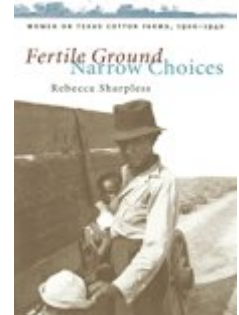


Rebecca Sharpless. *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xxiii + 319 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2456-6.



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Rebecca Sharpless has added an important dimension to our understanding of southern farm life in the early twentieth century. For all the attention given to the southern cotton economy, few historians have paid more than cursory attention to the lives of women on cotton farms. Sharpless fills that gap with this meticulously researched and readable work on the Texas Blackland Prairie before World War II.

In the preface, Sharpless sets forth two aims for her work: analyzing the physical conditions of women's lives on Texas cotton farms and discovering how these women coped with the harsh reality of their lives (p. xviii). She accomplishes this in chapters that examine the various roles women played: family member, housekeeper, domestic food producer, market producer, field worker, and reproducer of the labor force.

In general, women on Texas cotton farms, regardless of race, lived in a small world defined largely by their connections to family. They usually married in their late teens, had a child within a year, and bore children at two-year intervals until menopause. Most lived in nuclear families, except

for a brief period after marriage and when caring for elderly parents and in-laws. Black and Mexican families were more likely to live in extended households because of financial difficulties. Women were expected to keep house, bear and raise children, and produce much of the family's food supply, as well as participate in the commercial cotton farming activities of the family. Although some families shared decision making, the husband was most often the dominant figure in the household.

Sharpless maintains that the crop-lien system was the central constraint in the lives of Blackland farm women. This system created a highly stratified society in which the conditions of a woman's life depended largely on whether she was the wife or daughter of a large or small landowner, a tenant who owned some of his own tools, or a sharecropper who depended on the landlord for nearly everything. In addition, women's lives were constrained by racial and ethnic prejudices, with African-American and Mexican women at the bottom of the economic ladder. Even white women faced prejudice: Czech and

German immigrants suffered discrimination at the hands of Anglos. Social expectations of women's behavior as daughters, wives, and mothers and a lack of access to birth control also limited the personal choices of women on Blackland cotton farms. Still, Sharpless argues convincingly that women nevertheless managed to shape their own lives and those of their families in powerful ways.

The economic status of the family largely determined the material conditions of women's lives. Wives of landowning farmers enjoyed larger, better built houses than their poorer neighbors and were more likely to have modern household appliances, though few Blacklanders of any class enjoyed electricity or running water before the 1930s. Landowning women could also hire household help from among the wives of tenants and sharecroppers in the neighborhood. Housing for tenants and sharecroppers was almost always substandard, and families of agricultural laborers, usually migrant workers, lived in wretched conditions, complicating women's job of house-keeping.

One of the most fascinating chapters in this work is entitled "Living at Home: Food Production and Preparation in the Blackland Prairie." As Sharpless points out, few southern historians have considered the importance of food in the lives of farm people, but the meaning, production, and preparation of food was central to the lives of farm women. After all, it was the most repetitive and unending of all their tasks; they prepared meals several times each day. Yet in spite of the drudgery of preparation, food was essential for survival. Moreover, food was part of the "credit matrix" (p. 110) of the crop-lien system: the more food families purchased instead of producing at home, the more likely they were to sink hopelessly into debt. Thus, many women devoted significant amounts of time and energy to growing gardens, raising livestock, and preserving food for their families. To many Blackland women, food

preparation represented physical and symbolic nurturing. As one woman put it, "For Mama, preparing and serving food was synonymous with caring and nurturing" (p. 110). Some women also found a creative outlet in cooking. Though everyday meals might be utilitarian, women prepared elaborate spreads for Sunday dinners, for company, and for church and community gatherings.

Sharpless describes the details of household food production, pointing out that most rural people's diets depended heavily on corn products, pork, and molasses. She provides a vivid account of the procedure for killing hogs and preserving pork for the family's use, and she then examines the difficulties in safely preserving food without refrigeration. Before World War I, few women knew how to can at home or had access to the necessary equipment. With the appointment of large numbers of home demonstration agents during World War I, many Blackland women learned canning techniques, but not all women could afford to buy pressure canners, glass jars, and the other equipment they needed to use this preservation method. Some women pooled their efforts, sharing equipment and labor to take on the massive task of canning garden produce.

In her discussion of food production, Sharpless points to one of the supreme ironies of the crop-lien system. Landowners often discouraged their tenants from growing gardens or keeping livestock because they resented taking any land or labor out of cotton production; some explicitly forbade their tenants to do so. Even tenants whose landlords allowed them to produce their own food had few resources for seed or livestock. As a result, the landless people who were least able to afford it were usually forced to purchase large percentages of their food, often at inflated prices, from furnishing merchants (sometimes the landowner). Landowning families, on the other hand, had the land, the resources, and the time to produce much of their own food. Thus, the more prosperous a family was, the more they were able

to save by producing their food at home, freeing up more cash for other purposes.

Although women were responsible for all of the family domestic chores, they were also expected to assist in cotton production. Several contemporary studies showed that the majority of women in all ethnic groups performed at least some field labor every year. Still, the practice and the outlook in individual families varied widely. Some women did all the field work while the men in the family performed wage work elsewhere. Ironically, women with small children were most likely to do field work; older children could often replace their mothers in the fields so that women could devote more time to household responsibilities.

Although life on the Blackland Prairie could be isolating, farm women were part of larger communities. Most families lived within a quarter mile of neighbors, and visiting was a very popular activity. Women depended heavily on mutual-aid networks and were active participants in local churches. Families also had some contact with the outside world. Rural Free Delivery provided access to the world beyond the Blacklands through newspapers and magazines. By the 1920s many families also had access to party-line phones. Yet the automobile played the largest role in exposing rural Texas families to the wider world, providing easy access to towns and commercial amusements and transforming courtship rituals. Women eagerly embraced the automobile, recognizing its potential to broaden their lives. They learned to drive or encouraged their daughters to do so, and they began to make frequent trips to town, where they were exposed to the enticements of consumer goods and new employment opportunities.

This exposure to the temptations of an urban world, along with New Deal policies that pushed tenants off the land and the job opportunities created by World War II, helped lead to the depopulation of the Blackland Prairie in the 1940s and 1950s. Young people led the move to towns and cities, where they found jobs in textile mills, cot-

tonseed oil plants, and other locations. Many had trouble adjusting to the loss of independence in the city, but they reveled in expanded economic opportunities and improved material conditions. Values changed, even for those who remained on the land. Neighborhood visiting declined as rural people gained access to other amusements. Yet the advent of improvements such as rural electrification and farm mechanization lightened the burden for farm women.

Sharpless's work is rendered more vivid by her skillful use of oral histories and personal memoirs. Her preface includes an honest and reflective meditation on the pleasures and responsibilities of using oral history. She supplements these first-person accounts with the statistics and reports of contemporary rural social reformers. She also mines popular cultural artifacts, such as songs, rhymes, and community rituals, to examine gaps between ideology and practice and to discover community expectations of women.

Not only does *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices* help to complete our picture of life on southern cotton farms, but it complicates our understanding of the region we call "the South." As historian Robert Tracy McKenzie and others have pointed out, there are many Souths [1]. We often conflate "the South" with the Cotton South, but Sharpless shows us that even the Cotton South was full of variety. The Blackland Prairie region of Texas was more productive than the Mississippi Delta or other areas of the Cotton South, producing as much as 6 percent of the total U.S. annual cotton crop in the early part of the twentieth century. This productivity was largely due to the region's extremely fertile soil and its longer growing season. It was also more arid than the rest of the South, creating special challenges for farming and for maintaining households. Most important, the Blacklands displayed far more ethnic diversity than the rest of the South, because of the presence of Mexican, Czech, and German immigrants. All of these variations made life in the Blacklands Prairie different

from life in other parts of the Cotton South. Understanding the diversity of the region we call the South will enhance our understanding of the impact of race and class in constraining the lives of farm families.

In summary, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices* is a fine contribution to the literature of southern history, rural history, and women's history.

NOTE

[1]. Robert Tracy McKenzie, *One South or Many? Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War-Era Tennessee*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

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