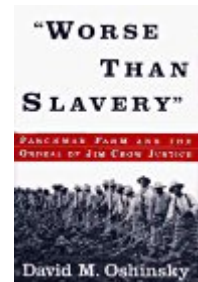


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David M. Oshinsky. *"Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: The Free Press, 1996. xiv + 306 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-684-83095-7; \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-82298-3.

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During the Cold War years an article of faith that distinguished the West from the “Evil Empire” of Soviet Communism was the latter’s Siberian Gulag, a vast network of prison camps where inmates faced unspeakable brutality and horrors from both nature and man. Of course, nothing of that kind could flourish here. According to David Oshinsky, the U.S. did indeed have its own gulag, and it went by the name of Mississippi. Parchman Farm was its “first circle.”

The Parchman Farm story begins with the Reconstruction era. Determined to overthrow Republican regimes, Mississippians devised what would become the model for Democratic redemption elsewhere, the so-called “Mississippi Plan.” Its elements were straightforward enough. Use whatever means necessary, from fraud to murderous violence, to regain political control. It worked, and by 1875 Democratic legislatures were back in control and immediately set out to resolve what they considered to be two key problems: a shortage of labor, and the need to restore white supremacy. Criminal statutes were enacted such as the “Pig Law” in which theft of a farm animal worth more than ten dollars was punishable by up to five years in prison. Along with laws such as these, which were almost always aimed at the thousands of poor freedmen, was the “Leasing Act.” This statute allowed convicts to be leased out if their sentences were less than ten years. Since whites were usually only charged and convicted for the most serious of crimes, their sentences entitled them to the relative safety of the state penitentiary at Jackson.

As it developed in Mississippi, convict leasing successfully replaced racial bondage with a system of racial castes while at the same time fueling the economic devel-

opment of the late 19th century “New South.” The use of convicts for everything from raising cotton, to building railroads, to extracting turpentine gum spread rapidly. It solved the problem of high fixed labor costs, since minimal expenses for food, clothing, and shelter were necessary. Moreover, there was always a ready supply of replacement labor, so incentives against the mistreatment of convict workers were non-existent. Oshinsky catalogs the horrors that awaited a leasee—from ubiquitous lash to the use of metal spurs riveted to the feet to prevent escape. The mortality rate was high, and the system encompassed all ages. The state penal code made no distinction between juvenile and adult offenders, so that by 1880 “at least one convict in four was an adolescent” (pp. 46-47).

The movement to end convict leasing in Mississippi resulted in the creation of Parchman Farm, and the man behind it was the “White Chief,” Governor James K. Vardaman. Using race-baiting and fears of black lawlessness and criminality to gain power, Vardaman was convinced that a prison farm, “like an efficient slave plantation,” was necessary to provide young African-Americans with the “proper discipline, strong work habits, and respect for white authority” (p. 110) that the end of slavery had eliminated. Set on 20,000 acres in the Mississippi Delta region, the Farm consisted of fifteen work camps, each organized much like an ante-bellum slave plantation complete with “sargeants” (overseers), “trustees” (slave drivers), and “gunmen” (the convicts who toiled under the gun of a trustee). Using a variety of sources, including the many ‘blues’ songs that came from the farm or those who spent time there, Oshinsky chillingly and graphically documents the story of the “farm with slaves” that regularly turned a profit for the state. The famous song

“Midnight Special” was based on the train that left Jackson every Saturday night to carry the wives and lovers to the prison for their Sunday visits. Olshinsky also chronicles the “other Parchman,” the white men and women of both races who served their time there.

But Parchman Farm, as bad as it was, was a reflection of larger problems. For one thing, as Olshinsky notes, Mississippi had a long tradition of violence, and a criminal justice system that tolerated it. Prohibition and the great migration of blacks to the north following World War I increased the percentage of white male Parchman inmates. Segregation was simply extended to the criminal justice system as well. Even reform had its grizzly aspects. In the 1930s a number of “bungled” hangings led to calls for change to a more humane form of capital punishment. The solution in Mississippi was Jimmy Thompson and his “killing machine,” an electric chair mounted on the back of a pick-up truck. Rather than face possible riots with a permanent execution chamber at Parchman, Mississippi’s contribution to American criminal justice was the first portable electric chair. Used until 1955 Jimmy Thompson oversaw the execution of seventy-three people, of whom fifty-seven were black.

Like the end of segregation, real change at Parchman did not come without a struggle. Indeed, during the civil rights years Parchman Farm was the detention place for movement workers and leaders, including the Freedom Riders James Farmer and Stokely Carmichael. And, like other bastions of Jim Crow, Parchman Farm fell only when four courageous inmates brought suit in federal court to put an end to the abuse and conditions at the

Farm. The case, *Gates vs. Collier*, was decided in 1972 by an independent-minded Southern federal judge, William C. Keady. Keady found that Parchman Farm was “an affront to modern standards of decency,” and ordered an immediate end to all of the unconstitutional conditions and practices.

Ironically, as Parchman Farm changed so did society. Segregation of inmates was abolished, but was replaced with gang activity organized along racial lines. Following *Gates*, it was abolished to use inmate farming as a means of paying for prison food and clothing. The farm land leased out. Today, prison labor has become popular again as a tool of correctional “rehabilitation,” and the farming of food products by Parchman inmates has been “revitalized.” Although a majority of the guards and administrators of Parchman Farm are now African-American, the percentage of black inmates remains at the same 70% level it has been since the 1930’s.

This is a solid and well-written monograph that represents the kind of detailed study called for by historians of criminal justice like Lawrence Freidman and Samuel Walker. Unlike several recent Hollywood films dealing with “justice” in Mississippi, Oshinsky has no need of drama and high-priced stars. The men and women who experienced the “ordeal” of Parchman Farm are sufficient testimony to this important chapter in the history of the South and the American gulag.

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