

Race and the Remaking of the Rural South: Delta Cooperative Farm  
and Providence Farm in Jim Crow-Era Mississippi

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## ABSTRACT

ROBERT HUNT FERGUSON: Race and the Remaking of the Rural South: Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm in Jim Crow-era Mississippi  
(Under the direction of W. Fitzhugh Brundage)

Delta Cooperative Farm (1936-1942) and Providence Farm (1938-1956) were intentional communities in rural Mississippi that drew on Christian socialism, cooperative communalism, and social egalitarianism to enact progressive and leftist challenges to the South's racial hierarchy and labor practices. This dissertation demonstrates that even in the "closed society" that Mississippi represented, the rural poor and their leftist allies could challenge hegemonic social structures by employing a cooperative economy, operating a desegregated health clinic, holding interracial church and union meetings, and successfully managing a cooperative credit union. For twenty years, the farms were a beacon of hope and safe haven for southerners engaged in racial amelioration, labor reform, and black self-help. By the mid 1950s, however, the armies of massive resistance forced the closing of the remaining farm while internal racial tension bubbled to the surface among farm residents. The story of Delta and Providence is a measure of the possibilities for and obstacles to transformative change in the rural South during the mid-twentieth century.

*Race and the Rural South* also places Delta and Providence within the context of the major social and economic changes taking place in the rural South from the Great Depression, through World War II, and into the early years of the classic phase of the civil rights movement. Dynamic labor activism in the 1930s rural South abated during

the war years when agriculture further mechanized and many dirt farmers moved off the land and into factories. Civil rights activism, intimately entwined with labor unionism in the 1930s, was grounded in interracialism—black and white activists tackling their problems together—but World War II also changed this dynamic as whites left the farms. After World War II, African Americans living at Providence deliberately engaged in black self-help endeavors, using the farm as a sort of “free space” to carry out their visions for a democratic society. In these ways, Delta and Providence farms were representative of a rapidly changing region.

For Charlie and Annadelle June

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I have spent most of the last six years thinking and writing about intentional communities. During that time I was able to reflect fondly on the communities that supported me while in Chapel Hill. My graduate school colleagues—Randy Browne, Brandon Byrd, Catherine Conner, Christopher Fowler, Jonathan Hancock, Lance Lagroue, Liz Lundeen, Kelly Morrow, Brad Proctor, Rob Shapard, Jessie Wilkerson, and David Williard—provided a sense of community that spilled beyond Hamilton Hall. Between attending conferences, organizing working groups, and preparing for interviews, we found time to play soccer and pick-up basketball, go to shows at the Cat's Cradle, and help North Carolina elect Barack Obama in 2008.

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When I asked Anna Krome-Lukens to proofread a draft of my entire dissertation at the eleventh hour, she enlisted her mother, Elizabeth Krome, and both cheerfully went about the task. I am lucky to have Anna as a colleague and friend.



The first friend I made at UNC was Katy Simpson Smith. I believe Katy would have rather kept to herself while she completed the Ph.D., but she has benevolently endured my friendship over the years. Aside from one lunch at Two Sisters in Jackson, Mississippi when she casually told me what my dissertation was about before I had a clue, we spent most of our time together talking about anything other than our projects—which is probably why we’ve remained close friends.

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come often enough. During my third year in the program, my brothers and I took a trip to Alaska. Al, Marty, and I have enough stories from that trip to fill several dissertations. I have the good fortune of not only enjoying my brothers' company, but looking up to them as well. It helps that they have increased the number of fun family members in Jennifer, Hunter, and Jessie. My grandmother, Delle Martin, has supported me in many ways for longer than I can remember. Her stories about her own history continue to captivate me as much as any book. My parents, George and Liz Ferguson, have given freely of their modest resources to ensure that I followed my career path. They first instilled a love of history in me and have seen my education to fruition. No acknowledgements can express my gratitude.

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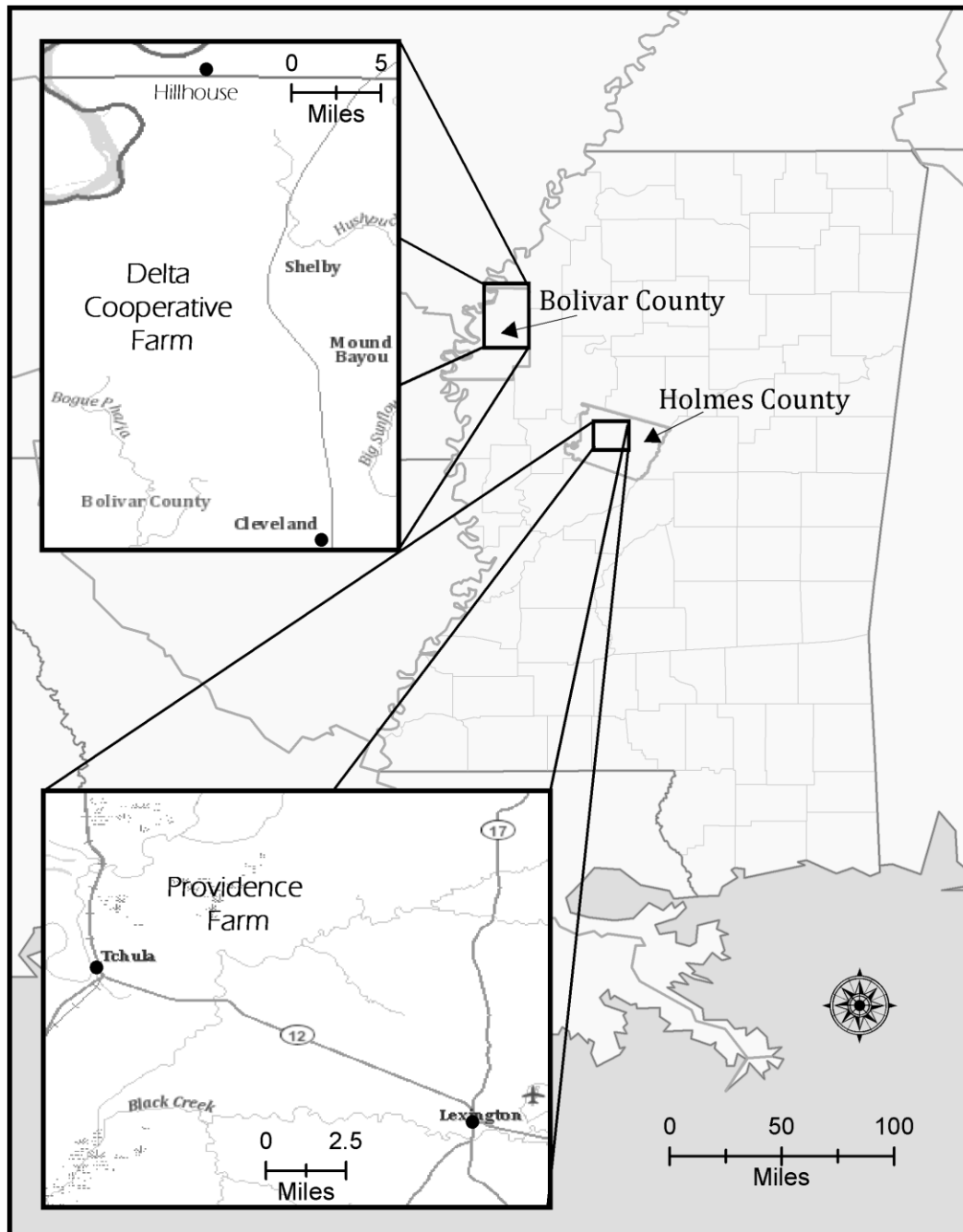
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AEC	A. Eugene Cox Collection, Mississippi State University
GSE	George Sherwood Eddy Papers, Yale Divinity School Special
JDC	Jerry Dallas Delta Farm Cooperative Collection, Delta State University
MDAH	Mississippi Department of Archives and History
MVC	Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill
STFU	Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers

Figure 1: Map of Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm, Mississippi



## Introduction

### Race and the Rural South from the Great Depression to the Civil Rights Movement

For twenty years during the age of segregation, a collective effort in building the beloved community through interracial cooperation and African American self-help endured in the Deep South. Two interracial cooperative farming communities, measuring approximately three thousand acres each, began in rural Mississippi in 1936 during the auspicious days of the New Deal and ended in 1956 during the white backlash to the mounting civil rights movement.

Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm sprouted in the most unlikely of landscapes—the Mississippi Delta, a place that is as much myth as it is reality. Eulogized in song, prose, and poetry, made romantic or grotesque by film and fiction, the alluvial plain running south from Memphis, Tennessee to Vicksburg, Mississippi, has been called the “the most southern place on earth.” Yet the human struggles that took place in the Mississippi Delta from the Civil War to the civil rights movement were inseparable from national conflicts and anxieties. America’s contests over race, labor, and religion played out in dramatic events in the Delta in ways that often revealed as much about the rest of the nation as about Mississippi. Civil rights activists often used Mississippi as a litmus test for the whole country. Activists believed that if they

ameliorated race relations and rendered labor less exploitative in Mississippi, the same changes could be accomplished anywhere in the country.<sup>1</sup>

A close examination of the two decades in which Delta and Providence farms existed, reveals that the farms represented a moment of imagined possibility when heady ideas rooted in community organizing, socialism and Christian realism were put into practice. The political and social climate of the Depression, New Deal, and World War II fostered opportunities for the rural poor to attain some economic and social autonomy. In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the rural poor were engaged in struggles that began as Jeffersonian dreams of agrarian subsistence and economic stability but evolved into a battle for civil rights and full participation in the democratic process. These struggles took many forms, communitarian cooperative farms among them. The liminal space created by the Depression and the New Deal made all of this possible, for a moment.

Rural southerners took part in a small revolution in race relations and economic self-sufficiency in the heart of the plantation South. Sharecroppers escaping the nightmare of plantation labor and activists committed to uplifting the sharecropper built two farming communities from the ground up. Progressive reformers designed these communities, carved out of the Mississippi Delta, to provide social and economic relief for landless farmers. They were organized by an alliance of the rural poor, labor unionists, socialists, and Christian missionaries who broke ground at Delta Cooperative Farm in 1936 and immediately began relocating two dozen sharecropping families from Arkansas into Mississippi. Over the next twenty years, Delta and Providence farms changed with shifting race relations and agricultural practices, as the civil rights

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<sup>1</sup> See James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).



movement picked up steam, southern agriculture mechanized, and the southern economy modernized. Interracialism—black and white sharecroppers addressing their needs together—was a founding principle of this cooperative movement. This principle took various forms throughout the life of the farms. In the early 1940s, Delta Cooperative Farm closed and all operations were moved to Providence Farm. In 1956, the white Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan forced the effective closing of the community at Providence. The experiment in Mississippi was short-lived, but significant for its goals.

Labor and civil rights activities in the Deep South had long been dangerous undertakings. A 1919 massacre in Phillips County, Arkansas—only a few miles from the Mississippi border—served as a chilling notice of how far white supremacists in the Delta would go to keep Jim Crow and plantation labor intact. World War I put all European cotton production on hold while American cotton farmers supplied the world with materials needed for the war effort. To share in the higher prices fetched by wartime cotton production, African American sharecroppers in and around the community of Elaine, Arkansas joined the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America in an attempt to improve their bargaining power. Before the operation could gather momentum, white planters broke up sharecroppers' meetings. After several white Phillips County residents exchanged fire with black guards outside a union meeting, deputized planters and federal troops fresh from the trenches of western Europe roamed the county's towns and countryside looking for "insurrectionists" and engaging in bloody standoffs. Black and white veterans on both sides of the massacre remembered those events fifteen years later when the new Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) set to

work organizing in Arkansas. Throughout the Delta, labor and civil rights organizing was perilous business.<sup>2</sup>

Delta Cooperative Farm sat only fifty miles across the river from Elaine but seemed a world away from the region's violent past. In Mississippi, the colossal, meandering Mississippi River forms the Delta's border to the west while dramatic bluffs and the Yazoo River mark its boundary to the east. Beyond the eastern edge of the Mississippi Delta, topographical maps depict ridges, river basins, and rolling hills. On the same maps, the geography of the Delta, in comparison, is implausibly flat, with no hint of the slightest crests or valleys. The soil, though rich from sediment deposited by flooding, challenged cultivators with its tendency to become viscous in the rainy season and concrete-hard during droughts.

In 1936, as now, Highway 61 ran north through Vicksburg, Cleveland, and Clarksdale before reaching the sprawl of Memphis. Between hamlets like Panther Burn, Arcola, and Alligator, Route 61 often seemed as desolate as a desert highway. Sharecropper shacks and unadorned churches dotted the landscape. "These people must have great Faith in the Lord," noted one traveler from the North, "because you experience the feeling that the least sign of a breeze might topple the churches over. I believe the expression 'impending Heaven' might aptly be applied here." Up around Bobo, Mississippi, travelers turned west from the highway and drove directly toward the Mississippi River, bounded by raised levees that could easily be seen from a distance of

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<sup>2</sup> James D. Ross, Jr., "'I Ain't Got No Home In This World': The Rise and Fall of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in Arkansas" (PhD diss., Auburn University, 2004), 22-23; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 75-109; Grif Stockley, *Ruled by Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas from Slavery to the Present* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 157-179; Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 186-187.

miles if not for the lush cypress, sycamore, pecan, highwood, ash, elm, oak, and gum trees that choked the roadside. In Rena Laura, travelers turned southward for a few miles before reaching a place in the road where the Mississippi River bowed toward Highway 1, just over the Bolivar County line near the tiny Hillhouse township. It was here that Presbyterian missionary and theologian Sherwood Eddy purchased a 2,138 acre tract of land that would become Delta Cooperative, a haven for destitute sharecroppers. On Eddy's farm, the experiences of rural southerners reflected a nation and a region undergoing rapid and profound change in race and labor relations, industry, and economy. When Delta Farm's land and operations did not pan out as organizers hoped, farm manager Sam Franklin found another tract of land one hundred miles southeast of Bolivar County where the alluvial dirt of the Delta meets the bluffs of the Mississippi hill country. Christened Providence, residents and staff started over with a revised vision of the beloved community that paralleled the grassroots community-based activism of the 1940s and 1950s civil rights movement.<sup>3</sup>

As the men and women at Delta and Providence faced the anxiety of the Great Depression, the initial panic and subsequent mobilization of World War II, and the turmoil of the civil rights movement, they forged a path that often paralleled and occasionally took the vanguard in post World War II struggles of working class and minority Americans to attain the rights of full citizenship. Their foremost aim, however, was to destroy sharecropping—a form of labor organization that kept white planters atop an oppressive and exploitative economic hierarchy.

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<sup>3</sup> Delta Cooperative Farm Records, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWherter Library, University of Memphis; From Lindsay Hail to Edna Voss, 29 December 1936, Folder 20, in the Delta and Providence Farms Papers #3474, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Sharecropping replaced slavery as the main mode of labor in the rural South after the Civil War. It solidified a black underclass, provided white plantation owners with a labor force, and laid the groundwork for its wretched sibling, Jim Crow. Under the sharecropping arrangement, landowners rented small farms to poor white and black families and advanced them loans in the form of seeds, tools, and other supplies they needed to get through the year. Sharecropping families, in turn, secured those loans by giving the landowners a lien on their crops. When harvest time came, landowners had first claim on production. When the crops were sold at market, sharecroppers had to pay off the landowners for the loans on seed and supplies. Sharecropping families pocketed whatever profit was left—which often added up to very little. Until sharecroppers settled all their debts, landowners owned everything. As a result, sharecroppers rarely saved enough money to purchase their own land. Because of plantation agriculture, the post-slavery dream of freedom and white hopes of subsistence farming turned into a nightmarish cycle of poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Rural black and white workers had attempted to fight agrarian exploitation before the 1930s. Southerners participated in various biracial political movements in the years between Reconstruction and the solidification of Jim Crow at the turn of the century. The Readjuster Movement in Virginia, the national Populist movement, and the fusionist alliance among white Populists and black Republicans in North Carolina were, for a time, viable movements aimed at creating biracial approaches to government. Biracial labor

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the development of sharecropping, see Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1996); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Pete Daniel, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984).

activism also gained support in various locales. As labor historians have noted, lumbermen and dock workers took part in pragmatic biracial alliances before the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

The 1930s created another moment suited for biracial cooperation and labor unionism. This time, labor union organizers had national support. In 1919, the Elaine Massacre was portrayed in the national press as a socialist uprising by “well drilled and armed” blacks. Fifteen years later, the onset of the Depression focused the nation’s sympathetic attention on poverty and labor. Hired by the Roosevelt administration to evoke compassion, photographers like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans plied their trade around the region, taking pictures that would become iconic. Lange visited Delta Cooperative Farm in 1936 and photographed men working in the fields, a black STFU organizer, and a biracial Fourth of July picnic. Mostly, though, Lange photographed the ugly side of the 1930s. Through these photographs, the rural Southerner became the hollow-eyed human face of the Depression. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal zeroed in on those faces, and many government programs attempted to alleviate the gut-wrenching poverty experienced by rural southerners. If the New Deal could uplift the South, it could surely raise the entire nation out of ruin.<sup>6</sup>

This national attention gave the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union—a biracial union formed by socialists in Tyronza, Arkansas—a profile that previous rural labor unions in the South lacked. Rural Americans, particularly sharecroppers, were hit hardest

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<sup>5</sup> For more on interracial political alliances and interracial unionism, see Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998); Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Woodruff, *American Congo*, 91.

by the Great Depression. Left behind by the prosperous 1920s, already struggling dirt farmers suffered from falling crop prices. As more and more farmers were evicted from the land, make-shift communities sprang up all over the rural and urban United States. Many large farms went into debt and foreclosed while sharecroppers and tenant farmers spiraled further into poverty and malnutrition. Attitudes toward labor changed dramatically during the 1930s and 1940s, although southern planters never fully accepted unionization of their laborers. Planters attempted to maintain their labor force through violence and other forms of intimidation. For a time, though, the STFU was able to take advantage of national sympathy for the sharecropper. New Deal liberals, who knew that the Agricultural Adjustment Act's stipulation of removing land from production to stabilize prices would hurt sharecroppers, debated the fate of landless farmers. Socialist sharecroppers in Arkansas seized the moment, formed the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, staged roadside pickets, and filed lawsuits on behalf of their members.

As the old labor and racial systems of the rural South further crumbled, cooperative models of labor and planned communities were tested by groups as disparate as religiously-motivated utopian colonists and the federal government's Resettlement Administration, an umbrella bureaucratic program that placed the government in the role of landlord over rural agriculturalists in communities throughout the country. After all, Delta Cooperative Farm was only a few miles from the Dixie Plantation, a Resettlement Administration colony and Providence Farm shared Holmes County with an all-black cooperative community name Mileston that later led the way in organizing Holmes County civil rights activists.

Though ubiquitous in the 1930s, cooperative labor communities were not foregone conclusions for fixing the country's economic woes. In the United States, where the national ethos of rugged individualism stood in stark contrast to communitarian-style cooperation, planned communities faced outside ambivalence and internal cleavages. Even at Delta and Providence, collective labor often proved as untenable as sharecropping. Unhappy with their meager dividends, many cooperative members complained to the trustees or left the endeavor completely. Although the moment was rife with hope that the farms would usher in a new kind of collective labor in the rural South, the difficulties of interracial, socialized labor presented at Delta and Providence proved vexing.

Still, thousands of poor black and white southerners took advantage of the opportunities that New Deal programs offered. Early in the Depression, even southern politicians apprehensive of federal intervention were convinced that their constituents needed help. Increased federal presence in public programs around the South meant a liberalization of social policies that the South had only glimpsed a few times in its history. While some of the rural poor found employment in Roosevelt's relief programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corp, others found aid in privately funded endeavors, like Delta and Providence, many of which proposed to go further in their social agendas than had the federal government. The Resettlement Administration, for example, refused to integrate its communities, while Delta and Providence were open to both black and white residents.

The Depression and the New Deal were not the only influences on how the rural southerners' lives were changing. World War II also marked changes in southern

society. Liberal New Deal initiatives and African Americans' World War II-era "Double V" campaign to rid the world of fascism and America of white supremacy exposed cracks in Jim Crow. Federal government intervention, black veterans returning from Europe, an increase in wage labor, and more poor Americans advocating for their economic and civil rights meant that the rural South was a society on the brink of upheaval. In this climate, grassroots movements such as Alabama's communist Sharecropper's Union and the socialist-inspired Southern Tenant Farmers' Union garnered support from non-southerners and ate away at the remaining vestiges of the post Civil War South's economic, labor, political, and racial structures.

Religion also played important roles in turning rural southern society on its head. Christianity took on a particularly activist tone in the 1930s as labor unionists modeled their rallies after spiritual revivals. At Delta and Providence, residents approached their day-to-day interactions through a mixture of socialist ideology and what Reinhold Niebuhr called "Christian Realism." This mixture produced a type of religious activism that proved to be a precursor to Liberation Theology later put into practice during the Civil Rights Movement and other movements around the world.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, plantation agriculture experienced its greatest transformation since Reconstruction. Almost as soon as Delta Cooperative was established, large-scale cooperative farming became obsolete in the face of changing agricultural production. As a result, the farm had to change with the times or face failure. The most tangible change occurred in the stock and equipment used for plowing, tilling, and harvesting. Both mule and man hours were reduced in the cotton South beginning in the 1930s. Although much

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<sup>7</sup> For the difference between the Social Gospel, Christian Realism, neo-orthodoxy, and Liberation Theology, see Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).



of the American South did not tractorize as rapidly as the rest of the nation, the Mississippi Delta's flat geography and large plantations encouraged many farmers to switch from mules to tractors before World War II. Not only did the number of mules decrease in the Delta, but so too did the number of farmhands needed to work a given patch of land. According to historian George B. Ellenberg, many large plantation owners were attracted to the tractor for what it saved them in the long run. "In the Delta region of Mississippi," explains Ellenberg, "preparing and planting a one-acre cotton field required 9.3 man-hours and 20.4 mule hours." Mechanization reduced those hours to "4.9 man-hours and 3.3 tractor hours." In addition, the federal government pushed plantation owners to transition from sharecropping to wage labor, making human labor more expensive. In sum, with tractors, fewer farmers were needed to work the land and a plantation-sized cooperative employing hundreds of individuals became obsolete.<sup>8</sup>

Before World War II, cooperators at Delta used both mules and tractors, and even tested one of the first models of the mechanical cotton picker. As wartime needs increased demands for efficiency and food, farms across the country used more and more machines. Coupled with an increase in urban jobs in the war industry, Americans left the farm in record numbers. Given the drastic changes in mechanization and immigration, a large-scale cooperative that employed a hundred or more farmhands was simply unsustainable. Although many observers figured that rural America would return to mixing stock use with machine use after the war, the economy continued to boom, and by the 1950s tractors had almost completely replaced mules and displaced untold numbers of

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<sup>8</sup> George B. Ellenberg, *Mule South to Tractor South: Mules, Machines, and the Transformation of the Cotton South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 105; Wright, *Old South, New South*, 198-238.

farmhands from the land. After all operations at Delta Cooperative were moved to Providence Farm, the endeavor only faintly resembled a cooperative, and the inhabitants, while still spending some time engaged in the intricacies of large-scale agriculture, now focused on issues that would mark the post-World War II South for African Americans: economics, education, health, and civil rights. The mechanization and labor changes that took place at Delta and Providence resembled those taking place across the rural South.<sup>9</sup>

Mechanization forced many rural southerners to modify their interactions with the land and with each other. As the practice of sharecropping came under attack, as blacks joined the Great Migration, and as whites found work in the war industry, race and labor relations were altered to the point that they challenged the southern social stratification. Those engaged in opposing the social status quo experienced backlashes from southerners entrenched at the top. Planters and their allies based their hierarchy on white supremacy, plantation agriculture, and a capitalist, micro-level view of core-periphery exploitation. Simply put, planters exploited the labor of the poor and the resources of their region to line their own pockets. In the minds of plantation owners, the very presence of Delta and Providence farms, with black and white sharecroppers making dividends off of what they grew and sold, threatened to overturn white planter hegemony in the rural South.<sup>10</sup>

Jim Crow, however, was not a static phenomenon nor did it operate the same way from locale to locale. The day-to-day race relations at Delta and Providence demonstrated this fact. The New Deal opened possibilities for cross-racial cooperation.

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<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Old South, New South*, 198-238.

<sup>10</sup> For a straightforward discussion of the core-periphery model and its theoretical developments, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University, 2004).

World War II, while empowering the struggle for black equality, left Providence Cooperative Farm as an almost exclusively black endeavor as whites left for jobs in the war industry. But, in an ironic and tragic twist, the backlash to the civil rights movement hindered black self-help and pressured the farm to close.

The story of Delta and Providence cooperative farms underscore how the implementation of egalitarian ideologies was difficult to put into practice in the rural South. White managers, volunteers, and trustees arrived at Delta as idealistic and enthusiastic activists. Soon, however, the harsh realities of life in the rural South fueled animosities and divisions that trumped philosophies of cross-racial and cross-class solidarity. Given the many obstacles they faced, however, the simple fact that the cooperative farms existed at all was extraordinary.

## **HISTORIOGRAPHY & THEORY**

Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm were two examples of what historians have called the “other South.” As John Egerton, Jacquelyn Hall, Robin D.G. Kelley, Robert Korstad, Glenda Gilmore and others have demonstrated, political radicals, labor unionists, agrarian reformers, and hosts of southerners dissatisfied with the status quo possessed bold visions for the South that were consonant with a truly democratic society. The other South, or the “countercultural South,” as Kirby termed it, was very real. It existed alongside demagogues and segregationists. But southerners who made up the other South were different—they were leftist and often intensely radical. Although cooperative members at Delta and Providence steered clear of calling themselves

“radical,” they were living and working on a socialist inspired interracial farm in Mississippi. They embodied the radical essence of the other South.<sup>11</sup>

Glenda Gilmore’s *Defying Dixie* makes the case for how radical southerners and their northern allies laid the groundwork for the civil rights movement in the half century before the 1950s. Although many of the individuals involved with Delta and Providence tackled economic and racial disparity in different ways than, for example, Frank Porter Graham or Pauli Murray, their mere presence in the South indicates that the radical roots of the civil rights movement ran deep into the southern countryside. As the first manager at Delta, Sam Franklin, recalled years later, the endeavor was as much about economic parity as it was about racial equality. Like most early struggles for civil rights, class-based coalitions challenged the economic status quo. The strongest proof that the cooperatives were important salvos in the civil rights struggle can be found in the fervor with which the Citizens’ Council and the Ku Klux Klan dogged the inhabitants of Providence. Outsiders understood that Providence challenged the economic and racial supremacy of whites. Additionally, Fanny Booker and several of the African American

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<sup>11</sup> For works on the “other South” see Pippa Holloway, ed., *Other Souths: Diversity and Difference in the U.S. South, Reconstruction to the Present* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: the Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008); Jack Temple Kirby, *The Countercultural South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Robert F. Martin, *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904-1977* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer & Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism*; Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Robert Rogers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Laurie Boush Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

farmers who stayed at Providence after 1956 became civil rights activists due to their experiences on the farm. While Gilmore's narrative suggests how early struggles and successes softened the ground for future activists and victories, the fate of Delta and Providence demonstrated both the need for and the barriers to starting a massive reform movement in rural America.<sup>12</sup>

The geographical location of Delta and Providence also played important roles in the endeavors' history. The farms were in the rural South, not the relative safety of college-towns or urban areas. As Mark Schultz has pointed out, race operated differently in the Jim Crow-era rural South. Racial relationships were more fluid and malleable in the rural South where strict Jim Crow laws were not as enforceable or necessary for the maintenance of white supremacy as they were in New South cities. Cooperation across racial lines occurred by virtue of the fact that rural Americans had to rely on their neighbors to make it through illnesses, difficult harvesting seasons, or simply to borrow tools—what Schultz calls “personalism” between black and white neighbors. Racial hierarchies still remained, but it was a far different system than in the town and urban South. The relative fluidity of race in the rural South operated in similar ways at Delta and Providence.<sup>13</sup>

The “other South” met the rural South at Delta and Providence farms. From 1936 to 1956, hundreds of ex-sharecroppers and dozens of labor unionists, Christian missionaries, and socialist activists embarked on a path that few Americans chose. At the time, the possibilities were endless and the individuals were hopeful that their

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<sup>12</sup> Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 247-296.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 7.

communitarian vision for the rural South would spark new possibilities in ameliorating race relations, modernizing labor practices, instilling Christian socialism, and socializing the southern economy. The moment, born from the despair of the Great Depression, teemed with optimism.

The history of Delta and Providence also engages the claims made by James Cobb, David Goldfield, Morton Sosna, Bruce Schulman, and others that World War II marked a major shift in southern society—that the war’s “social, economic, and political consequences” so drastically shook the region that it produced a new society. Most of these historians focus on how the South modernized and industrialized, or how southerners moved from the rural South to urban locales. But what of the vast areas that remained rural? What of the southerners who stayed put in the rural South? Did rural southerners approach their daily lives differently before and after World War II? At Delta and Providence farms, and throughout much of the rural South, race, religion, labor, and agriculture were avenues through which a new rural South emerged similar to but subtly different from the region before World War II.<sup>14</sup>

The experiences on the cooperative farms in Mississippi also underscore the challenges of creating intentional communitarian spaces in any time or place. At Delta and Providence, the collective spaces were organized to promote social and economic equality. Similar spaces occurred in pockets throughout the Jim Crow South, challenging the color line and infuriating the arbiters of white supremacy. The aim of the founders of

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<sup>14</sup> Neil R. McMillen, ed., *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), xiv; For World War II as southern watershed, see James C. Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

Delta and Providence farms was to encourage interracial cooperation that moved beyond casual interaction and pushed for an egalitarian and shared community in the fields, worship services, and other day-to-day activities, emancipating poor southerners from the shackles of white supremacy.

At Delta Cooperative Farm, private assumptions about race by ex-sharecroppers, for instance, were now necessarily opinions that were aired in public forums, like cooperative council meetings or collective work groups. The collective space of sharing church services with blacks or taking instructions from them in the fields now confronted whites who before had been privately racist. As W. Fitzhugh Brundage points out in his work on southern historical memory, controlling physical space is essential to shaping identity. The physical space of the cooperatives, however, was collective and interracial and meant to delegitimize white supremacy. Within this collective space, negotiations were necessary to reconcile the private, individual space with public interactions. Public space and private space were often at odds on the cooperative farms, particularly when racial and class lines were at stake. Black and white sharecroppers and paternalistic employees had to share the public space, but many privately held onto their ideas of inferiority. Put another way, collective space at the farms was often where the public and private converged—sometimes with deleterious results.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, many black cooperators now felt the liberty to publicly express their views on race and oppression that before had been private. In his work on Norfolk, Virginia, Earl Lewis argues that carving out public and psychic spaces for African Americans translated into tangible political power. When operations moved to

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<sup>15</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 6-8.

Providence and residents transitioned from a cooperative model to a model of black self-help, African Americans used the new farm as a base for challenging Jim Crow—holding black minister retreats, college preparatory programs, and health initiatives. Conversely, residents at Providence had to negotiate the spaces carved out for interracial cooperation or black self-help with those neighbors who opposed them. The white racists who swelled the ranks of the Citizens' Councils and the Ku Klux Klan were at loggerheads with the men and women at Delta and Providence farms. By the mid 1950s, the opposition had consolidated power to such an extent that it became impossible for Providence Farm to function as a viable, activist community.<sup>16</sup>

Delta and Providence allowed whites and blacks the liberty to imagine and, to an important extent, realize changes in southern society. Sara Evans and Harry Boyte argue that negotiated, collective spaces, what they term “free spaces,” are essential to furthering ideas of democracy, political action, empowerment, and citizenship. Specifically, Evans and Boyte assert that African Americans, women, and laboring classes developed nascent notions of American democracy and citizenship through these spaces. Through voter drives, health initiatives, and educational institutes, blacks at Providence used the physical and collective space of the cooperative for empowerment.<sup>17</sup>

Delta and Providence were liminal spaces of leftist reform for the rural South's poor in the often bleak Jim Crow era. Liminal space signifies a threshold between the old and the unexplored—the possible, where boundaries dissolve and historical actors depart into new territory. This space can be psychological or physical. In the case of Delta and

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<sup>16</sup> Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 70-88.

<sup>17</sup> Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 182-202.



Providence farms and the ex-sharecroppers who lived there, it was both. In the psychological sense, the farms helped ex-sharecroppers realize changes in social and economic structures that facilitated fuller expressions of their humanity. Additionally, the cooperative residents were “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification.” On the farms, they were no longer sharecroppers, nor tenants, nor “niggers,” nor “crackers.” They were something new. They were now “cooperators” or “members” of something ambiguous—an ill-defined relationship that would plague the endeavor from the outset. Divested of previous titles, the cooperators’ new positions and classifications were uncertain.<sup>18</sup>

The physical spaces at Delta and Providence were liminal because the community store, the church, the medical clinic, dairy co-op, and the fields were all locations on the farms where Mississippi’s social or economic hierarchies were challenged. The cooperative farms were communities on the fringe, separated from the mainstream, which sought to change southern, and ultimately American, society from the margins. By incorporating the farms’ four tenets in daily interactions, ex-sharecroppers sought to cooperate equally in labor and production, socializing the economy, enacting egalitarian race relations, and practicing Christian Socialism. Despite many limitations, Delta and Providence provided opportunities for southerners, particularly black southerners, to access avenues for racial and economic equality through collective space. Jim Crow-era Mississippi is not often thought of as a region of opportunity or possibility for poor agrarians. Viewing Delta and Providence cooperative farms as liminal spaces, however,

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Witter Turner *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 232.

allows a reconsideration of the emergence of the modern South, forged on the fringes of American society.<sup>19</sup>

## **CHAPTER ORGANIZATION**

The ensuing five chapters relate a chronological narrative of the farms while weaving them into national events and trends. I have chosen this method because Delta and Providence farms can best be told in a linear fashion, as a story of hope, death, and rebirth on southern soil.

I divide the events at Delta and Providence cooperative farms into three periods: the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-war civil rights era. Chapter One addresses the ideological antecedents of Delta Cooperative Farm. This chapter deals specifically with establishing the major themes of the dissertation, tracing the farms' origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and bringing them up to the mid-1930s. I place the cooperative farms in geographical, political, ideological, and temporal contexts and argue that these communities represented a revolutionary moment in southern history that emerged during the Great Depression. The convergence of socialism, democratic ideals, social Christianity, and the New Deal made the era seem ground-breaking. The radical 1930s opened new avenues for biracial cooperation in achieving economic, labor, and civil rights. I argue that the liberal tendencies of the New Deal and the possibility that American infrastructure could be remade in the wake of economic devastation enabled white and black southerners to pursue a leftist agenda that had heretofore gained little traction. Agricultural communities like the ones found at Delta and Providence farms in Mississippi began in the 1930s as a result of the damage caused by the Agricultural

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Adjustment Administration (AAA) upon the South's sharecroppers. The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) emerged as a way for sharecroppers to combat the AAA and plantation labor. This chapter uses three characters important to Delta and Providence to explain the main factors at work in the creation of the cooperative farms. William R. Amberson, a physiologist at the University of Tennessee Medical School in Memphis, a member of the American Socialist Party, an advisor to the STFU, and the Tennessee secretary of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought socialism and rural labor organizing to early discussions of cooperatives. Sherwood Eddy, a theologian, northerner, prolific author, and Christian missionary with socialist leanings entered the discussion to start a farmers' cooperative through his devout belief in practical Christianity and service to the world's poor. Sam H. Franklin, a protégé of Eddy, native of rural Tennessee, a missionary, activist, and a staunch believer in reforming the southern agricultural system of sharecropping through Christian cooperation, offered first-hand knowledge of cooperative models that would eventually help Delta Cooperative Farm get underway. These men and their domineering personalities represented various strands of Social Christian theology and socialist ideology that sought to build egalitarian economic and social communities in the South. These communities, consisting of evicted tenant farmers, ostensibly transcended the color barrier and directly confronted the South's twin dilemmas: poverty and race.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter Two begins with the founding of Delta Cooperative Farm in 1936 in Bolivar County, Mississippi. This chapter establishes the complicated efforts of both the organizers and the laboring tenants to launch a biracial agricultural community. I explore

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<sup>20</sup> See Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

the relationship among organizational leadership, on-the-ground organizers, and local people; the challenges of biracial organizing; the navigation of local power brokers; tension between local people and outsiders; and the promises and pitfalls of biracial cooperation and labor reform in the Jim Crow South that pushed for an egalitarian and shared community. The agrarian inhabitants had to negotiate, on their own terms, the ideological and philosophical intentions of Delta's and Providence's organizers. In particular this chapter focuses on the day-to-day lives of black and white sharecroppers living cheek by jowl while establishing a cooperative community in the Deep South.

Chapter Three chronicles the decline of Delta Cooperative Farm. In 1938, things began to fall apart at Delta. This chapter outlines the financial and ideological reasons why the endeavor at Delta closed in 1942. Also in 1938, Providence Cooperative Farm emerged in Holmes County, Mississippi under the same leadership. Gradually the managers and trustees moved all operations from Bolivar County to the new site in Holmes County. This chapter will analyze the impact of World War II and increased mechanization on the new farm at Providence. World War II drew many rural whites into the war industry, leaving a largely black population at the cooperatives, and complicating attempts at interracial collectivism. During this time, many members complained of unfair treatment, unequal pay, and racism as the cooperative experienced growing pains and lacked clear leadership. Building on many of the same questions regarding biracial organizing and day-to-day operations at Delta, this chapter will examine how reform at Providence took a different path than the one taken at Delta. The two main tenets at Delta, biracialism and cooperative labor, transformed at Providence. Many of the white farmers moved off the land and mostly black families remained.

Although Providence was technically still a cooperative, in practice residents adapted or compromised much of the original cooperative principles.

Chapter Four focuses on how agriculture and approaches to the land changed dramatically at Providence in these years. As the cotton belt gave way to the Sunbelt in the postwar years, Providence ceased to be a viable agricultural endeavor. Jettisoning a cooperative approach to agriculture also changed the racial make-up of Providence as more whites moved off the farm to seek jobs in the booming industries during and after World War II. Providence turned into a place of black self-help, continuing religious, medical, and educational institutions that focused mainly on African Americans. Following several key characters, including African American resident and educator Fannye Booker, director A. Eugene Cox, and resident physician David Minter, this chapter highlights evolving ideologies of race and cooperative living.

Chapter Five draws on the declassified Mississippi Sovereignty Commission files to demonstrate the deleterious effects of massive resistance on Providence Farm. When the backlash to civil rights movement emerged in Mississippi things changed dramatically for Providence. After *Brown v. Board* brought international headlines from the South, the Emmett Till murder focused the attention expressly on Mississippi. The Ku Klux Klan became a powerful force once again and the white Citizens' Council was created as the unofficial, "civil" arm of the more militant Klan. In many circumstances, these two groups had the full support of local law enforcement. In the weeks following Emmett Till's murder, the Citizen's Council and the Klan in Holmes County turned their anger to the curious farm outside of Tchula. This chapter details the steady decline of the relationship between Providence and the surrounding community. I argue that the

backlash to the civil rights movement and anti-communism made small communities like Providence easy targets for the Citizen's Councils. Although many of the same farmers had successfully overcome the "communist" label years before, now "miscegenation" epithets were hurled with twice as much force. Threats poured in from all over the county, given teeth by the Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan. The Citizens' Council dragged several cooperative members before public meetings to answer to accusations of race-mixing, communism, and civil rights agitation. In 1956, after numerous threats, Eugene Cox and David Minter, the white manager and physician at Providence, gathered their families and left Mississippi. Black farmers and their families, however, continued to live on the Providence parcel long after Cox and Minter left, using the farm as a base for voter registration drives, Head Start programs, and other activities. Additionally, Cox and Minter sustained their relationships with these working families after leaving Mississippi while continuing to advocate for reform of rural labor practices and race relations.

Finally, I offer some tentative conclusions about the meaning of Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm. Though the farms were small and, at times, insular, they were demonstrative of how interracial struggles for human rights changed from the Great Depression to the classic phase of the civil rights movement. I argue that the work that largely ended in 1956 had long-lasting implications in Mississippi and for the former sharecroppers who called Providence home.

## Chapter One

### The South's Twin Dilemmas: Poverty and Race

In 1934, the perennial Socialist Party of America's candidate for President, Norman Thomas, published a pamphlet titled "The Plight of the Share-Cropper." Thomas, compelled by his affection for the working classes and having recently returned from a trip through the South where he saw the destitution firsthand, called sharecroppers the "most truly forgotten" Americans. To rectify this problem, Thomas set about familiarizing his reader with sharecropping system, the sharecropper, and New Deal programs that worsened the situation for many southern sharecroppers. The pamphlet was a tour de force, establishing the sharecropper in stark tones—"a man who raises cotton but cannot possibly afford proper underclothes for his children or sheets and towels for the family." Once Thomas established the picture of Americans living in the direst of situations, he turned his attention to eviscerating southern landlords and critiquing the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Thomas, a Presbyterian minister who espoused the social gospel, called landlords no better than slave owners of the antebellum South and labeled administrators in the AAA as dishonest.<sup>1</sup>

Norman Thomas laid much of the blame at the feet of the profit system of capitalism, and a "nationalistic capitalism at that." He knew, however, that a wholesale revolution in the market or in American culture was nearly impossible. Instead, Thomas

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Thomas, "The Plight of the Share-cropper" (New York: The League for Industrial Democracy, 1934), 3-14.

advocated for collectivism among sharecroppers who wished to stay on the land.

Sharecroppers could use collective organizing to their advantage in two ways. First, they must organize into a labor union. “This organization to be effective,” counseled Thomas, “must be of white and Negro share-croppers together.” Secondly, sharecroppers should join cooperatives “which would get the benefit of expert guidance and a comprehensive plan” that would, in turn, pool their production and maximize their buying power. “Social ownership,” concluded Thomas, would lead to the “emancipation” of the South’s rural laborers.<sup>1</sup>

Norman Thomas’s missive, published by the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), an organization aimed at promoting socialism and labor activism in the United States, included a fifteen-page report on the “social and economic consequences of the cotton acreage reduction program” forced upon farmers by the AAA. This report, directed by what Thomas called “the Amberson Commission,” further indicted the Department of Agriculture’s local administrators for pocketing government subsidies while evicting thousands of sharecroppers, thus denying the laborers “access to the land, and to the only labor that they know.” In some ways, Thomas’s essay on the sharecropper served as a preface to the devastating accusations leveled by the Amberson Commission. Every page of the report contained statistics, culled from over 500 interviews with sharecroppers in Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi, which supported its argument that the AAA and plantation owners were in collusion to evict sharecroppers from their land and livelihood.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 15-18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 20.



“The Plight of the Share-cropper” and the accompanying survey coincided with a burgeoning interest among social scientists in the experiences of the southern sharecropper. Although Rupert B. Vance had written his dissertation on cotton culture in 1928, Norman Thomas’s small publication in 1934 kicked off a legion of important works on the topic. In addition to Vance’s continued work, black sociologist Charles Spurgeon Johnson published two of his seminal books, *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) and *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (1935) within months of Thomas’s publication. Arthur Raper, who had studied under the eminent sociologist Howard W. Odum at the University of North Carolina, followed Johnson’s publications with *Preface to Peasantry* (1936), a scathing critique of plantation agriculture, and *Sharecroppers All* (1941). The numerous publications on sharecroppers began to influence public interest and, in turn, public policy. Even as Norman Thomas wrote about the travails of sharecroppers, plans were underway to accomplish two of his recommendations: organizing a sharecropper union and establishing cooperatives.

The individuals engaged in the Amberson Commission, whose report had been published in tandem with Thomas’s pamphlet, were members of the Memphis (Tennessee) Chapter of the League for Industrial Democracy and the tiny, fledgling Tyronza (Arkansas) Socialist Party. The latter was made up of two men – Clay East and H. L. Mitchell. By the end of 1934, East and Mitchell had organized the first local of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, which would gain thousands of members across the South. Two members of the Memphis Chapter of the LID who were central in collecting, compiling, and publishing the findings of the Amberson Commission were William R. Amberson, a physiologist and socialist whose meticulous scientific research methods

made him the *de facto* head of the commission, and Blaine Treadway, a Memphis printer and socialist. While East and Mitchell were busy organizing sharecroppers for collective bargaining purposes, Amberson and Treadway set to work accomplishing Thomas's second suggestion: placing poor farmers into cooperatives.

The transition for landless farmers from sharecropping to cooperative farming would not be easy. Proponents of reorganizing sharecroppers into cooperative communities began casting about for ideas on exactly how to accomplish what they considered a momentous transformation of the southern economy and social structure. One of the first to weigh in was E. B. "Britt" McKinney, the charismatic African American preacher and First Vice President of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). Although McKinney was only passably literate, he was an exceptional speaker respected by white and black sharecroppers alike. McKinney declared that all who toiled under the "hellish system" of tenant farming and sharecropping "were slaves." One way to attain freedom for these farmers, McKinney urged, was to create cooperative farming communities. H.L. Mitchell, William Amberson, and Blaine Treadway shared McKinney's belief in the redemptive possibilities of farming cooperatives and were well on their way to initiating one in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>3</sup>

McKinney took great pains to explain the type of person who should be selected as the cooperative's first director. If the director was fair and friendly and did not adopt the moniker of "boss" among the tenants, McKinney predicted, the cooperative would accomplish its first goal: freeing southern tenant farmers from an oppressive cycle of

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<sup>3</sup> From E. B. "Britt" McKinney to unknown, undated, Folder 1, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC). McKinney's letter is undated. However, because McKinney mentions crops grown in 1935 it can safely be surmised that the letter was written around late 1935 or early 1936.

poverty, psychological torment, and physical violence. McKinney suggested that a director be chosen who would understand the importance of the endeavor. For the undertaking to succeed, “and to make it a cooperative in truth,” McKinney believed, “it must consist of both White and black.” Once the cooperative ideal was established, the South could boast that it was truly the “land of the free” because it had been “won by the brave.” McKinney underscored the significance of the undertaking by pointing out that an interracial agricultural cooperative in the region had the potential to be a new model “for the whole south, if not the whole nation.”<sup>4</sup>

Although prone to hyperbole, McKinney fervently believed in the importance of creating an interracial community where blacks and whites would toil together in the fields, make mutual decisions on behalf of the entire community, and have equal stakes in their collective welfare. Even housing, he suggested, should be secured on a first-come, first-served basis, regardless of color. He did not, however, advocate complete intermingling of black and white in the cooperative. McKinney contended “that the white and the colrd should not live together at this time.” In McKinney’s vision, the cooperative would be divided in half by a wide road. On one side African American farmers would reside with their families; the other side would be designated for whites. McKinney also proposed that a school should be constructed with a partition for separating white and black students, while each class would have a “teacher of their own race.” The children, however, would not be as strictly separated by the boundaries of racial segregation and could play and work together. He hoped that this level of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

integration would mean that “the young minds will not be poisoned with the old chronic ills that the older ones are infected with.”<sup>5</sup>

McKinney’s suggestions not only succinctly summarized the hopes, desires, apprehensions, and reservations of the proponents of establishing cooperative farms, but also reflected the feelings of the sharecroppers who would make up the residents and laborers at the cooperatives. Given the climate of southern race relations in the 1930s, what McKinney advocated and what reformers like William Amberson, H. L. Mitchell, Blaine Treadway, Sam Franklin, and Sherwood Eddy put into practice in Mississippi was a forthright challenge to white planters’ economic hegemony, the plantation’s inequitable labor system, and the Deep South’s racial hierarchy. In 1936, secular socialists Amberson and Treadway, and STFU activist Mitchell, with help from Christian socialists Franklin and Eddy, came together to envision and establish a mode of agricultural production rooted in egalitarian collectivism. The reformers realized that the provisions put forth by the AAA and the mass eviction of sharecroppers in Arkansas and elsewhere exposed the gross inequities of the southern agricultural system, and they moved to promote their own solutions in the form of collective farming.

At base, a tenuous alliance of American socialists, labor organizers, Christian missionaries, and the rural poor put into practice progressive ideas regarding labor, religion, race, and class at Delta Cooperative Farm. This alliance would, in 1938, play important roles in the creation of Delta’s successor, the Providence Cooperative Farm. Both cooperatives suggest the degree to which and ways that the New Deal expanded notions of democracy and citizenship and, for a brief moment, allowed for radical

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

reformers to dream of remaking America. At Delta Cooperative Farm reformers drew on American socialism and the theology and practice of Christian Realism to envision the uplift southern sharecroppers, the nation's most marginalized working class. In the experimental spaces of Delta and Providence, reformers felt at liberty to imagine the possibilities of cooperation across the color line, challenging inherited notions of race and traditional labor practices. Reformers hoped that these communities, consisting of evicted tenant farmers, would transcend the color barrier and directly confront the South's twin enduring dilemmas: poverty and race.<sup>6</sup>

Three men who converged on Arkansas and helped make the horrible conditions of sharecropping front-page news were torchbearers for the cooperative vision and founding of Delta Cooperative Farm. William R. Amberson, a physiologist at the University of Tennessee Medical School in Memphis, a member of the American Socialist Party, an advisor to the STFU, and the Tennessee secretary of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought socialism and a passion for rural labor organizing to early discussions of cooperatives. Sherwood Eddy, a theologian, prolific author, and Christian missionary with socialist leanings joined the discussion on starting farmers' cooperatives through his devout belief in Christian Realism, what he called practical Christianity, and service to the world's poor. Sam H. Franklin, a protégé of Eddy, native of rural Tennessee, missionary, activist, and staunch believer in reforming the southern agricultural system of sharecropping through Christian cooperation, offered first-hand knowledge of cooperative enterprises. Although other notables such as Reinhold Niebuhr and STFU activists Howard Kester and H. L. Mitchell were also involved with the

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<sup>6</sup> For the New Deal's influence on expanded notions of democracy and citizenship, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

creation of Delta Farm from the early stages, Amberson had access to sharecroppers, Eddy provided the economic backing to get the cooperative off the ground, and Franklin directed the crucial leg-work and manpower.

William Ruthrauff Amberson was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1894. In 1922, he received a Ph.D. in biology from Harvard University. In 1930, after studying for a brief time in Germany, he joined the University of Tennessee Medical School in Memphis as chair of the Physiology Department. First introduced to radical socialism in Germany, he worked with the unemployed after settling in Memphis. He also joined the American Socialist Party there, an affiliation that often put him at odds with university administrators while also bringing him in direct contact with the casualties of the Great Depression. In 1932, in conjunction with the Memphis Socialist Party local and the Unemployed Citizens League, a group he helped form, Amberson prepared an exposé of dishonest Memphis merchants, particularly grocers, who habitually shortweighted and overcharged welfare customers. Amberson's report caused a stir in Memphis and was his first taste of the activism that would shape the next decade of his life. Amberson then embarked upon a mission to break down the rigid class and race boundaries that limited possibilities in the South. He noticed that the majority of the unemployed who flooded urban Memphis came from rural areas south and west of the city. They told him of recent mass evictions of sharecroppers throughout the Delta. He wrote Socialist Party standard bearer Norman Thomas of his deepening concern about the plight of sharecroppers,

concluding “I feel strongly that the socialist groups can do much... to aid these dispossessed people.”<sup>7</sup>

Amberson soon found allies for his cause. In Tyronza, Arkansas, H. L. Mitchell, a dry cleaner, and Clay East, a gas station operator, witnessed firsthand the devastation of local sharecroppers. Mitchell, a progressive-minded socialist and follower of Norman Thomas, gradually schooled his friend, East, in socialist ideology. Both knew Amberson from socialist circles in Memphis, a short drive from Tyronza. For two years Mitchell and East made futile efforts to aid and organize the sharecroppers and to start a socialist party local. After being forced off the ballot in his bid to be elected for local office on the Socialist ticket, Mitchell wrote to Amberson,

The Class Struggle is a reality in Poinsett County as elsewhere. Uncle Charley McCoy of Truman and I were over at the election board meeting and you should have heard this old time Red—threaten them with a Communist Revolution. Keep the petition as I would like to show that as an illustration of what happens when Socialists try to elect men to office in Arkansas.<sup>8</sup>

Through their socialist activities and their attempts at labor organizing, Mitchell and East waded into a dangerous mess in Arkansas. The situation was particularly dire for sharecroppers. In the Arkansas Delta, generations of clear-cutting for cotton production denuded the western floodplain of the Mississippi River of its trees.

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<sup>7</sup> “Biographical Sketch,” in the William R. Amberson Papers, Mississippi Valley Collection, McWhorter Library, University of Memphis (hereafter, MVC); Jonathan Daniels, *A Southern Discovers the South* (New York: The MacMillan Company), 84; “Report on an Investigation of Short-Weighting and Similar Dishonest Practices by Merchants in the City of Memphis,” in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC); From William Amberson to Norman Thomas, 22 February 1934, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

<sup>8</sup> Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1971), 27-29; H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell Co-founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 45-49; James D. Ross, Jr., “‘I Ain’t Got No Name In This World’: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in Arkansas” (PhD diss., Auburn University, 2004), 43-45; From H.L. Mitchell to William Amberson, 2 November 1934, in the William Amberson Papers, MVC.

Timbering and cash crop agriculture had been Arkansas's economic lifeblood since the end of slavery. Even by southern standards Arkansas planters and landlords were notorious for controlling their workforces through violence and intimidation. After World War I, the Arkansas Delta was infamous for club-wielding planters, gun-toting night riders, and law enforcement officers who practiced vigilante justice. In Poinsett, Cross, Mississippi, Crittenden, Lee, and Phillips counties, the rural poor during the interwar years faced some of the harshest and most oppressive conditions in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

As Amberson discovered, the onset of the Great Depression worsened already terrible working and living conditions. Through the AAA, the New Deal stepped in to alleviate some of the problems faced by both planters and sharecroppers. This recovery program called for farmers to participate in acreage reduction programs that took portions of farmland out of production and allowed it to lay fallow. As compensation, the federal government paid farmers a fee for reducing their cultivated acreage. President Franklin Roosevelt and Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace hoped that when crop production decreased, prices would stabilize. The crop reduction regulation established by the AAA irrevocably changed the face of sharecropping in the South, though not in the ways Roosevelt and Wallace anticipated.<sup>10</sup>

From their close associations with tenant farmers, Mitchell and East were well aware of the ill effects of the AAA on the landless. In Memphis, Amberson witnessed some of the consequences from afar. Despite feeble attempts by the AAA to enforce a

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<sup>9</sup> For racial violence in early twentieth century Arkansas, see Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Grif Stockley, *Ruled by Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas from Slavery to the Present* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, viii.



stipulation that sharecroppers not be forced off the land, planters immediately began serving eviction notices. In mid January 1934, a sharecropper and his family on Arkansas's Twist Plantation received a terse letter stating, "You are hereby notified that we demand that you quit, and deliver to us the possession of [the plot] now occupied by you on or before January 21 1934." This notice gave the cropper and his family only five days to vacate. By booting sharecroppers off their land, landowners were able to comply with the AAA's acreage reduction program while hoarding the full federal payment they received for keeping the land fallow. In time, Amberson came to hold local AAA officials personally responsible for the mass eviction of croppers and possessed little faith that the New Deal agency would be able to do anything to alleviate the wrongs perpetrated against landless farmers. Amberson expressed his displeasure in a searing critique of the New Deal in a 1935 article for the *Nation*.

The department can get adequate investigations neither through its county agents, who, though technically competent, are yet unskilled in social relationships and closely bound to the landlords, nor through the hurried trips of harassed minor officials inspecting scattered cases on the run and unfamiliar with local situations... In times of economic distress we see the feeble hold of legal forms.<sup>11</sup>

The Old South plantation system proscribed the affects of the New Deal on southern agriculture. Following emancipation, landlords and laborers in the South struggled to develop a system of labor to replace slavery. Because of the resistance of ex-slaves, a gang labor system could not be enforced by postbellum planters. Gradually, planters developed a new system based on the family as the central unit of labor and ownership, and sharecropping as the prevailing contractual relationship between laborers

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<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 57; From F. Twist to W.H. Kible, 16 January 1934, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC; William R. Amberson, "The New Deal for Share-Croppers," *Nation*, February 1935, 187.

and landlords. By the early 1900s, the plantation system had evolved, under Jim Crow, into an exploitative relationship in which planters reaped the bulk of the benefit from the labor of their sharecroppers and tenants.

As Amberson, Mitchell, and East knew well, sharecropping kept both black and white rural southerners politically powerless and dependent on wealthy whites. “In the cotton country croppers have been driven from pillar to post for so long and have sunk so low in the human scale,” wrote Amberson in the pages of *the Nation*, “that they cannot imagine any other type of life, and do not know how to resist exploitation.” From Reconstruction to the mid-1930s, fueled by constant sources of cheap labor, southern planters perpetuated a separate agricultural system that kept the rural poor isolated from the rest of the nation. In the process, the South lagged behind in nearly every socioeconomic measure, including health and education. Tenants and sharecroppers on plantations faced plummeting cotton prices and a vicious cycle of debt. Borrowing “furnish” from plantation owners or crossroads merchants on credit meant that sharecroppers were almost always beholden to wealthy whites come selling time. “Either way,” wrote economic historian Gavin Wright, “a cropper had to borrow if he wanted even minimal security for his family’s needs for the coming year.” Sharecroppers and tenants had some of the grimmest living conditions in the nation. Amberson received word from a Poinsett County relief official in the winter of 1934 that approximately one third of all county residents received federal relief. According to the 1930 census, over 150,000 tenants and sharecroppers lived in Arkansas and around 225,000 resided in Mississippi. Economist T. J. Woofter reported that roughly six and half million rural

Americans were eligible for relief from the federal government, the bulk of whom were concentrated in the South.<sup>12</sup>

Rural African Americans in the South, having secured emancipation only a few generations before, had few choices. They could join thousands of other African Americans and migrate northward in search of better living and working conditions, or they could remain in their home communities, toiling on the same lands their ancestors had. Sharecropping, compounded by Jim Crow, meant that rural black southerners experienced the bleakest situation of any laboring group in America in the early twentieth century. Although rural African Americans were never completely powerless, they lived under the constant threat of the unpredictable, and sometimes violent, whims of white supremacists. While some of their urban counterparts joined unions, rural workers languished in a backbreaking cycle of poverty and racism with few opportunities for collective redress.<sup>13</sup>

The New South offered only marginally more to white sharecroppers. The color of their skin did not shield white sharecroppers from the same impoverished fate that befell their black counterparts. Despite the ideology of white supremacy, the fortunes of black and white sharecroppers were inextricably bound together before World War II. Amberson was keenly aware of this fact and believed that “white and colored croppers

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<sup>12</sup> Amberson, “The New Deal for Share-Croppers,” 185-187; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1996), 51-80, 97; Thomas, “Plight of the Sharecropper,” 6; T. J. Woofter and Ellen Winston, *Seven Lean Years* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1939), 11; From William Amberson to Norman Thomas, 4 March 1934, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

<sup>13</sup> For African American laboring choices after emancipation, see Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

[would] work together when once they have seen that their economic interests are identical.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite their plight, black and white sharecroppers kept an eye toward greener pastures somewhere down the road. When living and working conditions became unbearable, croppers sometimes had the freedom to vote with their feet and set out for a different plantation where another planter might, with luck, treat them better. Yet, usually this freedom was limited, as Gavin Wright has pointed out, since most sharecroppers moved only a few miles away in order to maintain a working rapport with local merchants who lent them furnish.<sup>15</sup>

The Great Depression threw sharecropping into the public conversation about the nation’s ills. Precisely because the effects of the Depression made manifest the inadequacies and inequities of the southern political economy, Amberson and other leftists renewed their commitment to dispatch poverty and racism in the South. In the predicament of the southern sharecropper, Amberson and other organizers saw a glaring critique of American labor and the urgent necessity for reform.

In 1933, Mitchell and East met with Amberson to discuss sharecroppers’ dire situation. By then Amberson was a member of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID) and chairman of the Committee for the Defense of Southern Sharecroppers, an advocacy organization affiliated with the American Civil Liberties Union. For months Amberson kept up constant communication with AAA officials and the Sheriff in Poinsett County, pleading with both to stop sharecropper evictions. Neither tactic

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<sup>14</sup> From William Amberson to Gertrude Orendorff, undated (sometime in 1934), in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Old South New South*, 98.

worked. Encouraged by the national headquarters of the LID, an organization that promoted left-leaning democratic and socialist ideals, the three compiled a report on the conditions around Tyronza and other locales in the Delta. Amberson developed a detailed questionnaire card, asking sharecroppers about income, crops, housing, and treatment by landlords. STFU locals distributed the questionnaires in Arkansas and Mississippi. When not traveling into the Delta himself, Amberson enlisted the help of Mitchell, East, and ex-sharecroppers to go house to house filling in the cards for the illiterate. Roughly 500 sharecroppers participated.<sup>16</sup>

Strolling through the hobo haunts in downtown Memphis, Amberson befriended former sharecroppers seeking refuge in the city, hitting up passersby for their next meal. One panhandler in particular, Buck Jones, proved especially valuable to Amberson's research in the Delta. Ex-cropper Jones, Amberson figured, was someone who could infiltrate plantations without raising too many suspicions. "Jones is a Michigan boy who 'lost his crop' last fall," explained Amberson, "He begged me for food on the streets of Memphis, having had nothing to eat for 24 hours." Amberson sent Jones to Oscar Johnston's sprawling Delta Pine and Land Company in Mississippi. Despite the name, Johnston, who was a Mississippi official in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, ran his operation as a plantation. Amberson specifically targeted Johnston because of his ties to the federal government. If he could paint Johnston as not abiding by AAA contracts, he would have a compelling case to take to the public and the courts. In Mississippi, Jones operated like a spy, clandestinely interviewing sharecroppers and taking pictures of empty shacks. Once Johnston caught wind that a stranger was in the area asking

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<sup>16</sup> From William Amberson to Norman Thomas, 8 April 1934, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

suspicious questions of his sharecroppers, he had Jones arrested and put in jail for several hours. Deputies attempted to extract information, pointing a pistol in his face while they demanded to know the names of his associates. Jones responded like a captured partisan, refusing to tell the authorities anything of substance except that he was there on orders from the American Socialist Party. Frustrated, the sheriff let him go. Jones was relieved and hoped “not to see any more guns for awhile.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite his many obligations as an academic, Amberson threw himself headlong into the sharecropper research project, traveling throughout the Arkansas and Mississippi river deltas interviewing landless farmers and enlisting the aid of national reformers to publicize their dismal situation. With the passion of a zealot, Amberson garnered a reputation as “the angry Prometheus of the sharecroppers’ original revolt.” Amberson, East, and Robert W. O’Brien, professor of Sociology at Le Moyne College for Negroes, set up an official tour of Johnston’s Delta Pine and Land Company. Not knowing that the troublemaker Jones had worked for Amberson, Johnston agreed to the delegation’s visit. While stopped for lunch at a restaurant in Scott, Mississippi, the local sheriff arrested all three. The sheriff told the group that they were detained on suspicion of being John Dillinger’s gang who were currently making headlines while on the lam for robbing banks and murdering police officers. The indignant Amberson considered this an excuse to round up outsiders who might be rousing trouble among the rural poor. They were released from jail when Amberson produced a written invitation from Oscar Johnston and the plantation owner came down to retrieve them, but not before they came to a clear

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<sup>17</sup> From Buck Jones to William Amberson, 12 April 1934, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

understanding of the dangers that awaited them in the Deep South if they drew attention to the plight of sharecroppers.<sup>18</sup>

The interviews and questionnaires Amberson gathered on his trips into Mississippi and Arkansas represented an overwhelming indictment of planters and the AAA. Amberson conveyed a straightforward account of his encounters with sharecroppers.

We have interviewed dozens of families who have been evicted, or in whose hands there are eviction notices. Many other families have been forced to move by pressure and intimidation, without service of papers. Most of these people are still living in the country, some in tents, some in abandoned houses, a few in such miserable shelters as corn-cribs and cotton houses. Many of them have drifted into the cities and towns, where they are dependent upon direct federal relief.

Norman Thomas published Amberson's findings in a widely circulated booklet entitled *The Plight of the Share-cropper*. The Associated Press picked up his findings and printed them in newspapers and magazines across the country. Nowhere else in America, wrote Thomas, "is life on the average so completely without comfort for the present or hope for the future as among the share-croppers of the South. The share-cropper then," Thomas explained bleakly, "is a man who raises cotton but cannot possibly afford proper underclothes for his children or sheets and towels for the family." The results of Amberson's research led Thomas to increase the Socialist Party's focus on the South and inspired Mitchell and East to launch a collective bargaining union for sharecroppers. Amberson also mailed the results of the survey to Henry Wallace and other officials in

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Mitchell, "Cabins in the Cotton," *New Republic*, September 22, 1937, 175; Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 45-46.

the AAA. Despite handwringing and promises to investigate, government officials proved unhelpful.<sup>19</sup>

Inspired by Amberson's report and the ineffectual attempts by the AAA to stop evictions, Mitchell and East decided that the only way to directly aid sharecroppers was to organize them. Encouraged by Norman Thomas and Amberson, who had some sympathetic friends in the AAA, the two organizers in Tyronza looked for an opportunity. In July 1934, when Hiram Norcross, a planter and local AAA official near Tyronza expelled many of his tenants, Mitchell and East held an interracial meeting with several of the evicted croppers and officially formed the first chapter of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. The STFU grew out of deep convictions of egalitarianism and drew on long traditions of rural African American organizing based on the family and the church. The STFU soon garnered the interest of liberals and radicals around the country, including clergyman Ward Rogers, a white graduate of Vanderbilt; his roommate, the charismatic preacher-activist Howard "Buck" Kester; and African American itinerant preachers E. B. McKinney and Owen Whitfield. The principal organizers called for interracial meetings, rallies, and strikes throughout the lower Arkansas and Mississippi river deltas, harvesting hostility from white planters and law enforcement officers. The STFU proved to be one of the notable exceptions to the paucity of labor organizing in the rural South.<sup>20</sup>

Many sharecroppers were eager to join the Socialist Party and the STFU when Mitchell, East, and other grassroots organizers ventured into Delta communities. Although labor movements and socialism had mainly lain dormant in Arkansas since the

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas, "The Plight of the Share-Cropper," 3, 9, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 62-87.



1920s, the STFU found old activist networks through which to recruit new members. Socialists focused their recruiting pitches on one group of disaffected southerners in particular, southern Populists. Recently defeated in elections across the region, southern Populists were predisposed to join the socialist party as it moved southward. Targeting agrarian workers, socialists had made significant headway in parts of the cotton belt, including Arkansas, during the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

The race question in the South, however, confounded American socialists. While their communist counterparts, after 1920, suggested that southern African Americans were a nation unto themselves, deserving of autonomy and full citizenship, socialists dithered on the issue, fearing the loss of white support or an all-out race war. Most white southern socialists treated African Americans much as their Democratic counterparts did—as workers in need of controlling, who had no business in the American political process. It was clear to northern socialists that the Socialist Party could successfully recruit southern African Americans only by removing Jim Crow from the equation, a task many socialists were not committed to undertaking.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For socialism development in the early twentieth-century South, see Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977); James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

<sup>22</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 128-138, 220-237; Only in the last thirty years have historians reflected on the long history of socialism in the United States. Some early observers of socialist thought confined the important developments to the European continent while ignoring any contributions from North America. When scholarship on American socialism finally blossomed, the vast majority of historians focused on the last decades of the nineteenth century and first three decades of the twentieth century as the Alpha and Omega of socialism in America. Similarly, many historians were often perplexed about how to address the role of African Americans within this story. Some ignored them altogether while others treated African Americans as they assumed socialists treated them: as no different from white workers. Philip S. Foner's *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* focused on the long history of socialism in America while casting the black workers as central to the development of socialist thought and exploring the myriad approaches socialist leaders undertook when addressing "the Negro question." Debates in Oklahoma over recruitment of black workers demonstrated just how perplexing the issue of racial equality was to socialists. Some state socialist organizers, mainly relocated northerners, demanded that the Socialist Party eschew Jim Crow customs, open membership to all

By the 1930s, however, prodded by the fear of losing membership to the Communist Party and emboldened by the liberal New Deal, southern socialists such as Mitchell and East saw biracial organizing as a route to success in the South. They reported that STFU locals were integrated, not because of socialist ideology, but because of the need to communicate effectively and efficiently. “There couldn’t have been much understanding if we had two unions,” explained East, because it would have taken twice as long to hold segregated meetings. Organizers held initial meetings where they felt safe and where they thought they could reach the most sharecroppers—black churches and schoolhouses. Shortly after the STFU’s creation, Mitchell informed Amberson that local planters were incensed by the new union meetings, particularly when they involved black members. “Norcross’ manager Alex East has notified the negroes,” reported Mitchell, “that their church and school buildings were going to (be) filled with hay and locked up if any more Union meetings were held.” Nevertheless, the STFU continued to organize black and white sharecroppers and conducted integrated meetings whenever possible. Out of pragmatic necessity and after years of false starts and halfhearted gestures, socialists in Arkansas committed themselves to organizing interracial union locals.<sup>23</sup>

At first officials in the federal government supported the STFU, but after a shake-up in the AAA in 1935 the Department of Agriculture no longer tolerated influential

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workers regardless of race, and directly challenge social inequality. Native born, white Oklahoma socialists disagreed and charged that socialism did not automatically translate into social equality for whites and blacks. Despite in-fighting, the Socialist Party in Oklahoma campaigned to give the franchise to black voters in the 1910s. The result was ultimately a failure but this support for black voting rights signaled that socialists could back workers in the South regardless of skin color.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 238-253; Quoted in Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 48-49; From H.L. Mitchell to William Amberson, 13 September 1934, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC; For a succinct and revisionary discussion on the STFU’s interracialism, see Jason Manthorne, “The View from the Cotton: Reconsidering the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union” *Agricultural History* 84 (Winter 2010): 20-45.

supporters of interracial unionism. U.S. courts dismissed lawsuits brought by the STFU because the farmers were not considered direct parties to the contract between the Department of Agriculture and the landowners. Emboldened by the support of the courts and the AAA's inaction, planters evicted members of the STFU from their farms *en masse* and local law enforcement officers began arresting union members and, in some cases, forcing them into peonage. The organized strikes that followed further enraged planters and resulted in mass evictions.

These setbacks, however, nurtured mounting interest in interracial farming cooperatives and prompted more reformers to join Amberson, Mitchell, and East in the fight to assist the sharecropper. Amberson convinced scores of his reform-minded contemporaries that the plight of the sharecropper was worsening under the New Deal and that something had to be done. One concerned observer important to Delta's eventual formation was a young, idealistic missionary named Sam Franklin. Franklin, recently returned from a mission in Japan, was eager to bring his socialist activism and practical Christianity to the American South.<sup>24</sup>

Sam H. Franklin, Jr. was born in 1902 in rural Tennessee and grew up on a farm near Knoxville. Franklin attended Maryville College in Tennessee, McCormick Theological Seminary in Illinois, and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. In the 1930s, he was ordained in the Presbyterian Church and left for a five year mission in Kyoto, Japan. There, Franklin and his wife Dorothy witnessed deplorable conditions of the poor that "forced us to rethink our faith in a way that came to terms with social tragedy and injustice." In Japan, Franklin also met Presbyterian missionary Sherwood

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<sup>24</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 58.

Eddy, who denounced Japanese imperialism and atrocities in the Sino-Japanese War. At Eddy's suggestion, the Franklins decided to take a furlough from missionary work in Japan and returned to the United States in 1934.<sup>25</sup>

While stateside, Franklin took graduate courses at Union Theological Seminary in New York City where he studied with influential theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and again came into contact with Eddy. Eddy invited Franklin to become his assistant and travel the country as "a lecturer and preacher at large." This was exactly the opportunity Franklin wanted as he and Dorothy reflected on their time in Japan and decided whether they wanted to return. While traveling in January, 1936, he met with William Amberson, H.L. Mitchell, and other officials from the STFU in Memphis to discuss cooperative models that Franklin had experienced first-hand in Japan and on mission trips with Eddy to Europe. Amberson brought the southern sharecroppers' plight to the young missionary's attention and Franklin vowed to return and inspect the situation himself. With Amberson as his guide he found the conditions in rural Arkansas "shocking." The first conversation Franklin had with Amberson about the possibility of starting sharecropper cooperatives in the South stuck with him throughout his travels, although the idea took several months to germinate. He and Dorothy talked extensively about work that could be done in the South. Since intermittent warring between China and Japan made travel to Asia nearly impossible, Franklin resigned his position as missionary in 1936 and headed south to put his experience to use aiding sharecroppers.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sam H. Franklin, Jr., "Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm," (unpublished), 6; From Sam Franklin to A.E. Cox, 30 October 1971, A. Eugene Cox Collection, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University (hereafter AEC).

<sup>26</sup> Franklin, "Early Years", 7-9.

Amberson and Franklin were not the first social justice advocates or reformers to consider cooperatives as a solution for the problems of rural America. Though almost always referred to as “experiments,” communitarian cooperatives existed in the United States a century before Arkansas refugees broke ground at Delta. Debates over the economic path of the country often encouraged communitarian movements. Although the South did not figure prominently in antebellum communitarian experiments, during the late nineteenth century the region “became the nation’s center of communitarian activity.” Over half of “all cooperative colonies established during the decade were located there.” North Carolinian Clarence Poe, for example, editor of the *Progressive Farmer*, was an advocate of the Populist and cooperative movements that swept through the countryside in the 1880s and 1890s. Populists, and the Farmers’ Alliance before them, encouraged credit cooperatives, purchasing cooperatives, dairy cooperatives, and feed cooperatives in rural America. In the pages of the *Progressive Farmer*, Poe entertained the idea of reorganizing farming communities based on the cooperative principal. Most often, reform came from agriculturalists, like Poe, deeply rooted in Jeffersonian ideals, who railed against the changes wrought by modernization that eroded the position of agriculturalists. Railroads, taxes, and banks drew the ire of Poe and like-minded agrarian reformers.<sup>27</sup>

The political mobilization that shaped the era came mostly from farmers in the South and West, but support for cooperative farms in the early twentieth century United

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<sup>27</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *A Socialist Utopia in the New South: The Ruskin Colonies in Tennessee and Georgia, 1894-1901* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 3, 15; For more on Poe and communitarian cooperatives, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 321-326.

States also drew inspiration from international sources. From his experience on missions in Japan and traveling to Russia with Sherwood Eddy, Sam Franklin had firsthand knowledge of international attempts at cooperatives. He brought that familiarity to Delta. Ultimately, cooperative farming initiatives that emerged in the United States during the New Deal, like Delta, had polyglot origins. Indeed, according to historian Daniel T. Rodgers, international reform currents, as much as the Great Depression, begat the New Deal. American reformers' interests in European cooperatives culminated in the formation of the New Deal's Resettlement Administration.<sup>28</sup>

Southern Tenant Farmers' Union officials were well aware of the transatlantic cooperative methods. As early as 1934, Amberson and Mitchell discussed the possibility of organizing large cooperative plantations run collectively by former sharecroppers and hoped to earn the interest and aid of the Federal Relief Emergency Administration. Mitchell also endorsed the Rochdale Plan, a cooperative store model first envisioned in Rochdale, England in the 1840s, as a possibility in Tyronza. Foreshadowing what Sam Franklin would later start at Delta Cooperative Farm, Mitchell wrote Amberson about the idea and displayed a firm ideological stance on the importance of the endeavor.

Clay [East] has had an idea that we might establish a co-operative store later on. Will you please have Co-op League send me details, I have heard of the Rochdale plan and understand that it is the only successful plan now in operation. We would have to have financing if it should be established

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<sup>28</sup> Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 318-343, 452-472. Like Franklin would do later, Poe and Wisconsin politician Charles McCarthy traveled extensively in Europe and both were permanently influenced by the effects of agricultural cooperatives on the European countryside. Poe noticed the orderly state of the English landscape, marked by the lack of dilapidated tenant and sharecropper shacks found blotting the land in the American South. McCarthy believed the agricultural cooperative practices of Irishman Horace Plunkett to be feasible in America. Plunkett, who started the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society in the 1890s, was inspired in turn by the cooperative rural reform efforts in Denmark. After the first workers' cooperatives were established in France and England by utopian socialists in the 1820s and 1830s, rural and urban cooperatives flourished across the European continent. Plunkett's globetrotting efforts to raise support for his agricultural reforms gained him many admirers, among them Poe, McCarthy, head of the United States Forest Service Gifford Pinchot, and future New Dealer Henry A. Wallace.

anytime soon because as you know the share-croppers would hardly have funds enough at one time to take even a \$5 share... it is important that the co-operative store idea be developed for in the time of Revolutionary crisis a strong Co-operative system could feed the workers before the capitalist system of distribution could be rearranged.

Seeking an escape from insufferable working circumstances and squalid living conditions, nineteenth century flannel weavers in Rochdale had started a cooperative store for the working-class community. After its initial failure, a more diverse group of workers began a second cooperative store in the mid 1840s called the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society. The success of the cooperative store, as the only viable model for the penniless, was evident as similar initiatives took root across urban and rural Europe. Through cooperative advocates at home and abroad, the popularity of the Rochdale plan eventually wound its way across the Atlantic. By the time Sam Franklin visited Amberson in Memphis in January 1936, the Memphis socialist and the STFU had decided that any cooperative farm they supported would operate on the Rochdale model.<sup>29</sup>

The cooperative farms in Mississippi also shared a link with transpacific rural reform initiatives, and in some ways Japan's influence was even more direct. Franklin served as a Presbyterian missionary in Japan for five years before he returned to his native South and met with sharecroppers through William Amberson. Not long after arriving in Japan, Franklin met Toyohiko Kagawa in Kobe. A Christian Socialist reformer and cooperative supporter, Kagawa was drawn to the plight of rural Japanese at the height of the Depression by what he saw as the atrocities wrought by a modernizing

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<sup>29</sup> From William Amberson to Lucille B. Milner, 12 November 1934, in the William Amberson Papers, MVC; Johnston Birchall, *Co-op: The People's Business* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 34-64; From H.L. Mitchell to William Amberson, 8 August 1934, Folder 3, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

and industrializing Japan. For over thirteen years, Kagawa lived in the slums of Kobe in a small room that he sometimes shared with outcast residents of the slum, contracting diseases and facing arrests for “his fearless vindication of the rights of labor.” Eddy and Kagawa, whom he called “the Christian Gandhi of Japan,” had a working relationship that dated back to the 1910s when Kagawa was a student at Princeton and Eddy footed the bill for Kagawa’s mission work. In Japan, Kagawa and Franklin were close associates. In the early 1930s, Kagawa set his vision of cooperatives to work in Japan and asserted that “through them the economic salvation of Japan could be effected.” In the midst of a rural depression and on the heels of one of the worst famines in modern Japanese history, Kagawa preached the gospel of agricultural cooperatives throughout the countryside. Kagawa’s experiences when he lived in the Kobe slums, organized some of Japan’s first labor unions, and crusaded for rural reform, as well as his passionate religious beliefs, made him a particularly compelling figure for Franklin and other reformers. Admirers saw Kagawa as a mystic, a prophet who tapped into the *gemeinschaft* of the rural Japanese to create successful cooperatives at a time when Japan experienced heavy-handed government repression. To help drum up support for cooperatives around the world, Kagawa traveled to the United States in the mid-1930s. Franklin received a letter from a friend in 1936 that enthusiastically anticipated Kagawa’s visit and declared that the cooperative movement would soon sweep the nation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 6; Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1955), 207-208; From Thomas Alva Stubbins to Sam Franklin, 16 March 1936, Folder 2, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; For more on Kagawa’s influence on Eddy and Franklin, see George B. Bikle, Jr., *The New Jerusalem: Aspects of Utopianism in the Thought of Kagawa Toyohiko* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976); Kerry Smith, *A Time of Crisis: Japan, the Great Depression, and Rural Revitalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Rick L. Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World: Sherwood Eddy and the American Protestant Mission* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).



Sam Franklin's epiphany in Arkansas in January and his knowledge of international cooperative movements impressed Amberson and set into motion events that led to the formation of Delta Cooperative Farm less than four months later. Amberson had connections in Arkansas that could funnel destitute croppers to the farm and Franklin had the practical know-how to get farming operations underway. One last piece of the puzzle remained: funding. Franklin knew that it was imperative for his associate, Sherwood Eddy, to come to Arkansas and see the devastated lives of sharecroppers firsthand. Eddy's arrival in Arkansas and his subsequent desire to help sharecroppers ensured that the envisioned cooperative community would be backed by his extensive funding networks.

Born in 1871 on the edge of the American West in Leavenworth, Kansas, George Sherwood Eddy inherited wealth and a luxurious lifestyle from his parents. He attended Harvard, Princeton, and Union Theological Seminary in New York before setting off for his first missionary trip to India in 1896. His subsequent years as national secretary of the YMCA included continued missionary work in Asia, Europe, and the United States. As a Presbyterian missionary, Eddy witnessed first-hand the horrors of warfare around the world and vowed to devote his life to rooting out the evil that caused such bloody conflicts. Just before he turned his attention to the plight of the sharecropper in 1936, Eddy wrote, "I was driven in my pilgrimage of ideas to the inescapable conclusion that capitalism is doomed. I as a radical," Eddy continued, "must seek to build a completely new order."

To seek by every reform the improvement of the lot of the workers and farmers, the employed and unemployed; and to begin to build, here and

now, a new social order, using every possible means of education and of coercion short of the destruction of life by war, whether civil or international.

Eddy saw socialism and the Gospel of Jesus as balms for the suffering world.

Foreshadowing his work with the cooperative farm, Eddy declared in 1934 that “to build an economic and ethical society under socialism, I would push forward the triple organization of workers, consumers and voters.”<sup>31</sup>

Through publishing and missionary work, Eddy and other reform-minded theologians set out to alter the way Christians expressed their faith. He and Reinhold Niebuhr “were deeply concerned with how to make Christianity relevant to an increasingly secular society and how to get Christians to think socially.” Eddy hoped that Christians would use “personal faith as a foundation for social action,” and would contribute their time, labor, and money to those less fortunate or in need.<sup>32</sup>

Eddy’s Social Christianity had roots equally in the United States and abroad in the half century between Reconstruction and the New Deal. Social Christian activist James Dombrowski credited multiple circumstances for the creation of Social Christianity in America. But for Dombrowski, one factor caused the most important and dramatic developments. After the Civil War, the growth of organized labor activity, and the power gained by labor unions, pressured ministers and theologians in the United States and Europe to develop a Christian-based philosophy that incorporated support for social movements. Labor leaders criticized ministers who, they believed, encouraged their flocks to be complacent, docile workers resigned to their lot in a stratified society.

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<sup>31</sup> Franklin, “Early Years”, 8-9; Sherwood Eddy, *A Pilgrimage of Ideas or the Re-Education of Sherwood Eddy* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, INC., 1934), 255-259.

<sup>32</sup> Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World*, 166, 350.

Sociologist Liston Pope famously criticized the role that local churches played in supporting mill owners in Gastonia, North Carolina during the 1940s. Labor unionists argued that American churches were in danger of being rendered obsolete by the growing popularity of labor organizations. The development of Social Christianity was a way for churches to be relevant in the altered American cultural and political landscape.<sup>33</sup>

Gradually, some churches and seminaries, particularly in the North where labor unions were strongest, adopted the tenets of Social Christianity. These churches proved instrumental in spreading Social Christianity to Americans in the late 1800s. Seminaries at Princeton, Harvard, Andover, and Union in New York pushed the notion that tithing and charity work were no longer sufficient. Direct social justice advocacy was necessary to create the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. At the turn of the century, the term “Social Gospel” gained wide use as a catch phrase for the burgeoning Social Christianity. In the American South and West, Social Gospel practitioners made headway through public health initiatives, settlement houses, and national organizations like the YMCA.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For the American development of social Christianity, see Paul T. Phillips, *A Kingdom On Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880-1940* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), xiv. Phillips stressed the transatlantic origins of Social Christianity, identifying British native John Frederick Denison Maurice as a key founder of the theology who, through his followers, would have a lasting impact on its development in America; See also James Dombrowski, *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966). An important development of nineteenth century Social Christianity was the focus on the salvation of the group—the social organism—while shifting emphasis away from interpretations of an individual’s relationship with the Holy. This ecumenical shift paved the way for Christian activists to devote their time to addressing the needs of whole populations. Theologians pointed to the “inherently” liberal, egalitarian teachings of Jesus Christ and drew much of their philosophies and practices from the growing social science movement. Social Christians and social scientists alike shunned a millennialist approach to life, advocating instead for a perfection of society—the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Social Christianity, as a philosophy and as a practice, put a great deal of emphasis on good works “done on earth as it is in Heaven.” Quoted in Dombrowski, 16. See also Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942).

<sup>34</sup> Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth*, 26.

Students and faculty who passed through New York's Union Theological Seminary were particularly influential in developing and reworking the Social Gospel. Union became the epicenter for the teaching of social ethics and exploring the divine plan and man's role in it. Sherwood Eddy first suggested Union hire Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the country's most prominent theologians. Having no budget for a new position, Union balked until Eddy offered to pay Niebuhr's salary in the first year. During the interwar years, Niebuhr became one of Union's most influential and renowned teachers when he developed a course on social ethics which promoted the idea that "moral idealism" would save western civilization. As a result of their close friendship and similar worldview, Eddy's and Niebuhr's brands of social Christianity often evolved in tandem. Though at first Niebuhr furthered the espousal of liberal Christian idealism perhaps more than any other instructor at Union, he would begin to change his views in the late 1920s, inching ever closer toward socialism, taking Eddy with him.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the development of the Social Gospel in America, invested observers noticed troubling shortcomings. For Eddy, Niebuhr, and other leftist Christians, a sense of futility set in. The positivist belief that society inched ever closer to utopian equality and that this perfection could be attained through continued moral suasion struck many radicals as naïve. Through their belief in the triumphant arc of history, liberal Social Christians adhered to pacifism and clung to their staunch belief that middle-class morals would save society. Liberal Christians had become complacent and written the tragedy

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<sup>35</sup> David P. Cline, "Revolution and Reconciliation: The Student Interracial Ministry, Liberal Protestantism, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1970" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010), 34; Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 235; David L. Chappell, "Niebuhrisms and Myrdaleries: The Intellectual Roots of the Civil Rights Movement Reconsidered," in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 3-18.

of sin out of their theology by sentimentalizing the Gospel of Jesus. The tragedy of history, as Niebuhr saw it, was that the working classes suffered brutal fates at the hands of a capitalist system run amok. To Niebuhr, liberal Christian doctrine was too self-congratulatory, wedded to capitalism, and made no real long-term progress at alleviating the problems of the poor. For Eddy and Niebuhr, like Union student - cum - socialist politician Norman Thomas, their Christian socialist ideology gave way to more practical approaches to their activism and faith.<sup>36</sup>

By the 1930s, both noted the Social Gospel's deficiencies and moved to the far left of American politics. Niebuhr joined the American Socialist Party and the Fellowship of Social Christians while rejecting the pacifism of his old friends in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a transatlantic, pacifist organization that grew out of the horrors of World War I. In 1932, Niebuhr published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in which he ridiculed liberal Christianity and the old Social Gospel for being hopelessly naïve. The world demanded more aggressive measures, Niebuhr counseled. At this stage in his life, Niebuhr was an avowed Marxian socialist and Christian realist, lambasting capitalism, idealism, and pacifism.<sup>37</sup>

Eddy was similarly displeased with the inadequate state of Christian volunteerism and apathy toward the poor exhibited by most Americans. In his public speeches and publications he frequently displayed his socialist inclination while admonishing a complacent society for its lack of charity. He wrote in 1927,

Our social order is characterized by gross inequality of privilege; vast wealth unshared, side by side with poverty unrelieved; flagrant luxury and

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<sup>36</sup> Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth*, 254; Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 237; Chappell, "Niebuhrisms and Myrdaleries," 3-18.

<sup>37</sup> Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 237.

waste confronted by unemployment, poverty and want; costly homes and resorts for the rich, and reeking slums and disgraceful housing conditions for the poor.

Eddy's mission work and extensive world traveling convinced him that humans were social creatures and religion was a social experience. "Love thy neighbor as thyself" and the parable of the Good Samaritan "who went out to bind up bruised and bleeding humanity" were Eddy's lessons wherever he traveled. Religion, Eddy demanded, must be dynamic, practical, and attentive to the brutality of human existence—what he and Niebuhr called "Christian Realism." Despite his wealth, Eddy condemned the privileged who would not better humanity by giving of their time and resources. Although he suggested personal lifestyle changes, his true goal was a complete overhaul of the social order, a redistribution of wealth, egalitarian race relations, and international peace.<sup>38</sup>

Niebuhr's and Eddy's newfound Christian realism strongly influenced Christian-inclined social activists, particularly those who came through Union Theological Seminary. Among Christian realists, Niebuhr was notably moderate on the issue of race, yet his teachings on practical egalitarianism were translated by others into the espousal of racial equality. As historian Ralph Luker has pointed out, Social Christians' commitment to overcoming racial inequality in the early part of the twentieth century is often overlooked. Luker argues that the Social Gospel movement was made up of mostly white clergy and black reformers who tackled issues of race and race relations. Historian Paul Harvey similarly contends that Howard Kester saw in Delta Cooperative Farm Niebuhr's espousal of practical Christianity wedded to social equality. Kester, one of

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<sup>38</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Religion and Social Justice* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 5; Alfred Noyes, et. al, *Dynamic Religion: A Personal Experience* (New York: Eddy and Page, 1930), 41.

Niebuhr's most radical understudies and a future STFU organizer, was a staunch believer in racial equality. Eddy, too, hoped to wipe out racism. "I will seek justice for every man without distinction of race or color," he wrote. "Especially I will strive for the fuller opportunity for the self-advancement of Negroes, Orientals, and all exploited races, seeking legal protection against lynching, and against all racial discrimination." Unlike Kester, Eddy and Niebuhr were intellectual peers and their theology often developed together. One of Niebuhr's closest friends and staunchest allies, Eddy developed Niebuhr's ideas about Christian realism and put them into practice around the world, first in Asia, then in the cotton fields of the South. Through international missions, Eddy and others modeled an egalitarian form of Social Christianity that proved to be a precursor to Liberation Theology. This specific brand of the Social Gospel trickled down from Niebuhr to Eddy to Sam Franklin. As late as 1943, Franklin believed that the farms had put into practice a "sternly realistic" Christian philosophy in the Mississippi Delta that he believed eschewed "optimistic humanism [and] the psycho-pathic tendencies that threaten modern reformers." Franklin brought Kagawa's cooperative teachings to Delta, blended them with the Rochdale model, allied them with Amberson's socialist values, and wed them to Eddy's vision of dynamic Social Christianity.<sup>39</sup>

Sam Franklin's meeting with William Amberson and the other STFU officials in January 1936 set into motion a complicated alliance of men with strong convictions and

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<sup>39</sup> Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 97-99, 101-105; Randy J. Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi for the Mississippi Historical Society, 2001); Noyes, *Dynamic Religion*, 43; Quoted in Donald M. Royer, "A Comparative Study of Three Experiments In Rural "Community" Reconstruction In The Southeast" (MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1943), 48.

stubborn personalities. Any of the men present at the meeting could have ended up elsewhere, Amberson continuing to rally Memphis's unemployed, Franklin heading back to Asia as a missionary, and Eddy globetrotting around the world preaching Christian Realism. Yet a sense of social responsibility, empathy for sharecroppers, hubris, and a taste for adventure led all three across the Mississippi River and into the Arkansas bottomlands. Amberson's description of the situation in Arkansas piqued Franklin's interest. He in turn convinced his employer and associate Eddy to pay a visit to the sharecroppers. In late February 1936, Eddy arrived in Memphis where he met Franklin and Amberson, who together decided that the best way to acquaint Eddy with the sharecroppers' situation was to take a driving tour of the Arkansas Delta. The three men set out with inventor Mack Rust, who had developed a mechanical cotton picker and was interested in the plight of sharecroppers and cooperative farming methods, and Jack Byer, a reporter from the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. During this trip a collective vision for a cooperative farm began to coalesce.<sup>40</sup>

In a tumultuous and revelatory road trip that predated a similar journey taken by Agriculture Secretary Henry A. Wallace in the fall of 1936, the group toured Arkansas and observed evicted sharecroppers living in makeshift tents on the side of the road, some fleeing for their lives after being threatened for joining the STFU. Recalling the trip years later Eddy labeled what he saw as "aspects of slavery, feudalism, and Fascism in the attitude of the planters and the landowners toward the evicted sharecroppers and tenant farmers, black and white." As the men traveled the area, speaking with displaced sharecroppers and learning of retribution lynchings, powerful whites also threatened the group. In Cross County, the local sheriff treated the carload to a few hours in a make-

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<sup>40</sup> Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World*, 275; Franklin, "Early Years," 9.



shift jail in a cotton warehouse for, as the sheriff saw it, stirring up trouble among black sharecroppers. As they sat detained in the warehouse, “a score of planters and men off the streets” came by to relay what they deemed “the truth about these damned niggers who won’t work.” The sheriff released the men after Eddy was permitted to send a telegram. Eddy chose his former college roommate, United States Attorney General Homer S. Cummings. At every turn local whites told Amberson, Eddy, and Franklin that black sharecroppers would be stricken with “sudden pneumonia,” a euphemism for lynching, unless the three men left the Delta. In Eddy’s account of their travels, threatening whites evoked the specter of the bloody massacre that took place fifteen years earlier in Elaine, Arkansas. The arrest and threats only increased Eddy’s and Franklin’s resolve to help the men and women living under the harsh conditions of sharecropping. “If it were the last act of our lives,” Eddy declared, “if it took the last dollar we possessed; if we were ever to respect ourselves as American citizens, we could not accept this disgraceful situation ‘lying down,’ nor leave this shame and blot upon the honor of our country without doing all in our power to remove it.” Both Eddy and Franklin had traveled extensively in Europe and Asia spreading the gospel as Presbyterian missionaries, lured from their homes to far corners of the world because they felt compelled to help where their work was needed the most, but never had they experienced a situation like the one they found in Arkansas. On this fateful journey, Eddy and Franklin realized the desperate needs with their own country and decided to lend their skills to Amberson’s plans to help the sharecropper, not so much out of “divine guidance,” said Eddy, “as of divine compulsion.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to unaddressed, 2 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Sherwood Eddy, “A Door of Opportunity, An American Adventure in

The STFU and Amberson had ideas to purchase land in Alabama to provide the displaced sharecroppers with a place of their own, a large plantation where land would be farmed collectively. Eddy and Franklin immediately took up the idea as the best way to blend their socialism, Christian beliefs, and commitment to the sharecropper. “We believe,” preached Eddy, “that we can more nearly carry out his law (Jesus) of love through cooperative organizations than thru capitalism.” Eddy decided to stay longer and find a suitable piece of land that could handle a resettlement community. Several days later, he and Amberson drove through Bolivar County, Mississippi on a tip that a large tract was for sale. There Eddy found “a gift from God” -- a tract of 2,138 acres abutting the Mississippi River levee. Rather than stick their heads in the lion’s mouth by starting a cooperative in Arkansas, Eddy deemed this tract in Mississippi to be the best location to create the new social order. Amberson remembered Eddy’s conviction that this was the right place when they first saw the plot.

Near sundown we reached the 2,000 acre plantation which became Delta. Mobley turned East on the road which runs the length of the farm. At its end he stopped and we all got out of the car. Looking toward the setting sun Eddy was in ecstasy. ‘God has brought us to this place. He has guided me before. I will buy this farm as soon as possible.’

Eddy made a down payment out of his own pocket, subsequently subsidized by a trust fund set up specifically for his Social Gospel endeavors. On March 26, 1936, Eddy finalized the purchase for \$17,500. One third of the plot was ready to be cultivated and approximately 160 acres could be timbered for the use of a Rochdale-style building cooperative. Amberson and Mitchell criticized Eddy for being so hasty with his purchase

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Cooperation with Sharecroppers,” (New York: Eddy and Page, 1937), 31, in the Rare Book Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Woodruff, *American Congo*, 74-100; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 131; Franklin, “Early Years,” 10.

and prophetically warned that if Arkansas was the lion's mouth, Mississippi was surely the lion's den. Mitchell, in fact, said that starting an interracial cooperative in Mississippi was like "jumping from the frying pan into the fire." Despite these concerns, Eddy and Franklin were anxious to build their vision onto the landscape.<sup>42</sup>

In the late winter and early spring of 1936, Amberson, Franklin, and Eddy felt that the tides of labor and race in the South were changing. In the spring of that year at Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, southerners converged for the second meeting of the Southern Policy Committee (SPC), a politically liberal, purely advisory body that hoped to shape the direction of southern politics and labor practices. Some of the most influential southerners of the Depression Era, including sociologists from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as well as the Vanderbilt Agrarians, represented most vocally by Allen Tate, were present at the meeting. William Amberson and officials from the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union also attended.

Discussion at the meeting centered on federal passage of legislation aimed at aiding tenant farmers and debate over small, self-sufficient homesteads versus large cooperative farms as the most viable livelihood for ex-sharecroppers. The Nashville Agrarians favored small, individually owned homesteads while the STFU favored plantation-sized cooperatives; the debate was often heated. The intellectual confrontation between Tate and Amberson that occurred at the meeting led H.L. Mitchell to later write that it was the end of "Southern Agrarianism, which had sought to turn back the pre-Civil War days of moonlight and magnolias." In a clash of ideology and practicality,

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<sup>42</sup> Sherwood Eddy, "Some Basic Principles of the Delta Cooperative Farm," in the Delta Cooperative Farm Records, MVC; From Sherwood Eddy to unaddressed, 2 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From William Amberson to Gene Cox, 17 January 1973, AEC; Jerry W. Dallas, "The Delta and Providence Farms: A Mississippi Experiment in Cooperative Farming and Racial Cooperation, 1936-1956," *Mississippi Quarterly* 4 (1987): 283-308.

Amberson thoroughly discredited Tate's romantic notions of the agrarian lifestyle as "pretty-poetry foolishness" and "nothing but a plan to reduce the people to peasantry."<sup>43</sup>

In an article for *The Nation*, the Tennessee socialist later expounded on his argument, saying that the individual homesteads advocated by the Agrarians were unsustainable in the present economy and a naïve throwback to the "Golden Age of the Republic." "Forty acres and a mule," said Amberson, would only produce more tenants in time. Without access to all the modern farming amenities that big planters possessed, small homesteaders would not be able to compete and the large plantations would eventually take over. "The big planter across the road," declared Amberson, "with his tractor and four row equipment and his superior credit facilities, cultivates his cotton at \$5 an acre, while the mule, dragging a half-row plow, runs the bill up to over \$14." "The frontier is gone," he thundered, "it is gone not only horizontally but vertically."<sup>44</sup>

There was, Amberson suggested, a "'middle way' for the agricultural South, steering between plantation exploitation on the one hand and the inefficiency of the small homestead on the other." Amberson's "middle way" was "large-scale cooperative farming ventures." All Tate could muster were feeble attempts to paint Amberson as a communist. By the end of the impromptu debate, Amberson had won the crowd over and "even Tate's friends grinned" in support of the fiery STFU advisor. Overall the SPC also sided with Amberson and endorsed large cooperatives over small homesteads. The few to disagree with this endorsement came mainly from the Agrarian attendees. The debate

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<sup>43</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 127; Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> William R. Amberson, "Forty Acres and Mule," *Nation*, March 6, 1937, 264-266.

at the Lookout Mountain meeting further confirmed to Amberson and his reform-minded circle that they were riding a tide of activism that would remake southern society.<sup>45</sup>

African Americans were conspicuously missing from the early stages of an interracial endeavor like the Delta Cooperative Farm. Though Amberson, Eddy, and Franklin informally consulted labor unionist E. B. McKinney, his contributions consisted of one letter. Franklin and the STFU specifically targeted African American farmers as potential inhabitants, but they did not significantly enlist blacks to contribute to the intellectual development of their endeavor. The fact that no African Americans were included as major players in the founding of Delta demonstrates the contradictions implicit in starting a “biracial” cooperative with only whites at the top. Once Eddy and Franklin entered the scene, establishing the farms was hasty, but ambitious. This contradictory trend continued throughout Delta’s existence and led to interracial policies that often did not reflect the desires of ex-sharecroppers. Ultimately, twenty years later, blacks would take over on their own the experiment that whites started. The first challenge for Amberson, Eddy, and Franklin, however, was to secure the lives of sharecropping families by moving them to the recently purchased tract of land in Mississippi.

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<sup>45</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 127; Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 87; Steve Brown, “Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s: The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Agricultural History* 55 (Oct. 1981), 361–63; William R. Amberson, “Forty Acres and Mule,” *Nation*, March 6, 1937, 264–266.

## Chapter Two

### “We are Going to Make a Go of This”: Establishing Delta Cooperative Farm in Mississippi, 1936—1937

In the late winter of 1936, Sam Franklin carried the cooperative idea to a handful of starving and destitute sharecroppers in Arkansas. Franklin ducked into dilapidated, dusty cabins and make-shift tents where whole families crowded into a space meant for only two or three, to deliver a message of hope. Despite his experience in the slums of Japan, the conditions he observed in Arkansas appalled Franklin. When he visited future white cooperative member Nute Hulsey, he found a family begging for help.

In the middle of a great muddy field was a wretched shack. There was no floor in it, but the wind, for it was February and cold found plenty of holes thru which to pour. In the center of the room sat a young woman holding a baby on her knee, its little legs covered with sores, on the floor played a beautiful three year old child and both had but one garment to cover them. Nute was not at home that day, having walked some three miles to find firewood, as he was forbidden to get any nearer the shack.

Before Franklin could secure transportation for the Hulsey family to move to Delta, they were evicted from the spartan shack and spent their last few weeks in Arkansas living in a seven-by-seven tent on the banks of a muddy stream. “The hygienic conditions were so bad,” regretted Franklin, that Nute and his wife had “contracted a bad skin disease.” As he explained the nascent ideas for an interracial farming cooperative to the gaunt and hardened faces, their near-starving children looked up at him expectantly. For the remainder of his life, Franklin would remember the “distended stomachs of some of the

little children.” When the Hulseys finally moved to Delta, “not even a comb could be found to help them look more respectable.”<sup>1</sup>

Following networks already established by the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU), Franklin spoke to sharecropping families about Christian brotherhood, socialism, racial egalitarianism, and collective farming. He assured each family that these methods were the answers to their longstanding problems under the plantation system. These meetings also acted as interviews, and Franklin, future trustee William Amberson, and STFU secretary H.L. Mitchell, often decided who would make productive members of the cooperative. By visiting these sharecroppers, Franklin was setting in motion events that would confront many of the social and economic issues facing the nation’s rural communities. Once Franklin deemed them suitable, he extended sharecropper families invitations to move to the parcel of land in the rural Mississippi Delta that Sherwood Eddy purchased only days before.

Here, Sam Franklin, a few staff and volunteers, and over two dozen sharecropper families moved in the spring of 1936 to start over. They took their stand in Mississippi, a state notorious for its lagging economy, obsolete agricultural practices, and harsh social and racial norms. Along the Mississippi Delta, where slavery evolved into sharecropping but cotton remained king, white and black dirt farmers often lived hand to mouth in backbreaking destitution. Yet these sharecroppers and tenant farmers still found spaces to challenge the plantation mentality and carry out strategies they hoped would foster economic parity and fair labor practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam H. Franklin, Jr., “Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm,” (unpublished), 14; Delta & Providence – Former Residents, House Box #1, AEC.

William Amberson appointed Sam Franklin as the first Resident Director of Delta Cooperative Farm because of Franklin's experience with farming cooperatives in Japan. Franklin's strong personality, devotion to Christian activism, and previous hands-on farming knowledge doubtless endeared him to Amberson, who played a major role in finding suitable staff for the new cooperative. "Franklin is really a distinguished personality," Amberson gushed, "and will ultimately be recognized as one of the really significant Southern leaders." Amberson, Sherwood Eddy, and STFU leaders Howard Kester and H.L. Mitchell considered Franklin to be the "most competent and enthusiastic leader for this venture we can find." To grease the wheels and get the cooperative underway, Eddy agreed to pay Franklin's salary for the first six months.<sup>2</sup>

Since Franklin's interests had shifted away from rural Japan, where war with China made it difficult to return, he and his wife, Dorothy, quickly agreed to move to the Mississippi Delta and carry on their work of uplift through Christian activism. The Resident Director position required all manner of responsibilities, only the first of which was traveling through Arkansas and interviewing possible candidates for membership in the cooperative. Franklin soon found himself involved in a bevy of duties, including answering all mail to the farm, mailing out donation requests, greeting all visitors and sometimes hosting them overnight, speaking to groups interested in the farm in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, and assisting in the planting of crops and raising of structures. His busy schedule was not aided by the fact that he was a micro-manager who often critiqued the work of cooperators then continued to spend hours working cheek by jowl in the fields to make sure the work was done properly and efficiently.

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<sup>2</sup> From William R. Amberson to Thad Snow, 12 August 1937, AEC; From William Amberson to Sam Franklin, quoted in Franklin, "Early Years", 11-12.



Franklin wrote to Eddy after less than a month on the farm detailing an industrious scene of cooperators hard at work. “Your reference to being so busy making history that no time was left to write it,” disclosed Franklin, “has held true pretty well of me.”<sup>3</sup>

Amberson and STFU officials decided to name Blaine Treadway as Associate Director. Treadway was a secretary and organizer in the STFU, executive member of the Socialist Party of Tennessee, and close associate of Christian Socialist Howard “Buck” Kester who had studied at Vanderbilt with Social Gospel theologian Alva W. Taylor. Before arriving at Delta, Treadway was a printer residing in Memphis. In the early and mid 1930s he was one of four editors for the independent literary publication, *The Observer*, which published submissions from poetry to literary criticism. The *Sewanee Review* considered *The Observer* to be the organ of a small but important literary movement in Memphis that had the potential to rival the Agrarians in Nashville. Treadway, observed the *Sewanee Review*, was “interested in literature as propaganda for the class struggle.” A devout socialist, Treadway considered socialism, union organizing, and cooperative farming to be the cure for problems facing southern sharecroppers. As Associate Director, he was in charge of farm operations when Sam Franklin was away from the cooperative. In addition to his duties as Associate Director, Treadway took charge of Delta’s community store which sold goods to its members and the surrounding community. A good-natured southerner, he “appeared to have his feet flatter on the buckshot earth than anyone else on the plantation,” mused visiting journalist Jonathan Daniels. He was as dedicated to the cooperative effort at Delta as Eddy, Amberson, or

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<sup>3</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 27-28 March 1936, Folder 2, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Miscellaneous, Box VII, AEC.

Franklin, though his hands-off, pragmatic nature often contrasted with Sam Franklin's dynamic, and occasionally overbearing, leadership style.<sup>4</sup>

Franklin and Treadway embodied the two principal ideological influences at Delta Cooperative Farm: the Social Gospel and American Socialism. At the outset, these two approaches to reforming life in the rural South worked in harmony. Franklin certainly had socialist leanings, and Treadway, southerner that he was, knew a thing or two about the Gospel of Jesus. Both the STFU and the American Socialist Party advocated for cooperative approaches to American labor and economy while Franklin's brand of activist, practical Christianity had espoused cooperatives all around the world for many decades. Now the two men were poised to put their respective ideologies into practice in the Mississippi Delta.

Eddy cobbled together a Board of Trustees in the spring of 1936 that assisted Franklin and Treadway in their endeavor. Eddy hoped that national luminaries like Eleanor Roosevelt, Norman Thomas, and William Alexander Percy would serve on the national advisory board of Delta Cooperative Farm, but quickly scrapped those names in favor of a board that had direct experience with race, labor, agriculture, socialism, and the Social Gospel. If not as influential as the first names suggested, the eventual board members were more practical and could easily give advice on the farm's progress and goals. Joining Eddy and Amberson as trustees were Bishop William Scarlett, mechanical entrepreneur John Rust, and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Scarlett was an advocate for sharecroppers in Missouri and an old ally of Eddy's. With his brother Mack, John Rust had developed a mechanical cotton picker—around the same time as the International

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1938), 151; *The Sewanee Review*, October – December 1934, 389.

Harvest Company—that they hoped would revolutionize agriculture. Both brothers supported cooperative communalism. As a prominent theologian, socialist, and member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation with Norman Thomas, Niebuhr brought name recognition to Delta Cooperative Farm. Although Niebuhr’s Christian Socialist theology was an important ideological foundation of Delta, he remained a figurehead throughout his service on the Board of Trustees. Each trustee served specific purposes, and Niebuhr’s was to bring legitimacy. Of them all, Amberson had the most direct contact with sharecroppers from his travels through the South. Eddy, of course, provided the bulk of the funding.<sup>5</sup>

The plot already was home to approximately ten African American sharecropping families who had worked for the Staple Cotton Association, the previous owners, and lived in dilapidated homes scattered around the farm. Eddy and Franklin gave these farmers the option to stay, which most elected to accept. They would become some of the most valuable community members because of their intimate knowledge of the cooperative’s land. Two of these African American families became charter members of the farm. George Smith and Monroe Whitney, who were brothers-in-law, lived and worked at Delta Cooperative Farm throughout most of its six-year existence. Smith, who had farmed the area for the last decade and possessed valuable abilities as a carpenter, drew up plans for buildings and became an elected leader among the cooperators and an integral member of the farm’s STFU chapter. Whitney “had been studying poultry bulletins for two years and dreaming of someday having a poultry farm of his own.” The cooperative, needing the meat and eggs that chickens could provide, offered Whitney the

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<sup>5</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Sam Franklin, 14 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

opportunity by acquiring “750 day-old chicks.” Whitney raised them in a brooder he built from an oil drum and eventually brought them to “frying size, losing only 19.” Whitney was temporarily set back in December, however, when a thief nabbed 117 of his prized chickens. He vowed to track down the offender, and Sam Franklin even wrote prominent lawyer and renowned Mississippi poet William Alexander Percy to inform him of the situation in case Whitney needed legal representation.<sup>6</sup>

Delta’s Board of Trustees, on advice from Amberson, decided that preference would be given to STFU members when determining who could join the farm. Following STFU networks and the two-year-old Amberson study, representatives from the union and the farm, including Sam Franklin, travelled Arkansas identifying some of its hardest hit members and judging their ability to work and live in a cooperative capacity. Franklin identified potential members, at the behest of the STFU, for being in acute physical danger or on the verge of starvation. A few of the original cooperative member families were previous Resettlement Administration clients on a plantation project in Earle, Arkansas and told STFU and government interviewers that they experienced near starving conditions on both government farms and private plantations. The rural resettlement division of the Resettlement Administration, a New Deal agency, relocated scores of sharecroppers to tracts of land that resembled rural communities, though labor still operated like plantations. Wilburn White, his wife, and six children had lived on a government farm and “went hungry most of the time.” When a union organizer visited the Whites and admitted that she had never known real hunger, the children remarked “your father must have been a very rich man.” Amberson boasted that

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<sup>6</sup> From William R. Amberson to Alice Barrows, 17 April 1936, AEC; Delta & Providence – Former Residents, House Box #1, AEC; From Sam Franklin to William Alexander Percy, 17 December 1936, Folder 20, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Paper #3474, SHC.

the STFU offered invitations to over twenty families who possessed a “proven devotion” to the Union.<sup>7</sup>

Although the cooperative model of farming sounded worthwhile to most prospective members, some wanted to know more about the founder’s designs to make the farm interracial. Franklin assured both black and white sharecroppers that interracial interactions would mainly take place in the context of work and thought that African Americans in particular seemed relieved that they would not be forced into intimacy, such as eating meals, with whites. Black and white sharecroppers already had plenty of experience working side by side, but their interactions were typically limited to the fields. Southern custom and law segregated social gatherings, like meals and church meetings. Southern African Americans were often as invested in keeping these events separate as whites, but for markedly different reasons. For blacks, the separation was necessary to cultural survival where white hegemony was the norm. “We just want economic equality,” African Americans told farm organizers, “we don’t care to have socials with them.” Despite the devout commitment of the cooperative’s socialist organizers to promoting interracialism, sharecroppers had a much more ambiguous understanding of and commitment to it. Because of the ideological differences between farm managers and most of the ex-sharecroppers, race relations would prove to be one of the most difficult tasks facing the cooperative effort at Delta.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> From Sam Franklin to H.L. Mitchell, 15 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From William Amberson to Helen F. Dudley, 14 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Franklin, “Early Years”, 11; H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell Co-founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 45; Delta & Providence – Former Residents, House Box #1, AEC; Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty & Politics: The Rise & Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1968), 85-125.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 15; Untitled, Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, MVC.

As soon as the land was secured in March 1936, destitute sharecroppers, many of whom were refugees from the Dibble Plantation near Parkin, Arkansas, began moving to Delta. Planter C.H. Dibble had been in negotiations with the STFU to sign a collective bargaining agreement when H.L. Mitchell gave a fiery speech in which he issued Dibble an ultimatum to either sign the agreement or face a labor strike on his plantation. Newspapers in Tennessee and Arkansas quoted Mitchell's speech, and suddenly influential whites pressured Dibble to evict his sharecroppers with STFU affiliations. Threats of foreclosure and economic boycott of his plantation forced Dibble's hand, and in January 1936 he evicted approximately one hundred sharecroppers from his land. Mitchell had inadvertently worsened the situation and alienated a potential ally in Dibble. The sharecroppers set up a tent colony, many sleeping in their cotton sacks, along the roadside between Parkin and Earle. Mitchell, Amberson, and the STFU in particular, worked for months trying to find a sanctuary for the evicted sharecroppers.

Threatened with destitution, starvation, and violence, the families who resided at Delta by April of 1936 came from the ruins of the Dibble calamity, the interviews that Franklin conducted, and the few African American families who already resided on the parcel of land. Joining families like the Whitneys and the Smiths were Bennie Fleming, his pregnant wife, and their young child. Fleming, an African American and president of the STFU local on the Dibble Plantation, was evicted by the plantation owner and threatened by local officials with death if he did not give up his union affiliation. Instead, Franklin and the STFU gave the Flemings a chance to start anew at Delta. After only a few months on the farm he became "a transformed man," noticed Sam Franklin, "again holding his head erect and unafraid." When their second child was born, the first on the

cooperative, the Flemings chose to name him Sherwood after the cooperative's benefactor.<sup>9</sup>

Other members came from similarly dire situations. J. H. Moody, a white sharecropper identified by the STFU as a potentially valuable resident, was an STFU member and socialist of the Norman Thomas ilk. He and George Smith often worked side-by-side on carpentry responsibilities, demonstrating the farm's commitment to interracial labor. Moody's daughter, Shirley, displayed considerable musical talent and was placed in charge of entertainment and recreation. Two white cooperators, brothers Jess and Hubert Erwin, and their families were among the first families to make positive impressions at Delta. Franklin was particularly impressed with the Erwins, and "they were soon driving tractors and trucks and taking other assignments of special responsibility." Jess Erwin's family had been residing "in the most forlorn slums imaginable" with "no window glass in their shack." Their six year old daughter was severely malnourished upon arriving to the cooperative and Franklin learned that she had been whipped frequently at school "probably because she hadn't the strength after the fifteen mile bus ride in an overcrowded bus to keep up with the other children." White sharecropper Jim Henderson's stubborn nature had served him well on a plantation "where both Negro and white workers were in the habit of being taken to the barn for beatings when the boss-man was displeased." Learning of the opportunities at Delta,

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<sup>9</sup> Delta & Providence – Former Residents, House Box #1, AEC.

Henderson emotionally asked Franklin, “do you really mean that I can learn to read and write?”<sup>10</sup>

Plantation owners, overseers, and law enforcement officials, often threatened at gunpoint croppers and union members for relocating. When Henderson decided to leave the plantation, the planter threatened violence. Instead of acquiescing, Henderson grabbed his shotgun and stood guard while union members helped him load all his belongings in a truck bound for Delta. While interviewing a female sharecropper about the recent death of a union member in Arkansas, Sam Franklin was approached by a pistol-brandishing plantation owner and ordered to leave because the planter believed he was “interfering with labor.” When Franklin simply said he was doing his duty as a Christian minister, the planter ended the conversation by proclaiming, “I’d shoot you if you was Jesus Christ himself.”<sup>11</sup>

Like Henderson, most traveled to the farm via transportation that Franklin and the STFU secured for them. Amberson received word from Franklin in mid March that he had helped thirteen families move in one week. In all, thirty families were admitted to Delta as members in its first year, eleven white and nineteen black. Accounting for adults and children, the farm housed 111 individuals, not including the Franklins, Treadways, and others staff and volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

Though records exist that name specific residents, it is nearly impossible to account for every resident at the farm from year to year. Sharecroppers were used to

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<sup>10</sup> From William R. Amberson to Laurent Frantz, 19 March 1936, Box VII, AEC; Franklin, “Early Years,” 14-16; “Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Calendar of Events, June-October 1936, William Amberson Papers, MVC.

<sup>11</sup> “Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Calendar of Events, June-October 1936, William Amberson Papers, MVC.

<sup>12</sup> Delta & Providence – Former Residents, House Box #1, AEC.



voting with their feet, and most, until they were blacklisted for being union members, could find work on other plantations in Arkansas if they chose. The same mentality followed many ex-sharecroppers to Delta. Because some residents only stayed on the cooperative for a year or less, the community was in a state of constant flux. The population's fluid nature speaks to the fact that, though there existed a degree of self-selection among farmers at Delta, they did not arrive with necessarily the same convictions or hopes that drove people like Sam Franklin, Sherwood Eddy, and William Amberson. Organizing a cooperative was a tactic that activists hoped would lead to economic equality for both white and black. For Christian missionaries and most socialists, biracialism, socialism, and practical Christianity were ideologies they hoped to put into practice. For many farmers, choosing to move to Delta Cooperative Farm was simply a choice born of desperation or a hope for a fresh start.<sup>13</sup>

A few staff members and the relocated farmers began, hastily but optimistically, to get their project underway near Hillhouse, Mississippi. The need to provide destitute sharecroppers with food and shelter dominated the early days of breaking ground and moving families to the cooperative. Pragmatism, however, took a back seat to hopefulness. Although the cooperative idea had percolated for several years in the minds of many involved in organizing Delta Cooperative Farm, no one took much time to explain the day-to-day vision to the relocated sharecroppers. The reality was that despite

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<sup>13</sup> H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell Co-founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 130-131, 133; Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1971), 88-90; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Mark Fannin, *Labor's Promised Land: Radical Visions of Gender, Race, and Religion in the South* (University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 113; Franklin, "Early Years", 14; "Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community," undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (hereafter MDAH); Delta Cooperative Farm – History, House Box #1, AEC.

any earlier experiences as overseas missionaries or as union organizers, no one knew precisely how an interracial farm like Delta would operate. In essence, the blind led the blind. Yet optimism prevailed among trustees, managers, and farmers. Cooperator Virgil Reese, a teenaged early resident of the farm, told a reporter that “we are going to make a go of this,” and he hoped, “we’re all going to be getting something out of this.” In the face of the brutal violence and near constant intimidation sharecroppers had experienced previously, it was easy to view Delta as a beacon of hope.<sup>14</sup>

Lawlessness and violence in Arkansas drew more attention to the plight of sharecroppers and increased the profile of endeavors like Delta Cooperative Farm. Eddy made a return trip to Arkansas in May to investigate the accusations of peonage labor, mayhem, and murder against Crittendon County Sheriff Paul D. Peacher. He was appalled by what he saw and heard in Crittenden County. He interviewed thirteen African American “prisoners” in the county jail who all told him what he already suspected, that Peacher had murdered several sharecroppers and that the inmates were incarcerated without cause. Upon returning to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Eddy, still seething from his visit to Arkansas, drafted a letter to United States Attorney General Homer Cummings. He and Cummings had been classmates at Yale, yet Eddy wasted no time on cordial greetings. “Our histories should be revised,” insisted Eddy, “in misleading us that slavery was ever abolished in Arkansas.” In a threatening tone, probably in the hopes that it would galvanize his old friend, Eddy declared that if the federal government refused to look into the matter he would “rouse public opinion from coast to coast over the national disgrace of lawless Arkansas.” The Peacher ordeal would

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<sup>14</sup> “Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community,” undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH.

drag out for several months, but the union eventually won the war over peonage labor. For the STFU, Christian activists like Eddy, and the federal government, Sheriff Peacher embodied the malevolent side of sharecropping in the Deep South. Eddy, Amberson, and Franklin were now more determined than ever to throw their backs into the cooperative endeavor.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the violence in Arkansas, the Board of Trustees accepted “refugee residents” who were not accorded full cooperative membership but deemed by the STFU to be in the gravest danger. The most famous of these refugees was Vera Weems, the wife of STFU “martyr” Frank Weems. In May 1936, Frank Weems, an African American member of the STFU, joined scores of striking farmers near Earle, Arkansas as they protested evictions, demanded work reinstatement, and agitated for wage increases. Local law enforcement officials and plantation owners did not appreciate the sight of empty fields while “their negroes” banded together with the “crackers.” Violence erupted and thugs beat or shot at picketers. A violent mob cornered Frank Weems, severely beat him, and left him for dead. His friends and family assumed his lifeless body had been disposed of by his attackers. When Weems disappeared he became an immediate martyr and his story attracted national and international attention. Weems’s story became emblematic of the chronic violence that sharecroppers faced in Arkansas. Two African American sharecroppers Jim Reese, a founding member of the STFU, and Eliza Nolden, were also beaten by the same group of vigilantes who beat Weems. Neither Reese nor Nolden would fully recover from their beatings. Reese suffered

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<sup>15</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Homer Cummings, 21 May 1936, Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Papers, microfilm, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter STFU); Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 90-91, 117-118; Grif Stockley, *Ruled by Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas from Slavery to the Present* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008), 222-223.

psychological damage as a result and Nolden died several days later. White activists like minister Claude C. Williams and Willie Sue Blagden, both affiliated with the STFU, were severely beaten in Earle when the two were on their way to attend Weems's funeral. *Time* Magazine reported that Weems's apparent death and other beatings, maimings, and murders "swung the spotlight of national attention on the 1936 Arkansas sharecroppers' strike which had been fumbling along unnoticed for four weeks."<sup>16</sup>

Vera Weems, assuming her husband was dead and wracked with fear for her own safety, found sanctuary at Delta. She and her children moved to the farm while the media frenzy around her husband's apparent death reached a fever pitch. Members of the interracial cooperative met to discuss her situation and, echoing the brotherhood of the STFU and the Christian charity advocated at Delta, resolved that "Weems gave his life in our cause, and we'll take care of his wife and children," Sympathetic cooperators even suggested that each able-bodied member pitch in on Saturdays to build the refugee family a new home. Vera Weems and her eight children resided on the farm until 1937 when news reached them that Frank was alive. Weems turned up alive near Chicago but refused to go back to the South and reunite with his family. Not long after, she and her children left Delta with a widower in search of other employment and a new home.<sup>17</sup>

Like Vera Weems, desperate sharecroppers from Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia, Missouri, and Illinois sent letters to STFU officials or directly to Delta Cooperative's managers and trustees attempting to plead their way onto the farm. A handwritten letter to H. L. Mitchell from Harvey Barton, a white farmer in Truman,

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<sup>16</sup> "True Arkansas Hospitality," *Time*, June 29, 1936, 19; Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 109-114; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 86-90.

<sup>17</sup> "The Story of Delta Cooperative Farm in Pictures" Photographs Box, AEC.

Arkansas, revealed Barton's hopes that Mitchell could help his family join the cooperative. Barton began the letter by addressing Mitchell as "dear comrade" and stressed that he was a socialist since 1910 as well as a charter member of the Truman STFU local. To make themselves attractive to the cooperative endeavor, Barton, his wife, and three children offered their hard work and a "Jersey Heffer." Barton ended the letter by declaring that he had "been in a destitute condition for two years and if it had not been for the boxes of clothing that was sent to" STFU organizer Charlie McCoy "we would have been necked (sic)." Mrs. Jim Thunderberg from Ruleville, Mississippi pled directly to Sherwood Eddy during the summer of 1936:

Dear Sir, Would you give us a crop on your farm? We have had not crop in 3 yrs. Have 5 children. My husband has walked all over this Delta hunting a crop. At least 10 families here would be glad to get a crop with you.

Inarticulate and haggard from years of destitution, scores of farmers from all over the southeast and rural middle America found hope in Delta's existence. The vast majority, though, had to be turned away for lack of facilities and resources. Franklin wrote to H.L. Mitchell only days before Mrs. Thunderberg made her request, lamenting that the cooperative wanted to take in more sharecroppers, but no longer had space to do so.<sup>18</sup>

An aggressive publicity and fundraising campaign, mainly executed by Eddy, brought the interest of another constantly changing population to the cooperative: college-aged volunteers. Prompted by Eddy's extensive speaking engagements and article writing campaign, offers to volunteer from young men and women inundated his

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<sup>18</sup> From Harvey Barton to H. L. Mitchell, 29 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Mrs. Jim Thunderberg to Sherwood Eddy, 12 May 1936, Folder 4, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Dorothea Lange, "Plight of Resettlement Administration Rehabilitation clients on Dixie Plantation, Hillhouse, Mississippi" AEC; From Sherwood Eddy to H.L. Mitchell, 14 May 1937, STFU.

YMCA office, the farm's post office box, and the desk of Rose Terlin, the YWCA's National Student Secretary for Economic Education of the National Student Council. White and African American students wrote to volunteer from institutions as wide ranging as Berea College, Hanover College in Indiana, Washington University, Garrett Theological Seminary in Illinois, the University of Texas, the University of Georgia, the University of Kentucky, North Carolina State University, Emory College, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Gammon Theological Seminary in Georgia. In some cases, interested volunteers, like one white male college student who hitchhiked down from Madison, Wisconsin to lend a hand for the summer of 1936, showed up unannounced. Because volunteers usually stayed for only a few months, often during summer break from college, they proved both helpful to the community with their labor and entertainment, and a hindrance due to their constant turnover.<sup>19</sup>

A letter Franklin received from Warren H. Irwin, a twenty-two year old white resident of Loranger, Louisiana was typical of the requests Delta received. Irwin was a "single, young, non-smoker, non-drinker, without race prejudice, nor fear of hard work" and enthusiastic to help in an endeavor he viewed as a religious undertaking. Volunteers arrived from every corner of the United States, and most of the early volunteers at Delta Cooperative were drawn to the farm because of what Eddy termed "Christian cooperation." Though some volunteers came to Delta because of their belief that the farm would help them "get a real understanding of the problems of the common people," most were called to act through their commitment to Christian service. Signing his letter,

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<sup>19</sup> From Rose Terlin to Sam Franklin, 15 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Rose Terlin, 15 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; *The Co-Op Call*, Vol. III, No. 8, Delta & Providence – Program, House Box #1, AEC.

“Your (sic) for practical Christianity,” Irwin typified the majority of young, eager volunteers who came to Delta.<sup>20</sup>

Despite similar enthusiasm from African American college students, though, Sam Franklin and the trustees decided that no African American male volunteers should be accepted at the farm during the first few summers. Any African American volunteer would have to “adjust themselves to a race policy which while daring in this section falls short of what both they and we would desire.” “For this reason,” rationalized Franklin, “it will be necessary to choose only those who will bear with us patiently and make adjustments.” “I believe that it will not be advisable to take negro men this year on account of housing and other problems,” Franklin told Rose Terlin. Though he never stated it outright, Franklin feared that black men from outside the region would be in danger in the Mississippi Delta and, in turn, endanger the farm’s residents. Franklin’s reticence was also clearly a result of what he thought college-educated African American men might find at Delta, a social experiment that, at times, was not as progressive as it was billed. Fearing backlash to their racial policies, Franklin informed the female volunteers that under no circumstances were black and white girls to live “under the same roof” and mix “intimately on a social plane.” Franklin concluded that in all other areas female volunteers could mingle as they pleased but rooming together “would unduly complicate the situation at this time.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> From Sam Franklin to Warren H. Irwin, 10 April 1937, Folder 31, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; *The Co-Op Call*, Vol. III, No. 8, Delta & Providence – Program, House Box #1, AEC.

<sup>21</sup> From Rose Terlin to Sam Franklin, 15 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Rose Terlin, 15 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Rose Terlin, 30 April 1936, History—Farms (Delta & Prov.), House Box #1, AEC.

Although drawn to Delta through liberal Christian activism, most volunteers were typical college students of the era who worked hard and blew off steam in their free time. Volunteers paid a lodging fee of fifteen dollars per month and funded their own travel expenses. Terlin suggested to volunteers who came through her office that they dress appropriately for the work at hand. “Galoshes” were needed to deal with the Delta mud and women were instructed to wear cotton dresses so they would not stand out from the poorer female farmers; slacks and trousers were similarly discouraged for female volunteers. Typically, the male campers helped clear fields and repair buildings while their female counterparts ran a summer school for the children and helped female residents in “activities having to do with the care of a home.” Volunteers visited the farm’s swimming hole during breaks on summer days, where they occasionally did not abide by the surrounding community’s moral standards. One volunteer reported that “the ladies in the community do not approve our nudist tendencies.” On weekend evenings, after long workdays, volunteers attended farm dances, sang “mountain ballads,” played horseshoes and checkers, or collapsed into their cots from exhaustion. Occasionally they drove to Clarksdale or Memphis for entertainment in the way of minor league baseball and movies. Wanting to keep up a relationship with the farm, the STFU sent vivacious union secretary Evelyn Smith during the summer of 1938. She fit right in with the other college-aged volunteers.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> From Rose Terlin to Dorothy O. Williams at Spellman, 6 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Rose Terlin, 15 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Dorothy Franklin to Rose Terlin 15 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; *The Co-Op Call*, July 4, 1938 Vol. 3 No. 8, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Work Camps—AFSC, House Box #1, AEC.



To train and oversee college students who came to the farm, Eddy asked the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to establish a summer work camp beginning in 1937. The AFSC sent brochures to colleges campuses all over the country calling for students “conscious of the serious limitations of our economic structure in meeting fundamental human needs” and searching for “constructive patriotism (as compared with military service). This generation of students,” stated the brochure, “must face a world threatened by war, torn by class strife, and thwarted by poverty in the midst of plenty. They can be defeated by the thought of entering such a world,” it continued, “or they can be challenged by it to start, during their student days, the building of a better world.” The brochure informed applicants that at Delta Cooperative Farm they would be “building a work-shop, a road, and clearing land for the Delta Community” over the course of two months. In the summer of 1939, the nearby Mound Bayou newspaper reported that, “twenty-two young white representatives” from all over the United States and Jamaica came to volunteer at Delta’s summer work camp.<sup>23</sup>

As a result of the student volunteer summer work camps, the number of Quakers and political activists concerned with pacifism and racial equality increased at Delta. Quaker activists and utopian community advocates Wilmer and Mildred Young arrived with their children from Pennsylvania in September 1936 to assist with the cooperative endeavor and the summer work camps. The Youngs came, not as volunteers or staff but as full-fledged members with the same labor and community responsibilities as the other cooperators. Mildred took charge of a women’s social circle and Wilmer lent his services to constructing houses and overseeing the community garden. Their children, previously

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<sup>23</sup> Brochure for Volunteer Work Camps from the American Friends Service Committee for the Summer 1937, Folder 27, in the Delta and Providence Farms Papers #3474, SHC; M.L. Golden, “Students From Co-op Farm Visit Southern Advocate,” *The Southern Advocate*, July 22, 1939.

accustomed to middle class amenities, participated in the same educational and recreational opportunities as their ex-sharecropping neighbors.<sup>24</sup>

The stresses of embarking on a radical endeavor did not always consume the lives of Delta residents, volunteers, and staff; they fell in love, raised children, celebrated weddings and birthdays, and suffered sicknesses and deaths. The first wedding at Delta took place in January 1937 between the children of two white refugee sharecropping families, the Hendersons and the Moodys. Newlyweds Shirley and Jim Henderson and their extended families would be longtime members of the cooperative. Reverend Sam Franklin presided over the wedding of cooperators Birvin Mason and Margaret McKee. In December 1936, Mildred Young's sister, Dorothy Binns, visited Delta Cooperative Farm to spend the holidays and volunteer at the make-shift medical clinic. While there, Binns met the handsome, hardworking, and idealistic Blaine Treadway. By the next summer, Dorothy and Blaine were married and she had moved to the farm full-time. A year and a half later, they gave birth to their first son. Longtime Delta residents George and Leola Smith gave birth to their daughter, Mary Alice, seven days after the Treadways. Quaker activist volunteers Art Landes and Margaret Lamont met at Delta in February 1939 and were married by June.<sup>25</sup>

When not hard at work, black and white cooperators spent their free time at Delta engaged in segregated activities. Increased participation in varied entertainment and leisure activities marked a shift in the lives of many sharecropper families. Cultural

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<sup>24</sup> From Wilmer Young to Sam Franklin, 18 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; "Memo On Trip to Delta Cooperative Farm," American Friends Service Committee Archive, Special Collections, Haverford College; From Wilmer and Mildred Young to unknown December 1937, Wilmer and Mildred Young Papers, Manuscripts Department, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

<sup>25</sup> Untitled, House Box #1, AEC.

events of a wide array took place in the farm's community building. Delta acquired a motion picture projector in 1938 and showed free movies in the community building, an early showing for African Americans and a late showing for whites. By 1939, twelve families on the farm owned personal radios. Music was apparently very popular among cooperative residents and neighbors who frequented events at the community building. The cooperative did not have its own musical instruments for cooperators to use until 1937 when staff member Constance Rumbough sent away to Sears and Roebuck for a fiddle and guitar. After Delta acquired several musical instruments, the community center hosted a square dance every Saturday night. Social life on the farm sped up as families became more settled into their environs. County extension agents sponsored segregated home demonstration clubs for women while Delta sponsored its own Women's Club that mostly promoted the making and selling of clothes at the cooperative store. Adults encouraged young girls to join a social circle of their own that focused on sewing, bookbinding, and cooking. Save for the rare event, most leisure activities reinforced racial boundaries and adhered to the letter of the Mississippi law.<sup>26</sup>

Although on the surface the lives of residents at Delta were not so different from other rural Americans, the cooperative nature of the endeavor had a profound effect on their daily lives. Franklin, Eddy, and the other trustees intended the cooperative to be a viable, long term community, and the organization of the farm was an extension of that goal, with a chain of command to help operations run smoothly. Once enough families were in place, farmers chose a democratically elected council, selected every six months,

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<sup>26</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 15; From Dero A. Saunders to Sam Franklin, 20 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; "Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence in New Type Community," undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH; From Constance Rumbough to Paul Vanderwood, 11 April 1964, Folder 1, Delta Cooperative Farm Papers #03892-z, SHC.

to govern all farm decisions and appoint individuals to specific tasks in the spring of 1936. Reflecting a commitment to interracialism, the five person council could not consist of more than three members of the same race.

The council answered to the farm members but could be overruled by the Resident Director and the Board of Trustees. This hierarchy set up an unequal balance of power and resulted in many contentious council meetings. Decision making could often be a long, arduous task. First the farm council had to speak on behalf of the cooperators. Then Sam Franklin could weigh in, often using his veto power to overrule the council's decisions. Finally, for major decisions, the Board of Trustees entered the equation and, at times, overruled the will of the members. To the cooperators, Franklin seemed to be the mouthpiece of the Board of Trustees, carrying out the will of absentee white men. The complicated and hierarchical chain of command sometimes fostered suspicion and hard feelings among ex-sharecroppers whose only comparison to the situation was the hated riding bosses and absentee landlords of their former lives. In the beginning, though, Franklin and the trustees considered this process to be the most democratic and egalitarian way to proceed.

Franklin, Treadway, and the council set to work delegating tasks for each farming family to accomplish in the hopes of getting the farm off to a productive start. The Cooperative had three goals in its early weeks. The first was to begin making money. Cooperators cleared approximately three hundred acres and put them into cotton and staple crop production by mid April. Once farmers properly prepared the soil in late summer, they planted Delta's other main staple crop, alfalfa. Acreage not covered in timber or staple crops were sown with tomato, potato, corn, and other seeds for the

expansive community garden. Subsistence crops were augmented by beef, poultry, and dairy production. The Board of Trustees also pushed to establish a sawmill on the farm, but equipment and knowledgeable operators proved hard to come by in the initial weeks. Still, within a few months, Delta operated a small sawmill that quickly grew in production. Otto C. Morgan, a white tenant farmer and journeyman, born in Mississippi County, Arkansas during the 1880s, arrived sometime in the spring with his family and Franklin put him in charge of all sawmill and timber operations at Delta. Morgan's work ethic and rapidly acquired acumen eventually led to the sawmill eclipsing cotton production in financial returns, though it could not sustain itself indefinitely because of the finite availability of timber on the farm. Lastly, cooperators built new structures and renovated existing houses to accommodate the newly arriving cooperative members, staff, and volunteers. Houses were initially primitive, but offered several amenities that most sharecropper homes had not previously enjoyed, such as sanitary toilets, attached to the back of each home, and mosquito proof screening to reduce the threat of malaria. Each house was equipped with either kerosene or wood-powered stoves for cooking. To adhere to local custom and law, housing was segregated along the main road through the farm. Whites lived in homes along the north row and African American families lived across the road on the south row. The houses, however, were identical and provided to families on a first-come, first-served basis.<sup>27</sup>

Cooperative laborers finished the community building, capable of holding approximately one hundred people, in April as they continued construction on individual

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<sup>27</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 14 -17; From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 28 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 7 May 1936, Folder 4 in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; "Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community," undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH.

housing. Arthur Raper, who became a member of the Board of Trustees in 1938, thought that the community building was the heart of cooperative living:

For it was here that all the families met for the Cooperative business meetings, here that the people gathered to celebrate a good crop, to meet with some visitor who wanted to hear what the farmers themselves would say, to hear and see entertainment provided for them, and to complain to the Staff, or the Trustees, about something that went wrong. Here was a common meeting place for any and all members of the community.

For both egalitarian and expedient reasons, business and union meetings were integrated in the community building. Aside from business dealings, music often echoed from the building from the community radio, the old piano, or Saturday night square dances. The community building served as the backdrop for many of the most important events at Delta.<sup>28</sup>

Because of the farm's location bordering the levee and the rich alluvial soil that washed down river, the 2,138 acres that Sherwood Eddy purchased seemed the perfect location to begin building a new agricultural society and accomplish the first task of getting a good crop in the ground. The soil, however, was sharkey clay, better known as "buckshot." Sand and silt washed in from the Mississippi River usually made up about forty percent of buckshot soil. The other sixty percent was clay that possessed high water retention and was slow to drain. In practical terms, when buckshot saturated during winter and early spring, it became a mire of knee-deep mud. One farm resident remarked that "if he would stick to the earth in summer, it would stick with him in winter." When the soil dried, it developed wide cracks that threatened the integrity of seeds and roots.

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<sup>28</sup> From Arthur Raper to A. Eugene Cox, 5 January 1972, Jerry Dallas Delta Farm Cooperative Collection, M 109, Delta State University Archives, Cleveland, MS (hereafter JDC); From Sam Franklin to Jerry Dallas, 22 October 1986, JDC.

Fortunately for the cooperators, the first year's crops were successful despite the deficiencies of buckshot soil.<sup>29</sup>

The first spring and summer were busy months for all involved with the cooperative. As important as work projects, Delta's residents and managers were trying to figure out their identities and roles in this new endeavor. In fact, no one had yet decided the name of the farm. Between March and April, it was referred to variously as the People's Plantation, Rochdale Cooperative, Delta Cooperative, and Sherwood Eddy's Cooperative. In keeping with his modest character, Eddy made it clear that if his name were used in the farm's title he would resign as its trustee and treasurer. Eventually the Council and the Board of Trustees settled on Delta Cooperative Farm as the official name, perhaps because "People's Plantation" conjured the specter of Communism, an association Franklin and Eddy tried doggedly to avoid because of virulent anti-communism in Mississippi. Often though, residents referred to their home as Rochdale, in homage to the British Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, the first cooperative movement in modern history.<sup>30</sup>

On the surface, the little community at Delta might have been a microcosm for any community in America. Jess Erwin's young wife took over teaching Sunday school classes while other women took to beautifying the area around the community building. Staff and volunteers offered evening classes for adults in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

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<sup>29</sup> Sherwood Eddy, "A door of opportunity; or, An American adventure in cooperation with sharecroppers," 1937, Rare Book Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2; Jerry W. Dallas, "The Delta and Providence Farms: A Mississippi Experiment in Cooperative Farming and Racial Cooperation, 1936-1956," *Mississippi Quarterly* 3 (Summer 1987): 295; From Lindsey Hail to Edna Voss, 29 December 1936, Folder 20, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>30</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Sam Franklin, 14 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

Sawyer Otto Morgan was “going to night school and is learning long division for the first time, although he stands at the saw and estimates log footage as few college professors could.” The farm also offered a library, socials, outdoor sports, children’s story hours, a choir, and educational forums for adults on various topics including Japanese culture and cooperative pioneer Robert Owen.<sup>31</sup>

By the spring of 1937, a year after breaking ground, Delta Cooperative Farm resembled a small village. It claimed nearly thirty families, a community building for social, educational, and religious functions, a make-shift medical clinic, several rows of mosquito-proof houses, a post office, and over one thousand acres in alfalfa, cotton, and various cover crops. In the late summer, Sam Franklin spoke to a journalist as he looked out over the thriving, yet modest, cooperative. “Within 10 years,” Franklin proudly mused, “we hope to have 75 to 100 families here.” He envisioned Delta as a lively hamlet built on a cooperative model that would sweep the whole nation. Franklin and the other trustees hoped that their experiment could change the face of poverty in rural America, “wipe malaria out of the county, foster higher education,” and produce leaders from the impoverished families who now lived at Delta.<sup>32</sup>

The founders of Delta Cooperative Farm conceived of the endeavor as a remaking of plantation agriculture. In reality, Delta operated much the same way a plantation would. Although it borrowed strategies from cooperative models and completely cut out the profit that usually flowed into the pockets of plantation owners, Delta’s operations

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<sup>31</sup> Delta & Providence – Former Residents, House Box #1, AEC; Delta & Providence – Program , House Box #1, AEC.

<sup>32</sup> Eddy, “A door of opportunity,” “The Story of Delta Cooperative Farm in Pictures” Photographs Box, AEC; “Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community,” undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH.



replicated many facets of plantation agriculture. The endeavor paid skilled laborers more than unskilled laborers and farmers realized very little real income in the process. In fact, the trustees knew that small farms could not compete with large plantations so Delta was conceived as a “large plantation on the cooperative model in order to compete with privately owned large plantations.” Economist T.J. Woofter, a keen observer of sharecropping and the plantation system of agriculture, remarked in the late 1930s that “there can be little doubt of the similarity of the economic arrangements of the plantation share tenant and those of the worker on a co-operative farm.” For Woofter, the only differences between these two types of laborers were that “the tenant does not have any voice in management policies and receives a smaller proportion of the total income” while the cooperator, in theory, enjoyed both practices.<sup>33</sup>

Still, Delta Cooperative Farm did borrow from cooperative communitarian endeavors. Blaine Treadway established and operated a consumer’s cooperative, patterned after the Rochdale model, to oversee the selling of numerous products. The cooperative store sold meat, homemade ice cream, and vegetables from the community garden, including tomatoes, melons, onions, corn, cane, cabbage, and several varieties of potatoes, to both residents and non-residents. Additionally, the consumer’s cooperative store front, a newly erected building, sold garments fashioned by female cooperators and goods received from outside that sharecroppers normally procured from a plantation commissary or crossroads store. Tobacco, coffee, salt, sugar, fat meat, and basic provisions were also available at the store. A volunteer at Delta remembered that some

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<sup>33</sup> William Amberson, “To Rescue the South,” *Christian Register*, March 18, 1937, 23; “Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community,” undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH; T.J. Woofter, Jr., Ellen Winston, *Seven Lean Years* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1939), 163-164.

residents came to the store at 6 a.m. to get breakfast. The store sold “soft drinks” and, in order to boost the store’s profit, shoppers were charged one dollar for cups for the water cooler. “They thought that was expensive; thought it robbery to have to pay for water,” the volunteer remembered. “They would buy a paper cup and park it on the shelves to use it next time. The shelves were dotted with the cups!” Each member of the farm was automatically a member of the consumers’ cooperative and, every six months, had to buy five dollar shares in the cooperative until they reached a total of ten shares. Members also received dividends on what they purchased and the total of what was sold. For many people in and around Bolivar County, the consumer’s cooperative store became their only interaction with the peculiar farm near Hillhouse. Treadway, a genial Tennessean, and a bevy of young female members and volunteers usually worked as store clerks and fostered good relationships with some local whites who may have had doubts about the endeavor.<sup>34</sup>

A producers’ cooperative conducted all business related to Delta’s production and operated in tandem with the consumers’ cooperative. The producers’ cooperative sold goods to the consumers’ cooperative at wholesale prices and also conducted business off the farm, selling cotton and other crops to outside buyers. Members received dividends proportional to the total and quality of their work output. When the farm failed to produce a profit, which was likely at Delta because overhead costs were high, there were no dividends to distribute.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> From Constance Rumbough to Paul Vanderwood, 11 April 1964, in the Delta Cooperative Farm Papers #3892-z, SHC.

<sup>35</sup> “Some Basic Principles of the Delta Cooperative Farm,” Delta Cooperative Farms Papers, MVC.

Recognizing the uncertainty of Delta's income, the trustees established the Cooperative Foundation, Inc., a non-profit that raised money for the farm. The Board of Trustees, including Sam Franklin and Blaine Treadway, all agreed that the trustees, through the foundation, would own the land for an undetermined number of years, eventually turning it over to the ex-sharecroppers. The official charter stated that the trustees could "sell or transfer any part of the property to the cooperative farmers who have been awarded permanent membership in the cooperative farms." "Our land is held in trust by the trustees," reported William Amberson to the *Christian Register*. "Our members are building an equity in the property through their own labors," he continued, "and they will ultimately own the farm, as a co-operative group, together with all improvements which they make upon it." Eddy hoped that after the staff and volunteers established the cooperative model at Delta and ex-croppers took up all responsibilities, the Trustees could turn over all ownership to the cooperators. Franklin predicted that "in four or five years we will be able to turn it over to the people."<sup>36</sup>

Eddy spoke around the country, in places ranging from churches and colleges to chambers of commerce and town hall meetings to raise money for the Foundation. Eddy often scheduled lunch or dinner meetings with groups and charged a fee per plate. Although Eddy fronted the money to purchase Delta and the new residents agreed to repay the acquisition price of the Farm at 2.5 percent interest, he knew that his personal trust fund was insufficient to sustain a long-term venture. Aid in the form of small donations trickled in from individuals and religious organizations from as far away as Quebec, Canada. Some national organizations gave generously, including a \$2,000

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<sup>36</sup> "Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community," undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH; Amberson, "To Rescue the South," 23; "Record of Charters," Delta Cooperative Farms Papers, MVC.

donation from the New York City based Church Emergency Relief Committee. Eddy courted influential Americans, including theologian and social activist Warren Wilson of the Union Theological Seminary, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, both of whom pledged support and promised to rally like-minded individuals to their cause. Eddy also published dozens of articles and wrote scores of introduction letters on behalf of Sam Franklin to recipients as diverse as officials in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Mississippi author William Alexander Percy. Almost all received news of the farm with enthusiasm. Cordell Hull, the US Secretary of State and Tennessee native who would help establish the United Nations and win the Nobel Peace Prize in the next decade, wrote to Eddy expressing his admiration and support. By June 1937, donors had given Eddy's fund over ten thousand dollars for educational, agricultural, and medical projects while also providing Sam Franklin's salary. Eddy's speaking schedule truly was a kind of evangelizing on the farm's behalf. When economic times worsened on the farm and uncertainties loomed, northern philanthropy almost singlehandedly kept the cooperative afloat.<sup>37</sup>

Eddy often began his public remarks by situating Delta as an alternative to the Resettlement Administration's policies toward sharecroppers. He liked to compare Delta Cooperative with the Resettlement Administration's Dixie Plantation just a few miles down the road. Eddy felt certain that farmers at Delta were getting a squarer deal than those at Dixie, who rented the land at a higher rate and complained that they could not get

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Mitchell, "Cabins in the Cotton," *New Republic*, September 22, 1937, 175; "Sherwood Eddy Luncheon, Chamber of Commerce," George Sherwood Eddy Papers, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School (hereafter GSE); "Sherwood Eddy Fund, Contribution Account," GSE; From Sherwood Eddy to Sam Franklin, 19 April 1936, Folder 3 in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Rev. James Myers, 22 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

the aid they needed because of government “red tape.” In fact, at least two families, the Wilkinsons and the Holmes, migrated from Dixie to Delta. Eddy also bragged that “the Government at Washington” offered to build the houses at \$1,000 a pop but because of the timber on the land and the presence of the sawmill, the houses at Delta cost \$33 dollars to build. Additionally, he claimed that Bolivar County produced more cotton than any other county in America “if not in the world,” thus situating Delta on a prime piece of land purchased for approximately five dollars an acre and worth, Eddy assured his audience, well over ten times that amount. Audiences came away from Eddy’s remarks with the overwhelming feeling that government aid was inept and only endeavors like Delta could succeed. On this issue, Eddy and William Amberson were in complete agreement. Amberson pointedly critiqued the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal overall as unable to address the plight of sharecroppers. Amberson believed that the administration favored “small individual subsistence homesteads” that could not possibly address the needs of every destitute sharecropper or compete with large plantations. Because of the large number of tenant farmers, approximately 200,000 new families each year, Amberson insisted that agricultural cooperative communities were the only solution.<sup>38</sup>

Eddy tugged the heartstrings of his audience by belaboring sharecropper hardships while underscoring the hope that Delta represented. “The Negro Fleming,” declared Eddy, who was forced out of Arkansas, now plies his trade as a carpenter to help others build their own houses at Delta. He explained how one white farmer felt like a free man for the first time in his life after working on a plantation where black and white

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<sup>38</sup> “THE DELTA COOPERATIVE FARM: First Report of Progress” (Hillhouse, Mississippi 19 April 1936), Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers, SHC; Amberson, “To Rescue the South,” 23; “Delta Cooperative Farm Review,” Delta Cooperative Farms Papers, MVC.

tenants were “whipped” and, when evicted, had to “rescue his furniture only with his own rifle.” Eddy bragged about the accomplishments at Delta and conjured a bustling little village with an apiary, an invaluable sawmill, and Holsteins acquired “at a bargain,” “two tractors plowing furrows, four men spreading fertilizer, other crews logging, building houses, sowing cotton and corn and planting vegetables.”<sup>39</sup>

Addressing many of the pressing issues that brought about Delta’s formation, Eddy assured his audiences that the Rochdale model of cooperation was the best way to accomplish an overhaul of the crumbling economic system. More important, Eddy conveyed the clear message that Delta’s organizers were serious, smart men who were tapping into and building on a long history of cooperatives of which they were acutely aware. The founders hoped, through the consumers’ cooperative and the producers’ cooperative, that the undertaking in Bolivar County would duplicate the success of cooperatives in parts of Europe.

But the Mississippi Delta was a long way from Europe. Both sharecroppers and plantation owners found the plantation mentality difficult to cast aside, even by the late 1930s, and egalitarian class solidarity proved easier to preach than practice. Southerners interested in maintaining the status quo had so thoroughly quelled meaningful cooperation among the working class that many poor whites bought into white supremacy. New race relations, however, were not the only barriers to success at Delta.

In the cooperative model, members would have to come to grips with an increasingly mechanized system. Eddy put great faith in the Rust Brothers Cotton Picker and prayed that Delta would “be the first in our district to have its cotton picked by machinery.” Amberson joined in Eddy’s sentiment and hoped that Delta Farm would be

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<sup>39</sup> “First Report of Progress,” in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

the “proving ground” for the Rust Cotton Picker. In 1936, Mississippi’s Commissioner of Agriculture observed a demonstration of the Rusts’ invention and was none too impressed. He objected that the machine occasionally picked green leaves with the cotton and that the picker sometimes missed high-grade cotton, knocked it to the ground, and trampled it. The first demonstration at Delta, however, generated much excitement. Observers considered the coming of the mechanical cotton picker as a blessing and curse for sharecroppers. Mechanizing agriculture meant that long hours in the field could be reduced but also that many sharecroppers would be rendered redundant. To mitigate such fears, the Rust Brothers formed a foundation that sought to subsidize a number of cooperative efforts around the world, especially in developing regions, using the proceeds from the cotton picker to finance these efforts.<sup>40</sup>

The Rust brothers and their cotton picker embodied one of the great contradictions of the farm: it was a cooperative model using capitalist measuring sticks. As a result of the trustees’ ownership of the farm, the cooperators were, in some ways, like employees. The problematic and disjointed chain of command left members feeling completely disconnected from the Board of Trustees, who rarely visited the farm. Most damning was that members saw very little monetary compensation for their labor. Trustees pledged to turn the land over to the cooperators eventually, but in the interim most of the money the farm made went into paying overhead costs like equipment and seed or back to Sherwood Eddy, who had fronted the money in the first place. In addition to the tenuous relationship between cooperators and the trustees, the specter of

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<sup>40</sup> “Mechanical Cotton Picker Almost But Not Quit Does Job,” *Bolivar County Democrat*, September 10, 1936; From William R. Amberson to Laurent Frantz, 19 March 1936, Box VII, AEC.

race relations also shadowed the farm and soon confronted the trustees, staff, volunteers, and cooperators in ways that threatened the existence of the farm.

Though Delta's challenge to the plantation system was not as radical as the founders hoped, the presence of an interracial STFU local, a rarity in Jim Crow era Mississippi, demonstrated that the cooperators were committed to contesting unacceptable labor conditions. H. L. Mitchell authorized an official charter for a new STFU local based at Delta Cooperative Farm less than a month after farmers arrived. He sent the necessary paperwork for STFU Local 146/UCAPAWA Local 127 to African American resident Bennie Fleming, a union leader evicted from the Dibble Plantation and charter member of the cooperative. STFU officials like H. L. Mitchell, Howard Kester, Evelyn Munro Smith, and Claud Nelson kept in touch with their union members by paying frequent visits to the farm. Apparently Kester thought enough of the endeavor at Delta to ask Sam Franklin for ten pounds of Mississippi Delta soil to be used in his new "Ceremony of the Land," a ritual performed at large STFU gatherings which drew from notions of Christian brotherhood, socialist class solidarity, African American call and response, and a reverence for the earth. Kester's ceremony, which he wrote with Evelyn Smith, was his attempt to reach out to the STFU's rank and file through a participatory ceremony that echoed what many would have experienced in church. Asking for soil from Delta signaled that Kester felt the cooperative could play a role in the earthly salvation of downtrodden sharecroppers. STFU membership fluctuated at Delta, but in February 1938 Local 146 had thirteen white members and four African American



members. George Smith, one of the original members of Delta, was its president and Quaker Wilmer Young was the secretary.<sup>41</sup>

While raising money for the foundation, Eddy stressed that collective bargaining was the right of all laborers at Delta and that he was working closely with the STFU to ensure worker rights. He was careful to distance himself from more radical approaches to labor and race relations. “If we should desert” the STFU “and the Communists should capture the organization and inject the element of violence and race war,” declared Eddy, “the weaker race will be further crushed and the Union will be destroyed.” This sentiment demonstrated both Eddy’s loathing for communism and his belief in the importance of protecting Delta from it. Socialists and communists were often at odds, especially since communism had garnered a mainly negative image in the United States. Strictly in a political sense, Eddy knew that associating the farm’s endeavor with communism could jeopardize the whole affair. But it was not merely a show; Eddy was a staunch anti-communist who often critiqued communist governments around the world. He hoped that he would be able to distance his own socialist views and the cooperative’s egalitarian spirit from the more radical approaches of communists.<sup>42</sup>

Eddy’s commitment to egalitarian socialism also trickled down to the farm. Fair labor practices had a lasting impact on the cooperative’s members and their children. The council, with the full support of the Board of Trustees, decided that children under

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<sup>41</sup> From H.L. Mitchell to Bennie Fleming, 29 April 1936, STFU; “Delta Cooperative Farm Guest Book,” Oversize Box, AEC; From Howard Kester to Sam Franklin, undated, 1975 Addendum, AEC; From Sam Franklin to Howard Kester, 14 September 1938, STFU; From Frank McCallister to Dorothy May Fischer, 25 March 1939, in the Delta Cooperative Farms Papers, MVC; “Local Secretary’s Report,” 18 February 1938, STFU Box, AEC; Erik S. Gellman and Jarod H. Roll, “Owen Whitfield and the Gospel of the Working Class in New Deal America, 1936-1946,” *Journal of Southern History* 73 (May 2006): 304; Woodruff, *American Congo*, 166; Robert H. Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 158-159.

<sup>42</sup> “First Report of Progress,” in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers, SHC.

twelve were forbidden from laboring in the fields at Delta. Those children were instead paid a small sum by the cooperative, amounting to just a few cents each day, for babysitting their younger siblings and neighbors. The cooperative organized those not babysitting into “clean-up squads” who busied themselves doing odd jobs around the cooperative grounds. In a move that must have pleased the STFU local and amused their parents, the children formed a “Junior Union,” elected their own president, and lobbied the Cooperative Council for fair, age-appropriate wages. Additionally, the Council instituted a ten-hour workday, although members typically put in longer hours, especially when the farm was in its infancy. Though the eight-hour workday was in vogue among labor unions and socialists, rural laborers such as farmers were mainly excluded from such hours because their work was closely tied to the rising and setting sun. Instituting a ten-hour workday in 1936 demonstrated Delta’s progressive approach to rural labor and preceded by two years the eight-hour workday law established under the Fair Labor Standards Act.<sup>43</sup>

The most vexing and delicate of all the endeavors at Delta was interracialism. On this subject, Eddy was candid and, despite his paternalistic tendencies, demonstrated a complex understanding of African American and labor history.

Are we here rushing in where angels fear to tread? I for one refuse to believe that there is no solution for this perplexing question. If the Communists of Russia and the Moslems can solve it, is it insoluble only for Christians? We, or our ancestors, raided the African’s villages long ago and against his will dragged the Negro here in slavery. Every other civilized slave-owning country, except our own, freed its slaves without bloody war. Russia gave land to all its liberated serfs, but we never did to our freed men. As long as the owners could play the Negroes and the poor

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<sup>43</sup> “The Story of Delta Cooperative Farm in Pictures” Photographs Box, AEC; “Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community,” undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH.

whites one against the other, both have remained more or less in economic slavery. But at last they have seen that their interests are one.

Though his explanations were brief, Eddy understood the harsh legacy of slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow. Additionally, he assumed that the change that Delta represented would be accepted by the majority of white southerners only if they were ushered in by fellow southerners. Eddy made a point of highlighting the leadership of southerners in the venture. Referring to them, Eddy stated that Delta Cooperative Farm “was born in the hearts of Southern white men [who] absolutely refuse to run it on ‘Jim Crow’ lines of racial segregation and exploitation. Their vision and courage,” he concluded “are putting us Northern men to shame.”<sup>44</sup>

Eddy and most of the trustees understood the roots of historical, class-based racism in the South. Eddy gave priority to economic justice for southerners, regardless of race. The finer points of Mississippi’s racial caste structure would eventually give way if the system of economic injustice was reformed. Eddy declared that he refused to “draw a red herring across the trail by raising the moot question of ‘social equality’ which is now purely academic for these half-starving” sharecroppers.

The Negroes want bread and basic economic justice; a chance to live without fear and insecurity and degradation. They want rudimentary education and a right to work as self-respecting members of their own Union that demands elemental justice and liberty. The racial policies of these Cooperative farms (for we hope that this is only the first of a chain of such farms) will never be determined by Northern “Yankees,” but by Southern men. It was Southern white men who found both colored and white families evicted by the side of the road in Arkansas and took them in. Both are now working like beavers, happily and harmoniously together.

Eddy and the other farm organizers presumed that cooperators would embrace class solidarity. “The Negro and the poor white man today,” noted one early pamphlet from

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<sup>44</sup> “First Report of Progress,” in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

Delta, “are the victims of economic injustice” who have been “pitted against each other by those who wished to make money out of both of them.” The managers and Board of Trustees attempted to incorporate this understanding into business and interpersonal relationships on the farm in the hopes that it would trickle down to the farmers. In an early letter to a donor, Sam Franklin noted that white men who worked under black men were getting along well and engaged in productive work.<sup>45</sup>

Delta residents breached Deep South racial conventions in another important setting: church. The physical space of the worship service was one conspicuous location where cooperators transgressed southern racial mores. Franklin and the staff integrated previously segregated rural church services at Delta, particularly for significant religious holidays. “We held our Easter services in Fleming’s house,” wrote Sam Franklin, the farm’s white manager. “I suspect it has been a long time since whites and blacks sat down to celebrate the resurrection of Christ together in this part of the country.” Sunday school and adult “Christian education groups” were never officially segregated. Cooperative members proposed separate services for whites and blacks but the practice never caught on and worshipers of either race were free to attend all services and “sat where they pleased.” For Franklin, the worship service was a space that embodied two of the main aspects of Delta Cooperative Farm. He hoped that Christian practices would meld with interracial cooperation inside the church door and serve as the lifeblood of the community.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community,” undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH; From Sam Franklin to Thomas Alva Stubbins, 7 May 1936, Folder 4, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; “Some Basic Principles of the Delta Cooperative Farm,” Delta Cooperative Farms Papers, MVC.

<sup>46</sup> From Sam Franklin to Rev. James Myers, 22 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Jerry Dallas, 22 October 1986, JDC.

In addition to interracial church services, Delta also hosted interracial meetings and conferences that fostered cooperation across the color line beyond the farm's borders. In the fall of 1938, continuing its commitment to practical Christianity, Delta held a Negro Ministers' Institute in which African American ministers from the region came to attend courses offered by managers, trustees, and guest lecturers such as the Chaplain at the Tuskegee Institute. Classes at the institute focused on an array of topics including "Christianity and Modern Social Problems, The Minister's Use of the Bible, and a Reorientation in Theology." STFU official Howard Kester spoke on the broad topic of race relations (in exchange for which Sam Franklin offered to cover his travel expenses and, he joked, "an honorarium in the way of a check for \$10,000 payable when the new social order is established"). On Easter weekend in 1939 the Southern Socialist Conference held their annual integrated meeting at Delta. Southern representatives of the Socialist Party hoped that the "primitive surroundings" would help them "get in the right mood for an attempt at dealing with the tremendous problems of the southern area."<sup>47</sup>

Despite fostering interracial cooperation outside the community, Delta's residents had far from solved the race problem on the farm. Eddy's public remarks often reflected a balance between his egalitarian nature and Mississippi's racial caste structure. Delta Cooperative Farm operated on what Jonathan Daniels called "a queer compromise" between the Trustee's "Christian consciences" and Mississippi's "dangerous prejudices. "They want to take the Christian attitude toward race," observed Daniels, "but they do not want to complicate the cooperative experiment unduly by unnecessarily alarming Mississippi." Sam Franklin recalled that the most knowledgeable and efficient farmer at

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<sup>47</sup> From Frank McCallister to Dorothy May Fischer, 25 March 1939, in the Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, MVC; From Sam Franklin to Howard Kester, 14 September 1938, STFU.

Delta was George Smith. Smith was indispensable to all cooperative endeavors, a leader in the STFU local, and later spoke about the cooperative effort at national meetings of the NAACP. Yet because of the color of his skin, white members would often ignore Smith's suggestions, even when it came to carpentry. Franklin was sure that the fact that, on the farm, "his abilities would never be rewarded to the same degree that they would if he were white rankled within him." Though Franklin was aware of discrimination against Smith, he apparently took no action to alter such behavior. William Amberson reported to Fisk University President Charles S. Johnson that as early as December 1936, the cooperative was "hitting angles of the race problem which have been a revelation to us. We had once thought that the addition of a colored worker in the higher administration staff might ease the strain" among cooperators, admitted Amberson, "but recent indications suggest that this might be just the wrong thing to do." He gave no specific account of the "recent indications," although a survey of several white members at Delta revealed that they still harbored racist views. The unnamed members believed that "Negroes were like brutes" who were unhygienic and sexually promiscuous. One white cooperator assured the interviewer that,

We don't hate the Negro; People in the North think we hate the Negro.  
We don't. The negro is just different, that's why we don't mix. They  
don't dance or sing like we do.

Constance Rumbough remembered that racial integration "didn't go far at all." The main goal, she said, was that the farmers achieve economic equality only. Full integration of social activities did not seem to be vital to the community's mission.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 15; From Constance Rumbough to Paul Vanderwood, 11 April 1964, Folder 1, in the Delta Cooperative Farm Papers #3892-z, SHC; From William Amberson to Charles S. Johnson, December 1936, Folder 2-g STFU, Box VII, AEC; Daniels, *Southerner Discovers the South*, 150-151.

In December 1936, African American cooperators called an “indignation meeting” to address what they perceived as racial discrimination. Housing was a limited commodity on the farm and when two African American families vacated Delta, black cooperators felt that the families had been forced out and were concerned that their houses would go to white families. Despite his acute sensitivity to the downtrodden, the incident prompted William Amberson to comment that “the race difficulties are much more in the minds of the colored group than in the white. The racial problem is evidently tremendously more difficult than any of us had dreamed,” he continued, “yet thereby it becomes an even greater challenge.” Despite obvious fissures in race relations at Delta, the “indignation meeting” demonstrated that African Americans would not hesitate to advertise their grievances to the managers and other cooperators. White cooperators noticed that African Americans with whom they had worked side by side for many years in the plantation system and who normally only answered with simple and deferential responses, now stood up to any indignities that came their way. White cooperator Jim Henderson remarked to African American cooperator Jim Billington how much the latter had changed since arriving at Delta.

When you first came here, all you did was say, ‘Yas suh’ to everything a white man told you. The riding boss could call you a ‘damned nigger’ and tell you to hurry up and finish the job or, ‘I’ll kick your behind for you’ and all you’d say was, ‘Yas suh’. Now here you talk a lot.

Delta Cooperative Farm provided the space in which African Americans no longer felt compelled to accept the indignities that had previously defined much of their lives.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> From William Amberson to Sam Franklin, 21 December 1936, AEC; “REPORT on Delta Cooperative Farm,” Delta Cooperative Farms Papers, MVC; Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2007), 52.

In many cases, indignation on the part of poor farmers was well founded. Franklin was constantly concerned that his authority would be usurped by cooperators, thus he occasionally undermined the farm council's decisions and often ignored Delta's egalitarian principles. On several occasions, black and white farm workers and outside observers accused Franklin of heavy-handedness in his management of the farm. Though Franklin was frequently praised for his efficiency and generosity by Eddy and distant onlookers, members of the farm did not always see him in such positive light. By most accounts, Franklin hovered over cooperative laborers, making suggestions, prodding them to work harder and increase production. Upon walking the length of the property with Franklin and observing his interactions with working cooperators, Jonathan Daniels reported that "there is undoubtedly a fire in the man." It seemed clear, too, that Franklin held paternalistic attitudes toward the poor agrarians at Delta. "I look forward to the day when all of them, black and white, will call me by my first name" mused Franklin. "But we must remember," he conceded, "that we are dealing with rough, passionate men." One observer, who was sympathetic to interracial cooperatives but unhappy with Delta's leadership, called Franklin a "paternalistic dictator" and refused to support the endeavor.<sup>50</sup>

Paternalism, even from the most well-meaning racial progressives like Franklin, hampered biracial and cross-class movements from abolition to civil rights. Historian William Link, in his research on the paradoxical practices of southern progressives, argued that white progressives displayed the "often erratic behavior of reformers: how

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<sup>50</sup> From Sam H. Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 22 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Daniels, *Southerner Discovers the South*, 149-151; From Bradner J. Moore to William R. Amberson 1 May 1936, Folder 4, Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to John S. Radosta, 7 May 1936, Folder 4, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.



they embraced uplift and progress, yet believed in a hierarchy of race and culture; how they were fervent advocates of democracy, yet also endorsed measures of coercion and control.” The liberals at Delta in the 1930s and 1940s displayed similar tendencies. By calling African Americans “the weaker race” in public remarks, Eddy conveyed his continued paternalistic views that were all too common among many liberal white men of his day. A letter to Sherwood Eddy from a woman who hoped to find employment teaching at Delta demonstrated the contradictions in the attitudes espoused by many liberals during the 1930s. Norma Nelle Bullard, from Aurora, Illinois, assured Eddy that she knew “a good bit about the darkies, for we have had them in our home. However,” she tempered, with no sense of irony, “in those days they served us; it would be my joy to now serve them.” Reflecting on Delta Cooperative Farm thirty years after it closed its gates, former trustee Arthur Raper commented that the South’s rural poor possessed “no tradition of taking part in community affairs, or even in decisions directly affecting their own lives.” Raper, anti-lynching activist, sharecropper advocate, and member of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), saw rural African Americans as helpless because they possessed, as far as he knew, no history of self-organizing or community activism. Raper was blind to what recent scholars like Steven Hahn, Robin D.G. Kelley, Charles Payne, and Mary G. Rolinson have revealed—a rich, if often furtive, tradition of African American activism. But before the classic civil rights era, this point was lost on many whites of all political persuasions. In his research on African American rural activism, Kelley wondered if interracial organizing efforts led by whites were unable to mobilize more support because they failed to tap into African American community organizations already present.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> From Norma Nelle Bullard to Sherwood Eddy, 9 May 1936, Folder 4, in the Delta and Providence

The manifestations of cultural superiority were deleterious to the cooperative effort at Delta. For example, though integrated church services had the larger goal of racial understanding and cooperation in mind, they ignored rural religious practices. Although religious holidays were often celebrated together, very few farm residents attended church services because white missionaries did not preach the kind of rural prophetic religion that interested many sharecroppers. One staff member thought that integrated worship “was a painful experience [because] the two races had been used to different forms of worship.” Though the rural poor who lived at Delta and Providence readily understood the sermons, the services held by educated white missionaries lacked other similarities vital to rural church services. For instance, Reverend Franklin laced services at Delta with Presbyterian restraint, a scene wholly unattractive to sharecroppers used to the fervor of tent revivals. By not taking complaints of racial discrimination seriously, by holding interracial church services that were vastly different from the rural prophetic religion to which many black southerners were accustomed, and by generally imposing Christian or socialist ideology, white volunteers, managers, and activists at Delta overlooked the long history of community-based activism present among rural

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Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Arthur Raper to A. Eugene Cox, 5 January 1972, JDC; Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, 1 (June 1993): 83. For community-based African American activism in the South see Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

African Americans. The staff and the trustees often treated the members as their children who could not be trusted to make sound decisions for themselves.<sup>52</sup>

To explain Sam Franklin, Arthur Raper, and other whites' attitudes *only* as paternalistic, however, simplifies them and removes them from their historical contexts. Scientific racism still held considerable influence. For most white and black residents at Delta, given the prevailing opinion of the day, it was "natural" to separate residences and recreational activities. Additionally, while the New Deal was one of the most liberal government undertakings in American history, it was also anti-egalitarian and pro-capitalist, especially as conservative southern Democrats pushed back against many of Roosevelt's reforms. Delta Cooperative Farm could not escape the limitations of its time nor the social-political climate of the New Deal.<sup>53</sup>

In the same ways, the New Deal made Delta what it was. First, the Agricultural Adjustment Act pushed the moment to its crisis and brought increased national attention to the labor and economic exploitation of sharecroppers. Second, Sherwood Eddy and his circle were, in the main, supporters of Roosevelt's administration and admirers of Eleanor Roosevelt. They were encouraged that the Resettlement Administration attempted to implement the cooperative model too, though disagreements about how to best carry out the endeavor persisted. It is plain, however, that Roosevelt's hope for a pluralist society did not always equate to egalitarianism and scientific racism still ruled the day. Limits of New Deal liberalism were equally reflected in the day-to-day activities

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Donald M. Royer, "A Comparative Study of Three Experiments In Rural "Community" Reconstruction In The Southeast" (MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1943), 62.

<sup>53</sup> For more on southern Democrats' fight against the New Deal, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); 221-247.

at the cooperative. The complicated and often contradictory New Deal milieu highlights the internal conflicts that, to a degree, hamstrung the endeavor at Delta.

Pragmatically, Eddy and the other trustees knew that interracialism in the Mississippi Delta had to be handled carefully. For people involved in interracial activities or upending established labor practices, Mississippi was as dangerous as Arkansas. Exactly one year before Delta was founded, Reverend T. A. Allen, an African American minister and sharecropper activist, was murdered and his body thrown into a river near Hernando, Mississippi. Planters apparently killed Allen for organizing one of the state's few STFU locals. Even the appearance of interracial labor or organizing had to be handled carefully. After all, the *Chicago Defender* likened Delta to a volatile "keg of dynamite" that threatened to blow southern race relations and labor practices to smithereens. The *Chicago Defender* hoped, however, that Delta would prove to be the harbinger of "the new social order that will soon sweep the South."<sup>54</sup>

To help drum up funding and support for Delta, Eddy published a small booklet titled "A door of opportunity; or, An American adventure in cooperation with sharecroppers." Ostensibly, Eddy conceived of this booklet as a way to not only raise funds for the cooperative but also to introduce many southerners to the farm. Eddy laid out the four tenets of Delta Cooperative Farm and stated that the endeavor grew from a deep desire and conviction to aid evicted sharecroppers. Eddy expounded on the third tenet of biracial equality at length, wedding the idea of racial equality with economic parity but stopping short of advocating for the integration of social activities. Addressing the farm's goal of interracial cooperation, Eddy explained;

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<sup>54</sup> John Robinson, "Many Activities of Sharecroppers Threaten Southern Social Order," *Chicago Defender*, August 13, 1938, 10.

We aim to be loyal to the principle of inter-racial justice in enlisting the cooperation of the white and Negro races in economic activity designed to bring about their mutual betterment. Without raising the question of “social equality,” the teaching of which is forbidden by the laws of Mississippi (Statute No. 1103 of 1930), we endeavor to develop a sense of solidarity and to bring workers of both races to a realization of the necessity of facing their mutual economic problems together.<sup>55</sup>

The booklet straddled the knife’s edge between promising what the local community wanted to hear while upholding Delta’s tenets of interracial cooperation and justice. Eddy continued, however, to state that “the Negro is doubtless the acid test of America’s principle of democracy. The Negro is also the spiritual test of our country.” He stressed that all decisions made on the farm, especially on matters of race, were made by southerners. Eddy was also quick to point out that the farm manager, Sam Franklin, was a native Tennessean and devout Christian, and that white and black farmers were cooperating in work and economy, yet conducted separate social lives. He closed by assuring southerners, and Mississippians specifically, that the cooperative would adhere to the racial customs of the region as much as possible.<sup>56</sup>

On several occasions Eddy attempted to seek out the support of “men of good will” in Mississippi before rumors spread of communism or miscegenation at Delta. Besides gaining national and international financial support and raising awareness about the plight of sharecroppers in Arkansas, Eddy also began efforts to secure the well-being

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<sup>55</sup> Sherwood Eddy, “A door of opportunity; or, An American adventure in cooperation with sharecroppers,” 1937, Rare Book Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 33; Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, 83. Mississippi Code 1103 of 1930 stated: “RACES – social equality. Marriage between – advocacy of punished. – Any person, firm, or corporation who shall be guilty of printing or circulating printed, typewritten or written matter urging or presenting for public acceptance or general information, arguments or suggestions in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and negroes, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars or imprisonment not exceeding six months or both fine and imprisonment in the discretion of the court.”

<sup>56</sup> Eddy, “A door of opportunity,” 33.

of Sam Franklin and the other inhabitants of Delta Cooperative Farm. Above all Eddy feared accusations of interracial sex. The perceived sanctity of white womanhood, Eddy knew, was the third rail of southern race relations. He envisioned a scenario that was all too common in the southern past. In a letter to Sam Franklin, Eddy wrote;

Some white girl will get in trouble. To avoid punishment she will point out some negro as having attacked her. The man may be lynched before there is any trial or inquiry or anything of the kind. I think we must get sponsors and the backing of men of good will before such an incident occurs, before they start the inevitable propaganda that we are a bunch of communists teaching free love.

The recent trials of the “Scottsboro Boys” hung in the air as a reminder of the kind of danger Delta Cooperative Farm could encounter. In 1931, nine African American teenagers were arrested and accused of raping two white women in a train near Scottsboro, Alabama. When the Communist International Labor Defense committee stepped in to represent the teenagers and the hopes of a fair trial, white moderates and conservatives were incensed by the “meddling” of radical “outsiders.” Eddy and his associates did not want to contend with the kind of foment that the Scottsboro Boys trial produced, nor did they want to confront the ire of conservative or moderate white southerners. On the contrary, Eddy hoped that the cooperative would gradually create racial harmony. Friends warned Eddy to “exercise very great care in the realm of interracial relations lest all that you seek to do... be neutralized by too bold a move in the sphere of interracial activities.” Delta Trustee Bishop William Scarlett implored Eddy to use only southern men on the cooperative; “the experience of the Scottsboro Defense Committee shows how they resent northern attempts to step into their affairs.” The more

support Eddy sought, the more he realized that Delta Cooperative was both an enormously important and dangerous endeavor.<sup>57</sup>

Correspondence among Delta's staff and the trustees in the first summer and fall spoke of unnamed threats to the farm and its residents. Supporters of the farm were fearful that farm enemies would use the slightest excuse to mount a violent campaign against the farm. On a visit in September, STFU organizer and budding folk singer Lee Hayes sent a letter from Delta Cooperative to friends back east describing his desire to have "a strong escort of about a hundred armed union men" to protect cooperative residents. The letter somehow made it into the hands of a local planter and raised even more suspicion about the curious farm. Howard Kester sent off a furious letter to Hayes, haranguing him for being "negligent," "irresponsible," and "thoughtless," and for providing "perfect ammunition for our enemies." Kester admonished Hayes that his statements and others like them had "given us our greatest troubles and permitted the planters and officers of the law to accuse us of being insurrectionists."<sup>58</sup>

Although Sam Franklin seemed to dismiss the idea that mob violence would befall the cooperative, William Amberson warned Franklin to take threats of violence seriously. Amberson outlined plans for mitigating future intimidation and defending the cooperative, and he suggested that Blaine Treadway be deputized in order to get on the good side of the local sheriff and to have some authority if an angry mob descended on

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<sup>57</sup> For more on the Scottsboro case, see James E. Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage, 1995); From Sherwood Eddy to Bishop Will Scarlett, 3 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sherwood Eddy to Sam Franklin, 7 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From F. S. Harmon to Sherwood Eddy, 7 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Bishop Will Scarlett to Sherwood Eddy, 9 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>58</sup> From Howard Kester to Lee Hays, 3 October 1936, Folder 15, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

Delta. In case of attack, Amberson begged Franklin to place an alarm on the boiler and erect a guard house on the most remote end of the property. Lastly, Amberson told Franklin that he and the cooperators must be ready to take up arms if necessary to defend their endeavor. Cooperators discussed at length whether or not members should be armed. Some ex-croppers supported this idea, saying that non-violence had not worked for them yet. Others suggested that only whites be allowed to defend the cooperative while black members would be corralled into a hideaway. None of these steps were taken, but Amberson's suggestions underscored the serious threats directed against Delta and suggested a vast difference in Amberson's philosophies and Franklin's practices. Amberson, lacking the religious foundation that Franklin possessed, reacted much the same way that rural farmers, who were no strangers to firearms or violence, might have reacted. Franklin's practice of "turn the other cheek" offended Amberson's hot-tempered nature. Despite Amberson's best efforts to mitigate threats, fear of attacks and sabotage continued.<sup>59</sup>

Buttressed by his faith in humanity and Christian principles, Franklin's rosy outlook persisted. "Our cooperative meetings in which negroes and white people sit together have of course brought our race policy before the community," Franklin revealed, "and there has been some criticism from the illiterate lower class of white people." Yet Franklin did not want to betray his own efforts by painting too bleak a picture. "In general," he continued, "we have been amazed at the friendliness of the reception we have had." The goodwill between the outside community and Delta, however, was often little more than a shroud of civility. Though the cooperators often

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<sup>59</sup> From William Amberson to Sam Franklin, 14 July 1936, AEC; From Dorothy Fischer to Bishop William Scarlett, 7 December 1936, Folder 19, in the Delta and Providence Farms Papers, #3474, SHC.



received support from Bolivar County public services, especially with health and sanitation projects, neighboring white planters were unfriendly, openly suspicious, and even hostile when they spoke about the goings on at Delta. Most planters agreed that the land Eddy bought was substandard and had ruined at least two previous planters. More exasperating than the staff's farming ignorance, though, was the biracial nature of Delta. Integration found its way into day-to-day courtesies when farm residents took to calling each other "Mr.," "Mrs.," and "Miss." Those who knew each other intimately would use informal greetings. "Crazy," one exasperated local white critic spat, "mistering niggers in Mississippi."<sup>60</sup>

At an "opposition meeting" held in Memphis in April 1936, local community leaders accused Delta of doing more than "mistering niggers." Sam Franklin attended the meeting and found a minister, "adept in old-fashioned Southern pulpit oratory," who was "dwelling on the horrors of attacks on white girls by Negroes, and presenting the case very luridly." The minister accused Sherwood Eddy, who was not there to defend himself, of being a Communist who believed that white women deserved to be raped by black men. Franklin attempted to defend his friend and the undertaking at Delta but was cut off when another minister declared "if I was calling him a liar he would step outside with me and settle it." Franklin perceived that "others seemed anxious to get me outside in order to have a part in punishing me for my temerity." Franklin ultimately escaped the meeting without a physical confrontation. Coupled with internal problems of racism,

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<sup>60</sup> From Sam Franklin to unaddressed, 7 May 1936, Folder 4, in the Delta and Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Daniels, *Southerner Discovers the South*, 159.

opposition from outsiders corroded Delta's progress and eventually threatened its very existence.<sup>61</sup>

Although articles, speeches, and pamphlets positioned Delta Cooperative Farm as a model for the South and the nation, the reality was less promising. Audit records show that the farm could not continue to survive on its current financial footing. Delta made a net profit of over eight thousand dollars during its first year of operation in 1936. By 1942, however, Delta netted a total profit of only eight hundred dollars. While profits in 1936 exceeded expectations, a series of harsh, soaking winters and hot, dry summers turned the soil at Delta alternately into a quagmire and then a cracked, barren wasteland. To make conditions worse, some of the farm volunteers and employees were inept at their jobs. Well-meaning volunteers from small town and urban America came to Mississippi to lend a hand at Delta. Most had never lived or worked in such conditions and impeded the progress of production. When Jonathan Daniels visited Delta in 1937, he concluded that the volunteers and missionaries were "Robinson Crusoes washed up by good will on the Delta of Mississippi where they were applying their city brains and missionary Christian enthusiasm." Yet, their "intellectual ignorance" toward daily farming operations, lamented Daniels, "seemed to me then... to be the tragic flaw in the Delta Cooperative Plantation."<sup>62</sup>

Contradictory approaches to interracialism and hastily established agricultural and economic structures weakened Delta Cooperative Farm out of the gate. To be sure,

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<sup>61</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 22 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>62</sup> Delta made a profit of \$8,562.47 in 1936. Profits dramatically declined each year until 1942 when the farm made a profit of only \$839.59. See Audits from Delta Cooperative Farm, Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, MVC; Daniels, *Southerner Discovers the South*, 149, 154.

starting an interracial farming cooperative in the Deep South that supported labor organizing was a radical and admirable undertaking. Although a society built on white planter hegemony stacked the deck against them, cooperators made small but remarkable progress at Delta in the mid and late 1930s. Not long after farmers were settled on the farm, however, internal racial and financial problems began taking tangible tolls. Time would tell if the struggling cooperative could withstand internal deficiencies and external disapproval to accomplish what it set out to do in March 1936: find economic solutions to sharecroppers' dilemmas through egalitarian, interracial, and Christian means.

Delta Cooperative Farm residents and neighbors celebrated Christmas 1936 on a cheerful note. On Christmas Eve, the cooperative's children performed a manger scene and pageant. Some of the staff dressed up as Santa Claus and distributed gifts—many of them donated—to their young residents. At the end of the night, one African American resident stood and, alone, sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing” the “Negro National Anthem.” The residents had had a good year. Together, and with the help of people like Sam Franklin and Sherwood Eddy, they had lifted themselves out of the mire. Their fortunes as destitute sharecroppers seemed changed for the better. In less than one month, however, their positive outlook would begin to change.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> From Dorothy Franklin to Florence G. Tyler, 20 January 1937, Folder 23, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

## Chapter Three

### The Limits of Interracialism and the Failure of Delta Cooperative Farm, 1937—1942

The cooperative's first calendar year ended on a positive fiscal note. Sam Franklin estimated that the farm had harvested 150 bales of cotton in 1936, roughly three-fourths of a bale per acre, or about 375 pounds of cotton per acre. This was well above the average American cotton farmer who produced an average of just under 190 pounds per acre, but fell far behind neighbor Oscar Johnston's behemoth operation at Delta Pine and Land Company which yielded 638 pounds of cotton per acre in the same year. The *New Republic*, which gained access to Delta's bookkeeping, reported that the cooperative made more than \$18,000, mainly from cotton and timber production. The overhead expenses for the first year amounted to \$8,000, and another \$1,000 were paid toward the loan used to purchase the original acreage. On average, this left \$327 in cash income for each member family. Cooperative member income was more than double the \$122 the Works Progress Administration (WPA) reported the average sharecropper household received in 1935. Additionally, the WPA deduced that sharecroppers' cash income was only thirty to fifty percent of their real expenses and did not factor in shelter, food, and other necessities. "Applying these ratios," concluded the *New Republic*, "the total real income of Delta Cooperative Farm families would range from \$655.06 to \$1,091.76," which approached the income of the average employed American laborer. For the *New Republic*, these figures were evidence that "white and Negro sharecroppers, organized

cooperatively, can raise their standard of living above anything the South has previously known.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet when visiting Delta Cooperative Farm the same year, author and newspaper editor Jonathan Daniels peered through the thick Mississippi heat and saw the endeavor for all its shortcomings. While praising all involved for their efforts and genuinely impressed by what he saw, Daniels rightly observed that staff and volunteers were “better grounded in social and religious doctrine than in agricultural science.” The same could be said for the absentee trustees, who often made decisions that affected Delta’s residents. Amberson admitted to staffer Gene Cox that he “never actually saw [the cooperators] in the fields.” More damning to the cooperative method, though, was that Delta “still hung dependent upon capitalistic philanthropy,” not “upon the cooperation in brotherhood of the common man.” For Daniels, cotton and timber were not the source of Delta’s income. “The one dependable cash crop is rich Yankees of soft heart,” declared Daniels, who “stir in sympathy to the churchly sound of Christian Cooperation.” Daniels was right about the donations that rolled in from mainly northern philanthropists. Most donations were solicited by Sherwood Eddy, but all the staff at Delta used their connections to increase the funds the farm had at its disposal. Dorothy Franklin sent a letter to a friend in Amherst, Massachusetts, who in turn read the letter to a group of her friends. “I can assure you,” her friend replied, “that we had a group of women weeping real tears.” The group of women—Daniels’s “rich Yankees of soft heart”—promptly

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<sup>1</sup> From Sam Franklin to Robert F. Strong, 6 February 1937, Folder 24, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC; Jonathan Mitchell, “Cabins in the Cotton,” *New Republic*, September 22, 1937, 175-177; From William Amberson to Vincent C. Widney, 6 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Gene Dattel, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 343-344; The 1936 annual income for Delta Cooperative families equals approximately \$9,917.61 to \$16, 529.25 in current (2010) US dollars.

donated to the cooperative effort. If not for donations, Delta might have closed in its second year.<sup>2</sup>

The years between 1937 and 1942 saw the death and eventual rebirth of a social experiment in the Mississippi Delta. The rosy public perception of Delta Cooperative, portrayed by the *New Republic* article and shared by distant observers eager to praise a worthy cause, belied myriad underlying problems that Jonathan Daniels only glimpsed. The excitement of a productive start among cooperators soon gave way to harsh realities. Natural disasters and race and class antagonisms hampered the efforts at Delta, impeding residents' dreams to remake southern society. First, farming was difficult under the best of circumstances. But during the Great Depression, the unpredictability and frustrations of working the land were exacerbated by poor weather and even poorer financial returns. The first productive year at Delta proved to be an exception across the rural South. The remaining years, when the cooperative struggled, were typical of the hard lives eked out by agrarians living hand-to-mouth everywhere. Second, Christian and socialist ideologues like Sherwood Eddy, Sam Franklin, and William Amberson chose to experiment with their radical visions for America in this harsh environment. The trustees did not fully consider the cruel realities of farming in the Deep South. Their new hope for America blinded them to their own ignorance of exactly how to implement their vision in an unpredictable and unforgiving land. The failures that followed were both human and institutional, and they exacerbated race and class antagonisms that already existed just under the surface but were largely pushed to the margins during the cooperative's successful start the year before. Amberson, Eddy, Franklin, and scores of

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Daniels, *A Southern Discovers the South* (New York: The MacMillan Company), 154-155; From William Amberson to Gene Cox, 6 December 1968, AEC; From Marguerite E. Bicknell to Dorothy Franklin, 14 October 1936 Folder 19, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

sharecroppers made a leap of faith at Delta and ultimately fell short. The social experiment at the cooperative underscores the failure of many utopian communities when ideologies were put into practice while the material realities of those living the experiment were not given foremost consideration. Out of Delta's failure, however, grew a new community. Remaining members revised their vision for a cooperative community and fashioned new solutions to the problems of the rural poor.

To the dismay of everyone living along the Mississippi River in 1937, rain indeed followed the plow. Torrential rains fell on the farm not long after cooperative residents celebrated their first New Year's Day at Delta. In the first few weeks of 1937, the Mississippi River Valley received the most rainfall since the deadly 1927 flood that displaced thousands of Delta residents. By late January, the farm was reduced to a mud bog, and floods upriver threatened to overwhelm the levee nearest Delta. The same rains that threatened Delta Farm also wreaked havoc up and down the entire Mississippi River flood plain. At the Resettlement Administration's Dyess Colony in Arkansas, excessive rainfall and frigid temperatures left the colony a flooded, frozen mess. Colony managers sent colonists to live with relatives in the area or put them on trains to Memphis. Homeless flood victims faced freezing temperatures and influenza, which relief workers feared would spread rapidly among refugees housed in close quarters. As a precaution, the Delta Cooperative's women and children were evacuated to Memphis like thousands of other refugees from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Missouri. Delta's evacuees found refuge in a vacant café, two private homes, and the Rust Brothers' factory. At the factory, the Red Cross assisted Delta's refugees, and local Memphis bakeries donated

loaves of bread. Meanwhile the men secured what they could and built evacuation boats in case the levees broke. By the time the water began receding in February, the 1937 flood had covered more than eight million acres and killed nearly 400 people. The Red Cross mobilized its largest effort to that time and estimated they attended to over eighteen thousand refugee families who fell victim to the rising waters and disease. After a month of waiting out the rain, the women and children returned to find production already behind schedule. “As we start plowing,” Sam Franklin confided in farm trustee Reinhold Niebuhr, “I can see that we are up against quite a problem if we are to get this damp soil ready for planting on time.” To lift their spirits, cooperative residents sang “We Shall Not Be Moved” at the conclusion of a February community meeting.<sup>3</sup>

The flood in the winter of 1937 marked the beginning of Delta’s downward financial spiral. Not even a year old, Delta Cooperative Farm began to confront financial and agricultural problems that proved difficult to overcome. The flood had set agricultural operations behind by one month. Cooperators did not plant cotton on the farm until mid-April. Slow production and inadequate financial returns put additional pressure on an endeavor struggling to find stability. As tensions rose due to harsh weather, poor crop yields, and economic instability, misunderstandings and disagreements among farm residents followed—further exacerbated when cooperative members were not immediately paid for their work. Most of this unrest manifested in racial and class antagonisms.

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<sup>3</sup> David Welky, *The Thousand-Year Flood: The Ohio-Mississippi Disaster of 1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 180-199; From Sam Franklin to Barbara Parker, 5 February 1937, Folder 24, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Reinhold Niebuhr, 11 February 1937 Folder 25, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; “Minutes of the Cooperative Meeting,” 28 February 1937, Folder 26, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers, #3474, SHC.



Each group involved with the cooperative effort was often oblivious to the travails of others. White cooperative residents were unsure what to make of black residents advocating for rights they had heretofore been denied, while black ex-sharecroppers were concerned that whites were getting better financial returns and preferential housing at Delta. Additionally, Resident Director Sam Franklin and the Board of Trustees often viewed former sharecroppers as a primitive community who needed to be shepherded along the path to socialism and were not yet capable of running the cooperative. Dorothy Franklin decried the lack of “moral suasion” and abundance of spiritual “superstition” among African American residents. “The stealing and lying among our Negroes are appalling not to mention their ignorance along truly religious lines,” she complained. “We sometimes feel,” she continued, “that we are in the heart of Africa. The white families have more quickly grasped the meaning of the farm,” Dorothy confided in a friend near the end of 1936, “but it is a terrific struggle for the Negroes to have even a modicum of faith in us or what we are trying to do.” Ex-croppers, particularly African Americans as Franklin suggests, were sometimes skeptical of the motives of the manager, volunteers, and trustees. Used to conniving planters who had cheated them out of money by “figuring the accounts with a ‘crooked’ pencil,” sharecroppers had learned not to take whites in positions of power at face value.<sup>4</sup>

Sam Franklin, like his wife, also approached the ex-sharecroppers with skepticism. According to Franklin, the “rough and passionate men” who populated the farm did not have the knowledge and discipline to run the cooperative themselves. He proved this sentiment through his actions, ruling over each minute decision and

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<sup>4</sup> From Dorothy Franklin to Edna Voss, 23 November 1936 Folder 19, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Dear Friends, November 24, 1936 Folder 20, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

micromanaging farm tasks. Yet publicly, Franklin portrayed a different attitude. “I believe it remains for farms like ours,” he told a potential donor, “to disprove some of the easy generalizations regarding the low mentality of the white and colored rural workers and their inability to manage their own affairs.” Franklin’s socialist ideology and paternalistic tendencies were often at odds. A naturally reflective man, Franklin was aware of his shortcomings as farm manager. Franklin wrote a colleague about the “pitfalls that await idealists in the field, especially if they lack the special technical training that the work required.” “I have known this handicap myself,” he conceded. Biracial cooperation among white and black ex-sharecroppers faltered as did the implementation of egalitarian Christian socialist ideology from leaders like Franklin. The majority of these tensions happened between the members of the cooperative, who were hypersensitive to unfair treatment, and the paid staff like Franklin who understood his role as director in terms of mission work.<sup>5</sup>

Adding to these tensions, Sam Franklin had to inform several members that they were no longer welcome on the cooperative for various reasons. Some members who had fallen out of favor with Franklin had been antagonistic, while others simply produced poor work or conducted themselves in a manner contrary to the cooperative’s founding Christian principles. Franklin asked African American croppers Clarence Wilson and Eugene Williams and their families to leave. Ernest Strong, who was the only renter to stay on the land when Delta was established and who had offered keen insight into local agriculture, was also asked to leave. Franklin gave no reason except that the endeavor

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<sup>5</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 22 April 1936, Folder 3, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Clare L. Pieno, 19 February 1937 Folder 25, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Gertrude Orendorff, 15 December 1936 Folder 19, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

did not “want him next year although he is related to some of our people and would very much like to stay.” Henry Williams and James Henderson were put on probation for the poor quality of their work. Member Clarence Oliver was asked to make changes in his negative attitude or else he would be forced to leave. Another member, Ben Baker, had suffered a serious illness and gone into debt with the cooperative in order to meet some of his medical bills. Baker left in the middle of the night, taking furniture and other items that belonged to the cooperative as he fled.<sup>6</sup>

Financial and agricultural problems persisted and put pressure on race and worker/manager relations at the farm throughout the late thirties and early forties. To solve many of the problems at Delta, the trustees authorized the purchase of a new farm in 1938 where old problems at the first farm could be corrected. However, the trustees put the new location, Providence Farm in Holmes County, under the same leadership. Gradually members, volunteers, and staff moved all operations from Bolivar County to the new site in Holmes County. For nearly four years, Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Plantation existed as dual challenges to the Old South’s racial and economic structures. Staff and volunteers, however, stretched themselves thin between the two sites, and internal problems continued. In these years—1937 through 1942—the farms experienced crises of identity as structural changes occurred from top to bottom. Drastic turnover among members, staff, and the Board of Trustees caused significant alterations. As jobs in the war industry opened for whites and the rural south rapidly modernized, the farms’ racial demographics and the cooperative method changed significantly. At the dawn of 1942, as the United States entered World War II, the cooperatives were

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<sup>6</sup> From Sam Franklin to Trustees, Cooperative Farms, 12 December 1936, Folder 20, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

drastically altering their approach to biracial cooperation and agricultural labor reform to reflect a coalescing black-led civil rights movement. Just as the rural South experienced growing pains in a swiftly modernizing era, so too did Delta and Providence farms as new dilemmas necessitated new approaches to interracial communitarian cooperation. Still, in 1937, Delta Cooperative Farm's history was unwritten.

All farming, outreach, and social activities at Delta expanded in 1937 and 1938. One of the largest needs among black children at Delta was education. To receive the state funded eight months of schooling, white children at Delta rode a bus to nearby Gunnison, where white teachers who possessed a degree in education collected considerably more pay than their African American counterparts elsewhere in the country. In contrast, in 1936 and 1937, African American children at Delta walked nearly two miles to a nearby plantation where they received four months of state-mandated education in a one-room schoolhouse taught by an underpaid African American instructor. As was customary in most rural communities in Mississippi, Bolivar County did not have a high school for African American teenagers. In an early show of interracial communion, the cooperative council voted to educate African American children in all grades. The funds, however, were lacking.

Sam Franklin began contact with the Julius Rosenwald Foundation in early 1937, asking for money to help build a school at Delta. The Rosenwald Fund, which began as a philanthropist organization to provide monetary support for black communities building their own schools, had first built schools in Alabama in the 1910s, and by the 1930s had helped build rural schoolhouses throughout the South. Franklin argued passionately for an African American school at Delta, promising that the farm would supply all the

material and human labor if the Rosenwald Fund would only provide the monetary means for construction. Writing to the fund, Franklin made a good case.

I still think the matter of especial importance that we should have such a school, since our Negro youth are growing up in a different economic atmosphere and will therefore be better fitted to serve as leaders for their own race in meeting the social and economic problems which they face today. It will therefore be a double tragedy if we can turn them out with but little more schooling than the state of Mississippi now provides. The four and one-half month term is now in session, and they are supposed to be attending daily, but only a week or two ago the school was closed for several days for lack of wood to keep it warm. On other days we often see the teach[er] arrive at ten o'clock, and other evidences of a very low educational level.

President of the fund, Edwin R. Embree answered Franklin's letter directly, recognizing "the unfortunate condition of the Negro school," but acknowledging that his hands were tied because the fund had "to work chiefly through the higher sources" in Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>

In the wake of the Rosenwald Fund's refusal to help, Sherwood Eddy began a fundraising campaign for building the school. On September 21, 1937, Delta Cooperative Farm held a fish fry to celebrate the official opening of a "New County Colored School" on the farm. Delta hired a local teacher for \$37.50 per month to offer four additional months of schooling for black children, marking the first time in the history of the county that both white and black children attended school for eight months. Seventeen-year-old Virgil Reese expressed the hopes of many young cooperators when he told a newspaper journalist that everyone was having their specific needs met at Delta.

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<sup>7</sup> James L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 213-214. From Sam Franklin to Edwin R. Embree, 21 January 1937 Folder 23, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Edwin R. Embree to Sam Franklin, 27 January 1937, Folder 23, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

“Maybe I’ll even go to school this fall.” “I’ve only been as far as the sixth grade,” he continued, “and haven’t been to school in four years.”<sup>8</sup>

Some white teachers and volunteers, however, were less than egalitarian in their dealings with white and black children at Delta. Constance Rumbough, Delta’s Sunday School teacher in 1937, remembered that when she taught African American children she was “distressed to find them so very primitive, ignorant and seemingly retarded.” Rumbough meant her comment to be an indictment of Mississippi’s education of African American children, yet she also demonstrated a marked difference in perception between black and white children.<sup>9</sup>

In 1938, Delta held its first summer camp for area children, charging a small registration fee. The *Co-Op Call*, the cooperatives’ monthly newsletter, announced an essay contest for resident children who would write on the “beginning and growth of cooperatives” in the United States or abroad. The announcement encouraged children to use the books in the cooperative’s library as resources and win free admission to the camp. Split into four camps divided by both gender and race, forty-two children from six towns attended Delta’s first summer camp. Camp offered a fun and educational experience to the area’s children. An advertisement circulated in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, in 1938 announced that summer campers could “develop skills, initiative, and self-confidence” and “learn to make things by their hands, learn of nature, go hiking and camping.” The Delta summer camps were also a place where trustees and volunteers

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<sup>8</sup> Untitled, House Box #1, AEC; “Mississippi Delta Colonists Seeking Independence In New Type Community, undated newspaper clipping, Delta Cooperative Farm, Vertical File, MDAH; Mitchell, “Cabins in the Cotton,” 175.

<sup>9</sup> From Constance Rumbough to Paul J. Vanderwood, 11 April 1964, Folder 1, in Delta Cooperative Farms Papers #3892-z, SHC.

hoped area children would receive “a better understanding of the whole cooperative movement;” where children would embody the visions of socialism, Christianity, and egalitarianism that adults had for Delta’s future. Even William Amberson, a cautious pragmatist, acknowledged that Delta would “ultimately recommend this type of organization to the whole south.”<sup>10</sup>

To outside supporters, whom trustee Sherwood Eddy courted for financial support and publicity, Delta Cooperative Farm seemed to be a successful model of interracial cooperation. Local, regional, national, and international publications ran stories about Delta, while New Dealers like Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, a WPA official who supported cooperative communities, pointed to it as an example of Roosevelt’s promotion of a pluralist society. National figures like photographers Marion Post and Dorothea Lange, socialist Presidential candidate Norman Thomas, and past leader of the unemployed “Coxey’s Army,” octogenarian Jacob S. Coxey, joined hundreds of curious visitors from all over the world. In mid-summer 1939, Delta Cooperative Farm was a featured topic at the thirtieth Annual Conference of the NAACP in Richmond, Virginia. Delta resident and secretary of the local STFU chapter, George Smith, spoke to a session of young people about the merits of the farm, presumably to gain more working volunteers. Delta trustees and allies Charles S. Johnson, Howard Kester, and Arthur Raper all spoke at the convention on topics pertaining to Delta Cooperative Farm. Other speakers such as Thurgood Marshall, Charles Houston, and Walter White spoke on issues

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<sup>10</sup> *The Co-Op Call*, May 6, 1938, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; *The Co-Op Call*, August 25, 1938, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; *Chicago Defender*, August 13, 1938; “Summer Camps To Be Held,” *The Southern Advocate*, June 4, 1938; M.L. Golden, “Students From Co-op Visit Southern Advocate,” *The Southern Advocate*, July 22, 1939; *The Co-Op Call*, July 4, 1938, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From William Amberson to Vincent C. Widney, 6 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

ranging from health to education while Eleanor Roosevelt presented operatic singer Marian Anderson with the NAACP's esteemed Spingarn Medal less than three months after Anderson staged her iconic performance on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Yet despite these prestigious guests, "economic security" for African Americans in the rural South dominated conference discussions. The fact that the cooperative effort in Mississippi was central to the conference signaled that Delta was considered by its allies to be part of the solution to challenges African Americans faced in the midst of the Depression. The reality was that Delta promised rural agrarians, black and white, chances to enact a better life for themselves, but not everyone realized these opportunities as progress was stunted by racism, financial problems, poor leadership, and poor agricultural production.<sup>11</sup>

The farm continued to draw more volunteers and staff as agricultural operations and activities increased. Trustee Sherwood Eddy's tour of college campuses and churches reached thousands of young volunteers, most of whom would stay only for a season or a year. Speaking at Texas Christian University (TCU) in 1936, Eddy met a young idealist who subsequently became the farm's longest resident, and gradually shaped the cooperative effort by his vision. Upon hearing Eddy describe the cooperative movement, Allen Eugene "Gene" Cox became immediately interested in Delta Cooperative Farm. A deep devotion to practical Christianity led Cox to Delta and kept him there for the next twenty years. In 1931, Cox had entered TCU with just enough money for one semester. Over the next four and a half years he worked a series of odd

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<sup>11</sup> "Delta Cooperative Farm Guestbook," Oversize Box, AEC; "N.A.A.C.P. Watchdog of a Race," *Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1939, 13; "N.A.A.C.P. To Consider Farm Tenants' Problems," *Chicago Defender*, June 10, 1939, 6; From Colonel Lawrence Westbrook to William Amberson, 22 March 1937, Folder 18, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.



jobs, including stints as a social worker with the Texas Relief Commission and as a community preacher, earning five dollars per week, in order to pay his way through school. When Eddy sought him out on recommendation from a mutual associate, Cox accepted the paid staff position of accountant and bookkeeper. Cox had not obtained his degree from TCU, but felt the opportunity Delta Cooperative Farm offered was too good to pass up. He arrived at Delta in late April 1936 and permanently settled at the cooperative in June of that year. A seminary student at TCU, Cox was “more interested in good works than preaching” and arrived at Delta “fully intending to make it his life’s work.” He eventually became as inseparable from the cooperative movement in Mississippi as Eddy or Franklin.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to gaining needed staff, Delta Cooperative Farm gradually added amenities after its first year. The United States Postal Service established the Rochdale, Mississippi Post Office on Delta’s grounds in September 1937, and the Farm Council asked Eugene Cox to serve as its first postmaster. Through rural electrification initiatives, Delta received electricity in 1938, although some farmers elected not to have their individual homes wired and, instead, continued using kerosene lamps. Other residents, after having electricity installed in their homes, noticed that the lights attracted more mosquitoes than kerosene lighting and returned to using only oil lamps.<sup>13</sup>

Interracial and community events continued at the farm, too. Community celebrations, like the one-year anniversary party for the farm, were well-attended. Delta residents celebrated the anniversary with horseshoes, checkers, a fish-fry, barbecue,

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<sup>12</sup> “Jerry Dallas notes from interview with Coxes,” JDC; Sam H. Franklin, Jr., “Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm,” (unpublished), 17-18; Daniels, *Southerner Discovers the South*, 152; “Biographical Data,” AEC.

<sup>13</sup> *The Co-Op Call*, August 25, 1938, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

singing, speeches from the earliest members, several competitive races, and a “husband-calling contest” for the women. Efforts at interracial understanding and black self-help also continued. A farm-wide community night in April 1937 featured a presentation called “What Do You Know About The American Negro?” An advertisement for the evening in the farm’s organ, *the Co-op Call*, invited cooperative residents to attend. “If you want to hear about some of America’s greatest educators, poets, authors, who are negroes,” read the ad, “come to the Forum Thursday night at 7:40.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the educational needs of the residents, the health of the cooperators and their sharecropping neighbors was long a concern of the trustees and staff. White staff had been appalled by the folk medicine practiced by some of the residents. Dorothy Franklin was particularly dismayed by “our old woman who tells fortunes ‘by the Holy Ghost, the Virgin Mary and hoca-poca!’ and puts hoodooes on people, as well as performing abortions, we believe, and affecting other cures.” Another African American woman, the community’s midwife, had prescribed a mixture of cockroaches, garlic, and herbs to be applied to a woman who had suffered a vaginal infection after childbirth.<sup>15</sup>

Just before the end of 1936, a young nurse named Lindsey Hail, the daughter of Christian missionaries in Japan whom Dorothy and Sam Franklin had known while serving in Asia, arrived and began nursing work on the farm fulltime. One of her first patients was the farm’s accountant, A. Eugene Cox. Cooperators noticed that their normally reticent and business-like accountant immediately took to the attractive, single—and according to one letter of recommendation, “impulsive”—Miss Hail. Nine

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<sup>14</sup> *The Co-Op Call*, April 10, 1937, Folder 30, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>15</sup> From Marguerite E. Bicknell to Amherst Committee for Cooperative Aid, 14 September 1936, Folder 19, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

months after being introduced, they were married, and lived the next twenty years of their lives in service to the cooperative effort, eventually taking over as trustees and Resident Directors.<sup>16</sup>

Cox was only one of many patients Hail attended as cooperative nurse, often spending sleepless nights moving from house to house tending to the ill. In one incident that left a lasting impression on Hail, she played “the role of mother to a Negro baby for two weeks.” The two-month-old infant, named Mildred, had been born to an unwed mother who left the newborn in care of the delivering midwife. The midwife, having experience only delivering babies but not raising them, fed the child a steady diet of “raw cow’s milk, undiluted.” When the child arrived in Hail’s care, the nurse thought the baby was dead.

Her eyes were sunk deep in her head and the eyelids were partly open and the eyes were glazed. You could not see or hear her breathe. Wrinkles around the mouth and forehead made her appear ridiculously like a very old woman... She reminded me of a baby crow with no feathers! The skin over her chest showed the outline of every rib. The abdomen was distended and looked like a round black drum. Her arms and legs had loose flesh hanging on the thin bones. She was so dehydrated the flesh when pinched up remained that way instead of springing back in the normal manner. Her tongue had the appearance of white fur.

Hail nursed baby Mildred for two weeks, waking up several times each night to feed her. When she deemed the child well enough, Mildred was returned to the mother who had originally given her up. The mother lived in a household “overflowing with children of various ages, all very dirty.” When she gave the mother evaporated milk to feed her baby, the rest of the children seemed to covet it and Hail wondered “if little Mildred will not be sharing her diet.” Despite her misgivings, Hail left her in the crowded home.

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<sup>16</sup> From Edna Voss to Dorothy Franklin, 18 November 1936, Folder 19, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

“Perhaps if Mildred lives,” Hail hoped, “she will grow up to be another Marion Anderson.” Like many malnourished babies, though, Mildred did not live beyond infancy.<sup>17</sup>

Among the duties which Hail immediately took on in late December 1936, was to supply experimental birth control to farm residents. Sam Franklin had been in contact with Dr. Clarence J. Gamble, the heir to the Procter and Gamble empire and staunch advocate of birth control and eugenics. Gamble, eager to test new spermicidal jellies in the population, supplied boxes of diaphragms, lactic acid jellies, and applicators to the farm. As the only nurse, Lindsey Hail was charged with dispensing the contraception and keeping copious notes to send to Dr. Gamble. Yet one nurse could only do so much. It was not until a traveling health clinic sponsored by the African American sisters of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, INC first visited Delta in 1937 that sharecroppers in the area and the farm’s residents received adequate health examinations and immunizations.<sup>18</sup>

Alpha Kappa Alpha, a sorority for middle and upper class black women, placed a high premium on service. In the mid 1930s, they identified the black populations of the Mississippi Delta as in acute need of medical care. Dr. Dorothy Ferebee of Howard University Medical School headed up the project that began in 1935 in Holmes County. They were to make their headquarters at the Lexington-based Saints Industrial School. When the women arrived for their six-week clinic in the summer of 1935, however, they found that most plantation owners had refused to let their sharecroppers leave the

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<sup>17</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 38-39.

<sup>18</sup> From Sam Franklin to Gilbert W. Beebe, 5 August 1936, Folder 20, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Clarence J. Gamble, 17 December 1936, Folder 20, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

plantation and attend the clinics. The women figured that if the sharecroppers could not come to them, they would go to the sharecroppers.<sup>19</sup>

Originally, the women of AKA had planned to take the train from D.C. to Mississippi, but they were refused service at the Union Station by the ticket agent. The women instead organized a carpool and drove themselves to Holmes County. Using personal vehicles they had driven from Washington D.C., the women traveled throughout Holmes County in 1935. The next year, however, they decided to move their base of operation to Mound Bayou in Bolivar County—figuring they would meet with more support in the all-black community. They were right. Thousands of patients visited their clinics in Mound Bayou that summer, and the AKA volunteers received additional support from an eager Bolivar County Health Department. The traveling health clinics continued as well, and for the next five summers AKA volunteers, nurses, and doctors set up temporary clinics in schools, churches, community buildings, and fields. In 1937, in addition to immunizing for diphtheria and smallpox, a dental staff was added so that the mobile clinics could provide dental care, too.<sup>20</sup>

The AKA-sponsored Mississippi Health Project collaborated with the medical clinics at Delta from 1937 to 1941. In an attempt to address black uplift and the “social welfare needs of the poor,” AKA members traveled to the Mississippi Delta each summer as volunteers, bringing with them state of the art medical devices, doctors, nurses, dentists, and social workers. The health clinics most likely continued providing birth control to Delta residents. Dorothy Ferebee, the physician who headed the summer

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas J. Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 239-249.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

health project in Mississippi, understood that black men and women were at the mercy of paternalistic white doctors when it came to gaining access to birth control. As a result, Ferebee became a proponent of providing birth control to rural blacks in Mississippi. Because of the health clinics, many black Delta residents went from having no medical facilities to being able to access some of the most modern clinics in the rural South.<sup>21</sup>

Still, residents at Delta need medical attention above what Nurse Hail and the summer clinics could provide. In late summer of 1938, a white doctor, David Minter, arrived at Delta to be the cooperative's permanent doctor. Minter was dedicated to the type of missionary work that a clinic at Delta offered. The steady influx of college-aged women at the summer volunteer camps also offered the handsome and single doctor opportunities to find a wife. Minter had been visiting the farm to decide if the place was right for him when he met his future wife, Sue Wootten. Fresh from college graduation, Wootten, from Evansville, Indiana, was a volunteer at the Quaker summer work camp that year and immediately fell in love with the Delta. Indianans did not have anything like the Delta's landscape, and she loved every aspect of her new environment. In her early twenties, Wootten was several years junior to Minter, but the two quickly took to each other. Both had unusual senses of humor that made them fast friends. Wootten was most attracted to the doctor's quiet but affable manner, and the near constant practical jokes he played on residents at the farm. But it was not until she overheard a conversation between Eugene Cox and Minter that she began to fall in love with the farm's doctor. One day Cox and Minter, thinking no one was within ear shot, argued

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<sup>21</sup> Susan L. Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 149; Ward, *Black Physicians*, 239-249; Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 173.

good naturedly over the color of Wootten's eyes. Minter was adamant in his belief that her eyes were brown while Cox, being noticeably less interested, thought they might be green. Minter was right. Wootten knew she would soon be courting the doctor. The Minters married in December 1940 in Delta's community building while Gene Cox played songs on the cooperative's Victrola. After a brief honeymoon, Sue moved to the farm.

Cooperators spent most of the summer building a new, two-story medical clinic to prepare for Dr. Minter's arrival. Sherwood Eddy established a clinic fund and subsidized all medical needs at Delta, though patients had to pay for their own medications. Through donated funds and in cooperation with the AKA, the clinic possessed resources considered state-of-the-art in rural Mississippi. Not long after Minter arrived, the clinic was dedicated with a religious service presided over by trustee Bishop William Scarlett. The clinic had an integrated staff during the AKA summer clinics, which bucked the segregated custom of nearly every medical clinic in the South. White doctors did not employ black nurses and when the rare African American doctor, often educated at black-only Meharry or Howard, set up a clinic in the rural South, the staffs were all black. The clinic at Delta also served both white and black patients. In rural Mississippi, this was the prevailing practice. Often, though, the waiting room was reserved for whites only. Black patients visiting a white doctor's office in the rural South had to wait outside or in a hallway before they were seen. At Delta, the waiting room was integrated. The clinic offered the most benefit, however, for area African Americans, who did not have year-round access to a physician until Minter arrived. Most rural blacks still relied on home remedies and "conjure doctors" who practiced folk medicine. The health situation for

many rural Southerners was dire. While Sam Franklin was away from the farm for a few weeks, Blaine Treadway wrote him of the deteriorating health of residents.

The health situation is still a major problem. Mr. White has had a bad case of blood poisoning in his arm which has prevented him from working. We have had him visiting the dentist while he has been out. Lando Hollman and family are having a siege of boils. Dr. Weidener has ordered Lando to bed. He says that one of the boils which he has, conceivably could cause instant death if its progress is not checked immediately. John Will Henderson was bitten by a spider on Friday, and before we could get Dr. Day here he was have serious convulsions. However, after two injection intravenously of magnesium sulphate he is able to work again. Tom Jones and Annie Belle Billington are both in bed with chronic cases of Gonorrhea. Lee Phillip's baby has a case of malaria.

Travelers even had to receive typhoid and small pox vaccinations before venturing south to Delta. From a public health standpoint, living in the rural South before World War II, when many communities did not have regular access to medical care, was akin to living in the Old World. Having a doctor and nurse on the farm—when they did—saved more than a few lives.<sup>22</sup>

Despite productive initiatives like summer camps and medical clinics, steady agricultural production and economic stability eluded the farm. As the land turned against them, cooperators began to raise questions about how race and labor were structured at Delta Cooperative Farm. Sam Franklin told Reinhold Niebuhr in March 1937, the one year anniversary of the farm, that he had heard rumors of a “coming sit-down strike on the part of some of our women when the cotton-chopping season begins.” The women believed that they were not making as much on the cooperative as other cotton choppers were on nearby plantations. When a similar event had happened months

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<sup>22</sup> Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South*, 121-123; Untitled, House Box #1, AEC; From Blaine Treadway to Sam Franklin, 25 October 1936, Folder 16, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.



before, Franklin had remarked that the situation “indicates that some of the Negroes are abusing their new freedom.” Demonstrating the extent to which the cooperative had not solved the issue of plantation labor, the women were “under no contract to work, so they cannot strike,” Franklin reassured Niebuhr, “and I think the matter will be ironed out before the time comes.” Franklin ironed it out, however, by sending George Smith to Clarksdale to hire cotton choppers to come to Delta. When the day laborers arrived, Franklin paid them at the rate that other hired laborers in the area fetched. In addition, Franklin sanctioned the women who had participated in the strike by not allowing them “credit at the cooperative store nor to participate in the distribution of gift clothing that was sometimes sent to us.” In response to Franklin’s harsh measures, some of the women returned to work while others moved to nearby plantations. Some of the staff were furious at Franklin’s actions. Mildred Young, a Quaker who joined the farm as a full member, worked side-by-side in the field with strikers who returned in order to show her solidarity. The idea of cooperative labor proved difficult to implement. Some white cooperators expressed their desire to have “a separate project for the colored.” Race and class antagonisms trumped inter-race and cross-class cooperation when the day-to-day operations did not operate smoothly. White and black members accused Sam Franklin and other staff of unfair treatment and withholding payments. Black ex-sharecroppers charged whites on the cooperative with racism over housing, labor details, and fair wages. Racial tensions and accusations of paternalism added to an already difficult endeavor.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> From Sam Franklin to Reinhold Niebuhr, 26 March 1937, Folder 28, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 14 August 1936, Folder 11, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Franklin, “Early Years,” 44;

The simple fact that it was an attempt at cooperative farming also made Delta contentious. Establishing cooperative communities in a capitalist society was no easy task, even in the cooperative-friendly milieu of the New Deal. Ultimately, those in charge of keeping Delta financially viable could never reconcile that cooperatives were counterintuitive to American agrarian ideals of democracy and individual ownership. The trustees knew that a plantation-sized cooperative with thousands of acres in production was needed in order to keep Delta financially competitive. This was not always the preference of cooperative members. After sharecropping and tenant farming had proved to be so destructive for black and white croppers in the years since the Civil War, many preferred to seek out a plot of their own where they would not answer to a plantation owner or, in this case, a board of trustees. Several critics of the farm concluded that residents were not completely behind the cooperative model and did not take to sharing their work and profits with their neighbors. One early visitor was impressed with Delta on the whole, but surprised at the scant knowledge the average cooperator possessed about the principles in place on the farm. "The members need a clearer understanding of the nature and function of the Cooperative," he wrote. Another more critical visitor accused Franklin of running a "paternalistic dictatorship." Taken together, the early criticisms of Delta Cooperative exposed Franklin and implicated the Board of Trustees as misunderstanding the very people they were so eager to help. Often critical of liberals as milquetoasts on the race issue, Franklin, Eddy, Niebuhr and other socialists were nevertheless ill-prepared to put ideology into practice in the Mississippi Delta. Franklin, educated at several seminaries, approached his role on the farm as

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Quoted in Donald M. Royer, "A Comparative Study of Three Experiments In Rural "Community" Reconstruction In The Southeast" (MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1943), 61.

missionary, teacher, father-figure, and task master. His relationships with many of the cooperators were often abrupt, tense, and condescending. In spite of his efforts to help sharecroppers, Franklin and the board members carried prejudiced assumptions about how race and class operated in 1930s America. Ex-sharecroppers could not possibly be expected to take care of themselves, thought Franklin, because they simply were not culturally ready.<sup>24</sup>

The cooperative suffered from a crisis of identity as a result of the communication gap. Initially this crisis was most evident in the tenuous relationship between the STFU labor leaders and Christian missionaries who were quick to get the farm off the ground but often quibbled about the ideological focus and day-to-day operations. Yet the disagreements between the union and the cooperative paled in comparison to the criticisms that disgruntled trustee William Amberson began to level at his fellow trustees, particularly Sam Franklin and Sherwood Eddy. Beginning in the late spring of 1935 William Amberson gradually drifted away from the Socialist Party, feeling he had been “taken for too many rides” by fellow comrades looking for money, devoting more of his time to the STFU and his role as a trustee for Delta Cooperative Farm. The STFU, Amberson explained to Socialist Party leader Clarence Senior, was “the only significant Socialist work in this section.” The Memphis socialists, he complained, were “faint-hearts” and not fully or financially committed to the socialist cause. Amberson’s disgust with the southern socialists was partly based on interpersonal squabbles and disagreements. But ruptures plagued the national party, too. The years 1934 to 1937 marked a major decline for the American Socialist Party. The party split into various

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<sup>24</sup> “History of Bolivar County, Mississippi,” (Jackson: Daughters of the American Revolution, 1948), 261-264; *The Brown American*, December 1936, 22; Bradner J. Moore to William Amberson, 1 May 1936, Folder 4 in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

factions and interest groups while longtime socialists were forced to choose ideological sides, cannibalizing their overall strength at the polls. Instead of getting swept up in the heated and often unproductive arguments over the direction of socialism in the United States, many, like Amberson, simply disengaged from party politics.<sup>25</sup>

Amberson believed that his experience with the STFU had altered his and Howard Kester's approaches to aiding leftist reform movements. His previous "position was more theoretical than practical, and the experience of the field," Amberson realized, "has made us, not less radical I hope, but less doctrinaire." Amberson dove headlong into the organizing effort, spreading the STFU's aims around the South. He soon realized, however, that political action was moot without economic advancement and security for southern farmers. Soon disillusioned by the STFU's protest tactics and wanting more tangible successes for sharecroppers, he felt that striking and marching were empty gestures without serious plans for how to replace the plantation system of agricultural labor. The STFU, in his view, was gaining no political ground and had "no chance whatever to succeed for some years yet." The only viable answer Amberson saw was to support cooperative communities. When ex-sharecroppers found economic stability and competed in the agricultural market, Amberson believed, only then could they truly have their voices heard. Instead of the direct political action of the STFU, he was drawn more to the cooperative model at Delta, though he knew that this would be seen as acquiescence by many leftists. "I have reached the point where I am willing to accept half a loaf," conceded Amberson, "rather than go without bread at all." In this way, Amberson was different than many intellectual socialists of the 1930s. Doctrinaire

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<sup>25</sup> From William R. Amberson to Sam Schneider, 7 September 1937, Box VII. AEC; From William R. Amberson to Clarence Senior, 16 November 1935, Folder 13a, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

ideologies often hampered the national party and blocked practical strategies for overhauling capitalism and American democracy. In 1937, Amberson still had high aspirations for socialism in practice and realized that the endeavor at Delta Cooperative Farm represented a fighting chance for rural socialists to enact their own vision for America.<sup>26</sup>

Gradually, though, Amberson became antagonistic toward the cooperative's trustees and management just as he had with the Tennessee Socialist party. Financial and interpersonal disagreements led him to question his fellow trustees. Initially an admirer of Franklin, Amberson accused both him and Eddy of not having the best interests of the poor in mind, and worse, embezzling money. His biggest concern, though, was that the other trustees had no intentions of allowing the cooperators to ever own the land outright on a collective basis, thus undermining the cooperative effort.

When Amberson's friend, fellow socialist and co-founder of Commonwealth College, A. James McDonald, arrived to Delta as Franklin's secretary in March 1937, he immediately began criticizing his new boss and the day-to-day operations. McDonald was argumentative, hard-headed, and apt to think he knew best how to run a cooperative community and socialize the farm's economy. He had experience living on the New Llano Cooperative Colony in Louisiana and worked closely with the Rust Brothers as they developed their cotton-picking machine. Keeping up a steady correspondence, McDonald served as Amberson's informant on the farm. Most appalling to McDonald, an atheist, was the kind of Christian philosophy espoused by Eddy and employed by Franklin. McDonald considered practical Christianity to be unrealistic and naive.

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<sup>26</sup> From William Amberson to Sam Franklin, 11 Feb 1937, AEC; From William R. Amberson to Francis A. Henson, 6 May 1936, Box VII, AEC.

Despite being personally attended to by Cox and Franklin when he came down with malaria, McDonald continued to loathe most of the staff, as well as the practices at the farm, and to pass his observations onto Amberson. McDonald's letters only fueled Amberson's displeasure with Franklin and Eddy.<sup>27</sup>

Through letters to associates and the other trustees, Amberson accused Franklin of being foolish in his expectations and Eddy of being dishonest, especially in terms of raising money for farm "improvements" and then pocketing the money to cover his purchase of the farm. Amberson even accused Eddy of yelling at the members on one occasion during a particularly tense meeting, "If you can't do what you are told to do then goodbye, brother, go on down the road!" If Delta failed, thundered Amberson, it was not "because of the antagonism of the planter aristocracy but because of the inexperience and the dishonesty of such men as Franklin and Eddy." Amberson's accusations revealed serious disagreements among Delta's leadership and proved a reflection of Delta's gradual downward spiral. Amberson's fears of financial dishonesty grew when Sam Franklin suddenly, and with little consultation, purchased Providence Plantation on behalf of the trustees.<sup>28</sup>

Though Eddy and the other trustees hoped that Delta Cooperative Farm would be the flagship of multiple cooperative endeavors in the rural South, no real opportunities to purchase more land presented themselves in the first eighteen months at Delta. Then, in late 1937, Sam Franklin found a parcel of land with a working dairy in Holmes County, on the edge of the Mississippi Delta. Franklin, without consulting the Board of Trustees, took steps to purchase the land and the dairy. Previously called Providence Plantation,

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<sup>27</sup> Untitled, Box VII, AEC.

<sup>28</sup> From William Amberson to Gene Cox, 17 January 1973, AEC.

the land struck Franklin as ideal for beginning another cooperative. Although the Board of Trustees quickly approved the purchase of the Providence tract in January 1938, Amberson abstained from voting on the purchase because he objected to blindly following Franklin's suggestions without seeing the land for themselves. Amberson's disdain for Franklin and the other board members continued to grow. The purchase of the second property would mark a watershed moment for Delta and the men and women involved in the endeavor. The membership and the Board of Trustees experienced significant turnover as the operations moved to Providence.

The population of Delta also was in flux. The number of white farmers at the cooperative dropped dramatically in the early 1940s in conjunction with the purchase of the new farm. There were three reasons for this trend. First, several white farmers complained directly to STFU official H.L. Mitchell that they were "invited" to leave the farm by Sam Franklin and Sherwood Eddy. These whites believed that African American farmers were receiving preferential treatment. In December 1941, white resident Wilburn White, a founding member of Delta Cooperative, wrote to H.L. Mitchell complaining that Franklin reportedly told the entire Farm that "he could no longer raise any money on the white families and thought he could on the Negroes." Several white families, especially those who were critical of Franklin, were directly asked to leave by either Franklin or Eddy. As his Christian philosophy evolved, Eddy considered the plight of poor African Americans to be the most pressing issue of his time. In an early publication on Delta Cooperative Farm, Sherwood Eddy stated that "(t)he Negro is doubtless the acid test of America's principle of democracy." Eddy's public speeches reflected his evolving philosophy as well. In public remarks at historically black North

Carolina A&T College in 1941, Eddy focused on the troubles of African Americans in general, not sharecroppers specifically.<sup>29</sup>

Second, the onset of World War II meant that whites could now enter the workforce in greater numbers. Many rural white and black southerners migrated to urban centers in the South, North, and West. African Americans wishing to stay in the South found fewer jobs in the war industry than did whites. Many whites joined the military. Like other whites from Delta, Dr. David Minter, who was drafted to study the effects of malaria on American soldiers, entered military service in 1942, although he returned to run the medical clinic at Providence after his tour.<sup>30</sup>

Last, the increased mechanization of agriculture meant that Providence could not support as many families as Delta had in the 1930s—Providence simply needed fewer laborers to run farm operations. Delta may have been on the cutting edge of Mississippi race relations or economic reform, but it was not a trailblazer in terms of modernizing the business of agriculture. A large, plantation-sized cooperative with hundreds of workers became obsolete almost as soon as it got underway in the late 1930s; although the cooperative used both mules and tractors, the farm could not keep up with the rate at which the rural South mechanized. The Board of Trustees had hoped that John and Mack Rust's mechanical cotton picker would revolutionize field labor and socialize farming

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<sup>29</sup> From W. F. White to H. L. Mitchell, 2 December 1941, AEC; Eddy, "A door of opportunity," 46; Franklin, "Early Years," 49-63; "Dr. Eddy Advises U.S. to First Practice Democracy," *Chicago Defender*, February 1, 1941, 4.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the transition from Delta to Providence, see Fred C. Smith, "Agrarian Experimentation and Failure in Depression Mississippi: New Deal and Socialism, the Tupelo Homesteads and the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms" (MA thesis, Mississippi State University, 2002); 64-103.



equipment by funneling profits into cooperative communities, but their invention failed to sell and was soon eclipsed by International Harvester.<sup>31</sup>

The Board of Trustees also experienced changes in membership, but not in its oversight of the farm and continued support of Sam Franklin. Sociologist and activist Arthur Raper joined the board in late 1937, and fellow sociologist Charles S. Johnson, President of Fisk University, integrated the board by becoming a trustee in early 1938. Raper and Johnson had published extensively on sharecroppers' circumstances and suggested many avenues of relief. In 1936 they had collaborated on a report that suggested drastic changes to the southern plantation economy—changes that would have given more croppers ownership of the land they worked and thrown government support behind cooperative farming. Raper specifically took note that the Deep South's cotton economy had “its economic background in feudalism and racial background in slavery.” It was here, in places like Arkansas and Mississippi, suggested Johnson and Raper, that ownership of large plantations should be divided among croppers. Though the Board of Trustees now more closely reflected the racial make-up of the cooperators with the addition of Johnson, Sam Franklin remained a dominating influence at Delta. Because most of the trustees rarely visited the farm, Franklin continued to be the major source of information for the board. Having few opportunities for interaction with disgruntled cooperators, the trustees did not seek to make changes. The power dynamics Franklin developed early remained in place.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> From Arthur Raper to A. Eugene Cox, 5 January 1972, JDC; “Recommendations regarding Tenancy Legislation submitted to the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy by the Southern Policy Association,” 14 December 1936, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

In 1938 and 1939, as cooperators began the task of moving to Providence, Amberson's continued alienation and black members' complaints of racial discrimination came to a head. Both white and black members separately accused Sam Franklin and Sherwood Eddy of discrimination and anti-union sentiment in 1938. The Board of Trustees and the STFU, though, seemed uninterested in exploring the matters until they were brought before a union convention meeting later that year. Several STFU members visiting Delta complained that cooperators were being treated unfairly. In all, these members, supported by an initially indignant H.L. Mitchell, leveled fourteen specific complaints to the union office, the foremost of which called the members "Clients at Will" of the Trustees. By this accusation, members meant that their situation was little better than it had been while they toiled under the sharecropping system. The members accused farm management of being heavy-handed, untruthful about financial affairs, and discriminatory in their policies. White and black farmers declared that they were not receiving proper wages and that they had received no "settlement" from legal victories won by the STFU. They were also furious over a farm council vote that took place when Sam Franklin assumed the director's position at Providence. The council voted that Albert Day, the farm's paid white "director of agriculture," be left in charge of agricultural operations instead of the well-liked Blaine Treadway. African American farmers felt that they were being made "slaves" of Day, who was a native of Bolivar County and had professional and personal ties to the area's white planters. After Franklin stood and publicly endorsed Day, the council voted that "Albert Day should be executive at Rochdale over field and garden crops, timber, sawmill, and livestock; that Blaine Treadway should have direct oversight of garment-making, movies, and furniture making

and should exercise general supervision and represent the farms to the public.”

Cooperators felt that Franklin had unfairly swayed the opinion of the council with his endorsement of Day, and left the well-being of the cooperative and its members in the hands of a man almost no one except Franklin trusted. The schism between Franklin and the STFU, which represented many cooperative residents, was palpable when H. L. Mitchell publicly accused Franklin of ignoring the union’s role on the farm altogether and of supporting Day, who had growled that he “didn’t intend to allow any damned union organization” at Delta. Accusations and ill will threatened to tear the endeavor apart from the inside.<sup>33</sup>

It took the Board of Trustees and the STFU over a year and a half to cobble together an investigating committee to look into the accusations of mistreatment, mismanagement, and racism. Trustees Arthur Raper and John Rust joined STFU National Executive Council members Howard Kester, D.A. Griffin, and J.F. Hynds in announcing that they would hear any public or private grievance while making inquiries into each allegation. Though the committee visited the farm to investigate, there is no record of their meeting one-on-one with the members. A community meeting was held, which Franklin attended, where the committee asked members to stand up and talk about their grievances. None did.

The committee chalked up the grievances to unfortunate misunderstandings and the discontent of a few. Addressing the most serious accusation that members were “Clients at Will” of the Board of Trustees, the committee attributed this feeling to a lack

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<sup>33</sup> From Reinhold Niebuhr to Sam Franklin, 22 May 1936, Folder 5, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From J.R. Butler to Howard Kester, 21 January 1939, STFU; From Unsigned to J.R. Butler, 27 May 1937, STFU; Franklin, “Early Years,” 48-49; Untitled, House Box #1, AEC.

of communication between the members and the trustees. Many cooperators were “unaware of their rights and responsibilities” at Delta and at newly formed Providence, reported the committee, and did not fully understand the communitarian nature of the cooperative effort. The committee drew the same conclusion in investigating undispersed wages, subsidies, and settlements. Though the committee suggested altering the bookkeeping practices at Delta and Providence to allow for more transparency, they concluded that it was necessary for monies received from the producers’ cooperative or government aid to go directly into the cooperatives’ overhead costs. This necessity, the committee posited, “seems to have escaped many of the people.”<sup>34</sup>

In all cases of supposed discrimination, the committee found that the contrary seemed to be true. “Negroes,” wrote the committee, “were not found to be discriminated against in any manner.” To prove this point they highlighted that an African American woman had received the highest wages of any unskilled laborer at the cooperative. The investigating committee suggested that the trustees and managers engage in more transparent and clearer communication about farm operations with its members. To aid in this reform, the committee asked the managers to “employ language generally understood by the people.” The language chosen by the committee echoed the condescension of Sam Franklin who felt that cooperators needed constant supervision in order to work effectively. The only significant redress to any grievances was in clarifying Albert Day’s position at Delta and diminishing his role as “executive,” essentially leaving the cooperative in Bolivar County in the hands of Blaine Treadway and Gene Cox. In concluding, the committee commended Sam Franklin “and his associates for their devotion to this heart-breaking and difficult problem.” Despite the

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<sup>34</sup> “Report of the Committee Investigating Delta and Providence Farms,” 1940, STFU.

committee's inadequate conclusions, the usually fiery H. L. Mitchell seemed pleased with the report and concluded that the "greatest good that came from the investigation was in opening Raper's and Rust's eyes to the fact that the folks down there ought to be permitted to run the farms with less interference from the outside."<sup>35</sup>

The committee's investigation did not satisfy Amberson or his allies. McDonald and Amberson speculated that the members did not raise their concerns in front of Franklin for fear they would be kicked off the cooperative. McDonald hypothesized that Raper and Rust were not fully committed to the investigation, and "had no place on such a committee under any circumstances that I can conceive of; men do not investigate their own actions impartially." "Griffin and Hynds were the only members of the committee who were really interested in making an investigation," thought McDonald, but "they were wholly lacking in the qualifications that were needed." Finally, McDonald considered Kester "a church politician whose principles are just about as elastic as a rubber band." McDonald chalked up most of the cooperative's problems to Sam Franklin, the Board of Trustees, and the investigating committee, who possessed a "lack of confidence in the ability of the common man to understand, to plan and to execute." Quoting a friend who had briefly volunteered at Delta but left in disgust, McDonald called Franklin's style of leadership "paternalistic feudalism." The majority of the committee approached the cooperators with some of the same misunderstandings as did Franklin. The ideological assumptions of the committee—that ex-sharecroppers were the burden of men like Franklin—hijacked the investigation from the outset. Ultimately, though, McDonald blamed Franklin and Kester for colluding to whitewash the investigation. Amberson took a slightly different tack. Although he was utterly

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

disgusted by Franklin, he believed that Kester influenced the investigation because he wanted to maintain his friendship and financial relationship with trustee Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr had in fact raised funds on behalf of many of Kester's organizations. Despite Amberson's contemptuous understanding of the situation, Kester clung to the hope that the cooperative farm could accomplish its original lofty goals but that the process would be a slow one.<sup>36</sup>

During the long deliberations of the committee, Amberson became too disgusted with his associates to continue his relationship with Delta Cooperative Farm. In a February 1939 meeting of the Board of Trustees, Amberson read aloud his six-page resignation letter, stating that he felt the operations in the fields were "a dictated rather than democratic program." On the issue of Franklin encouraging the farm council to appoint Albert Day as executive, Amberson scoffed that "to claim that the procedure actually used was democracy is to trifle with words. Better by far to say frankly that the Board or the Resident Director will appoint the farm foreman, than to go through this elaborate hocus-pocus of seeming to give the choice to the people while in fact denying it to them." Amberson added that "it was sociological ventriloquism at its dreadful worst." He then devoted the majority of his resignation letter to breaking down the farms' finances to conclude that both endeavors were firmly in the red and that Franklin and Eddy were misleading donors and the members when they stated that both farms were succeeding. Amberson saw the difference in his figures and the official bookkeeping as

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<sup>36</sup> From A. James McDonald to Blaine Treadway, 14 September 1940, Folder 22, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC; From A. James "Mac" McDonald to William Amberson, 20 April 1939, Folder 20, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC; From William Amberson to J. H. Moody, 29 September 1940, Folder 22, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers, SHC; Robert F. Martin, *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904-1977* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1991), 103-104.

dishonesty on the part of Franklin and Eddy. But he also viewed the problem as ideological differences. “Never before have I seen with such blinding clarity,” declared Amberson, “the essential and irreconcilable conflict over the scientific and ecclesiastical approach to social problems.” Competing ideologies, thought Amberson, blinded the trustees to the actual problems at the cooperative. Amberson also perceived that Sam Franklin had blamed him for fomenting the “subterranean rumblings” of dishonesty and racism. Franklin had dismissed the complaints as the results of “instigation from the outside.” Amberson concluded that Franklin was essentially calling him an “outside agitator” and “the pattern of plantation thought which he (Franklin) had meant to break, rises up again to grip his own mind.” Condemning the board as a whole, Amberson concluded that “criticizing absentee landlordism, we have ourselves created its most vicious form.” Finally, he asked to be immediately removed from all publicity associated with the cooperative farms. The Board of Trustee accepted his resignation without discussion. Amberson wrote a cooperative resident after his resignation, summing up his feelings in blunt terms. “I regret more than I can say that this venture, conceived on so high a plane, should have fallen into the hands of a bunch of dishonest ecclesiastics,” Amberson lamented. “I loathe them all.”<sup>37</sup>

Amberson’s dispute with the trustees, though, did not immediately come to an end. He and Eddy waged a bitter row in the pages of *The Christian Century*, each refuting the other’s claims and both sounding defensive and shrill. Still, many of the accusations leveled by Amberson were correct. By 1940, the cooperative effort was still

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<sup>37</sup> From H.L. Mitchell to J.R. Butler, 14 May 1940, STFU; “A Statement to the Board of Trustees Cooperative Farms, INC.” in the William Amberson Papers, MVC; From William Amberson to J. H. Moody, 29 September 1940, Folder 22, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

not a true cooperative, and members did not own the land or their labor outright because Sam Franklin and other trustees did not believe that the members were ready to run the farm's operations without supervision. Despite the discord, operations pushed forward and Eddy continued to raise money for the endeavor as though the cooperative was flourishing. Writing of Eddy, Amberson declared that "this colossal fraud brazens his way onward in spite of his own dishonesty." "It is enough," Amberson concluded, "to make the angels weep."<sup>38</sup>

Delta Cooperative Farm experienced a dramatic decline after 1939. The Eddy – Amberson dispute fueled speculation that Delta was failing in its stated goals. Staff and members left in droves. Some, like A. James McDonald, Amberson's ally, were asked by the Board of Trustees to vacate the cooperative because, according to the board, they did not align themselves with the mission of the endeavor. STFU President J.R. Butler received word from Art Landes, a white union member, in June 1941 that "only a few of the clients are attempting to farm cooperatively" but that the cooperative store seemed to be "succeeding very well." Landes wrote H.L. Mitchell the next month to inform him that because only three residents, including Landes, had been attending the sporadic STFU meetings at Delta, they decided to dissolve the local altogether. He reported that the local possessed "between 4 and 5 dollars in cash" and no other assets. By the next spring, Landes and his wife Margaret had moved from Delta, and the cooperative retained only tenuous ties to the STFU through a few residents.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Editorial," *Christian Century*, June 14, 1939; From William Amberson to A. James McDonald, 24 December 1940, Folder 22 in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

<sup>39</sup> From J.R. Butler to Norman Thomas, 23 June 1941, STFU; From Art Landes to H.L. Mitchell, 3 August 1941, STFU; From Art Landes to H.L. Mitchell, 12 February 1942, STFU.



From 1938 until 1942, all operations gradually moved to Providence Cooperative Farm in Holmes County. Over that period, Delta was divided up by the board and sold to various private landowners, businesses, and the State of Mississippi, which coveted the land because of its proximity to the Mississippi River. In December of 1942, the final acres were sold to a local landowner for \$36,400 in cash. Only one of the original Arkansas refugee families lived at Delta in 1942 when it closed. Cooperators simply packed up and left Bolivar County. Many made their way to Providence along with Gene Cox and his family, but most, like Blaine and Dorothy Treadway, frustrated and weary from their experiences, chose to make their lives elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

Poor soil, harsh weather, blinded ideologues, racism, and classism combined to defeat Delta Cooperative Farm. Additionally, some of the same type of personality clashes that doomed the STFU also haunted Delta. Minutes of the Cooperative Council meeting in 1939 show that discussions were plagued by disagreements, personal vendettas, and indecisions. Reflecting years later on Delta's closing, Arthur Raper declared that

such an undertaking elicited the interest of people with a bold faith in the common man, and the belief that they themselves should help these dispossessed people if they could. The result was the coming together of well-meaning people trying to do an almost impossible thing. They were strongly individualistic, articulate, and motivated by high moral courage. So they held marked differences of opinion, carried on searching discussions, and even then sometimes no consensus was reached.

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<sup>40</sup> Miscellaneous handwritten notes from Jerry Dallas, JDC; "Delta Cooperative Farm Review," in the Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, MVC.

The ever blunt William Amberson put it more succinctly when considering what he believed was Sherwood Eddy's potentially dishonest fundraising and naïve faith that the effort would succeed. "Led by such a man," he spat, "the farm was bound to fail."<sup>41</sup>

Soil quality and poor crop yields were also factors that contributed to Delta's failure. The region's mix of poor, buckshot soil and erratic flood/draught cycles contributed as much to its doom as any other factor. And as previously stated, when agricultural practices were tough, and financial hardships arose, latent racial and class antagonisms bubbled to the surface—exacerbating an already dire situation. The land at Providence, many miles from the Mississippi River levee system, was more predictable, but by the early 1940s, members were moving away from full-scale cooperative farming anyway, and the survival of the endeavor did not depend solely on agricultural or timber production.

In the most basic terms, Delta Cooperative Farm brought Americans' attention to race, labor, and economic discrimination and exploitation in the Deep South. Although Delta mitigated the pain of enduring poverty, it did not solve the problems created by plantation agriculture. The men and women at Providence Farm, now led by Gene Cox, would have to carry out what Sherwood Eddy, Sam Franklin, William Amberson, and scores of sharecropping families began at Delta. "Much can be pushed forward; much may have to be changed; the whole must be deepened," wrote cooperative member

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<sup>41</sup> From Arthur Raper to A. Eugene Cox, 5 January 1972, JDC; From William Amberson to Gene Cox, 17 January 1973, House Box #1, AEC.

Mildred Young upon the Delta's closing. "The great thing is that life has stirred in the dark seed and growth is occurring."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> From Wilmer and Mildred Young to unaddressed, December 1937, in the Wilmer and Mildred Young Papers, Manuscripts Department, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

## Chapter Four

### Providence Farm Addresses the “Concrete Needs of the Thousands among Us,” 1942—1949

Returning from a conference in Raleigh, North Carolina in March 1943, Sam Franklin was energized by the meeting he had just attended. The conference was called by social justice activist Rev. Howard “Buck” Kester and sponsored by the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, an interdenominational and interracial group of liberal laity and clergy from the South who worked toward ameliorating the region’s many social problems. Kester titled the conference “Christianity, Democracy, and the Healing of the South.” It was just the kind of work that the residents at Delta and Providence had done for the last seven years, and Franklin had been a featured speaker at the conference. Returning to Providence, Franklin thought about how to implement on the farm what he learned from other conference attendees.<sup>1</sup>

The trip to Providence was long. Franklin traveled by bus from Raleigh to Meridian, Mississippi, where he then took a train to Jackson. In Jackson, he boarded another bus and rode sixty miles north to Tchula, Mississippi. From downtown Tchula, he hitchhiked the remaining seven miles out to the farm. The lengthy journey gave Franklin time to reflect on Kester’s conference, but it also provided him ample opportunity to observe the racial customs of public transportation in the South and

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<sup>1</sup> From Howard Kester to Sam Franklin, undated, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3473, SHC.

overhear southerners' conversations about race relations. At the conference, Franklin had taken part in discussions with like-minded activists, many of whom were southerners, who viewed Jim Crow as an impediment to "healing the South." As he returned to Providence Farm, he saw and heard white southerners of a different mind, who were determined to maintain Jim Crow at great cost. "As I traveled in Mississippi, I not only saw new evidence of almost sadistic inhumanity in the needless humiliations imposed on Negroes in bus travel," Franklin lamented, "but also heard one middle class white woman telling another that she had been warned to go armed at all times as the Negroes were soon going to 'rise.'"<sup>1</sup>

What Sam Franklin witnessed in his travel was a South in transition. World War II had made race relations more elastic, forcing many Americans to see the fight against fascism as a battle overseas and at home, while simultaneously increasing white racists' fears of black advancement. The increased emigration of sharecroppers, which was fueled by the pull of wartime employment and the push of the mechanization of agriculture, contributed to a tense racial atmosphere across the rural South. Thousands of African Americans joined the Great Migration and moved from the rural South to new homes in the urban North and West. Wanting to maintain a native labor force while continuing to deny African Americans political participation, white southern conservatives, as historian Jason Morgan Ward points out, employed their own brand of a Double Victory campaign. They championed white supremacy and protection from federal intervention. Southern whites who were invested in Old South economics and race relations were anxious about the encroachment of the federal government, the decay

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<sup>1</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 30 March 1943, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3473, SHC.

of one-party politics, and overt affronts to segregation. The South, as they had known it in the 1930s, crumbled all around them. The challenges to white supremacy wrought by the New Deal order and World War II struck many white southerners with alarm, especially in Mississippi Delta locales like Holmes County, where blacks outnumbered whites by more than three to one.<sup>2</sup>

Black initiatives at Providence were an outgrowth of what was taking place around the South. Sociologist and Providence trustee Charles S. Johnson declared in 1944 that “the great majority of southern Negroes are becoming dissatisfied... and want a change.” Another sociologist, Samuel Adams, surveyed the Mississippi Delta during World War II and found significant race pride among African Americans. In Coahoma County, just a few miles from where Delta Cooperative Farm had operated, blacks staged a strike to protest planters’ attempts to decrease their cotton picking wages. White racists viewed returning black veterans as threats to their economic hegemony and personal safety. The United States military trained African Americans for a variety of professional tasks and instructed them in firearm proficiency, making black veterans seem doubly dangerous to white racists. As Johnson and fellow sociologist Howard W. Odum pointed out in the early 1940s, many whites feared a “Negro insurrection.” Fantastic rumors, one of which included an army of ice-pick wielding blacks attacking whites during Defense Department-imposed nighttime blackouts, ran rampant throughout the South. The types

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 38-66.

of rumors that Odum and Johnson documented were nearly identical to the conversations Sam Franklin overheard while traveling through Mississippi.<sup>3</sup>

The changes wrought by World War II played out in rich detail at the farm as managers and staff scaled back the cooperative model, whites left the farm, and residents concentrated their efforts on black self-help. The interracial cooperation that had been the crux of earlier efforts at Delta and Providence was feasible because black and white sharecroppers had experienced the nadir of American opportunity. Together, the sharecropping class was at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy that American capitalism and plantation agriculture had created before World War II. The war, however, opened opportunities for white ex-croppers in Mississippi in a way that it did not for blacks. No longer were the rural poor, black and white, in their fight together. Black self-help at Providence was a reaction to the improved economic circumstances World War II offered many whites. The events at Providence Farm place the social landscape of the rural South during World War II in sharp relief. Evolving race relations and approaches by African Americans and their allies to lay claim to civil and economic rights permeated nearly every interaction at Providence.

With so many material and financial resources pouring into the war effort, little was left for those who did not find jobs in war industries or join the military. Donations for endeavors like Providence simply dried up. Victory taxes and rationing, two ways civilians ostensibly aided the war effort by economic means, hurt rural southerners' pocketbooks. For Sam Franklin, a man who made roughly \$250 per month, his monthly

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<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Johnson, "The Present Status of Race Relations in the South," *Social Forces* 23 (October 1943): 30. For post-war racial tensions, see Howard W. Odum, *Race and Rumors of Race: The American South in the Early Forties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943); Charles S. Johnson, *To Stem This Tide: Survey of Racial Tension Areas in the United States* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1943).

victory tax was \$12.40, five percent of his total monthly earnings. With outside financial resources declining and whites deserting the farm, Providence residents turned to black self-help initiatives to redress their own poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Sherwood Eddy's earlier experience with the YMCA had convinced him that black uplift—and black self-help—were worthwhile endeavors for Christian missionaries in the Depression years. The notion of black uplift had its antecedents in turn-of-the-century northern black communities and middle and upper class blacks who constituted W.E.B. DuBois's "talented tenth." Taking their clues from wealthy blacks, many 1920s middle class civic organizations, such as the YMCA, began to get involved with similar uplift initiatives. As historian Thomas Sugrue explains, "through Christian education, edifying lectures, courses on hygiene, and camping and recreation programs, the Y would transform simple country women into upstanding, respectable urban citizens." His time with the YMCA and close working relationship with the YWCA influenced Eddy to promote similar uplift initiatives at Delta and Providence. In the 1940s, rural African Americans embraced the idea of uplift shorn of its Victorian cultural assumptions and applied it to their lives. Instead of the "talented tenth" elevating the race, ex-croppers at Providence were doing for themselves, from the bottom up. This sort of self-help occurred as a direct result of economic changes during World War II and white plantation owners' diminished influence over black work. Mechanization, while increasing farm production, decreased the number of workers in the fields. The fewer sharecroppers that planters needed, the more African Americans had to pursue employment elsewhere. For some, even unemployed poverty and breadlines were favorable to working for crooked

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<sup>4</sup> From Sam Franklin, unaddressed, undated, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.



plantation owners. The hardships continued, but many blacks were freed from the cyclical impoverishment that came with being a sharecropper.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in 1938—with the establishment of Providence—and throughout most of the 1940s, residents made the transition away from their earlier goals of cooperative production, a socialized economy, and interracial cooperation. As the number of whites in the community drastically decreased, and as outsiders questioned the viability of a large-scale cooperative farm, Providence residents gradually implemented new tactics that focused particularly on barriers to economic freedom, adequate education, and proper health care for African Americans in the rural South. Farm residents worked for black self-help through financial profit from the cooperative store and the dairy, increased access to health care through the cooperative health center and traveling summer health clinics, and improved educational opportunities for children and adults through a variety of courses conducted year round at Providence. Finding Providence no longer addressed his needs, longtime resident Koss Kimberlin, a white socialist, left the farm to pursue other work opportunities. Black ex-croppers like founding member Jim Billington, however, remained at Providence.<sup>6</sup>

World War II's most immediate impact on Providence Farm, though, was Sam Franklin's decision to join the United States Navy and leave the directorship in other hands. Franklin's choice to become a chaplain in the Navy changed the course of Providence Farm for the remainder of its existence. White social justice activists who had no real practical experience running an agricultural cooperative initiated and

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), 10.

<sup>6</sup> From Koss Kimberlin to William Amberson, 1 February 1940, Folder 21, in the William Ruthrauff Amberson Papers #3862, SHC.

implemented Delta Cooperative's policies. At Providence, however, the leadership dynamic changed dramatically when Franklin left. Franklin, whose overbearing personality led him to be involved in even the most insignificant details at Providence and who inundated Sherwood Eddy with a surfeit of letters each week, was replaced by A. Eugene Cox. Cox, as a quiet leader who would rather "climb on the tractor and work all day to escape the writing of a single letter," oversaw the transition to a much more democratic atmosphere on the farm than Franklin had been able to accomplish. Other leadership changes took place simultaneously at Providence. Charles Johnson and F. D. Patterson integrated the Board of Trustees and African Americans gradually moved into the farm's leadership. Beginning in the 1940s, the leadership of Fannye Booker, an African American woman and Holmes County native, signaled a major shift in how residents of the farm viewed the purpose of their endeavor. Booker spearheaded the education initiatives and worked in the health clinic, cooperative store, and credit union when she could. Through these initiatives, Providence Farm exemplified the coalescing civil rights movement taking shape in the rural South, as African Americans relied on local community initiatives to push for equal access to public resources. After Franklin left the farm in 1943, Providence was a different place.<sup>7</sup>

Though World War II began for the United States in earnest in December 1941, the effects of the war did not come to Providence until the fall of 1942. In many ways, the summer of 1942 was the high tide of activities at Providence. The farm's staff, volunteers, and residents held their highest attended summer health clinics and youth summer camps, while practical and religious education continued to draw students from

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<sup>7</sup> From Gene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 25 May 1952, Folder 163, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3473, SHC.

all over the county. From late 1942 until the end of the decade, however, Providence had to evolve with the changes dictated by the war and develop new strategies for alleviating poverty and race prejudice in the rural South.

The move to Holmes County began in 1938 when Sam Franklin bought an old plantation named Providence Farm from landowner T.C. Parrish on behalf of the Delta Cooperative's Board of Trustees. The 2,800 acres, covering just over four square miles, sat astride the geological boundary of the eastern edge of the Mississippi Delta. About five hundred acres of the farm were lowland and planted in crops. Most of the rest of the land was hilly and mainly covered in oak, pine, and cottonwood trees. Bluffs that signaled the eastern boundary of the Yazoo - Mississippi Delta ran along the eastern edge of the property. Chicopa Creek, which flooded often, ran through the property and offered a natural source of irrigation along with several sloughs and a natural spring, which residents dammed and made into a swimming hole. The property contained two large buildings, a dairy, which would be Providence's main focus in the first years, and the old plantation commissary, which cooperators turned into the Providence Cooperative Store. Because it was a former plantation, the tract housed several sharecropper families. Franklin asked cooperator Wilmer Young to visit each sharecropper, explain the new ownership, describe the cooperative model, and give them the option of staying on as members or finding employment elsewhere. As at Delta three years earlier, most families elected to move, but several decided to join the cooperative. Sam Franklin and his wife Dorothy made the first move to Providence in June 1938, the same month that electricity from the Rural Electrification Administration reached the farm. Franklin continued to

manage both farms from Providence, making weekly visits to Delta, while A. Eugene Cox stayed at Delta and acted as *de facto* manager and administrator. Albert Day also stayed at Delta and continued to run operations in the fields. Blaine Treadway, Delta's original assistant director, moved to Providence to take over the creamery operations, despite having no practical experience in this area. Only a few months into his milk processing job, however, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union asked him to step in as acting secretary to temporarily replace H. L. Mitchell. Treadway accepted the STFU's offer and left the farm for good in 1939. Slowly, the remaining families from Delta moved to Providence or left the endeavor altogether.<sup>8</sup>

Continuing a commitment to diversified agriculture, the 1939 crop rotation plan at Providence included cotton, soy beans, corn, small grain and hay, and a cover of clover. Over one hundred acres were used for hogs and thirty milch cows were put to pasture. The creamery was a new venture for the staff, residents, and volunteers, many of whom now had to make milk deliveries all over the county. With no experienced members who could run a creamery, the endeavor was a source of frustration for Sam Franklin.

The Board of Trustees experienced another change in 1941, two years after the resignation of William Amberson. Joining Reinhold Niebuhr, Sherwood Eddy, Sam Franklin, John Rust, Arthur Raper, and Charles S. Johnson, were Reverend Emory Luccock of the First Presbyterian Church in Evanston, Illinois, and Frederick Douglass ("F.D.") Patterson, the President of the Tuskegee Institute from 1933 to 1953 and the founder of the United Negro College Fund in 1943. This Board of Trustees proved to be

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<sup>8</sup> Sam Franklin, "Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm," (unpublished), 59-74.

a stabilizing force throughout the subsequent evolution of Providence and remained unchanged for the rest of the decade.

Holmes County was a different place, geographically and socially, than Bolivar County where Delta Farm had been located. The soil was rocky and ill-suited to grow cotton. The surrounding community was also different than any near Delta. The town of Tchula, seven miles down Mississippi Highway 49 from Providence, had a population of one thousand inhabitants, which was bigger than any community near Delta. Although white neighbors were skeptical of Delta, they were geographically scattered and unorganized. Tchula offered Providence farmers an outlet for their goods, but its tight-knit white community would become more apprehensive about Providence with the rising civil rights movement and growing anti-communism. The locations were similar, however, in that seventy-five percent of the population in both counties was African American but whites firmly controlled politics and economics.<sup>9</sup>

The new location precipitated changes, minor at first, that demonstrated cooperators' willingness to adapt their original goals. Given the challenges that the new farm presented, the "sense of the mission of our enterprise began to change," reported Sam Franklin. "It was directed to the concrete needs of the thousands among us, victimized by racial prejudice and by economic injustice. We asked ourselves how we could make our little Farm community a center for social change in the whole locale," he continued. The result was a focus on the surrounding black community through economic advancement, medical care, and education.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu>.

<sup>10</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 71.

The Providence Farm had bold visions for the future of blacks in a portion of Mississippi where seventy-five percent of residents were black in the 1940s and 1950s, but less than thirteen percent of the total farmland was owned by African Americans. For black Holmes Countians, adequate health care, economic security, and educational opportunities were nearly non-existent. They could have moved almost anywhere in the country and had better access to these three necessities. But beginning in the early 1940s, Providence Cooperative Farm offered practical strategies to begin to meet their needs.<sup>11</sup>

Among the top concerns of staff and volunteers at Providence was the medical care of the rural population of Holmes County. The interest in the health of community members began when the sisters of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, INC (AKA) initiated their traveling health clinics in 1935. The clinics provided examinations and immunizations for thousands of black patients in Bolivar and Holmes counties. In 1936, AKA made their first visit to Delta Cooperative Farm and a partnership between the sorority and the cooperative was born. In 1937, a black dentist from Canton, Mississippi was added to the staff so that the mobile clinics could provide dental care. Before the clinic opened at Providence, no black dentist had maintained a practice in the county and most residents had never had access to dental care. The closest white dentist was in Lexington, nearly twenty miles from Providence, and he only offered limited service to black patients. Instead of being able to wait in the large waiting room with whites, black patients had to sit in the stairwell leading up to his second-story office. Because of the hardship of traveling great distances to see a dentist and the demeaning way blacks were treated when they arrived, over ninety percent of the AKA's patients had never visited a

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<sup>11</sup> Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu>.

dentist. Even a decade later, there were only thirty-three black dentists in the entire state of Mississippi.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the summer clinic's year existence, AKA sorority sisters teamed with the medical staff at Delta and Providence farms, which consisted mainly of Dr. David Minter and white nurses Lindsey Hail Cox and Dorothy Binns Treadway, who had come to Delta Cooperative when her husband, Blaine, was appointed assistant director. Minter and Lindsey Hail Cox had traveled once a week to Providence beginning in 1939, but maintained their permanent clinic at Delta Cooperative. So when the AKA came to Providence in the summers between 1939 and 1942, it was the best chance for many poor Holmes Countians to receive satisfactory health care.<sup>13</sup>

Health conditions among many rural blacks and whites in the Delta were dire. One history of a regular patient at the Providence clinic noted that "J.R." lived on a plantation with a family of five. "House in very bad condition. No screens, no toilet. Works at least 13 hours per day. Average breakfast—eggs, butter, molasses, biscuits. Dinner—a vegetable, milk, bread. No supper." Like J. R., most sharecroppers lived on milk, molasses, vegetables, and cornbread. To address malnourishment, which caused numerous cases of pellagra, rickets, and a host of other maladies, the clinic brought sorority sisters trained as nutritionists to demonstrate "methods of combining foods with a large vitamin content to 'stretch' or increase" the nutrition of each meal.<sup>14</sup>

Offering all manner of medical services, from dental care to contraception, Minter and the AKA provided the African Americans of Holmes County with dependable health

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<sup>12</sup> "Dr. Jones is State's First Woman Dentist," *Negro Star*, September 3, 1948.

<sup>13</sup> "The Kappa Alpha Health Clinic Reopened," *Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1942, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 61.

care and treatment for the first time in their lives. “When we heard about you all coming,” reported a black sharecropper to the clinic staff, “we just ran outside and thanked God. We have been praying for someone to be sent in His name,” she continued, “to speak for his poor laboring people.”<sup>15</sup>

The AKA health clinic reached the most rural Mississippians in the summers of 1941 and 1942. During those summers alone, the clinics aided nearly six thousand patients in Holmes County. In those years, Providence Farm served as the headquarters for the clinic, housing the sorority sisters while some of the farm’s residents cooked for the clinic staff. Because of the year-round health care Minter offered, using Providence as a base allowed the sorority to learn about the health histories of patients that they would only see during the summer months. The clinic staff and the residents at Providence grew close over those summers. Sam Franklin and Ida L. Jackson, an AKA soror and Mississippi native who worked at sorority headquarters in Oakland, California, and who was the co-founder and director of the health clinics, kept up a correspondence throughout 1942 and 1943. The relationship between the cooperative and the sorority developed to the extent that Sherwood Eddy secured a \$1,500 annual donation from the AKA beginning in 1943 in exchange for a promise that the sorority could use Providence as its headquarters for subsequent summer clinics. Eddy also spoke with the sorority about having a representative serve on the farm’s Board of Trustees, granting the African American sorority the privilege of appointing the first woman to serve on the Board. This plan, however, never materialized.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> From Ida L. Jackson to Sam Franklin, 6 May 1943, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.



The cooperative's medical activism had perhaps its most successful year in 1942. Dr. Minter treated over ten thousand patients—one in four Holmes County residents—both black and white. In only a one-month period, the AKA summer health clinic saw ten percent of the county's black population. As the summer of 1943 approached, Providence Farm and the AKA were planning another successful summer clinic.<sup>17</sup>

A series of events stemming from World War II, however, changed the path of the farm forever. Delta Cooperative Farm was finally sold on January 2, 1943 for \$33,600 to a private land owner. That month, Gene Cox worked tirelessly to liquidate Delta's assets and move the last remaining families, including his own, to Providence. By the end of January, Delta founding families the Billingtons, the Hendersons, the Morgans, and the Erwins joined the Franklins, the Coxes and eleven other families at Providence to carry on their experiment in cooperative work and communal living.<sup>18</sup>

The profit from the sale of Delta Cooperative enabled Providence to "proceed with a certain degree of economic security and stability." The Cooperative Farms, Inc. could pay off all debts related to Delta and close out the mortgage on Providence Farm outright. The biggest debt was to board member Sherwood Eddy, who had fronted the \$15,000 down payment on the Providence purchase in 1938. Eddy had received \$1,000 toward the repayment of that debt, and the Cooperative Farms, Inc. paid him the remaining \$14,000 after Delta's sale. A Holmes County attorney living in Lexington named Pat Barrett, who would later play a pivotal role in the demise of the cooperative

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<sup>17</sup> Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu>; Miscellaneous, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>18</sup> Wilmer and Mildred Young to undisclosed recipients, February 1938, in the Wilmer and Mildred Young Papers Manuscripts Department, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

experiment, prepared the deed for Providence Cooperative Farm and officially transferred the ownership of the tract from Sherwood Eddy to Cooperative Farms, Inc.<sup>19</sup>

From January 1938 until January 1943, the Cooperative Farms, Inc. had owned three properties in Mississippi. The ownership and operation of Delta Cooperative Farm in Bolivar County, Providence Farm near Tchula, and the creamery in Lexington stretched already scarce human, material, and financial resources to the limit. Sherwood Eddy had purchased the creamery at Franklin's behest not long after the move to Providence. Though Franklin urged Eddy to buy the creamery on behalf of the farm, he would later call the creamery the source "for some of the most traumatic experiences of my years with the Farms." The purchase of the creamery meant that staff and residents at the farm had to deliver milk all over the county. Though they barely kept up this schedule for several years, it soon became clear to Franklin that this purchase had been ill-advised.<sup>20</sup>

Operating the creamery and processing milk at Providence had proved too much to handle for the staff. Because no dairy operator held the position for longer than a few months, the responsibility often fell to Sam Franklin and some of the female staff and volunteers. Tending to the milch cows and the dairy was nearly round-the-clock work, with residents often milking after dark and rising at 3:30am for the first milking of the day. Franklin's "hair grew gray over such matters as bacteria counts, leaking compressors, and lost milk bottles." Exactly one week after the Cooperative Farms, Inc. finalized the sale of Delta Cooperative, they also sold the rights to the Lexington

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<sup>19</sup> From Sam Franklin to Arthur Raper, 11 January 1943, Folder 153, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 69.

creamery to Mann Smith, “an enterprising Negro who has a business of his own and who will in all probability be able to meet these notes without difficulty.” Once the Lexington creamery was sold, instead of pasteurizing the milk themselves, Providence obtained a contract with a creamery in Greenwood where they shipped their raw milk. The end product went to a military base in Mississippi. In April 1943, with more staff freed from the milk delivery schedule to work exclusively at the dairy, Franklin reported that the farm was producing 100 gallons per day of raw milk.<sup>21</sup>

Beginning in 1942 and culminating the next year, the Cooperative Farms, Inc. drastically downsized their responsibilities and activities. The selling of Delta Farm and the Lexington creamery were only part of larger transformations taking place within the cooperative endeavor. The most obvious change for residents was the population decrease that began when some cooperators elected not to make the move from Delta to Providence and crested in late 1942 and early 1943 when the effects of America’s entrance into World War II finally reached Holmes County, Mississippi.

As of the spring of 1943, there were fifteen families at Providence. Ten of these families were African American, including former Delta Cooperative farmers such as Jim Billington and his family. “Most of the white people from Providence had gone into war work as was natural,” explained Sam Franklin, “and some of those from Rochdale have gone into industry or have chosen to remain in Bolivar County.” The compulsory draft and war industries beckoned. For many rural southerners who had experienced hard lives in the fields, the war was an opportunity to escape the ever-present threshold of poverty.

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<sup>21</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 69—70; From Sam Franklin to Frances Denton, 17 April 1943, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

The missionary and medical experiences of some of the staff at Providence made them attractive to the armed forces. Many of the volunteers who passed through Providence were idealistic young men who felt strongly about the war—either as pacifists who refused to fight or as anti-fascists who were anxious for the United States to enter the fray. Charles Merrill, a Harvard-educated volunteer, arrived in the summer of 1941 and planned to take up long-term residence on the farm. Merrill was “inwardly raging at the fascism which was devouring Europe” but was able to direct his energies into cooperative farming at Providence. On December 7, 1941, the young Merrill listened to news coverage of the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces on the radio in the Providence Community Center. Within days he had enlisted in the Canadian Army, not waiting for the United States Army to mobilize, becoming the first person from Providence to leave the farm because of World War II.<sup>22</sup>

The suddenness of Merrill’s departure signaled the first of many changes at Providence. The first permanent staff member to leave the cooperative effort because of the war was Dr. David Minter. Minter had assumed that one military branch or another would draft him and commission him as a medical officer. To his wife, Sue, Minter privately predicted that his experience treating malaria in the Mississippi Delta would make him a prime candidate for military service in the Pacific Theater. The Minters did not want to leave the farm, nor was Dr. Minter particularly interested in serving in the military. Though he had a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania, which insured him at least the possibility of operating a lucrative practice anywhere in the United States, Minter felt called to come south and serve an underprivileged population

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<sup>22</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 76; From Sam Franklin to John R. Fain, 12 February 1943, Folder 154, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

in the Mississippi Delta. Minter knew he was the only doctor upon whom many Holmes Countians could rely. Driven more by his Hippocratic oath and his Christian faith than any ideological dogma, Minter treated all patients equally and had one waiting room instead of the customary segregated waiting room. He did not want to give up his practice for a stint in the military. Providence was his home and there was important work to be done there. The Minter's attachment to the farm was deep and personal; after all, David and Sue had met at Delta Cooperative in 1938.<sup>23</sup>

As the war set in, Minter went about his medical practice and hoped that the draft board would overlook him. In 1942, however, he was notified by the Army Air Corp that he would be drafted and, pending a review, commissioned as a medical officer. After the AKA summer health clinic in 1942, Minter left for service in the Pacific Theater, treating soldiers for malaria. His wife, Sue, moved back to Indiana to live with her parents.<sup>24</sup>

Minter's entrance into military service dealt an immediate blow to the farm. He had been the only doctor at both locations for the last four years. He left at the height of his practice as word continued to spread among the rural poor that he was an outstanding doctor who treated all patients, regardless of color or class, with the same kind and humorous bedside manner. "Our work is quite unspectacular," Sam Franklin revealed to

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<sup>23</sup> Though hospitals were required by law to have separate waiting rooms, country clinics often circumvented the law because rural Jim Crow laws were often less stringent. Still, some of Minter's white patients preferred to wait in their cars instead of share the integrated waiting room with blacks.

<sup>24</sup> Sam Franklin to Ralph W. Cessna, 11 January 1943, Folder 153, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

a friend in early 1943, “especially since we have lost our doctor to the Air Corps and our medical program is much curtailed.”<sup>25</sup>

The draft claimed other members of the farms. Sam Checkver, an ardent socialist, pacifist, labor organizer, and cooperative store manager at both Delta and Providence, ran afoul of Selective Service in 1942 only months after leaving Providence. Checkver was born in Russia to a Jewish family which had immigrated to the United States shortly after his birth. Graduating *magna cum laude* from Harvard, Checkver attended Harvard Law School in the 1920s and served on the editorial board of the *Harvard Law Review*. After arriving at Delta in 1938 and even after he moved to Providence in 1940, Checkver often found his radical positions in opposition to Sam Franklin’s leadership and theology. Much like A. James MacDonald, a volunteer at Delta who had reported back to William Amberson and found every possible opportunity to argue with or chide Franklin, Checkver’s socialist convictions and confrontational nature often led to heated, public disagreements with Franklin.<sup>26</sup>

Mostly, Checkver took issue with how labor operated at Providence, and he clandestinely reorganized an STFU local in early 1940. However, other Providence residents were not persuaded by his organizing. The only cooperative member other than Checkver who attended the meetings was original Delta cooperator Wilburn White. The remaining twenty members were black sharecroppers from neighboring plantations. That only one other resident attended these meetings demonstrated a shift away from labor-focused reform at Providence. Ties to the STFU had dwindled since Providence scaled

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> From C. Dena Bulgaris to A. E. Cox, 4 March 1971, 1975 Addendum, Box 1, AEC.

down agricultural initiatives and focused economic initiatives on the dairy and the cooperative store. Sam Franklin was concerned about Checkver's STFU meetings and wrote Eddy detailing the situation.

They have been meeting surreptitiously in a vacant house three miles from the farm. Now we who are from the South, know that it is about three times more dangerous for Sam to be doing this than anybody else. When it leaks out, as it inevitably will, that a Russian Jew from New York is holding clandestine meetings with Negroes in Mississippi organizing them into a union, there is likely to be trouble of a very serious sort.

Franklin's private letter to Eddy underscored the murderous reality of the situation in the Mississippi Delta but also belied his egalitarian convictions. Franklin was right that Checkver's ethnicity and foreign accent would make him an easy target for white supremacists looking to punish anyone challenging the status quo. Checkver's challenge was especially serious since it involved the black labor force. Franklin's letter also made clear that, as long as he was in charge, Providence was only looking for the "right" kind of social activist. Being a dogmatic non-Christian did not ingratiate Checkver to the farm's severe director.<sup>27</sup>

Franklin knew, however, that Checkver's undeniable abilities as the cooperative store manager had increased the store's profits and members' dividends. "With immense business ability he built up the stock in" the Providence store, Franklin asserted, "helped to draw in scores of members from the disadvantaged Negroes around us, and raised the level of the store's earnings to a high figure." Nevertheless, he convinced Eddy to personally ask Checkver to leave the farm in early 1942, saying that it was perhaps best if Checkver find a situation more fitting of his "radical" views. Unbeknownst to Franklin

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<sup>27</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 30 March 1940, quoted in note from Eugene Cox, 20 March 1968, 1975 Addendum, Box 1, AEC.

or Eddy, a warrant had been issued for Checkver's arrest on charges of draft evasion. After leaving Providence, Checkver bought land in Celo, North Carolina, where conscientious objectors, including some previous volunteers at Delta and Providence, had settled. Within a few months of leaving the farm, however, Checkver was arrested for avoiding Selective Service and imprisoned in a federal work camp in California.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to changing the racial make-up of the cooperative, America's entrance into World War II also meant women began to outnumber men in the farms' workforce. Women took over doing much of the work that had been previously reserved for men. Before the war, women primarily performed three jobs at the cooperatives: nurse, teacher, and field hand. The war pushed the farm to downsize much of its operations, though the dairy, the cooperative store, and all agricultural work continued. Much of this work fell to Gene Cox and Sam Franklin, but they, even with the aid of other cooperators, could not handle all the manual labor and attend to their administrative duties. Franklin had to rely on the female staff and volunteers to cover at the dairy and occasionally drive the milk truck full of raw milk to Greenwood. Necessity led to unfamiliar and unprecedented practices such as having a woman operate a large truck off of the farm.

Dorothy Franklin took on much of the farm responsibilities in early 1943. The staff shortage reached almost crisis proportions in that year, and when Sam Franklin was convalesced with an abscessed tooth, Dorothy stepped in to run the farm in all but name. Franklin spent much of his time off the farm, seeking treatment in Lexington and Jackson. Besides her duties as a mother, Sunday school teacher, and unofficial one-woman host for overnight visitors to the farm, Dorothy took on more than her share of farm tasks.

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<sup>28</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 64.



In addition to suffering constant pain, Franklin was distracted from his duties as farm director for another reason. He had spent many months considering the wars in Europe and Asia and wondering where God was leading him. Were his abilities best employed at Providence, or did his experiences as a missionary in Japan—during which time he became fluent in Japanese—make him valuable to the war effort? At first, Franklin decided to inquire with the Navy about the possibility of a commission. He figured that he would let the Navy make the decision for him. On February 8, 1943 Franklin received a one-line letter from the Navy saying that his request to be commissioned into the Navy as a chaplain was denied. He guessed it may have been because of his associations with the farms or because local people around Tchula, skeptical of the farms' presence, may have painted him negatively when the Navy sent representatives to inquire about him. Four days after receiving the Navy's rejection, Franklin wrote a cousin in Georgia that he and Dorothy were relieved "to have the matter settled and to know that I can now continue with a clear conscience in the work here. Dorothy and I are celebrating," he continued, "by enlarging the garden."<sup>29</sup>

Franklin's willingness to take the Navy's refusal as the final word on the matter did not last long. In March, Franklin revealed to Eddy that he had appealed the Navy's rejection of his commission as a chaplain. The Navy denied him a second time, but then shortly after sent him a message that he needed to submit his papers for reconsideration. Taking time away from the farm, Franklin hand-delivered his request papers to the regional Office of Officer Procurement in New Orleans to ask about his rejections.

"There I learned that the original rejection had been because mu [sic] work was not

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<sup>29</sup> From Sam Franklin to John R. Fain, 12 February 1943, Folder 154, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 8 March 1943, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC.

regarded as being properly that of a minister,” Franklin wrote Eddy. The officer in charge “indicated some knowledge of the project, asked me about Mitchell and the S.T.F.U.,” he continued, “and revealed that some of the prejudice against our experiment had quite considerably colored the decision of his office.”<sup>30</sup>

Eddy begged Franklin to reconsider his decision to pursue a military commission. Instead of giving in and returning to the farm, however, Franklin took a trip to Atlanta to meet with the Army about a commission as a chaplain. Providence once again was in the hands of his wife. Franklin admitted to Eddy that he went to Atlanta to meet with the Army because he was a “hard loser.” The dogged pursuit of a commission, however, reveals more than simple personality traits. The Franklins had an affinity for Japan they could not dismiss and Sam considered the war a way to get back to Asia. Additionally, despite strong convictions as a social Christian, he was not a conscientious objector. He argued with many college-aged Quaker volunteers at Delta and Providence about the dictatorships in Asia and Europe and bitterly disagreed with their pacifist views that America should stay out of the world’s affairs. Finally, Franklin’s eagerness to take a commission as a chaplain meant that he was beginning to acknowledge that the potential for success at Providence was limited.<sup>31</sup>

Franklin’s friends and associates did not see the endeavor at Providence in this limited way. Eddy wrote him almost daily asking for updated news of his plans and asking him to put the needs of Providence before his own desires to return to Asia. Ida L. Jackson, who had befriended Franklin as the AKA director of the clinics at Providence,

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<sup>30</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 8 March 1943, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>31</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 8 March 1943, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC.

wrote him in May 1943 after hearing from Eddy that he might leave the Delta for military service.

Conditions are so tense everywhere now, and Negro-White relations are always strained in Mississippi that I really hate to think of facing the situation in Holmes County with you away. Your presence was not only the moving force and inspiration for us, but you offered a certain amount of protection against the 'evil forces emanating from the great White world.' Soooo, I hope Uncle preferred to leave you there to do a job that is in my way of thinking just as essential.

Jackson's letter revealed her fear about the future of Providence, the AKA health clinics, and expressed a belief that what Franklin was doing in the Mississippi Delta was making a positive difference in race relations. Within a few days of receiving Jackson's letter, however, Franklin received final word from the Navy that they would commission him as a chaplain. In mid-May 1943, the man who was most responsible for the establishment and direction of Delta and Providence cooperative farms, and the only manager either farm had known, shipped off to naval boot camp in Williamsburg, Virginia.<sup>32</sup>

Though there was continuity in some of the farm's programs after 1943, Franklin's departure was the pivotal moment in Providence Farm's saga. Despite his best efforts, Franklin often hindered the democratic spirit he wanted to foster. Franklin made decisions directly or he wrote Sherwood Eddy to gain the advice of the trustees. Now, decisions were more frequently made at the farm instead of having to approve them with the Board of Trustees. The only obvious choice to take over as director was Gene Cox. Though Eddy pleaded with Cox to keep him informed of the farm's inner workings, Cox found it almost painful to take the time to write letters. As a result, Providence residents

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<sup>32</sup> From Ida L. Jackson to Sam Franklin, 6 May 1943, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC.

found an increased level of autonomy they had previously lacked with Franklin at the helm.

Franklin recommended to Eddy that Cox lead Providence “until I return.” He hoped that the military commission would only be a brief interruption. Eddy had a clearer understanding of international affairs and knew that Franklin could be away for several years. Armed with this assumption, Eddy did not think Cox was the best person to take over as manager at Providence farm for the long-term. Eddy wrote Franklin in 1943, explaining why he did not think Cox could handle the responsibilities of the job:

From my point of view, he must have two qualifications, both of which you have: first, spiritual consecration, and vision, and purpose; and second, practicality—a man who could make a farm a success and not a terrible money losing liability. Gene for instance could do the second, but not the first.

Despite Eddy’s misgivings about Cox’s spiritual dedication, the endeavor at Providence had to move forward as seamlessly as possible. Only a month before leaving, Franklin described himself as “persona non grata with most of the farmers in this section.” He wrote to trustee Arthur Raper that he did “not participate in much of the small talk about crops, labor, etc. that goes on in the barber shop, pool room, etc. of Tchula and other small towns.” Cox, in contrast, did not come across as severe or as ideologically driven as Franklin and had the potential to bridge some of the divides that existed between the farm and the surrounding community.<sup>33</sup>

When Franklin left, various plans for Providence collapsed. A plan to relocate Japanese-American internees, for instance, fell apart. During 1942 and 1943, two eighth-graders at Providence, Barbara Jean Erwin and Otto Morgan, Jr., became pen pals with

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<sup>33</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Sam Franklin, 23 Feb 1943, Folder 154, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to Arthur Raper, 8 May 1943, Folder 156, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC.

Japanese-American students interned at the Tule Lake Relocation Center in Newell, California. Spurred by this epistolary relationship, Franklin had struck up a correspondence with managers at the Tule Lake Center and began talks to have several interned Japanese-American families interested in cooperative farming transferred to Providence Farm as members. This idea grew out of Franklin's continued interest in Japanese culture and no doubt also revealed his concern for interned Japanese-Americans. The Tule Lake Center was infamous for housing families who had supposedly refused to declare allegiance to the United States. The Japanese relocation idea only blossomed weeks before Franklin left for military service, after which correspondence stopped and no families were relocated to Providence.<sup>34</sup>

In the immediate wake of Dr. Minter's departure for the Air Corps, Franklin had scrambled to keep the health care initiatives of the farm intact. Lindsey Hail Cox resigned as farm nurse in December 1942, feeling that she could not run the clinic by herself and needing to take care of her newly adopted infant daughter, Carol. With Minter gone and Cox resigned, Franklin pursued the services of a black doctor to come to the farm.

Franklin had made contact with Clarence M. Wigfall, an African American medical student who was interning in the spring of 1943 at the Kate B. Reynolds Hospital in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Wigfall was born and raised in Georgia. His parents were small business owners and his mother had worked for a district office of the largest

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<sup>34</sup> From Dorothy Franklin to Garnet Van Buskirk, 20 May 1943, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers #3474, SHC; Harold Stanley Jacoby, *Tule Lake: From Relocation to Segregation* (Grass Valley, California, Comstock Bonanza Press, 1996), 70-79; Karl Lilliquist, "Farming in the Desert: Agriculture in the World War II-Era Japanese-American Relocation Centers," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Winter 2010): 74-80.

black-owned company in America, North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company. He was a “Southerner by birth, training and choice,” and, on paper, was just the kind of doctor Franklin was looking for to fill Minter’s vacancy at Providence. Wigfall seemed progressive in his ideas about race relations, but understood that the endeavor at Providence necessitated moderate actions by the staff so that the whole enterprise did not provoke white violence. In his letter of application, Wigfall quoted Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition speech, stating that he agreed with Washington’s assessment of economic unity and social segregation. Wigfall was also respectful to “the white man,” he assured Franklin, “so long as there are no overt threats to my safety.”<sup>35</sup>

Like many black doctors in the urban South, Wigfall worked in a segregated hospital managed by white administrators. Kate B. Reynolds Hospital was the “colored branch” of City Memorial Hospital in Winston-Salem. Though most of the doctors and nurses were African American, many of the administrators were white, including his superintendent. At first, Franklin received glowing letters of recommendation from former professors and administrators on Wigfall’s behalf. Then, the superintendent of Reynolds Hospital sent Franklin a letter declining to recommend Wigfall, dismissing him as “lazy” and resentful of authority. Wigfall may have anticipated this turn of events when he wrote Franklin that “a reference is no better than the man who gives it, favorable or otherwise.” Franklin immediately wrote Edward L. Turner, the President of Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee where Wigfall had obtained his medical degree. Turner confided in Franklin that the white superintendent at Kate B. Reynolds hospital was a man of questionable character who harbored race prejudice. Turner concluded that

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<sup>35</sup> From Clarence Wigfall to Sam Franklin, 7 April 1943, Folder 156, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

the superintendent was upset at his black intern staff and had retaliated by writing negative letters on their behalf. After hearing this perspective, Franklin moved forward with attempting to secure a salary for Dr. Wigfall.<sup>36</sup>

The challenge of securing a doctor had occupied much of Franklin's last months at Providence. He kept assuring Wigfall that a salary would be in place as soon as the doctor arrived to the Delta. At the same time, however, Franklin was communicating with Sherwood Eddy and Ida L. Jackson of the AKA, asking for donations toward the doctor's salary. When Franklin left the farm, the deal to bring Wigfall to Providence was still unresolved. Gene Cox took up the correspondence, but did not hear from the doctor for several weeks. In the end, Wigfall perceived the absence of reliable funding and declined the invitation to set up a practice at Providence. Around the same time that Wigfall wrote Cox to tell him he was not coming to the Delta, the AKA wrote to inform Cox that money for the doctor's salary could not be secured.<sup>37</sup>

Cox was dealt another serious blow from the AKA in late summer 1943, only two months after taking over as director at Providence. Ida L. Jackson wrote Cox to say the sorority was unable to secure volunteers and funding for the Delta health clinics and was forced to cancel them for 1943. Jackson related that many sorors with medical training or experience as nurses, which was virtually the entire volunteer staff for the health clinics, had been pulled into the war effort. Additionally, securing travel for the volunteers and their medical supplies had always been a challenge, but in 1943 it proved completely

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Miscellaneous, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

impossible. Because of fuel rationing, the federal government issued a request to all organizations not to travel unless absolutely necessary.<sup>38</sup>

As a result, between 1943 and 1946 Providence Cooperative Farm had no health clinic. Repeated attempts to entice black nurses and doctors to the area proved unsuccessful. The loss of the health clinic severely hindered the work residents at Providence hoped to accomplish. Many patients previously had learned of farm activities through their visits to the clinic. In this fashion, the clinic represented significant community outreach. The lack of a clinic also hurt the area's black population. In the preceding years, rural blacks in Holmes County had received excellent health care from Minter and the AKA summer clinics. With Minter away in uniform and wartime rationing restricting travel, sick African Americans had to once again rely on white doctors who did not always treat them with dignity or appropriate care.

In the absence of Franklin and other whites who had dominated the farm's affairs, African Americans built a community at Providence. They made the choice to stay because they saw Providence as their best chance to obtain material and spiritual wealth, and also because they viewed it as a home where they now had roots and a small measure of security. Residents at Providence faced the winter of 1943, like so many seasons before, with uncertainty about the future of their endeavor and their own lives. The Board of Trustees, including Sherwood Eddy, was still committed to the mission of the farm, but in losing Sam Franklin, the endeavor had lost a visionary and a man who got things done. With no medical clinic, dwindling population, new leadership, and

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<sup>38</sup> From Ida L. Jackson to Gene Cox, 10 August 1943, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; "Health Clinic is Called Off By AKA Sorors," *Chicago Defender*, September 4, 1943, 16.



questionable crop yields, Cox and the remaining African Americans were forced to either come together or abandon the farm altogether.

Only four white families and nine black families remained at Providence in the fall of 1943. Everywhere farm residents looked, their world was changing. The war dominated conversation, media coverage, and the popular consciousness. The experiment at Providence now seemed to many a curiosity at best. Ralph Cessna, central news editor for the *Christian Science Monitor*, wrote to Providence in 1943 to inquire about writing an informational piece on Providence. Cessna typed up a draft of the story, but for months the article languished while he tried and failed to fit it into an issue. According to Cessna, the delay was because “the thing lacks vital news interest.” If Cessna’s estimation was correct, it was an indication that the public’s fascination with the curious and laudable cooperative project in the Mississippi Delta had run its course. America’s role in World War II simply dominated the news media. Donors who had supported the effort at Providence previously, now put their resources into the war effort. Additionally, sociologist and board member Charles S. Johnson had noticed that news outlets during the early 1940s dwelled on negative stories about black/white relations. Because of his role as a trustee, Johnson had written to the farm in 1943 that “there are many developments in the relations existing between white and Negro peoples in the United States that point in the direction of an intelligent and satisfying human relationship between racial groups.” He added, however, that “these seldom come to the

attention of the public. The tragic, the bizarre, the sensationally troublesome items,” he concluded, “are the more usual focus of our interest and, so, of our attention.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite outside ambivalence, the residents at Providence made the most of their circumstances. By late 1943, Providence Farm was organized into four spheres: the Producers’ Cooperative, the Extension Farm, the Cooperative Store, and the Providence Cooperative Association. The Producers’ Cooperative handled the dairy and beef herd and operated on the same Rochdale Cooperative model that drove the farm at Delta Cooperative. All profits from the production and sale of raw milk and beef went into overhead costs and member dividends. The Extension Farm, a small tract of land worked by residents and renters, was a new endeavor for Providence, mainly because the land used for farming was far smaller than the land used at Delta Cooperative Farm. Yield from the Extension Farm was sold at the Cooperative Store, but as the population of Providence dwindled, Cox gradually phased out this aspect of the cooperative. The Cooperative Store operated similarly to the store at Delta. Members of the store gained a dividend from all profits. The major change to the store was that white volunteers and staff no longer exclusively ran the register. By late 1942, all former employees at the store had left Providence. New store staffers were recruited from ex-sharecropping families. Gene Cox convinced Lilly Little, an African American teenager who lived with her family at Providence, to run the register. Little had no experience working a register, but Cox trained her and within days she was running the store. By 1943, the Providence cooperative store had all African American clerks who served both white and black customers. In addition to Little, Robert and Hattie Granderson and Fannye Booker ran

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<sup>39</sup> From Ralph Cessna to Sam Franklin, 26 February 1943, Folder 154, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Charles S. Johnson to Sam Franklin, 29 March 1943, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

the register and stocked shelves. Finally, the Cooperative Association was a new concept that Franklin had developed and that came to fruition under Cox's leadership. The Cooperative Association's purpose was community outreach. Through this initiative, Providence consolidated outreach programs in education, economic development, and religious guidance.<sup>40</sup>

By the mid 1940s, Cox was nearly fed up with the producers' cooperative and its failure to be consistently self-sustaining. "I have the feeling that collectives can succeed only where there is a large degree of regimentation," concluded Cox, "and I cannot see the farmers in this country accepting very much of it." Even Sherwood Eddy conceded that "there is not a natural tendency for the average man to work as hard for a cooperative or a collective as he would on his own where he gets all the fruits of his labor." Thus Cox implemented a modified producers' cooperative for those who wished to participate and encouraged the cultivation of personal plots.<sup>41</sup>

The sale of Delta Cooperative Farm and sales from the cooperative store kept Providence and its residents afloat during the war years. The store became the social and economic center of Providence as it had been at Delta previously.

Customers from the hills and some of the plantations flocked to the "Co-op" where blacks were treated without discrimination and where the profits that once went to the owner of the commissary were returned to members in proportion to their purchases. Saturday was the peak business day of the week. Black and white were relaxed and ready to linger around the stove in winter or under the shade of the surrounding oaks in the summer. Soon after we came, we established a reading room and library in one of the two small back rooms of the store building. The store was the natural connecting link between the Farm and the larger community,

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<sup>40</sup> Kieran W. Taylor, "I Done Made My Mind Up: The Legacy of the Providence Cooperative Farm," (MA thesis, University of Mississippi, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Fellow Director of Cooperative Farms, INC. 27 April 1945, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

helping us to understand the needs, physical, economic, educational, and spiritual, of the people by whom we were surrounded.

The cooperative store was the most successful economic venture the farm pursued.

Selling dry goods and some farming tools, and housing a small café, the store served as the lifeblood of the surrounding black community for nearly twenty years. The co-op store was much like any other crossroads store of its time, serving both black and white customers. The big difference, of course, was that dividends from the store were divided among Providence residents instead of going solely to a merchant. By the end of 1943, the store made \$15,000 in revenue, reportedly \$500 better than sales a year earlier.<sup>42</sup>

The crops from the Extension Farm were subpar in 1943, and Gene Cox sought to boost the farming potential of Providence for 1944. Cox wrote to Eddy that he had “secured four large families to farm on the place next year. They have moved in and with the other families on the farm,” he reported, “we should have sufficient labor to farm next year.” Both the Erwins and the Hendersons, original residents at Delta Cooperative Farm, left Providence in January 1944. Following the trend of whites moving out of the rural South and away from farming as a profession, Jess Erwin and John Henderson, “were not interested in farming” any longer and took work in Tchula at a mechanic’s garage.<sup>43</sup>

Even with several new families who were willing to farm, Cox knew that to rely on financial returns from the dairy and the store could result in serious economic jeopardy. “Many of our families left the farm and went to the city for defense work,”

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<sup>42</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 70; From Eugene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 18 Dec 1943, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>43</sup> From Eugene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 18 Dec 1943, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

Cox somberly reported. “The result is that we are limiting our program here until the others return from their present duties.” Instead of sitting idly by, waiting for others to return, however, Cox had all families at Providence file with the Farm Security Administration for the 1944 year. Apparently he did this as a precaution in case the farm could not support itself. If it came to that, Cox hoped that Providence could be taken over by the FSA and transformed into a resettlement community like those created by the agency elsewhere in the South, including Mileston, only a short distance from Providence.<sup>44</sup>

The FSA never took control of Providence because Cox’s efforts kept the farm economically viable. Cox, whose first job at Delta in 1936 had been as the farm’s accountant, was able to see beyond the limits that Sam Franklin’s ideology had placed on the endeavor. Cox negotiated deals that leased over a thousand acres of Providence’s original tract to the Texas – based Atlantic Refining Company and the Mississippi – based Magnolia Oil Company, both of which sunk oil wells on the land. In all, the oil companies paid Providence \$2,000 per year for drilling rights. The profits from these deals went directly to the Cooperative Farms, Inc. Eddy wrote Cox in 1945 that all income from the leasing of land to the oil companies should be for the “wide benefit of the sharecroppers of Holmes County and the South. The idea all along,” Eddy continued, “has been that members and people on the Farms should make all that was possible from the annual income of the farming operations, but that the capital account and the future of the farms was to be held by the Directors to carry out our original purpose to serve the sharecroppers of the South.” Eddy’s vision that capital gained from ventures like leasing

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<sup>44</sup> From Eugene Cox to Dennis Hart, 26 February 1944, Folder 158, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Eugene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 18 Dec 1943, Folder 157, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

the land go to the Cooperative Farms, Inc. instead of directly to the ex-croppers, underscored his ten year desire to aid sharecroppers all over the South. But Eddy was vague on exactly what he meant by “to serve the sharecroppers of the South.” Was Providence not accomplishing this, even if on a small level? Did Eddy mean for all profits to flow directly to the members? Eddy’s hesitation to allow the cooperative members to receive all profits and his vague statements were the same kind of obfuscations that had infuriated William Amberson and caused him to leave the Board of Trustees in the late 1930s. Ostensibly, though, whatever income came from leasing the land went toward overhead costs for the Producers’ Cooperative, the Extension Farm, the store, and the outreach programs at Providence.<sup>45</sup>

The only aspect of Providence’s new structure in the first years of the 1940s not wholly aimed at economic uplift was the Providence Cooperative Association. The brainchild of Sam Franklin, the Cooperative Association began in 1943 as “the formulation of long range community-wide objectives.” The objectives were aimed at “physical, economic, educational, and religious” uplift of the surrounding community and included “100% of the community in church, 75% in Sunday School, and Bible reading and prayer in every home.” Aside from the maintenance of the spiritual health of the community, the Association strove “to get half of our children of high school age into high school.” The Association targeted “those families within a radius of six miles of this farm, most of whom are Negroes who are day laborers, tenant farmers, or owners of small tracts of eroded land.” Franklin, before he left for military service, thought it was “interesting and challenging to be able to have a part in the gradual transformation of a

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<sup>45</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Eugene Cox, 10 May 1945, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Sherwood Eddy to Fellow Director Cooperative Farms, INC, 27 April 1945, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

community through the practical application of the teachings of Christ. It is a community that emphasizes the number 1 economic problem in America as the President's Commission has termed the South," he continued, "and which reveals the starkest need along every line from the physical to the spiritual."<sup>46</sup>

Importantly, the first president of the Providence Cooperative Association was Robert Granderson, a black farmer from rural Holmes County. Franklin observed that Granderson "had suffered from the arrogant discrimination which deprived black people of political rights and made education in the segregated schools little more than a gesture." Despite these hardships, Granderson "had grown to middle age with dignity and an independent spirit, with a deep Christian faith and a strong concern for social well being." He steered the Association and the farm in important directions throughout the 1940s.<sup>47</sup>

Although many of the staff and volunteers at Providence in the 1940s were no longer dyed-in-the-wool Christian Socialists, the teaching of social justice on the farm now had a long history that would continue into the next decade. Granderson oversaw the "Educational Institute for Negroes" held each December at Providence. Beginning in December 1941 and recurring throughout the decade, the institute consisted of instruction in agricultural practices and handicrafts, Bible lessons, and advanced courses that prepared black youth for college. Signifying the importance of social justice to black pupils, one teacher offered "classes in Isaiah and found my listeners very responsive as we talked of the prophet's ideals of justice." The 1942 educational institute culminated

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<sup>46</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 75; From Sam Franklin to Harry C. Herman, 4 March 1943, Folder 155, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>47</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 72.

in a Christmas service “with a colored Madonna,” reported one teacher, “which was very beautiful.”<sup>48</sup>

The classes offered at the Educational Institute for Negroes reflected the farm’s new commitment to black self-help. Beginning with the first institute in 1941, some of the most influential black leaders of the era came to Providence to instruct black residents of the Mississippi Delta. Instructors included the longtime farm ally Reverend Howard Kester, civil rights activist and educator Juanita Jackson, who had organized a march in Annapolis to repeal Maryland’s Jim Crow laws, and Dr. Jacob Reddix, who was then president of the Jackson Training College for African American students and who had organized a successful African American cooperative in Gary, Indiana called the Consumers’ Cooperative Trading Company. Other instructors came from the surrounding black churches and a dozen colleges and institutions including Tougaloo College, Jackson College, the Saints Industrial School in Lexington, and the Farm Security Administration. Course titles included “Church Work,” “the Art of Cooking and Homemaking,” “Cooperative Organization,” and “Toward a More Healthy Community.” In order to attract a large audience, attendance was free.<sup>49</sup>

The Cooperative Association quickly became the main focus of farm activities and bolstered the farm’s reputation among local blacks. The formation of the Cooperative Association marked a shift in the cooperative’s goals. Both Franklin and Cox noticed that, beginning in the early 1940s, Providence had “an increasing range of influence in this impoverished community of Negro farmers and sharecroppers. At this

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<sup>48</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 74; From Sam Franklin to Miriam Walker, 8 January 1943, Folder 153, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>49</sup> Franklin, “Early Years,” 74.



time when it is so necessary that we realize at home the ideals for which we are fighting abroad,” Franklin declared only weeks before he left in 1943, “I think there are few causes which will yield better returns in aiding worthy people to help themselves than this community-wide program that we are carrying on.”

To appreciate what it meant one has to think of it against the background of ignorance, preventable disease, abject poverty, denial of elementary civil rights, and confused and distorted religious thinking which characterizes most of the Negro life of this section. We feel the Providence Farm is strategically located here in a county where three-fourths of the population is colored and where nearly all of the moral issues arising out of the sharecropping and tenant system are found in an acute form. It is a satisfaction to us that though our progress has been very slow we now have mobilized many of our neighbors within several miles of the farm to make a constructive attack upon the evil condition under which they have been living.<sup>50</sup>

Franklin’s views that African Americans in the Delta had “confused and distorted religious thinking” once again betrayed his paternalistic tendencies as a lifelong missionary to cultures he deemed unsophisticated. Under Gene Cox, however, a man whose convictions were much less dogmatic, the educational institutes fostered black-centered leadership and increased the roles of black teachers and students.

Perhaps no teacher involved with the Educational Institute for Negroes proved more important than Fannye Thomas Booker. Booker was born in the small community of Sweet Water, near Lexington, Mississippi, in 1906. Booker had been orphaned as a child and taken in by Joe and Cornelius Thomas, a black couple who owned and farmed 360 acres. Sweet Water was home to African American subsistence farmers, some of whom were landowners, instilling in Booker from a young age a sense that landownership and self improvement were essential elements in African American

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<sup>50</sup> From Sam Franklin to Ralph W. Cessna, 11 January 1943, Folder 153, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Sam Franklin to the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, 23 January 1943, Folder 153, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

progress. Unlike most rural black Mississippians, Booker completed high school and was able to attend classes at Jackson State College and Mississippi Industrial College, a Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) affiliated school in Holly Springs. After college she married William Shank Booker. They had no children.<sup>51</sup>

Booker moved to the Tchula area in 1944 to become a county school teacher. She soon took an interest in the black self-help initiatives at Providence, especially those that focused on education. To supplement her meager county teaching salary, she initially worked part-time at Providence Cooperative Farm as a summer school instructor. In 1944, at the invitation of Gene Cox, Booker attended an integrated labor union meeting of the National Agricultural Workers Union as a delegate from Providence. Not long after returning from the union meeting, Booker was fired from her county teaching job. Though no cause was given, she and Cox assumed it was because word had spread among whites in Tchula that Booker was involved with black self-help and labor agitation. Though her firing caused indignation among residents at Providence, it meant that Booker could devote her full attention to her activities at the farm. She took work at the medical clinic at Providence, acting as receptionist and administrative assistant. She then moved to a position at the cooperative store working the register and stocking shelves. In this capacity she came into contact with hundreds of black families and became a “student of living conditions in Holmes County.” As a result, “it was Booker, among the local people,” as historian Kieran Taylor explains, “who most fully embraced the democratic and cooperative ideals of the farm.” More than many residents, black or

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<sup>51</sup> Taylor, “I Done Made Up My Mind,” 36 – 37; Dimitri B. Shimkin, Edith M. Shimkin, Dennis A. Frate, eds. *The Extended Family in Black Societies* (Chicago: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 159.

white, Booker grasped the radical potential of the farm. She equated the economic and educational efforts to emancipation.

Well it's like when the Yankees came through. They was tired of people living in slavery and they was trying to let you come out on your own. And they was doing that to show you that you could make profits for yourself. You could – you didn't have to be the underdog all the time. You could work for yourself and save for yourself. You were being taught, you see.<sup>52</sup>

Booker took it upon herself to increase the educational opportunities for blacks in Holmes County. Like elsewhere in the South, black students were the recipients of a second-class education. In Holmes County, in the school year 1947-1948, 7,108 black students attended school compared to 1,441 white students. Though this number accounted for nearly all the school-aged black and white children in the county, access to education was far from equal. In the same year, Holmes County spent an average of \$12 per black pupil versus \$44 per white pupil. The county spent \$28.67 on transportation for white students while not a penny was spent on transporting their black counterparts to school. Average annual salaries for black teachers were approximately \$480 while annual salaries for white teachers reached nearly \$1,500. In short, black children in the county badly needed Fanny Booker's school at Providence. Gene Cox described the dismal situation before Booker arrived.

Our county has a total population of about 45,000 of which over 36,000 are Negroes. The schools in the rural areas of the county run for not more than six months per year. We have no four year high-schools for Negro youth in the rural sections, and the county furnishes no bus services for Negro youth in our county. The children who plan to go to high-school

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Taylor, "I Done Made Up My Mind," 4, 38, 72.

must room in one of the towns where they can attend high-school, and this is difficult for the majority because of expenses involved.<sup>53</sup>

Providence provided Booker space and resources to transform the education of local blacks. Soon after moving to Providence, Booker expanded the summer school program to include high school lessons. Year round through her school lessons and summer camps, local youth came to the farm for Booker's instruction. In the spring of 1945, Booker ran a school for African American children in the Providence Community Building. Booker's school opened after county schools for black pupils closed—usually six weeks before they closed for white students—and picked up again in the fall six weeks before the customary opening of black schools. Forty students attended Booker's classes that session. Booker also began supplemental summer courses for African American students who had fallen behind in their schoolwork in the county schools. The farm charged attendance fees, but many impoverished parents bartered in exchange for their children to attend Booker's courses.<sup>54</sup>

Among black youth, Booker's summer camps were as popular as her classroom courses. Gene Cox reported that thirty-two girls boarded for the summer camp in 1947. Though Booker had decided that a shorthanded staff meant they could accommodate only girls, several parents dropped off three boys for the camp. Booker made arrangements for them to stay. An additional thirty girls were day campers. Activities at Booker's camps consisted of "recreation, Bible study, classes in handicraft and elementary education, and a bus trip to Jackson." Booker recruited female students from

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<sup>53</sup> "Holmes County Scholastic Years Session 1947-1948," in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Eugene Cox to L.N.D. Wells, 25 September 1947, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>54</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Directors, 27 April 1945, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; Taylor, "I done made up my mind," 40.

Mississippi's black colleges to serve as camp staff. Because they were not from Holmes County, the staff had little concern that they would jeopardize their careers, as had Booker, by being involved with Providence.<sup>55</sup>

Booker also played an important administrative role in another significant aspect of the Providence Cooperative Association—the establishment of a credit union. One of the most entrenched barriers to economic freedom African Americans faced in the Jim Crow South was their inability to obtain fair loans from banks and “furnish,” or credit, from their employers. Though Providence was the center of important health and education initiatives, the establishment of a credit union was perhaps the most radical initiative undertaken by members of the Providence Cooperative Association.

Since the founding of Delta Cooperative Farm, establishing a credit union had been a long term goal of the endeavor. “I have recently heard of colored men of the locality being called to Lexington and being threatened with having their ‘furnish’ cut off if they had anything to do with us,” Sam Franklin reported in the early 1940s. “One of the men who participated in this intimidation was said to be a banker,” Franklin continued, “a leading citizen of the county.” Local white racists who did not like the presence of social activists in their county used the threat of refusing credit to intimidate African Americans who attended meetings at Providence or patronized the cooperative store. The Board of Trustees, Franklin, and Gene Cox gradually worked toward gathering “resources sufficient to extend credit to anyone who is denied it through the ordinary agencies because of prejudice against us.” The Great Depression also promoted support for cooperative credit unions. As banks lost deposits and failed, Americans saw

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<sup>55</sup> “Camp Springs” Pamphlet, Folder 163, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

credit unions as a safe alternative to banks. Deepening unemployment and staggering poverty “put citizens in a mood to try different approaches to their credit problem.” As a result, disaffected Americans began a credit union movement as thousands of credit unions blossomed in every state by the mid 1930s.<sup>56</sup>

In the early 1940s, Gene Cox, on behalf of the Providence Cooperative Association, applied for and received authorization from the federal government to start the Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union, one of only three dozen credit unions in Mississippi at the time. The Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union was another way that the Cooperative Association hoped to break down the plantation mentality that gripped some rural blacks, while providing them with fair and affordable loan rates. Cox assumed the position of Treasurer of the Credit Union and Fannye Booker served as its first President, making it perhaps the only credit union in the state with an integrated administration and a woman president. By the end of the 1940s, the credit union had one hundred and six members from Providence and the surrounding area and paid dues to the Credit Union National Association (CUNA). Cox joined the Board of Directors of the Mississippi Credit Union League, which had seventy-five members by the mid-1950s, and often represented all of Mississippi’s credit unions at CUNA annual meetings. Membership in the Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union rose steadily each year until the mid 1950s.<sup>57</sup>

Residents at Providence made significant strides to overcome hardships despite their lack of resources and the upheaval of World War II. In early 1945, it seemed clear

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<sup>56</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 19 February 1943, Folder 154, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; J. Carroll Moody and Gilbert C. Fite, *The Credit Union Movement: Origins and Development, 1850-1980* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1984), 94.

<sup>57</sup> From S. H. Myers to A. E. Cox, 18 March 1949, Box IV-A, AEC.

that Sam Franklin would not return to Providence and would elect to stay on as a missionary in Japan. He would, however, remain a member of the Board of Trustees for the next ten years. Sherwood Eddy wrote to Cox that “if you are left to carry on alone, I would favor increasing your salary, asking you to carry the books, the store, and the Farm.” At the same time, Eddy hinted at a profound and far-reaching reorganization of the farm. Eddy first mentioned to Cox that he favored selling individual plots at Providence to the “ten families now on the Farm” and “persons in Holmes County thoroughly reliable.” These discussions, however, did not signal an end of the cooperative; both Eddy and Cox had plans to restart a medical clinic as soon as a doctor could be secured at war’s end. Importantly, however, this conversation signaled the first time that the Trustees seriously considered selling the land to the cooperative members, as was the original plan at Delta in 1936. For the time being, however, Cooperative Farms, Inc. maintained ownership of the land at Providence.<sup>58</sup>

In early summer 1945, David Minter, now a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force, returned to Providence with his family and resumed the medical clinic he had left three years earlier. Lindsey Hail Cox rejoined the clinic as nurse, Minter steadily rebuilt his patient base, and the clinic once again flourished as it had in 1941 and 1942 when the AKA conducted their summer health clinics. By the end of the year, Dr. Minter and Nurse Cox were treating between thirty and fifty patients per day in the clinic and on house calls. Eventually, Minter built the clinic into a state-of-the-art center with a

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<sup>58</sup> From Sherwood Eddy to Eugene Cox, 11 December 1945, Folder 159, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

fluoroscope, an x-ray imaging machine, and a cardiograph machine, all donated by the AKA.<sup>59</sup>

Although staff and volunteers returned to the farm at the end of the war and Providence increased its community-wide efforts in black self-help, national support sagged dramatically. Cox was not the fundraiser that Franklin had been, and Sherwood Eddy, approaching his eighties, was eager to hand off the financial burden of the farm to another organization. Eddy's own finances were suffering along with his health, and he hoped that a group with ample financial resources could replace him as trustee and benefactor. Eddy suggested that the Church of the Brethren—a Christian denomination known for their stance on peace and non-hierarchical, egalitarian membership—take over the charge of Providence, a proposal Cox adamantly opposed. Cox felt that the Brethren's lack of experience in race relations in the South would drive them afoul of Mississippians already leery of the farm. The Brethren, thought Cox, were too forceful in their approach to race relations and would demand too much too soon from Providence and its residents. Certain that the Brethren would bring unwelcome press coverage from the conservative Mississippi media, Cox warned Eddy that a local editorial included a scathing review of cooperatives in the South. "At this time there is great talk about the Negroes getting power in this section," read the editorial. "If anything hurries the day when the Negro takes a big hand in our financial and political affairs, it will be through the Co-op movement." Given the negative publicity, Eddy eventually agreed with Cox that the Brethren were not the best choice to take over administering Providence.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 81.

<sup>60</sup> From Eugene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 20 November 1947, Folder 160, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.



On New Years' Eve, 1947, Cox, Minter, and Eddy met to discuss the future of Providence Cooperative Farm. Eddy declared that if the farm kept operating at its present budget, the enterprise would be broke within two years. Donations had shrunk to a mere \$1,000 per year while the farm operation cost over \$6,000 annually. Eddy seemed completely flummoxed. But Cox and Minter asked Eddy to remain on the Board of Trustees while proposing two ideas. The first was that Cox and Fannye Booker would reduce their salaries to ease the financial strain on the Board. Cox was making \$2,400 per year, and Fannye Booker made \$900.00 per year. Cox desperately wanted Booker to receive a raise, so that her salary would be commensurate with the best paid white teachers in the county. But because Providence faced financial ruin, both Cox and Booker agreed to salary reductions.<sup>61</sup>

The second proposal was that, if necessary, the Cooperative Farms, Inc. should be liquidated and Minter, Cox, and others on the farm would take over as Directors and Trustees. A foundation that Cox had formed called the Delta Foundation, Inc., which was a non-profit organization originally chartered to buy discounted war supplies for use at Providence, would take over ownership of the farms. Eddy agreed to the first idea and stated that the second idea was a good one but that liquidating the Board of Trustees was unnecessary at the moment.<sup>62</sup>

Two years later, however, that moment had come. From 1941 to 1949, the Trustees had remained unchanged. Reinhold Niebuhr, Sherwood Eddy, John Rust, Arthur Raper, Charles S. Johnson, Emory Luccock, and F.D. Patterson all served on the

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<sup>61</sup> Eugene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 8 May 1947, Folder 160, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>62</sup> "Conference of Sherwood Eddy, A.E. Cox, and David Minter," Folder 160, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

board for nearly a decade. In January 1950, however, the Cooperative Farms, Inc. was liquidated and the Delta Foundation, Inc. took over control of the farms. Johnson, Rust, Luccock, and Patterson all let their terms expire. Niebuhr, Eddy, Franklin, and Raper remained affiliated with the Foundation, but took drastically reduced roles. Those added were Gene Cox, who replaced Niebuhr as president, Lindsey Hail Cox, who replaced Eddy as Secretary–Treasurer, David R. Minter, who replaced Franklin as Vice President, Sue Minter, and Louise Gates Eddy, Sherwood Eddy’s wife. The majority of the trustees now lived at Providence and their financial actions were not subject to approval by a distant board, freeing them, for the first time, to make financial decisions as they saw fit.

The 1940s brought major transformations to Providence. World War II caused drastic changes to the farm population and its operational structure, but the residents and staff handled those challenges by adapting their original goals and embarking on new ventures in black self-help. The entire decade of the 1940s could be summed up by an African American farm resident who fell into conversation with Sam Franklin one evening in 1942. “In the course of general conversation last night one of the older Negroes said quite spontaneously and naturally, ‘I never heard of democracy until the last four years when this farm started.’”<sup>63</sup>

January 1950 marked a new period for Providence Farm. The staff and residents now had an increased degree of autonomy and were not beholden to the ideologies of thoughtful men of faith, who nevertheless had little practical knowledge of the day-to-day realities of operating a social experiment in the Jim Crow Era Mississippi Delta. Black self-help would continue to be the major focus at Providence. The 1950s, however,

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<sup>63</sup> From Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 19 February 1943, Folder 154, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

brought a new set of challenges as the battles over Jim Crow and communism reached new heights.

## Chapter Five

### Preventing another Emmett Till: The Politics of Intimidation and the Failure of the Beloved Community 1950—1956

On a hot evening in late September 1955, A. Eugene Cox and David R. Minter attended a community meeting in the Tchula High School auditorium, seven miles from their homes at Providence Farm. Five hundred of their neighbors, many of whom could not find a seat and leaned against walls, packed the room. Temperatures in Tchula registered in the low 80s that night, and the auditorium, packed with people, was stifling. Learning of the meeting only hours before, Cox and Minter were not sure what to make of their summons to the high school auditorium. They had known most of the people in the room for at least fifteen years, but were now called before them to defend their very livelihood. By the conclusion of the three hour meeting, five hundred of their neighbors had voted, in a near unanimous showing of hands, that Cox and Minter leave Holmes County. Attendees at the meeting, which had been called by members of the White Citizens' Council, accused the two men of being communists, preaching racial equality, and breaking Mississippi's segregation laws. As they left the meeting, a white neighbor threatened Cox and Minter with lynching. The lives of the families at Providence Farm would never be the same.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Weather Observation," *Lexington Advertiser*, September 29, 1955, 1.

Since moving to the area in the late 1930s, Providence Farm and its residents had been under the constant scrutiny of surrounding white communities. Though Cox and Minter had improved the public image of the farm among skeptical whites after Sam Franklin left in the 1940s, local and national events transpired to lead whites in Holmes County to demand that Cox and Minter abandon Providence Farm and leave the county.

Holmes County, of course, had changed since Cox, Minter, and the ex-sharecropping families first arrived there in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Racial and political upheaval rallied many whites to the cause of what historians have called “massive resistance.” The willingness of hard-core segregationists to use violence in defense of Jim Crow shaped the 1950s. By the time white Holmes Countians gathered at Tchula High School to condemn Cox, Minter, and Providence Farm, white racial privilege and *de jure* segregation had been challenged by civil rights activists and the federal government in well-publicized campaigns. The eviction meeting in Tchula occurred less than a year and half after the *Brown v. Board* decision and only days after the accused white murderers of fourteen year old Emmett Till were acquitted. In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board* and the Till murder, many white racists hardened their resolve to maintain segregation and white supremacy. The coalescing of white racists into a massive resistance movement made it much harder for civil rights activists to accomplish their work of racial amelioration and black self-help. Though work continued at Providence, resistance by outsiders, particularly in the nearby town of Tchula, became more severe and unrelenting. Whites from Holmes County who wanted to maintain segregation and racial discrimination had to look no further than Providence Farm to locate dangerous agitators and race traitors.

In this age of anxiety, nearly any event, from the most personal to the most public, could elicit swift and severe punishment. Anxieties over race relations were only part of the social landscape of the Mississippi Delta in the early 1950s. A Red Scare had swept across America beginning in 1950 when Joe McCarthy, a little-known senator from Wisconsin, gave a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia claiming that he knew the names of communists working within the federal government. Hysteria spread quickly as McCarthy accused respected institutions, from the Protestant clergy to the United States Army, of supporting communist subversives. Even some of the more progressive minded Holmes County residents, like newspaper editor Hazel Brannon Smith, fully supported McCarthy's mission. In 1954, Smith wrote a paean to McCarthy in her weekly column, "Through Hazel Eyes."

McCarthy, in my opinion, is doing a vitally important and necessary job in ferreting out Communists in our government. In any job this big where there are powerful entrenched interests someone is bound to get hurt—as we have said before. If a few innocent people get hurt it is to be regretted—but understandable. In war a lot of people get hurt, a lot of innocent people, too. And don't forget this is war.

For many Americans who were invested in maintaining racial segregation, civil rights activists were bringing the red menace to American soil. Emboldened by McCarthy and his supporters, segregationists believed that efforts to desegregate public spaces were part of the communist conspiracy. McCarthyism left many civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League scrambling to avoid public relations disasters as red-baiters accused them of communist ties. The damage done to left-leaning organizations

and civil rights groups was severe. A culture of fear continued as Americans felt compelled to be suspicious of their own neighbors.<sup>1</sup>

Holmes County residents who favored segregation and deplored communism were also swept up by the tide of McCarthyism. In 1954, Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland ran on three promises—weeding out communists, upholding segregation, and supporting Mississippi farmers. Rural Mississippians loved Eastland as much for his unwavering support for agricultural price controls as for his stances on communism and segregation. Eastland won Holmes County in 1954 by a count of 1745 to 382. Only twenty-two people in Tchula voted against the incumbent senator. In March 1955, Circuit Judge Tom Brady—who would later be appointed to Mississippi’s Supreme Court at the height of the civil rights movement—spoke to a packed Tchula High School auditorium, calling the attack on segregation an “all-out war.” Brady began his remarks by referencing the Bible when he traced the “development of the human race” and the “divisions of the various tribes.” Brady stressed the “Biblical basis for racial purity” and blamed leftists for defying the word of God by supporting the desegregation of public schools. “The question of segregation today is only a small segment in the plan to destroy Christianity and the world,” Brady told the Tchula crowd, “and the Socialists and the Communists” were leading the charge. Brady assured his audience that Communists and Socialists had “brain-washed” many teachers and preachers into thinking that Jesus wanted “one world.” He concluded the evening by declaring that “it is the preservation of our Christian civilization that we are dedicated,” then added, “don’t forget to pray to God every night.” Brady was introduced to the Tchula crowd that evening by World War

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<sup>1</sup> Hazel Brannon Smith, “Through Hazel Eyes,” *Lexington Advertiser*, May 6, 1954, 1; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), 106-111.

II veteran Robert B. Patterson from Indianola, Mississippi. Two months later, Patterson would put Brady's words into action and organize the first White Citizens' Council.<sup>2</sup>

Rumors, insinuation, and inflammatory rhetoric by anticommunists and anti-integrationists—and their political uses of violence and threats of violence—led to the closing of Providence Farm in the 1950s. As historian Danielle McGuire has shown in her work on black women in the civil rights movement, white racists used intimidation and threats of violence—like the kind that residents at Providence endured in 1955 and 1956—in times of social change and upheaval “to dominate the minds and bodies of African-American men and women.” But violent threats were not the only tactics used by segregationists. Accusing racial progressives of communist ties was a politically expedient way for segregationists to discredit their adversaries. In an era when local law enforcement and politicians winked at hostility against blacks and their white allies—or openly engaged in it—intimidation and violence operated as political capital for hard-core segregationists. At Providence, residents found themselves the targets of incendiary accusations and threats.<sup>3</sup>

Providence Farm had also changed since ex-sharecroppers first arrived in 1938. Though the community at Providence persisted, it did not have much in common with its predecessor. Delta Cooperative Farm had been a radical interracial experiment to save sharecroppers. The identity of the residents as ex-croppers was important to Delta's goals. Providence in the 1950s, however, was something different. The identities and

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<sup>2</sup> “Eastland Discusses His 12—Year Stewardship In Senate To Holmes County,” *Lexington Advertiser*, August 5, 1954, 1; “Holmes County Goes for Eastland 1745-382 In Primary Tuesday,” *Lexington Advertiser*, August 26, 1954, 1; “Problems Facing South Today More Serious Than The Civil War Conflict, Says Brady,” *Lexington Advertiser*, March 24, 1955, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance: A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 3.



occupations of the residents were less important now that Providence focused mostly on outreach. Most of the residents who called Providence home were more than a decade removed from their sharecropping days. The farm also had fewer residents in the 1950s than at any time in either cooperatives' history. The key members of the community were engaged in initiatives that mainly served people living off the farm. Dr. David Minter and Lindsey Hail Cox continued to operate the clinic, while Fannye Booker ran the summer camps and black school. Only Gene Cox and a few resident families continued to grow cotton and other staple crops to supplement the farm's meager earnings. Minter's clinic and Booker's camps and schools were now the crux of the farm's identity. Farming was rendered nearly irrelevant. Providence was now more like a small community focused on good works than a radical cooperative challenging the South's power structures.

Unlike Sam Franklin's hectic life as Director of Delta Cooperative Farm, the Coxes and the Minters led lives that resembled many Americans experiencing post World War II prosperity. Both families took vacations to popular destinations like the Great Smoky Mountains and Devil's Den State Park in nearby Arkansas. The Cox and Minter children enjoyed birthday parties at the farm, often attended by their Tchula classmates, where Gene Cox treated them to "moving pictures" from the farm's projector. Cox's daughters had sleepovers with their friends while Lindsey Cox cooked a themed "ethnic" dinner for the girls. Both families took the time to write to the local newspaper about their vacations, parties, and day trips to bigger cities like Jackson. Less is known about the other families living at Providence. They did not write to the white-owned local newspaper about their lives, and their occupations became less important to farm

activities. Though many area blacks who were involved with uplift initiatives at Providence later helped lead the charge for voting rights in Holmes County, the lives of residents in the early 1950s merely faded into the background of farm activities.<sup>4</sup>

The letters that Cox left behind reveal that some of the residents were not involved with the outreach programs. Though he cared deeply about the individuals on the farm, Cox mostly wrote about the deeds of the outreach programs rather than the day-to-day lives of the residents at Providence. The silence of these residents conveys the image of a community in decline. The issues the farm tackled in the 1930s and 1940s were in the vanguard of human rights work in the Mississippi Delta. By the 1950s, however, Providence's outreach programs were circumspect and ill-defined when compared to some of the more dynamic challenges to Jim Crow that were sweeping the country. The farm functioned more like a community center for area blacks. The cooperative may have persisted long after 1956, but by then it was a community in search of an identity. Massive resistance, though, pushed Providence toward an early demise.

After the consolidation of ownership under the Delta Foundation, Inc. in 1950, Providence puttered along. In addition to the summer camps, school, and medical clinic, membership in the Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union crested with around two hundred members annually from 1950 and 1955. In 1955, Cox attended the Credit Union National Association annual meeting where he represented all ninety-five credit unions in Mississippi. The community building at Providence hosted a smattering of union meetings, the Providence Woman's Club, church services, evening forums, educational

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<sup>4</sup> C.R. Hamlin, "Tchula News," *Lexington Advertiser*, July 14, 1949, 7; C.R. Hamlin, "Tchula News," *Lexington Advertiser*, October 8, 1953, 7; C.R. Hamlin, "Tchula News," *Lexington Advertiser*, April 28, 1955, 6. For how activities at Providence helped spur area African Americans to push for civil rights, see Providence Cooperative Farm, Special Research Projects, Southern Oral History Program, #4007, SHC.

films, and Association meetings—all of which remained integrated but were attended mostly by area blacks. The films often drew the biggest crowds, with an average of fifty-five viewers showing up each night in the early 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

Because the cooperative was still not self-sustaining, Cox occasionally had to solicit donations. In 1952, the John Rust Foundation, Inc., headed by the farms' former trustee, donated \$1,000 toward the farm's educational and health programs. Rust wrote to Cox that "we have read your charter and by-laws and are impressed with the activities of your Foundation in conducting educational and health activities among people who otherwise would have little, if any, opportunity to avail themselves of these services." To ameliorate the foundation's financial problems Cox lived on a meager income. Beginning in 1950, he received fifty dollars a month from Sherwood Eddy. Eddy increased the amount to seventy-five dollars in 1952. The monies Cox received from Eddy, along with Lindsey Cox's modest salary from the medical clinic, constituted the Cox family's entire income.<sup>6</sup>

For farm residents, life in the rural South did not get easier in the 1950s. Heavy rains and a boll weevil infestation ravaged cotton throughout Holmes County in 1949 and 1950, putting farmers a month behind their usual planting schedule and resulting in several years of poor yields. On some Holmes County farms, extension agents counted as many as 1250 weevils per acre, slightly above the average for farming counties from Georgia to Texas. The rains that fell on the Mississippi Delta led to emergency conditions at Providence. Chicopa Creek periodically flooded the property, saturating fields,

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<sup>5</sup> From Gene Cox to Sherwood and Louise Eddy, 8 August 1954, Folder 164, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>6</sup> From John Rust to A. Eugene Cox, undated, House Box #2, AEC.

threatening livestock and homes, and cutting Providence off from the main roads in Holmes County. White children missed school, and their neighbors could not shop at the community store or visit the community's clinic. As soon as the rains stopped, however, a severe drought set in that lasted throughout the mid 1950s. In 1954, Holmes was one of 50 counties in the state to be declared a disaster area by the Secretary of Agriculture. Holmes County farmers applied for relief in droves. Because losses in cotton production devastated farmers, Gene Cox pushed for relief in crop diversification and cooperatives. Holmes County farmers needed to "plant orchards and raise cattle," Cox instructed, "not depend so much on cotton." He also hoped that local farmers would "join the Providence Credit Union, and through it buy and sell in bulk." Cox confided in the trustees that "for a number of years we have realized the futility of the small farmers of our community placing primary emphasis on cotton as a cash crop. On the other hand," Cox tempered, "we know that any attempt to shift the farm pattern requires considerable capital, initiative and technical experience." Even though Providence possessed some of the capital needed to make the shift away from cash crops, Cox had to use what little money the farm had on the unexpected setbacks that often occurred on a farm, especially in a region as unforgiving as the Mississippi Delta. In 1950, the farm lost five milch cows and a colt "due to stealing, dogs, drowning, and rattle-snake bites." Cox considered the animals' deaths "a financial loss greater than we have suffered in the past 7 years combined."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Holmes Designated Disaster Area," *Lexington Advertiser*, September 23, 1954, 1; "Weevil Infestation Reported In Holmes," *Lexington Advertiser* June 23, 1949, 6; Phillip Rushing, *Empty Sleeves* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 95; From Gene Cox to the Trustees of Cooperative Foundation, INC, December 1950, Folder 163, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

The number of patrons at the cooperative store also fell in the early 1950s. Cox attributed the decline to competition from the influx of chain stores in the county, such as the popular Jitney Jungle in downtown Tchula. That the farm's store operated on a strictly cash basis added to the store's difficulties. The miserable crop production in the county as a result of the boll weevil and natural disasters also left neighbors with less money to spend. Cox and Fannye Booker often discussed closing the cooperative store, but working at the store was Booker's only income, aside from what Cox could raise for her teacher salary from summer camp fees.<sup>8</sup>

Booker's summer camps, now called "Camp Springs" after the popular swimming hole at Providence, continued to be one of the farm's more successful pursuits and brought scores of "Negro young people" to Providence. Activities offered at Camp Springs included "religious education, health, weaving, handcraft, home economics and recreation." In 1950, registration cost seven dollars per child and each had to come with the majority of their food to last them a month. Some African Americans who had been campers in the 1940s returned in the 1950s as college-aged staffers, carrying out Booker's program of black self-help.<sup>9</sup>

Even while Providence Farm continued to offer Holmes County African Americans some uplifting opportunities, race relations remained treacherous in Mississippi. White racial hostility in the county worsened significantly in early 1954. Over the span of a year and a half, four racially charged events contributed to mounting

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<sup>8</sup> From Gene Cox to the Trustees of Cooperative Foundation, INC, December 1950, Folder 163, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

<sup>9</sup> "Camp Springs" Pamphlet, Folder 163, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; From Gene Cox to Sherwood and Louise Eddy, 8 August 1954, Folder 164, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

suspicion of and antagonism toward the community at Providence. Murders, manhunts, shootings, and a court decision turned suspicious Holmes Countians against Providence like never before. Still, opponents of Providence needed an excuse to turn public opinion against the farm and its residents. That moment came in the form of a flirtatious comment from an African American teenager.

Curtis Freeman, a 19-year-old African American, was riding in the back of a pickup truck with three black teenagers on the morning of September 26, 1955. Only three days had passed since the acquittal of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, the two white men accused of murdering Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American from Chicago spending the summer in Mississippi. The news was still fresh to all Mississippians. That morning, the conservative Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* had reported that Mose Wright, Till's relative who had bravely pointed out Till's murderers in the courtroom, had fled to the north because he "sold out" his white neighbors. As the truck carrying Freeman passed a school bus stop along Hwy 49, Mary Ellen Henderson, the ten year old daughter of Jim and Shirley Henderson, was waiting to catch her bus to school in Tchula. The white Hendersons lived on Providence Farm and had been among the inaugural residents at Delta Cooperative Farm in 1936. Shirley Henderson's father, J.H. Moody, had been a committed socialist and follower of Norman Thomas. Jim Henderson's father, also named Jim, was an organizer for the biracial Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in the 1930s and had stood guard with a shotgun while his belongings were loaded into a truck by STFU volunteers and shipped to Delta Cooperative Farm. When Sam Franklin traveled the Arkansas Delta in 1936 looking for families who were in perilous conditions and who would make ideal cooperators in a biracial community, he chose the Moodys

and the Hendersons among the first dozen families. Shirley Moody and the younger Jim Henderson met at Delta Farm in 1936 and quickly married in the first ceremony performed at the cooperative. Throughout their stay at Delta and Providence, the Hendersons and the Moodys prospered and displayed an eagerness to engage in the interracial endeavors of the farm. Still, their lives were not without tragedy. Jim and Shirley were pregnant often, losing several children in childbirth or at young ages. In 1945, their young son Donald was hit by a car and killed. Jim Henderson died unexpectedly in 1952 and left nine children, the oldest only fifteen, in the care of his widow, Shirley. The remaining Hendersons relied on welfare from the federal government and on the kindness of their black and white neighbors at Providence to get by. Yet when a black teenager apparently flirted with Jim and Shirley's daughter, Mary Ellen, the limits of interracial cooperation at Providence surfaced.<sup>10</sup>

As Mary Ellen Henderson waited with other children at the bus stop, the truck motored by and Freeman yelled out, "Hey sugar, you look good to me," in Henderson's direction. Henderson assumed the flirtatious statement had been meant for her, and began crying. Why Freeman's comment upset Henderson, a girl who had grown up with black neighbors all her life and who lived on a farm that was dedicated to black self-help, is unclear. Maybe it was the fact that she was white and he was black that most upset her. Or maybe it was the unwanted flirtation of an older boy that caused her reaction.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Burton, "'Old Man Mose' Sells Out, He'll Move To New York," *Clarion-Ledger* September 26, 1955, 1; From Gene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 25 May 1952, Folder 163, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

Either way, what happened in the next few hours proved to be the undoing of Providence Farm and its near twenty-year promotion of African American-centered uplift.<sup>11</sup>

As Henderson boarded the school bus, the driver noticed she was upset and asked her what was wrong. The driver in turn reported the incident to the Tchula school principal, who immediately called Holmes County Sheriff Richard Byrd. Byrd quickly “apprehended” Freeman and his three teenaged companions. Freeman knew who Byrd was. He knew that the Sheriff had a reputation for kicking blacks around and that he may have even murdered his own deputy. Freeman probably knew about Emmett Till’s fate too and hoped he would not meet the same end. Byrd called county attorney and citizens’ council member Pat Barrett, who was already skeptical of the practices at Providence. Byrd, Barrett, and a few others questioned the four black teenagers for hours. Freeman swore that he was speaking to someone else at the bus stop, an African American girl whose nickname was “Sugar” and with whom he had a friendly relationship. Byrd and Barrett did not care. They told him that it did not matter who he was speaking to, but that he uttered the phrase within earshot of Henderson, a white girl. The sheriff charged Freeman with the “unlawful use of vulgar and obscene language” in the company of a white woman. Several weeks later, a Holmes County court sentenced Freeman to six months hard labor on the county farm.<sup>12</sup>

In another context or another decade, the incident with Freeman and Henderson might not have had much impact on Providence Farm or its residents. If the incident had happened even two years prior, it might not have resulted in jail time for Freeman or

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<sup>11</sup> “Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” House Box #2, AEC; Murray Kempton, “Intruder,” *New York Post*, November 17, 1955.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



eventually led to Providence's closing. But by the fall of 1955, several events had altered the terrain of race relations and hardened the resolve of many white segregationists in Holmes County.

The first incident that intensified white hostility in Holmes County occurred in January 1954 and also involved the specter of interracial sex. Eddie Noel, a 28-year-old African American World War II veteran who lived in rural Holmes County, approximately ten miles from Providence, shot and killed Willie Ramon Dickard, a white honky-tonk owner and part-time moonshiner who was having an affair with Noel's wife, Lu Ethel Noel. Lu Ethel was a waitress at the honky-tonk, and when Eddie came to the bar to confront the two, Dickard beat him up and threw him out of the front door. Noel retreated to his vehicle and grabbed his .22 caliber rifle. While white and black customers looked on, Noel shot Dickard on the front porch of the honky-tonk. For the onlookers, it was the first time many of them had seen a black man stand up to a white man, much less kill one.<sup>13</sup>

Noel fled into the countryside. Over the next nineteen days, Holmes County waited in fear as manhunts and shootouts became common occurrences. Over five hundred men turned out from all over Mississippi to participate in the manhunt. Noel narrowly escaped their clutches several times, managing to kill a well-respected Holmes County Deputy as well as a World War II veteran who had cornered Noel with a Luger the veteran had retrieved from a dead German soldier. The Luger misfired. Noel's .22 did not. Noel also severely injured three others, nearly killing them all. As the manhunt continued, Noel gained an almost mythical status among both black and white Holmes County residents. Three times Noel was cornered, and three times he escaped by

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<sup>13</sup> Allie Povall, *The Time of Eddie Noel* (Concord, North Carolina: Comfort Publishing, 2010), 16-22.

shooting his way out, operating his bolt action .22 with the precision and efficiency of a highly trained soldier. The whites who tracked him—trained law enforcement officers, hunters, and World War II veterans—concluded that Noel was the living embodiment of what they had feared when black veterans first returned from World War II. Not only were blacks agitating for increased rights, they were armed and trained by the United States Army. In the same breath that whites condemned Noel as a “crazy nigger,” they were awestruck by his marksmanship. Some feared that Noel’s murderous rampage would spark an all-out race war in Holmes County. In the end, however, the posse never caught him nor was he lynched. In late January, cold and hungry, Noel turned himself in without incident. Noel was tried, found legally insane, and sentenced to a medical ward for detention.<sup>14</sup>

The Noel incident propelled Holmes County Sheriff Richard Byrd, the officer who would arrest Curtis Freeman the next year, into the media spotlight. At the time of the manhunt, Byrd had only been in office for two years but already had garnered a reputation as a Sheriff who broke the law more than he upheld it. Because of the Noel incident, however, Byrd’s questionable character came to light even more. First, Holmes Countians widely understood that Byrd orchestrated one of the largest manhunts in Mississippi history so that if it failed, the blame would not fall on his shoulders alone. Second, rumors circulated that he had murdered his own deputy during a shootout with Noel and then blamed it on “that little nigger.” The deputy had been the former Holmes County Sheriff and had a reputation as a fearless protector of law and order, specifically targeting bootleggers in the county. Byrd, however, was rumored to be taking money from the very same bootleggers in exchange for their protection from legal prosecution.

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<sup>14</sup> Povall, *The Time of Eddie Noel*, 23-134.

There exists no preponderance of evidence to support the claim that Byrd murdered his own deputy. The fact that the rumor existed at all and was widely believed, however, underscores that Byrd's previous behavior had led many to deem him as the kind of sheriff who was capable of such a crime.<sup>15</sup>

Sheriff Byrd's reputation became the focus of journalist Hazel Brannon Smith's editorials in her newspaper, *The Lexington Advertiser*. Her columns were unpopular among many conservative whites because Smith was progressive, for 1950s Mississippi, on the issue of race relations. Smith wanted to blame someone for the killing sprees and thought it was too simple to only blame Noel. The Noel incident, she concluded, illuminated deeper issues in Holmes County that needed to be addressed. First, she took aim at moonshine and excoriated officials, namely Sheriff Byrd, who allowed it to circulate throughout the county unregulated. Then Smith devoted column after column to Byrd's miscarriages of justice, gaining her both friends and enemies. The columns only seemed to fuel Byrd's hot temper and frustration with the manhunt. He assaulted Noel's friends and family and threatened them with murder if they did not turn Noel over to him.<sup>16</sup>

After Noel surrendered, tensions eased in Holmes County, although Smith's editorial attacks on Byrd continued. Then, in May 1954, the United States Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision, ruling that public school segregation was unconstitutional. As news spread, tensions rose again in Holmes County. Less than two months after the Supreme Court's verdict, Robert Patterson formed the first White Citizens' Council in Indianola, Mississippi. Patterson's

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 86 – 110.

group targeted “respectable” white individuals, mainly middle class professionals and business owners, who could block desegregation and the civil rights movement by political and economic means. Only days after Patterson convened the first Citizens’ Council, a second was chartered in Lexington, Mississippi—making Holmes County an epicenter for the fight over black civil rights.<sup>17</sup>

After the Supreme Court decision, Gene Cox noticed that “tensions, rumors and suspicions have been multiplied” about Providence Farm. What Cox called a “smear campaign” against the community included a rumor that either he or David Minter had been arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation “as a Red spy.” A friend informed Cox in September 1954 that he had been approached by a private investigator in Jackson who had been hired to look into Cox’s subversive activities. “It appears that all the rumors of the past 18 years,” surmised Cox, “are being remembered and put back into circulation. For twenty years” Cox and other residents at Delta and Providence farms “had been talking to educators and business people in Mississippi,” Cox admitted, “trying to get better schools for Negroes.” When the Supreme Court issued their decision on the *Brown* case, Cox knew that “extreme segregationists” in Holmes County would target Providence. Citizens’ Council members, some of the leading businessmen and politicians in Holmes County, spread rumors about Providence’s racial policies and ties to communism. Cox and Minter looked to Lexington Attorney Pat Barrett for council. Barrett had drawn up the deed to Providence Farm in 1943, personally handed it to Sam Franklin, and had known Cox for over a decade. To the dismay of the cooperators, Barrett publicly called Cox’s motives into question, insinuating that Cox was a communist dupe. Cox called on other friends in high places around Mississippi to write

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<sup>17</sup> James Graham Cook, *The Segregationists* (New York: Appelton-Century-Crofts, 1962), 40.

letters to Holmes County officials and state legislators to assure them that neither Cox nor anyone at Providence were communists. “It is very difficult to prove you are not a Communist,” a frustrated Cox stated, “when people are not aware of just what constitutes communism.”<sup>18</sup>

Making matters worse for farm residents, over the Fourth of July weekend in 1954, Sheriff Byrd again sparked controversy after he was involved in an incident that ended with a black man being shot in the thigh and David Minter as the attending physician. Around eleven o’clock at night on July 3, Sheriff Byrd and three other lawmen were driving down Highway 49 near Tchula’s outskirts in a patrol car. As the law enforcement officers passed Henry Randle, Isaiah Carlton, and Missouri Hunter—African American men in their late twenties—Byrd thought he heard one of them let out a loud “whoop.” Byrd had roughed up Holmes County blacks for lesser offenses and told the officer driving to turn around and head back to the three men. When Byrd got out, he approached the 27-year-old Randle and asked why he and his friends had made the “whooping” noise. Randle replied that “it wouldn’t none of him that whooped.” Byrd then struck Randle across the head with his black jack. Byrd told the men to “get goin,” while Randle and his two companions turned to run. What happened next was where Byrd’s and Randle’s stories diverged. Randle claimed he heard four rapid shots, one of which hit him in the back of the left thigh and passed through the other side of his leg. As he stumbled in agony, he looked over his shoulder to see Byrd’s pistol pointed in his direction. In later court testimony, Byrd said that he did not draw his weapon, but that one of the other officers “fired a .44-calibre pistol in the air three times in an effort to

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<sup>18</sup>Cook, *The Segregationists*, 35; “Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” House Box #2, AEC; From Gene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 6 October 1954, Folder 164, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

disperse the crowd of Negroes.” Isaac Randle, Henry Randle’s father, first took his wounded son to a doctor in Tchula but could not find the physician at home. Next, they drove out to Providence, only two miles from the Randle home, and awoke Dr. Minter around midnight. Minter testified that he treated Randle’s wounds, noticed a “goose egg” on the side of his forehead that he assumed was from the sheriff’s black jack, and that he smelled no alcohol on Randle’s breath.<sup>19</sup>

Word of the shooting spread quickly and Hazel Brannon Smith once again accused Sheriff Byrd of unlawful activities in her newspaper editorials. Smith insinuated that Byrd and his companions were out for a good time that Saturday night and had accosted another half-dozen men. This time, Byrd countered with a libel lawsuit—totaling \$57,500 in damages—against Smith. Smith responded in her column that “we don’t know whether to be flattered at being sued for so much—or surprised that the Sheriff places the value of his reputation at so little.” Perhaps to escape being the center of attention in the Byrd incident, only days after the shooting, Minter packed up his family and spent a week-long vacation at Cumberland Falls State Park in Kentucky.<sup>20</sup>

Being the first white person to hear a direct account of Randle’s story, Minter became a chief witness in the libel court case. As the trial drew near, Minter became the target of a smear campaign and rumor mill. In an attempt to discredit him, “there were many rumors spread all over the county that I was a Communist,” Minter remembered later, “that I was heading a spy ring and holding secret meetings, that I was distributing

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<sup>19</sup> “Two Shootings Mar Holidays,” *Lexington Advertiser*, July 8, 1954, 1; “Sheriff Wins Verdict,” *Lexington Advertiser*, October 14, 1954, 1. The three law officers with Sheriff Byrd were Tchula Constable Bob Gillespie, Tchula Deputy-Jailer Coyier Farmer, and State Highway Patrolman J.A. Love. The men were riding in Love’s patrol car.

<sup>20</sup> Cook, *The Segregationists*, 37-39; Hazel Brannon Smith, “The Law Should Be For All,” *Lexington Advertiser*, July 15, 1954, 1; Hazel Brannon Smith, “Through Hazel Eyes,” *Lexington Advertiser*, July 22, 1954, 1.

communist literature.” Building on the pre-trial accusations, the defense only had to impugn Minter with the white jury by accusing him of “communist interracial activities” and simply asking if he lived “in a community called Providence.” Apparently, the mere mention of Providence carried enough weight to discredit Minter. In a moment of exasperation, Gene Cox wrote FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in the hopes that he would clear the air of the rumors leveled against him and Minter. Cox also could not resist admonishing Hoover for what he felt were the director’s irresponsible comments about “Red doctors regularly dish[ing] out communist propaganda.” Cox worried that these statements had worsened the atmosphere surrounding Minter.<sup>21</sup>

The initial result of the civil suit was a victory for Byrd. The court ordered Hazel Brannon Smith to pay the sheriff \$10,000 in restitution. Smith appealed to a higher court and the decision was eventually overturned. Still, the case had damaged Minter’s reputation in Holmes County and heightened suspicions about the purpose of Providence.<sup>22</sup>

The downward spiral continued in late March, 1955, when Minter was asked by the First Presbyterian Church of Tchula, where he was a deacon and had been teaching Sunday School classes for seven years, not to return as a teacher in light of the allegations against him. One year earlier, the Tchula church defied the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States, which had resolved that legal segregation was un-Christian and that their congregations would be desegregated. The elders of the Tchula church issued a statement saying the congregation would “pledge ourselves to

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<sup>21</sup> From Eugene Cox to J. Edgar Hoover, 1 October 1954, House Box #1, AEC; Cook, *The Segregationists*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> “Sheriff Wins Verdict,” *Lexington Advertiser*, October 14, 1954, 1.

retain segregation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and for the glory of God.” The unanimous pledge by the elders continued that “non-segregation would destroy not only the peace of the church but also the purity of its message established in the Word.”

Despite the congregation’s racial views not aligning with his own, Minter stayed on because of his devotion to his Sunday School students. Minter and his wife, Sue, had been involved with the youth at First Presbyterian for several years, taking a group of young high- school-aged congregants to the Presbyterian Youth Rally in Jackson once a year. For several years Sue had been the Chairman of Christian Education at the church and, along with Lindsey Cox, was an active member of the Women of the Church, who sponsored fundraising and membership drives. The congregation’s view of the Minters was not improved when Sue Minter was compelled to defend her views on teaching communism in college classrooms. When pressed about her beliefs in front of the congregation she answered that college educators ought to be able to teach their students the differences between communism and other philosophies. That she condoned the discussion of communism at all angered parishioners.<sup>23</sup>

David Minter was devastated by his excommunication. “To this son of a Presbyterian minister and brother of two missionaries,” remembered one friend, “this dismissal came as a very great shock.” The Minters were not without sympathizers in the congregation, though. Lindsey Hail Cox, who also taught Sunday School at the church, resigned her position in protest. Two sisters, former Sunday school students in Minter’s class, wrote the doctor and expressed their sorrow at the situation and anger at “this injustice that has been done you. The Christian-like manner in which you have reacted to

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<sup>23</sup> “Presbyterian Church bulletin,” House Box #1, AEC; “Tchula Presbyterians Make Statement On Belief And Policy,” *Lexington Advertiser*, September 16, 1954, 1; “Tchula News,” *Lexington Advertiser*, March 24, 1949, 2.



this situation,” the girls continued, “has convinced us even more of your true faith and Christian devotion.” Despite several letters of support and the girls’ impression that Minter was taking his dismissal with quiet dignity, the action of his church deeply hurt Minter and his family.<sup>24</sup>

The accusations by Sherriff Byrd and the reaction by the Minters’ congregation proved that race-baiting and red-baiting would be the tactics white racists would use against racial moderates and progressives in Holmes County. Since before the United States became formally involved in World War II, as Robert Korstad points out, “Communism had been used as a catch-all denunciation for any challenge to Jim Crow.” Even as early as the mid 1930s, Sam Franklin and Sherwood Eddy worried that their Christian socialist views on race would lead white Mississippians to brand them as communists. Oscar Johnston, manager of the Delta Pine and Land Company, had done just that in a 1937 meeting of the President’s Commission on Farm Tenancy. The commission invited both Franklin and Johnston to speak at the hearings. After Franklin spoke, Johnston devoted the beginning of his testimony to denouncing the cooperative’s initiatives as “communistic.” In 1937, though, having no nearby community of white business leaders to support his anti-communist claims, Johnston was merely tilting at windmills. In the mid-1950s, however, the relationship between residents at Providence and the conservative white community was already too tenuous for Cox, Minter, and the other farm residents to weather a frontal assault by anti-communists in the mid 1950s.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> From Jeanne and Mary Alice Shields to David Minter, 3 April 1955, House Box #1, AEC; Sam Franklin, “Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm,” (unpublished), 85; “Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men,” House Box #2, AEC.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 340; Franklin, “Early Years,” 48.

For months, news of federal challenges to segregation and the threat of communism dominated the press in Holmes County. Editorials debated whether Mississippi's schools would ever desegregate. Gene Cox wrote a friend in September 1954 that racial tensions were high:

I imagine you are aware of what is happening here in connection with the segregation question. Two Negro teachers have lost their jobs in Holmes county. One after she had been shot by a prominent farmer and business man of Lexington. On the front page of one of the Jackson papers last Friday appeared this statement: "One said, 'a few killings' would be the best thing for the state just before the people vote on a proposed constitutional amendment empowering the legislature to abolish public schools." Such a nice place to be living just now.

In December 1954, Mississippi held a special election spurred by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on school desegregation. By a wide margin, voting Mississippians gave the state legislature the power to abolish public schools if deemed necessary to uphold segregation. Holmes County voted for the amendment 2,393 to 70. A single voter in Tchula voted against the proposal. Publicly, politicians who supported the measure touted it as in the best interests of all Mississippians. Segregationists also pointed to recent "improvements" in Mississippi's black schools and argued that separate could be equal. Still, in 1954, white Holmes County teachers made an average of \$320 per month while black teachers made an average of only \$175 per month.<sup>26</sup>

In August 1955, the murder of Emmett Till further plunged the state into turmoil. The teenager's apparent "wolf-whistle" at a white woman enraged Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, the woman's husband and his half-brother, so much that they beat the fourteen

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<sup>26</sup> From Gene Cox to Clark Bouwman, 15 September 1954, 1975 Addendum, Box 1, AEC; "Holmes County Voters Approve Abolition Amendment On Tuesday 2,393-70," *Lexington Advertiser*, December 23, 1954, 1; "Holmes County School Progress Cited," *Lexington Advertiser* January 13, 1955, 1.

year old teenager, shot him, and then tied his body to a cotton gin fan and threw him into that Tallahatchie River. Several days later, Till's body was fished from the muddy river.

Mississippians, black and white, were apprehensive about what was happening in their state. African Americans and their white allies saw a child murdered and his white killers go free. Pro-segregationist whites felt that their way of life, their time-honored racial privilege, was being severely challenged by "outside agitators" and "race traitors." Given all the events of the past months—Noel's rampage and subsequent manhunt, Sheriff Byrd's frustration with Hazel Brannon Smith, communist accusations against David Minter, the *Brown v. Board* decision, and Emmett Till's murder—Curtis Freeman could not have picked a worse moment to be accused of flirting with Mary Ellen Henderson.

During Curtis Freeman's interrogation, Sheriff Byrd and Holmes County Attorney Pat Barrett asked Freeman and his friends questions about Providence Farm. All the boys had spent time at Providence. The boys' parents shopped at the cooperative store, patronized the credit union, came to the educational and religious institutes, and used the medical clinic. Byrd and Barrett used the four teenagers as scapegoats to outflank Gene Cox and David Minter, men with whom they had serious disagreements ever since Minter was Henry Randle's attending doctor and the chief defense witness in Byrd's libel lawsuit against Hazel Brannon Smith. In the interviews with the four teenagers, most of the questions were about the goings-on at Providence Cooperative Farm. Did Mr. Cox talk about integration? Did Dr. Minter encourage blacks to register to vote? Did interracial swimming occur at the swimming hole? The boys answered variously, but most said they did not know what went on at the farm. After intense questioning, the

Sheriff concluded that those in charge at Providence had broken Mississippi state laws by promoting integration—he especially dwelled on the swimming hole where whites and blacks supposedly recreated together—and for being communists. As historian Jeff Wiltse demonstrates, the fight to integrate public swimming pools began long before *Brown v. Board*, and the backlash by white opponents was often violent. For whites across the country, segregated swimming pools were often more sacred than segregated schools. Upon the conclusion of the interrogations, the sheriff and attorney called an emergency community meeting for the following evening on September 27.<sup>27</sup>

Gene Cox and David Minter were among the last to receive word about the meeting. Reverend Marsh Calloway, a white Presbyterian minister from nearby Durant, Mississippi, who had struck up a friendship with both Minter and Cox over the years, heard about the meeting and immediately drove out to Providence to inform them and their families. Several hours before the meeting, incoming state representative J. P. Love called Minter and brusquely told him to be at that night's meeting. Cox assumed that the meeting was more of the same accusations they had been hearing for years, and he and Minter decided to attend in order to defend themselves in person. Neither man had any idea that their fates at Providence would be sealed that night.<sup>28</sup>

Cox and Minter were shocked when they arrived at the auditorium. Around five hundred people, half the population of Tchula, showed up to hear the recorded “confession” of the four black teenagers and to listen to Cox and Minter defend

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<sup>27</sup>“Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” House Box #2, AEC; William Lee Miller, “Trial by Tape Recorder,” *The Reporter* December 15, 1955, 27-32; Cook, *The Segregationists*, 40; Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 121-180.

<sup>28</sup> “Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” House Box #2, AEC; Cook, *The Segregationists*, 37; Franklin, “Early Years,” 86.

themselves. The meeting was convened by retiring Mississippi legislator Edwin White of Lexington and his recently elected replacement, J.P. Love, who was an influential member of the Tchula Citizens' Council. Attorney Pat Barrett and Sheriff Richard Byrd joined White and Love on stage to lead the meeting.<sup>29</sup>

All of the meeting's conveners were well known in their communities and were either violent racists, in the case of Sheriff Byrd, or prominent Citizens' Council members who pledged at every turn to uphold segregation. Edwin White was a Lexington attorney by trade, but had represented Holmes County for two terms in the state legislature. In the last months of his term, White had been deeply disturbed by both the Eddie Noel incident and the U.S. Supreme Court decision to strike down segregation in public schools. To guard against more "crazy niggers" with guns, White proposed that the state legislature pass a law requiring the registration of all firearms and ammunition. In his testimony, White alluded to the rising number of blacks who were purchasing guns and expressed alarm. The proposed bill died in the Senate. After the *Brown* decision, White was a vocal proponent of giving the legislature the power to abolish the public school system in Mississippi. White was fond of quoting the Bible's passages that, to him, prohibited "racial amalgamation." He called the *Brown* decision, "sinful, unholy, and unworthy of obedience." "There is only one thing in the whole situation which the white man asks for," White assured his supporters, "and this is the privilege of his children, and his children's children continuing to be white people." By the time of the mass meeting at the Tchula auditorium, White was serving out his last months as a state representative. He continued to be active in the Holmes County Democratic Party, however. As chairman in 1956, he strongly supported "pro-segregation" candidates and

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<sup>29</sup> "Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School," House Box #2, AEC.

helped push through a resolution that Holmes County delegates at the state and national conventions would only vote for candidates supported by the Citizens' Council. Cox and Minter sat horrified at the mass meeting as White "fanned the emotions of the crowd with Hitler-like, facist oration."<sup>30</sup>

Representative-elect J. P. Love and incumbent County Attorney Pat Barrett also took well-known stances in defiance of the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision. Love, the head of the Tchula Citizens' Council, announced his candidacy by proclaiming he would uphold "the framework of existing Southern traditions and principles." One of Love's first acts in the legislature was to introduce a bill that would "permit county boards of supervisors to make unrestricted donations of public funds to the pro-segregation Citizens' Councils." Barrett was not as veiled as Love had been in his reelection announcement. In a letter to the *Lexington Advertiser*, Barrett clearly told Holmes Countians where he stood on the issue of school segregation.

With reference to the tragic and deplorable situation caused by the shameful decision of our Supreme Court, I do not believe it is necessary for me to remind my many friends throughout the County that I shall continue individually and as your County Attorney to strive unceasingly and unendingly to preserve our Southern way of life; and I believe my training and experience will be a valuable asset to this office during the critical period we are facing.

That Holmes County politicians were quick to take up the mantle of the Citizens' Council was not uncommon. All five candidates for governor of Mississippi in 1955 made

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<sup>30</sup> David T. Beito, *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 104; "Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men," House Box #2, AEC; "Representative Edwin White Writes On Mississippi's People And Her School Situation," *Lexington Advertiser*, August 5, 1954, 1; "Representative Edwin White In Favor Of Mississippi's Proposed School Amendment," *Lexington Advertiser*, November 18, 1954, 1.

campaign promises to support the “southern way of life” and the pro-segregationist stance of the Citizens’ Councils.<sup>31</sup>

The gathering convened by White, Love, Barrett, and Byrd began with the minister from the Tchula Methodist Church giving an invocation. Byrd then played the “confession” of the four black teenagers. On the tape, the boys were repeatedly asked what went on at Providence, and most of them answered that they did not know, even though they had attended religious and educational meetings at the farm. David Minter remembered thinking that “either they were not answering questions completely truthfully or that we had done a damn poor job of education of people for what we were trying to really do in the community in the way of health education, better farming methods, etc.” Cox and Minter were then “subjected to a barrage of questions” from the conveners and attendees. The two men attempted to answer accusations that they had broken the law but instead were shouted down by more accusations of communism and integrationism. Upon being pressed about his opinions on school segregation, Cox finally replied that he believed segregation to be “unchristian.” An angry crowd member yelled back that “this isn’t a Christian meeting.”<sup>32</sup>

Only three men spoke up in defiance of the crowd. A Tchula banker suddenly stood up and left the meeting, stating, as he made for the exit, that he did not want to be a part of what was happening to Cox and Minter. A local planter named S. J. “Bobo” Foose, from a prominent Tchula family, made a long speech in which he spoke glowingly

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<sup>31</sup> “Love Is Candidate for Representative,” *Lexington Advertiser*, June 9, 1955, 1; “Barrett IS Candidate For Re-Election As County Attorney,” *Lexington Advertiser*, June 16, 1955, 1; Tommy Guion, “All Gubernatorial Candidates Pledge To Maintain Southern Way of Life For Good Of Both Races At Madison County Rally,” *Lexington Advertiser*, June 16, 1955, 2; “Public Funds Asked For Citizens Councils,” *Lexington Advertiser*, March 15, 1956, 1.

<sup>32</sup> “Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” House Box #2, AEC; Miller, “Trial by Tape Recorder,” 27-32; Franklin, “Early Years,” 86-89.

of Minter as a doctor and “good Christian.” “I may not have a friend in Holmes County tomorrow,” declared Foose, “but I want to go home and sleep with a clear conscience tonight.” After he spoke, Foose left the meeting as well. Marsh Calloway, the Presbyterian minister who accompanied Cox and Minter to the meeting, spoke for the embattled men and questioned both the legality and morality of the mass meeting. A chorus of boos cascaded down upon Calloway. Two weeks later, Calloway slinked away from Holmes County, having been told by his Durant congregation that they did not agree with his support of Cox and Minter and no longer wanted his services.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Representative Love declared that Cox and Minter may not be card-carrying members of the Communist Party, but that they were “following the Communist line.” Love then called for a vote to ask Cox and Minter to leave the county. The vote for them to leave their homes of almost two decades was nearly unanimous. Only Cox, Minter, Calloway, and a local blacksmith who believed he needed to pray about the situation before he gave his decision voted in favor of allowing the men and their families to stay. The rest, perhaps swayed by their own convictions of white supremacy and anti-communism or convinced by hearing their county leaders call Cox’s and Minter’s actions into question, agreed that the men should leave “for the good of Holmes County.”<sup>34</sup>

As they left the meeting, shocked and sullen, Cox and Minter walked out of the school behind Tchula resident Jeffery “T. J.” Bogue. The elderly Bogue was a well-known member of the Tchula community whose life was not unlike other well-to-do white Tchula residents. Bogue’s wife was an active member of the Tchula Baptist

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<sup>33</sup> “Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” House Box #2, AEC; Miller, “Trial by Tape Recorder,” 27-32; Franklin, “Early Years,” 86-89.

<sup>34</sup> “Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” House Box #2, AEC; Miller, “Trial by Tape Recorder,” 27-32; Franklin, “Early Years,” 86-89.



Church. They had successful children, one of whom was the Superintendent of a consolidated school system in Mississippi. Bogue had grandchildren whom he lavished with gifts and extravagant birthday parties. Exactly a year before the mass meeting at the Tchula High School, Bogue received the awful news that a granddaughter, who lived in Greenwood, had contracted polio. Had his granddaughter lived in Tchula, she might have been treated by Dr. Minter. Had they gone to the same church, Minter and Cox might have personally comforted Bogue about his granddaughter's illness. But T. J. Bogue was not the sort of man who associated with Providence residents. As Bogue filed out in front of Cox and Minter and approached three of his friends, he said in a loud voice, "What we need for these S.O.Bs is a couple of grass ropes." Cox and Minter kept walking, trying not to react to the threat of lynching their neighbor had just made. "I really think they would have killed us," Minter later reflected, "except for the schoolchildren." "Just about the time the vote was being taken on telling us to leave the state," Minter remembered, "the [football] game ended and there were kids all over the schoolyard."<sup>35</sup>

Attorney Pat Barrett, who was a key member of the witch hunt against Providence, told a reporter after the meeting that "there is nothing personal" about the accusations leveled at Cox and Minter, and then added that "my best friend is a Negro." Further reflecting on his friendship with blacks, and perhaps hoping for some absolution in the matter, Barrett concluded that it was best for the county if Cox and Minter left because "we don't want a lot of good Niggers getting killed." Barrett, who had known

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<sup>35</sup> From Eugene Cox to H.L. Mitchell, 30 September 1955, House Box #2, AEC; C.R. Hamlin, "Tchula News," *Lexington Advertiser*, March 3, 1949, 7; C.R. Hamlin, "Tchula News," *Lexington Advertiser*, April 14, 1949, 7; C.R. Hamlin, "Tchula News," *Lexington Advertiser*, September 9, 1954, 7; quoted in Will D. Campbell, *Providence* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1992), 14-15.

Gene Cox for nearly twenty years, visited the farm to encourage the Coxes and Minters to leave quietly and quickly. Cox told Barrett how his daughter came home from school one day upset about the possibility of leaving her childhood friends if they were forced to move. Cox had struck a nerve with the County Attorney and he left without saying anything further. Later that night, Barrett called Cox, and though he did not apologize, he said he “had been sitting with his own daughter on his knee and he just couldn’t make Gene leave.” J. P. Love, who had used Dr. Minter as his family physician for several years, also regretted the mass meeting somewhat and said Minter “is well liked personally in the community and a real fine doctor.” Edwin White, however, was unrepentant. White bellowed that “some people believe what they want to believe. But what those nigger boys said was enough for us people who have suspected what was going on for 20 years. We know the minds of these Negroes are being poisoned down there,” White added. The retiring politician pursued the residents of the farm vociferously after the mass meeting. White bluntly told a reporter that Cox and Minter were “practicing social equality out there. We won’t have that,” he added pointedly. White later claimed, contrary to the evidence on the tape-recorded interviews, that the four black teenagers questioned had told him that “all white girls are whores.” The specter of miscegenation loomed large over the entire incident, from the first remark made by Freeman, to his conviction for uttering vulgarities in the company of a white woman, to Byrd’s and Barrett’s questions about interracial swimming at Providence. Several years later, Love remarked to an investigator for the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission that he once observed Cox dancing with Fannye Booker in the cooperative store. Love did not have to say any more on the subject—the insinuation was that Cox

had transgressed racial and sexual mores. For White, Love, Byrd, and Barrett to insinuate that the activities at Providence would inevitably lead to interracial sex was to roll out an argument white southerners had used to defend informal and formal racial segregation since the end of the Civil War. The argument that segregation guarded against miscegenation was as much political capital for segregationists as was their use of intimidation and violence.<sup>36</sup>

The night of the meeting, Sue Minter and Lindsey Hail Cox stayed home with their children, “shivering with fear” for the safety of their families. The next morning, Sue and Lindsey gathered their children on the front porch of the Coxes’ home to speak with them about what had happened the night before. Both women fully expected their children to be the targets of taunts or violence in school after the meeting. “Looking out over the beautiful view” of Providence Farm, the mothers prayed with their children to find strength in their faith. Lindsey Cox found particular strength in Romans, Chapter 8, verses 38 and 39.

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

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<sup>36</sup> “Asked to Leave the County,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, October 17, 1955, 2-4; Tom Scarbrough, “A. E. Cox, 933 Chambliss Road, Whitehaven, Tennessee,” July 8, 1960, SCR ID# 2-54-1-39-5-1-1, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAH, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/index.php](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/index.php); Kempton, “Intruder,” *New York Post*. For more on miscegenation in the South, see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

The Coxes and Minters were relieved when their children came home to report no tension at school.<sup>37</sup>

After the mass meeting in Tchula, the White Citizens' Council began a boycott of the cooperative store while the Sheriff's office, with the unofficial aid of armed Klansmen, "guarded" the only road leading into and out of the farm for ten nights. Lindsey Cox wrote a friend that she did not think what the Sheriff was doing could be called "protection" and revealed that she felt much safer when the law enforcement officers ended the blockade. A local white minister stopped by David Minter's home unannounced one afternoon to say that he thought it best if the Coxes and Minters left the county. The minister scoffed at the black self-help efforts Providence residents undertook for over a decade. Besides, the minister remarked, what was the use of calling a black woman "Mrs." when everyone knew black people were never actually married. Minter resisted the urge to physically throw the minister out of his home and, as politely as he could, asked him to leave.<sup>38</sup>

Cox and Minter attempted to alert their allies to their precarious situation. Cox called his longtime friend and labor organizer H.L. Mitchell, who was used to dealing with threats to his safety and livelihood. Mitchell was outraged and called the United States Justice Department for help. Apparently Mitchell's phone call precipitated a small investigation by the FBI into the incidents involving Providence. Mitchell insisted on undertaking a letter writing campaign to spread the word about the injustices against Providence. Cox rebuffed Mitchell's advice and asked him to remain calm, preferring to

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<sup>37</sup> "Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School," House Box #2, AEC; "Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men," House Box #2, AEC; "Letters that had been... kept closed until 1992," House Box #2, AEC.

<sup>38</sup> "Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School," House Box #2, AEC.

“keep this quiet and attempt to work it out on the local level.” Still, fearing for his safety and the well-being of his family, Cox wrote Mitchell three days after the mass meeting at the Tchula high school, detailing T. J. Bogue’s lynching threat and making it clear that if “anything serious should happen to us here,” Bogue and his friends could be responsible. Cox instructed Mitchell to open the letter only if he should be attacked or killed. Mitchell did as he was instructed, returning the letter to Cox some twenty years later. David and Sue Minter discussed the safety of their children and Dr. Minter’s aging mother who had come to live with them on the farm. Throughout the accusations against her son for being a communist and threats to their lives, “Mother Minter” had met the sentiments with “good Presbyterian righteous indignation” which had kept both David’s and Sue’s spirits high. After one Tchula resident remarked to the Minters that they could “not get mother Minter out of the house if it were burned,” however, David and Sue decided that it would be best for her safety if she moved in with relatives in Texas.<sup>39</sup>

Providence residents were encouraged by old allies who showed their support—some wrote letters while others made the journey to the farm. Sam and Dorothy Franklin were the first old friends and members of the farm to visit after the mass meeting. Franklin appealed directly to Pat Barrett, whom Franklin had known for many years. He asked Barrett to hold another meeting to express “confidence in the Coxes and the Minters.” Barrett refused. A. James McDonald, the idealistic volunteer who had butted heads with Sam Franklin, also came in September and visited again in April 1956. Providence residents were probably relieved when McDonald left, however, because of his actual ties to the Communist Party. In October 1955, like-minded liberals and

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<sup>39</sup> From Eugene Cox to H.L. Mitchell, 30 September 1955, House Box #2, AEC; From Lindsey H. Cox to Mrs. Hamlin, October 1955, House Box #2, AEC; From Eugene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 6 October 1954, Folder 164, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC.

journalists flocked to the farm. Alice and Buck Kester paid a visit, as did journalist and future Pulitzer Prize-winner David Halberstam, who visited on a research trip that would yield his first foray into exposé journalism. Another journalist who had already made a name for himself, Hodding Carter, invited the Coxes and the Minters to his lake house near Greenville, Mississippi, for the weekend as a respite from the pressures mounting in Holmes County. Carter and Hazel Brannon Smith took up the defense of Cox and Minter in their newspapers. Carter wrote an open letter to Holmes County residents in which he lamented that if Cox and Minter leave, “something will leave Holmes County with them, something very precious and American, something for which a great many Holmes County citizens apparently don’t give a damn. That something,” continued Carter, “is the spirit of the Bill of Rights.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite support from longtime friends around the country, friends in Holmes County who were willing to support residents at Providence, however, were few. One month after the meeting, Lindsey Cox wrote letters to everyone in Holmes County who had stood up for her family during the mass meeting or sent the Coxes and Minters letters of support since. She wrote only six letters. “Few others have voiced their faith in us,” wrote the Coxes and Minters in a joint letter to friends in 1955. “Above these small voices,” the letter continued, “is this frightening SILENCE.”<sup>41</sup>

Not long after the meeting, someone cut the phone lines to the farm. Hazel Brannon Smith accompanied Cox and Minter on a visit to the office of the Mississippi governor-elect James P. Coleman to ask for help in resolving the situation. Smith had

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<sup>40</sup> “Delta-Providence Guestbook,” House Box #6, AEC; “Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School,” Home Box #2, AEC; Franklin, “Early Years,” 90.

<sup>41</sup> “Letters that had been... kept closed until 1992,” House Box #2, AEC; “Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men,” House Box #2, AEC.

publicly supported Coleman in her column and believed him to be an honest and fair man. Coleman was a moderate but won the gubernatorial race by promising to uphold racial segregation. Coleman and Pat Barrett were also associates and fellow Rotarians, and Barrett had invited the future governor to speak at several civic events in Holmes County in the early 1950s. The meeting with the governor-elect yielded neither practical support from the state government nor an end to the intimidation.<sup>42</sup>

Another Mississippi ally, Will Campbell, who was Director of Religious Life at the University of Mississippi at the time, came to Providence with a friend to size up the situation for himself. As liberal on the issue of race as anyone at Providence, Campbell considered racism a sin and later devoted his career to social justice activism. As he entered the farm, law enforcement officers stopped Campbell and took down his license plate number. Upon his return to the university, the Dean called Campbell into his office and asked what his business had been in Holmes County. Apparently, local law enforcement ran Campbell's tags and notified the university to further intimidate individuals sympathetic to Providence Farm.<sup>43</sup>

Though they had become the focus of racists, most Providence residents hoped the whole ordeal would blow over. Determined not to be intimidated, residents at the farm attempted to go on living their lives. Trying to keep a normal schedule, David Minter went into Tchula every day "to buy gas at the local station, stop and have a cup of coffee," and patronize the bank, drug store, and post office just so things appeared normal and to give everyone the impression that he and his family planned to stay at Providence. In November, Sue Minter threw a big birthday party for her 9-year-old daughter, Susan,

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<sup>42</sup> "Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School," Home Box #2, AEC.

<sup>43</sup> Campbell, *Providence*, 21-24.

inviting children from Tchula to attend. In December, Gene Cox wrote to Sherwood and Louise Eddy that “things are much quieter here in Holmes County just now—on the surface, at least.” “Everyone is preparing for Christmas as in former years,” he continued, “however, we are not having a public Christmas program as we have in the past.”<sup>44</sup>

The calm façade did not last. The Coxes and Minters wrote a joint Christmas letter to friends and supporters of Providence in 1955. The weariness of each family was palpable, even on paper. They wrote of threatening and intimidating phone calls in the middle of the night, snarling “When are you Communists going to leave?” Worried for their children, parents experienced many sleepless nights and deteriorating health. A friend of Lindsey Cox’s wrote Sue Minter expressing concern that Cox “has been quite ill. Probably accumulated anxieties just wrought her insides to an unendurable pitch of inflammation.” The Coxes and Minters were disappointed that only two members of their churches had written them expressing their support. Most troubling, though, was that Cox and Minter felt they had endangered their friends, particularly the black residents at Providence. Cox attempted to secure some protection for them and instructed Fay Bennett, the Executive Secretary of the National Sharecroppers Fund, to contact the Mississippi secretary of the NAACP on their behalf. “I believe his name is Evers,” Cox wrote.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> From Eugene Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 20 December 1955, House Box #1, AEC; C.R. Hamlin, “Tchula News,” *Lexington Advertiser*, November 17, 1955, 6; From Eugene Cox to Fay Bennett, 7 March 1956, House Box #2, AEC.

<sup>45</sup> “Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men,” House Box #2, AEC; From Mrs. Seth Wheatley (Elizabeth) to Sue Minter, 1955, House Box #4, AEC; From Eugene Cox to Fay Bennett, 7 March 1956, House Box #2, AEC.



Even after the blockade ended, Minter's medical clinic, the cooperative store, and the credit union suffered mightily throughout the end of 1955 and 1956. The blockade had turned away many of Minter's patients who had come to the farm by foot, mule, horseback, or tractor. Countless patients were stopped from receiving medical care. Intimidation continued and Minter's patient numbers fell off drastically. Minter blamed the Holmes County Citizen's Council and their influence among whites and intimidation of blacks.

Most planters [had] stopped sending patients to me. There were a few exceptions, but there was evidently a concerted effort on the part of the council members to boycott me... One former patient [a white man] confided to me while drinking that he would have been to see me but that the council had told [people] to stay away... It is hard to say if the council would have bothered us if the Sheriff had not laid the groundwork, although eventually there would have been something done because our opposition to them (not open but just the fact that we did not join)."<sup>46</sup>

Still, a few friends and patients trickled in and out of the clinic. One black farmer who had visited Minter's health clinic for several years accompanied his wife on a visit to Providence. The man walked in the front door holding his wife's arm in one hand and a rifle in the other. He reached the farm without incident, but swore to Minter that if anyone had tried to stop them, he would have shot his way through to keep the appointment. Another patient heard about Minter's trouble and came to Providence just so that he could pay an outstanding debt of eleven dollars because the man thought Minter might need some "traveling money."<sup>47</sup>

Even as Providence lost money, the campaign of intimidation from the surrounding community escalated. United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company,

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<sup>46</sup> Cook, *The Segregationists*, 42; "Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School," Home Box #2, AEC.

<sup>47</sup> "Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School," Home Box #2, AEC.

through which Minter insured his practice, received word that arsonists could lay siege to the clinic at any moment. With no warning, U.S.F. & G. promptly cancelled Minter's insurance. A reporter sympathetic to Providence later found that the Holmes County agent for the insurance company was a member of the White Citizens' Council. When a visitor asked Minter why he was considering closing the clinic, Minter simply answered, "You can't practice medicine without patients." Citing drastically decreased income and having no insurance to operate a medical practice, Minter officially closed the clinic in 1956.<sup>48</sup>

The cooperative store took a financial hit too, with sales dropping from over \$12,000 in 1955 to only \$3,000 in 1957. The African American families who stayed on the land, including the Bookers and Robert Granderson, tried to keep up the store and return it to its heyday as the center of the community. The decline of the store was an example of the long lasting effects of the intimidation meted out to blacks in 1956. From that year forward, many stayed away from Providence Farm.<sup>49</sup>

In late 1955, Gene Cox and Fannye Booker, with the input of the Cooperative Association, set in motion the liquidation of the Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union. At the time, the credit union had over \$9,000 in unpaid loans. As part of the campaign against the cooperative, plantation owners lied to their black employees and told them that they did not have to repay loans the credit union provided. Some black credit union members who lived off the farm were warned by whites to stay away and concluded that visiting Providence would put their lives in danger. In January 1956, the

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<sup>48</sup> Campbell, *Providence*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Kieran W. Taylor, "I Done Made My Mind Up: The Legacy of the Providence Cooperative Farm," (MA thesis, University of Mississippi, 1998).

Credit Union stopped offering loans and only took deposits on an emergency basis. It was clear to Cox that he would have to close the Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union but could not completely repay all deposits because of the unpaid loans. For several years, Cox had been the National Director of the Credit Union National Association (CUNA). He called on his professional relationships through CUNA and wrote over thirty letters to credit unions all over the country, hoping to receive some financial support in order to pay his members their full deposits. Cox wrote of the treatment they had received from their neighbors and pleaded for financial assistance. One sympathetic manager at a credit union in Minnesota sent Cox one hundred dollars and exclaimed, "I can hardly believe that the state of Mississippi can still be in the confines of the United States of America." But only one other check, for twenty dollars, came from his credit union colleagues. Cox finally cancelled the charter for the Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union in late 1957 when he distributed a total of nearly \$4,000 among the last eighty members, many signing their reimbursement checks with a simple X to mark their endorsement.<sup>50</sup>

From 1955 to 1957, the population at Providence dwindled as residents joined the flood of southern blacks migrating out of the region. For Cox, Minter, and Booker, vacating residents were signs that segregationists were winning. They felt "responsible for these families" and attempted to help them relocate. Checks from the Credit Union were mailed to addresses in Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, Illinois, Michigan, Arizona, and California. By the cooperative's final days, only a few families remained in the employ of the Delta Foundation, INC. They performed maintenance on the farm and

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<sup>50</sup> From A.J. Snell to Gene Cox, 17 July 1956, Folder 164, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC; CUNA Miscellaneous, Box IV-A, AEC.

worked at the cooperative store. The rest sought new homes. Shirley Henderson, with her children, including Mary Ellen, the girl whose distress had been the catalyst for the cooperative's demise, moved to Edwards, Mississippi in hopes of finding work at the Mt. Beulah Institute—an educational center associated with Tougaloo College of which Gene Cox had become director in 1953. Nute Hulsey and his family moved to Roseville, California. The Billingtons moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and the Whitneys to Indianapolis, Indiana. Like thousands of other black families, the Hulseys, Billingtons, and Whitneys found housing in new and affordable communities, leaving their rural lives—and the cotton belt—behind them.<sup>51</sup>

By mid 1956, depleted incomes, down-scaled programs, and continued intimidation finally forced the Cox and Minter families to seriously consider an end to their stays at Providence. “On June 1<sup>st</sup> I will have completed my first 20 years in Mississippi,” Gene Cox wrote Sherwood and Louise Eddy. “I am not certain that there is another 20 left,” he admitted, then added, “it has been a wonderful experience and I am thankful that Sherwood directed me to Mississippi.”<sup>52</sup>

Finally, in late July, 1956, the Minters joined the exodus, packing up their belongings and moving to Tucson, Arizona. Dr. Minter had treated patients in the clinic up until the very last night he lived at Providence. Cox wrote a friend of the “sad day in this community when he closed the Clinic for the last day. As I told some of the folks here,” Cox continued with vindication, “he will be remembered a hundred years after the local bigwigs are all dead and gone.” In Tucson, Minter set up a medical and dental

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<sup>51</sup> “Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men,” House Box #2, AEC; “Members – Delta Cooperative Farm, Rochdale, Mississippi,” Folder #2 in the Delta Cooperative Farm Papers #3892-Z, SHC; “Providence Cooperative Federal Credit Union” Miscellaneous, Box IV-A, AEC.

<sup>52</sup> From Gene Cox to Sherwood & Louise Eddy, 26 May 1956, House Box #1, AEC.

clinic for migratory farm workers and continued his community service. In 1969, Minter was honored by his Tucson community for “significant achievement in patient care and health services.” A Holmes County newspaper picked up the story and ran an article on Minter, complete with a large picture of the doctor. The newspaper gushed that Minter was “still remembered with love and affection by hundreds of friends and patients in the county.” In a bewildering display of revisionist history, the article listed among Minter’s many medical and community service honors that “in September of 1955 he was honored at Recognition Night of the Holmes County Community Council.” His old friend, Gene Cox, cut out a copy of the article and wrote in the margin, “white citizens’ council.” The “Recognition Night” the article mentioned was, in fact, the night that hundreds of Minter’s neighbors voted him out of the county. In early 1991, Minter passed away in Tucson. Will Campbell wrote Minter’s widow, Sue, that he “wept when I got the mailing about Dave.” “I wish they had taught me some words to say,” continued Campbell. “They didn’t. Except, ‘I’m here if you need me.’ And, ‘I loved him too.’”<sup>53</sup>

In August 1956, Gene and Lindsey Cox moved with their daughters to a suburb in Tennessee called Whitehaven, the name of which the Coxes found ironic. Whitehaven, near Memphis, “seemed impossible to us after the beauty and peace of Providence,” Lindsey Cox wrote not long after moving. Gene Cox took two fulltime positions as Secretary-Treasurer of the Agricultural and Allied Workers Union of the AFL-CIO and Director of Rural Development Program for the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches. Even from Whitehaven, he continued his activism in Holmes County. For many years, Cox returned to visit friends and on business with the

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<sup>53</sup> From Gene Cox to undisclosed, April 1957, AEC; “Dr. David R. Minter Honored,” *Lexington Advertiser*, June 12, 1969, 1; From Will D. Campbell to Sue Minter, 15 February 1991, House Box #2, AEC.

National Council of Churches. Into the 1960s, he visited former Delta and Providence resident Shirley Henderson and her children at Mt. Beulah Institute twice a year.<sup>54</sup>

About four years after Cox left the farm, he became the target of investigations by the clandestine Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, organized in the mid 1950s to ward off the encroachment of federal desegregation policies and civil rights legislation. His frequent trips to Mississippi had raised the suspicions of the Commission, and it sent an investigator to tail Cox's 1948 Packard as he traveled around the state. Cox quickly figured out that his activities in Mississippi were being closely followed and decided to turn the tables on the investigator charged with keeping tabs on him. While stopped in Holly Springs, Mississippi for lunch at a cafe, Cox approached the investigator who had seated himself on the other side of the dining room. The man in the employ of the Sovereignty Commission was Tom Scarbrough, whom Cox had briefly met while still living at Providence. Scarbrough had been sheriff of Chickasaw County, Mississippi in the 1940s and head of the Mississippi State Highway Patrol in the 1950s. He was appointed to the Commission in 1960 and trailing Cox was one of his first assignments. Judging from his Commission reports, many of his interviewees found him intimidating. Scarbrough had a robust opinion of himself and viewed his work as defending Mississippi's moral compass. When he asked Cox what he was doing in Holly Springs, Cox matched wits with the glib Scarbrough. "I would assume you would know what I'm doing," Cox answered. Cox told Scarbrough that he supported some of the groups that were working towards civil rights in Mississippi. Scarbrough was disgusted that "his thinking has gotten no better since I saw him last." Cox then admonished the Commission for inquiring about his activities when they should be "checking on the Ku

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<sup>54</sup> From the Coxes to undisclosed recipients, April 1957, House Box #2, AEC.

Klux Klan.” Though in front of Scarbrough he showed only restrained enmity, in private Cox seethed that the State of Mississippi would stoop to the level of spying. Even ten years after confronting the investigator in Holly Springs, Cox agonized over the insinuation that he had done anything that warranted being the subject of a clandestine commission. In the early 1970s, he began compiling a report to “convince the historians as to how utterly silly some of the work of the Commission really was.” When he wrote Will Campbell in an attempt to correct some of the inconsistencies he found in the Commission papers, Campbell wrote back that he did “not worry about the Sovereignty Commission checking on any of my activities as I have One far more permanent and authoritative checking also—the Lord Christ Himself.” Cox, however, did not share Campbell’s dismissive reaction and fumed over the Sovereignty Commission’s investigation.<sup>55</sup>

On December 14, 1992 Cox and his wife of fifty-five years who he had met at Delta Cooperative Farm in 1936, Lindsey Hail Cox, sat in their Whitehaven living room and chatted, as they did every night. “In the evening while we were talking Gene suddenly slumped over,” Lindsey remembered. Gene had suffered a massive stroke. He died five days later. Sam Franklin wrote to Lindsey not long after Gene’s death. “He was, I think, more nearly a brother to me during the 56 years since he came to Hillhouse,” Franklin said, “than any other living person.” At his funeral, the pastor of Cox’s church recalled how since leaving college to join Delta Cooperative Farm, Cox had taken “his ministry to the trenches.” Cox’s old friend and ally since his Providence days, Will

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<sup>55</sup> Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 69; Tom Scarbrough, “Marshall County (President E. A. Smith, Rust College),” June 4, 1964, SCR ID# 2-20-1-76-2-1-1, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAH, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/index.php](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/index.php); From Gen Cox to Mrs. Wallis Schutt, 29 November 1972, House Box #1, AEC; From Will Campbell to Gene Cox, 21 December 1972, JDC.

Campbell, again eulogized a fallen resident of the cooperative farms. Noting that Cox had helped bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth and that he would find familiar surroundings in death, Campbell prayed aloud, “we commend him to that great interracial cooperative, Providence, somewhere up with the wind eternal.”<sup>56</sup>

After 1956, Fannye Booker stayed on the farm and attempted to maintain community education initiatives and her summer camp. “Well-placed, subtle suggestions” of reprisal by whites if African Americans continued to frequent the farm kept many students and campers away. Still, Booker managed to offer summer camps for increasingly fewer youth into the 1970s. For the rest of her life, Booker stayed in Holmes County and became involved with promoting black-owned and-operated businesses, including a string of “community pride grocery stores,” a home for the elderly, and a museum celebrating black achievements in Holmes County. She also became intensely involved with the Holmes County Head Start Program and with voter registration drives after the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965. In the 1967 election, Booker supported a black Holmes County teacher named Robert Clark to represent their county in the state legislature. In what must have seemed like sweet justice, Clark defeated incumbent J. P. Love, who had helped lead the eviction of Gene Cox and David Minter from the county twelve years prior, for a seat in the Mississippi House of Representatives. Aside from the personal victory over Love, Booker had helped elect the first African American to the Mississippi legislature since Reconstruction. She continued to tend the cooperative store on a limited basis after Cox left. The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission briefly targeted Booker because of her association with Cox and Providence. The same

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<sup>56</sup> From Sam Franklin to Lindsay Cox, 29 December 1992, House Box #9, AEC; Michael Kelley, “Mourners Say Farewell to Cox, Fierce Fighter For Racial Harmony,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 23, 1992.



investigator Cox had confronted in Holly Springs visited the cooperative store and inquired about Booker, the farm, and Cox, attempting to gain information for the commission. Scarbrough condescendingly referred to Booker as “above the average negro in intelligence.” Booker did not trust the man and answered his questions with curt responses. After 1967, Booker kept the store open only one hour each day before finally closing it for good in 1971. In February 1997, Fannye Thomas Booker died in Lexington, Mississippi. Scores of former campers and students attended her funeral.<sup>57</sup>

The Delta Foundation gradually divided the land that once supported the Providence community and sold it to mainly private farm operators. In 1985, a section was sold to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The MDAH coveted the land, not for its historical significance as the home of a community engaged in black self-help and defying the state’s racial caste system, but because the farm contained several Choctaw mounds. Since the MDAH’s purchase, the rest of the farm is now owned by a Mississippi-based organization that advocates conservation and environmentally friendly farming practices. The organization, improbably, is named Delta F.A.R.M. (Farmers Advocating Resource Management). The money that the Delta Foundation made from the sale of Providence Farm went toward an annual scholarship to fund the college education of an African American student from Holmes County. Gene Cox first started the scholarship back in the late 1940s, but had trouble finding reliable financial support until the Foundation sold Providence. In the end, however, residents never took ownership of the land like they had been promised since the 1930s.

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<sup>57</sup> From Fannye Booker to Mr. and Mrs. Cox, 24 August 1989, House Box #2, AEC; Franklin, “Early Years,” 91; “Confidential,” Delta & Providence Farms, House Box #2, AEC; Tom Scarbrough, “A. E. Cox, 933 Chambliss Road, Whitehaven, Tennessee,” July 8, 1960, SCR ID# 2-54-1-39-5-1-1, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAH, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/index.php](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/index.php).

Before many of Providence's residents died, they attempted to take stock of their lives on the cooperative. In the 1970s, Gene Cox began to order the papers he saved from his days at Delta and Providence. Cox possessed a paper trail going all the way back to Eddy's and Franklin's first ideas about a relocation farm for evicted Arkansas sharecroppers. Cox thought that an archive might one day be interested in the papers. He contacted some of his old colleagues in the struggle for human rights with the hope that they could help him fill some gaps in the historical record. The occasion allowed Cox and others a chance to reflect on the legacy of Delta and Providence.

Sam Franklin was perhaps most candid about his experiences at the farms. Franklin considered the ventures a "financial failure" but maintained that it was a "human success." His reflection on his own part in the projects was most telling. In the twilight of his life and perhaps seeking some absolution for his heavy-handed leadership, Franklin simply apologized.

I am conscious of having made many mistaken judgments even while trying to do my best. I am also sure that egotism, closed-mindedness and impatience may have complicated the picture. For these 'secret sins,' known to God and usually to others but concealed by the sinner from himself, one can only ask forgiveness from all involved.<sup>58</sup>

H.L. Mitchell, the former STFU secretary, also communicated with Cox about what he should do with his collected papers. Cox was apprehensive about handing all of his papers over to an archive. After his experience with the misinformation spread by the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, Cox was justifiably shy about wading into debates over historical events in which he played important roles. "The record is going to speak for itself," Mitchell assured Cox. "No one is going to accept one man's opinion of

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<sup>58</sup> From Sam Franklin to Mildred and Wilmer Young, undated, House Box #2, AEC.

Sherwood, Sam, you or me. We will be judged by historians on the basis of what we did, or what we tried to do.” Then the cantankerous Mitchell reminded Cox that “if someone libels us, we can sue them or our children can do so.”<sup>59</sup>

Cox also contacted William Amberson and almost immediately regretted it. Rather than evoke an even-keeled appraisal of the farms, Amberson rekindled some of his accusations against Eddy and Franklin—namely that they had engaged in “dubious or completely dishonest handling of money.” Like a petulant grade-schooler, Amberson wrote to Mitchell to once again complain about the farm. Cox also wrote to Mitchell to object to Amberson’s most recent antics. Mitchell again tempered Cox, but remained disappointed by Amberson. “His pursuits of Sherwood beyond the grave,” revealed Mitchell, “remind me of Claude Williams who is as bitter about Kester.” In the final analysis, though, Mitchell, who had plenty of experience managing loutish personalities while with the STFU, reminded Cox that old wounds should be left alone. “If I were you and Sam, I wouldn’t bother,” Mitchell told him, referring to Cox’s attempts to refute Amberson’s recent accusations. “Amberson is old and probably a damn sight crankier than he ever was.” After several years of communication, Amberson politely ended his correspondence with Cox. “I cannot embark upon a lengthy correspondence,” he wrote in 1973. “I need rest and peace from the problems of the old South.”<sup>60</sup>

In the 1950s, Providence was a community in decline. Lacking a clear identity and possessing vague goals, it was no longer the radical endeavor it had been in the 1930s and 1940s. When the soldiers of massive resistance attacked Providence in 1955,

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<sup>59</sup> From H. L. Mitchell to Gene Cox, 14 February 1971, House Box #1, AEC.

<sup>60</sup> From William Amberson to H. L. Mitchell 24 December 1970, House Box #1, AEC; From H. L. Mitchell to Gene Cox, undated, House Box #1, AEC; From H. L. Mitchell to Gene Cox, 31 December 1970, House Box #1, AEC; From William Amberson to Gene Cox, 26 January 1973, House Box#1, AEC.

the farm did not have a strong network to turn to for support. Still, the farm's initiatives—including the clinic, educational courses, and the credit union—offered Holmes Countians a chance to raise their positions in a rural South that still operated on strict racial and class hierarchies. Of all the reflections on Providence after 1956, perhaps former resident Esther Lou Moody phrased it best. “The kids and I go back over the old days quite often,” Moody confided to Lindsey Cox in 1966, “and try to put all the nice things in front of all the heartaches.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> From Mrs. Karl M. (Esther Lou) Moody to Lindsey and Gene Cox, April 7, 1966, House Box #1, AEC.

## Conclusion

### Making the Beloved Community a Reality

From 1936 until 1956, Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm provided opportunities for hundreds of destitute rural southerners, particularly African Americans, to pursue avenues for racial and economic equality. A socialized economy, cooperative buying and selling power, and a credit union that offered fair loan rates provided Bolivar and Holmes county residents some economic stability. Health and medical services provided by nurses, doctors, and the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority summer health clinics markedly improved the lives of hundreds of rural Mississippians. Educational initiatives in academics, agriculture, and Christianity prepared students for life in a drastically changing South as more southerners moved off the land, attended college, and became involved in the political process.

But even without these measures of success, the simple fact that the cooperative farms existed at all made them extraordinary. Near the end of his life, farm benefactor Sherwood Eddy recalled how he, Sam Franklin, Gene Cox, and hundreds of other residents, volunteers, and staff “had thrilling adventures in fighting lawlessness, race prejudice, and poverty in one of the most backward states in the deep South.” Even in Mississippi, a “state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression,”—to borrow a phrase from Martin Luther King Jr.—dedicated farmers at Delta and Providence took part in a twenty-year struggle for labor and civil rights. Although in the end it was

segregationist Mississippians who pressured the farms to close, they succeeded in chasing farm residents away only when red-baiting and race-baiting reached their zenith in the early 1950s. The farmers' work stood as testimony, as a contemporary *New Republic* journalist noted, that Delta and Providence farms offered proof "of the essential bravery and vitality of human beings that ought always to be remembered."<sup>1</sup>

Aside from those families who were directly affected, however, few people remember Delta and Providence farms. No historical markers commemorate the ground that once supported the farms. For locals, Delta and Providence are puzzling afterthoughts in Bolivar and Holmes county histories, if they are remembered at all. The costs of not remembering Delta and Providence are hard to measure. A clear loss, however, is a narrative of southern history that includes men and women who engaged in what many of their detractors considered radical behavior. The farms existed in a time when the tenets of socialism seemed to be feasible alternatives to capitalism—when living collectively, organizing labor unions, and putting Christian Realism to work in the South were all practical and viable means of reimagining the lives of America's rural poor. Perhaps the highest cost of not remembering communities like Delta and Providence is that models for the beloved community are too few.

Human rights activists have yet to usher in the beloved community that Delta and Providence represented. Uneducated sharecroppers and idealistic, but practical, Christians and Socialists populated the farms. Their daily lives resembled those of many poor farmers in the Jim Crow-era South: they struggled to maintain a farm, support their families, overcome sickness, and find joy. In these regards, their actions were mainly

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1955), 157-158; Jonathan Mitchell, "Cabins in the Cotton," *New Republic*, September 22, 1937, 175-178.

practical. But their *idea* was radical—that these two farms would become common throughout the country and change the way Americans approached labor, religion, race relations, and the economy. In the present, what we may need is a little conviction and a lot of imagination to realize the beloved community.

Understanding the successes and failures at Delta and Providence helps guide the builders of the beloved community. The story of the cooperative farms is interwoven with many of the threads that made up twentieth century leftist and progressive visions for American democracy. Radical agrarianism, Christian socialism, African American quests for social and economic rights, and cross-racial class consciousness all played important roles in how the farms came into existence and why they persisted, in one form or another, for twenty years. The reasons why the farms failed are just as layered and complicated as their beginnings. Like other activists in the vanguard, residents of Delta and Providence weathered violence, economic intimidation, red-baiting, race-baiting, and clandestine investigations. The farms' internal problems also took measurable tolls. In the end, external attacks and internal cleavages vitiated volunteers, managers, and trustees efforts to cultivate collective biracial space in the Jim Crow South. For instance, Delta and Providence were managed by whites, some of whom were unwilling, or unready, to check their paternalistic tendencies at the door. Hamstrung by their cultural assumptions, white farm managers and trustees limited interracial communion, even while promoting the farms as racially harmonious. For all the progress made by both farms, the beloved community founded on interracial cooperation had its limits. After all, a white female resident's reaction to a black teenager's flirtatious comment precipitated the endeavor's demise.

Present-day builders of the beloved community should also know that they can draw on a long history for guidance and inspiration. Although important watershed moments altered the ways residents at Delta and Providence approached their brand of social justice, the twenty-year saga of the cooperative farms suggests that a continuity of activism existed in the long civil rights movement. As historians of the civil rights movement have pointed out, long traditions of activism existed in African American communities around the South. The difference in the 1930s, as Jacquelyn Hall has shown, was that labor unionists, the federal government, and other white allies struck alliances with many of these communities so that the movement evolved in tandem with the New Deal order. From the 1930s into the early 1950s, despite strident anticommunist scapegoating of labor unionists, the alliance of African Americans, New Deal liberals, and labor activists persisted and paved the way for the modern civil rights movement that began in the mid 1950s. This alliance also opened up space in the agrarian South.<sup>2</sup>

The novelty of an egalitarian community wore off, however, as public places desegregated by federal mandate. By the time the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan threatened to run Providence residents out of the county, the movement's new generation of leaders had turned their attention elsewhere. Additionally, as the Supreme Court struck down *de jure* segregation, a community based on social egalitarianism lost much of its significance as a visionary enterprise in the rural South. By the late 1950s, civil rights activists were accomplishing social equality at a faster clip than the residents at Delta and Providence could hope to realize over their twenty year existence.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* (March 2005): 1233-1263.



In Providence, the civil rights movement had a model for the beloved community—a shared space that promoted diverse approaches to fostering class and racial egalitarianism. The irony is that in the mid 1950s, when Martin Luther King, Jr. began speaking publicly about creating the beloved community, Providence Farm officially closed as a cooperative community and center for black uplift. Left-leaning activists had long fought for the creation of the beloved community, predating King’s speeches in the 1950s. In 1936, the same year the interracial experiment began at Delta Cooperative Farm, the Fellowship of Reconciliation sponsored a series of conferences, workshops, and discussions on “Making the Beloved Community a Reality.” Based in the Social Gospel and structured around cross-class and cross-racial cooperation, the beloved community was a vision for an America free of poverty, racism, and war. But by the 1950s, instead of focusing on building communities like Delta or Providence, that vision took the form of desegregating public spaces. Without the support of national organizations and media coverage, isolated rural communities like Providence fell victim to the armies of massive resistance. Sam Franklin, Sherwood Eddy, William Amberson, and others launched Delta Cooperative Farm in a moment of possibility during the New Deal and ironically, twenty years later, Providence Farm closed during another moment of possibility for African Americans and their allies.<sup>3</sup>

I argued throughout the dissertation that the cooperative farms were liminal spaces of opportunity for the rural South’s poor in the often bleak Jim Crow era. Delta and Providence were thresholds between the old and the unexplored—the possible, where boundaries dissolved and historical actors departed into new territory. This liminal space

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<sup>3</sup> “Fellowship of Reconciliation” Brochure, October 1936, Folder 12, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers, #3474, SHC.

was psychological and physical. In the psychological sense, the farms allowed whites and blacks the liberty to imagine and, to an important extent, realize changes in southern society—changes in social and economic structures that facilitated fuller expressions of their humanity. Additionally, the cooperative residents were “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification.” On the farms, they were no longer sharecroppers, nor tenants, nor niggers, nor white trash, nor any of the epithets used for poor whites and blacks. They were something new. They were now “cooperators” or “members” of something ambiguous—an ill-defined relationship that would dog the endeavor from the outset. Divested of previous titles, the cooperators’ new positions and classifications were uncertain.<sup>4</sup>

The physical spaces at Delta and Providence were liminal because the community store, the church, the medical clinic, the dairy co-op, and the fields were all spaces where cooperative residents and visitors challenged Mississippi’s social and economic hierarchies. The cooperative farms were communities on the fringe, separated from the mainstream, who sought to change southern, and ultimately American, society from the margins. By incorporating the farms’ four tenets in daily interactions, ex-sharecroppers sought to cooperate equally in labor and production, socialize the economy, enact egalitarian race relations, and practice Christian Realism. Eventually, however, the external threats combined with internal problems to bring the farms to their demise. Initially accepted by most Mississippians, the cooperatives were increasingly seen by locals as fringe communities, and they suffered at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, the white Citizens Council, and the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. The liminal space

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Witter Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 232.

at Delta and Providence represented an endless threshold. Cooperators were always on the verge of ushering in new racial and economic orders to rural southern society. Put another way, the ex-sharecroppers seemed to be in a state of perpetual transition. But liminality cannot persist indefinitely. The little upheavals and seemingly minor, day-to-day events that took place at Delta and Providence, and the backlash from outsiders, were the rumblings of the clashes between the plantation mentality of the Old South and the as-yet uncharted territory of the modern South. In the end, Providence's failure was a tragic contingency of history, one that Niebuhr's Christian Realism might have predicted. The residents, staff, and volunteers were too radical and not radical enough—the farms were ahead of their time and throwbacks to another age of activism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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