removed acreage restrictions, labor had migrated from the South so the labor shortage drove the mechanization of cotton, not vice versa.¹³²

Mechanization came to cotton farming much slower than it had to other types of farms, but when cotton began to use technological innovations the metamorphosis from

pre-twentieth century methods of horse-drawn implements and hand picking disappeared with startling speed. Tractors came to cotton farms in the 1920s and by 1960 horses had been replaced. In 1925, southern farmers reported \$423 million in equipment. Between 1925 and 1929, southern farmers spent an additional \$450 million in tractors and newer technology. Initially, Oklahoma cotton farmers used tractors to plow fields but still needed labor to pick the cotton.¹³³ In 1920, Oklahoma had only 6,120 tractors but ten years later the number grew fourfold to 25,292. By 1940, the number of tractors in the state multiplied to 41,130. And, over the course of the next decade, tractors continued to multiply in the state. From 1940 to 1945, farmers purchased almost 20,000 tractors and another 11,000 by 1950. In 1950, Oklahoma farmers reported 71,710 tractors. Thus, World War II forced tenants and workers from the farms so Oklahoma farmers had to purchase tractors to survive. Farmers, especially cotton farmers, did not mechanize to displace tenants but the opposite. When tenants left, farmers were forced to mechanize.¹³⁴

Farmers in southwest Oklahoma embraced tractors more quickly and expanded their operations in the 1920s. One study illuminated the growing trends in mechanization. In southwest Oklahoma, farmers who used horse-drawn equipment had an average age of forty-five while those using tractors averaged thirty-six years of age. Tractors also caused farms to grow in size and even boosted productivity in Tillman County. In 1929, the Oklahoma Experiment Station produced a study that showed that a farm with no tractor produced \$1420 in cotton on 143 acres while farms with tractors produced \$2032 worth of cotton on 190 acre farm. Thus, farms with tractors tended to be more productive and larger while considerably reducing the number of hours needed to

plant a crop. The same study proposed that converting to tractor-powered implements would save money in fuel per acre. Horses and mules used approximately \$4.10 per acre in feed to produce a crop while the tractor used \$2.70 per acre for the same tasks. This study, however, does not mention the initial investment a farmer needed to buy a tractor when he already had draft animals on hand.¹³⁵

Mechanization came slowest in picking improvements. In the 1930s, mechanical cotton pickers were still in an experimental stage which made the venture risky at best. Most cotton farms clung to older traditions of horse- or mule-drawn plows and handpicking by tenants or hired hands.¹³⁶ There were cotton stripping machines and machines that picked bolls in the 1930s, but the machines were highly inefficient. Stripping machines left a significant amount of cotton in the field, about 9 percent of the total crop, while hand pickers only lost about 2 percent.¹³⁷ Also, cotton plants matured unevenly and picking unripe cotton damaged bolls and devalued the cotton.¹³⁸ Stripping machines were much more prevalent in western Oklahoma and Texas in the 1940s, and most experts agreed that machine-picked cotton, even with the loss of cotton, was slightly more profitable when compared to handpicked cotton. Machine-picked cotton was a lower grade because there were more stalks and dirt in the cotton and cotton was lost during picking, but harvesting with a stripping machine cost approximately \$33.40 per bale while paying hand pickers cost \$37.76 per bale.¹³⁹

By the mid-1940s, tractor numbers increased slowly in Oklahoma moving from west to east. A study by the Oklahoma A & M College Rural Sociology Department showed that counties in western Oklahoma had 78 to 124 tractors per 100 farms while counties in eastern Oklahoma had 2 to 15 tractors per 100 farms. Nearly every farm in

the western half of the state had a tractor and as few as one in fifty farms in some eastern counties had tractors. Counties with the highest percentage of tractors included Alfalfa, Beaver, Blaine, Canadian, Cimarron, Garfield, Grant, Harper, Kay, Woods and Kingfisher in the wheat belt and Cotton, Custer, Harmon, Jackson, Kiowa, Noble, Tillman, and Washita in the cotton growing areas. The counties of Beckham, Caddo, Comanche, Jefferson, Greer, and Grady in the cotton belt and Dewey, Ellis, Logan, Roger Mills, and Woodward had fifty to seventy-five tractors per hundred farms. All of the counties with fewer tractors were in eastern Oklahoma and lay in the counties with traditionally high tenancy, smaller farms, and more racial diversity. The counties with the fewest tractors were traditional cotton-producing counties but in eastern and southeastern Oklahoma. Bryan, Creek, Hughes, Lincoln, Marshall, Mayes, McIntosh, Murray, Muskogee, Okfuskee, Oklahoma, Okmulgee, Ottawa, Pottawatomie, Rogers, Tulsa, and Washington counties had all begun the transformation from cotton to general farming, but farms were traditionally smaller and by 1945 only had between nineteen and thirty-three tractors per farm.¹⁴⁰ In conjunction with the study of Tillman County, this would suggest that cotton farms in Oklahoma mechanized unevenly. Cotton farms in Southwest Oklahoma had more tractors which improved efficiency while farms in eastern Oklahoma remained smaller and had fewer tractors. Small cotton farms did not necessarily need a tractor if a tenant could still finish the work. Mechanization and displacement were mutually reinforcing. As tenants left farms, farmers needed more tractors to make up for lost laborers. When farmers bought tractors, even more tenants became displaced because a single tractor replaced five to ten farm families. Horses also

became expendable so the land used to grow feed was reevaluated and planted to cash crop or feed for money producing livestock.¹⁴¹

By the 1950s, the mechanization of cotton production in the United States was complete. Cotton farming in the traditional Piedmont of the United States had all but ended. The center of cotton production had shifted to the Llano Estacado region of the Texas Panhandle, California, and the irrigated Arizona desert. The Piedmont was no longer a vast expansion of tenant plantations but a series of isolated cotton-producing communities.¹⁴² Mechanization was rapid and played a huge role in the transformation. In 1955, one-quarter of the cotton harvested in the United States occurred by machine (two-thirds of the California crop) while ten years earlier, virtually no American farmer picked any cotton with a machine.¹⁴³

According to geographers Merle Prunty and Charles Aiken, the decline of the Piedmont was not due to the boll weevil, government limitations on acreage, or even mechanization but instead cotton production in the South became less profitable because of the cost of entering a new, modern phase of cotton production.¹⁴⁴ Noted historian Wayne Flynt attributed the death knell of southern cotton tenancy to the mechanical cotton picker because it reduced the time it took to produce a bale of cotton from 160 hours to eight. Flynt may be correct that tenancy died after the perfection of the mechanical picker, but tenancy was already in rapid decline throughout the South and especially in Oklahoma.¹⁴⁵

Though slow to begin, the mechanical revolution in cotton farming was swift.¹⁴⁶ It was nearly complete throughout the industry by the end of the 1950s. In fact,

technological innovations came to nearly every aspect of the cotton industry. New implements, mechanized pickers, and row planters made cotton production less labor intensive and new herbicides and insecticides reduced the loss to weeds and weevils.¹⁴⁷ Farmers created new weapons to combat pests. One such innovation was the flame cultivator built by the New Holland Company known as the “Sizz-Weeder.” A returning World War II veteran modeled the cultivator after the flame thrower used extensively against the Japanese in the Pacific. The “Sizz-Weeder” was also an effective weapon against weevils and weeds.¹⁴⁸ In addition, sulfur dusting and calcium arsenate helped raise the productivity of farms by killing field pests. Anhydrous ammonia, a new type of fertilizer, added nitrogen to the soil to boost the yield.¹⁴⁹ Modern cotton gins required tremendous amounts of invested capital, which soon forced small private gins out of the industry altogether.¹⁵⁰ Agricultural Experiment Stations also assisted with cotton production by experimenting with new varieties of cotton, scientific analysis of soil, conservation methods, and improved methods of killing weeds and insects.¹⁵¹

However, mechanization did not occur on a widespread scale until the 1950s, which suggests that mechanical pickers had very little to do with the decline of farm tenancy and, in fact, quite the opposite was true – the migration of tenants and day laborers probably forced the mechanization of cotton production after World War II.¹⁵² In the 1970s, William Peterson and Yoav Kislev produced a statistical analysis suggesting that the increasing scarcity of labor forced mechanization because farmers had to solve the labor shortage crisis on the farm.¹⁵³ The 1940s saw the mass migration of rural Americans to the cities as farm labor wages could not compete with those of the city. Peterson and Kislev’s study posits that the higher wages of the city produced 79

percent of the force by pulling tenants and laborers to the cities while mechanized harvesting only had 21 percent push factor. The more important statistic is that southerners flocked to the cities and higher wages and mechanization are the two forces behind the trend.¹⁵⁴ Though Southwest Oklahoma cotton farmers used cotton strippers during the 1940s, it was not until the 1950s when the spindle picker emerged that southern planters finally had a machine to pick cotton efficiently.¹⁵⁵ The row crop tractor was also a key component to mechanization. Other advances like the use of liquid fertilizer in the form of anhydrous ammonia and insecticides sprayed from airplanes effectively combated the weevil and helped solve most of the cotton farmer's historic problems.¹⁵⁶ Even with all of these improvements, it was not until 1975 that machines picked 100 percent of the cotton crop, which was long after Oklahoma ceased being a major cotton producer.¹⁵⁷

Agriculture changed fundamentally during the 1940s in Oklahoma as it did the rest of the United States. Tenants had moved away, mechanization was on the increase, and cotton was no longer the unchallenged monarch of the state agricultural economy. In fact, it was dethroned! In 1943, wheat surpassed cotton as the most profitable commodity in the state. Wheat farmers brought in \$65 million while cotton produced only \$59 million for the agricultural economy of the state. By the late 1940s, the gap widened even further. Wheat farmers planted 7.1 million acres while cotton farmers planted only 1.2 million acres. That year, cotton accounted for \$64 million but wheat brought in \$202 million.¹⁵⁸

By the 1940s, the conditions of rural Oklahomans had improved dramatically. The standard of living had increased and economic conditions were improving. Housing

remained poorest in Southeastern Oklahoma, but conditions there had also improved somewhat since 1930. Home ownership was also on the rise because tenants had moved during the lean years of the Depression.¹⁵⁹ Farms increased in size from 166 acres in 1935 to 219 acres by 1950. Farm tenancy had declined from 61 percent in 1930 to 55 percent in 1940 and 31 percent in 1950.¹⁶⁰ Housing conditions were significantly improved. In 1930, only 4 percent of Oklahoma farm homes had electricity. By 1950 this had grown to 66 percent. Nearly half of all farms had tractors, 59 percent had automobiles, and 32 percent had phones.¹⁶¹

The end of the tenant farming era began with the Great Depression. Once prices fell to a level where poor farmers could no longer survive, the mass migration to other places and professions began. Then, the New Dealers believed they were helping the tenants but landlords soon learned to manipulate the system and forced tenants into wage laborer jobs at best, or on a trek to California at worst. David Conrad claimed the AAA as the culprit but also as the harbinger of a better life. “In a way, AAA accomplished an unintended reform in helping to drive tenants from the land because those evicted were forced to seek new occupations and most of them eventually found a better life.”¹⁶² As tenants became migrants, they forged west to create a new Okie-influenced culture in California as many remained to work in wartime industries. When the government again tried to help in the late 1930s with a tenant purchase program, the intentions were sincere but the program was underfunded and saw limited results. Some tenants purchased farms with government help but not enough to change the tenure situation. Once again New Deal programs fell short of agrarian expectation. World War II righted the economy and put tenants to work as soldiers and laborers. And, once tenants went to factories, their

wages rose, standard of living improved, and farm tenancy was but a distant memory of a once dominant agricultural system. The migration of farm tenants led to a need for mechanization in the cotton fields, which further revolutionized the industry. Cotton production and manual labor were practically divorced by 1960. The period from 1930 to 1950 saw a decline in farm tenancy, but this time it was because tenants left the farms and, unlike the decrease of tenancy around World War I, tenant farmers never returned.

CHAPTER VI
ENDNOTES

¹ Tom W. Cheek, "The Evils of Farm Tenancy," March 27, 1937, *Tom W. Cheek Collection*, Special Collections and University Archives, Oklahoma State University Library, Stillwater, OK.

² *Union Advocate Review*, February 24, 1910.

³ *Tulsa Democrat* reprinted in *Harlow's Weekly*, December 12, 1917.

⁴ J. B. A. Robertson speech to 7th Legislature, *ibid.*, June 25, 1919.

⁵ Letter from Campbell Russell to Eugene Arnett, May 24, 1935; letter from Dean Blackwell to Eugene Arnett, May 21, 1935, *Campbell Russell Collection*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, Box 1, Folder 1.

⁶ Speech to 5th district of Oklahoma, undated, *ibid.*, Box 1, File 6.

⁷ Testimony of John Simpson before the Interstate Commerce Commissions at Kansas City, MO, January 11, 1926, *John Andrew Simpson Papers*, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, Box 1, File 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ James Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 164-176; *Harlow's Weekly*, December 15, 1934.

¹¹ University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*, ONLINE, 1998, University of Virginia, Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

¹² *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, November 1, 1932.

¹³ *Ibid.*, July 15, 1931; National Bureau of Economic Research, <http://www.nber.org/databases/macroeconomy/>.

¹⁴ *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, December 15, 1938.

¹⁵ Arthur N. Moore and J. T. Sanders, *Credit Problems of Oklahoma Cotton Farmers with Special Reference to Garvin, Jackson, and Pittsburg Counties* Bulletin No.

198 (Stillwater: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Agricultural Experiment Station, October 1930), 2.

¹⁶ Ibid; *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, September 15, 1933. The newspaper stated that credit ranged from 10 percent 30 percent,

¹⁷ *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, August 1, 1932.

¹⁸ Moore and Sanders, *Credit Problems of Oklahoma Cotton Farmers*, 18.

¹⁹ Robert T. McMillan, "Migration and Status of Open-Country Families in Oklahoma," Technical Bulletin No. 19 (Stillwater: Department of Sociology and Rural Life, Oklahoma A & M Agricultural Experiment Station, September 1943).

²⁰ *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, November, 15, 1930.

²¹ W. M. Osborn, "Cotton Experiments at the Lawton (Oklahoma) Field Station, 1916 to 1931" (Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, 1933), 5.

²² National Bureau of Economic Research browser; United States, Bureau of the Census. Department of Commerce, Census of Agriculture of 1960, "Cotton Production and Distribution, Year ending July 31, 1960" Bulletin no. 197 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), 23.

²³ Moore and Sanders, *Credit Problems of Oklahoma Cotton Farmers*, 21.

²⁴ Horace J. Harper, "Cotton is the King – of the Soil Ravaging Crops," *Oklahoma Union Farmer*, 6/15/37.

²⁵ Ben G. Duncan, "Land Use Problem Areas in Oklahoma, Revised as of May 20, 1935," unpublished manuscript, *Agriculture Collection*, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, State Land Planning Consultant National Resources Board, Box 16, File 1.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Testimony by Dr. W. W. Alexander, FSA Administrator before the Senate Civil Liberties Committee, May 23, 1940, 8-9, *Otis Durant Duncan Rural Sociology Department Collection*, Special Collections, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, Box 1, File 6.

²⁸ Duncan, "Land Use Problem Areas in Oklahoma."

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 11.

³¹ J. T. Woofler, United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, "Migration in the Near Future," (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office), June 3, 1940.

³² Gregory, *American Exodus*, 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration. "Migrant Farm Labor, The Problem and Some Efforts to Meet It" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 5.

³⁶ "Oklahoma Population Trends and Prospects," Address to the Comptrollers Institute of America, Oklahoma Control, Tulsa, OK, February 12, 1962, *Otis Durant Duncan Papers*, Special Collections, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, Box 1, File 3.

³⁷ Gregory, *American Exodus*, 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹ Gregory estimates that 500,000 left the West South Central region while a USDA study believes the number was closer to 350,000.

⁴⁰ *US Census Browser*.

⁴¹ O. D. Duncan, "The Significance of the Migrations of Oklahoma Farm Populations," Address to the Rural Life Section of the First Annual Oklahoma Conference on Social Welfare, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 19 to 22, 1939, *Duncan Papers*, Box 3, File 23, 4.

⁴² Letter from Frederick R. Soule, Regional Information Advisor to FSA CA division, to O. D. Duncan, undated, *Duncan Papers*, Box 1, File 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ USDA, FSA, "Mobile Camps for Migrant Families," September 13, 1940 (Washington, DC: United States Government, 1940), 1; USDA, Farm Security Administration. "Migrant Farm Labor, The Problem and some Efforts to Meet it," 1.

⁴⁵ USDA, FSA, "Migrant Farm Labor, The Problem and some Efforts to Meet it," 2, 5.

⁴⁶ Letter from Ernest E. Scholl to All White Agents, October 20, 1939, *ibid.*, Box 1, File 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ James Gregory, *American Exodus*, 64-65. Okie Migrants usually tried to find accommodations and stayed away from FSA camps whenever possible. There was a one year maximum occupancy rule and Okies sought to avoid the stigma of living in the camps.

⁴⁹ USDA, FSA, "Migrant Farm Labor: The Problem and some efforts to meet it," 5.

⁵⁰ Woofter, "Migration in the Near Future," 2-5.

⁵¹ Testimony of Otis Nation, United States Congress, House Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, "Hearings before the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens" (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940-41), September 19, 1940: 2104.

⁵² Testimony of Nation, "Hearings before the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens," 2104.

⁵³ *Oklahoman*, August 3, 1940.

⁵⁴ United States Congress, House Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, "Hearings before the Select committee to investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, House of representatives, Seventy-sixth Congress, Third Session, Pursuant to House Resolution 63 and House Resolution 491, Resolutions to Inquire into the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, to Study, Survey and Investigate the Social and Economic Needs and the Movement of Indigent Persons Across State Lines," (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1940-1941); United States Congress House Select Committee, Committee to Investigate National Defense Migration, "Hearings before the Select Committee to Investigate National Defense Migration," (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, January 8, 1943).

⁵⁵ *US Census Browser*.

⁵⁶ Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler and E.L. Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture* Social Research Report no. 8 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and The Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1938,): 38; William H. Harbaugh, "Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions," *Agricultural History* 66 (Summer 1992): 96.

⁵⁷ For a history of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, see Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971). For a firsthand account from a prominent member see Howard Kester, *Revolt among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Covici-Frede, 1936). For a succinct and personal account of the founding of the STFU see H. L. Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (1973): 342–369. For a biographical sketch of the founder see H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happened on This Land* (Montclair, NJ: Allenheld Osmen, 1979). For more on the demise of the STFU and its affiliation with the Socialist Party and Communist Party see Lowell K Dyson, "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 88 (1973): 230–252. For a summary of the grievances of the STFU and a concise history of the organizations see Jerold S. Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers: Socialist Critics of the New Deal," *Labor History* 7 (Winter 1966): 3–74.

⁵⁸ Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers," 115; Dyson, "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics," 251. Dyson argues that Henry Wallace intentionally killed sharecropping and promoted scientific and mechanized agriculture which were incompatible with the archaic southern land tenure system.

⁵⁹ Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 89-91. Grubbs argues that, despite evidence to the contrary, the movement never formally affiliated with the Socialist Party because it did not "formulate any policy" (89-91); cited in Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers," 119 (n. 17).

⁶⁰ Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," 342-369. Mitchell was the original founder of the STFU in northeastern Arkansas. This article is a detailed account of the origins of the organization at the annual meeting of the Arkansas Historical Association in April of 1973.

⁶¹ Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 80, 124-125, 177-178, 187-188. No extensive study of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in Oklahoma exists to date. Most scholars treat the subject in a superficial sense and focus instead on the personality of Odis Sweeden as the driving force behind the organization. For more on the lack of STFU growth in Oklahoma, see Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 80; Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," 359, 367; Dyson, "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics," 237-238.

⁶² Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 177-178.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ For more on the demise of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, see Dyson, "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics," 230-252.

⁶⁵ Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 21-24.

⁶⁶ O. D. Duncan, "Social Implications of Agricultural Adjustment," reprinted from *Journal of Farm Economics* 3 (July 1944): 506, 513, *Duncan Papers*, Box 3, File 24. For a brief but adequate discussion of the dispossession of tenant land, see David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 212-214.

⁶⁷ *The Oklahoman*, February 14, 1935; January 12, 1939; Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 29-30. Mertz estimated from Census numbers that 30 percent of tenants in Texas left their farms between 1930 and 1935 but there is no way to know who many were evicted.

⁶⁸ George Stanley Brown, "A Farm Ownership Program of the Farmers Home Administration in Oklahoma," (MA Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1951), 48; J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980), 80.

⁶⁹ *Oklahoman*, November 14, 1936, February 19, 1937, April 23, 1939.

⁷⁰ Milton B. Williams, Manager of Southwestern Farm Loan Department and Aetna Life Insurance Company, "Proceedings of the Oklahoma Farm Land Tenantry Conference," 25, *Marland Collection*, Box 1, File 19.

⁷¹ *Oklahoma Union Farmer*, September 1, 1941.

⁷² Letter from D. P. Trent to *Harlow's Weekly*, December 19, 1936.

⁷³ *The Washington Post* reprinted in *The Oklahoman*, July 7, 1937.

⁷⁴ United States Congress, Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, "To Create the Farm Tenant Homes Corporation," (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, March 5, 1935); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 181.

⁷⁵ Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Poverty*, 189-191; Edward C. Banfield, "Ten Years of the Farm Tenant Purchase Program," *Journal of Farm Economics* 31 (1949): 469-486.

⁷⁶ *Oklahoman*, August 8, 1937, August 15, 1937.

⁷⁷ *Oklahoma Farmer Stockman*, January 1, 1938, August 1, 1938, August 1, 1939.

⁷⁸ Brown, "A Farm Ownership Program," 115-118. Brown had access to the file and records of the Oklahoma division of the Farmers' Home Administration which provided statistics that are no longer available.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸¹ *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, January 15, 1941.

⁸² *Oklahoma Union Farmer*, September 1, 1941.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, December 15, 1941.

⁸⁴ For a History of the Farm Security Administration, see United States Department of Agriculture, Farmers Home Administration, "A Brief History of Farmers' Home Administration" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, January 1981); for a timeline of events, see Brown, "A Farm Ownership Program," 153-157; for more on the Farm Bureau and its involvement with the New Deal see Christiana McFadyen Campbell, *The Farm Bureau: A Study of the Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-40* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1962).

⁸⁵ USDA, FHA, "A Brief History of Farmers' Home Administration," 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Brown, "A Farm Ownership Program," 70.

⁸⁸ For more details on the Farmers Home Administration, see United States Department of Agriculture, Farmers Home Administration, "A Brief History of Farmers Home Administration" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, January, 1981).

⁸⁹ National Resources Committee. "Report of the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, February 1937), 15, 18-19, 30, 33.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15, 18-19, 30, 33.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 63-69.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 11-17.

⁹⁴ James R. Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1982), 200; Michael W. Everman, "The Political Career of Earnest Whitworth Marland" (MA Thesis, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, 1977), 40-49. Remarkably, little scholarship is available on the New Deal in Oklahoma. Numerous articles deal with various aspects of the period but there is no single work that details and describes national and state programs working within Oklahoma.

⁹⁵ "Governor Marland the New Dealer," unpublished manuscript, *Marland Collection*, Box 1, Folder 1.

⁹⁶ E. W. Marland, First Inaugural Speech to the state of Oklahoma, January 15, 1935, 3.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ "Proceedings of the Oklahoma Farm Land Tenantry Conference," *Marland Collection*, Box 1, File 18.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 19-20.

¹⁰² Speech made by W. J. Griffin, *ibid.*, 8-10.

¹⁰³ Peter Nelson, "Farm Tenure at its Best," *ibid.*, 10-12.

¹⁰⁴ J. R. Butler address to the Oklahoma Farm Tenantry Conference, *ibid.*, 15-16.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* D. P. Trent discussed absentee land ownership (22) and the Bankhead Bill (30-31); Milton B. Williams, Manager of the Southwestern Farm Loan Department of Aetna Life Insurance Company, defended farm foreclosures by lenders (23-25); Clarence Roberts defended the current owners of farms in Oklahoma stating that owners deserve help if tenants receive it, (26).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-33.

¹⁰⁷ For more on the Depression era policies of Governor E. W. Marland in Oklahoma, see Everman, "The Political Career of Earnest Whitworth Marland."

¹⁰⁸ Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 8 and No. 18 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co).

¹⁰⁹ House Concurrent Resolution No. 8 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co).

¹¹⁰ “Farm Landlord and Tenant Relationship Act,” Oklahoma Senate Bill No. 272, April 28, 1937, *Oklahoma Session Laws* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co), 391-393.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, January 15, 1939.

¹¹³ Ibid., March 15, 1938.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, August 15, 1938; *Oklahoman*, July 18, 1938, July 17, 1938.

¹¹⁶ Senate Bill No. 82, Repeal of “Farm Landlord and Tenant Relationship Act,” February 24, 1939 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co), 341.

¹¹⁷ Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 125.

¹¹⁸ *US Census Browser*. The Census of 1950 was extremely complex in determining the sub-category of the tenure status. There were categories for: share tenant, share-cash, crop share, cropper, and live-stock share.

¹¹⁹ Ibid; Gerald D. Nash, *World War II and the West: Reshaping the Economy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 1-2

¹²⁰ Nash, *World War II and the West*, 218.

¹²¹ Harold G. Vatter, “The Inheritance of the Preceding Decade,” *The US Economy in the 1950s*, reprinted in Harold G. Vatter and John F. Walker, eds., *History of the US Economy Since World War II* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 4-5.

¹²² Stuart Bruchey, “Some Deeper Currents in the Recent Past,” *The Wealth of the Nation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), *ibid.*, 29.

¹²³ Bruchey, “Some Deeper Currents in the Recent Past,” 28.

¹²⁴ Sally Miller and Daniel Cornford, *American Labor in the Era of World War II* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 2.

¹²⁵ David Michael Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 747.

¹²⁶ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1939), 44-45. In Chapter Five, the bank forced tenants off the land.

¹²⁷ *US Census Brower*.

¹²⁸ Frank J. Welch and D. Gray Miley, "Mechanization of the Cotton Harvest," *Journal of Farm Economics* 27 (November 1945): 928.

¹²⁹ *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, March 15, 1929.

¹³⁰ Peter Berck, "A Note on the Real Cost of Tractors in the 1920s and 1930s," *Journal of Agricultural History*, 59 (January 1985): 66.

¹³¹ James H. Street, "Mechanizing the Cotton Harvest," *Agricultural History* 31 (January 1957): 13.

¹³² United States Census Bureau, *Seventeenth Census of the United States in the Year of 1950: Agriculture*, "Oklahoma, Chapter A: Statistics for the State," (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office): 15.

¹³³ P. H. Stephens, "Mechanization of Cotton Farms," *Journal of Farm Economics* 13 (January 1931): 27.

¹³⁴ *Census of 1950: Agriculture*, "Oklahoma: Statistics," 6.

¹³⁵ Stephens, "Mechanization of Cotton Farms," 29-32.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁷ Welch and Miley, "Mechanization of the Cotton Harvest," 933-935.

¹³⁸ Street, "Mechanizing the Cotton Harvest," 13.

¹³⁹ Welch and Miley, "Mechanization of the Cotton Harvest," 934-943.

¹⁴⁰ Robert T. McMillan, "Social Aspects of Farm Mechanization in Oklahoma," Unpublished Manuscript, *Otis Durant Duncan Collection: Rural Sociology Department*, Special Collections and University Archives, Oklahoma State University Libraries, Stillwater, OK, Box 1, File 64.

¹⁴¹ *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman*, February 15, 1940.

¹⁴² Merle C. Prunty and Charles S. Aiken, "The Demise of the Piedmont Cotton Region," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62 (June 1972), 283.

¹⁴³ Street, "Mechanizing the Cotton Harvest," 13; Welch and Miley, "Mechanization of the Cotton Harvest," 933. Welch and Miley showed that only twelve cotton picking machines were used in the United States in 1944 and only 2229 bales were picked by machine.

¹⁴⁴ Prunty and Aiken, "Demise of the Piedmont," 283.

¹⁴⁵ Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten Poor*, 97.

¹⁴⁶ *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, December 15, 1944.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, March 15, 1948.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1946.

¹⁴⁹ *Oklahoma Farmer Stockman*, June, 1943; *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, June 15, 1946.

¹⁵⁰ Prunty and Aiken, "The Demise of the Piedmont Cotton Region," 284, 298.

¹⁵¹ *The Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, April 15, 1945.

¹⁵² For a history of cotton mechanization in the United States see Street, "Mechanizing the Cotton Harvest," 12-22; and for mechanization after 1950 see Charles R. Sayre, "Mechanization since World War II," *Journal of Agricultural History* 53 (January 1979): 105-124.

¹⁵³ Willis Peterson and Yoav Kislev, "The Cotton Harvester in Retrospect: Labor Displacement or Replacement?" *The Journal of Economic History*, 46 (March 1986): 206.

¹⁵⁴ Sayre, "Mechanization since World War II," 110; Peterson and Kislev, "The Cotton Harvester in Retrospect," 199.

¹⁵⁵ Sayre, "Mechanization since World War II," 109-110.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁵⁷ Peterson and Kislev, "The Cotton Harvester in Retrospect," 201.

¹⁵⁸ *Oklahoma Cotton Grower*, April 15, 1943, December 15, 1948, January 15, 1949.

¹⁵⁹ McMillan, "Farm Housing in Southern Oklahoma," 5.

¹⁶⁰ *US Census Browser*; Brown, “A Farm Ownership Program,” 129.

¹⁶¹ O. D. Duncan, “Analysis of Certain Factors in Levels of Living of Oklahoma Farm Population,” unpublished manuscript (ca. 1953), *Duncan Rural Sociology Papers*, Box 1, File 5.

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CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the twentieth century, farming in the United States underwent a revolution. In 1900, the tenant farm was a dominant fixture of the American countryside but by 1950, the small, individual tenant farmer was a dying profession. Farm tenancy has long since been supplanted by an increasing corporate movement. An agribusiness mentality suggests that small farmers are simply another casualty of the movement toward larger business. In the interest of keeping production costs low for farmers and food prices low for consumers, the inefficiency of an earlier era has led to greater consolidation over the twentieth century. As corporations became increasingly concerned “with the bottom line” and not lifestyles, this trend will likely continue throughout the twenty-first century.¹ Noted agricultural geographer John Fraser Hart believes that “the future of American agriculture is in the hands of those who realize that they must embrace change instead of trying to halt it, the entrepreneurs who have learned that they need to add a zero or two to the way they think.”²

With time, the memory of the tenant farmer fades. Most twenty-first century Oklahomans do not remember the era when cotton grew in fields in nearly every county of the state. “King Cotton” has long since been dethroned by wheat and livestock. Horses have been supplanted by tractors for over half a century and tenant farmers were casualties well before that. Along with the fall of the old monarch, “King Cotton,” farm tenancy has all but passed into history as well. Increasingly, many Oklahomans’ only knowledge of tenant farmers comes from John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* which portrays the mythic tenant as a shiftless and ignorant farmer clinging to an outdated system. Steinbeck’s portrayal of the system stereotyped tenants. They were unwilling or unable to modernize. Those who did not adapt suffered the same fate as the weary and worn-out character “Grampa.”³

Many things about Oklahoma’s past are unique and its pattern of farm tenancy is certainly one. Tenancy in Oklahoma was different from southern sharecropping and wheat tenancy on the Great Plains because the two systems collided within the oddly diverse political borders of Oklahoma. Farm tenancy in the state was born from Indian allotment in the 1890s. Despite the late emergence of the tenant system, the number of tenants and landlords quickly surpassed other Plains States and approached the high numbers of tenants in cotton-growing southern states. In Oklahoma, just as in the South, cotton was the predominant crop from 1890 until the 1940s but Oklahoma tenants were not sharecroppers. Most tenants in Oklahoma were white share tenants who produced cotton in conjunction with other crops.

Tenancy in Oklahoma was different in other ways as well. Oklahoma tenants, unlike many in the South, had political rights because of their skin color and political

activism. From 1900 to 1940, southern whites increasingly resorted to sharecropping. In Oklahoma, the system began as a white institution (88 percent of tenants were white) and it remained that way. Because they were members of the ruling race, Oklahoma tenants had a political voice and the legislature acknowledged the existence of renters' rights by passing tenant friendly legislation. Oklahoma tenants joined organizations like the Oklahoma Farmers' Union, flirted with the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and attempted to help themselves long before the national government recognized their problems. In fact, the Socialist Party and the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League emerged from agrarian discontent in the state and frightened many politicians into passing semblances of progressive laws. Even though tenants and their proponents influenced some legislation, for the most part, intent exceeded reality and it was not until the New Deal and World War II that tenancy finally died.

Furthermore, this study shows a unique trend in Oklahoma politics. Oklahoma state politicians acted in a manner exactly opposite of stereotyped politicians from the early twentieth century. During the Progressive Era, especially before 1910, Oklahoma politicians did not protect the rural poor at all. When Progressives focused on reforming the conditions of urban tenements and slums, Oklahoma politicians did little. In fact, prominent Oklahomans allowed for the rental and purchase of Indian land for individual gain often at the expense of potential homeownership for tenants. Some politicians like Campbell Russell and William H. Murray fought for graduated land taxes and stressed limited holding, but no real tenant protections ever came to fruition. From 1915 to 1922, Oklahoma's agrarian politicians passed several progressive laws to thwart tenancy. Though fears of radicalism probably fueled the legislation, state lawmakers

acknowledged the problems associated with tenancy and helped landless farmers through ownership programs. Most notable of these programs was a state-sponsored and funded farm loan program that helped landless farmers purchase homes. In addition, lawmakers also regulated gins and set “Movin’ Day” as January 1 of each year instead of allowing individual contracts to stipulate the end of the lease. Then, in the 1930s, Oklahoma lawmakers were notably absent once again. Bill Murray, erstwhile tenant advocate in the Farmers’ Union, disliked the New Deal so much that he stalled many federal programs within the state. Eventually, President Roosevelt and the New Dealers looked at rural America and discovered the poverty and suffering. The federal government enacted several loan programs to help tenants purchase homes, but the end results remained minimal. And even as the federal government followed the issue more closely, Oklahoma lawmakers surveyed the problems of tenants, created a department to help tenants, but once again disappeared. Though there was a public overture toward alleviating tenancy with the Landlord-Tenant Relations Board, no real assistance came from the state government in the 1930s except for a one day meeting held at Oklahoma A & M College and the uncovering of poverty trends by a commission appointed to study the situation.

In many ways, the federal and state governments served tenants best by not assisting. As Gilbert Fite noted, farms were simply too small in most southern states to be productive.⁴ The readjustment of the poor rural population was probably in their best interest. Even though the government sought to help with AAA subsidies and relief checks, tenants fled the cotton fields for the allure of western opportunity. Tenant purchase programs had very noble intentions and often tenants who were assisted in

purchasing a farm, those “lucky” enough to receive assistance according to one scholar, became successful farmers and usually paid off their farms in a timely fashion.⁵ But, the government purchase programs only helped a fraction of farm tenants and the methods of selection, like so many things that involve the government, were arbitrary. Hundreds of thousands applied for farm loans, but only thousands received government assistance because there simply was not enough money.

Tenant farmers also could not overcome the numerous obstacles on the path to financial success. Credit, cotton, and mechanization all worked against the tenant. Even though several farm organizations like the Farmers’ Union, Oklahoma Cotton Growers’ Association, and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union sought to help tenants and some agricultural newspaper editors advocated on their behalf, tenants could not overcome their inability to obtain cheap credit and the boom and bust cycles of the increasingly complex agricultural economy in the early 1900s.

The final question is how much we should lament the passing of the tenant farmer. Tenant farmers were tough and tenacious survivors who simply could not escape rural poverty. They clung to an arcane system until forced by a combination of economic factors, ill-planned government reforms, and hopes of a better life. These stubborn agrarians are as much a part of our proud heritage as the plight of the urban poor, even though we know significantly less about them. In addressing the Rural Life Section of the First Annual Oklahoma Conference on Social Welfare, O. D. Duncan had been asked to find statistics that refuted John Steinbeck’s portrayal of the Joads. Duncan, much to the dismay of many Okies, told the crowd gathered in Oklahoma City that Steinbeck was basically correct in his “general impression” of the migrants.⁶ But Oklahomans should

not be ashamed of their link to the most famous transients in American literature. Instead of focusing on the negative images of the barely literate wandering migrants, readers should recognize that the Joads represent something much more important – the tenacity of the agrarian poor. Tenants fought for as long as possible but they simply could not overcome the economic factors stacked against them. Tenants, however, did not disappear. They became the urban workers of the World War II factories that propelled the Allied forces to victory in Europe. As Ma declared in the closing lines, “That's what makes us tough. Rich fellas come up an' they die an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But we keep a-comin'. We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. And we'll go on forever, Pa. . . . 'cause. . . we're the people.”⁷

CHAPTER VII
ENDNOTES

¹ John Fraser Hart, *The Changing Scale of American Agriculture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 257.

² *Ibid.*, 264.

³ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1939).

⁴ Gilbert Fite, "The Agricultural Trap of the South," *The Journal of Agricultural History* 4 (Autumn, 1986): 39.

⁵ George Stanley Brown, "The Farm Ownership Program of the Farmers Home Administration" (MA Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1951), 151-152.

⁶ O. D. Duncan, "The Significance of the Migrations of Oklahoma Farm Populations," Address to the Rural Life Section of the First Annual Oklahoma conference on Social Welfare, Oklahoma City, OK, 10/19-21/39, *O. D. Duncan Collection*, Special Collections, Edmond Low Library, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, Box 3, File 23.

⁷ John Ford, *The Grapes of Wrath* (20th Century Fox), 1940.

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VITA

Kurt Lively

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: "WHERE THE GREAT PLAINS AND SOUTH COLLIDE: A HISTORY OF FARM TENANCY IN OKLAHOMA, 1890-1950"

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Woodward, OK on February 17, 1979, the son of Randy and Emily Lively. Married in Buffalo, Oklahoma on December 21, 2002 to Jarie Janelle Pierce.

Education: Graduated from Sharon-Mutual High School in Mutual, OK in May 1997; received Bachelor of Arts in History in May 2002 from Northwestern Oklahoma State University; completed Master of Arts in History at Oklahoma State University in August 2004; completed the requirements for Doctor of Philosophy at Oklahoma State University in May, 1010.

Experience: Graduate Teaching Associate at Oklahoma State University, 2004 to present; Adjunct Instructor at Oklahoma City Community College, 2008 to present; Graduate Teaching Assistant at Oklahoma State University, 2002-2004

Professional Memberships: Western History Association, Agricultural History Association, Western Social Science Association, Southwest Social Science Association, Phi Alpha Theta

Name: Kurt A. Lively

Date of Degree: May, 2010

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: "WHERE THE GREAT PLAINS AND SOUTH COLLIDE: A
HISTORY OF FARM TENANCY IN OKLAHOMA, 1890-1950"

Pages in Study: 313

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: History

Scope and Method of Study: This study examines the rise and fall of farm tenancy in Oklahoma. Primary materials include manuscript collections, agricultural newspapers, government documents, and census data. Secondary sources incorporated a variety of historical monographs and journal articles on farm tenancy, agriculture, and Oklahoma.

Findings and Conclusions: This study demonstrates that farm tenancy in Oklahoma was unique when compared with that in other states. Oklahoma farm tenancy was a hybrid of regional renting systems. Because Oklahoma sat at the intersection of two agricultural and cultural regions, farm tenancy in the state combined share tenancy from the Great Plains and cotton production from the South. Tenancy patterns in western Oklahoma mirrored rental conditions from the Great Plains; in eastern Oklahoma, tenants grew cotton, but they were predominantly share tenants, not sharecroppers. In addition, this study traces the development of farm tenancy from 1890 to 1950. Tenancy in Oklahoma had its origins in Indian land allotment in the 1890s. It grew into a cash-crop system by the 1920s. However, unlike tenants in southern cotton producing states, tenant farmers in Oklahoma remained a cohesive voting bloc and forced politicians to recognize and support their rights. Tenants in Oklahoma were not politically marginalized like southern sharecroppers and exerted more influence than renters from plains states. Despite moderate legislative success in 1920s, daily life improved very little and tenancy remained an institution of the rural poor. It was not until the 1930s that the federal and state government worked to eradicate tenancy through federal, state, and local programs. Despite these efforts, it was actually social and economic factors that ended the tenant era. A low standard of living, farm foreclosures, and farm consolidations forced many tenants from their farms in the 1930s. Finally, New Deal programs, wartime industry, and increased mechanization enticed remaining tenants to seek jobs with better pay, thus ending the era of farm tenants in Oklahoma by 1950.

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