Sharecropping

Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History , 1999

Sharecropping is a system of agriculture whereby the farmer who works the land receives proceeds of a portion of the crop harvest in return for his labor. After the American Civil War (1861-1865), the South was in ruins. Former plantation owners, now without slave labor, also lacked the resources to hire wage laborers. Further, many freedmen disliked the idea of working for wages. Hearing of a rumored promise of "forty acres and a mule" at the end of the fighting, black men in the South wanted their own farms. Two systems of agriculture emerged: One was sharecropping and the other was tenant farming. Plantation owners divided up their land and arranged the tracts to be farmed by one of these two methods.

What was a sharecropper furnished with?

A sharecropper was furnished with a house and a plot of land. The landowner, however, retained ownership; the property was simply the sharecropper's to use to work the land. Often the house was nothing more than a shack, frequently the housing that had been supplied to the slaves. The sharecropper was provided with seed, fertilizer, tools, and other implements necessary to cultivate the land. Most, if not all, the labor in the fields was performed by the sharecropper and his family. If there were any wage laborers working under the sharecropper, they were under the supervision of (and were paid by) the landowner. At the end of the harvest, the yield was turned over to the landowner, who took it to market. Once the harvest was sold, the costs of the supplies were deducted from the proceeds, and the farmer was given between one-third and one-half of the remaining sum as payment for the sharecropper's labor. If the weather had been poor during the growing season or if the market price of the crop had dropped, the sharecropper often wound up in debt. As there would be little return on the harvest, the sharecropper would be unable to pay the landowner for the supplies. Most sharecroppers found themselves in this situation, particularly after the South's economy became based on a single crop—cotton. In the days following the Civil War, landowners were eager to make money. At the time cotton was the crop most eas [illegible] was in high demand. But overproduction of cotton soon caused its price to plummet. [illegible], between 1882 and 1902 the price never exceeded 10 cents a pound.

What happened if the crop didn't make money?

While the majority of sharecroppers were perpetually in debt to the landowners, some were able to turn a profit, which eventually afforded them increased independence as farmers. Some became tenant farmers (who rented the land from the landowner), while a few established their own farms.

- Family of Sharecroppers

Source Citation:

"Sharecropping." *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History*. Ed. Thomas Carson and Mary Bonk. Detroit: Gale, 1999. *Gale Student Resources In Context*. Web. 29 Feb. 2012.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ1667500629