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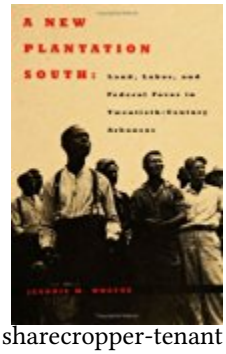
Jeannie M. Whayne. *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996. xvi +324 pp. $39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1655-2.



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Published on H-Rural (May, 1997)

Jeannie Whayne has produced an interesting local history of Poinsett County, Arkansas from the 1880s to the 1940s that has broad implications for historians interested in agricultural change, rural politics, southern race relations, and the effects of the New Deal. Like most local studies, Whayne's study seeks to help readers "understand the role of the individual and the power and pathos of defeated alternatives" (p. 4). She does show the potential of alternative paths to social relations and development such as those proposed by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Unfortunately, this work contains so many paths itself that it lacks a clear thesis.

A New Plantation South is centered around the theme of agricultural change, who shaped it, and how it affected this Mississippi Delta county's economics, politics, and land use. In the postbellum era, Poinsett had no real plantation district and much of its delta land was subject to flooding or was "sunk land" created by the New Madrid earthquake of 1811. The most productive land under cultivation before the turn of the century lay along Crowley's Ridge, a strip of highland that ran through the center of the county, where most of the population resided. West of Crowley's Ridge the land turned into prairie. Migrants from the midwestern states settled there and began raising rice on homesteads. A major transition occurred in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when hundreds of thousands of acres of rich alluvial soil were reclaimed through large scale drainage projects such as the St. Francis Levee District. The new plantation area developed widespread sharecropping, tenancy, a commissary system and a cotton monoculture economy. Over time, yeomen, who were at a disadvantage to pay the drainage taxes, lost out to a group Whayne calls "businessmen-planters." In many ways her study is about these businessmen-planters and the sharecropper-tenant class.

The businessmen-planters were, for Whayne, distinct from other southern planters in that they came to plantation owning and management from a different perspective. For the Poinsett County business-planter, "the plantation was an extension of his business enterprise rather than a way of life" (p. 23). These men came to own most of the delta land and sought to accompany their rise in economic power with a comparable rise in their political stature. Interestingly, though they wrested away some power from the older political elites that lived on Crowley's Ridge, the delta planter elite never dominated all of the county's politics. The voting bloc of the prairie farmers and Ridge folk, combined with class and race division in the delta, resulted in a dilution of the businessmen-planters' power.

Despite their inability to dominate local politics, the delta businessmen-planters succeed in controlling and shaping Red Cross aid for the flood of 1927. From this experience, Whayne points out that the planters learned the value of controlling outside money and influence. During the New Deal the planters gained control of local boards that administered the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and works programs. They also benefited by keeping the crop subsidy for themselves, having public works done to improve their routes to market, and expanding the reclamation projects in the delta. In addition, by taking active control of the New Deal on the local level, planters channeled relief and recovery to their own pockets and kept reform at bay. These entrepreneurs proved to be in the best position to benefit from the post-war economic boom of the 1940s; many of their plantations turned into

modern agribusinesses over time.

Another facet of Whayne's project is an exploration of the struggles of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers of Poinsett County. Unlike their planter landlords, sharecroppers and tenants found their economic prospects declining throughout the period under study. She demonstrates how homesteaders could be driven down the economic ladder by any number of events: floods in 1927, the drought of the early 1930s, the boll weevil, and the vagaries of the cotton market. Indeed, the yeomen and sharecroppers of Poinsett experienced more plagues than the Egyptians. Throughout the 1920s and 30s homesteaders defaulted in large numbers for non-payment of taxes and saw their lands bought up by companies and businessmen-planters. Once they had lost their land they had to move or turn to disadvantageous sharecropping or tenancy arrangements.

The corruption and abuses of the plantation commissary, tenancy, and sharecropping systems in the postbellum South have been well documented. Indeed, scholars have also given thought to the different reactions of the sharecropper class to their problems. In this regard, Poinsett County offers Whayne a unique opportunity for study because of the variety and radical nature of the responses given to such abuses by tenants in that area. In Whayne's view, moving provided the most successful means of protest for sharecroppers. By emphasizing the value and complexity of mobility as a form of resistance, she places her arguments between Jonathan Wiener and Robert Higgs. She suggests that on the one hand, tenants did not usually significantly improve their circumstances by moving from plantation to plantation, but she stresses that "the true meaning of mobility [is] defiance of planter control" (p. 60). Paradoxically, she also notes that this form of resistance did not threaten the system itself, but rather shaped it and made it more tolerable. In fact, the sharecroppers' and tenants' emphasis on mobility allowed for new plantation areas to develop by attracting constantly migrating sharecroppers from other parts of the south.

The most striking and radical of sharecroppers' and tenant farmers' responses to their plight was the creation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, founded in a Poinsett County school house in 1934. The STFU's formation and actions have attracted historians, some of whom have held it up as an example of southern radicalism. Poinsett County's STFU was particularly interesting because it was biracial. Like scholars Robin D. G. Kelly and Nan Woodruff, Whayne explores the socialist beliefs of some participants, many of whom were black ministers. The goals of the rank and file of the SFTU, however, were more conservative, and most members were primarily interested in protecting their sharecropping opportunities instead of bringing about large-scale land reform. In showing the conservatism of the union, Whayne revises some previous assumptions about the radical nature of the SFTU and its participants (p. 206).

This study is rich with other themes of interest to scholars. Whayne explores the fight over prohibition and the class divides that influenced the temperance controversy. Agricultural historians will find her recounting of the work of the department of agriculture and individual county agents interesting. However, this inclusiveness of theme and detail results in a book that sometimes lacks a central argument. If there is a central theme here it is the history of agriculture in Poinsett County from the rise of the plantation delta to the changes of mechanization, diversification and ultimately the growth of agribusiness. One particular strength of Whayne's work is her quantitative research and graphs. This book represent prodigious use of agricultural and population census records and tax records. The quantitative material makes her arguments more convincing. In particular, she demonstrates the shift in population and economic power within the county and tracks land tenure and forfeiture (pp. 127, 142-144). For agricultural historians this work may provide useful local data for comparison.

A New Plantation South is not without its failings. Stylistically, the manuscript would have benefited from further editing. There are some little errors in prose that could have been avoided. Moreover, some of the material seems extraneous to the book's themes on land, labor, and federal favor. For example, the prohibition battle that she describes does not seem relevant to larger issues like agribusiness and mechanization. The result of these anecdotes and tangents is some loss in readability and an overall weakening of her arguments. However, the book also lacks jargon and is approachable for general and undergraduate readers.

Whayne points the way to at least one tantalizing avenue for further research. In an interview with George Stith, a onetime member of the STFU, the former farmer reveals both the gulf between white and black and hints at possibilities for cooperation: "[Y]our family didn't come over to visit mine. But there was something common about what we did....when the union came along this was what we met on the turn row and talked about when I were joining you" (p. 197). Through Stith's com-

ments, Whayne raises the perennial issue of race relations and labor relations and the nexus where they meet. It is an essential piece of American history that black and white relations have been complex; they cannot be understood simply in terms of violence and oppression, but only in rare cases like the STFU do they feature mutual support and respect. Most of the history of race relations lies somewhere between, as Whayne shows. Hopefully, scholars will take the opportunity to probe this enigmatic issue.

Readers of *A New Plantation South* will learn a good deal about Poinsett County, Arkansas. They will also learn about the tribulations of cotton agriculture, federal agricultural policy, race relations and southern grass roots politics. Whayne provides the reader with a bounty of information and leaves the final analysis open to interpretation.

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Citation: James H. Tuten. Review of Whayne, Jeannie M., *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas.* H-Rural, H-Net Reviews. May, 1997.

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