

Chapter 7

What It Means to Be a Share-Cropper

By Ray Sprigle

You begin to get a better idea of what it means to be a black share-cropper in the South as you sit on a home-made stool in the two-room shack of Henry Williams in Sumter county on the road to Americus in the Georgia cotton country. No northern farmer would keep his cattle in a shanty like this. And this place of Henry's is far and away better than hundreds of others we have passed on our travels.

It at least has one window in one room. Many of these sharecropper cabins have none at all — just holes in the wall with a wooden shutter that can be closed against the sleet and cold of the winter. And when you close the shutters you shut out the light too, so you live for five months of the year in a dismal black cavern. In the summer you can leave your shutters open to the sunlight and wind -- and also to the flies, mosquitoes and sundry other insects.

Discrepancy in Count

Henry, however, has no fault to find with his mansion. "Yessir," he says, "got us four rooms here." The two-room discrepancy between Henry's account and mine is due to a rough board lean-to slapped against the back of his shack and bisected by a rough board partition. In one-half of the place is a rather hopeless stove where Mrs. Williams does her cooking. At that she's far better off than scores of her neighbors up and down the road. They do their cooking in an open fireplace — with a kettle for collards or turnip greens, a skillet for fat-back and the corn pone baked in the ashes.

Henry has been a share-cropper for 29 years, he tells me.

"You been making any money these few years back with cotton and peanuts bringing big prices?" I ask him.

"You don't make any money share-croppin'," he replies, surprised at the question. "Some years you get some cash in the fall. Bad years you jest go over to the next year."

Five Years His Record

Henry, like most share-croppers, admits that he "keeps movin'" in a so-far futile effort to do better for himself. Five years was the longest he ever worked on one plantation in his 29 years of share-cropping.

In 1946, he says, he "made" 14 bales of cotton and six and one half tons of peanuts. That year "The Man" (the landlord) gave him \$800 cash.

Last year, 1947, he made 17 bales of cotton and 10 tons of peanuts. Despite bigger crops and equal if not higher prices, that year "The Man" gave him \$700. Between crops he lives out of the commissary maintained by "The Man."

Cotton last year brought about \$200 a bale, with the seed, and peanuts sold at \$200 a ton. That would be \$3,400 for Henry's cotton and around \$2,000 for the peanuts -- \$5,400 in all with Henry getting half of it or \$2,700. Of course out of that \$2,700 comes tractor hire, if "The Man" supplies a tractor, fertilizer, and Henry's commissary bill. But \$2,000 for that seems just a little high. Even Henry seems to think so. Now, it could be that the \$700 that Henry got was a perfectly fair settlement. Point is that Henry doesn't know, I certainly don't know -- nobody in the whole wide world knows except "The Man."

Never Sells Own Produce

In all his share-cropping, Henry has never seen any kind of an account of his operations. "The Man" never gives him a statement -- no figures -- just hands him a check or a bundle of cash. Henry never has had a bill or account of his purchases at the commissary. He has never known what his cotton or corn or peanuts sold for. Technically, half the crop he raises is his. But he never has sold an ounce of cotton or a single peanut.

Here is the pattern throughout the South.

Every Negro knows it and accepts it. It's a custom, a tradition, just as basic as Jim Crow. No Negro dares buck the system. Everywhere I went, and I talked with at least a score of sharecroppers, I heard the same expression:

"If you go to figure behind The Man you're gonna git trouble." For that matter every Negro share-cropper I talked to admitted that he couldn't "figure." "The Man jes' calls it off," they told me, each with a wry smile.

Unable to "Figure"

Up in Macon county Henry Mann farms 22 acres of "The Man's" plantation. Last year he raised two tons of peanuts and 11 bales of cotton. At \$200 a bale and ton that would have been \$2,600 -- Henry's share \$1,300 -- less, of course, his "furnish" and other expenses. He got \$242 cash. Shamefacedly he admits he can't "figure." He wouldn't "figure behind 'The Man' " anyway. Year before, he says, he made only seven bales and a ton and a half of peanuts. He had a hospital bill to come out of his share and wound up with \$30 cash for his year's work. But Henry has a garden of his own and raises a few hogs each year. Apparently he's convinced he is doing all right for himself.

On many plantations "The Man" won't waste good cotton land in gardens for his croppers, so cotton grows "right up to the front door and right up to the back door." On many other plantations "The Man" puts in a big patch of collards and turnips and other garden truck and assigns a couple of hands to take care of it. The share-croppers then buy it from "The Man." Every stem of collards they eat is charged against them on the bill they never see.

Well it's no use cluttering up the record with statistics. The story runs like that all over the South. It could be that the share-croppers I happened to strike were all worthless, lazy or liars. But in county after county in the plantation country of three states, I talked to Negro business men, professional men, undertakers, now and then a Negro farm agent. Certainly they know the sharecropping system and the black men at the bottom who produce the cotton and the peanuts and the corn. Not one of them but insisted that cheating a sharecropper out of his eye teeth was accepted and standard practice. Every one of them backed up his belief with instance after instance. I didn't bother taking notes. I'd talked with share-croppers myself.

This share-cropping in the South is grand larceny on a grand scale. And the Negro is the victim.