

Arkansas's cotton plantocracy:  
the role of POWs in establishing postwar labor systems

by

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B.S., University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2012  
M.A., University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of History  
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

## **Abstract**

This project examines how the cotton plantocracy of Arkansas during World War II, with the help of county and state officials, manipulated the military and federal government to use prisoners of war (POWs) to suppress the wages of local labor and set up their postwar future. This practice had lasting effects on labor in the South as POWs remained in the fields until the spring 1946, which allowed the planters to transition to Mexican migrant laborers and eventually mechanization. Through manipulation by the planter elite and complicit government officials, the most significant number of camps and POWs devoted to one crop occurred in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

Local planters, agriculture organizations, and state representatives in Arkansas, such as Congressman Ezekiel C. "Took" Gathings and Arkansas Governor Homer Adkins, exaggerated their labor needs and continually lobbied for POW camps to spark the cotton economy in the Mississippi Delta despite objections from labor organizations, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), a biracial union of sharecroppers and farmworkers. Furthermore, Arkansas' segregationist practices influenced labor policies, as maintaining a distinct racial hierarchy remained a priority through these years of transition. Only certain people could labor in the cotton fields, with Japanese American internees in Arkansas being notably excluded. This dissertation relies on an interdisciplinary methodology, as the nature of this topic blends elements of labor, race, military, and Southern history along with economic and sociological aspects. Since the move towards mechanization was a gradual postwar process, Mexican nationals or braceros came to replace German and Italian POWs after 1946 as an inexpensive and removable labor force that the planters could employ to manipulate local labor wages until mechanical cotton harvesters forever changed Southern labor systems.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AAA – Agricultural Adjustment Administration  
ACA – Agriculture Council of Arkansas  
AFBF – American Farm Bureau Federation  
AFL – American Federation of Labor  
AMC – Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America  
ASF – U.S. Army Service Forces  
CIO – Congress of Industrial Organizations  
CO – Commanding Officer  
DOJ – Department of Justice  
DSC – Distinguished Service Cross  
ETO – European Theater of Operations  
FSA – Farm Security  
G-1 - The Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel  
IDP - Industrial Personnel Division of the War Department  
IH – International Harvester  
INS – Immigration and Naturalization Service  
JAG – Judge Advocate General  
LWC – Lee Wilson & Company  
NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons  
NCO – Non-Commissioned Officer  
NIRA – National Industrial Recovery Act  
NLRB – National Labor Relations Board  
OPMG/PMGO – Office of the Provost Marshal General  
PMG – Provost Marshal General  
POW/PW – Prisoner of War  
PTO – Pacific Theater of Operations  
PX – Post Exchange  
SOS - Services of Supply  
SPD – Special Projects Division  
STFU – Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union  
UCAPAWA – United Cannery, Agricultural Packing, and Allied Workers of America  
USDA – United States Department of Agriculture  
USES – United States Employment Services  
V-E Day – Victory in Europe Day  
V-J Day – Victory in Japan Day  
WD - War Department, Department of War  
WDL – Workers Defense League  
WFA – War Food Administration  
WMC – War Manpower Commission  
WRA – War Relocation Authority

## Introduction

Writing from Wynne, Arkansas, in February 1945—during the peak of US deployment in World War II—J.E. Hollan encouraged Mabel Gieseck, a local cotton planter and businesswoman, to attend a hearing at the county courthouse to determine the cotton-picking wages that civilian laborers would earn in the following year's harvest. Hollan, who chaired the local prisoner of war camp association, concluded his entreaty to Gieseck with the words: "Will you please attend the meeting, and help us to look after 'OUR BUSINESS.'"<sup>1</sup> Harkening back to attitudes from the "peculiar institution" of slavery a century before, the planters' call to look after *their business* now involved colluding to stack the hearing with like-minded planter elites, complicit sharecroppers, and supportive government officials. The ultimate goal was to set a low wage ceiling for cotton laborers, which—once approved by the United States Department of Agriculture and the War Food Administration at the meeting—would destroy the bargaining power for the predominantly African American local laborers.

This letter highlights how complex labor arrangements in the Mississippi Delta had become during the war and how the planters and their organizations maintained control over their state's politicians and government officials to influence the federal government. Additionally, the war marked a transitional time in cotton agriculture, when the decades-old exploitive sharecropping system began to crumble and was ultimately replaced by seasonal wage laborers, leaving local laborers dispossessed from even the modest benefits of sharecropping: a year-round home and a plot of land upon which they could raise families. By 1945, Arkansas cotton planters like Hollan and Gieseck had grown accustomed to using the cheap and readily

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1. J.E. Hollan, letter to Mabel H. Gieseck, dated February 14, 1945. Lansing/Gieseck Collection, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, AR.

available German and Italian prisoners of war (POWs) to meet their labor needs. They then used the POWs' presence in the state to broker lower wage ceilings for laboring U.S. citizens, thereby constructing a postwar future with low-wage workers instead of tenants or sharecroppers.

This project examines how the cotton plantocracy of Arkansas during World War II, with the help of county and state officials, manipulated the U.S. military and other federal government institutions to suppress the wages of local labor via POWs. This practice had lasting effects on labor in the South after the war. Despite the Geneva Convention calling for immediate repatriation after the war's end, German and Italian POWs remained in the fields until spring 1946, which allowed the planters to transition to Mexican migrant laborers and eventually mechanization. To make the best of the wartime labor pinch, the War Department allowed the use of POWs on the home front. Of the nearly 425,000 German and Italian prisoners of war (POWs) held across all 48 states, many took jobs in the civilian sector, primarily in agriculture but also in lumber, mining, construction, food processing, and public works. However, through manipulation by the planter elite and complicit government officials, the most significant number of camps and POWs devoted to cultivating one crop occurred in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta Region of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana.<sup>2</sup>

The War Department and Office of the Provost Marshal General originally planned to build camps away from urban and industrial areas, vital transportation routes, international borders, and coastlines for security purposes. They also prioritized placing the camps in states with mild climates to minimize operating costs and in regions where POWs could alleviate labor

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2. The Lower Mississippi River Delta Region is defined as a 219-county strip along the Mississippi River in Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. James M. Ward, “‘Nazis Hoe Cotton’: Planters, POWs, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Fall, 2007), 471-492. During World War II, 425,000 POWs were held in the U.S., with camps in all 48 continental states—Arkansas with 23,000 POWs, Mississippi with 20,200 POWs, and Louisiana with 20,000 POWs.

shortages. The Mississippi Delta met many of these criteria, but as the war progressed, security concerns went out of the way, and the planter's power influenced the placement of these camps to meet their labor needs. The military found an area with a mild climate that wanted POW labor without understanding the seasonal nature of cotton, where labor would be dormant for large periods of the year. This study examines how one-seventh of all POWs interned in the U.S. served at military bases or picked cotton in the Mississippi Delta, straddling one of America's most vital strategic waterways, the Mississippi River.

To gain this local labor, planters, agriculture organizations, and state representatives in Arkansas, such as Congressman Ezekiel C. "Took" Gathings and Arkansas Governor Homer Adkins, exaggerated their labor needs and continually lobbied that POW camps be established in the region. This was done despite objections from labor organizations, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), a biracial union of sharecroppers and farmworkers formed in Arkansas, which argued that POW labor depressed wages for local workers. The STFU maintained that Arkansas had an ample supply of workers, but the planters refused to pay decent wages. Due to such low wages, the STFU arranged transportation for over 12,000 workers to higher-paying jobs in Arizona, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Florida, and California in 1944 and 1945 in what they termed the "New Underground Railroad."<sup>3</sup> Many of these workers would never return to the Delta.

Notably, segregation influenced labor policies in Arkansas and the South, as maintaining a strict racial hierarchy in labor practices took precedence, even during the purported labor crisis.

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3. H.L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, (Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979), 215. Additionally, sometimes it was referred to as the Second Underground Railroad. Most of these jobs were designed to be temporary 6–8-week positions during the down periods of cotton production; however, it introduced many laborers to much higher wages, and many never returned, and it introduced the idea of leaving the South.

For example, Governor Adkins blocked the use of interned Japanese Americans housed in Arkansas, despite very lucrative labor offers from mining and construction companies. POWs offered the planters many benefits compared to the Japanese American internees. As White foreigners, the POWs could never unionize, demand fair wages, or benefit from New Deal programs the way laborers with American citizenship could. Although they were protected by the Geneva Convention in theory, the use of POWs lacked real oversight and the protections of a foreign government. Thus, after the POWs repatriation the planters looked for alternative labor.

During the war, the Arkansas planters rarely used or outright refused to use bracero migrant labor, because the federal government guaranteed their wage rate, and they would also have to pay for transportation and housing. With the use of POWs, the military would pick up the tab on transportation and housing, and as this study will show, the planters leased the labor of POWs at almost half the cost of a bracero or a local laborer. However, after the war's end and without federal government oversight, the planters began to manipulate the wages for braceros to make them a viable labor option by 1946 in the Delta. This supplemental labor allowed the planters to slowly transition to mechanical harvesters over the next two decades.

### **Historiography**

This dissertation will rely on an interdisciplinary methodology, as the nature of this topic blends elements of labor, race, military, and Southern history along with economic and sociological considerations. Based on new archival information found in the Lansing Company and Mabel Gieseck collection at Arkansas State University and the records from the Lee Wilson

& Company, the Office of the Provost Marshal General, and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, this study will show how the planters profited more from POWs than any labor type.<sup>4</sup> In the land of king cotton, the planter elite wielded control and used their clout to construct a collusive relationship with the government at the expense of the predominately Black local laborers and eventually the interned Japanese Americans. The planters successfully used European POWs to fill the labor voids in the cotton fields and set up favorable postwar wage ceilings on local labor. By the war's end, with wartime steel rationing over, the tenant farmer/migrant labor system gave way to the increased use of mechanical cotton harvesters and herbicides that forever changed Arkansas and Southern labor systems.

Unlike this study's analysis of the POW labor regimes in Arkansas, most literature on POWs in Arkansas and the South has focused on providing general information on POWs and the camps' operations and are not thesis-driven. This dissertation provides a new evolution in the study of POWs, focusing on more complex issues, especially labor utilization and POWs' position within Jim Crow labor hierarchies. On this latter point, there have been examinations of POWs regarding racial issues more broadly; however, no scholarship to date replicates my focus on POWs' positions within America's various racialized labor regimes. Among studies that examine racial issues, Matthias Reiss' articles "Solidarity Among Fellow Sufferers" and "Icons of Insult: German and Italian Prisoners of War in African American Letters during World War II" stand out. Reiss, a senior lecturer at the University of Exeter, argues that during their

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4. Lansing/Gieseck Collection, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, AR. Lee Wilson and Company Records (MC 1289), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AR. Records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, Prisoner of War Division, 1941-1946; Special Projects Division, 1943-1946. (RG 389), Modern Military Branch, National Archives, College Park, MD. Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, 1934-1970, Microfilm edition, Microfilming Corporation of America (now ProQuest). University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AR.

interactions in the United States, German POWs and African Americans found themselves sharing an oppressed status at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, often working side-by-side in typically harmonious relationships. However, Reiss also found that many African American soldiers who encountered German and Italian POWs on U.S. military bases felt the POWs served as "icons of insult," often receiving better treatment than they did.<sup>5</sup> This study furthers Reiss's work and highlights more particular instances of racial prejudice against African American service members, the favoritism shown towards the German and Italian POWs, and, in some instances, the violence that resulted, such as the August 14, 1944, Fort Lawton Riot outside Seattle, Washington.

Most of the thesis-driven agricultural and labor studies on Arkansas and the South covering World War II only briefly discuss the existence of POWs as cotton laborers and therefore do not provide an in-depth analysis on the true nature of their impact on Southern society and labor. This study most closely relates to the articles done by James Morgan Ward entitled "'Nazis Hoe Cotton': Planters, POWS, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South" and Nan Elizabeth Woodruff's article, "Pick or Fight: The Emergency Farm Labor Program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas During World War II."<sup>6</sup> Writing at the time as a Ph.D. candidate at Yale University, Ward argues that POWs working in Southern cotton fields

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5 Matthias Reiss, "Solidarity Among 'Fellow Sufferers': African Americans and German Prisoners of War in the United States During World War II." *Journal of African American History* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 531-561.

Reiss, "Icons of Insult: German and Italian Prisoners of War in African American Letters during World War II." *American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2004): 539-562. Additionally, Matthias Reiss's latest book, *Controlling Sex in Captivity: POWs and Sexual Desire in the United States during the Second World War*, serves as another example of his more critical examination of POWs in the U.S. during the war by focusing on the fraternization and same-sex activities of captors and captives.

6. James M. Ward, "'Nazis Hoe Cotton': Planters, POWS, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Fall, 2007): 471-492.

undercut planter profits, exposed racial anxieties, and unwittingly assisted in extending exploitive practices of plantation agriculture by devaluing African American labor in the cotton sector. Ward makes valid arguments that this work shares, but its effort to cover complex issues over the entirety of the Mississippi Delta in a short article leaves space for scholarship such as mine.

This dissertation uses a case study approach, examining the actions of particular actors in Arkansas' cotton-growing region by interpreting archival records from government officials, the planter elite, labor unions, and federal government bureaucracies. This research renders a more comprehensive look at how politicians and planter elites wielded control over Arkansas to maintain Jim Crow segregation, adhere (though barely) to the Geneva Convention, and maximize profits during the war. In so doing, I correct Ward's claims that POW labor undercut planter profits. In fact, the opposite is true: new archival information found in the Mabel Gieseck and the Lansing Company collection at Arkansas State University shows how planters profited more from POWs than any other labor type. My work also differs from Ward's conclusion that POW labor helped retain a place for African Americans on the plantation after the war. Instead, I conclude, alongside historians such as Pete Daniel, that most African American farm laborers and sharecroppers did not return to these farms and plantations after the war.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps most similar to this dissertation is the work of Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, a historian at Penn State University. Her article, "Pick or Fight: The Emergency Farm Labor Program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas During World War II," argues, like I do, that the

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7. Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).



planter elite in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta manipulated the wartime government.<sup>8</sup>

Woodruff focuses on the efforts of Delta planters to shape federal wartime policies related to farm labor through the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, a New Deal program run by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Woodruff shows how Delta planters looked to the USDA during the war, as they had done in the 1930s, to protect cotton prices while protecting their interests against challenges from farmworkers for fair wages, decent working conditions, and equal treatment by the federal government. Ultimately, the USDA sided with the planters, whether through tenets of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in the 1930s, the passage of Public Law 45 in 1943, wage ceiling hearings in 1944 and 1945, or the use of migrant and POW labor programs.

In sum, Woodruff's article focuses more on the overarching elements of the planter elite's manipulation of the labor situation and how they used the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program. Meanwhile, Woodruff's subsequent book, *American Congo: the African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta*, additionally provides a wealth of information on the violence and intimidation that Black sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta faced from the planter elite and how their fight for rights and citizenship connects to the civil rights movement.<sup>9</sup> Conversely to Woodruff's studies, this dissertation details more concretely the planter elites' manipulation of Arkansas' labor situation during the war. Woodruff spoke more in macro generalizations about the labor situation and only briefly addressed POWs, lumping them together with braceros as

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8. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Pick or Fight: The Emergency Farm Labor Program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas During World War II," *Agricultural History* 64 (Spring 1990): 74-85.

9. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

other labor. This study, in contrast, disaggregates these non-White and/or non-American labor groups and ultimately shows the progression in the cotton economy from POW labor to braceros.

Woodruff's POW coverage is similar to Jeannie M. Whyne's in *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth Century Arkansas*. Although she only discusses POWs in passing, Whyne argues that war prisoners in the Arkansas Delta helped cotton planters weather a severe labor shortage. She also acknowledges that, by its very existence in a labor-scarce economy, the POW labor program depressed farm wage rates and encouraged some landless farmers to seek employment in war industries. This dissertation concurs with this assessment; however, based on the archival evidence found in the Gieseck, Gathings, and Adkins collections, it more thoroughly establishes POW labor's role in the planters' manipulation of labor markets. For example, Whyne states that the POW labor program "was designed so as not to interfere with prevailing wage rates; ...planters were prohibited from paying less than the prevailing rate."<sup>10</sup> In point of fact, planters found ways to pay POWs far below the prevailing rate, meaning that POWs played a much more significant role in disrupting Arkansas's labor ecosystem.

As for historiography on POWs, Arnold Krammer's book, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, provides one of the first and most comprehensive looks at the POWs held in the U.S. during World War II.<sup>11</sup> This study details the history of how the U.S. government handled the detainment of over 425,000 POWs in 511 camps scattered throughout the country. Krammer provides an overview of the POWs in America, including the camp developments, POWs' life

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10. Jeannie M. Whyne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 223.

11. Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1996).

behind the wire, the labor programs, escape attempts, the U.S. public's reaction, and the repatriation of POWs. Krammer's text, first published in 1979, prompted some historians to examine the POW camps in their respective states to further understand their effects on American society. While Krammer focused more on the POWs as a whole and, more specifically, in this text on the German POWs, he does not share this study's focus on the labor systems and the racial systems that POWs were placed into, especially when entering the South's cotton economy, so historically tied to America's unfortunate legacy of racialized enslavement.

This work will use Arkansas as a case study, so it is essential to understand the historiography of POWs in Arkansas. Merrill R. Pritchett and William L. Shea's "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946" provides the most comprehensive study on POWs in Arkansas by examining the three German POW base camps: Camps Chafee, Robinson, and Dermott.<sup>12</sup> Pritchett and Shea detail the development, structure, and day-to-day activities of the POW camps in Arkansas. These authors detail both the recreational activities available to POWs—such as educational courses, sports, music, and theatre—as well as the labor opportunities on and off the camps where POWs could earn meager wages, mostly in canteen script. Although not thesis-driven, their work provides a solid overview of POW conditions in Arkansas. Additionally, William Shea, a professor at the University of Arkansas-Monticello, edited the memoir of Edwin Pelz, a former German POW, in the article "A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz." Pelz's memoir provides a rare first-person account of a former POW

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12. Merrill R Pritchett and William L. Shea. "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1978): 3–22. Pritchett and Shea only discuss the German POW camps in Arkansas. It should be noted that a fourth POW camp was located at Monticello for Italian POWs, most of whom were officers.

written in English. It traces Pelz's experiences from his capture at the beaches of Normandy in the wake of the D-Day landings to the cotton fields of Arkansas as a POW.<sup>13</sup>

One thing that made the POW camps in Arkansas unique was that Camps Chafee and Dermott were initially built as internment camps for Japanese Americans. Camp Chafee was never used as an internment camp, while Camp Dermott served as the Jerome Relocation Center for Americans of Japanese ancestry until they were relocated to Camp Rohwer in Arkansas or sent to camps on the West Coast in June 1944. Jerome and Rohwer served as the only camps in the Mississippi Delta region that housed Japanese Americans, who thereby comprised a "third race" that further complicated matters in the seemingly binary racial system of the Jim Crow South.<sup>14</sup> C. Calvin Smith's "The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas 1942-1945" and Jason Morgan Ward's "'No Jap Crow': Japanese Americans Encounter the World War II South" examine the civilian response to these different camps and their inhabitants. Both Smith and Ward argue that the POWs in Arkansas were better received than the Japanese Americans, as Arkansans typically failed to acknowledge them as rightful Americans.<sup>15</sup> Ward also details Japanese American troops stationed in the South, especially how they highlighted the increasing incompatibility of Southern racial practices with American war rhetoric that valued the maximal deployment of Americans for the war effort.<sup>16</sup>

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13. Edwin Pelz and William Shea, "A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985): 42-55.

14. For more information on Japanese Americans interned, see William Cary Anderson, "Early Reaction in Arkansas to the Relocation of Japanese in the State," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 23 (Autumn 1964), 195-211. Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

15. C. Calvin Smith, "The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas 1942-1945," *Arkansas Historical Association Vol. 53*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 340-366.

16. James M. Ward, "'No Jap Crow': Japanese American Encounter the World War II South," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (February 2007): 75-104.

Regarding works that detail the war's impact on Southern society more broadly, a foremost contributor is Pete Daniel, a professor of history, public historian, and former president of the Southern Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. In his book *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* and his article "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," he finds that 3.2 million people left Southern rural areas between 1940 and 1974, with the number of African American farmers falling from 681,790 to just 45,594--a drop of 93 percent.<sup>17</sup> Daniel chronicles the counterpart narrative to the Great Migration: African American farmers' fierce struggles to remain on the land while at the same time facing discriminatory practices, including from government bureaucracies. These antagonisms persisted even into and beyond the civil rights era. Daniel concludes that the USDA used agencies such as the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the Federal Extension Service, and the Farmers Home Administration to exercise a variety of discriminatory practices, such as in the hiring of office staff and agents, withholding information from farmers, adjusting acreage allotments, disbursing loans, and adjudicating disputes. In many cases, these officials looked after their own families and friends and erected barriers that discouraged and prevented women and minorities from attaining equitable treatment. As Daniel put it, "By the 1950s, the intrusive tentacles of agri-government uncoiled from Washington through state and county offices and paired with agribusiness, reconfigured the national farm structure."<sup>18</sup>

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17. Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

18. Pete Daniel, *Dispossession*, xi.

In "Going Among Strangers," Daniel looks at the wartime "push and pull" factors that ousted rural farmers and sharecroppers from the land, primarily to seek better (though uncertain) futures in cities. Daniel's central thesis is that World War II planted seeds in the South that hastened the development of a new agricultural structure based on mechanization and temporary migratory labor, intensified urbanization, and—as a response to African Americans' increased desperation—triggered the civil rights movement. For decades rural people feared leaving the farms and plantations to "go among strangers" in the cities, but during the war and the later 1940s, those fears dissipated. Daniel argues that after World War II, the South entered a transitional phase before mechanization fully took hold, where planters experimented with various labor arrangements that blended elements of the labor-intensive plantation system with more modern agricultural practices. In this work on the exodus from the rural South, Daniel briefly discusses the POW labor program as a strategy to ease the "perceived shortages of rural labor" and hold wages down, but he covers it more in passing.<sup>19</sup> My work decisively establishes that POW labor, while temporary, enshrined wage expectations for the postwar era that discouraged African Americans from returning to agricultural jobs.

In addition to a decline in labor demand due to mechanization, labor demand among Arkansas planters after the war also subsided in tandem with a shift to different crops. Whereas over 57 percent of Arkansas farms grew cotton in 1945, by 1997, that figure fell to less than four percent.<sup>20</sup> During this additional transition, hundreds of thousands of farm laborers continued to

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19. Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990): 886-911.

20. Peter Drucker, "Exit King Cotton." *Harper's* 192 (May 1946): 473-80, found in Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 120.

leave Arkansas's fields for higher-paying industrial jobs. In *the Second Great Emancipation*, historian Donald Holley examined the impact of mechanization and the higher manufacturing wages on the labor pool available for picking cotton. Holley concluded that mechanization accounted for less than 40 percent of the decrease in handpicking. In comparison, higher wages in manufacturing jobs accounted for the other 60 percent.<sup>21</sup>

During this transitional phase, the planters in the Mississippi Delta became more reliant on Mexican laborers, first via the Bracero Program and the use of undocumented workers. With a new racialized regime entering Arkansas, starting with the first mass hiring of braceros in Arkansas in 1946-47, a further complexity regarding labor constellations and issues of race and citizenship was introduced. Especially when chronicling this development, this dissertation engages with Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*.<sup>22</sup> While examining the history of immigration policy in the U.S., Ngai explores the creation of the idea of national origin as a racial category, an identifier, and, eventually, a basis for exclusion for certain groups of immigrants. This study builds on the work of Ngai in that it advances the claim that despite POWs' inferior citizenship position (i.e., lack of U.S. citizenship and membership in a fighting corps threatening the U.S.), their White, European racial status granted them more opportunities than not only Japanese POWs but also Japanese American internees, most of whom were U.S. citizens and (almost) all of whom were legally resident in the U.S. When considering both braceros and undocumented Mexican nationals, Ngai finds that both groups' combination of non-US citizenship and (usually) non-White racial standing condemned

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21. Donald Holley. *The Second Great Emancipation*, 173.

22. Mae Ngai *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

them to inferior labor market opportunities that, simultaneously, depended on their supposed racial inferiority. The same conclusion is reached by this dissertation, which finds that Mexican immigrants (braceros or undocumented workers) were used to depress local wages while facing intense discrimination in the Mississippi Delta.

On braceros and Mexican nationals in the South, Julie Weise in *Corazon de Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910*, based on extensive research and interviews with Mexican immigrants and their descendants, provides the most comprehensive historical account. Weise explores the social, economic, and political factors that shaped the migration patterns of Mexicans to the South and the various challenges and discrimination they faced upon arrival. Weise's chapter on Arkansas focuses on the discrimination Mexican laborers experienced in the state and, similar to this study, shows the disparity in pay they endured, all the while being used by the planters to understate the "prevailing wage" to their advantage.<sup>23</sup> Weise concluded that the "Mexicanization" of Arkansas did positively promote some cultural and racial reforms for all races, and "at key moments in the early 1950s, braceros did force white planters to pay a minimum wage in agriculture—the first in the state's history—not only to braceros but, inadvertently, also to black and white workers."<sup>24</sup>

## Chapter Discussion

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23. Julie Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 102.

24. Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910*, 117.



The organization of this dissertation is based on the complex characters amassed in Arkansas during World War II. The chapters of this study focus on the policymakers (the federal government and military), the economic drivers (the planter elite and state government officials), and the disaffected (the primarily African American local laborers and then the POWs and Mexican nationals who ultimately replaced them). Chapter One explains government policies impacting Arkansas' cotton economy, efforts to abide by—and occasionally skirt—the Geneva Convention, and the logistical side of getting POWs into the camps and then putting them to work. With the utmost concern for national security, the War Department charged the Office of the Provost Marshal General to build camps away from urban and industrial areas, vital transportation routes, international borders, and coastlines for security purposes, with the intent to place the camps in states with mild climates to minimize operating costs. While national security concerns served as the paramount factor in the initial rounds of these deliberations, eventually, the security concerns subsided as full employment of the POWs became the most important goal. Governmental proceedings and town lobbying, both heavily influenced by the planter lobby, determined the POW camps' placement and how satellite camps spread to areas of perceived labor shortage. Indeed, Arkansas benefitted handsomely from these evolutions in policy, as it received a disproportionate number of POWs working in various fields, especially in the cotton-growing sector.

The next three chapters of this study focus on the main economic actors in Arkansas' cotton economy, including the planter elite, complicit Arkansas government officials, and those most affected, the STFU and local laborers. Chapter Two is dedicated to the planter elite, planters, plantocracy, and their associations that continually lobbied for cheap labor and eventually secured POW labor for the region, manipulating the government in their self-interest.

Past studies discussing the planters' control over the labor situation have examined the situation more generally because primary documents on plantation operations are more challenging to find.

This study will use the papers of Miss Mabel Gieseck and the Lansing Company found at Arkansas State University to paint the picture with more specificity. An examination of the Lansing Company's records, and its manager Mabel Gieseck, provides an excellent source on how the POW labor process worked in Arkansas from the planter elites' perspective. Gieseck kept meticulous records and saved a lot of the correspondence from herself and the Lansing Company that details their cotton operations, including their use of POWs. Gieseck, the only female Cross County Farmer's Association member, managed an extensive farming operation near Parkin, Arkansas. The Cross County Farmer's Association, with 23 members and an original investment of \$7,875, paid to build the Wynne Prisoner of War Camp, a local labor branch camp designed to hold 600 POWs from Camp Robinson.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, the Cross County Farmer's Association reimbursed all its members for their original investment through the association fees paid on leasing POWs.

With POWs laboring in the Mississippi Delta cotton fields, it depressed the wages and had the greatest impact on the local laborers. The displaced local laborers, predominately African Americans, but also, in a very different manner, interned Japanese American potential laborers were denied opportunities to work on plantations due to local racial/citizenship customs. In this dissertation, Chapter Three presents the voice of the disgruntled laborers, primarily from the perspective of the STFU and one of its founders, H.L. Mitchell, who devoted several years to

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25. "Wynne Prison Camp Membership," letter to Wynne Prison Camp Member (Mabel Gieseck) June 12, 1945. Gieseck/Lansing Archive, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

protesting against using POWs and foreign migrant labor. The STFU, estimated at around 40,000 members in 1940, was a biracial union of sharecroppers, farm workers, and migrant laborers formed in eastern Arkansas. The union claimed—quite correctly—that planters were using outside labor forces to depress the wages for local workers in the Mississippi Delta.

In constant contact with AFL and CIO, the STFU helped garner support and protest POW use, but they failed in altering this process. They received several letters from the War Manpower Commission and OPMG saying they would investigate the matter, though to no avail. The papers of the STFU and its secretary/president, H.L. Mitchell, found at the University of Arkansas, provide an excellent source on the labor situation in Arkansas, as they received hundreds of letters from workers, sharecroppers, day laborers, labor unions, government, and military officials. The STFU strongly contested that there was a labor shortage in the Mississippi Delta. Ultimately, in the face of such intransigence, the STFU resorted to resettling its members out-of-state, sending over 12,000 workers to higher-paying jobs in Arizona, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Florida, and California in 1944 and 1945 in what they termed the "New Underground Railroad."<sup>26</sup>

Chapter Four focuses on the members of the Arkansas government, particularly Governor Homer Adkins and Congressman E.C. "Took" Gathings of the House of Representatives. These two men continuously appealed for more POWs and contacted military officials to make it happen. The Homer Adkins Papers found at Arkansas State Archives and the files of E. C. "Took" Gathings, the Congressional House Representative from eastern Arkansas's First

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26. H.L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, (Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979), 215. Additionally, sometimes it was referred to as the Second Underground Railroad. Most of these jobs were designed to be temporary 6–8-week positions during the down periods of cotton production, however, it introduced many laborers to much higher wages, and many never returned, and it introduced the idea of leaving the South.

Congressional District (which spans the entirety of Arkansas's Mississippi River border and is the state's largest cotton-producing area). During the war, Representative Gathings served on the House Agriculture Committee, heading up its cotton subcommittee, and played a crucial role in establishing and operating the agricultural POW work camps in eastern Arkansas. Gathings' wartime correspondence with the planters, the government, and camp commanders provides a wealth of detail on the POW camps and their labor programs. Through constant contact with planters, the War Department, and the War Manpower Commission, Gathings helped secure over 23,000 POWs for Arkansas and helped keep these POWs in place through part of 1946, making Arkansas one of the last states to repatriate their POWs. Playing such an influential role, Gathings received constant inquiries and complaints from his planter constituents about the operations of the branch camps and POW labor, which included: complaints about having to adhere to a 10-hour workday, having to provide bench seating for POWs in transportation, not having enough POWs available, problems with the limited daily cotton picking quotas for POWs, and the restrictions placed on the types of jobs POWs could do in addition to picking cotton such as working in the warehouse or gins.<sup>27</sup>

The final two chapters of this study examine how the efforts to maintain white supremacy interacted with concerns about the citizenship status of laborers to impact labor utilization during the country's time at war. In both the captivity of the nation's perceived enemies and the treatment of African Americans—many of whom felt like prisoners in a segregated society—race and citizenship played significant roles in labor opportunities and their on-the-job treatment. The historical Jim Crow realities of America's agricultural labor market created a complex

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27. Assorted letters found in E. C. Gathings Archives, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

ecosystem in which one's racial and citizenship status opened or closed certain employment prospects, determined one's wage, and factored into the other labor conditions one would face. In Arkansas, cotton laborers received different pay and treatment based on their condition of servitude, race, and citizenship. Thus, there were a variety of constellations of laborers working in Arkansas during World War II: free Whites, White prisoners at a state-run plantation, free Blacks, Black prisoners on state-run penal plantations, Japanese American war internees, Mexican braceros, undocumented Mexican workers, and German or Italian POWs.

During the war, the U.S. military on American soil interned roughly 375,000 Germans, 50,000 Italian, and 5,000 Japanese prisoners of war, as well as nearly 120,000 relocated Japanese Americans or persons of Japanese descent as a result of Executive Order 9066.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, by the war's end, nearly 250,000 Mexican nationals would enter the U.S. for emergency farm labor as a part of bilateral agreements between the nations that became known as the Bracero Program, with another 75,000 Bahamian and Jamaican “guestworkers”<sup>29</sup> brought in as well but were not used in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>30</sup> In Arkansas and the South, segregation heavily influenced labor policies, as maintaining the racial hierarchy took precedence and created racialized labor regimes.

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28. Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1996). Additionally, Arnold Krammer in “Japanese Prisoners of War in America,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Feb. 1983), 83.

29. Guestworker is defined as the state-authorized, temporary foreign workers, derived from a translation of the German *Gastarbeiter*. Found in Cindy Hahamovitch, “Creating Perfect Immigrants: Guestworkers of the World in Historical Perspective,” *Labor History* 44, no. 1 (2003): 69-94.

30. Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte, NC: McNally and Loftin, 1964), 53. Cited in Barbara Heisler Barbara Schmitter Heisler, “The ‘Other Braceros’: Temporary Labor and German Prisoners of War in the United States, 1943-1946,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 31 (Summer 2007), 246.

The Arkansas government willingly allowed planters to exploit the labor situation during the war in part because the state already housed their own forced labor program in their 16,500-plus-acre penal plantation at the Cummins Prison Farm (now Cummins Unit) and the 4,500 acres Tucker Unit. All the Mississippi Delta states ran prison farms, a practice dating back to the banishment of convict leasing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and each state used inmate labor to grow crops and produce livestock. Indeed, each of these states still maintains maximum security prisons using inmates as labor to grow crops and produce livestock to defer costs and, at times, make a profit. Mississippi's Parchman Farm, Louisiana's Angola Prison farm, Arkansas's Cummins Unit are renowned for their brutal pasts, and they remain controversial today in their operation of prison farms with very low or no wages paid to the inmate workers. The introduction of German and Italian POWs in the Delta gave the planters a novel way to reopen the convict leasing system, though this practice was—again, for racial motives—closed off to interned Japanese Americans and Japanese POWs.

POW labor usage in the United States during World War II exacerbated racial tensions in the country that, in some cases, led to reprisals and violence, as it did in the Lawton Riot and Camp McCoy POW strike, both profiled in Chapter Five. The white German and Italian POWs (turned pro-American Italian Service Unit members after Italy's surrender to the Allies) received preferential treatment as opposed to the Japanese POWs, interned Japanese Americans, braceros, and sometimes even Black U.S. servicepersons and civilians. The American military provided better treatment to German and Italian POWs, allowed them to participate in a greater variety of jobs, gave additional access to educational opportunities, and offered them greater access to re-education programs. In most cases, strikes, riots, or protests at the POW camps were resolved

peacefully. However, whether it be misunderstanding, prejudice, racism, or indifference, differential treatment based on race among the POW groups continually occurred.

Arkansas was the only state in the Mississippi Delta to house both interned Japanese Americans and POWs. Jerome Relocation Center and Rohwer Relocation Center for Japanese American internees served as the easternmost relocation camps for the War Relocation Authority.<sup>31</sup> However, unlike braceros or White POWs, this potential labor source, due to their race and citizenship status, was heavily resisted in Arkansas, despite being used in other states. Governor Homer Adkins' racist views played a crucial role in the restrictions placed on the Japanese American internees in Arkansas. Adkins blocked labor opportunities and requests for Japanese American internees to enroll in Arkansas universities. An outspoken segregationist, he also felt that allowing the internees to take courses in Arkansas might provide an "entering wedge" for African Americans. Staying consistent with the state's racial hierarchy, the actual enemy—in the form of German and Italian POWs—could take correspondence courses in education and English from the University of Arkansas.<sup>32</sup>

The compensation levels and work conditions for different racialized groups led to an incredibly diverse and complex labor environment, where race and citizenship determined one's status as a worker in the Mississippi Delta. As the POWs left the South in 1946, the Bracero Program provided an attractive alternative for the planters. Like POWs, Mexican laborers could be closely monitored and paid a low wage without the threat of protest. As foreign non-citizens in the cotton fields, whether documented via the Bracero Program or undocumented, these

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31. C. Calvin Smith, "The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas 1942-1945," *Arkansas Historical Association* Vol. 53, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 340-366.

32. Report by Frank Stoltzfus, International Red Cross, Swiss Legation, December 20, 1944. Records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, RG 389, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Mexican laborers were considered expendable, removable, and replaceable by the planters. After the cotton was harvested or if a problem or protest arose, they would be loaded in trucks and shipped out of the region. Being non-US citizens made these laborers highly attractive to the planters. Ultimately, these Mexican nationals were the next iteration of German and Italian POWs, themselves serving as a disempowered and temporary stopgap in the transition away from the increasingly outdated sharecropping system that persisted in the Mississippi Delta since the Civil War into a postwar future dominated by short-term wage labor and the long-term shift to mechanization.



## Chapter 1 - Security v. Full Employment: Development of Prisoner of War Labor Utilization

On the morning of June 24, 1944, 22-year-old Edwin Pelz of Waldfrieden, Germany, a ground radio operator for the Luftwaffe stationed in Cherbourg, France, woke to heavy bombing by the Allies. After the outbreak following the D-Day landings in Normandy, the American Army Rangers quickly surrounded Pelz and his remaining comrades on the Cherbourg Peninsula, forcing their capitulation. Pelz's journey as a prisoner of war (POW) began. In less than a month and a half, Pelz received his final camp placement and new work assignment at the Memphis Army Service Forces Depot outside Memphis, Tennessee. Pelz's first job at the depot involved constructing the fence surrounding their new POW camp. Then, for the next 18 months, Pelz and his fellow German POWs worked various jobs loading and unloading railroad cars at the depot "where food, spare parts, and other military supplies were packed and shipped around the world."<sup>1</sup> Eventually, Pelz and his fellow POWs would be transported daily from camp across the Mississippi River into eastern Arkansas for their new job, picking cotton.

How did a German POW captured in the wake of the Normandy landings end up in as little as six weeks working at a U.S. military depot and picking cotton in the American South? Logistically, for Pelz, it was pretty simple. After surrendering, Pelz and his fellow POWs were loaded onto trucks and sent to Omaha Beach and across the Channel to camps in England. In his interview, Pelz made special note that all the truck drivers they saw were African Americans working in what became known as the Red Ball Express.<sup>2</sup> Pelz left England through Glasgow

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1. Edwin Pelz and William Shea, "A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 43.

2. The Red Ball Express was the famed truck convoy system used by the Allied forces to quickly move goods and supplies to the front following the D-Day landings. Known for the trucks marked or painted with a red

harbor on July 6 aboard the English luxury liner, the *Queen Mary*. After the war's outbreak, the *Queen Mary* had been converted to a troop transport, and in Pelz's case, a POW transport bound for the United States. Due to her speed and new grey paint, the *Queen Mary* earned her name, the "Grey Ghost," often traveling without convoy or escort as U-Boats could not match her speed. Thus, Pelz and his captive comrades arrived in Boston harbor on July 13, after only a seven-day Atlantic crossing. Then, Pelz marched through Boston, his first time seeing American civilians, and boarded a train heading south. As he states about the journey, "We were expecting boxcars, the way German soldiers normally traveled in Europe. Believe it or not, our prisoner-of-war train consisted of Pullman cars with black waiters serving the meals!"<sup>3</sup> After four nights of train travel, fellow German POWs of the Afrika Corps captured in 1942-1943 greeted and welcomed Pelz as they entered the POW camp in Aliceville, Alabama, where he stayed for a few weeks before being transferred to his final POW camp at the Memphis Army Service Forces Depot.

Pelz's journey from a soldier in Normandy to POW working at an American military depot and in the cotton fields of Arkansas took a mere six weeks. It was akin to the experiences of the nearly 425,000 German and Italian POWs held in the U.S. during World War II by the war's end. His experience raises some interesting questions over the decisions, regulations, policies, and eventual labor utilization that occurred while interning POWs in the U.S.: Should POWs be allowed to work at military depots or pick cotton? Would having POW camps close to big cities and supply depots be a security concern? By the time Pelz got to America, the U.S. military had been planning and revising its policies on efficiently utilizing POWs' labor for the

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ball or insignia on them. They followed a similarly marked route that was closed to civilian traffic to expedite the transportation. Notably, 75% of the Red Ball Express drivers were African Americans.

3. William Shea and Edwin Pelz, "A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985): 42-55.

last two years. Thus, this chapter will explain the government policies, efforts to abide by and occasionally skirt the Geneva Convention of 1929, and the logistical side of getting POWs into the camps and then putting them to work. While national security served as the paramount factor in the initial rounds of these deliberations, eventually, the security concerns subsided as full employment of the POWs became the most important goal. In a relatively short time after the arrival of POWs on U.S. shores, one-seventh of all POWs housed in the U.S. ended up in the Mississippi Delta, either working at military bases or picking cotton. Indeed, Arkansas benefitted handsomely from these evolutions in policy, as it received a disproportionate number of POWs working in various fields, primarily in agriculture.

### **Development and Interpretation of POW Policies**

With only limited experience housing POWs in the U.S. during the First World War, the military's policies toward captured enemies were still underdefined to handle the mass incarceration of World War II POWs. However, during the interwar period, the most essential evolution of international policy towards the treatment of POWs occurred with the "Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva July 27, 1929." More commonly known as the Geneva Convention, this agreement outlined the regulations concerning the treatment and safety of prisoners of war in the future. Built upon the Hague Regulations of 1899 and 1907, the Geneva Convention comprised 97 articles covering nearly every aspect of POWs' handling, including shelter, food, clothing, allowable interrogation procedures, and prisoner labor. It also

stipulated that the facilities and provisions for POW camps must be equal to the holding power's military camps and that locations be removed from combat zones and dangerous weather.<sup>4</sup>

Through mediation by the Swiss government, the major participants of World War II agreed to adhere to the rules set forth by the Geneva Convention of 1929. Japan had initially signed the 1929 Geneva Convention but never ratified it. However, they announced their de facto adherence, which proved to be more policy than practice, with notable poor treatment given to POWs and atrocious incidents such as the Bataan Death March.<sup>5</sup> During the war, the United States attempted to follow these regulations and stressed fair treatment and good living conditions for its POWs. The Swiss government and the International Red Cross continuously checked on POW camps to ensure they met the codes of the Geneva Convention. Furthermore, U.S. officials feared reciprocal actions against American POWs in the custody of the enemy if they treated the POWs in their captivity poorly.

Besides the Geneva Convention, the only domestic interwar policy towards POWs came in 1937 from the United States Department of War (War Department), and it included plans to reinstate the Office of the Provost Marshal General (OPMG) when necessary. Thus, in 1941, the War Department reactivated the position and appointed Major General Allen Wyant Gullion, the Judge Advocate General of the United States Army, to be the 17<sup>th</sup> Provost Marshal General of

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4. International Committee of the Red Cross, *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, July 27, 1929, <http://www.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/305>.

5. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army 1776-1945*, by George C. Lewis and John Mewha, Washington D.C.: Department of Army, 1955. The "de facto adherence" also proved quite problematic, leading to the notoriously inhumane treatment of POWs in Japanese captivity. In the Bataan Death March, an estimated 500-650 Americans and 5,000-18,000 Filipinos were killed. According to Dr. William Skelton III, Ex-POW Physician Coordinator for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in *American Ex-Prisoners of War*, American POWs died at the hands of the Japanese in the Pacific theater, and specifically in the Philippines more than in any other conflict to date. In WWII Germany, American POWs died at a rate of 1.2%. In the Pacific theatre, the rate was 37%. In the Philippines, POWs died at a rate of 40%. In total, 11,107 American soldiers captured in the Philippines died.

the United States Army (PMG). Initially, the OPMG supervised the surveillance, investigation, and internment of suspected subversives or those deemed a potential threat. Throughout the war, the OPMG's roles expanded into doing security clearance investigations and overseeing the military police.<sup>6</sup>

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States entered World War II and, on the following day, captured its first POW, 21-year-old Ensign Kazuo Sakamaki. Sakamaki commanded one of the five miniature two-person submarines used to attack Pearl Harbor in conjunction with the aerial assault. During the attack, Sakamaki's sub, with already damaged navigation equipment, eventually became uncontrollable and crashed into a reef, where his comrade drowned. Sakamaki attempted to scuttle his sub to no avail, and both he and the sub washed ashore on Oahu. All the other miniature subs in the attack also sunk, with none of them hitting their targets, and all crewmembers lost. Then, on the morning of December 8, 1941, Sergeant David Akui, a Japanese American member of the Hawaii Territorial Guard, found Sakamaki on the beach, making him America's first POW.<sup>7</sup>

With only one POW for the next couple of months, nothing significant happened in new policies or procedures until President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. This order authorized the evacuation of all persons deemed as threats to national security to be relocated from a wide swath of land on the Pacific Coast and confined in internment camps in the nation's interior, with the justification that "the successful prosecution

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6. Ronald Craig, "Evolution of the Office of the Provost Marshal General." *Military Police*. April 2004.

7. Ulrich Strauss, *The Anguish of Surrender: Japanese POWs of World War II*. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003), p. 8-12. Also, see Kazou Sakamaki's memoir with Gary R. Coover's introduction, *I Attacked Pearl Harbor: The True Story of America's POW #1*. Translated by Toru Matsumoto, (Rollston Press, 2017).

of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities . . .”<sup>8</sup> It led to the evacuation of 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry—two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens, with the remainder heavily comprised of long-time legal immigrants that were not allowed to naturalize—to relocation centers in a vast swath of the U.S. West stretching from the deserts of California’s interior to the rural parts of Arkansas.<sup>9</sup> PMG Allen Gullion supported the evacuation of interned Japanese Americans and aided in drafting Executive Order 9066. The OPMG often supervised the surveillance, investigation, and internment of Japanese Americans and suspected subversives, and they provided logistical, construction, and administrative support to the Secretary of War and Department of Justice in charge of the evacuation program.<sup>10</sup>

### **1942 Army Manual, “Civilian Enemy Aliens and Prisoners of War”**

In March 1942, the Army underwent a major reorganization by President Roosevelt with Executive Order 9082, “Reorganizing the Army and the War Department.”<sup>11</sup> Before the

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8. Executive Order 9066, “Authorizing the Secretary of War to Prescribe Military Areas.” February 19, 1942; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

9. For more information on Japanese American internment, see Mae Ngai *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), and William Cary Anderson, “Early Reaction in Arkansas to the Relocation of Japanese in the State,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 23 (Autumn 1964), 195-211. Stephanie Hinnershitiz, *Japanese American Incarceration: The Camps and Coerced Labor during World War II* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

10. Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps: North America Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co., 1981), 70-72, and 101.

11. Executive Order 9082, “Reorganizing the Army and the War Department.” February 28, 1942; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

reorganization, technically, the Personnel Division of the Army had been responsible for POW planning and policy but relied on the OPMG for the execution. During the reorganization, the Personnel Division hardly exercised its authority, so POW matters went to the OPMG in practice. Additionally, the OPMG reported to the Commanding General of the Services of Supply (SOS) and reported to him through the Chief of Administrative Services and the Chief of Staff for the SOS. In March 1942, the SOS became the Army Service Forces (ASF) and simplified some of its organization, and by June 1945, the PMG reported directly to the Chief of Staff of the ASF. For this study, effectively by 1943, when POWs began arriving in large numbers, the OPMG became responsible for the construction and management of the POW camps and the civilian internment/relocation camps in the U.S.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, on April 22, 1942, the OMPG began constructing camps and finally implemented its manual for POWs and interned civilians (which they considered interchangeable because of the security precautions) entitled "Civilian Enemy Aliens and Prisoners of War."<sup>13</sup> The manual, prepared at the behest of the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, reflected the collaboration of the War Department, OPMG, the SOS/ASF, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Although at times vague, the 63-page manual created a long list of rules and stipulations for the treatment of interned civilians and POWs. Most of the regulations spoke to the humane treatment

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12. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 80.

13. OPMG, "Civilian Enemy Aliens and Prisoners of War," April 22, 1942, found in microfilm for Office of the Provost Marshal General, Prisoner of War Operations Division. *Historical Monograph: Prisoner of War Operations Division*, 1945-46, Vol. 1-4. Washington: Library of Congress, Photoduplication Service, 1974.

of POWs and “civilian enemy aliens”<sup>14</sup> and stated the obligations of conforming to the 1929 Geneva Convention.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the manual outlined provisions for the employment of POWs, stating, “Except as hereafter provided, all employable internees will perform such labor as may be directed by the camp commander provided such labor is commensurate with their ages, sexes and physical condition.”<sup>16</sup> The manual divided POW labor into two classes: “Class One” referred to the labor required to maintain the camp or military installation and would generally be unpaid, and “Class Two” labor included all paid labor by POWs outside of camp for other agencies, state or local governments, or by private employers.<sup>17</sup> Later directives from the Army Service Forces in August 1943 would change the name of the POW types of labor using “Priority” instead of “Class.” Thus, Priority I referred to “essential work” conducted at the POW camp or a military installation. Priority II work related to outsourced contract labor employed in various civilian industries, primarily agriculture. Priority III labor included “useful but nonessential work” on U.S. military installations, usually ditch work, control of soil erosion, or road repair on and around bases.<sup>18</sup>

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14. The confounding use of “Civilian Enemy Alien” used to describe the interned Japanese Americans in government policy and other issues associated with citizenship and race is discussed in Chapter 5 – “Racialized Labor Regimes.”

15. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 78-79.

16. OPMG, “Civilian Enemy Aliens and Prisoners of War,” April 22, 1942.

17. OPMG, “Civilian Enemy Aliens and Prisoners of War,” April 22, 1942.

18. Army Adjutant General Robert Dunlop, “Employment of Prisoners of War off Reservations,” to all Service Command Commanding General’s, August 24, 1943, found in microfilm for Office of the Provost Marshal General, Prisoner of War Operations Division. *Historical Monograph: Prisoner of War Operations Division, 1945-46*, Vol. 1-4. Washington: Library of Congress, Photoduplication Service, 1974.



Additionally, the 1942 manual determined that the POWs would be paid 80 cents a day in canteen scrip for their labor outside of the camp (roughly based on an American Army private's \$21-a-month salary). In the labor section, it hardly distinguishes between POWs and civilian internees, except when it says, "Civilian internees may not be required to perform class two labor without their voluntary written request or consent."<sup>19</sup> The 1942 manual sets up the frameworks for many of the policies to come and the beginning of the POW labor program, but the first monthly census of POWs, shown in Table 1.1, illustrates that there were only 32 POWs interned in the Continental United States by the end of May 1942: Japanese POW Sakamaki and 31 German POWs.<sup>20</sup>

Even before the manual's publishing, the OPMG began constructing internment camps for the estimated 120,000 of Japanese ancestry to be evacuated from the West Coast. With the utmost concern for national security, the War Department and the Department of Justice charged the OPMG to begin surveying land through the Army Corps of Engineers to build camps away from urban and industrial areas, vital transportation routes, international borders, and coastlines (provisions established for security purposes), with the additional intent to place the camps in states with warm or mild climates to minimize operating costs. The OPMG and War Relocation Authority (WRA) decided the most suitable campsites would be military installations in the American Southwest in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, with the first enemy "alien" internment camp built at the Florence Military Reservation in Arizona.<sup>21</sup> Early in

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19. OPMG, "Civilian Enemy Aliens and Prisoners of War," April 22, 1942.

20. See Table 1.1, sourced from Army Service Forces and War Department, "Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in Continental United States," ASF WD Monthly Progress Reports, sec. 11 Administration. Copy found in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 90-91.

21. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 82. Special to note that although the Florence Military Reservation was built for interned Japanese Americans, like many camps of its kind, it was

the war, the OMPG and WRA continued this model of placing the camps in safe locations that met the security requirements, but once large numbers of POWs began coming to the U.S., most of the security concerns dissipated.

By the end of August 1942, the OMPG held only 65 POWs in the continental United States, so there still was not too much concern about the building of these camps; however, this quickly changed.<sup>22</sup> After successful campaigns in North Africa by Great Britain in the spring and summer of 1942, problems arose over their internment of enemy POWs. Prior to U.S. involvement, the British handled all of the POWs in North Africa, but now they feared that any sudden influx of prisoners would overtax their military. The British held 280,000 Italian and German POWs at the time, so they proposed that the United States intern 50,000 POWs with one month's notice and an additional 100,000 within three months.<sup>23</sup> Due to the urgent appeal, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were tasked with assessing the viability of Great Britain's request and contemplated taking in only 50,000 POWs and sending the rest to Canada, as they could be a security hazard to major U.S. war industries. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that at least

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transferred into use as POW camps. Early in 1943, the War Department transferred all civilian enemy aliens held by the Army to the Department of Justice, which is why subsequent manuals will focus solely on POW internment. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) was established within the Office for Emergency Management by Executive Order 9102 of March 18, 1942, to formulate and effectuate a program for the removal, relocation, maintenance, and supervision of persons excluded by order of the Secretary of War (War Department) or by an appropriate military commander from designated military areas. After the passage of an amendment to the Nationality Act of 1940 (58 Stat. 677), approved July 1, 1944, the WRA assisted the Department of Justice in repatriating Japanese who renounced their United States citizenship. On February 16, 1944, an executive order transferred the WRA to the Department of the Interior, where it retained its organizational identity. After the revocation on January 2, 1945, of the Western Defense Command's exclusion orders, the WRA began to release the evacuees and close out its field offices and relocation centers. In accordance with an Executive order of June 25, 1946, the WRA terminated its work on June 30, 1946.

22. Army Service Forces and War Department "Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in Continental United States," August 1942.

23. Antonio Thompson, *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America during World War II* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 7-10

50,000 POWs be accepted because they could work in sectors to fill the anticipated mass unskilled labor shortages, such as in forest conservation areas, agricultural regions with mass farming, and zones with construction needs on roads and airfields.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the U.S. agreed to take in all of the nearly 150,000 POWs under two conditions: Great Britain had to give at least a one-month notice before each shipment of POWs, and secondly, the British would pledge to provide all necessary transportation for their repatriation. The British government promptly agreed.<sup>25</sup>

Now on an expedited timetable, the OPMG began building more camps, and with security in mind, they figured the safest place to build the camps would be at already established military bases and forts. As Major Maxwell McKnight of the OPMG put it, “At the initial planning stage, security rather than employment opportunities was the paramount consideration.”<sup>26</sup> At the least, the OPMG figured the POWs could be used for the “Class One” type of labor, in which they would work in service of the military bases, performing the cooking, cleaning, and maintenance, as well as numerous other jobs. Furthermore, the OPMG pushed for the construction of camps at existing Quartermaster Depots and Remount stations on military installations, such as Fort Reno in Oklahoma and Fort Robinson in Nebraska, to help care for the tens of thousands of horses, mules, and dogs used by the U.S. Army.<sup>27</sup>

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24. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 82.

25. Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1996), 1-3. By comparison, California held 10,000, Nebraska 12,000, Florida 10,000, Oklahoma 22,000.

26. Maxwell S. McKnight, "The Employment of Prisoners of War in the United States," *International Labour Review* 50, no. 1 (July 1944), 48.

27. PMG Allen W. Gullion, letter to Chief of Administration Services, SOS, September 11, 1942, found in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 82.

In constructing these POW camps, the OPMG strictly followed the Geneva Convention, according to which they had to provide quarters equivalent to that of U.S. troops. The typical POW camp or base camp housed 3,000-5,000 POWs and included: barracks, mess hall, lavatory facilities, infirmary, canteen, chapel, recreation building, and often theatres, outdoor space, and soccer fields for recreation. The POW camps had several guard towers outfitted with spotlights, sirens, and machine guns for security. A patrol road and double fence with barbed wire tops encircled the entire POW complex. The complex also included a thin wire 20 feet from the inside of the fencing called the “deadline.” If a POW crossed the deadline and did not stop, the guards would open fire.<sup>28</sup> The OPMG also used the camps and land of former federal government projects to expedite the construction of POW camps in the United States. For example, they converted camps formerly belonging to Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Youth Administration, and the Farm Security Administration.<sup>29</sup>

### **Expansion of POW Labor**

In April 1942, by Executive Order 9139, President Roosevelt established the War Manpower Commission (WMC), a joint civilian and military organization headed by a civilian, Paul V. McNutt, formerly the administrator of the Federal Security Agency, to balance the labor

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28. U.S. Army, “Layout of War Internment Camp, Fort Robinson,” Fort Robinson, Nebraska, December 12, 1942, Record Group 393, National Archives: Washington, D.C. Also, Maxwell S. McKnight, “The Employment of Prisoners of War in the United States,” *International Labour Review* 50, no. 1 (July 1944): 47-64.

29. Maxwell S. McKnight, “The Employment of Prisoners of War in the United States,” *International Labour Review* 50, no. 1 (July 1944): 47-64.

needs of agriculture, industry, and the armed forces. In July 1942, the WMC became tasked with determining the need for employment in various industries and estimated that nearly ten million civilian workers needed to be recruited to fill the nation's labor shortages.<sup>30</sup> The War Department found an apparent solution by expanding the allowable types of Class Two POW labor, i.e., by expanding the usage of POWs outside of the camps and bases. However, this decision fostered new questions on how to effectively utilize POWs through civilian contracts.

Tasked with tackling this new challenge, meetings ensued in the early months of 1943 between the War Department, the Office of the Provost Marshal General, the War Manpower Commission, the Department of Agriculture, the War Food Administration, and the Industrial Personnel Division of the Army Service Forces. In September 1942, Provost Marshall Gullion put out his plan for POWs to be used as Class One labor at military installations, but it did not mention anything about Class Two labor.<sup>31</sup> However, the Chief of Administrative Services, Major General George Grunert, in forwarding the plan to General Somervell, Commanding General of the Army Service Forces, added, "The plan also envisages the utilization of large numbers of these prisoners on agricultural and other projects not under War Department supervision where there is a recognized shortage in unskilled labor."<sup>32</sup> General Somervell approved the plan, noting that more details would be provided later.

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30. Brigadier General Frank J. McSherry, "Mobilization of Human Resources for the War Effort," (speech, Charlottesville, VA, July 7, 1942), War Manpower Commission, found in Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 86-87.

31. PMG Allen W. Gullion, letter to Chief of Administration Services, Army Service Forces, September 11, 1942.

32. Maj Gen George Grunert, memo to Commanding General of Army Service Forces, September 15, 1942, found in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 86-87.

Although the August 1942 agreement with Great Britain called for the admittance of 50,000 POWs in one month and another 100,000 over the next three months, arrivals never materialized quickly. As Figure 1.1 shows, by the end of January 1943, there were still only 2,365 POWs housed in the U.S. Yet, knowing the POWs would be arriving soon in the tens of thousands monthly, the OPMG began to reexamine its POW policies and labor program and how it would comply with the Geneva Convention and be received by the general public so as not to create protest, fear, or labor strikes. With the plan to utilize POW labor at military installations and, eventually, in agriculture and forestry, the OPMG faced the daunting task of interpreting the rules of the Geneva Convention and deciding what specific types of jobs POWs could perform in both the Class One and Class Two categories. The two major concerns were related to national security: fears of POW subversion and sabotage and of reprisals inflicted on American POWs in enemy captivity.

Articles 27-34 of the Geneva Convention cover the labor regulations for POWs. As stated in Article 31, “Work done by prisoners of war shall have no direct connection with the operations of the war. In particular, it is forbidden to employ prisoners to manufacture or transport arms or munitions of any kind, or to transport material destined for combatant units.” Thus, the April 1942 manual for POWs and civilian internees reflected the Convention’s policies, but they still left many questions to be answered. For example, could POWs aid in constructing highways or railroads, which would ultimately have both civilian and military uses? Could POWs work at supply depots or shipyards and handle the other material and supplies of war, excluding arms and munitions?<sup>33</sup>

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33. International Committee of the Red Cross, *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, July 27, 1929, <http://www.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/305>.

To answer these types of questions, the OPMG, in September 1942, sent many of its thoughts and plans on POW labor usage to Colonel Archibald King, the Judge Advocate General and chief of the War Plans Division. One specific part of the plan involved using POW labor on the Alcan Highway, or Alaskan Highway, already under construction, connecting the contiguous United States to Alaska through Canada. Col. King believed using POW labor violated the Geneva Convention because the road was designed for military purposes. He stated, "It is work directly and greatly helping the war effort of the United States and the United Nations, in which our enemies should not be expected or required to engage."<sup>34</sup> Col. King thought having POWs do such work would potentially lead to reprisals against eventual American POWs.

Provost Marshal General Gullion found Col. King's interpretation far too restrictive, as it would mean POW labor could not be used on almost any government project. So, the OPMG sought advice from the War Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Department of State, the Secretary of State, and Army Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of the European Theatre of Operations. This collaborative effort resulted in the "War Department Policy with Respect to Labor of Prisoners of War" by order of the Secretary of War. Published on January 10, 1943, this brief directive addressed the adherence to the Geneva Convention concerning POW labor, stating, "Any work outside the combat zones not having direct relation with war operations and not involving the manufacture or transportation of arms or munitions or the transportation of any material clearly intended for combatant units, and not unhealthful, dangerous, degrading, or beyond the particular prisoner's physical capacity, is allowable and desirable."<sup>35</sup>

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34 U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 87.

35. War Department, *War Department Policy with Respect to Labor of Prisoners of War*, The Army Adjutant General's Office: Washington, D.C., January 10, 1943, found in microfilm for Office of the Provost

### **Pay and Class One Labor**

The War Department believed its directive maximized the efficiency of POW labor while still adhering to the Geneva Convention. This loose interpretation by the War Department permitted the use of prisoners located outside of combat zones to transport and load/unload supplies except for arms and ammunition, even though some of the supplies might ultimately be used by combat troops. Thus, any POW held in the United States could be used in this capacity, as they were all outside combat zones. Additionally, it specifically endorsed the use of POW labor for maintenance at POW camps and military installations, employment in War Department-owned laundries, jobs in brush clearance, soil conservation, agricultural projects, construction of firebreaks, roadways, highways, and drainage ditches, and jobs in strip mining and quarrying.<sup>36</sup> The OPMG distributed the War Department's directive to all nine Service Commands controlling the U.S. POW camps. This directive also stressed that any labor questions relative to the legality of adhering to the Geneva Convention should be directed to the War Department and that "[s]uch reference will be addressed by the Provost Marshal General."<sup>37</sup>

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Provost Marshal General, Prisoner of War Operations Division. *Historical Monograph: Prisoner of War Operations Division*, 1945-46, Vol. 1-4. Washington: Library of Congress, Photoduplication Service, 1974.

36. Although the new policies permitted the use of POWs on highways no POWs were used on the Alaska Highway, however, they did help dismantle the Alaska Barge Terminal just west of Juneau that was constructed for a similar purpose.

37. War Department, War Department Policy with Respect to Labor of Prisoners of War, January 10, 1943.



The January 1943 directive and the OPMG manual of 1942 emphasized the importance of POW labor and how its aim should be to relieve G.I.s for the front lines. Class One labor was classified as essential to the war effort and became the priority for POW labor usage. However, the labor classifications created problems, as POWs performing Class One labor went unpaid, but POWs performing Class Two labor were paid. The government rationalized that working as unpaid labor benefited the mental and physical health of the POWs. However, it also created tension among the POWs, as they, of course, only wanted to be a part of the paid labor programs, which began to flourish.<sup>38</sup>

In the January 1943 directive, the War Department decided to pay the POWs for full-time Class One labor positions to combat these issues, while part-time jobs such as cleaning and cooks' assistants remained unpaid. The OPMG set the pay rate for all POW work at 80 cents per day, along with the 10 cents a day an enlisted POW received for essential items, while officers received an inflated per diem matching their rank.<sup>39</sup> The War Department required all enlisted prisoners to work, while POW officers did not have to work. Instead, they could work at their discretion for the 80 cents a day wage. As the labor program matured, the government hired POW officers for supervisory and administrative positions on POW labor details to maximize efficiency and alleviate the use of U.S. guards. The employers did not pay the POW officer supervisors, as the government covered their wages.<sup>40</sup>

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38. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 92.

39. War Department Policy with Respect to Labor of Prisoners of War, January 10, 1943. Also, cited in OPMG, "Civilian Enemy Aliens and Prisoners of War," April 22, 1942.

40. Antonio Thompson, *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America during World War II* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 88-89; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoner of War in America*, 83-85.

Both the officers and enlisted POWs received their pay in canteen script or credit to an account set aside for after the war, rather than ever receiving it in hard currency, which the OPMG believed could aid in escape. The Class One paid positions at the compounds included cooks, clerks, interpreters, company leaders, typists, accountants, warehouse workers, carpenters, plumbers, dental assistants, firefighters, electricians, and mechanics. This policy change boosted efficiency at the camps, as the military utilized the POWs' skills and knowledge from prewar professions. For example, prisoners who worked as accountants or typists before the war aided in those realms at the POW camps. The POWs typically worked under military supervision or were kept away from vital records.<sup>41</sup>

Eventually, in December 1943, the War Department established the Prisoner of War Employment Reviewing Board, consisting of a special assistant to the Secretary of War and representatives of the Judge Advocate General and the OPMG. They had the authority to make final decisions in any questionable employment cases and to interpret the Geneva Convention. It relieved the burden on POW camp commanders and created a uniform interpretation. The Prisoner of War Employment Reviewing Board made several decisions over permissible work and permitted the use of POWs on the maintenance and repair work on any vehicle designed to carry cargo or personnel, scraping operations on military vehicles and equipment, work on gas masks, hydrogen-filled cylinders, dry cell batteries, water repellent material, and tires. They explicitly prohibited: work on preparing motor vehicles for overseas shipment, steam cleaning tanks and their motors, and work connected with guns of any kind, rifle ranges, bayonet courses, or any aids used to train personnel in combat.<sup>42</sup> Similar to Provost Marshal General Gullion's

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41. Walter Rundell, Jr., "Paying the Pow in World War II." *Military Affairs*, Autumn 1958, p. 121-134. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 157.

42. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 113-114.

interpretation of POW labor, such as the Alcan Highway judgments, most of the decisions made by the board focused on items that could be used for civilian or military use so that they would be permitted.

### **Wage Rates and the Establishment of Class Two Labor**

With the policies and procedures mostly in place following the January 1943 directive for using POW laborers at military installations, the country's ever-lingering labor shortages in some areas of agriculture and industry demanded attention by spring 1943. Most leaders settled on eventually using POWs, particularly in agriculture during harvests; however, the OPMG only housed 5,007 POWs by the end of April 1943.<sup>43</sup> Once POWs started arriving in more significant numbers, it was now feasible to build new satellite camps in agricultural areas needing laborers, with the camps' rural locations eliminating most security concerns. The most significant debate arose over the wage rate an employer would pay for POW labor.

In May 1943, Brigadier General B.M. Bryan, assistant director for the OPMG, and others believed employers would not and maybe should not pay the prevailing wage rate for POW labor because of the "nuisance factors" of using POWs. The nuisance factors included: the adjustments of work schedules and conditions for security reasons; additional cost for training, supervision, interpreters, and guards; the possibility of sabotage; the danger to the employer, employee, and citizens; possible attempts of escape; and the need for guards to prevent the escape of prisoners.<sup>44</sup>

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43. See Table 1.1. Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in the Continental United States.

44. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 103-104.

Provost Marshal General Gullion agreed with this finding, believing employers should pay between 50-75% of the prevailing civilian wages because “forced labor” could not be the equivalent to American free labor. Additionally, he figured farmers would want a predictable estimate of their labor costs, and the POWs provided too many uncertainties, so they may not want to use POWs.<sup>45</sup> Provost Marshal General Gullion and General Bryan (the successor as PMG upon Gullion’s retirement in 1945) showed their beliefs in the “nuisance factors” that potential POW labor posed in agriculture. These early thoughts on the matter (prior to any POWs actually being employed in agriculture) gave way to a laxer administration regarding POW labor. Planters ultimately exploited the lenient governance to create a differential pay scheme, drastically undervaluing POW labor, which ultimately led to the deterioration of American laborers’ wages, as covered in the succeeding chapter.

However, in May 1943, one of the dissenting opinions on the matter came from James P. Mitchell, the director of the Industrial Personnel Division (IPD) for the War Department. As one of labor’s representatives in the War Department, Mitchell felt there would be tremendous pressure to employ POWs instead of free labor, and the War Department would be showing favoritism in making them available to certain employers and not others. It would be seen that POWs were being distributed based on political and personal influence and not on shortages of labor. Finally, Mitchell felt it would undermine organized labor’s favorable attitude toward the War Department since the POWs would be seen as competing with free labor at a lower cost. Paul V. McNutt, the chairman of the War Manpower Commission, sided with Mitchell and

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45. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 103-104.

argued that employers should pay the prevailing civilian wages to use POW labor, and if there needed to be corrections for inefficiencies, it could be revisited.<sup>46</sup>

In spring 1943, with only a few thousand POWs in the U.S., most of the labor policies were discussed more in the abstract; however, Allied successes in North Africa increased the number of POWs housed in the continental U.S. to 130,000 by the end of August 1943.<sup>47</sup> The War Department and the WMC agreed to the wages and sent a directive to the commanding generals of the nine Service Commands on August 24, 1943, which stipulated the details and hiring process of using POW labor in civilian realms. First and foremost, prisoner labor at the military camps and bases would always take precedence.<sup>48</sup> Once this need was filled, then private employers could apply for POW workers. To apply, potential employers needed to fill out a “Certification of Need” from the WMC, stating the particulars on how many POWs would be needed and how they would be used. Additionally, the WMC added four seemingly restrictive employment policies for those seeking POW labor:

1. Prisoners of war shall not be employed to displace employed workers or in any activity which will impair the wages, working conditions, and employment opportunities of free labor.
2. Prisoners of war shall be employed only when free labor is not available and cannot be recruited from other areas within a reasonable length of time. This includes all secondary labor sources from which workers normally are recruited to perform work in a particular activity.
3. Prisoners of war shall not be made available for private employment at a cost the employer of less than that for free labor.

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46. James P. Mitchell, “Policy Statement on Employment of Prisoners of War,” letter to Chief of Staff, Army Service Forces, May 24, 1943, found in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 104-106.

47. See Table 1.1. Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in the Continental United States.

48. War Department, *Employment of Prisoners of War off the Reservation*, War Department, the Adjutant General’s Office: Washington D.C., August 24, 1943.

4. Prisoners of war shall be employed on essential projects to the fullest extent compatible with the provisions of the Geneva Convention, security regulations, and the foregoing policy statements.<sup>49</sup>

After submitting the applications, the WMC would investigate the area's labor situation and determine its viability for POW use. Upon WMC approval, the employer, the War Department, and OPMG entered a contract through the Commanding Officer of the POW camp or their designated contract officer. Then, the POWs would be available for pick up by the employer after giving the camp at least a 24-hour notice of their need. The WMC and the State Extension Service determined the cost to use POW labor, with a minimum daily usage cost of \$0.80 per POW.<sup>50</sup> For example, the Arkansas Extension Service determined that the prevailing wage for Cross County, Arkansas, was \$0.18 per POW working hour, which later increased to \$0.22.<sup>51</sup>

Comparatively, nonexempt domestic labor received a federal minimum wage of \$0.30 an hour from 1939-1944 and \$0.40 an hour by October 24, 1945, established by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (which initially called for the \$0.40 an hour but was amended to gain support from Southern states).<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the employer agreed to transport the POWs and

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49. War Manpower Commission, "Procedure to be followed in Hiring Out Prisoner of War Labor." August 12, 1943. Records of the War Manpower Commission. RG 211, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

50. The use of state and county agents to determine the prevailing wages and the labor needs of each county for POW labor created the two main ways for planters to manipulate the federal government for their benefit, will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 2 – Arkansas's Cotton Plantocracy.

51. "Wynne War Prison Camp: Application for Prisoners for Farm Work," April 23, 1945, Gieseck/Lansing Archive, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

52. Jonathan Grossman, "Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938: Maximum Struggle for a Minimum Wage." *Monthly Labor Review* 101, no. 6 (1978): 22–30. The controversial Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was riddled with numerous problems stemming from the numerous loopholes and exemptions, so that in practice many of the provisions did not apply to agriculture, the railroad industry, interstate retailing enterprises, and other transportation sectors. However, it still serves as a good comparison for POW labor cost and generally what the discussion over the federal minimum wage rate was for civilian domestic labor.

guards to and from the job site; however, as one will see, the government will give very lucrative travel allowances of \$0.40 per prisoner to the employers.<sup>53</sup>

The OPMG and War Department put all of these terms and conditions in place to ensure the safety of the prisoners and civilian contractors' adherence to the Geneva Convention. In policy, those interested in protecting domestic labor wages, such as WMC chairman McNutt and IDP director Mitchell, seemed to have won by placing wording into the policy that explicitly tied POW labor rates to the prevailing domestic labor rates. Nonetheless, as POWs began to work in agriculture in the Mississippi Delta, the policies in practice became watered down. Although the policy stated that POW labor should not "impair the wages, working conditions, and employment opportunities of free labor," that is precisely what happened.<sup>54</sup>

The War Department wanted to optimize POW labor to free up G.I.s for overseas duty. The desire for self-sufficiency went as far as having the camps grow their own crops in an attempt to minimize the costs of the camp. In most cases, the first prisoners at the camps helped finish the construction of the camps, and then POWs would be made available for Class Two labor. Following the War Department's directives, POWs assimilated into labor positions almost immediately upon arrival. One such directive stipulated the government's "no work – no eat policy." If an enlisted POW refused to work, he would be reprimanded and placed under supervised confinement on minimal rations of bread and water. Camp commanders happily enforced these orders, and in most cases, the belligerent POWs returned to work after only a couple of days of confinement. In addition, many camp commanders liked the labor programs

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53. Maxwell S. McKnight, "The Employment of Prisoners of War in the United States," *International Labour Review* 50, no. 1 (July 1944): 47-64.

54. War Manpower Commission, "Procedure to be followed in Hiring Out Prisoner of War Labor." August 12, 1943.

because they kept the POWs busy. They reasoned that inactivity led to mischievous behavior, such as escape attempts and strikes.<sup>55</sup> These policies formed the basis for the POW labor program, and outside a few memoranda by the War Department was not revised dramatically until 1945.

The new policies by the WMC and the War Department over POW labor in August 1943 reflected the opinions of Mitchell and McNutt in trying their best to appease free labor; however, they fell short. In practice, the use of POWs reflected the beliefs more of PMG Gullion that employers should not have to pay the same for POWs as free labor. Indeed, my research demonstrates that many of these policies were broken by the cotton planters in the Mississippi Delta (in close cooperation with their political representatives in state and federal governments) in their use of POWs. These planters used POW labor at a cost less than that of free labor, and they directly impaired the wages and employment opportunities of free labor.

### **More POWs, More Camps, Less Security**

Fall 1943 to early 1944 became crucial for the War Department, OPMG, and everyone involved with housing POWs and utilizing their labor. In August 1943, the U.S. held roughly 130,000 POWs, which grew continually every month until reaching its peak in May 1945 at

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55. War Department, *Administrative and Disciplinary Measures*, War Department: Washington, D.C., October 27, 1943, found in microfilm for Office of the Provost Marshal General, Prisoner of War Operations Division. *Historical Monograph: Prisoner of War Operations Division*, 1945-46, Vol. 1-4. Washington: Library of Congress, Photoduplication Service, 1974.



425,871 POWs.<sup>56</sup> With tens of thousands of POWs coming to American shores every month, everything had to be expanded upon very quickly—more camps to house POWs and more jobs for POWs to do. An examination of Figure 1.1, entitled the “Distribution of Base and Branch Prisoner of War Camps as of August 1, 1943,” shows the camps had been built reasonably spaced out, with a preference given to camps built in the South, as they believed mild to hot climates would be the most cost-effective. The camp distribution also reflected many of the War Department’s security concerns, as they built the camps away from urban and industrial areas, vital transportation routes, international borders, and coastlines. However, as Figure 1.2, “Distribution of Base and Branch Prisoner of War Camps as of June 1, 1944,” shows, things quickly changed in less than a year with the exponential growth of new camps. There was now little concern over coastal, border, or transportation security. Comparing Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2, one sees a vast growth mainly in the South, with a particular preference even further given to Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The rapid growth was necessary to accommodate the growing number of POWs, but what changed to make the Mississippi Delta, despite its relatively dense population and significant value to domestic transportation and trade, the preferred home to POWs?

One factor came in late 1943 when the Army Service Forces did an internal audit of POW labor and found that 48% were unemployed because of no work available. Additionally, they found overcaution in some work projects, having a one-guard-to-one-POW ratio. The ASF then sought a formal examination of the prisoner of war situation done by the Office of the Inspector General of the Army. The Inspector General found a lack of POW labor utilization in Class One labor, doing most of the everyday work at the military installations. Early POW camp

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56. See Table 1.1. Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in the Continental United States.

policies dictated the construction of large, heavily guarded camps in isolated areas for security concerns. There was only so much the POWs could do at the camps themselves, so it left thousands of POWs without labor, and due to their camps being in more desolate areas, it limited the usefulness of POWs for Class Two labor outside the camps, such as in agriculture or timber. Large camps with idle, unemployed POWs, the Inspector General felt, could be similar to them being loaded with dynamite. Additionally, the Inspector General reported numerous instances of potential uses of Class Two labor where service or camp commanders became influenced by prominent citizens or, in one case, the mayor of Chicago to not use POWs because of the labor unions and local opposition.<sup>57</sup>

With this new information, the commanding general of Army Service Forces, Brehon B. Somervell, at a conference of the commanding generals of the service commands, in February 1944, ordered all of the service commanders to take a “calculated risk” in the use of Class Two POW labor (given that labor outside of camps and military bases with minimal guards was deemed riskier). Effectively, this order made security no longer the paramount factor, as all decisions were now to lean more toward productivity and the full labor utilization of POWs. Additionally, Brigadier General Blackshear M. Bryan, the Assistant Provost Marshal General, stressed the necessity to maximize POW labor utilization to allow more American soldiers to participate in combat and solve civilian labor shortages. Doing so meant much higher POW-to-guard ratios (which had previously hampered some Class Two labor because there were not enough guards to go out with the POWs). General Somervell put it, “. . . find the essential jobs and put the prisoners of war to work on them . . . Essential work is work that would have to be

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57. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 116-117.

done whether or not there were any prisoners of war; in other words, work every prisoner of war you have.”<sup>58</sup>

In practice, this led to larger guard-to-POW ratios at the bases themselves. The new standard for Class Two off-site work was one guard to every 10-15 POWs, supplanting the previous standard of one guard to eight POWs.<sup>59</sup> Eventually, towards and after the war’s end, POWs in Class Two labor would often be used without guards, and the guards would check in with them by car or Jeep as they roamed from different job sites or fields. Also, POWs would be used as Class One labor in constructing and dismantling branch/satellite camps in areas of labor need that would then offer Class Two labor. With the arrival of tens of thousands of POWs monthly beginning in the summer of 1943, most changes regarding POWs were designed to speed up the certification and contract process between WMC and OPMG. These newly lax policies and encouragement for full utilization of POW labor allowed cotton planters in east Texas and the Mississippi Delta to quickly swoop in and consume large portions of the POW labor.

### **The Mullens Plantation POW Experiment**

One of the first experiments in using Class Two POW labor to pick cotton happened near Clarksdale, Mississippi, in June 1943. It began when cotton planter Paul F. Williams presented a

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58. Minutes, Sixth Conference of Service Commanders, ASF, Edgewater Park, Mississippi., 1-3 Feb 45, quoted in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 118.

59. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 116-117.

plan to the Delta Council<sup>60</sup> to use Italian POWs located at Camp Como to see how they would work in the cotton fields. The Delta Council approved the venture, so Williams contacted Colonel H.L. Henkle, the commanding officer at Camp Como. Eventually, Col. Henkle approved the 60-mile travel and POW labor experiment, and on June 24, 1943, 60 Italian POWs left Camp Como for the first of many days working at E.J. Mullens Jr.'s plantation to chop weeds in cotton fields under the watchful eye of "scores" of planters, Italian American citizens, and the press. After a quick learning curve, assisted by an Italian officer serving as an interpreter, the Italian POWs got the hang of chopping weeds and sang throughout the day.<sup>61</sup> Mullens, the press, and many observers regarded the experiment as successful. News of the POWs working in cotton fields traveled quickly as papers in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas reported on the event by the next day.<sup>62</sup>

Although possibly seen as a publicity stunt or picnic to see the once Italian warriors captured while fighting in North Africa now working in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta, for the planters and groups such as the Delta Council, as with all things pertaining to cotton, it came down to the brass tacks and the bottom line. As the Italian POWs sang away, on the other side of some railroad tracks, Mullens had his usual cotton-chopping crew of African

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60. The Delta Council, founded in 1935, is an organization made up of planters, politicians, and businessmen representing the 19 Delta and part-Delta counties of Northwest Mississippi. The Delta Council in 1948 had 3,000 members, though it claimed to represent all of the Delta's 600,000 residents. At times, the organization extended its concerns beyond commercial matters to include reforming the plantation system to retain workers and combat labor unions and civil rights advocates. More information can be found in Nan E. Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s," *Journal of Southern History* 60 (May 1994): 263-284.

61. James M. Ward, "'Nazis Hoe Cotton': Planters, POWS, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Fall, 2007), 475.

62. "Cotton May Be Picked by Italian Prisoners[sic]," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), June 25, 1943. "Italian Prisoner Chopping Cotton," *State-Times* (Baton Rouge, LA), June 25, 1943.

Americans working as well, so they could calculate the exact costs of using POWs compared to local labor. The *State-Times* of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, reported that Mullens paid “the government 80 cents a day for their labor and 65 cents a day for their board.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, Mullens paid \$1.45 per POW per day to hoe cotton, and due to the two-hour drive each way from Camp Como to the Mullens Plantation near Clarksdale and the mandatory lunch break, the POWs could only work for five hours a day. The local African American laborers received \$2.00 a day for 10 hours of work hoeing cotton. The planters calculated that on Mullens’ plantation, to use POWs, it cost \$5 an acre for chopping while local African American laborers did it for \$3 an acre.<sup>64</sup>

Of course, the glaring omission from these calculations is that the cost to use POWs would not change if they did not have a four-hour-a-day round-trip journey and could be worked for 10 hours a day. By changing these variables, planters would still pay \$1.45 per POW for a ten-hour day. Compared with local labor being paid \$2.00 a day, it would be much cheaper to use POWs instead of local labor. As these calculations took place at the tail end of the chopping season, the planters were actually calculating for the cotton-picking harvest for 1943 that would begin in a few months. Thus, if the POWs had less of a commute and worked on a quota system (as all hand cotton picking is done), the POWs’ inexperience and lack of speed would be negligible, and POWs would become the cheapest labor form.

How did local laborers feel about using POWs in cotton fields in the Mississippi Delta? Within five days of the first POW stepping into the cotton fields at Mullens Plantation, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) raised a protest over the usage of POWs below the

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63. “Italian Prisoner Chopping Cotton,” *State-Times* (Baton Rouge, LA), June 25, 1943.

64. “Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, State of Mississippi,” P.F. Williams and Harris Barnes, Coahoma County Advisory Farm Labor Committee, letter to Mr. L.I. Jones, Director of Extension, State College Mississippi, August 4, 1943. STFU Papers.

prevailing wages to the War Manpower Commission and the War Food Administration. The general secretary of the STFU, H.L. Mitchell, cited how other planters in the area had been offering around \$2.50-3.00 a day for 10 hours of work, and he also noted a surplus of labor in the Clarksdale area. Mitchell furthered, "It should be understood that our organization has no objection to the use of prisoners of war on farms provided there is an acute shortage of labor . . . and that our government receives pay for such labor equal to the prevailing rate being paid Americans."<sup>65</sup> In his estimation, however, these conditions were not met.

Mitchell wrote additional letters of the STFU's protest over the POW usage in cotton fields, seeking support from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The national labor unions responded in solidarity, as AFL President Frank P. Fenton wrote:

We are grappling with that same problem because reports we have received indicate that attempts are being made to employ prisoners of war to do repair work on railroad and to work in some manufacturing plants. We are protesting the use of prisoners in these lines of work and, of course, we will gladly join with you in opposing the employment of prisoners of war on cotton plantations where wages are already too low.<sup>66</sup>

In a letter to Mitchell, the Vice Chairman of the War Manpower Commission explained how he requested the War Food Administration (WFA) to investigate the wages and use of POWs on the Mullens Plantation.<sup>67</sup> The WFA sent the investigative duties to the Mississippi State Extension Service at Mississippi State College (today Mississippi State University). The

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65. H.L. Mitchell, General Secretary STFU, letter to Marvin Jones, War Food Administration, June 29, 1943. STFU Papers.

66. Frank P. Fenton, president American Federation of Labor, letter to H.L. Mitchell, General Secretary STFU, July 8, 1943. STFU Papers.

67. Clinton S. Golden, Vice Chairman of WMC, letter to H.L. Mitchell, General Secretary STFU, July 21, 1943. STFU Papers.

Director of Extension, L.I. Jones then wrote to the Coahoma County Advisory Farm Labor Committee chairman, asking him to check into the matter. The chairman just happened to be Paul F. Williams, the planter and member of the Delta Council, who devised the plan to use POW labor in the first place. Unsurprisingly, Williams found no wrongdoing in the matter and explained how Mullens had paid the prevailing wage for hoeing at that time.<sup>68</sup>

On August 23, 1943, the acting director of the War Food Administration, George W. Hill, wrote back to Mitchell to close the matter on the investigation over the POWs used at Mullens' plantation. Hill explained that now the WMC must approve all POW requests, and they will be responsible for determining the wage rates comparable to the prevailing local rates for similar work. Hill's letter states, "There seems to be no question but what this procedure will eliminate the difficulties to which you have called our attention."<sup>69</sup>

Of course, however, this intervention did not eliminate the difficulties. The Mullens Plantation experiment became just the beginning of the struggle between local labor and planters pertaining to the use of POWs, as will be discussed in succeeding chapters. Additionally, it highlighted many of the early problems confronting the War Department, OPMG, and WMC in their new policies over POW labor utilization. The STFU's direct protest, with the support of the AFL and CIO, put the pressure on Paul V. McNutt, the chairman of the WMC, to implement policies from August 1943 stating how employers should pay the full civilian prevailing wage for POW labor. However, by early 1944, the WMC's desire to ensure employers paid the

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68. "Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, State of Mississippi," P.F. Williams and Harris Barnes, Coahoma County Advisory Farm Labor Committee, letter to Mr. L.I. Jones, Director of Extension, State College Mississippi, August 4, 1943. STFU Papers.

69. George W. Hill, acting director of WFA, letter to H.L. Mitchell, General Secretary STFU, August 23, 1943. STFU Papers.

prevailing wages for POW labor clashed with the OPMG and Army Service Forces' desire for full employment of all eligible POWs. It led to the rapid expansion of the labor program, which allowed planters in the Mississippi Delta to exploit the situation, all at the expense of local labor.<sup>70</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In summation, the War Department and OPMG charged with interning POWs shifted their policies since the war's outbreak away from concerns over national security towards full employment utilization of POWs both on and off military reservations. In close consultation with various other government agencies, such as the War Manpower Commission, War Relocation Authority, Department of Agriculture, and the War Food Administration, it sometimes made things quite bureaucratically confusing. When significant numbers of POWs started entering the U.S. by fall 1943, processes had to be streamlined for getting POWs working in both Class One and Class Two labor. The OPMG and the Army Service Forces (technically in control of POWs but let OPMG function mostly autonomously) made a "calculated risk" regarding national security and pushed for full employment of POWs, believing it would most effectively aid the war effort and free troops up for overseas duties.<sup>71</sup> The OPMG settled on a favorable

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70. James M. Ward in his article, "'Nazis Hoe Cotton': Planters, POWs, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South," for *Agricultural History* (Fall 2007) seems to be the only work that discusses the Mullens Plantation POW experiment and the protest by the STFU. However, this study further emphasizes the Mullens case's true importance on the Mississippi Delta and reveals the results of the STFU protest. Ward's work took the planters at their word and incorrectly concludes that POW labor undercut planter profits.

71. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 116-117.



interpretation of the Geneva Convention to allow POWs to work at depots and military installations (Class One POW labor) as long as they did not get directly involved with arms, ammunition, and other goods destined for combat units.

Additionally, agriculture became a primary home for Class Two POW labor, taking place beyond a camp's perimeters. In the case of the Mississippi Delta, the Mullens Plantation experiment, under the watchful eye of the planter elite, proved the viability of using POWs to work in cotton fields. Then, once a local labor union protested the POWs' use, the federal, state, and county agents tended to side with the planters. The War Manpower Commission, the organization that fought in its policy to ensure POWs never undercut local labor, considered the matter resolved with the promise that employers of POWs would pay the prevailing wages. The OPMG, the organization that promoted full utilization of POWs, believed employers should not pay prevailing civilian wages since "forced labor" could not be the equivalent to American free labor. It now found employers begging for more POW usage. As this chapter shows, the overly bureaucratic and lax administration in the early experiments with Class Two labor allowed for the exploitation of POW labor by the planters. With the introduction of a new labor regime, the struggle over wages, POWs, and labor in the Mississippi Delta had just begun.

After the Mullens Plantation experiment, the Mississippi Delta planters held a meeting with the commanding officers from the POW camps Como and McCain and asked for 30,000 POWs for the upcoming cotton harvest.<sup>72</sup> Although the planters just spoke for Mississippi at the time, the Mississippi Delta, made up of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, would receive by war's end over 60,000 POWs. Keenly aware of what transpired across the river with the Italian

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72. James M. Ward, "'Nazis Hoe Cotton': Planters, POWs, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Fall, 2007), 471-492.

POW experiment, Arkansas planters began to maneuver for their own POW camps. Compared to Mississippi, which housed four base POW camps and 15 POW branch camps, Arkansas came to house over 30 camps from its three POW base camps. The first POW branch camp built to aid agriculture in Arkansas was—uncoincidentally—housed at the Victoria Plantation on the Lee Wilson & Company property, a planter family and company in control over 65,000 acres.<sup>73</sup>

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73. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 216.

**Figure 1.1. Distribution of Base and Branch Prisoner of War Camps as of August 1, 1943.**



**Figure 1.2. Distribution of Base and Branch POW Camps as of June 1, 1944.**



Source: Copy found in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 111-112. Also, found in the Office of the Provost Marshal General, Prisoner of War Operations Division. *Historical Monograph: Prisoner of War Operations Division, 1945-46*, Vol. 1-4. Washington: Library of Congress, Photoduplication Service, 1974.

**Table 1.1. Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in the Continental United States**

Year	End of Month	Total	German	Italian	Japanese	
1942	May	32	31	—	1	
	June	33	32	—	1	
	July	49	39	—	10	
	August	65	55	—	10	
	September	177	130	—	47	
	October	183	130	—	53	
	November	431	380	—	51	
	December	1,881	512	1,317	52	
	1943	January	2,365	990	1,313	62
		February	2,444	1,026	1,356	62
		March	2,755	1,334	1,359	62
		April	5,007	2,146	2,799	62
May		36,083	22,110	13,911	62	
June		53,435	34,161	19,212	62	
July		80,558	54,502	25,969	87	
August		130,299	94,220	35,986	93	
September		163,706	115,358	48,253	95	
October		167,748	119,401	48,252	95	
November		171,484	122,350	49,039	95	
December		172,879	123,440	49,323	116	
1944	January	174,822	124,880	49,826	116	
	February	177,387	127,252	49,993	142	
	March	183,618	133,135	50,136	347	
	April	184,502	133,967	50,168	367	
	May	186,368	135,796	50,164	408	
	June	196,948	146,101	50,278	569	
	July	224,863	173,980	50,276	607	
	August	243,870	173,980	50,272	730	
	September	300,382	248,205	51,034	1,143	

Year	End of Month	Total	German	Italian	Japanese
1945	October	338,055	248,781	51,032	1,242
	November	360,455	306,856	51,156	2,443
	December	360,281	306,581	51,071	2,629
	January	359,687	306,306	50,561	2,820
	February	360,996	307,404	50,571	3,021
	March	365,954	312,144	50,550	3,260
	April	399,518	345,920	50,304	3,294
	May	425,871	371,683	50,273	3,915
	June	425,806	371,505	50,052	4,249
	July	422,130	367,513	49,789	4,828
	August	415,919	361,322	49,184	5,413
	September	403,311	355,458	42,915	4,938
1946	October	391,145	351,150	35,065	4,930
	November	358,419	324,623	29,539	4,257
	December	341,016	313,234	25,696	2,086
	January	286,611	275,078	11,532	1
	February	208,965	208,403	561	1
	March	140,606	140,572	33	1
	April	84,209	84,177	31	1
	May	37,491	37,460	30	1
	June <sup>74</sup>	162	141	20	1

Source: Army Service Forces and War Department, "Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in the Continental United States," ASF WD Monthly Progress Reports, sec. 11 Administration. Copy found in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 90-91.

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74. The only POWs that remained after June 1946 were serving sentences in U.S. penal institutions for committing crimes while in custody.

## Chapter 2 - Arkansas's Cotton Plantocracy

*“Every farmer cannot give their talent, but there is no excuse for not investing money to protect your interests. You never know just when help from an organization like this will be needed and needed badly. Experience has taught us that you can’t wait until war is declared to form and train an army.”*— Harvey R. Adams, Executive Vice President of the Agricultural Council of Arkansas, 1943.<sup>1</sup>

Every morning for several months in 1945, German POW Edwin Pelz crossed the Mississippi River from Memphis to work in the cotton fields of Arkansas. Pelz recalls his first experience picking cotton, “I picked cotton like a fool without a break or interruption. I wanted to show everybody what a good worker I was. By noon my sack was full and so heavy I had difficulty pulling it between the rows of cotton plants . . . I was convinced I had broken all cotton picking records. Can you imagine how disappointed I was when I learned I had only 40 pounds of cotton in my sack? There were aches and pains all across my back and arms. I was half dead.”<sup>2</sup> Despite his best effort, Pelz found himself about 60 lbs. short of his daily quota, but his POW comrades helped him finish his quota under the moonlight. On the ride home, they all shared a laugh after his comrades told him how they usually filled their cotton sacks with dirt and rocks to cheat the scales, a standard “day-to-day resistance” tactic of the South’s former enslaved laborers.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Quote found on the Agricultural Council of Arkansas website: <https://agcouncil.net/about/>. The Agricultural Council of Arkansas (ACA or Ag Council) was established in 1939 by cotton farmers in East Arkansas to pool their resources and work together to overcome challenging times and remain sustainable. The Ag Council was one of the many planter-run organizations that advocated for POW labor.

2. Edwin Pelz and William Shea, “A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 52-53.

3. Pelz may have misremembered his daily cotton quota of 120 lbs. per POW, but the standard for POWs was 100 lbs. a day per POW at the beginning of the war and later increased to 150 lbs. by war’s end for experienced

Reminiscent of 19th-century slave labor practices on cotton plantations, the POWs operated in gang and task labor systems and picked their way across Mississippi Delta cotton fields under the watchful eye of armed guards and overseers. After the first couple of months of having POWs in the U.S., fears over national security subsided, and economic opportunity became the main driver of POW policy. Thus, the War Department's lax policies allowed the highly organized and influential planter elite in the Mississippi Delta to acquire a large number of these POWs. Combined with the two succeeding chapters, this study examines the main characters in the struggle over the cotton battle/fields, where the planter elite and complicit Arkansas government officials manipulated wartime policies to ensure cheap labor, which displaced many local laborers and froze the wages for those locals who remained behind.<sup>4</sup> The second chapter of this study focuses on the planter elite—aka, planters or plantocracy—and their associations and organizations that continually lobbied for cheap labor and manipulated the county, state, and federal governments for their self-interest. As Harvey R. Adams of the Agriculture Council of Arkansas, one of the numerous planter-run organizations, discussed in this chapter's intro quote, said, it takes an organized army to fight a war. However, the war Adams and other planters fought was not in the Pacific or Europe, it was in the Mississippi Delta cotton fields over labor and wages.

After events such as the Mullens Plantation Experiment, POWs became the latest labor regime used by the plantocracy that had long dominated the Mississippi Delta. Eventually,

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pickers. In Pelz's case, potentially the planters may have required 120 lbs. to negate some of the POWs' subversive tactics of using rocks and dirt in their cotton picking.

4. The term "battle/fields" was first used by Don Mitchell in "Battle/fields: Braceros, Agribusiness, and the Violent Reproduction of the California Agricultural Landscape during World War II," *Journal of Historical Geography* (Vol. 36, No. 2, 2010), 143-156.

planter manipulation led to one-seventh of all POWs housed in the U.S. ending up at military bases or picking cotton in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>5</sup> Arkansas benefitted handsomely from the influx of POWs to aid in agriculture and forestry. The state received a disproportionate number of POWs, and by the war's end, it housed the second most of any state, with 23,000 POWs (Texas being number one with 50,000).<sup>6</sup>

Arkansas housed three large POW base camps: Camps Chaffee, Robinson, and eventually Dermott. Originally the OPMG built Camps Chafee and Dermott as internment camps for Japanese Americans; however, Camp Chafee never served as an internment camp, while Camp Dermott served as the Jerome Relocation Center for Americans of Japanese ancestry before being converted into a POW camp.<sup>7</sup> To better serve agriculture and maximize the use of POW labor, Arkansas also came to hold over 30 branch camps, mainly in the cotton counties in the fertile alluvial plain of the Mississippi Delta.

The development of the branch camps allowed planters to wield more control over the POW labor. Establishing a POW branch camp often took significant organization, persistence, and influence, so planter associations formed to pool resources and lobby for these camps. This chapter will look at two main sets of records. The first comes from the Lee Wilson & Company, which established the first POW branch camp in Arkansas and four in total on their 65,000-acre estate based out of Wilson, Arkansas. The second record set comes from the Mabel Gieseck and

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5. 425,000 POWs were held in the U.S. during World War II, with camps in all 48 continental states. Arkansas with 23,000 POWs, Mississippi at 20,200 POWs, and Louisiana at 20,000 POWs, based on figures found in U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army 1776-1945*, by George C. Lewis and John Mewha, Washington D.C.: Department of Army, 1955.

6. Michael R. Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004, 3.

7. William Shea and Edwin Pelz, "A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985): 42-55.



the Lansing Company, which managed an extensive farming operation near Parkin, Arkansas. Gieseck and fellow planters from the cotton-dominated Cross County Farmers Association formed the Wynne Prison Camp Association, which built the largest POW branch camp in Arkansas, holding over 700 POWs at its peak.<sup>8</sup>

**“Fine black soil, good black labor, and outstanding white leadership.”<sup>9</sup>**

These three ingredients were what the Delta Council believed made for a healthy cotton-driven economy in the Mississippi Delta. However, during World War II, the Council faced a crisis, with labor leaving the plantations for much higher-paying jobs. The Delta Council was formed in 1935 as an organization of planters, politicians, and businessmen representing the 19 Delta and part-Delta counties of Northwest Mississippi to lobby and represent them before the state and federal governments.<sup>10</sup> However, the organization extended its concerns beyond commercial matters, including reforming the plantation system, retaining workers, and combating labor unions and civil rights advocates. This study previously discussed the Delta Council as the first organization to test the ability and usage of POWs in 1943 in Clarksdale, Mississippi, during the Mullens Plantation Experiment.

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8. Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1996), 88.

9. Delta Council, “Delta Survey for a Blueprint for New Horizons Submitted to Mississippi Power and Light Company,” Unpublished paper (Stoneville, MS: Delta Council, April 1, 1944), 9, quoted in Sharon D. Wright Austin. *The Transformation of Plantation Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta*. State University of New York Press, 2012, 33.

10. Ted Ownby, “Delta Council,” *Mississippi Encyclopedia*. Center for Study of Southern Culture. July 10, 2017. <<http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/delta-council/>>

The Delta Council officially established its headquarters at Stoneville, Mississippi's Delta Branch Experiment Station. It also housed offices for the U.S. Cotton Ginning Research Laboratory, Mississippi's Extension Service as a part of the United States Department of Agriculture, and the State Department of Agriculture. "The Delta Council has been housed at the Delta Branch Experiment Station since its inception. This relationship has been mutually beneficial . . . a close relationship with the Experiment Station and has been most helpful in securing needed research funds from state, national, and private sources."<sup>11</sup> The planters' use of state-sponsored agricultural departments and the Extension Services in the state played a vital role in obtaining POW labor.

Arkansas cotton planters too began forming their own organizations, the most prominent being the Agriculture Council of Arkansas (Ag Council). Several dozen East Arkansas cotton planters joined together and formed the Ag Council in fall 1939 to advocate for themselves. Similar to the Delta Council, the Ag Council often sent delegates to Washington, D.C., to lobby about farm policy and anything impacting the cotton industry. The plantocracy of Arkansas often intermingled with all of the cotton organizations at the state and national levels. For example, Lon Mann, a cotton planter and ginner of Marianna, Arkansas, served as president of the Agricultural Council of Arkansas, the National Cotton Council, the National Cotton Ginners Association, Agricenter International, the Mid-South Ginners Council, Southern Cotton Ginners Association. Mann also served as a member of the Cotton Producers Institute and on the Cotton Board for Cotton Incorporated board. He was inducted into the Cotton Hall of Fame and received the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service's Cotton Achievement Award, and

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11. Donald H. Bowman, "A History of the Delta Branch Experiment Station: 1904-1985," Special Bulletin, Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service, (August 1986), 65-66. Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University.

they named their Cotton Experiment Station after him. The *Farm Progress* (successor of the *Delta Farm Press*) described Mann as "the quintessential Southern gentleman and a pillar of the U.S. cotton industry for more than half a century."<sup>12</sup>

### **Oscar Johnston and National Cotton Council**

The planter elite of the Delta Council and the Ag Council also unofficially had headquarters at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. A plaque in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel quotes a passage from David Cohn's 1935 book, *God Shakes Creation*, and reads, "The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg . . . If you stand near its fountain in the middle of the lobby, where ducks waddle and turtles drowse, you will see everybody who is anybody in the Delta." From this very same hotel, prominent members of the Delta Council pushed for a more national organization to lobby for agriculture that would benefit the cotton industry. Thus, Oscar G. Johnston, lawyer, politician, banker, and president of the Delta & Pine Land Company of Scott, Mississippi, founded the National Cotton Council, an agricultural trade organization formed to better lobby for American cotton at the national and international level. On November 21, 1938, Johnston from the Peabody Hotel gathered with approximately 150 delegates from across the Cotton Belt and spoke on the seriousness of the problems facing the cotton industry. His remarks culminated with a cautionary admission, "The animals you see now in museums are animals that couldn't survive as

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12. Hembree Brandon, "Lon Mann, cotton industry leader, dies" *Farm Progress*. December 15, 2003.

conditions changed. The cotton business, if it does not meet the changed conditions, will soon be as extinct as the dodo.”<sup>13</sup>

Johnston became the National Cotton Council’s first president, but he formerly served in the Mississippi House of Representatives for Coahoma County and in 1933 as the director of finance for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. As the Delta & Pine Land Company president, Johnston operated over 38,000 acres of land that held about 800-900 tenant families, primarily African American, totaling several thousand workers.<sup>14</sup> Johnston and the Delta and Pine Land Company, similar to most large-scale cotton plantations, used the “half” basis or half system for its sharecropping contracts. In the half system, the company furnished the cottonseed, mules, tools, houses, access to woodland for fuel, provided credit for food, clothing, and other necessities to its tenants, and covered half the cost of insecticides, fertilizer, and ginning. The tenant supplied the labor for chopping/hoeing and picking the cotton, and at the end of harvest, they would split the profits at 50% for each party.<sup>15</sup>

The decades-old sharecropping system favored the planters and led to meager compensation that left some families perpetually in debt and poverty. Many tenants continually took out credit at the plantation stores and depended on one large influx of cash each year only after the harvest and ginning process. In the late 1930s, the plantation system began to crumble,

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13. D. Clayton, Brown, *King Cotton in Modern America: A Cultural, Political, and Economic History Since 1945*. (University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 40.

14. Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal*. (University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 95.

15. Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate*, 95.

The usual distinction between a tenant and a sharecropper is that ordinarily a tenant furnishes his own equipment and essential livestock, and usually pays the landlord one-fourth of the production and keeps three-fourths. The term of sharecropper usually applies to the relationship when the landlord furnishes the tools, equipment, and essential livestock, and the sharecropper does the labor, and the production is divided half and half.

and the planters felt undermined by labor unions and outside forces that drew their cheap labor away. Additionally, laborers wished to escape the debt cycle of living on the plantation in sharecropper shacks and looked for waged work picking cotton. Thus, the Delta Council and other planters began to use several different schemes and propaganda tactics to promote the plantation system and trick their tenants into a false sense of belonging and representation while, in the long run, planning to do away with the plantation system entirely.

### **American Farm Bureau Federation Scheme**

One way the planters manipulated their tenants was by coercing or forcing their tenants and laborers into organizations that actually looked after the interests of the large commercial farmers or planters.<sup>16</sup> One such organization is the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), commonly referred to as the Farm Bureau. The early foundations of farm bureaus started around 1911 in New York at the county and state level with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In 1919, over 30 states came together, founding the AFBF to be a voice for local, state, and national farmers to lobby and make farming more profitable and the

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16. For the purpose of this study, a planter is used, typically referring to those who owned or operated a plantation of more than 100 acres in cotton production. The planters at times referred to themselves as growers and farmers to possibly evoke a façade of a Jeffersonian small farmer agrarian society. The Farm Bureau referred to most of its members as farmers, regardless of being a planter or tenant. Tenant is used as a generic term to include all laborers occupying the housing on a plantation in return for cash or crop, including sharecroppers. Sharecropper is a member of the plantation labor force who contributes his labor and receives a stipulated share of the products as compensation for his and his family's labor, usually one-half. Additionally, a wage laborer refers to a hired person who works on a wage basis. Often sharecroppers who had finished their work would be hired as wage laborers picking cotton and so forth. Terms outlined in Frank James Welch, "The Plantation land tenure system in Mississippi" (1943). *MAFES Research Bulletins* Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University, 6-7.

communities a better place to live.<sup>17</sup> On April 28, 1931, Arkansas formed its own branch of the Farm Bureau, called the Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation.<sup>18</sup> By World War II, the Farm Bureau became the most influential representative for largescale farmers and favored them over small family farms. As historian Pete Daniel put it, "The AFBF and the USDA agenda was conservative in that it would preserve the power of commercial farmers to hold on to labor in the short run. It was radical in its advocacy of a new structure built on government planning and mechanization that would overthrow the sharecropping system in the long run."<sup>19</sup> Thus, the planters created a scheme using the Farm Bureau to enlist or coerce sharecroppers and tenants to increase the organization's prominence and lobbying power while simultaneously working to dissolve the sharecropping and plantation system.

In Arkansas and Mississippi in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the planters would force or mislead their tenants into joining the Farm Bureau. The most effective way for planters to collect Farm Bureau dues for these unknowing members would be just to write off \$2.00-2.50 annually from each laborer's wages or charge it to a sharecropper's commissary account. Frequently, only after receiving the Farm Bureau newsletters did laborers and tenants learn that they had been signed up as members. The STFU investigated the matter and found that "thousands of small

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17. Nancy K. Berlage, "Organizing the Farm Bureau: Family, Community, and Professionals, 1914-1928." *Agricultural History* (2001): 406-437.

18. Today, the Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation comprises more than 230,000 families in Arkansas. The bureau provides daily market updates, agricultural education programs, scholarships, promotional programs, and insurance plans. The mission statement of the organization: to "advocate the interests of agriculture in the public arena; disseminate information concerning the value and importance of agriculture; and provide products and services which improve the quality of life for our members." Donna B. Jackson "Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified November 14, 2007. <<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/arkansas-farm-bureau-federation-4155/>>.

19. Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990): 888.

farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers here in the southern states have been made victims of a vicious racket, representing a few larger owners of land and politicians serving the same interests."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the STFU found that many of the representatives of the Farm Bureau would be stationed at the AAA offices, so when a farmer would come in to receive their government check, they would cash the check for them and deduct the Farm Bureau dues. If the farmer protested, they would threaten to withhold the government checks. Additionally, the STFU found that signs had been hung in the county AAA offices that read, "Pay Your Farm Bureau Dues Here –The Farm Bureau is responsible for getting your AAA payments—"21

The planters additionally targeted African American tenants and laborers for the Farm Bureau scheme since they served as voiceless and politically powerless members. As the STFU described, "The negroes were permitted to join the organization in their local communities on a Jim Crow basis."<sup>22</sup> The STFU found that the most significant amount of Farm Bureau members in Arkansas (22,601 members) and Mississippi (28,901 members) came from the cotton counties of the Mississippi Delta. In just six of these counties in Mississippi, the STFU concluded that 13,000 "colored sharecroppers or day laborers" had their Farm Bureau dues "checked off" by the plantation owners, adding the membership dues to the cost of their tenancy.<sup>23</sup> The Farm Bureau could use the African American laborers to inflate their membership numbers to grow the organization's influence and lobbying power without representing their interests at all. Farm

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20. H.L. Mitchell letter to Senator Robert W. LaFollette. April 17, 1942. Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, 1934-1970, (STFU Papers) Microfilm edition, Microfilming Corporation of America (now ProQuest). University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

21. "The American Farm Bureau in the South." Report made by STFU and H.L. Mitchell, 1, found in the STFU Papers.

22. "The American Farm Bureau in the South." STFU Papers, 2.

23. "The American Farm Bureau in the South." STFU Papers, 4.

Bureau President Edward A. O'Neal, a planter from Florence, Alabama, once told a Congressional committee investigating the Farm Bureau's role in influencing anti-labor legislation that "farmers should join the Farm Bureau if they could, some other farm organization if no Bureau was handy, and rather than stay unorganized they should side up with the Ku Klux Klan."<sup>24</sup>

The STFU's General Secretary, H.L. Mitchell, even traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1943 to speak before Congress against the Farm Bureau on the 1943 Farm Labor Program. Mitchell presented over 100 affidavits and statements of farmers and tenants victimized by the planters and the operation of the Farm Bureau in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama. Mitchell recommended that Congress should not turn over the authority to supply the nation's farm labor needs to the state Extension Services, Farm Bureau, or the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), as these county and state agents looked after the planters' interests.<sup>25</sup> By inflating the membership numbers of the planter-controlled Farm Bureau, they would lobby in Washington, D.C., claiming to represent all farmers, laborers, and tenants. All the while, the planters held all the administrative and positions of power at the county, state, and national levels.

During the New Deal farm policies in the 1930s, under the leadership of President Edward A. O'Neal, known for his expensive suits and flamboyant lobbying, the Farm Bureau

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24. Theodore Saloutos, "Edward A. O'Neal: The Farm Bureau and the New Deal," *Current History* Vol. 28, No. 166 (June 1955), 356. In A. V. Krebs, *The Corporate Reapers: The Book of Agribusiness*. (Washington, D.C: Essential Books, 1992), 278, it is quoted slightly different. Krebs states that the "Bureau President Ed O'Neal told a congressional committee that it wasn't such a bad idea if farmers joined the Ku Klux Klan since every farmer should join something."

25. Farm Labor Program, 1943: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, 78th Congress, First Session, on H.J. Res. 96, a Joint Resolution Making an Appropriation to Assist in Providing a Supply and Distribution of Farm Labor for the Calendar Year 1943. United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943.



successfully worked its way into a strong partnership with the state Extension Services and became the local representative of the AAA. In the locales, the mission of a state Extension Service agent would be to create an organization amongst the farmers, so they would typically just work with the Farm Bureau to make this happen. Thus, the county agents “became the publicly paid organizer of the American Farm Bureau Federation.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Propaganda by Press**

During World War II, the planter organizations sought to strengthen their united message toward keeping labor on the plantations and wages low through planter-controlled media. The Delta Council invested money in local newspapers to push their message to labor and attempted to undermine unions. Among many newsletters and pamphlets published through the organizations themselves, such as the *Delta Council News*, they also employed two different newspapers in Mississippi, the *Delta Farm Press* and the African American-led *Delta Leader*.

Uncoincidentally, the *Delta Farm Press* began in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1943 (the same year and place as the Mullens Plantation Experiment) by Bill McNamee and members of the *Clarksdale Daily Press*. It started as a small weekly paper with farm information, “syndicated consumer articles,” and targeted ads for rural audiences.<sup>27</sup> Further investigation of the paper

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26. Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 47.

27. Farm Press Staff, “Farm Press Founder Bill McNamee dies,” *Farm Progress*. Informa Markets Division of Informa PLC: London. June 25, 2003. < <https://www.farmprogress.com/farm-press-founder-bill-mcnamee-dies>.>

The *Delta Farm Press*, under Bill McNamee in the 1960s, greatly expanded. It became one of the most significant agricultural publications in the nation. It was the launching pad for what became four regional

shows how prominent planters and businesspeople were listed as the newspaper's stockholders, and many of the articles came from the Delta Council, county agricultural agents, the Farm Bureau, and other planter organizations to spread their message throughout the Mississippi Delta. In particular, the "colored" page published letters from African American sharecroppers about the benefits of plantation life and how Christian and benevolent the planters treated their tenants. In her article, "Mississippi Delta Planter and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s," Nan Elizabeth Woodruff details some *Delta Farm Press* articles from sharecroppers. One such article appeared from Maggie Green, who had been on the Fisher plantation for 15 years and spoke to how the Fishers had been such great landlords by not letting the people go hungry, providing a doctor's services and a church. Green wrote, "the lord is blessing him and do you know it is time we colored people were praying more and stop looking at the dark side of life, for it will not do us any good."<sup>28</sup>

The Delta Council used Reverend Harrison Henry Humes, an executive staff associate for the Council, to spy on the day-to-day activities of the sharecroppers and learn of any literature sent to them by labor unions.<sup>29</sup> In 1937, Oscar Johnston and the Delta and Pine Land Company organized a "Pastors' Conference" under Humes's leadership to encourage cooperation between employees and employers, promote fellowship between the black and white races, and "guard against agitators or foreign elements who attempt to use the weak of our group as a gateway into

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newspapers that spanned the Sunbelt from Maryland to California, at one time reaching some 240,000 of the nation's farmers and agribusiness and government leaders, with 13 offices nationwide and currently owned by Informa Media Inc.

28. *Daily Farm Press*, Clarksdale, MS, January 13, 1944, cited in Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planter and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (May 1994), 279.

29. Sharon D. Wright Austin. *The Transformation of Plantation Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta*. State University of New York Press, 2012, 33.

this community with far-fetched organizations to unionize our people in such organizations that will disturb the peace and harmony of the two races in this Mississippi Delta.”<sup>30</sup>

In 1939, Humes bought the *Greenville Leader* and changed its name to the *Delta Leader*. As a member of the Associated Negro Press, it covered a wide range of content from local news and announcements as well as international news. However, its most controversial articles pertained to the encouragement of sharecroppers to remain on the plantation and to accept their political status by denouncing "black agitation" and promoting cooperation with the white community. The Delta Council donated money to the *Delta Leader*, and often planters would automatically subscribe to it for their sharecroppers. In turn, Humes, during the war, argued for the Delta Council to sharecroppers about the consequences of migration from the plantations, as Nan Woodruff paraphrased Humes's words: "Many people who have sold their possessions and have gone into northern industries will be flocking back this way after the war, empty handed, depressed, and embarrassed.' However, those who had 'conformed' to the 'conditions' and wisely handled their money 'will be happy, comfortable, and secure against the dark days that follow all wars.'"<sup>31</sup>

Humes also served as president of the General Baptist State Convention of Mississippi and the Negro Baptist Association, with nearly 387,000 members. Humes's racial thoughts often clashed with civil rights activists, such as Theodore Roosevelt Mason Howard and the editors of the nearby Mound Bayou's newspaper, *Southern Advocate*. Shortly before his death in January

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30. Document Dated May 4, 1937, in Oscar Johnston, General Correspondence, Delta and Pine Land Company Papers, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville, quoted in Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 183.

31. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planter and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (May 1994), 279.

1958, the Negro Baptist Association tried to remove Humes as president but failed. It became publicized that he accepted a \$400 payment from the State Sovereignty Commission, a state agency designed to prevent federal intervention and uphold racial segregation and white supremacy in Mississippi.<sup>32</sup> *Jet*, the entertainment and news magazine that billed itself as the “Weekly Negro News Magazine,” in an article about his passing, described Humes as often being considered “one of the biggest handkerchiefheads in Mississippi.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Lee Wilson & Company**

The first POW branch camp built to aid agriculture in Arkansas was uncoincidentally housed at the Victoria Plantation on the Lee Wilson & Company property, a planter family and company in control over 65,000 acres based out of Wilson, Arkansas.<sup>34</sup> The Lee Wilson & Company, by the late 1930s and 1940s, operated almost like a stereotypical depiction of a monopoly of the Progressive Era, but instead of oil, steel, and railroads, they did it in agriculture. Operating both horizontal and vertical integration, Robert Edward Lee Wilson took an inheritance of 400 acres of wooded swampland in Mississippi County, Arkansas, and built a prominent Delta empire. In 2010, the Wilson family sold the remaining property for an estimated

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32. “Rev. Hume[sic], Negro Leader, Editor, Dies In Greenville,” *Clarion-Ledger*, Jackson, Mississippi. January 3, 1958.

33. “Controversial Miss. Cleric Dies In Greenville.” Religion. *Jet*, January 16, 1958, p. 52. Lexico by Oxford Dictionaries defines a “handkerchief head” as a black person considered submissive or servile to white people; an “Uncle Tom.” Chiefly in Africa-American use, particularly associated with the Civil Rights Movement.

34. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 216.

\$110-150 million to Gaylon Lawrence of Sikeston, Missouri, and his son, Gaylon Jr., of Nashville, Tennessee, the owners of USAir Conditioning Distributor.<sup>35</sup>

With contacts through marriage, Wilson set up his own sawmills and lumber company on his inherited land and incorporated his company in 1904 as the Lee Wilson and Company. They cleared the land, drained the swamps, planted cotton on it, then brought tenants/sharecroppers to harvest it and live in their company towns. The cotton would be ginned, compressed, and transported by their own companies and railroad lines to Memphis markets. Then, all of the profits would be used to buy more land and repeat the process.

Wilson's program required vast amounts of labor, and each time the logging company moved too far from the mills, they set up new camps and towns. The Lee Wilson & Co. founded several company towns in Mississippi County, including Wilson, Evadale, Victoria, Marie, Armorel, and Keiser. Each town functioned as its own plantation with a headquarters, cotton gins, housing for tenants, schools, company stores, mercantile, manufacturing plants, stables, car dealerships, and even utilities, all operated and owned by the company. To finance operations, Lee Wilson founded their own bank, the Bank of Wilson, in 1908.<sup>36</sup> They depended on thousands of sharecroppers and tenants to operate their several plantations. However, the company also became quite innovative during and after World War II and utilized all sorts of labor to fill its needs, including POWs, migrant labor through the Bracero Program, and increased mechanization in the cotton fields. Additionally, as tenants fled to much higher-paying

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35. Kim Severson, "Arkansas Town's New Owner Has Visions of Its Renaissance," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2014.

36. Cindy Grisham, "Lee Wilson & Company," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Modified February 14, 2022. < <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/lee-wilson-company-4437/> >

jobs during the war, the Lee Wilson & Co. actively tried to recruit Japanese Americans interned in the state as tenants for the company.<sup>37</sup>

Lee Wilson managed a vast empire with thousands of employees and occasionally conflicted with his labor, especially through some of his heavy-handed tactics. In one instance, an employee accused of stealing from the company sued the Lee Wilson & Company for holding him in a Mississippi County jail until he agreed to work on the plantation picking cotton. The company also faced several charges of debt peonage by holding employees to their jobs against their will. The company at times paid its employees in scrip, and since they owned all of the housing and their furnishings, those who chose to leave the company did so in the dead of night with almost nothing. In 1925, the company faced an investigation from the Mexican consulate that workers from Mexico had been promised wages of \$1.50 an hour but were being paid sixty cents to a dollar an hour while being forbidden to leave.<sup>38</sup> As a regional railroad magnate, after taking ownership of the Jonesboro, Lake City, and Eastern Railroad, Lee Wilson withstood a three-year-long worker strike and a decade-long battle with the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad (Frisco Railroad). The Frisco Railroad refused to stop in Wilson, Arkansas, on its fast train from St. Louis to Memphis, so one night, a Lee Wilson & Company train had “stalled” on the intersecting lines in Wilson. Soon after the Frisco train stopped, Lee Wilson himself boarded the Frisco train, and thereafter all trains stopped on that line stopped in Wilson.<sup>39</sup>

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37. “The Wilson Plantation: Special Arkansas Bulletin,” Lee Wilson and Co. flier sent to War Relocation Authority, July 20, 1945. Lee Wilson and Company Records (MC 1289), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

38. Grisham, “Lee Wilson & Company,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*.

39. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire*, 89.

After Lee Wilson's passing in 1933, the administration of the Lee Wilson & Co. fell to James H. "Jim" Crain, a longtime employee from a modest background and the heir to the empire. Jim Crain served in various positions in the community and state, including being a member of the Wilson School Board, Arkansas's only three-term Highway Commissioner, and the vice president of the Agricultural Council of Arkansas.<sup>40</sup> R.E. Lee "Roy" Wilson, Jr. Roy graduated from Yale in 1912 and returned to serve in the family. Roy, known for his enjoyment of hunting and polo, took more of a back seat in operation at times, as he also struggled with alcoholism and severe bouts of malaria while also being known for taking lengthy vacations. Despite a power struggle over the company, Jeannie Whayne's *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South* presents a letter from Hy Wilson in 1939 on the leadership of the company, "when Mr. Roy Wilson signs an instrument for Lee Wilson & Co. it is necessary that Mr. Crain also sign it, but it is not necessary for Mr. Roy Wilson to sign with Mr. Crain."<sup>41</sup>

Under Jim Crain's leadership, the Lee Wilson & Co. shifted to a three-crop formula; half of the fields would be planted in cotton as a cash crop, then 25% in alfalfa and corn, grown as feed for the thousands of mules on the property. Jim Crain's son, John E. Crain, also worked for the company as an administrator of various joint industries; for example, he became the president of the Mississippi County Bank, the Crain Center of Osceola, and the Armored Planting Company of Blytheville, and the Crain Cotton Company of Memphis, Tennessee. Additionally, John Crain served as a Mississippi County Equalization Board Member, a governor-appointed

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40. Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department, "James H. 'Jim' Crain," *Historical Review-Vol. Two: Arkansas State Highway Commission and Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department*. April 2004, 194.

41. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire*, 190.

Highway Commissioner (replacing his father after his death in 1963), and the Mississippi County Farm Bureau president.<sup>42</sup>

During World War II, the Lee & Wilson Co. faced the same labor issues as other large plantation operations in the Mississippi Delta. The sharecropper-dependent system began to crumble as work could be found for much higher wages almost anywhere in the country. The company became one of the first to look for alternative labor pools and began inquiring and applying for a POW camp in September 1943. D.N. Morris, an assistant for the Lee Wilson & Co., began contacting the War Production Board, the POW Camp Robinson, and various rationing boards to receive the necessary approvals and preference ratings for the materials to refit an old Civilian Conservation Corps camp on the Victoria Plantation to house 400 German POWs for farm labor.<sup>43</sup> Eventually, they secured the first POW branch camp in Arkansas at the Victoria Plantation in February 1944.

John E. Crain, as the president of the Mississippi County Farm Bureau, played an essential role in securing POWs for the company and the county that eventually housed POWs in Victoria, Osceola, Luxora, Kieser, and Blytheville. John Crain represented the company and attended the meeting hosted by the Extension Service in April 1944 on the process of employing POWs. Mississippi County received over 2,400 POWs with the aid of their two county Extension

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42. Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department, "John E. Crain," *Historical Review-Vol. Two: Arkansas State Highway Commission and Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department*. April 2004, 195.

43. D.N. Morris, P.A., letter to C.S. Christian War Production Board in Little Rock, AR. September 18, 1943. Lee Wilson and Company Records.



Service agents, D.V. Maloch and Keith Bilbrey, where POWs harvested over 6,000 bales of cotton and saved the day.<sup>44</sup>

The Lee Wilson & Co. records do not indicate the exact specifics to the wages paid to employ POWs, but that they worked as cotton pickers, general farm labor, and in drainage work. However, for this study, Lee Wilson & Co. serves as a pillar of the plantation system as one of the largest cotton producers in the U.S. at the time and shows how planters shifted more to waged labor and a mechanized system. As the tenant-based plantation system crumbled during the war, POWs and then Braceros filled the company's immediate labor needs and eased the transition to a post-war mechanized cotton industry. To better show the exact specifics of how POW labor became utilized by the planter elite in Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta to keep wages low, Mabel Gieseck and the Lansing Company's records detail the collusive process.

### **Arkansas's Queen Cotton**

By World War II, Mabel H. Gieseck, affectionately known locally as “Miss Mabel,” became a prominent planter and businesswoman in the Arkansas Delta. Born in Monroeville, Ohio, on January 14, 1889, Gieseck later relocated to Arkansas in 1908 and began working for the Lansing Wheelbarrow Company (later the Lansing Company) in 1915 at the company's branch office in Parkin, Arkansas, where she worked for 41 years. In 1902, the Lansing

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44. D.V. Maloch, “Narrative Report of County Extension Agent,” South Mississippi County. December 1, 1944, to November 30, 1945, cited in Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire*, p. 216. A bale of cotton is about 480-500 lbs. of compressed cotton after already being ginned. It takes a couple of thousand pounds of hand-picked cotton to make a bale.

Wheelbarrow Company, originally of Lansing, Michigan, purchased 11,000 acres of virgin timberland outside of Parkin, where they constructed a large mill to cut and harvest the mostly gum trees needed to manufacture wheelbarrows and trucks. After selling the sawmill operation in 1918, the Lansing Company used the cleared land to begin its expansive agricultural business in cotton and moved into land development in commercial and residential real estate. Additionally, the Lansing Company played a fundamental role in developing the city's public works and established a municipal system under the Parkin Water & Light Company.<sup>45</sup>

Agnes Louise Hamill Park ran the Lansing Company as the manager in Parkin, Arkansas, from 1912 until her death in 1943, when Mabel Gieseck took over until her death in 1956.<sup>46</sup> Both A.H. Park and Gieseck became very influential in business and their community, and they worked closely together as friends and business partners in numerous ventures, which included the Lansing Company, the White Oaks Farm at Cherry Valley, Arkansas, the Park & Gieseck Farm, the Gieseck Cooperative Gin Company, Three Way Cash Store, and the Delta Mercantile Company. Additionally, Park served as the president of the Parkin School Board for over 25 years and as the chairman of the first Board of Directors of the Parkin Home Bank. Gieseck served as secretary-treasurer for the Cross County Fair, a member of the Arkansas Welfare Commission, the Cross County Farmer's Association, and the Cotton Production Committee for the Agricultural Council of Arkansas.<sup>47</sup>

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45. "Biographical Sketch," in Finding Aid for Mabel H. Gieseck Collection, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

46. "Mrs. Agnes Park," *Arkansas Gazette*. Little Rock, AR. October 31, 1943.

47. "Biographical Sketch" in Finding Aid for Mabel H. Gieseck Collection, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

After A.H. Park's passing in 1943, Gieseck became the manager of the Lansing Company and the various other businesses, many of which focused on cotton production utilizing over 11,000 acres of land. Gieseck, who never married, sat atop a cotton plantation empire in a male-dominated industry, yet she still closely connected with the planters and shared in many of their common interests. For example, Gieseck enjoyed hunting, fishing, traveling, horseback riding, and breeding Aberdeen Angus cattle for show.<sup>48</sup> Gieseck and the Lansing Company's meticulous record-keeping offers one of the best resources over the inner workings of Arkansas's cotton planters and POW branch camps. Gieseck's records, through her membership in the Cross County Farmer's Association, detail the development and operations of what became known as the Wynne Prison Camp Association, which came to be the largest POW branch camp in Arkansas, holding over 700 POWs. Although the only female in the organization, Gieseck garnered enough support to be nominated by the Board of Directors to become a director of the association.<sup>49</sup>

### **Cross County and Wynne Prison Camp Association**

Mabel Gieseck belonged to the Cross County Farmer's Association and became one of the 23 founding members of the Wynne Prison Camp Association. Gieseck purchased three membership shares for \$675 in the association at \$225 apiece, which theoretically entitled her to

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48. "Biographical Sketch" in Finding Aid for Mabel H. Gieseck Collection.

49. Whether or not she became director is left unclear, but the wealth of data and information, such as bank statements and deposits, would indicate her being elected as a director. J.E. Hollan, Chairman of Wynne Prison Camp Association, letter to Mabel Gieseck, October 20, 1944.

use up to 75 POWs once they became available. The 23 members, under the leadership of the association's president, J.E. Hollan, developed a plan to build a POW camp near Wynne, AR, with an original investment of \$7,875. The Wynne camp would serve as a local labor branch camp to aid in cotton chopping and harvest, designed to hold 600 POWs brought from the Camp Robinson POW base camp.<sup>50</sup> The association applied for a POW branch camp in January 1944. To build such a camp, the Arkansas Extension Service had to certify the county's labor need and determine the prevailing wage for cotton laborers for the War Manpower Commission.

To do so, the WMC and Extension Service go to the Cross County Extension agent to provide this information on the county's labor needs. Using state and county agents to determine the prevailing wages and the labor needs of each county for POW labor created the two main ways for planters to manipulate the WMC and War Department for their benefit. Speaking on it nationally, labor historian Cindy Hahamovitch found that "The WFA insisted publicly that growers assigned POWS were required to pay prevailing wages; however, privately they admitted that few states actually held hearings to determine what 'prevailing rates' were. County agents would sometimes just poll local growers and settle on a figure, and these same officials determined whether a labor shortage actually existed."<sup>51</sup>

For the Cross County, their agent Wilborn "W.B." Proctor did just that for the Arkansas planters. Proctor, a career employee for the USDA Extension Service, served as the Cross County Extension Service agent in 1944, a position he would hold over the next decade. Proctor, an active member of his community, served as a member of the Wynne Baptist Church, Rotary

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50. "Wynne Prison Camp Membership," letter to Wynne Prison Camp Member (Mabel Gieseck) June 12, 1945. Gieseck/Lansing Archive, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

51. Cindy Hahamovitch, *Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 178.

Club, Epsilon Sigma Phi (Extension Honorary Fraternity), Masonic Lodge, Fort Smith Agrata, Lions Club, and Kiwanis Club, and director of the Arkansas County Agent's Association and managed the Cross County Fair (where Mabel Gieseck served as treasurer).<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, in his career, W.B. Proctor had substantial working relationships with prominent planters and ginners in Cross County, such as J.E. Hollan and Edward "E.D." McKnight. Hollan served as the Cross County Framers Association president and Wynne Prison Camp Association's chairman. On the other hand, E.D. McKnight served on the Executive Committee for the Agricultural Council of Arkansas and as the president of the Cross County Farm Bureau, Parkin Prison Camp Association, and the Parkin School Board. McKnight also owned three memberships in the Wynne Prison Camp Association and was a member of the Rotary Club with Proctor. McKnight, Proctor, and Hollan in Cross County demonstrate the interconnectedness between the planters and their organizations with the Extension Service. Their involvement in these organizations amplified their voice and lobbying power from Cross County to the state level with the Agriculture Council of Arkansas and Extension Service to the national level with the American Farm Bureau Federation.<sup>53</sup>

Proctor and Hollan particularly worked closely together on the camp's construction and matters related to the acquisition of POWs, frequently both signing correspondence together on the Arkansas Extension Service letterhead.<sup>54</sup> On his own accord or through strong influence from the planters, Proctor became a strong advocate for POW labor in Cross County and played an

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52. Robert W Chowning, *History of Cross County, Arkansas, 1955: A Narrative Historical Edition Preserving the Record of the Growth and Development of Cross County, Arkansas*. Wynne, AR: Wynne Progress, 1955.

53. Robert W Chowning, *History of Cross County, Arkansas, 1955*.

54. Assorted letters found in Gieseck/Gathings Collections.

influential role in making the Wynne Camp the largest branch camp in Arkansas, with over 700 POWs. In one such letter about setting up another POW camp at Parkin in Cross County, Proctor lobbied for help from Congressman E.C. Gathings, as Proctor said, “We appreciate your splendid support and help you have given us all along and would like to ask that you continue to help us push this through.”<sup>55</sup> As for the Wynne Camp, Proctor alerted all the Cross County Farmers Association members of the POW camp's approval on April 21, 1944, and asked for a meeting. Proctor wrote, “In order that we may go forward with our part of the camp it is necessary that we have a meeting of all of the members of the entire association next Tuesday morning April 25 at 10:00 A.M., War Time in the courtroom. DON'T FAIL TO BE HERE ON TIME.”<sup>56</sup>

What this meeting was about is unclear, but the OPMG had already approved the Wynne camp, and military officials from Fort Robinson had staked out the necessary buildings and fences to begin construction in the next week. However, one of the few things left to be decided by the Cross County Extension Agent would be establishing the “prevailing wages” that planters would pay to hire the POW labor. It may have been the first wage scale meeting, but on July 28, 1944, W.B. Proctor explicitly wrote that they would hold a wage scale hearing on August 3 in the same Wynne courtroom. As the first meeting was only for Cross County Farmers Association members, this time Proctor asked Mabel Gieseck and the members something different:

We are requesting that you bring at least one farmer who is not a member of the Association and probably a share-cropper or a wage hand, who would make a statement as to the prevailing wage in his community for either rice harvesting or cotton picking. Please do not over look this matter as it will not be considered a wage scale hearing by

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55. W.B. Proctor to Congressman E.C. Gathings, letter February 3, 1945. Gathings Archive.

56. W.B. Proctor to All Members of the Cross County Farmers Association, letter April 21, 1944. Gieseck/Lansing Co. Archive. President Franklin Roosevelt instituted year-round Daylight-Saving Time during World War II, called "War Time," from February 9, 1942, to September 30, 1945.

the state office, with only members of the Association present. The reason is that organized labor is interested in wage scale.<sup>57</sup>

The *Arkansas Gazette* reported on this meeting called by the Extension Service at the direction of the War Manpower Commission, in total 26 “farmers, landowners, laborers and sharecroppers attended the meeting,” and they determined that last year \$1.25-2.00 per 100 pounds was paid for picking cotton.<sup>58</sup> These numbers are at the very bottom range for cotton picking, where STFU argued for \$3-3.50 per 100 pounds should be the minimum accepted. Thus, the planter-dominated meeting determined that the wages paid for POW labor should be between their favorable limits, much lower than labor unions' demands. The sparsely attended and planter-dominated hearing became a very crucial moment in POW labor utilization in Cross County and Arkansas. Seeing how the Wynne Prison Camp Association had 23 members, and only 26 people in total attended this crucial wage hearing, the planters now established a favorable wage for the upcoming harvest.

### **Utilizing POW Labor by the Numbers**

After the camp's completion on June 5, 1944, the first 200 POWs became available, coinciding with the summer chopping season or hoeing weeds in the cotton fields. To hire POW labor, one would contact the camp's commanding officer or designated work manager the day

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57. W.B. Proctor to Mabel Gieseck and Members of the Cross County Farmers Association, letter July 28, 1944. Gieseck/Lansing Co. Archive.

58. “Harvest Labor Plans Discussed At Wynne.” *Arkansas Gazette*, August 11, 1944.

before, then one could pick them up from the camp in the morning at 0700 and have them returned in the evening by 1700, but times varied for harvest seasons. Members of the associations, such as Mabel Gieseck, with her three memberships and total \$675 investment in the Wynne Camp, received priority access to the available prisoners. Based on the planter-dominated wage scale hearings held in August in Wynne that met no resistance from the WMC or the Arkansas Extension Service, they determined that the cost to use POW labor for such tasks as chopping and weeding would be set for “general farm labor” at \$0.18 per working hour for an eight-hour day (later increased to \$0.22 after May 1, 1945).<sup>59</sup>

Other general farm work allowed by the OPMG for POWs included: fence building and repair; construction, cleaning, and draining of drainage ditches; cutting firewood and hauling it; cutting fence posts; building culverts; construction and repair of field roadbeds; cleaning and straightening small water channels; destruction of noxious weeds; carpenters helpers in the repair of farm buildings; cleaning barns and hauling manure; blacksmith helpers in repairing farm machinery and equipment; cutting and hauling logs for construction and repair of farm buildings; feeding livestock; shucking and shelling corn; clearing land including the sodding, seeding, fertilizing; unloading track and carload of seed, feed, fertilizer, fuel, etc. for farm use, loading cars with produce, cotton, cottonseed, corn, soybeans, and small grains. It explicitly stated that POWs could not be used as mechanics, blacksmiths, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, bricklayers, cement work, and the construction of buildings within city limits.<sup>60</sup>

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59. “Wynne War Prison Camp: Application for Prisoners for Farm Work,” April 23, 1945, Gieseck/Lansing Archive, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

60. Headquarters Prisoner of War Branch Camp Wynne, Arkansas, “Instructions to Contractor for Prisoner of War Labor.” Signed by Captain Charles Crain, CMP, Commanding, no date. Gieseck/Lansing Archive



To employ POW labor, an association fee had to be paid to the camp investor association, in this case, the Wynne Prison Camp Association. Furthermore, planters and farmers who used POW labor also received a \$0.40 per man (POW and guard) per day transportation allowance to incentivize POW labor usage.<sup>61</sup> As R.A Fisher, a manager for the Wynne Prison Camp Association, put it in a letter to Gieseck over the cost to POWs for general farm labor, “Under our present contract, all work of this kine[sic] is 18¢ per hour, which amounts to \$1.44 for 8 hours work, plus 20¢ Association fee or \$1.64 less 40¢ transportation allowance, or a net cost of \$1.24 per man per day. And as you know, all P.W. labor may be put on a task basis.”<sup>62</sup>

Frequently, the transportation allowance fluctuated on the contracts made between the commanding officer in charge of the branch camp and the camp associations. The WMC memo states, "Prisoner of War Circular 21, 1944, paragraph 9c, govern allowance for transportation of prisoners of war and guards between the camp and worksite and return. The maximum allowance is 1¢ per mile per man, but not exceed 50¢ per man per day. Lesser amounts may and should be agreed upon by the contracting parties when appropriate."<sup>63</sup> The memo also stated that many of the transportation allowance forms received by the WMC thus far had been submitted incorrectly, as they did not calculate the distance to the job sites.

At the Wynne Prison Camp, they incorrectly calculated the transportation allowance for Gieseck and the other members and instead issued a flat allowance for transportation. At the

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61. R.A. Fisher, letter to Mabel Gieseck. November 26, 1944. Gieseck/Lansing Archive. R.A. Fisher, letter to Lansing Co., May 3, 1945. Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

62. R.A. Fisher, letter to Mabel Gieseck. November 26, 1944. Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

63. War Manpower Commission, "Utilization of Prisoner-of-War Labor," memo to all Regional Manpower Directors, May 22, 1944. found in microfilm for Office of the Provost Marshal General, Prisoner of War Operations Division. *Historical Monograph: Prisoner of War Operations Division, 1945-46*, Vol. 1-4. Washington: Library of Congress, Photoduplication Service, 1974.

most, it was 25 miles from the Wynne Prison Camp to the Gieseck and Lansing Company properties in the Wynne, Parkin, and Cherry Valley areas, but they received a flat transportation allowance of \$0.40 per man transported, as did all of the members. Between October 16 – November 15, 1944, the Lansing Company’s receipts show that they transported 953 POWs and 42 guards to their farm for labor that month, so the Wynne Prison Camp Association wrote them a check for \$398 for their transportation allowance.<sup>64</sup> Of course, the money did help offset the cost of transporting POWs to and from the camp daily, but \$0.40 per person is quite generous when gas during the war cost \$0.21 per gallon, and the government did not offer such a uniform and lucrative program for hauling local labor.<sup>65</sup>

The divide in calculating wages paid for POWs becomes disconnected between government/military policy that calculates everything in man-hours or pay per hour and the planters typically calculate everything in cotton weight per 100 lbs. (cwt.) and requiring workers to meet specific cotton quotas, so pay per meeting the quota.<sup>66</sup> A lot of the push for an hourly wage stems from the push for equivalent wages by local labor to the \$0.30 an hour for a 10-hour day the federal government established for Mexican laborers by the Bracero Program 1942. In translating the general agreement into cotton fields, it assumed the average civilian picker could pick 150 lbs. of cotton in a 10-hour day, so they argued for a \$2.00 per cwt. for picking cotton, which would equal \$3.00 a day, the same as an hourly wage of \$0.30.<sup>67</sup>

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64. R.A. Fisher, letter to Lansing Co., n.d. Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

65. “Average Annual Retail Price of Gasoline, 1929-2011,” Vehicle Technologies Office. August 20, 2012. <<https://www.energy.gov/eere/vehicles/fact-741-august-20-2012-historical-gasoline-prices-1929-2011>>

66. Cwt. is the abbreviation for hundredweight, formerly centum weight. Planters and merchants often calculated wages in cwt., so 100 lbs. cotton equals cwt.

67. “A Plan to Utilize Agricultural Labor of the South,” memorandum by H.L. Mitchell, General Secretary, Southern Tenant Farmers Union, October 6, 1943. Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, 1934-1970, Microfilm edition, Microfilming Corporation of America (now ProQuest). University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

In addition to reimbursing their investments, POW camp associations members after June 8, 1945, had the association's fee dropped to \$0.05 per POW used, while nonmembers still had to pay a \$0.20 association fee per POW. Thus, Wynne Camp members, such as Gieseck and Hollan, after the hourly rate increased from \$0.18 to \$0.22 on May 1, 1945, and the association fees dropped in June, they paid ***\$1.41 per POW for an 8-hour day for general labor, after the transportation allowance.*** A nonmember would still pay *\$1.56 per POW* after the transportation allowance, but most of the POWs went to the Wynne Camp Association members.<sup>68</sup> Also, the POW camps calculated all cotton chopping or farm labor done by POWs during spring and Summer at the hourly rates for general farm labor, except picking and pulling cotton and rice harvesting, for which each had their own special wages.<sup>69</sup>

When calculating precisely for POWs picking or pulling cotton, the pay becomes a bit more convoluted. Sometimes the records from the Wynne Prison Camp found in Gieseck's archive show a flat fee of \$1.50 per 100 lbs. of cotton picked by POWs for the cotton-picking in September and October 1944, and it increased to a \$2.00 flat fee for cotton picking after November 1, 1944, while cotton pulling remained a \$1.00 cwt. flat fee for the remainder of the war.<sup>70</sup> They would still have the same travel allowances and association fees, so for POWs

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68. Numerous Wynne War Prison Camp receipts, found in Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

69. "Composite labor report. October 16 thru November 15, 1944." Wynne Prison Camp Association, found in Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

70. "Composite labor report. October 16 thru November 15, 1944." Wynne Prison Camp Association, found in Gieseck/Lansing Archive. Cotton picking involves picking out just the cotton fibers from the boll and leaving it and the burr on the plant. Cotton pulling is collecting the entire boll with the burrs. Cotton picking is much more labor-intensive than cotton pulling, so picking generally garnered a higher wage. Cotton pulling takes a more advanced ginning process to clean the cotton, and civilian wages for pulling cotton generally were around \$1.00 – \$1.25 cwt.

picking cotton, the planters paid **\$1.30 in September 1944 and \$1.80 after November 1944** for each POW to pick 100 lbs. of cotton. After the association fee changed to \$0.05 in June 1945, the planters paid **\$1.65 cwt. per POW for picking cotton.**

During the peak of the cotton harvest from October 16 thru November 15, 1944, the members/planters of the Wynne Prison Camp Association utilized about 400 POWs a day for a total of 10,117 man/days of labor and planters paid to the U.S. government \$16,925.94 and \$2,111.95 in association fees. From the \$16,925.94, \$5,906.04 came from cotton picking at \$1.50 cwt., \$4,946.24 for cotton picking at \$2.00 cwt., \$1,944.36 at the \$0.18 an hour, \$4,129.30 from rice harvesting at \$0.30 an hour.<sup>71</sup>

It would not be outside the realm of possibility that Gieseck and other planters of the association manipulated the lax supervision and used POWs contracted for general farm labor or cotton pulling at the lower wages to actually pick cotton. For example, one record of the planters paying \$2.00 per cwt. for POWs to pick cotton came from the Wynne Prison Camp report, "Utilization Report P.W. Labor, Feb. 1-16, 1945," where only 37 POWs total used over those two weeks picked cotton. During that same time, the report showed 1,297 POWs pulled cotton at \$1.00 per cwt, and 915 POWs worked as general farm labor at the \$0.18 an hour. Due to it being during a late-season harvest of cotton, they may have been pulling cotton more, but it would be incredibly easy to mistake pulling and picking cotton for someone not accustomed to agriculture while the planters only paid the \$1.00 cwt.

In one instance, Gieseck and the Lansing Co., in September 1944, received some complaints from Army officials for improperly using POW labor when they had contracted 39

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71. "Composite labor report. October 16 thru November 15, 1944." Wynne Prison Camp Association, found in Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

POW laborers for general farm labor and used six of them as carpenters to repair houses and buildings on the plantation.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, on June 1, 1945, all Cross County Association members received a sternly written letter from their president, J.E. Hollan, to stop paying the guards as it could jeopardize the entire POW camp operation. Hollan wrote, “This condition MUST be stopped as of this date, in order to maintain the camp and not impair the members interest, who are not paying the guards. You can readily see what a continuation of this practice will lead to.”<sup>73</sup> Hollan does not clarify whether the planters bribed the guards or paid them to work in the fields.

After the camp's one-year mark of operation, the Wynne Prison Camp Association compiled all of the figures on the camp's operations and sent a letter to J.E. Hollan on June 30, 1945. It stated the camp held 731 POWs, but planters had filed 26 more membership requests, which would require 650 more POWs. The breakdown shows that the camp's one full year of operation paid \$122,330.18 to the U.S. government (approximately \$1,884,301 in today's money).<sup>74</sup> Despite Germany's surrender from World War II the month prior, J.E. Hollan used this information to lobby further for more POWs in Arkansas.

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72. Mabel H. Gieseck, telegram to E.C. Gathings, dated September 29, 1944. Gieseck/Gathings Collection.

73. J.E. Hollan, letter to Cross County Farmers' Association, June 1, 1945. Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

74. Wynne Prison Camp, letter to J.E. Hollan with one-year breakdown attached, June 30, 1945, Gieseck/Lansing Archive. Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator by U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for June 1945 in December 2021 dollars.

## **“Prevailing Wages”**

The policies for POWs used by civilian contractors made by the Office of the Provost Marshal General and the War Manpower Commission stipulated that “Prisoners of war shall not be employed to displace employed workers or in any activity which will impair the wages, working conditions, and employment opportunities of free labor . . . Prisoners of war shall not be made available for private employment at a cost the employer of less than that for free labor.”<sup>75</sup> This policy, in practice, became translated as employers will pay the “prevailing wage” to use POW labor, the two words that lay at the heart of this labor struggle in the Mississippi Delta, prevailing wages. Newspapers across the country that advertised or reported on the labor usage of POWs almost all denoted that the POWs would be contracted out at the prevailing wages. When the planters and their organizations lobbied for more POWs, they always agreed to pay the prevailing wages.

The multiple definitions of the word “prevailing” provides an excellent trope to describe the war over wages. On the one hand, prevailing means “existing at a particular time; current,” but on the other hand, it means “having the most appeal or influence; prevalent.”<sup>76</sup> In federal government policy and theory, calculating the prevailing wages for picking cotton fits more with the first definition, as it should be pretty easy to calculate in cotton as every cotton picker is paid per 100 lbs. at a fixed wage. However, setting the prevailing wage in Arkansas fits more closely with the second definition, where the planters had the most influence through decades of oppressive practices towards cotton-picking labor in establishing the most prevalent wages to

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75. War Manpower Commission, “Procedure to be followed in Hiring Out Prisoner of War Labor.” August 12, 1943. Records of the War Manpower Commission. RG 211, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

76. Definitions for “prevailing” are from the *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

their favor. Did Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta planters pay the prevailing wages when utilizing POW labor? Simply put, no. After complexly accounting for the years of abusive labor practices in sharecropping and planter organizations geared toward ensuring low wages for cotton pickers, the answer also is no. The wages paid by planters to use POW labor in Arkansas, even if on the surface matched the wages paid to local labor, for example, \$2.00 per 100 lbs. of cotton picked, the transportation allowance incentive assured it would always be cheaper to use POWs instead of local labor.

What were the local prevailing cotton-picking wages in the cotton harvests of 1944 and 1945? Specifically for picking cotton in Arkansas, the Lee Wilson & Co. flier stated that they paid \$2.50 per 100 lbs. cotton (cwt.) for its hired wage pickers during the 1944 harvest.<sup>77</sup> For cotton picking in Arizona, USDA wage boards in 1942 set the rate between 3 and 4 cents per lbs. of cotton, so \$3.00-4.00 cwt.<sup>78</sup> In the meantime, organizations such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union since 1942 argued for a minimum of \$3 cwt. wage. Although the STFU argued for nearly double the cost of using POWs, over 10,000 STFU members in the Memphis area earned a \$3 cwt. wage for picking cotton in 1943. The STFU argued that no labor shortage existed, just a shortage of labor willing to work under for \$1.50 cwt.<sup>79</sup> The STFU in 1942 conducted its own survey on wages for labor, and it concluded that on average, cotton pickers in the Mississippi Delta received \$1-1.25 cwt., a price remnant of the Great Depression when

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77. "The Wilson Plantation: Special Arkansas Bulletin," Lee Wilson and Co. flier sent to War Relocation Authority, July 20, 1945. Found in Lee Wilson and Company Records (MC 1289), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

78. Samuel Liss, "The Concept and Determination of Prevailing Wages in Agriculture during World War II," *Agricultural History* 24, no. 1 (1950): 4-18.

79. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Pick or Fight: The Emergency Farm Labor Program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas During World War II," *Agricultural History* 64 (Spring 1990): 74-85.

cotton sold for 10 cents a pound, but now sold for 20-30 cents a pound depending on the cotton staple and quality.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, the STFU found extremely exploitive wages where African American populations in Mississippi received 50-60 cents a day.<sup>81</sup>

Even Arkansas's POW contracts for general farm labor (\$0.18 and \$0.22 an hour) were set at meager wages. In Nebraska, for POWs used in agriculture, a Tri-County labor board for Phelps, Kearney, and Gosper counties set the wage rate to use POWs for common farm labor at \$0.50 per POW per hour, such as throwing hay, and \$0.60 an hour for more specialized POW labor, such as detasseling or shelling corn.<sup>82</sup> Thus, for a farmer in Nebraska, it cost about \$3.60 per POW for an eight-hour day after the same transportation allowance for general farm labor, whereas for Mabel Gieseck and the Lansing Company, it cost only \$1.24 per POW. For POWs in Texas, they established the general farm work at \$0.25 an hour (\$2.00 a day) and \$3.00 per day for rice harvesting.<sup>83</sup> The Wabaunsee County Farm Labor Committee in Kansas established the general farm work wage to be paid to use POWs at \$0.37 an hour per POW (\$2.96 a day).<sup>84</sup>

Comparatively, nonexempt domestic labor received a federal minimum wage of \$0.30 an hour from 1939-1944 and \$0.40 an hour after October 24, 1945, established by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (\$2.40 and \$3.20 for an eight-hour day).<sup>85</sup> Mexican migrant laborers that

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80. H.L. Mitchell, STFU General Secretary, letter to H.L. Olden, October 13, 1942. STFU Papers.

81 "A Plan to Mobilize 10,000 Agricultural Workers in the South to Harvest Crops in Other Areas," Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Memorandum, no date. STFU Papers

82. "Wage Board Sets Tri-County Farm Pay at 50¢ For Common Labor and 60¢ For Special Work," *Holdrege Daily Citizen*, March 11, 1944.

83. Arnold P. Krammer, "When the 'Afrika Korps' Came to Texas." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1977): 247-82.

84. Penny Clark, "Farm Work and Friendship: The German Prisoner of War Camp at Lake Wabaunsee," *Emporia State Research Studies* 36, no. 3 (1988): 5-43.

85. Jonathan Grossman, "Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938: Maximum Struggle for a Minimum Wage." *Monthly Labor Review* 101, no. 6 (1978): 22-30.



came to the U.S. as a part of the Bracero Program starting in 1942 also received “prevailing area wages,” but it guaranteed no less than \$0.30 an hour.<sup>86</sup> In the case of POWs, the OPMG policies stipulated that employers had to pay the prevailing wages, but the guaranteed wage went as low as \$0.80 a day, a direct offset of the POW cost.

### **Agricultural Council of Arkansas Goes to D.C.**

After the first use of POWs in the cotton fields in 1943 and 1944 in the Mississippi Delta, the planters knew they had a new labor regime that could help fill the void left by fleeing tenant farmers but would also keep the wages low for cotton picking. Furthermore, using POWs as cheap general farm labor allowed the planters to no longer rely on the tenant-based plantation system where they only received half the profits from a harvest. They now had pools of labor that could be hired out for a cheap wage available when needed to capture the profit from the entire harvest, but more importantly, when not needed in the down periods in cotton, they did not cost them anything and did not remain on the plantation. With increased mechanization and the capability of herbicides in the cotton fields, planters could see a near future where a plantation could be run with only a handful of wage laborers. During the war, instead of housing and dealing with tenants, they could use POWs and not have to pay any of those costs and receive all the profits from their crops. The mission quickly became to obtain as many POWs as possible.

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86. Barbara S. Heisler, “The ‘Other Braceros’: Temporary Labor and German Prisoners of War in the United States, 1943-1946,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 31 (Summer 2007), 239-271.

Thus, the planters in Arkansas formed a general committee through the Agricultural Council of Arkansas composed of one representative from each of the POW camps in the state and held a meeting in Little Rock on June 30, 1944. This general committee passed a resolution to send a delegate committee to Washington, D.C., “for the prime purpose of persuading the Government to fulfill its signed contracts to furnish prisoner of war labor to the authorized camps in Arkansas.”<sup>87</sup> Unsurprisingly, the three-man delegate committee included Waldo Frazier, secretary of the Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation, Harvey R. Adams, secretary-manager of the Ag Council, and C.N. Houck of Marianna, Ag Council founder and its first president. The three leaders representing Arkansas's cotton planters and POW camp associations held a meeting in the office of Paul McNutt, the director of the War Manpower Commission. The meeting's attendance included: both U.S. Senators representing Arkansas, Hattie Caraway and John L. McClellan, Arkansas's members of the House of Representatives William F. Norrell, Ezekiel C. Gathings, Wilbur Mills, Oris Harris, and Brooks Hays, General B.M. Bryan of the OPMG (the eventual successor as Provost Marshal General in 1945) and Colonel C.S. Urwiller of the Army Service Command and OPMG, another unnamed general from the War Manpower Commission, and a Mr. Holley representing the War Food Administration.<sup>88</sup>

In the meeting, Senator McClellan acted as chairman for the delegation, and C.N. Houck outlined the labor situation in Arkansas. Houck stressed "the fact that crops had been planted and

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87. “Joint Committee Report: Prisoner of War Labor” H.R. Adams, Agricultural Council of Arkansas, no date, found in Gathings Archive. The initial meeting that decided to send a delegation took place June 30, 1944, and on the report, it dates a meeting that took place on June 5, but this may have been a mistype and should have said July 5, 1944, as the week the meetings took place. It has to be 1944, as the report indicates that General Bryan said there were 198,000 POWs in the U.S., and the Army Service Forces and War Department, “Monthly Census of Prisoners of War Interned in the Continental United States,” shows that they held 196,948 POWs at the end of June 1944. H.R. Adams, the author of the “Joint Committee Report,” states he is writing this the Tuesday after getting back from D.C., so the date of the report is most likely sometime mid-July 1944.

88. “Joint Committee Report” H.R. Adams, no date, found in Gathings Archive, 1.

money invested in the prisoner of war camps as a result of assurance, both public and private, by the ranking officers of the Eighth Service Command that war prisoners would be available to fulfill the contracts entered into by the Government and the contractors."<sup>89</sup> McNutt of the WMC and General Bryan reiterated several times that according to their information, "Arkansas was indicated as a surplus labor area" and that they had received requests for the labor of 149,000 POWs with only 102,000 available, so no POWs available. The committee challenged the surplus labor figures to no avail, as H.R. Adams stated in the Joint Committee Report, "A summary of the results of the conference in the office of Mr. McNutt was that there was no hope for additional labor until more was received from Europe . . ."<sup>90</sup>

Since they did not receive the desired support from some of the most powerful administrators and directors of POW labor, the committee pressed on and met with more government and military officials to lobby for more POWs for Arkansas, including the director of the War Food Administration. In their trip to Washington, D.C., the Ag Council committee met with every Congressman and Senator from Arkansas often multiple times, except J. William Fulbright, who was gearing up for his successful run for the Arkansas Senate seat in the upcoming election. Eventually, the committee found an empathetic officer in Colonel C.S. Urwiller, who told them, "Being a Georgia farmer and having been stationed for the past two years in Memphis, he felt he understood our problem very well."<sup>91</sup> Col. Urwiller worked for the Army Service Forces and the Office of the Provost Marshal General in the Prisoner of War Division and helped determine the supply of POWs to the Service Commands. Despite attending

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89. "Joint Committee Report" H.R. Adams, no date, found in Gathings Archive, 1

90. "Joint Committee Report" H.R. Adams, no date, found in Gathings Archive, 2.

91. "Joint Committee Report" H.R. Adams, no date, found in Gathings Archive, 2.

the first meeting in WMC director McNutt's office, Col. Urwiller now promised the Arkansas committee more POWs. H.R. Adams writes, "He said he definitely could promise at least 3000 additional prisoners and possibly up to 5000 around September 1 to the area, and he would recommend that the commitments made to Arkansas would be filled before allotting any to other states."<sup>92</sup>

In a strange coincidence of events, Col. Urwiller's new promise to the delegates for more POWs to aid Arkansas agriculture in the summer of 1944 may have been the same event that brought German POW Edwin Pelz to the Mississippi Delta. After his capture on June 24, 1944, following the outbreak of the D-Day landings in Normandy, Pelz received his final camp placement and new work assignment at the Memphis Army Service Forces Depot outside Memphis, Tennessee, in August 1944. The very depot where Col. Urwiller previously served as the quartermaster prior to working in Washington, D.C.<sup>93</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The planters firmly controlled the wages in the Mississippi Delta, and with the introduction of POWs as a new labor regime, they ensured favorable wages. POWs served as a lifeline to the planters as the tenant-dependent plantation system further crumbled. The planters knew they could not keep POWs as a long-term solution, but they could keep wages low and ease the transition into a mechanized and strictly waged labor future. As the data reveals from

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92. "Joint Committee Report" H.R. Adams, no date, found in Gathings Archive, 2.

93. "Urwiller To Become Depot Quartermaster," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. October 7, 1941.

the Lansing Company and Mabel Gieseck's records, it was more cost-effective to use POW labor than any other labor source. For example, after the membership fee reduction and the transportation allowance, the Lansing Company paid at most \$1.65 per POW to pick 100 pounds of cotton, while it would cost at least \$2.10 to use local labor with no transportation allowance.<sup>94</sup> Ultimately, planters could sustain cotton production by cheaply using POW labor to undercut local labor's higher wage demands. Even if they had to pay the same prevailing wage as local labor, the transportation allowance alone of \$0.40 per POW and guard transported per day made it quite lucrative and more appealing to use POWs instead of sharecroppers or local labor.

While the War Manpower Commission (WMC) declared that POWs could not work for reduced wages or in the place of available local labor, these requirements became challenging to enforce. As the head of the WMC Rural Industries Division admitted, "Prisoners of war have been used in agricultural employment in various instances and perhaps at less than the prevailing wage of domestic labor for similar work."<sup>95</sup> Even before the added complications with POWs, the STFU and the planter elite had quarreled over wages. In 1945 when the STFU demanded a picking wage of \$3.50 per 100 pounds of cotton, the planters eventually secured a federal wage ceiling of \$2.10.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the STFU, in its monthly bulletin, highlighted the collusion

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94. Using the 100 pounds of cotton harvested quota per person provides the best opportunity to compare labor costs between POWs and local labor, such as migrants, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers. The average and passed wage for local labor in Arkansas was \$2.10. Between 1942 and 1944, the wages fluctuated between as low as \$1.25 to as high as \$3.00 per 100 lbs. of picked cotton. For these comparisons, all costs will be for 100 lbs. of cotton picked per person/POW, which was the quota for POWs at the start of the war and later increased to 150 lbs. in some cases, while African American sharecroppers/laborers often had daily quotas of 200-300 pounds of cotton. These figures do not account for all externalities of the cost of labor and assume that the cost of equipment and transportation for the farmer/planter would be similar regardless of the labor type used.

95. Nelson Cruikshank to Clinton S. Golden, letter July 20, 1943, Records of the WMC, RG 211, NARA.

96. Press Release, STFU, August 23, 1945, STFU found in Woodruff, Nan Elizabeth, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s," *Journal of Southern History* 60 (May 1994): 263-284.

between the planter elite and the government, as they claimed that “the Farm Labor Committees in each county are either plantation owners or local officials dominated by the planters and these Farm Labor Committees determine the need and set the wage.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, many laborers refused to work for these low wages, and planters continued to utilize POWs.

Eventually, after one year of using POWs and collecting association fees, they fully reimbursed all of the original investments to the founding members of the Wynne POW Camp Association. The Cross County Farmer’s Association even hosted a “Chicken Bar-B-Q & Fish Fry” to celebrate the Wynne POW camp's first anniversary and settling debts in June 1945. To show the collusive and collective nature, it took to establish these camps, the flier for the party denoted, “The celebration to be in honor of those who have helped make our camp a success, including our Army officers, camp personnel, county officials, city officials, Farm Bureau officers and their wives.”<sup>98</sup>

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97. James M. Ward, “‘Nazis Hoe Cotton’: Planters, POWS, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Fall, 2007): 471-492.

98. “Chicken Bar-B-Q & Fish Fry” J.E. Hollan, Cross County Farmers Association, to Mabel Gieseck. Mabel Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

## Chapter 3 - Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Federal Intervention in the Mississippi Delta

*“There is mean things happening in this land  
Mean things happening in this land  
But the union's going on  
The union's growing strong . . .”*<sup>1</sup>

(Chorus of John L. Handcox’s song, “Mean Things Happening in This Land”)

After reflecting on nearly four decades as a Mississippi Delta labor leader and organizer, Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) founder Harry Leland Mitchell dedicated his autobiography to John L. Handcox. Mitchell felt Handcox, as an Arkansan, African American sharecropper turned poet, singer, and union organizer, played an essential role in popularizing the union, or as Mitchell named him, “the troubador[*sic*] of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.”<sup>2</sup> Mitchell also derived the title of his autobiography from Handcox’s song, “Mean Things Happening in This Land.” That song and many others by Handcox perfectly encapsulated the landscape of the decades-long labor strife felt by tenants and sharecroppers by the oppressive planters in the Delta.

In this dissertation, the voice of disgruntled laborers primarily comes in the form of the STFU and one of its founders, H.L. Mitchell, who protested against the use of POWs and foreign migrant labor. The STFU, a biracial union of sharecroppers, farm workers, and migrant laborers

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1. Song quoted in the Dedication in H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979).

2. H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979), Dedication.

formed in eastern Arkansas, climaxed at around 40,000 members in 1940.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, during the war, the STFU fought against the planters' use of POWs, which they correctly assumed was depressing the wages for local workers in the Mississippi Delta. In constant contact with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the STFU reached out to government overseers about POW use, but nobody listened to them. They received several letters from the War Manpower Commission and OPMG saying they would investigate the matter but to no avail.

This chapter will focus on the labor and the STFU in the Mississippi Delta and their struggle with the planters that led to a brutal domestic civil war over wages and treatment in the Delta's cotton fields. The POWs became just another tool utilized by the planters against the STFU. The papers of the STFU and its secretary/president, H.L. Mitchell, found at the University of Arkansas, provide an excellent source on the labor situation in Arkansas, as they received hundreds of letters from workers, sharecroppers, day laborers, labor unions, government, and military officials. The STFU strongly contested the planters' constant labor shortage claims in the Mississippi Delta. As the planters and government officials continually lobbied for more POWs to fill the purported labor shortages (with Arkansas ultimately receiving 23,000 of them), the STFU sent over 12,000 workers to higher-paying jobs in Arizona, New

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3. The estimate is most likely exaggerated or incorrect. The STFU often counted that each membership represented the entire tenant family, so they counted four or five people more for every actual membership. They also estimated the numbers of supporters who did not have the funds or jobs to pay dues.

H.L. Mitchell's testimony before the U.S. Congress, House, Hearing Before the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, Pursuant to House Resolution 63 and House Resolution 491, Part 2, 76th Congress, Montgomery, Alabama Hearings, August 14-16, 1940, 623- 628. Cited in Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Pick or Fight: The Emergency Farm Labor Program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas During World War II," *Agricultural History* 64 (Spring 1990): 74-85.



Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Florida, and California in 1944 and 1945 in what they termed the “New Underground Railroad.”<sup>4</sup>

### **“Mean Things” of the Mississippi Delta**

A series of terrible events plagued the Mississippi Delta from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, disturbing the decades-old plantation system formed after the American Civil War. Boll weevil infestations, the Great Flood of 1927, the Stock Market Crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and severe droughts from 1930 to 1931 sent cotton prices plummeting. The federal government intervened in the Delta through New Deal agencies and policies to aid the despondent farmers, sharecroppers, and growers. As historian Jeannie Whayne put it, “The introduction of the federal programs offered an opportunity to assert some independence and inspired some to attempt to gain a place at the federal feeding trough.”<sup>5</sup>

Federal agricultural programs and funding by the 1930s through the New Deal and even during World War II became a new weapon in the battle over the cotton fields between planters and labor. The STFU attempted to rely on the federal government through programs such as the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to intervene on their behalf while the planters still

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4. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, (Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979), 215. Additionally, sometimes it was referred to as the Second Underground Railroad. Most of these jobs were designed to be temporary 6–8-week positions during the down periods of cotton production, however it introduced many laborers to much higher wages and many never returned, and it introduced the idea to leave the South. Such instances that Pete Daniel deemed as “going amongst strangers” during the war that led to the migration of millions, detailed in his work, Pete Daniel, “Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II,” *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990): 886-911.

5. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 202.

controlled local and state governments. However, the planters, with much greater influence and support from the American Farm Bureau Federation, also at times successfully used and manipulated the federal government, particularly the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its State Extension Services, to further their own interests. When Congress allocated funding for farm labor, the American Farm Bureau Federation would push it into the hands of the USDA Extension Services and constantly attack and dislodge the FSA that tended to support or offer aid to the laborers and their organizations.

The FSA, staffed with committed New Dealers, would come to the aid of labor and looked to implement fair farm wages, hours, and working conditions, so they became despised by the large-scale planters and growers.<sup>6</sup> The FSA's photographs of rural America in the 1930s showed the harshness, poverty, and difficulties many laborers faced during the depression in an exploitive agriculture system. The FSA photographs included image like Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother." It presented a stark contrast to the idealized USDA's depictions of farm life. As historian Pete Daniel put it, the FSA images served as "poignant reminders of the shift in USDA policy that neglected marginal farmers while subsidizing large operators."<sup>7</sup>

The battle over New Deal policies in the Delta began with the controversial Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, which created the Agriculture Adjustment Administration (AAA) as a part of the USDA. With the support of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the AAA attempted to combat the severe economic situation, which led to some of the lowest agricultural harvest prices since the 1890s due to shrunken international markets and overproduction. To get

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6. Don Mitchell, "Battle/fields: Braceros, Agribusiness, and the Violent Reproduction of the California Agricultural Landscape during World War II," *Journal of Historical Geography* (Vol. 36, No. 2, 2010), 143-156.

7. Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990): 887.

prices back to parity with the golden years of 1909-1914, the AAA tried to reduce production by offering landowners contracts and payment not to grow crops. As policy in the Mississippi Delta, the AAA contracts also required the planters to maintain the typical number of tenants and that they should not pay rent for their accommodation for 1934-1935 and have the same access to credit and farm equipment. Section 7 of the AAA contracts also provided that the payments should be made directly to the tenants. However, this hardly ever happened, as pressure from Southern Democrats in Congress forced the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, to surrender on the issue, and the entire payment would go to the planter to distribute.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, newly common practices on the plantations arose to capture all of the AAA payments: the planters would retain the entirety of the checks, reclassify their tenants as wage laborers, or evict their tenants. In 1936, a U.S. Senate committee examined the parity payments sent to planters in the Mississippi Delta. Oscar Johnston, the president of Mississippi's Delta and Pine Land Company, the eventual founder of the National Cotton Council, the author of Section 7 of the cotton contracts, and the director of finance for the AAA received over \$318,000 in payments between 1933 and 1935. Overall, planters in Arkansas and Mississippi received between 1933-1936 \$2.1 million and \$2.5 million, respectively.<sup>9</sup> The Cotton Section of the AAA conducted a study in Arkansas on how the money affected planters and tenants. On one plantation, the landlord's gross income increased under the AAA from \$51,554 in 1932 to

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8. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 160-162.

9. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Payments Under Agricultural Adjustment Program*, Senate Doc. 274, 74th Congress, Second Session, 1936, 68-71, discussed in Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 171-172.

\$102,202 in 1934, while the average gross income for the tenants fell from \$379 to \$355.<sup>10</sup> These plow-up payments for cotton, and the planters trying to maneuver to capture more of them, led to massive evictions of sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta and became the very event that led to the founding of the STFU.

### **Founding of the STFU**

In mid-July 1934, Hiram Norcross, a St. Louis financier and the absentee owner of the Fairview Plantation in Poinsett County, Arkansas, evicted 23 families from his property. The evictions resulted in some sharecroppers having excess credit at Norcross's mercantile store since the credit depended on the number of acres each tenant farmed for the plantation. After the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and the plow-up incentive, the plantation planted fewer acres, giving them less credit at the store. Norcross surveyed his land and acres each tenant had compared to the credit and decided to have his lawyers evict 23 families, and he believed he should be entitled to all of the AAA plow-up money. Being so late in the cotton season, the evictions were extremely hard on the families, losing their job and home at the same time who had nowhere to go and no way to earn money. Some of the evicted sharecroppers and others met at the plantation schoolhouse to discuss forming a union.<sup>11</sup>

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10. AAA Cotton Section and University of Arkansas College of Agriculture, "Arkansas Plantation Survey, 1935," found in Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 20.

11. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 46-47.

They invited two local socialist leaders to attend: Harry Leland “H.L.” Mitchell and Henry Clay East. After previously being a tenant farmer, Mitchell eventually moved to Tyronza, Arkansas, to own a dry-cleaning business. Clay East came from a landowning family in the area and served as the leading law officer, a township constable, while owning and operating a gas and service station in Tyronza. Mitchell and East had been early adopters of socialist beliefs and organizers in the Mississippi Delta. They became followers of Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party leader and six-time presidential candidate after they invited him to speak in spring 1934. Some of the meeting organizers asked Mitchell and East to help form an organization similar to the Farmers Education and Cooperative Union of America (now the National Farmers Union) but more for sharecroppers.

Immediately at the meeting, the question of race arose, and the white and black attendees wondered if there should be two unions separated for Black and White tenants. H.L. Mitchell recalled that the discussion ended soon after a prominent White tenant farmer named Burt Williams stood up to speak about only having one union for both races. Williams said, “You know my pappy rode with the KKK, we drove the Republican officeholders out of Crittendon County some forty years ago. The Time has passed we have to forget this stuff . . . Preacher Smith lives right next door to me and a man never had a better neighbor than Preacher Smith.”<sup>12</sup> Williams pointed out Preacher Smith, an African American fellow attendee of this first meeting, then pointed to all eleven White men in attendance and asked if they agreed to have just one interracial union. Mitchell recalled, “Everyone of them nodded his head or said yes, that's right. It may have been because of Burt's presence and his forceful way of saying it, that they agreed or

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12. H.L. Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1973), 351.

they might have been afraid not to."<sup>13</sup> Williams then asked the seven African American attendees how they felt about one union. Ike Shaw, an African American tenant farmer in attendance, after a few minutes of silence, spoke up and believed with both races working together in an organization, "nothing can tear it down."<sup>14</sup>

Ike Shaw then briefly spoke on his experiences with being in an all-Black sharecropper union in Arkansas nearly 15 years before when he survived the Elaine Massacre of 1919. The Elaine Massacre began on the night of September 30, 1919, after 100 African American sharecroppers held a meeting of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America at a church near Elaine, Phillips County, Arkansas. Many sharecroppers and the union contracted a lawyer to garner better wages and a fairer settlement for their cotton shares from the exploitive planters. The union at this meeting had brought armed guards to protect the meeting, but after two deputized white men and an African American "trustee" pulled up to the church, firing erupted, one of the deputies was killed and the other wounded. In response, the county sheriff formed a posse to capture the suspects and put down the "black insurrection" or "Negro uprising." The posse roamed the area attacking and killing African Americans believed to be involved for the next three days until Arkansas Governor Charles Brough requested and used federal troops to disarm both parties, and they arrested 285 black residents.<sup>15</sup> In the end, an

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13. Mitchell, 351

14. Mitchell, 351.

15. Grif Stockley, "Elaine Massacre of 1919." Encyclopedia of Arkansas. Last modified November 18, 2020. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/elaine-massacre-of-1919-1102/>. Further readings on Elaine Massacre include Grif Stockley, Brian K. Mitchell, and Guy Lancaster. *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Massacre of 1919*. Rev. ed. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2020. Grif Stockley, and Jeannie M. Wayne. "Federal Troops and the Elaine Massacres: A Colloquy." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 61 (Autumn 2002): 272–283. Calvin C. Smith, ed. "The Elaine, Arkansas, Race Riots, 1919." Special Issue. *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 32 (August 2001).

estimated 100-237 African Americans and five white residents were killed in the fighting.<sup>16</sup> The events in Elaine brought investigative journalists from all over the country, such as anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnette and Walter F. White, the Field Secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP).<sup>17</sup>

With the warnings and remembrances of the Elaine Massacre from Ike Shaw, the new founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union would be one organization of both races, and they would take a position of non-violence. They discussed how if someone shot into their meetings, they planned to run and not fire back because it would mean certain death for many African American members and some of the leadership. After the first meeting, Mitchell became the secretary for the STFU and Clay East the president because they wanted to make sure the leadership stayed local to the area so the union could not be depicted as outside agitators. After holding more meetings in local churches and schoolhouses, the union slowly grew and raised funds to tackle their first challenge in fighting against the planters' abuse of the USDA and the AAA over the plow-up programs.

The STFU challenged the AAA and tried to enforce the Section 7 portions of the 1933 Act to stop the evictions and ensure that the payments went directly to the sharecroppers. Still, despite having a few tenant supporters in the AAA, the planters won. On the matter, Oscar Johnston, the prominent planter and author of Section 7, stated that it only served as “a proviso morally obligating landowners,” and was not intended to be legally enforceable.<sup>18</sup> The Arkansas

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16. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo*, 102.

17. Walter Francis White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1995), 49.

18. Oscar Johnston to Chester Davis, January 26, 1935, quoted in Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 42-43.

courts agreed as the STFU lost its case in the county courts and Arkansas Supreme Court. Since sharecroppers did not own the land and were not a party to the AAA payment contracts, the courts held that they had no right to sue under them. Thus, the STFU, knowing they could not achieve any justice at the county and state level, sent a delegation, including H.L. Mitchell and F.R. Betton, to protest to the AAA and the USDA in Washington for assistance and support. The delegation met with the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, who became sympathetic to their grievances and promised a fair investigation of the circumstances in Arkansas. Secretary Wallace sent Mary Conner Myers, a lawyer on the Al Capone income tax evasion conviction, to the Mississippi Delta to investigate the complaints by the STFU over the AAA payments.<sup>19</sup>

Myers set up an office in Marked Tree, Arkansas, commuting daily from the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, TN, and interviewed hundreds of sharecroppers who had not received their payments for plowing up cotton in 1933 and many of the evicted tenants. Myers returned to Washington, D.C., and submitted the report to the USDA, but nothing happened. Chester C. Davis, the AAA's head administrator, suppressed the Myers Report and said it was "too hot to print."<sup>20</sup> The cover-up or suppression created an immediate outcry from the STFU and sharecroppers from across the South as it became known that an impartial investigator had come to the Delta. While working on the report, Myers sent a telegram to Jerome Frank in the AAA that stated, "Have heard one long story human greed . . . section seven only one section contract begin openly and generally violated . . . mailing mild sample affidavit tonight . . . croppers much higher class than I expected and all pathetically pleased government has sent someone to listen to

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19. Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 47.

20. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 62.



them . . .”<sup>21</sup> The results can be pieced together with scrap statements and notes that support the STFU claims of the AAA payment abuses, but the Myers Report has not surfaced. In his book, *Cry from the Cotton*, historian Donald Grubbs wrote to Chester Davis about the Myers Report in 1962. Despite the hundreds of hours Myers spent interviewing tenants and sharecroppers and visiting plantations, Davis noted that the Myers Report "was a guided propaganda move . . . certainly was not a responsible finding" and that it could not be found today because "the report just wasn't that important."<sup>22</sup> As one journalist poignantly concluded about the suppression of the Myers Report by the AAA/USDA and Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, "It is clear that Wallace has no intentions of taking any steps likely to conflict with the interest of the planters. If he moves at all it will be as a result of the mass movement on the part of the Southern small farmers and tenants themselves."<sup>23</sup>

The STFU gained small victories, such as in 1938, when the USDA agreed to make the AAA payments in each person's name. In response, the planters pivoted and reclassified their sharecroppers to wage laborers and evicted them. At a minimum, the planters determined that the payments did not specify which tenants must receive them, so they could give them to trusted tenants. Some of the evicted in the STFU in Missouri staged a highway sit-down, where they set up tent camps on the road, an estimated 1,700 families.<sup>24</sup> It gained national public attention, even

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21. Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 49.

22. Chester Davis, letter to Donald H. Grubbs, August 7, 1962, cited in Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 51.

23. Herbert Barnes, "Conditions in South Beyond Words, Said," *Farmers National Weekly*, February 15, 1935.

24. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 171-172.

from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and then President Roosevelt.<sup>25</sup> The fights against the AAA were just the first of many times the sharecroppers and the STFU protested to the USDA for support and failed because the planters and the American Farm Bureau Federation already held sway over the USDA and Congress.

At the time, the majority leader of the Senate, Arkansas's Joseph P. Robinson, sided with his planter buddies regarding agricultural policy matters. In national politics, President Roosevelt and other Democratic Party leaders did not want to compromise the New Deal initiative by supporting the sharecroppers and their relatively new and small unions (at this time). They felt it would alienate the influential planters and the southern conservative wing of the Democratic Party that controlled the South.<sup>26</sup> On June 10, 1936, President Roosevelt visited Little Rock, Arkansas, for the state's centennial celebration and commented on the generosity, kindness, and "true Arkansas hospitality" he received from the state and Senator Robinson. The visit coincided with a large STFU cotton-picking strike that summer, where many strikers faced public attacks, beatings, arrests, and mob justice. Roosevelt's political rival, Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party, quickly criticized him for disregarding many of these "mean things" still plaguing Arkansas. Thomas stated, "You have just come from Arkansas where you eulogized the state and its leaders without reference to peonage, mob law, and murder."<sup>27</sup> With the STFU's founding, a battle in the cotton fields had entered a more impassioned/combatative phase.

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25. The National Guard eventually set up tents and field kitchens sent by President Roosevelt to relocate the protestors. In 1940, as part of the New Deal, the Farm Security Administration embarked on an experimental housing program in the Missouri Delta when it constructed the Delmo Labor Homes. Although classified as migratory labor camps, the FSA designed the ten communities as permanent housing projects for the growing workforce of farm laborers. Heidi Dodson, "Race and Contested Rural Space in the Missouri Delta: African American Farm Workers and the Delmo Labor Homes, 1940–51." *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 23, no. 1 (2016): 78-101.

26. Woodruff, *American Congo*, 162.

27. George Seldes, *You Can't Do That*, (New York: Modern Age Books, Inc., 1938), 64.

## **Battle/Fields<sup>28</sup>**

Although the STFU vowed a policy of non-violence, feeling it would only bring about more violence and death, like the Elaine Massacre, the battle in the cotton fields did become violent on the part of the planters and local law enforcement. H.L. Mitchell and the STFU leaders faced all sorts of harassment and violence at the hands of the planters and their deputized friends, including being jailed and beaten, having meetings broken up, enduring assassination attempts, and seeing their churches burnt.<sup>29</sup> The first instance of violence for the STFU stemmed from some growing pains of having an interracial union in the Jim Crow South.

It began in Marked Tree, Arkansas, on January 15, 1935, and the actions of Ward Rodgers, a white Methodist minister from Oklahoma turned union organizer, at a meeting in the town square. Rodgers asked for “Mister McKinney” to come to the platform to speak. E.B. McKinney, an African American man, served as the first vice president of the STFU and an organizer for the Socialist Party in Arkansas. Mitchell recalled, “in those days it was a crime to refer to a Negro as ‘Mister,’” and Rodgers' comments instantly divided the crowd full of tenant farmers, overlookers, and planters. Rodgers blatantly disregarded the customs of White supremacy, and he further riled up the crowd when he said, “You know if I wanted to do so, I

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28. The term “battle/fields” for struggles with agriculture was first used by Don Mitchell in “Battle/fields: Braceros, Agribusiness, and the Violent Reproduction of the California Agricultural Landscape during World War II,” *Journal of Historical Geography* (Vol. 36, No. 2, 2010), p. 143-156. Mitchell’s work examines the battles in and over the fields of California and will be discussed further in Chapter 5 – Racialized Labor Regimes.

29. Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union,” 352.

could lead a lynch mob to lynch any plantation owner in Poinsett County.”<sup>30</sup> Rodgers had already been on the radar of the planters, as he taught adult night classes for sharecroppers. Rodgers worked for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and taught tenants and sharecroppers on the plantations how to read, write, and do arithmetic. The night before the STFU meeting in Marked Tree, Rodgers' night class was interrupted by plantation owners and armed deputy sheriffs. They claimed he was teaching communism, but it is more likely that their objection stemmed from the federal agency's influence on and education of their plantation laborers. The following morning, the superintendent told Rodgers to stop teaching the classes and to leave the county, or he might find himself strung up a telephone pole.<sup>31</sup>

The Marked Tree police the next day arrested and charged Rodgers with anarchy, blasphemy, and barratry (vexatious litigation or incitement to it). Rodgers went to trial one week after his speech in Marked Tree. During his trial, Fred Stafford, the prosecuting attorney, depicted Rodgers as a Northerner agitator from “that Yankee school, Vanderbilt University,” stressing that he was “an organizer for the Communist Party and is advocating racial equality right here in Arkansas.”<sup>32</sup> With a jury made up primarily of planters, the Marked Tree Justice-of-Peace Court found Rodgers guilty of anarchy after 10 minutes of deliberation and sentenced him to six months in jail and a \$500 fine on January 22, 1935.<sup>33</sup> Mitchell also recalled that Mrs. Mary

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30. Rodgers claimed he only said mob and not the lynching part. “Rodgers Denies That He Made Lynching Threat,” *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, AR, January 17, 1935. Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union,” 355.

31. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 59-60.

32. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 61. The second quote is found in Grif Stockley, *Ruled by Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas from Slavery to the Present* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008), 216.

33. “Plot Charge Dropped: Anarchy Conviction of Rodgers Enough for Arkansas,” *Charleston News and Courier*, Charleston, SC, January 23, 1935. Also, found in Grif Stockley, *Ruled by Race*, 216.

Connor Myers, the investigator sent by the USDA, attended the trial and seemed spellbound by the Arkansas justice system, “a far cry from the orderly procedures she had known in her legal career.”<sup>34</sup>

After the Rodgers trial and a cotton picker strike in 1935, the violence intensified, forcing the STFU to move its headquarters from Arkansas to Memphis, TN.<sup>35</sup> Clay East, STFU president, closed his gas and service station in Tyronza, AR, after many of the planters would no longer support his business, as one asked East, "Why have you gone against your own class of people?"<sup>36</sup> Mitchell had closed his dry cleaning business for the same reason, the planters blacklisted them. East moved to Bartlett, Tennessee, but on one occasion, planned to return to Tyronza to host an STFU meeting. Bob Fraser, the mayor of Tyronza and East's friend, drove to tell East that some guys planned to ambush him at the town entrance, so East could avoid it by taking a different way to the meeting.<sup>37</sup>

A mob went after E.B. McKinney, the STFU vice president, at his home in Marked Tree, while H.L. Mitchell and Howard Kester, an adviser to Norman Thomas, stayed there. Mitchell and Kester described narrowly escaping McKinney's home after it was riddled with machine-gun fire that wounded two of McKinney's sons.<sup>38</sup> C.T. Carpenter, the STFU lawyer, got his windows

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34. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 61.

35. Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," 356.

36. Sue Thrasher, Interview with Clay East, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Documenting the American South. September 22, 1973.

37. Sue Thrasher, Interview with Clay East, September 22, 1973.

38. Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," 357. Also cited in Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 73.

and porch lights shot out in Marked Tree when a group of night riders<sup>39</sup> came to raid his home. Meanwhile, plantation owners began evicting and blacklisting any known STFU members, which forced them to form some organized tent colonies. In one case, night riders threw a stick of dynamite into one of the tent colony settlements, and Cross County Sherriff C.M. Stacy refused to investigate “just another publicity stunt.”<sup>40</sup>

When Norman Thomas, leader of the Socialist Party, returned to speak in Birdsong, Arkansas, in March 1935 to some five hundred workers and STFU members, 30-40 armed and drunken planters and sheriff deputies of Mississippi County disrupted the meeting.<sup>41</sup> After Thomas protested and pulled out a copy of the Constitution of Arkansas and its Bill of Rights, the Sheriff told him, “There ain’t goin’ to be no speakin’ here. We are citizens of this county and we run it to suit ourselves. We don’t need no Gawd-damn Yankee Bastard to tell us what to do with our niggers and we want you to know that this is the best Gawd-damn county on earth.”<sup>42</sup> They forcibly removed Thomas from the platform and chased his cars to the county line.

In an attempt to murder John Allen, an African American secretary for the STFU, the law officers of Cross County, during the interrogation, pistol-whipped the ear off a woman that supposedly knew Allen’s whereabouts.<sup>43</sup> In Hernando, Mississippi, Reverend T.A. Allen, an

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39. "Night riders" are broadly defined as bands of armed men, especially in the South since Reconstruction, who committed acts of violence and intimidation against African Americans and African American sympathizers at night. Closely associated with the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan.

40. Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 90.

41. “Norman Thomas Attacked in Arkansas: Mob Drives 3 Socialist From Town,” *Socialist Call*, New York, NY, March 23, 1935.

42. Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York, 1936), found in Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds. “THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS UNION.” In *The Black Worker, Volume 7: The Black Worker from the Founding of the CIO to the AFL-CIO Merger, 1936-1955*, 169–208. Temple University Press, 1983, 174.

43. Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 73.

African American organizer for the STFU, began to organize sharecroppers in Mississippi. Some planters or their cronies found out, formed a mob, seized him, chained him up, shot him several times, including one fatally through the heart, and dumped him into the Coldwater River, where some fishermen found his body on March 28, 1935.<sup>44</sup>

All of the violence towards the STFU and Ward Rodgers's trial brought the attention of the press. However, the local newspapers focused on depicting the STFU as a communist organization trying to cause race trouble in the Mississippi Delta. For example, in the *Marked Tree Tribune*, the impetus site of much of the violence, the headline read "Citizens Ask Reds to Leave."<sup>45</sup> The planters depicted and viewed the STFU as communists and socialists threatening White supremacy's role in the Delta, so they felt emboldened by their patriotic duty to fight them. Uncoincidentally, communists also became the main target of the Ku Klux Klan. The STFU in the 1930s did have some communist ties, most notably after volunteers from the Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas, including the college's director Claude Williams, started organizing and working within the union.<sup>46</sup> H.L. Mitchell and J.R. Butler, the STFU president, found a letter from Williams addressed to the central committee of the Communist Party detailing how they could take over the STFU, so they exiled Williams.<sup>47</sup> Mitchell felt the

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44. "Preacher Lynched! Believed to Have Spurred Sharecropper Organization in the Barbaric South," *Cleveland Gazette*, April 6, 1935. Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 73, cites Allen as an organizer for the STFU.

45. "Citizens Ask Reds to Leave" *Marked Tree Tribune*, March 28, 1935, cited in Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 73.

46. Commonwealth College was originally founded by members of the Socialist Party of America and aimed to recruit and train people to take the lead in social and economic reform and prepare them for unconventional roles in a new and different society. Students, staff, and faculty all worked together in the institution's operation, from growing and preparing food to the construction and maintenance of buildings. The college closed in 1940 after a series of financial setbacks, a declining student body, the departure of Claude Williams, and a series of attacks and fines imposed by the government for charges such as failing to fly the American flag, for displaying a hammer and sickle.

47. Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," 366-367.

STFU, a racially integrated union in the segregated South, already under constant attack, had enough on their plate without worrying about the Communist Party and potential charges of treason and sedition.<sup>48</sup>

### **“New Underground Railroad” – Farm Security Administration Phase**

With World War II came increased industrial output throughout the country and offered a new opportunity for the STFU. After facing constant attacks and violence, the STFU developed a new philosophy during the war that involved getting their members out of the Mississippi Delta. Eventually, H.L. Mitchell, while recounting what had happened, posited, ". . . we realized that the best thing many of our people could do was find jobs elsewhere. We set up what we called an underground railroad and transported workers jobs in the North and East." Mitchell added that such a move also meant new jobs beyond farming for many: "over 10,000 [were] sent to work in food processing."<sup>49</sup> The STFU's African American vice-president, F.R. Betton, first termed this operation a "New Underground Railroad."<sup>50</sup>

The original Underground Railroad in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century aided enslaved persons to escape the terrors of slavery and the dominant planter elite. This time, both African American

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48. Meagan Day, "There Once Was a Socialist College in the Rural South," *Jacobin*, June 14, 2021. <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/06/commonwealth-college-arkansas-socialist-education-debs-communist-party>

49. Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," 360.

50. H.L. Mitchell described Betton as "a powerful black man" from Cotton Plant, Arkansas, with grey hair and bright blue eyes, where he had been a schoolteacher for over 25 years and a justice of the peace. Betton joined the union in the mid-1930s and became vice-president in 1938, and served until the mid-1950s. Mitchell, "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," 368.



and white tenant farmers used the New Underground Railroad to escape the exploitative plantation system. It is in this context of a mass exodus of over 12,000 STFU members that we must consider the pleas of planters and government officials for more POWs to fill their purported labor shortages. More than their other efforts in the Delta, the STFU received more robust government support from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) for their new “underground railroad.”

Firstly, in the late 1930s, the STFU enlisted help from the FSA to secure loans, build cooperatives, and resettle laborers. Indeed, the FSA was tasked with assisting migrating agricultural laborers. However, these programs only reached marginal success due to poor funding and constant attacks from the American Farm Bureau Federation. In *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, Grant McConnell dubbed the FSA the "poor man's Department of Agriculture." Thus, the planter elite had the USDA, and the STFU had the FSA.<sup>51</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, the FSA, with the U.S. Employment Services, worked with the STFU in November and December of 1942 to send more than 2,000 black and white laborers from the Delta to the Southwest to pick long-staple cotton for \$4.00 cwt. and \$2.00 cwt. for short-staple cotton (almost double the wages at the time paid for cotton picking in the Mississippi Delta).<sup>52</sup> In January and February 1943, the FSA and STFU sent another 500 workers to the Florida citrus groves. The FSA would pay for the transportation, housing, and medical care

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51. Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 89.

52. Nan Woodruff, *American Congo*, 198.

for each laborer and their family and guaranteed a minimum wage of 30 cents per hour or \$3.00 a day.<sup>53</sup>

Despite cotton only requiring about 125 days of labor, the planters did not approve of their labor accepting these other labor opportunities, even though they were temporary. The FSA faced constant attacks and pressure from the American Farm Bureau Federation and their allies in Congress. They targeted the cooperatives and regional directors of the FSA, postulating them as communists with the co-ops being based on Soviet principles, as they trumped-up misappropriations and abuses of the loans. Eventually, the Byrd Committee, a joint Congressional wartime reduction committee, in 1942 significantly reduced the appropriations for the FSA to almost nothing, under a necessity to reduce "non-essential" governmental expenditures. By 1944, Congress withheld appropriations to the FSA entirely and completely dissolved it in 1946.<sup>54</sup>

Before developing the union-sponsored new underground railroad, STFU general secretary H.L. Mitchell wrote to Paul McNutt, chairman of the War Manpower Commission, and Chester Davis, War Food Administrator. Mitchell offered the names and addresses of 2,200 workers from the organization and promised to enlist no fewer than 10,000 workers for employment elsewhere as seasonal workers, provided they would be given government transportation. He outlined how most cotton laborers in the Mississippi Delta work less than four months per year (only during chopping and harvesting times), so they could be employed anywhere for those other eight months without disturbing any cotton production. Mitchell pled to

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53. "Recruitment and Transportation of Domestic Agricultural Workers," FSA Instruction 478.1. September 10, 1942. STFU Papers.

54. Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 160-161. FSA limped on after the war as the poorly funded Farmers' Home Administration.

the WMC, “It is our belief that with a determined effort being made by the agency responsible for recruiting and transporting farm labor 200,000 workers could be transferred from the various southern states and meet practically all of the estimated needs for seasonal farm labor.”<sup>55</sup>

The WMC said they brought Mitchell’s request to the attention of the Farm Security Administration, War Food Administration, and various other labor placement boards. However, F.W. Hunter, chief of the Agricultural Division of the Bureau of Placement in the WMC, ultimately replied to Mitchell’s letter to Chairman McNutt. Despite his seemingly most appropriate title for aiding the STFU’s request, Hunter reminded them, “As you know, responsibility for the recruitment and placement of farm workers has been transferred to the United States Department of Agriculture. We are cooperating with them in every manner to assure that full use is made of available labor suppliers.”<sup>56</sup> The STFU got the political run-around from the federal government’s main labor departments and only garnered the support of a defunded FSA. These changes and the passage of what became known as Public Law 45 in 1943 forced the STFU to form a new method of transporting their labor out of the Mississippi Delta without federal assistance, this time with support from other labor unions.

### **Public Law 45**

When Public Law 45 passed in 1943, the STFU faced another major obstacle that further bound labor to the Mississippi Delta. After Public Law 45 passed, the STFU, among many labor

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55. H.L. Mitchell, letter to Paul V. McNutt of WMC, April 9, 1943. STFU Papers.

56. F.W. Hunter, letter to H.L. Mitchell, April 16, 1943. STFU Papers.

organizations, felt labor had now been frozen in places like the Mississippi Delta and forced to accept below minimum wages. This law, a significant revision to agricultural labor, passed to the planters' benefit, as it denied funds to help labor leave temporarily and permanently to more profitable wartime industries. For the STFU, it meant that the move towards a labor-supported underground railroad without the aid of federal funds was now a necessity.

Initially, Public Law 45 started as House Joint Resolution 96, known as the "Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program," and became law on April 29, 1943. The law came about as a necessity after President Roosevelt assigned the Department of Agriculture in July 1942 the responsibility for transporting and housing transient essential agricultural workers with the Extension Services, Farm Security Administration, and the U.S. Employment Services. In order to finance the program during 1943, the Dept. of Agriculture requested appropriations from Congress for \$65,075,000, and deliberations in Congress began in February 1943.<sup>57</sup> The planter-backed American Farm Bureau Federation and other large farm organizations immediately criticized the proposed program.

On March 4, 1943, the Farm Bureau offered seven points to further their agenda. Most of them included increasing the power of the USDA's state Extension Services and placing them in complete charge of the recruiting, transporting, and placement of farm labor because the planters and the Farm Bureau already held sway over most of the state and county agents and were deeply suspicious of the FSA. Their plan focused on decentralizing the program by giving the funds and power to the Extension Service at the state and county levels, which then would be in charge of its own state's program. Other recommendations by the Farm Bureau included:

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<sup>57</sup> Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Agricultural Economics, September 1951), 45.

prohibiting any funds from going to what were previously standard moves by the FSA, including imposing minimum wages, regulating housing standards and hours of work, enforcing collective bargaining, and promoting union membership. The Farm Security Administration would now be expressly excluded from all such activities.

The STFU, the CIO, and UCAPAWA (the United Cannery, Agricultural Packing, and Allied Workers of America) all testified or filed statements opposing Public Law 45 and asked for an agricultural labor program similar to the original proposal by the Secretary of Agriculture, with more federal control over the Extension Services. Chester C. Davis, newly appointed by FDR as War Food Administrator who was charged with P.L. 45's revisions, also testified before the Senate that "House Joint Resolution 96 tied the hands of an administrator rather inflexibly."<sup>58</sup> The very same Chester C. Davis discussed earlier, who in 1933 suppressed the Myers Report about the labor crisis in the Delta, because it was "too hot to print."<sup>59</sup> Ultimately, when it came to Public Law 45, Davis agreed that the program should be reformed more along the lines of the Farm Bureau's recommendations by empowering the county and state levels through the Extension Service, but he also desired more freedom for the administrator (himself). That said, Davis certainly did not want the FSA to administer the program or be involved.<sup>60</sup>

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58. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47*, 45.

59. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 62.

Chester Davis ran the AAA from 1933 until its dissolution in 1936. The American Farm Bureau Federation awarded him a medal for distinguished service to agriculture in 1939. Davis then served on the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System from 1936 to 1941 until April 16, 1941, and then he became the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. During the war, he served on various boards, such as the World War Advisory Commission, and before being appointed as War Food Administrator. After only a few months, Davis resigned as War Food Administrator as he felt his "day-to-day actions, is being exercised elsewhere," and he disagreed with some of Roosevelt's subsidies in controlling inflation. "FOOD: The Tenth Czar," *Time*. April 5, 1943. Chester C. Davis, letter of resignation to Franklin D. Roosevelt. June 28, 1943. The American Presidency Project at U.C. Santa Barbara. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210180>

60. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47*, 45.

The portion that concerned the STFU and most labor unions came from the addition and eventual adoption of the “Pace Amendment,” introduced by Stephen Pace, a Representative of Congress from Georgia.<sup>61</sup> It was added during consideration on the floor of the House of Representatives and later changed in the Senate. The modified Pace Amendment in Public Law 45 appeared as Sec.4 and read as follows:

No part of the funds herein appropriated shall be expended for the transportation of any worker from the county where he resides or is working to a place of employment outside of such county without the prior consent in writing of the county extension agent of such county if such worker has resided in such county for a period of one year or more immediately prior thereto and has been engaged in agricultural labor as his principal occupation during such period.<sup>62</sup>

The freezing effect the Pace Amendment would have on labor was not lost on the members of Congress. Representative Pace made it quite clear that freezing labor within a state at low wages was his goal. He argued that without the passage of this amendment, “. . . we have set up a Federal agency [the FSA] to go into my State and there is not any way in the world to get a man out of my State other than to offer him higher wages and free transportation. When you do, you have immediately lifted the wage scale in the State of Georgia or any other State they go into.”<sup>63</sup>

After being signed into law, Public Law 45 appropriated \$26.1 million to be supervised by the War Food Administrator (Chester Davis), and half of that went to the states for expenditure by the State Extension Services. Public Law 45 became a huge victory for the

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61. Stephen Pace, a lawyer and “agriculturist,” served on the House Committee on Agriculture and was a noted member of the “farm-bloc” in Congress and known to slip farm bills through Congress. “U.S. At War: Poor Rich Farmers,” *Time*, December 21, 1942.

62. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47*, 45-46. Also, U.S. Congress. Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations. *Farm Labor Program, 1943*. (H.J. Res. 96- A Joint Resolution Making an Appropriation to Assist in Providing a Supply and Distribution of Farm Labor for the Calendar Year 1943). March 1943, p. 231-232.

63. U.S. Congress. *Farm Labor Program, 1943*. (H.J. Res. 96), 234.

planters and the Farm Bureau, which included most of what they proposed. It also included the desired bans on funds to fix wages, housing standards, hours of work, and impose or enforce collective-bargaining requirements or union membership. Through the passage of Public Law 45, the planters successfully barred the use of federal funds for minimum wages in agriculture for domestic labor, but it also ensured employers could use the funds to negotiate the “prevailing wage rates” for workers.<sup>64</sup> These were the three magical words every planter loved to hear. With so many restrictions, money to support labor migration within the U.S. was redirected toward importing more labor from Mexico, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. The same Chester Davis, who as the AAA administrator in 1933, would not help the STFU and suppressed the Myers' Report. Now a decade later, as War Food Administrator, Davis became disempowered by Public Law 45 from aiding the STFU’s underground railroad. Additionally, within two years, the planters in Arkansas and Mississippi imposed wage ceilings (maximum wages) for cotton picking through Public Law 45, yet it specifically outlawed minimum wages in favor of the “prevailing local wage.”

On May 4, 1943, President Roosevelt responded to CIO President Philip Murray's protest over House Joint Resolution 96. President Roosevelt stated that he had already signed it into law before receiving Murray's objection, but he said:

I was cognizant at the time of certain objectionable features in the measure, but I felt, nevertheless, that the need for an immediate inauguration of the farm labor program was of such a vital and pressing character as to more counterbalance the objectionable features in the legislation, and that, moreover, these objectionable features could be minimized to some extent through the medium of administrative regulation.<sup>65</sup>

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64. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47*, 46.

65. Franklin D. Roosevelt, letter to Philip Murray, CIO President, May 4, 1943. STFU Papers.

Furthermore, after hearing of Public Law 45, Prentice Thomas, assistant special counsel for the NAACP, asked for any literature and plans the STFU might have to potentially collaborate on “methods by which this evil might be controlled.” Thomas wrote, “I anticipate that the planters in the Delta country, working with the county agents are going to attempt to pull a ‘fast one’ on the agricultural laborers who might want to leave the section for better jobs.”<sup>66</sup>

To test the county agents of the Extension Service, on May 1, 1943, only days after Public Law 45 passed, the STFU sent blank transportation forms to 1,385 families (about 2,200 workers) in the Mississippi Delta to be signed by their county agents for written permission to accept transportation to other areas for employment on farms. After two weeks, the STFU received replies from 156 families, 131 outright denied authorization by the county agents, 24 responded saying they accepted work in the area so no longer needed transportation, and only one family received written permission to accept transportation out of the county.<sup>67</sup> In one such returned letter, Willie Reeves of Forrest City, Arkansas, wrote, “I went to the County Agent (St. Francis County) and he said he could not send any workers out of the county and that’s the reason he could not fill out the blank. He said we are to do work in this county and not out of the county.”<sup>68</sup> In another letter, J.R. Hatchell wrote, “In regard to my visit to the County Agent (Henderson County). He will not sign this paper. Said he could get me a job on a farm her[sic] at \$1.50 a day for 12 hours labor. He said his friends would not like for labor to be sent out of this

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66. Prentice Thomas, letter to H.L. Mitchell, May 4, 1943. STFU Papers.

67. “The effect in the Mid-South of legislation appropriating funds to supply and distribute farm labor,” memorandum from H.L. Mitchell, May 15, 1943. STFU Papers.

68. Willie Reeves, letter to H.L. Mitchell, May 9, 1943. STFU Papers.



county. They want a bunch of labor here all the time but will not pay a living wage. Can you understand a fellow wanting someone to work for 12½¢ an hour?"<sup>69</sup>

### **“New Underground Railroad” – Labor Solidarity Phase**

Knowing they had lost the battle in the cotton fields and on Congress’s floors to the planters and the American Farm Bureau Federation, H.L. Mitchell and the STFU started to make use of their newfound union connections to fight against Public Law 45 in May 1943. They sent out the message that they had 2,200 workers looking for positions, and soon letters and telegrams came pouring in from mainly food industries in desperate need of labor. On May 18, Seabrook Farms, Bridgeton, New Jersey, telegraphed the STFU. On May 25 Leon Schachter signed a contract with Francis H. Leggett & Company in Landisville, NJ, Landisville, New Jersey, to be their company's sole supplier of union labor.<sup>70</sup> On May 26, Frank P. Fenton, director of the American Federation of Labor, vouched for Mitchell and the STFU to E.W. Jimerson, the president of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America.<sup>71</sup> The new underground railroad had begun.

The STFU's crucial contact at this moment in getting their members to the Northeast was the well-connected Leon B. Schachter, a union organizer for Local 56 Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America (AMC) in Camden, New Jersey. With the help

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69. J.R. Hatchell, letter to H.L. Mitchell, May 11, 1943. STFU Papers.

70. Various letters and contracts found in STFU Papers.

71. Frank P. Fenton, letter to H.L. Mitchell, May 26, 1943. STFU Papers.

of Schachter, a Jewish Romanian immigrant, the AMC, a part of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), vigorously argued against the use of German POWs in canneries and food processing plants. To fill the labor void, Schachter contacted the STFU to supply labor. The jobs promised a minimum of 45 cents an hour for women and 50 cents an hour for men with overtime at a time and a half, whereas most of the wages were much higher, 60-70 cents an hour.<sup>72</sup> In every circumstance, the jobs in the North provided a much higher wage to workers than working the cotton fields, where the STFU argued for \$3.00 per 100 lbs. to equal the 30 cents an hour for a ten-hour day that Braceros received. Typically, pickers received even lower pay.

Together, the STFU and Schacter, with the support of the AFL, organized and arranged for the housing, food, and transportation for over 12,000 African American and White men, women, and students to jobs on farms and food plants in New Jersey and the surrounding states during World War II.<sup>73</sup> Some of the companies that employed workers from the STFU and the Mississippi Delta included: the Deerfield Packing Corporation, Seabrook Farms, Wilmington Provision Company of Bridgeton, NJ, the Edgar F. Hurff Company of Swedesboro, NJ, the Sussex Poultry Co. of Milford, Delaware, the Francis H. Leggett & Company in Landisville, NJ, and the Campbell Soup Co. in Camden, NJ.<sup>74</sup>

The companies paid a premium to the STFU for recruiting and transporting workers from the Delta to the Northeast. On June 30, 1944, the Campbell Soup Co. sent H.L. Mitchell \$400 to cover his \$150 in expenses already incurred and to cover “other recruiting activity” and an additional \$35 a week for three supervisors of the union’s choice sent with the transportation of

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72. “Report to the Executive Council” April 30, 1944. STFU Papers.

73. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 192.

74. Various letters from STFU Papers.

the 600 workers requested for the tomato season. Additionally, Campbell Soup Co. paid \$5 per worker after the first 200 shipped and \$7 per worker for the remaining 400 sent.<sup>75</sup> Seabrook Farms also deposited \$500 for recruiting labor. However, most of this money was used to transport labor (an estimated \$6.50 per worker) from around the Delta to Memphis, where the company would then pay the railroad fare and food for transit north (\$27 per worker). Return fares would be provided for each worker if they stayed for a certain period, usually at least six weeks. Also, the STFU profited one dollar a month in membership dues for every worker on the job sent North, and the employer companies automatically deducted it from the workers' pay.<sup>76</sup>

On July 19, 1944, the contract from Leon Schachter and the Wilmington Provision Company in Bridgeton, New Jersey, to H.L. Mitchell and the STFU provided the arrangement details. The company agreed to pay \$35 to the STFU and \$2.50 each for every worker sent from Memphis to Wilmington, Delaware. The workers stayed in a government project with a cafeteria on the premises, and every worker received a \$10 advance for housing and food, which they kept if they stayed for more than 90 days. The worker would receive 40 hours per week, 8 hours a day, and time and half overtime for 50-55 working hours. At this company, wages started at 60 cents per hour, and after 30 days, they bumped up to 65 cents and 70 cents after 90 days. In agreement with the contract, a worker also paid \$2.50 monthly in union dues to the STFU and the local hosting union.<sup>77</sup> Notably, these opportunities further North were also open to African American members on equal terms.

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75. "Tennessee Recruiting," J.E. Heap, Jr., Employment Manager Campbell Soup Co., letter to Mr. R.E. Worden, June 30, 1944. STFU Papers.

76. "Report to the Executive Council" April 30, 1944. STFU Papers.

77. Leon B. Schachter, memo to H.L. Mitchell and STFU, July 14, 1944. STFU Papers.

For many workers, the seasonal nature of cotton (chopping season in summer and harvesting in fall) left a lot of downtime in the winter and spring months, so most of these temporary jobs in the North in the canneries allowed workers to come work after planting and early chopping in spring/summer, then work 6-8 weeks in New Jersey then be back in Arkansas by the start of harvest. Additionally, depending on the contracts, some canneries and businesses in the area would offer housing and jobs for whole families if the wives and daughters over the age of 16 were willing to work.<sup>78</sup> The new underground railroad also benefited the STFU for several different reasons. It proved some effectiveness of the STFU as a prominent union with contacts and job opportunities throughout the country. Additionally, the STFU often struggled with fiscal responsibility and collecting dues, but the new connections to jobs in the North helped them secure the payment of membership fees. Soon after, the STFU established an economic basis for the organization and began its negotiations for affiliation with the CIO and AFL.

With the introduction of POWs in 1944 to the cotton fields, only the STFU saw the irony in the constant argument made by planters for more POWs. As Pullman luxury coaches brought POWs from the East Coast, southern laborers filled the second-class coaches heading North out of Memphis. By 1944, the planters in the Mississippi Delta could now receive aid through the Extension Services in their county and state to recruit and transport foreign labor to their fields, now not only POWs but Braceros. At the same time, when the funds from the federal government were being used to transport workers from Mexico, Jamaica, and the Bahamas and used to transport POWs from Africa, Europe, and the Pacific, it denied the opportunity for surplus domestic labor to receive aid to travel. The actions by the military and federal government stranded the labor in the Mississippi Delta. It trapped domestic laborers in low-

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78. H.L. Mitchell, memo to unknown, March 31, 1944. STFU Papers.

paying jobs, such as cotton picking, where they fell into debt to the plantation store or received wages for subsistence but never enough money to escape. Thus, the STFU had to take matters into its own hands with a new underground railroad.

Despite figuring out how to move labor north, H.L. Mitchell described how their new approach faced blowback, “The local and state employment services were bypassed by the unions. Local agents of the Employment Service in Arkansas had union representatives jailed on charges of ‘interfering with labor.’ Trucks and cars loaded with workers going to Memphis to board trains were turned back in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama.”<sup>79</sup> In one such instance, G.W. Baskin, manager of the U.S. Employment Service of the War Manpower Commission, in Forrest City, Arkansas, with the help of the sheriff of Woodruff County, stopped four truckloads of men on the highway heading to Memphis in transit to work for the Campbell Soup Co. in Camden, New Jersey. Baskin, acting on the complaint of some plantation owners and businessmen in Cotton Plant, arrested the union organizers and the truck drivers on an Arkansas statute that involved enticing labor and transporting labor out of state and not having a proper permit for the trucks, an Arkansas statute of dubious constitutionality. The STFU employed the services of a couple of local lawyers and called the higher-ups in the War Manpower Commission to validate the necessity of labor in the New Jersey industries. The court dismissed the case for the truck drivers and indefinitely suspended the case against the organizers over the enticing labor statute.<sup>80</sup> It was most likely unconstitutional, and the court wished not to draw

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79. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 192.

80. Ross Mathis, letter to H.L. Mitchell, August 15, 1944.

further attention. After the initial arrest, 50 made it to Memphis as scheduled, while another 15-30 became intimidated by the experience and remained at home.<sup>81</sup>

In another instance, Peter Coates Jr. from Yazoo City, Mississippi, where he had been a tenant farmer, accepted a “temporary” position for the U.S. Employment Services at the International Harvester Plant in Indianapolis, Indiana. After six weeks at the plant, Coates received was informed that a planter demanded his return to Yazoo City to be used for farm labor. Indianapolis NAACP chapter president Lowell Trice successfully defended Coates with a right-to-work argument and attacked WMC policies on how “southern states may keep Negro farmers in a state of peonage.”<sup>82</sup>

Despite these difficulties and their best efforts, the planters and Public Law 45 could not do anything to stop a migration organized and paid for by companies and the union, so the STFU sent over 12,000 laborers north. Furthermore, workers in the fields found a new bargaining weapon to threaten the planters they would ship out to New Jersey if they did not receive better pay. However, the planters in Mississippi and Arkansas planned to shut these demands down through various methods of controlling their labor, one through the draft boards and then by appointing wage ceilings for cotton picking.

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81. “Statement of Facts: Case of Sam W. James et al.” no date, STFU Papers.

82. Charles D. Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South during World War II*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 87.

## Planter Control: Draft Boards

The planters utilized the POW labor program to ease the "perceived shortages of rural labor" and hold wages down. The obsession over labor control stemmed from the once slave-dependent plantation system to the now decades-old corrupt sharecropping system. A system that spawned a broad spectrum of labor arrangements and, in some cases, "blurred the line between slavery and freedom."<sup>83</sup> Just as planters tried to use Public Law 45 to freeze labor on the plantations, the Mississippi and Arkansas planters also used their influence over the draft boards to prevent their best workers from leaving. For example, in Lafayette County, Mississippi, an experienced African American wage hand would typically receive a draft deferment as a necessary farm laborer in his mid-twenties. However, when a sharecropper left for a more lucrative defense industry job, the draft board would move him to the top of the list.<sup>84</sup> As the notes of a local STFU meeting show, "The local draft system is worked in such a way that all the men who leave farm jobs for defense work are immediately dra[f]ted. Roy Knapp reports that almost all of the last 30 young men who have left town have been drafted immediately, even though all of them took defense jobs."<sup>85</sup>

In one instance, they specifically targeted one of the STFU members involved in the new underground railroad. Carl Smith of Widener, Arkansas, stated on October 31, 1944, under oath before a notary public in Memphis, in hopes of an investigation against his plantation owner, John Sohroeder of Hicks Station, Arkansas. Smith accused Sohroeder or someone working for

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83. Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990): 886-911.

84. Walter W. Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War*. (Ames: Iowa University Press, 1947), 84-89. Also found in Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers."

85. "Situation at Dyess Colony," Meeting notes. January 1, 1944. STFU Papers.

him of forging his signature and falsifying papers to change his draft status. After planting his crops that season, Smith accepted a six-week position arranged by the STFU to work for the Campbell Soup Company in Camden, New Jersey, in August and mid-September 1944. Smith stated, "Mr. Schroeder had previously told my wife that he was going to see to it that I was sent to camp right away."<sup>86</sup> When Smith returned from Camden to collect his crop, he received a new draft card prioritizing him as 1-A (available for military service) when he previously held an II-C deferment (necessary to farm labor). Smith went to see his local draft board, and they notified him that they had received papers from him stating he was no longer farming. They then asked for Smith's signature, compared it to the files, and discovered it was forged. The lady at the draft board told Smith, "Not to worry that the draft classification would be changed and that I better leave the farm where I was before another year."<sup>87</sup>

Additionally, at the behest of the STFU, Frank McCallister, executive secretary of the Southern Workers Defense League, investigated and sent a report to the Justice Department about the alarming number of deceitful contracts made by planters in Arkansas abusing the draft boards and the Selective Service Act. Tenants would be asked to or forced to sign a multi-year contract by the planters, or they would not receive deferments and face the draft. For example, Henderson Perkins, an African American farmhand on the Shellhouse Plantation near Hicks Station, Arkansas, was drafted by the Army, where he served for only a year. Upon getting out of

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86. Carl Smith, Statement to Notary Public, Hazel Long, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, October 31, 1944. STFU Papers.

87. Carl Smith, Statement to Notary Public, Hazel Long.



the Army and returning to Arkansas, Mr. Shellhouse told Perkins that he got him out, so he could not leave his farm for the next five years.<sup>88</sup>

The David Gates' Plantation near Widener, Arkansas, asked its tenants to sign a five-year contract, and he would keep them out of the war. When STFU member, Isaac King, refused to sign the contract, Gates evicted him and seized his crop. The same happened on the Sams Rolfe Plantation. On the Hill and Clark plantation, the planters tried to slip a similar contract into what they said was an application for AAA benefits. Those that refused to sign the contract lost their crops. Gus Sweet, an owner of the Sweet Brothers' Plantation near Widener, Arkansas, just offered one mother to keep his son out of the war for \$50.<sup>89</sup> The STFU also alleged that the planters would secure deferment blanks from local draft boards of the Selective Service and give them to tenants that would sign five-year contracts. McCallister wrote to Victor Rotem of the Civil Liberties Unit in the Justice Department, "It would seem that this practice constitutes a new form of peonage. Such maladministration of the Selective Service Act with regard to Agricultural labor is stopping the normal flow of labor supply and is making it impossible for these people to move about seeking better work and more favorable living conditions."<sup>90</sup>

Additionally, the draft board protested against drafting African American men in Craighead County, Arkansas. They stated, "The negro soldier is a danger to any community . . . Military training of the negro will certainly intensify the race problem in the South. The South will do the negro's fighting, if he is left in the fields."<sup>91</sup> For many sharecroppers who refused to

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88. Frank McCallister, Secretary of Southern Workers Defense League, letter to Victor Rotnem, Justice Department, August 13, 1943. STFU Papers.

89. Frank McCallister, letter to Victor Rotnem, August 13, 1943. STFU Papers.

90. Frank McCallister, letter to Victor Rotnem, August 13, 1943. STFU Papers.

91. Nan Woodruff, *American Congo*, 50.

sign the contracts, the planters evicted them off the land, but as W.C. Banks, who faced an underpriced and fraudulent contract, said, "I would rather U.S. draft board draft me, and not the planters."<sup>92</sup>

### **Planter Control: Wage Ceiling Hearings**

In the waning days of the war, late August 1945, after the Japanese forces stopped fighting but had not yet formally surrendered, the planters and their organizations knew their days were numbered in utilizing the cheap POW labor currently at work in their fields. Thus, they unveiled a new weapon in the battle over wages and labor in the cotton fields and aimed it at the STFU and local cotton-wage laborers. The new weapon the planters of the Mississippi Delta employed came in the form of wage ceilings formed by planter-dominated wage ceiling referendums and hearings. Public Law 45 explicitly made it illegal to use any USDA and Farm Labor Program funds to impose minimum wages, but it said nothing about wage ceilings.

The planters successfully petitioned the USDA/War Food Administration and Extension Services to appoint state wage boards that would oversee hearings and elections in each county regarding a proposed pay ceiling or cap for cotton picking within the state. Public Law 45 stripped federal wage protections in favor of state and local moves to better control wages. As a result, in late August and early September 1945, the cotton counties in Arkansas and Mississippi established federally backed wage ceilings through a series of planter-dominated hearings and

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92. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Pick or Fight," 81.

referendums held at the county level that established the maximum wages at \$2.05 per 100 pounds of cotton picked in Arkansas and \$2.10 in Mississippi. In 1944, the prices for cotton picking ventured as high as \$4.00 per 100 pounds of cotton, and the STFU argued for a minimum of \$3.50 cwt.<sup>93</sup>

During the wage hearings held in Arkansas in August 1945, the landowners and planters dominated the discussion, with only a few sharecroppers and tenant farmers selected to speak, many of whom were chosen by the planters to argue that high wages would hurt sharecroppers since they bore the brunt of outside labor costs if a tenant could not harvest their crop.

Additionally, some members of the Delta Council felt it would make the African American laborers "cash happy," and they would not want to tenant farm because, with higher wages, they could make enough money just picking during the peak of the harvest.<sup>94</sup> Thus, the planters felt they would lose control. J.E. Hollan, the Wynne Prison Camp Association chairman, wrote to Mabel Gieseck to attend one such county wage board hearing to determine the wage paid to civilian labor. Hollan wrote, "Will you please attend the meeting, and help us to look after 'OUR BUSINESS'."<sup>95</sup> The call to look after their business involved colluding to stack the hearing with like-minded planter elite to set a price ceiling to freeze workers to a fixed wage and destroy all of the bargaining power of the STFU. After the hearings and referendums, the voters only voted for or against the wage ceiling without actually knowing what it would be. Each state's Extension Services and wage stabilization boards determined the actual wage ceiling later.

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93. Harry McAlpin, "Wrangle on Cotton Wage Ceiling; Planters and Tenants Seek a Showdown," *Plaindealer*, Kansas City, KS, September 21, 1945.

94. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Pick or Fight," 85.

95. J.E. Hollan, letter to Mabel H. Gieseck, dated February 14, 1945. Mabel Gieseck/Lansing archive.

At one of the Mississippi wage board hearings, the *Jackson Advocate* quoted Oscar Johnston, president of the National Cotton Council and operator of the largest plantation in the Mississippi Delta, where he declared the wage ceiling's design bluntly:

The ceiling will protect us against labor organizations. Some of my foremen wanted to break it (the Southern Tenant Farmers Union) up by violence, but I said 'no,' I knew that no organization can be powerful unless we grant the closed shop and check-off system.<sup>96</sup> And that we will never do. A labor organization fights for higher wages, but workers will not join unions when they know their employers will go to jail if he pays them more than the ceiling. We must have a ceiling if we are going to break up the union.<sup>97</sup>

The jail time Johnston referenced points to the wage ceiling violation penalties showing the actual controlling aspect of the planters. To ensure the collusion in suppressing wages, the planters, aided by the USDA, placed a maximum \$1,000 fine and up to one-year imprisonment for individuals found violating the wage ceilings, which applied to both employers and laborers.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the USDA pursued cases against planters in violation to ensure cooperation. The *Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, Tennessee, reported on the first wage ceiling case in the Mississippi Delta. R.H. Benton, executive director of USDA Wage Stabilization in Mississippi, announced the summons for George W. Harper, a planter of Pace, Mississippi, to appear before a federal court in Oxford on December 5 for breaking the wage ceiling. On several occasions, Harper allegedly paid \$2.50 per cwt. for picking cotton, or 40 cents above the state's

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96. "Closed shop" is an arrangement between unions and management stipulating that only union members would be hired and employed on the job. A "check off" is a contract that allows a union to collect dues through automatic payroll deduction.

97. Harry McAlpin, "Cotton Pickers Forced to Vote by Big Planters," *Jackson Advocate*, Jackson, MS, September 22, 1945.

98. "Finds Cotton Picking Ceilings Observed," *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, AR, November 4, 1945.

ceiling of \$2.10. Benton warned that several more cases were under investigation and would be brought up in the next coming weeks.<sup>99</sup>

After about two months of the wage ceiling being in place, the planters started to notice some problems with it, such as it only pertained to the states that enforced it. Collusion only works with all of the planters on the same page. While the planter-dominated cotton counties of Arkansas and Mississippi were in lockstep with wage ceilings, Missouri did not have one, so the cotton-picking labor chose to go for the higher wages. As the *Arkansas Gazette* reported in Blytheville, Arkansas, Sheriff Hale Jackson publicly announced the enforcement and arrest of anyone violating the wage ceiling laws and transporting cotton pickers to other states without proper licenses. The *Arkansas Gazette* wrote, “Although Arkansas has no jurisdiction over migration of pickers, persons transporting laborers must possess a license which costs \$200. Violators of this law are liable for a fine of \$100 maximum or six months in jail.”<sup>100</sup> The paper also warned that Sheriff Jackson and his deputies would be placed on all of the roads from Mississippi County that lead into Missouri “in an attempt to halt illegal transportation of workers.”<sup>101</sup>

The STFU vehemently opposed the wage ceiling hearings and argued that farmworkers were not adequately notified of the hearings and elections. STFU president H.L. Mitchell argued the hearings were illegal because the local and state Extension Services and committees represented the planters, not the workers. The STFU petitioned the USDA and the new Secretary

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99. “Court Action Slated in Cotton Wage Case: Pace Man Is Said to Have Paid Too Much.” *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, TN, November 21, 1945. It is uncertain of the results of the case against George Harper.

100. “To Enforce Cotton Wage Ceilings,” *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, AR, November 26, 1945.

101. “To Enforce Cotton Wage Ceilings,” *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, AR, November 26, 1945.

of Agriculture, Clinton P. Anderson, to reject the wage ceilings because the planters coerced the vote. In one instance, the STFU charged that a group of small farmers in Lincoln County, Arkansas, waited all day to cast their votes against the ceilings, and no one showed up to conduct the referendum.<sup>102</sup> Mitchell argued that in Arkansas, the vote had been 9,356 for a wage ceiling and 2,757 against, but a farm population in these counties consisted of over 84,377; thus, the most significant percentage of laborers had not been represented.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, the STFU, an interracial organization with a primarily African American labor base of sharecroppers, faced extensive Jim Crow laws and voter suppression. It became most telling in the wage ceiling vote in Mississippi; 22,193 votes for a wage ceiling and only 313 against it. H.L. Mitchell argued, "Such unanimity of opinion on a controversial issue may only be compared with totalitarian plebiscites in Europe. On several occasions, Adolf Hitler gave the German people an opportunity to cast a 'ja.'"<sup>104</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite objections from the STFU and its cofounder H.L. Mitchell, the planters and the American Farm Bureau Federation actively sought ways to keep labor in the cotton fields and did so with Public Law 45 and the manipulation of the draft boards. With the wages sufficiently

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102. Harry McAlpin, "Cotton Pickers Forced to Vote by Big Planters," *Jackson Advocate*, Jackson, MS, September 22, 1945.

103. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Pick or Fight," 74-85.

104. Harry McAlpin, "Wrangle on Cotton Wage Ceiling; Planters and Tenants Seek a Showdown," *Plaindealer*, Kansas City, KS, September 21, 1945.

depressed and the war's end drawing near, the planters established federally backed state wage ceilings to stop the STFU and their threats to strike to ensure low wages for when the POWs left the fields. In the end, it turned out to be more of a pyrrhic victory for the planters. In the cotton battle/fields, the planters won every victory in the courts, at wage hearings, and in exercising influence over the USDA, but their labor force fled. The incredibly low-wage ceilings now enforced by law were distinctly inferior compared to other opportunities now available to labor throughout the country in the defense industry and with the STFU's new underground railroad. A wage laborer in Arkansas could earn a maximum of \$2.05 per cwt. (8 hours of work for the average picker) Alternatively, they could accept a job through the STFU and AFL connection with paid transportation and housing to the Northeast to work at a guaranteed minimum wage of 45 cents an hour (or \$3.60 for an 8-hour day), with most of the jobs starting more around 60-70 cents an hour (or \$4.80-5.60 a day) with an opportunity for overtime.

After the war's end, some of the planters encountered more limits on their power, turning their temporary successes into pyrrhic victories. Even though Mississippi planters in May 1946 voted again for wage ceilings for cotton chopping by a 7 to 1 margin, this time, heavy pressure from the Workers Defense League (WDL) and the National Farm Labor Union (the new name of the STFU after joining the American Federation of Labor in 1946) led the USDA in Mississippi to decide against a wage ceiling. Their choice derived from the fear of a cotton choppers' strike and a court test over the legality of wage ceilings. The WDL already engaged an attorney for court action against the wage ceilings and organized a delegation to protest to the Secretary of Agriculture.<sup>105</sup> In fall 1946, Arkansas planters voted for a wage ceiling for cotton picking, with

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105. "Agricultural Wage Freeze Is Defeated," *Jackson Advocate*, Jackson, MS, May 4, 1946.

7,090 favoring the establishment of a ceiling and 3,614 opposing it. However, the USDA wage board decided not to have a wage ceiling that year unless the entire region also enforced it.<sup>106</sup>

Of course, the planters or wage boards did not do this out of the goodness of their heart. They cited that for a wage ceiling to be successful, it would take the planters' "wholehearted support," and the Office of Price Administration outside of the war could no longer help control the rationing and price-hauling pickers anymore.<sup>107</sup> Eventually, President Truman, with the issuance of Executive Order 9801, "Removing Wage and Salary Controls Adopted Pursuant to the Stabilization Act of 1942," on November 9, 1946, terminated all controls that artificially stabilized wages and salaries, including the wage ceilings in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>108</sup>

The STFU and local labor often looked to the federal government for assistance, but it failed them during the war and assisted the planters in finding other labor arrangements. The cotton planters, who started to look for alternative labor during the war, such as Mexican workers through the Bracero program or mechanical cotton harvesters, now would have to redouble these efforts. The plantation system began to crumble during the Great Depression but fell by World War II's end.

In Pyrrhus's case, after his victories in Italy, he was forced to vacate his gained land and eventually sustained a significant defeat and retreated to Greece. In the planters' case, their retreat was reminiscent of the calamity of the Civil War: while they still controlled their most valuable asset, the land, their traditional source of labor was drying up, jeopardizing their economic fortunes as the war came to a close. This existential crisis for planters was further

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106. "Board Against Ceiling on Picking," *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, AR, September 5, 1946.

107. "Board Against Ceiling on Picking," *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, AR, September 5, 1946.

108. "Executive Order 9801 of November 9, 1946, Removing Wage and Salary Controls Adopted Pursuant to the Stabilization Act of 1942." General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.



complicated, which is the topic of the following chapter: their vital stopgap source of labor that sustained operations in the Mississippi Delta was soon to be repatriated at the war's end. The planters utilized the German and Italian POWs to pick cotton in Arkansas and Mississippi from 1944 onward at the lucrative rate of \$1.50 cwt. and then eventually \$1.75 cwt. (not including the generous travel allowance), much cheaper than the \$2.10 cwt. wage ceilings for local labor. The planters started to plan for their postwar future.

## Chapter 4 - Arkansas Officials and Military Officers: POWs as Temporary Low-Cost Labor

*“We are therefore asking that you use your influence with the proper authorities of the War Department to obtain a sufficient number of prisoners of war for agricultural work to alleviate the labor shortage.”* – John Mann, C.N. Houck, and C.F. Tyson to Congressman E.C. Gathings, March 19, 1945<sup>1</sup>

*“The average day’s work of these Negro laborers can be done in less than an hour by the machine picker.”* – *Arkansas Gazette* December 17, 1944.<sup>2</sup>

On November 2, 1944, at the 4,000-acre Hopson Plantation near Clarksdale, Mississippi, over 1,800 planters, ginners, reporters, and curious persons gathered to watch seven red International Harvester (IH) cotton pickers harvest the first fully mechanized crop of cotton in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>3</sup> Without a single hour of hand labor, the cotton had been planted and cultivated by tractors, used “flame thrower weeders” instead of hand choppers, sprayed by airplane with Cyanamid defoliate, and now picked by the IH cotton pickers. The IH one-row cotton pickers mounted atop of tractors harvested 65 bales of cotton in 15 hours, representing the work of about 300 human pickers.<sup>4</sup> The crowd featured nearly 600 cars, with visitors from Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, Alabama, and Georgia.<sup>5</sup> The Hopson Plantation hosted several other demonstrations that fall for over an estimated 2,500 visitors. For those that

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1. John Mann, C.N. Houck, C.F. Tyson to E.C. Gathings, letter March 19, 1945. E. C. Gathings Archive, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University. Mann, Houck, and Tyson are all Arkansas planters involved in the Agriculture Council of Arkansas and various other farm associations.

2. Samuel F. Morris, “Machines In the Cotton Patch,” *Arkansas Gazette*. December 17, 1944.

3. Gerald Dearing, “Cotton Comment – Mechanized Farming Gets Planters’ O.K.,” *Commercial Appeal* Memphis, TN, November 3, 1944.

4. Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 102-103.

5. Dearing, “Cotton Comment – Mechanized Farming Gets Planters’ O.K.”

could not make it, the U.S. Office of War Information filmed the machines at work and included the footage in one of its newsreels in “United News.”<sup>6</sup>

After the demonstration at the Hopson Plantation on November 2, some 300 planters jammed to capacity at the Coahoma County Courthouse in Clarksdale and voted to endorse mechanical farming and authorized the committee's appointment to press for steel and labor allocations to bring about the production of more mechanical cotton pickers. Their plan entailed leaning on a committee of the Delta Council, also in Coahoma County, “to organize in sectional groups which will work through the Farm Bureau and representatives and senators to ensure that any equipment company” has the necessary support and permissions to produce machinery.<sup>7</sup> Mississippi planter Carey Cocke served as the meeting chairman and was assisted by Harris Barnes,<sup>8</sup> the Coahoma County Extension Service agent, and other notable planters, such as Richard Hopson and J. Holmes Sherrard, the owner of the 10,000-acre Sherrard Plantation in the county. Cocke told the meeting that the Delta did not fear the industrialization of cotton production, fully understanding that it would “upset the social and economic structure of the area,” but he felt the “transition would be so gradual that he was convinced that all labor would be absorbed at the higher living standards than at present.”<sup>9</sup>

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6. “‘Robot’ Field Hands Successfully Invade Southland,” *Commercial Appeal*. Memphis, TN, October 15, 1944.

“Part 2, cotton is picked by machine in Mississippi,” United News Company, Military Newsreels, Issue 6 1944. Records of the Office of War Information (RG 208), Modern Military Branch, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. The video can also be seen from Buyout Footage Historic Film Archive at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ2BNGwCGBU>>

7. Dearing, “Cotton Comment – Mechanized Farming Gets Planters’ O.K.”

8. Harris Barnes came from a small farm in Coahoma County, Mississippi, and graduated from Clarksdale High School and Mississippi State University in 1941. Barnes served as another county agent that developed a strong relationship with the planters. After the war, he worked as a manager for several plantations in Coahoma County from 1946-1969, including Baugh Plantation, Lea Plantation, and King and Anderson/Oakhurst Plantation.

9. Dearing, “Cotton Comment – Mechanized Farming Gets Planters’ O.K.”

In his front-page article, "Machines in the Cotton Patch," for the *Arkansas Gazette*, Samuel Morris also put forward a powerful argument promoting mechanical cotton pickers. He stated, "Its advantages lie in the fact that it can be operated by anyone who can drive a tractor, that it requires but one man, to handle, and that it can harvest cotton far faster and cheaper than human pickers." Despite the machines not picking the cotton as cleanly as by hand-picking standards, they estimated that the cost for mechanical harvesting would not exceed \$7.50 per bale while hand-picked cotton at the time cost between \$30-40 per bale.<sup>10</sup>

The successful Hopson Plantation experiments for International Harvester in fall 1944 came to fruition after decades of trial and error in creating a successful mechanical picker. The first patent for a cotton harvester by the U.S. Patent Office went to Samuel S. Rembert and Jedediah Prescott of Memphis, TN, in 1850, but most ultimately credit John Rust and his brother Mack in the 1930s with inventing the first true mechanical cotton picker. William E. Ayres, head of the Delta Experiment Station, wrote to John Rust in 1934 about his views towards mechanization and said, "We sincerely hope you can arrange to build and market your machine shortly. Lincoln emancipated the Southern Negro. It remains for cotton harvesting machinery to emancipate the Southern cotton planter. The sooner this [is] done, the better for the entire South."<sup>11</sup> In 1936, the Rust brothers performed a public demonstration at the Delta Experiment Station near Leland, Mississippi; however, it received mixed reviews. Some saw it as the future of cotton, while others believed it would destroy the sharecropping system and throw millions out of work during the Great Depression. As a writer for the *Jackson Daily News* thought, the

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10. Samuel F. Morris, "Machines In the Cotton Patch," *Arkansas Gazette*. Little Rock, AR, December 17, 1944.

11. Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation*, 86-87.

cotton picker "should be driven right out of the cotton fields and sunk into the Mississippi River."<sup>12</sup>

The Rust brothers were not alone in their innovation and experimentation in producing a mechanical cotton picker, as John Deere and International Harvester had their own projects in development. Leading into the 1940s, IH had spent the past two decades and \$4.5 million to develop their cotton picker.<sup>13</sup> Every fall for years, IH sent a caravan of their latest pickers and machine equipment from the Chicago area South to be tested. In 1942, Fowler McCormick, chairman of the board for IH and grandson of industrial magnates Cyrus H. McCormick and John D. Rockefeller, announced the arrival of their commercially viable cotton picker. The IH cotton pickers, known as the McCormick Deering M12H and later the H10H, would be mounted on top of the popular IH Models M or H Farmall tractor, which could be removed and used by itself. The cotton picker would cost \$3,800, which included a \$1,000 IH Farmall tractor.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, in 1942, IH bought a 260-acre tract of land four miles north of Memphis and planned to build a \$12,000,000 plant to build cotton-picking machines, but it got delayed by wartime conditions and rationing. The War Production Board allocated only enough steel for IH to produce experimental models during the war, while most of IH's plants and works were converted to wartime production. IH produced a wide array of wartime products, including cannons, cannon shells, torpedoes, engines, gun mounts, tanks, half-tracks, tractors, and trucks

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12. Donald Holley, "Mechanical Cotton Picker." EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples. June 16, 2003. <<http://eh.net/encyclopedia/mechanical-cotton-picker/>>

13. Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation*, 95.

14. Morris, "Machines In the Cotton Patch," December 17, 1944.

for the military.<sup>15</sup> After the Hopson Experiment, by December 1944, over 2,500 came to witness the IH cotton pickers. The planters had seen enough and embraced mechanization, and a “delegation of mid-South men went to Washington” to inquire about beginning construction on the plant.<sup>16</sup> However, International Harvester’s Memphis Works did not open until 1948. It became the largest farm-equipment manufacturing plant in the South that produced cotton harvesters/pickers, balers, plows, listers, disks, mowers, and other farm implements, until its closure in 1985. From 1943 to 1948, IH produced only 325 cotton pickers, but after the opening of the Memphis Works, then over the next three years, they produced 4,111 pickers, averaging 114 per month.<sup>17</sup>

In 1945, the de-facto spokesman of the Cotton South, Oscar G. Johnston, president of the Delta & Pine Land Company and the National Cotton Council, purchased two IH cotton pickers for testing their feasibility. Soon after, Johnston launched a million-dollar mechanization program to increase the number of tractors, cultivators, and cotton pickers on the South's largest plantation. It envisioned using 150 wage laborers with 75-100 cotton pickers to replace the 500-plus tenant families. However, Johnston's plans faltered as IH, and other implement companies could not fulfill the orders for equipment.<sup>18</sup>

The transition to mechanization would have to be gradual. Donald Holley called it the “Cotton South’s Gradual Revolution.” Thus, in the short run, the planters worked to hold onto

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15. “Harvester News-Letter: for the Men and Women with the Colors,” *International Harvester Company*, Vol. 4, August-September 1945.

16. Morris, “Machines In the Cotton Patch,” December 17, 1944.

17. Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation*, 105.

18. Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation*, 134-136.

cheap hand labor, the POWs and eventually Braceros, while working, in the long run, to replace that hand labor with machines. To achieve both these ends, the planters relied on their political support in the state government and Congress to manipulate the military and government agencies to secure POWs and Braceros as a cheap labor source until the production of mechanical harvesters and cultivators could eventually replace them. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the members of the Arkansas government and the military officials that made the POW labor program happen mainly during the crucial harvests of 1944-1945. Governor Homer Adkins and Congressman E.C. "Took" Gathings of the House of Representatives continuously appealed for more POWs and constantly negotiated and protested directly to the military officials on behalf of the planters to make things happen.

During World War II, Governor Adkins brought \$300 million worth of defense plants and military installations to Arkansas that helped the state quickly recover from the depression but created some labor shortages in the lower-paying agriculture sector.<sup>19</sup> Also, Adkins only reluctantly accepted some of the government and military installations, particularly ones dealing with race, such as training bases for African American soldiers and internment centers for Japanese Americans. Adkins did not want the relocation centers for Japanese Americans in Arkansas, as he told John H. Tolan, the House Committee Investigating National Defense Migration Chairman, "There will not be any way to employ these people in Arkansas. The only way I can visualize where we can use them at all would be to fence them in concentration camps under wire fence and the guard of white soldiers."<sup>20</sup>

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19. Nancy A. Williams, and Jeannie M. Wayne, eds. *Arkansas Biography: A Collection of Notable Lives*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press Fayetteville, 2000.

20. Homer M. Adkins, letter to J.H. Tolan, February 27, 1942. Homer M. Adkins Papers, Arkansas State Archives, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Although Arkansas needed agriculture laborers, particularly in the cotton fields, Adkins and the state's leaders blocked all labor opportunities for the almost 17,000 interned Japanese Americans at the Rohwer and Jerome Relocation Centers from 1942-1945.<sup>21</sup> The planters opposed the use of Japanese American internees in the state over the fear that they may stay in the area after the war and further complicated the existing race issues in the state. After a meeting with the War Relocation Authority and Arkansas's Congressmen and Senators in Washington, D.C., H.K. Thatcher, Executive Director of the State of Arkansas Agricultural and Industrial Commission, wrote to Governor Adkins, "There is reservation in the minds of all the Arkansas delegation, however, about turning the Japs loose in Arkansas, first, because of our negro problem, and, second, because of our record of having such a very few foreign born people in our population."<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Adkins jumped at the chance to employ POW labor in agriculture. In a telegram to the commander of the Eighth Service Command, Adkins wrote, "Laborers are needed for cotton picking, ginning, and cotton mill work; and unless some arrangement can be made within a very short time cotton will ruin, gins and cotton mills will be unable to operate, and thousands of acres of soybeans and other feed crops cannot be harvested."<sup>23</sup>

Arkansas's Representative E.C. Gathings also served on the House Agriculture Committee and played a crucial role in establishing and operating the agricultural POW work camps in eastern Arkansas. Gathings' wartime correspondence with the planters, the government,

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21. Russell E Bearden, "The False Rumor of Tuesday: Arkansas's Internment of Japanese Americans." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Winter 1982): 327-339.

22. H.K. Thatcher, letter to Homer Adkins, October 23, 1942. Adkins Papers.

23. Homer Adkins, telegram to Major General Richard Donovan of the Eighth Service Command, August 20, 1943. Adkins Papers. Adkins' reluctance to use Japanese Americans interned in Arkansas will be discussed more in Chapter 5.



and camp commanders, such as Lt. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge, the commander for POW Camp Robinson, provides a wealth of detail on the POW camps and their labor programs. Through constant contact with planters, military officials, the War Department, and the War Manpower Commission, Gathings helped secure over 23,000 POWs for Arkansas and became one of the last states to repatriate their POWs. Playing such an influential role, Gathings received constant inquiries and complaints from his planter constituents about the operations of the branch camps and POW labor, which included: complaints about not having a 10–12-hour workday, having to provide bench seating for POWs in transportation, not having enough POWs available, establishing a quota system for cotton picking and later increasing it, and expanding the types of labor POWs can perform.<sup>24</sup>

By the summer of 1945, the military looked to make their POW labor program as efficient as possible and determined that some areas overinflated their labor needs, so they enforced a check on the planters with a "non-use" clause in their contracts. Now, the farmer association members would have to pay for everyday POWs that were not used as off-camp labor, which created problems for the planters as cotton production is more seasonally intensive during the chopping and harvest is when most of the labor is needed. The planters quickly lobbied their politicians like Gathings to eliminate this policy but met their stiffest resistance from the Office of Provost Marshal General (OPMG) and began to look for other postwar alternatives. Towards the end of the war, the OPMG shifted to maximizing POW labor to aid in the war effort.

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24. Assorted letters found in E. C. Gathings Archive, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

## **Inefficiency, Industry, and Agriculture**

By the spring and summer of 1945, POWs in large numbers had been working throughout the country, and the War Department began to express greater concerns that some farmers, areas, or associations overinflated their labor needs. They believed that such practices led to inefficiency in the POW labor program throughout the country, with POWs sitting idly at the camps for large parts of the year due to the seasonal nature of some jobs. Cotton production and the overinflated labor demand by the Mississippi Delta planters became one of the targets of this inefficiency. The cotton season left many down periods for the POWs, with weeks off between chopping and harvesting seasons and large parts of the spring before planting. Thus, the War Department added a provision to the employment contract with the farmers' associations charging them a \$1.50 penalty for "non-use" per POW per day that the association would have to pay. Planters responded unsurprisingly with many complaints to Governor Adkins, Congressman Gathings, and the camp commanders. An example from John E. Craine from the Lee Wilson & Company and the president of the Mississippi County Farm Bureau of Osceola, Arkansas, in a letter to Gathings, he stated:

Since the farmers association built the camps and made other contributions for establishing them with the understanding that the War Department would charge for days worked only, the Mississippi County Farm Bureau protests the inclusion of any clause in the new contracts which requires Prisoners of War to be paid when not at work for the farmers. Also, the clause is unfair because the farmers can not charge the War Department for not furnishing them when they are actually needed.<sup>25</sup>

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25. John E. Crain to E.C. Gathings, letter July 17, 1945. Gathings Archive.

As J.H. Thweatt of the Luxora Farmers Association put it, “If we are to produce to win the war we must have the cooperation of our Army and government and not continually harassed by changes in policy and rules.”<sup>26</sup> Gathings reached out to his usual contacts in D.C. and within the War Department, but the policy came from the top, and he could not get any budge on it except for allowances on "acts of God" that created unworkable weather and soil conditions.<sup>27</sup> Earl Wells, a Phillips County Farmers Association board member, calculated that it would penalize their association approximately \$21,000 for the down period between cotton chopping and harvesting.<sup>28</sup> Although Congressman Gathings and the planters could not get the nonuse penalty overturned, with the war in Europe already over, they began re-evaluating the situation with local and foreign labor sources. Over the next few months, the planters secured price ceilings and wage caps for cotton picking.

The planters began to look for other work for the POWs during the down periods in cotton to avoid the nonuse penalty. In Arkansas, most POWs worked in the agriculture sector and mainly in the cotton fields, but they also served in other industries, such as timber, or filled other unskilled labor positions in ditch digging, fencing, and clearing fields. Eventually, POWs would begin working in cotton compresses and seed mills. When the OPMG sent officers to inspect POW Camp Robinson and its branch camps in May 1945, they found many improper POW labor utilizations with incorrect payments and wages being paid to use the labor.<sup>29</sup> The

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26. J.H. Thweatt to E.C. Gathings, telegram May 31, 1945. Gathings Archive.

27. Earl Wells to E.C. Gathings, letter July 16, 1945. Gathings Archive.

28. Earl Wells to E.C. Gathings, letter July 16, 1945. Gathings Archive.

29. Office of the Provost Marshal General, “Report of Inspection of Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Ark., and Branch Camps. 12-24 May 1945.” May 24, 1945. World War II Prisoner of War Records (MC 509), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

OPMG officers inspecting the POW branch camps found several instances where the planters leased the POWs as “general farm labor” at 22 cents per hour; however, they used them as construction and industrial laborers instead. In Wynne, Arkansas, POWs were used to construct a general store, and in another instance, they tore down and rebuilt a cotton gin. Also, a contractor in Elaine, Arkansas, violated the labor contract and used POWs for resurfacing roads.<sup>30</sup>

The planters found the POWs to be the cheapest labor they could find and wanted to use them at low wages in as many ways as possible. For the planters to utilize POW labor for industrial and construction purposes, it became bogged down in bureaucracy, as it took separate contracts by the farm associations that originally leased the POWs for agriculture labor, and now they would have to submit new contracts for industrial labor. The War Manpower Commission and the War Food Administration would have to certify the labor need in the area with its local agents, and then once that is confirmed, the pay scales would be developed at industrial work levels negotiated with the appropriate labor unions and determined by the War Labor Board. Thus, the planters often chose to ask for forgiveness and lease the POWs as general farm labor, pay the low wages, and use the labor as they pleased. This division between industry and agriculture is rooted in New Deal policy from the 1930s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt entered office in 1933 as a friend of labor and made it a point to help increase workers’ rights with policy to combat the Great Depression. In his first few months in office, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) to authorize the President to regulate industry for fair wages and prices to stimulate the economy. However, the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 1935. In response, President Roosevelt urged Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and Senator

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30. OPMG, “Report of Inspection of Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Ark., and Branch Camps. 12-24 May 1945.” May 24, 1945.

Robert Wagner of New York to push for a more permanent legislation that became the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act). The Wagner Act promoted collective bargaining, outlawed company unions or yellow unions (unions influenced by employers), strengthened the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to arbitrate and intervene in disputes, and guaranteed workers' right to join unions.<sup>31</sup> With the Wagner Act, union membership skyrocketed for workers in the steel, auto, coal, and textile industries, but it excluded any person subject to the Railway Labor Act of 1926, domestic workers, independent contractors, government employees, and agricultural or farm workers.<sup>32</sup>

During the Congress deliberation of the National Labor Relations Act, Representative Vito Marcantonio from New York, a strong labor proponent, presented the minority viewpoint to amend the bill to include agricultural labor. Congressman Marcantonio made specific reference to the labor situation in Arkansas and the rise of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) as "the most conclusive proof that there must be a Federal action to protect the rights of agricultural workers," as they organized peacefully and faced threats, intimidation, violence, imprisonment, lynching, and armed planters.<sup>33</sup> Marcantonio argued that the people of Arkansas and the STFU peacefully formed against the plantation system, which he called damnable and the most "outrageous exploitation in America" that combined feudalism and capitalism.<sup>34</sup> Marcantonio

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31. "A Friend of Labor: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Worker Rights." *FDR4Freedoms*. [https://fdr4freedom.org/wpcontent/themes/fdf4fdr/DownloadablePDFs/II\\_HopeRecoveryReform/07\\_AFriendofLabor.pdf](https://fdr4freedom.org/wpcontent/themes/fdf4fdr/DownloadablePDFs/II_HopeRecoveryReform/07_AFriendofLabor.pdf). Accessed October 2, 2022.

32. "A Friend of Labor: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Worker Rights." *FDR4Freedoms*.

33. National Labor Relations Board, *Legislative History of the National Labor Relations Act, 1935*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949, 3202

34. NLRB, *Legislative History of the National Labor Relations Act, 1935*, 1949, 3202

supported the Bill and stated he would vote for it either way, but he concluded that unless the agriculture worker is included there would be “virtual slavery until the day of revolt.”<sup>35</sup>

William Patrick Connery, Jr. of Massachusetts responded first to Marcantonio’s proposed amendment that the executive session decided not to include agricultural workers as they believed there would be an opportunity later to take care of them. Congressman Connery put it as, “. . . I believe in biting off one mouthful at a time.”<sup>36</sup> Gerald J. Boileau of Wisconsin added that it might be beneficial for some farm workers in the country, but for most of the Middle West farmers seldom employed more than a couple of employees, or they worked seasonally, so should not be included in the bill. Then, Congressman Connery interjected and asked that all debate on amendments be wrapped up within five minutes, which was passed without objection. Thus, the final protest to Marcantonio’s amendment came from several members over the legality of including the agricultural workers as they did not apply to the Supreme Court’s definition over “interstate commerce” (the only part deemed Constitutional from National Industrial Recovery Act). Marcantonio responded that agricultural workers should be included to the same extent as industrial workers.<sup>37</sup> Soon after, the amendment was rejected, and Congress moved on to another amendment as they ran out of time to discuss it. However, with this move, millions of agricultural workers became excluded from the Wagner Act and federal protections in organizing labor unions which still lasts in many regards to this day. The Social Security Act of 1935 also did not include independent contractors, domestic workers, and farm workers, which excluded about half the workers in the American economy, many of whom were African

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35. NLRB, *Legislative History of the National Labor Relations Act, 1935*, 1949, 3202

36. NLRB, *Legislative History of the National Labor Relations Act, 1935*, 1949, 3202

37. NLRB, *Legislative History of the National Labor Relations Act, 1935*, 1949, 3202-3204.

Americans.<sup>38</sup> Agricultural laborers were again excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, which established many workplace protections, the minimum wage, the 40-hour work week, overtime pay, and a ban on child labor.

Coming out of the 1930s, President Roosevelt became the friend of labor, but only in industry, not agriculture. Thus, the STFU petitioned more to the USDA, gaining small victories, such as in 1938, when the USDA agreed to make the AAA payments directly out in each person's name. As previously discussed, the planters pivoted and reclassified their sharecroppers to wage laborers and evicted them. Some of the evicted in the STFU in Missouri staged a highway sit-down, where they set up tent camps on the road, an estimated 1,700 families.<sup>39</sup> This public protest gained national attention, even from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and then President Roosevelt. The National Guard eventually set up tents and field kitchens sent by President Roosevelt to relocate the protestors. In 1940, as part of the New Deal, the Farm Security Administration embarked on an experimental housing program in the Missouri Delta when it constructed the Delmo Labor Homes. Although classified as migratory labor camps, the FSA designed the ten communities as permanent housing projects for the growing workforce of farm laborers.<sup>40</sup> Although the FSA attempted to help the STFU and Arkansas agricultural laborers, they often remained underfunded and lost out to the planters and the American Farm Bureau Federation, which had a much stronger influence in Congress.

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38. Larry DeWitt, "The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 70, no. 4, 2010.

39. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 171-172.

40. Heidi Dodson, "Race and Contested Rural Space in the Missouri Delta: African American Farm Workers and the Delmo Labor Homes, 1940-51," *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 23, no. 1 (2016): 78-101.

Additionally, in national politics, President Roosevelt and other Democratic Party leaders did not want to compromise the New Deal initiative by supporting the sharecroppers and their relatively new and small unions. They felt it would alienate the influential planters and the southern conservative wing of the Democratic Party that controlled the South, such as the majority leader of the Senate, Arkansas's Joseph P. Robinson. Thus, apart from the FSA, most of the New Deal policies supporting agriculture focused on or benefited landowners and not farm laborers, so most of the STFU and its leaders supported Roosevelt's political rival, Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party. After visiting Arkansas and meeting with the sharecroppers and tenants, Thomas began to refer to them in his speeches as "the Forgotten Men of the New Deal."<sup>41</sup>

To help Arkansas farm laborers, Thomas wrote to Roosevelt, the USDA, Senators, and anyone in government that would listen to no avail with the feeling that they feared the powers of the Southern Senators.<sup>42</sup> Thomas even wrote to Senator Robert F. Wagner to see why agricultural workers were not included in the National Labor Relations Act. Wagner replied that the bill excluded agricultural workers "only because I thought it would be better to pass the bill for the benefit of industrial workers than not to pass it at all."<sup>43</sup> Thomas never had the prominence or power to affect change, and Roosevelt and the New Deal remained more focused on industry and creating jobs through various works programs. Then once the war started to

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41. M.S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2, 1960, 225-46.

42. Robert Wagner to Norman Thomas, letter April 2, 1935, cited in M. S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937," 237.

43. Robert Wagner to Norman Thomas, letter April 2, 1935, cited in M. S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937," 237.



break out, industry became even more critical, but the policies of the New Deal and the Wagner Act affected how the POW labor needed to be administrated during the war.

While working in the cotton fields undoubtedly was agricultural work for the POWs, working in the cotton compresses and oil seed mills blurred the lines between agriculture and industry, requiring special permissions from the War Manpower Commission (WMC) and the Office of Provost Marshal General (OPMG) with wages determined by the War Labor Board and the Director of Economic Stabilization in consultation with the labor unions. In late 1944, 34 cotton compresses in Arkansas threatened to shut down unless they had POW labor to help compress and store the already picked and ginned harvest. Thus, the compress owners applied to the WMC for POW labor, and from November 1944 until February 1945, 725 German POWs worked at 16 compresses throughout the state, loading and unloading bales to be shipped out.<sup>44</sup> In these jobs, the compresses would pick up the POWs from the camps, transport them to work (receive a government travel allowance), and pay the "prevailing wage" to the government for their labor.

Problems again arose over the determination of the "prevailing wage." Labor unions, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), threatened to picket and strike once POWs began working at warehouses, compressors, mills, and gins. Cotton compressor and oil mill jobs became a big issue, as they traditionally paid higher hourly wages and were lucrative off-season jobs for many cotton pickers. H.L. Mitchell, president of the STFU, explained the situation in protest to WMC Chairman Paul V. McNutt, where POWs during the height of the harvest season began to work at cotton presses and mills, "when there was an alleged shortage of labor."<sup>45</sup> For

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44. Merrill R Pritchett and William L. Shea. "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1978): 3-22.

45. H.L. Mitchell to Paul V. McNutt, letter January 5, 1945. STFU Papers.

example, Mitchell stated, "In the town of Lepanto, Arkansas, 50 war prisoners are employed each day at the Federal Compress and Warehouse Co. In this town there are not less than 200 unemployed workers who would welcome an opportunity to get a job at this plant."<sup>46</sup>

Chairman McNutt responded on February 1, 1945, to Mitchell that their policy never intended to supplant free labor and that he should direct any surplus labor to the appropriate United States Employment Services offices to get them working in Lepanto compresses.<sup>47</sup> The STFU reported that the Lepanto compresses stopped using POW labor on February 3, 1945, and hired local unemployed workers.<sup>48</sup> Over the next few months, the planters and their politicians launched a coordinated campaign against the WMC ruling that removed the POWs from the cotton compresses. In another example of the planters impacting government policy, the planters prevailed, and the WMC overturned its ban and POW labor in the compresses. H.R. Adams, Secretary-Manager of the Agriculture Council of Arkansas (Ag. Council), touted that "Since that time about twenty plants of the Federal Compress Company in Arkansas and Mississippi have been using war prisoners . . ."<sup>49</sup> Conservatively, over 1,000 POWs eventually worked in 30 different Arkansas gins, compresses, and mills by 1945.<sup>50</sup>

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46. H.L. Mitchell to Paul V. McNutt, letter January 5, 1945. STFU Papers.

47. Paul V. McNutt to H.L. Mitchell, letter February 1, 1945. STFU Papers.

48. "News from the Southern Tenant Farmers Union," H.L. Mitchell and STFU, February 4, 1945. STFU Papers.

49. H.R. Adams to E.C. Gathings, letter June 29, 1945. E.C. Gathings Archive

50. Merrill R Pritchett and William L. Shea. "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1978): 3-22. Additionally, various other documents found in the Gathings/Gieseck Collection point to a large number of informal agreements where many more POWs could have been used in industrial labor, because the larger plantations often had their own gins.

Once POWs began working the compresses, warehouses, and oil mills, an argument over the prevailing wage again ensued. H.R. Adams and the Ag. Council complained to Gathings about WMC Order No. 30, which stated that the minimum wage for war prisoners working in compresses should be no less than 50 cents per hour, as it is classified as industrial work. Accustomed to paying the "prevailing wages" set by the planters in agriculture, the planters did not want to pay POWs at the federally mandated industrial wages set by the War Labor Board, as they felt POWs would be "receiving more than free labor in certain areas."<sup>51</sup> The planters and the Ag. Council, unsurprisingly, in meetings and hearings held amongst themselves, determined that the prevailing wages for cotton compress workers were under the federal 50 cents per hour, so they requested that Gathings intervene as they expressed their opposition "to the arbitrary setting of wage rates for war prisoners which in some instances are above that paid free labor."<sup>52</sup>

In another letter to Gathings, H.R. Adams, Secretary Manager of the Ag. Council voiced his opinion on the matter:

Due to the constant squawking and threats of organized industrial labor, farmers in the mid-south have spent half their valuable time the past two years trying to hold war prisoners to help plant and harvest their crops. Contracts, agreements of gentlemen, money invested in camps, or food and fibre for the war effort seemed to mean very little to the Brass Hats in Washington when the racketeer put on the pressure.<sup>53</sup>

Adams blamed the labor unions and the government for providing unemployment wages where someone could make \$15-28 a week instead of stacking cotton. Adams cited an Arkansas Economic Council survey that showed "21,942 employees in five Arkansas war plants being shut

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51. E.C. Gathings to Paul McNutt, letter July 3, 1945. Gathings Archive.

52. H.R. Adams to E.C. Gathings, letter July 29, 1945. Gathings Archive.

53. H.R. Adams, "Labor for Compresses" September 26, 1945. Gathings Archive.

down, only three-tenths of one percent would elect to farm."<sup>54</sup> Thus, the planters focused their displeasure on other industries and the federal government for paying too much and neglected the fact that they also offered some of the lowest wages in the country for agricultural work. Adams still called for everyone to write their Senators and Representatives to petition for POW labor in compresses, and if farmers suffered a heavy loss due to lack of labor, the War Manpower Commission should be charged for it. Other politicians, such as State Representative and prominent landowner in Crittendon County, Lamar L. Rodgers, also wrote to Gathings and chimed in on the matter in hopes of changing the ruling by the War Manpower Commission about POWs not being allowed to work in the cotton compresses.<sup>55</sup>

As the planters' representative, Gathings once again wrote to Paul V. McNutt, chairman of the WMC, to intervene on behalf of the planters. However, McNutt responded with a long and thought-out response detailing how cotton compressor work for POWs was not considered agriculture work and was industrial work. Thus, it had to meet several more approvals, requiring cooperation between labor and the government. For example, McNutt explained how the WMC served as the messenger for the War Labor Board and the Director of Economic Stabilization, who authorized the 50-cent per hour wage and that this figure came from a unanimous determination by the National Management-Labor Policy Committee, which consisted of representatives from United States Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Railroad Brotherhoods, the American Federation of Labor, the Congress of

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54. H.R. Adams, "Labor for Compresses" September 26, 1945. Gathings Archive.

55. Lamar L. Rodgers to E.C. Gathings, letter September 27, 1945. Gathings Archive.

Industrial Organizations, the National Grange, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and the National Farmers Union.<sup>56</sup>

To the planters and their politicians, the German POWs again became the cotton crop's saviors. They harvested, ginned, compressed, and stored it, all because local labor would not bend to the low-paying wages offered. However, in the compresses, the planters met their stiffest resistance from the military and federal government, which had already negotiated and made assurances with the nation's largest unions for standard living wages for all industrial work. By examining the differences between the use of POWs in agriculture and as industrial labor in the compresses, it further shows the control the planters and their representatives had over the prevailing wages in agricultural labor, but not when it came to industrial wages. However, the planters may have at times lost by the word of the policy, but they still at times resumed practice and business as usual. For example, when the OPMG sent officers to inspect POW camps in Arkansas in May 1945, they found that the Federal Compress Co. in West Memphis had still been paying the incorrect wages to use POW labor, and they had not paid overtime wages to the government for using POWs over 40 hours a week.<sup>57</sup> All of this was made possible by Arkansas's complicit government officials and politicians that even influenced the exclusion of agricultural labor in the Wagner Act that still regulates labor today, so it is vital to get to know these politicians that made the POW labor program possible. It started with Arkansas Governor Homer M. Adkins.

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56. Paul V. McNutt to E.C. Gathings, letter July 17, 1945. Gathings Archive.

57. Office of the Provost Marshal General, "Report of Inspection of Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Ark., and Branch Camps. 12-24 May 1945." May 24, 1945. World War II Prisoner of War Records (MC 509), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

### **“Holy Homer:” Arkansas Governor Homer M. Adkins**

Homer Adkins, pharmacist, businessman, World War I veteran in the Medical Corp, turned county sheriff and career politician, served as Arkansas’s 32<sup>nd</sup> governor from 1941-1945. Adkins began his political career in 1923 after winning the sheriff’s election for Pulaski County (Little Rock area) on the Democratic ticket with heavy support from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).<sup>58</sup> Patrick G. Williams from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville discussed Adkins’ relationship with the KKK, where Adkins “later explained that he joined the KKK simply to secure its support, but the Klan’s racism and noisy opposition to ‘vice’ remained Adkins hallmarks for decades.”<sup>59</sup> Adkins, who neither smoked nor drank, as sheriff and later governor, attacked drinking, bootlegging, and gambling operations. The attack on those vices, paired with his strong Methodist beliefs, led his opponents to call him “Holy Homer.”

As a longtime supporter of the influential Arkansas Senator Joseph T. Robinson and Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1932 presidential election, Adkins was appointed as the state’s collector of internal revenue under Arkansas’s political patronage system. As a part of the collector job for the next eight years, Adkins traveled throughout the state, meeting with taxpayers and educating and enforcing new taxes and levies. He served as a de facto spokesman for many of the New Deal policies, and through this notoriety/prominence, he launched his gubernatorial campaign in 1940. Adkins won the general election quite decisively, and by 1942,

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58. Nancy A. Williams, and Jeannie M. Wayne, eds. *Arkansas Biography: A Collection of Notable Lives*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press Fayetteville, 2000.

59. Patrick G. Williams, “Homer Martin Adkins (1890-1964),” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified January 25, 2017. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/homer-martin-adkins-84/>

he ran for reelection unopposed, as wartime federal government spending brought money and jobs to Arkansas. In total, Adkins brought in \$300 million worth of defense plants and military installations to Arkansas that helped the state quickly recover from the Depression. However, it created some labor shortages, particularly in the lower-paying agriculture sector that the planters demanded he help fill.<sup>60</sup> Adkins wanted cheap laborers to appease the planters, but his racial beliefs weighed heavily in his decision making.

Adkins did not want the relocation centers for Japanese Americans in Arkansas and took a very active role in denying employment opportunities for the internees for lucrative work outside the camps. In one instance, Adkins prevented Japanese Americans from working for the Utah Construction Company and the Morrison Knudsen Co. Inc. on the Norfolk Dam project in the state. The company requested 36 Japanese American workers and offered to provide living quarters, provisions, protection, and security from the Baxter County sheriff's department since they could not find any available labor in the area. They offered to pay each worker a very reasonable wage of \$.50 per hour (20 cents above the federal minimum wage and double what a cotton picker would make in a day).<sup>61</sup> Adkins responded, "My agreement with the War Department was that they would be kept in these colonies and under military guard and under no consideration can I alter my position in this matter."<sup>62</sup> In another instance, Adkins sent a

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60. Nancy A. Williams, and Jeannie M. Whayne, eds. *Arkansas Biography: A Collection of Notable Lives*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press Fayetteville, 2000.

Arkansas had six ordnance plants that contributed to some of the state's labor shortages, but the majority of the production line workers were women called WOWs (women ordnance workers). In August 1943, 12,686 employees were working at the plant, and about seventy-five percent of these were female. By December 31, 1944, there were 3,085 African Americans working four lines and comprising twenty-four percent of the workforce. More information can be found at Carolyn Yancey Kent, "World War II Ordnance Plants," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified August 25, 2020. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/world-war-ii-ordnance-plants-373/>

61. B. Williams, telegram to Governor Homer Adkins, December 2, 1942. Adkins Papers.

62. Homer Adkins, telegram to B. Williams, December 2, 1942. Adkins Papers.

telegram to the War Relocation Authority on October 21, 1942, after hearing a rumor about plans for employing the Japanese Americans interned in Arkansas to harvest crops or to build factories near the camps. Adkins wrote,

Please refer to our agreement wherein it was distinctly agreed upon and confirmed to me personally and by telephone that these Japanese colonists would remain in these camps under military guard, would not compete with local labor and would not be allowed to purchase land and would be removed after the war is over. I must insist with all of the emphasis at my command that this agreement must not be violated.<sup>63</sup>

However, after the announcement of the POW labor program, Governor Adkins sent a telegram to the Eighth Service Command requesting POW labor: "Laborers are needed for cotton picking, ginning, and cotton mill work; and unless some arrangements can be made within a very short time cotton will ruin, gins and cotton mills will be unable to operate and thousands of soybeans and other feed crops cannot be harvested."<sup>64</sup> Thus, Adkins helped create the racialized labor regimes in Arkansas, where interned Japanese Americans, many of whom were U.S. citizens (or because of their race were denied citizenship) were now denied opportunities for labor in Arkansas as they would "compete with local labor." Conversely, the white German and Italian POWs would be the saviors of the Delta crops. Following suit, most Arkansas farmers protested the prospect of the 17,000 Japanese American laborers in the state but jumped at the chance to use POWs to fill their labor voids. Maintaining racial hierarchies took precedence over cotton production, so the Arkansas government and populace preferred actual enemy

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63. Homer Adkins, telegram to E.S. Meyers, War Relocation Authority, October 21, 1942. Adkins Papers.

64. Homer Adkins, telegram to Major General Richard Donovan, Eighth Service Command, August 20, 1943. RG 211 Records of the War Manpower Commission, National Archives, Washington, D.C., cited in C. Calvin Smith, "The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas 1942-1945," *Arkansas Historical Association* Vol. 53, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 352.



combatants, captured German and Italian POWs, to the perceived enemy in the form of interned Japanese Americans.

In 1944, Adkins ran for the U.S. Senate against the incumbent, Hattie Caraway, and Representative J. William Fulbright. In the race, Dr. John M. Robinson, the Arkansas Negro Democratic Association leader, endorsed Adkins in the Senate race. However, Adkins snubbed Robinson and responded, "If I cannot be nominated by the white voters of Arkansas, I do not want the office."<sup>65</sup>

### **Ezekiel Candler "Took" Gathings**

With Governor Adkins advocating for POWs in Arkansas, the planters additionally found their greatest ally in the career politician, Congressman E.C. "Took" Gathings.<sup>66</sup> Gathings served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1939 to 1969 for Arkansas's First Congressional District, which spans the entirety of the eastern side of Arkansas along the Mississippi River and includes most of the cotton-producing areas. Throughout his career, Gathings became a champion for his district's planter elite and a dominant voice in politics for the more conservative Democrats who fought against many social and racial reforms. For example, Gathings signed the

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65. Ben F Johnson, *Arkansas in Modern America since 1930* (2nd ed. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2019), 75.

66. Sam Morgan "Ezekiel Candler 'Took' Gathings." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified April 26, 2022. <<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/ezekiel-candler-took-gathings-4397/>>. Gathings developed the nickname as his family originally called him "sugar," but his older brother pronounced it "Tooker," so everyone then began to call him "Took."

1956 "Southern Manifesto" that opposed racial integration and the desegregation of public schools ordered by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In 1944, Gathings secured an appointment to the powerful House Agricultural Committee, heading up its cotton subcommittee, where he remained until retirement. In this appointment, Gathings supported policies in support of cotton, such as high prices, low tariffs, and abundant agricultural credits for farmers.<sup>67</sup> During the war, Gathings played a crucial role in establishing and operating the agricultural POW work camps in eastern Arkansas, as well as advocating for Braceros postwar. With the first talks on using POWs to pick cotton in Arkansas, Gathings attended the meetings in D.C. between Arkansas politicians, military officials, and the delegation representing planters that included Waldo Frazier, secretary of the Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation; Harvey R. Adams, secretary-manager of the Agriculture Council of Arkansas; and C.N. Houck of Marianna, Ag Council founder and first president.<sup>68</sup> Congressman Gathings went above and beyond to ensure POW labor for Arkansas planters. As an advocate in D.C., planters wrote Gathings with their needs, wants, and concerns over POW labor, and he corresponded and facilitated the meetings with the most influential individuals in government to make it happen. For example, he even held meetings with Provost Marshal

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67. Morgan, "Ezekiel Candler 'Took' Gathings." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, 2022.

68. "Joint Committee Report: Prisoner of War Labor" H.R. Adams, Agricultural Council of Arkansas, no date, found in E. C. Gathings Archive, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.

This crucial meeting in July 1944 was discussed more in detail in Chapter 2 – Arkansas's Cotton Plantocracy, but the three leaders representing Arkansas's cotton planters and POW camp associations held a meeting in the office of Paul McNutt, the director of the War Manpower Commission. The meeting's attendance included: both U.S. Senators representing Arkansas, Hattie Caraway and John L. McClellan, Arkansas's members of the House of Representatives William F. Norrell, Ezekiel C. Gathings, Wilbur Mills, Oris Harris, and Brooks Hays, General B.M. Bryan of the OPMG (the eventual successor as Provost Marshal General in 1945) and Colonel C.S. Urwiller of the Army Service Command and OPMG, another unnamed general from the War Manpower Commission, and a Mr. Holley representing the War Food Administration.

General Archer L. Lerch, the senior most government official regarding POWs in the U.S., to further the wants and demands of his planter constituents. After Gathings sent the OPMG eight telegrams and two letters in less than a couple of weeks, PMG Lerch wrote in an attempt to appease him, "In the opinion of this office, the Eighth Service Command is doing commendable work to assure that prisoners of war are utilized to the best advantage of all concerned throughout the Eighth Service Command area. It was a pleasure to meet you the other day, and I trust our conference in the Office of The Under Secretary of War may result in satisfaction to you."<sup>69</sup>

Gathings' actual influence on obtaining POW labor can be seen in a letter he received from Colonel Daniel B. Byrd of the Army Eighth Service Forces Headquarters in Dallas, Texas. Col. Byrd writes, "Approximately 90% of the prisoners engaged in agriculture in Arkansas are located in your district. Should approval be given for the establishment of branch camps now pending, it would be a question when the allotment is made of taking prisoners from one camp and sending to another within your district."<sup>70</sup> In another letter, Lt. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge from the headquarters of POW Camp Robinson pointed out after a request from Gathings for more POWs that "at present [there are] approximately 8,400 prisoners of war employed in agriculture in Arkansas whose quota is only 7,231."<sup>71</sup> Despite being over this quota, Arkansas soon after received another 4,000 POWs.

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69. Provost Marshal General Archer L. Lerch to E.C. Gathings, letter February 15, 1945. E.C. Gathings Archive.

70. Colonel Daniel B. Byrd to E.C. Gathings, letter February 3, 1945. E.C. Gathings Archive.

71. Lt. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge to E.C. Gathings, letter February 3, 1945. E.C. Gathings Archive.

In one instance, Mabel Gieseck and the Lansing Company used POW labor as “carpenters’ helpers” in repairing houses on their plantation until the camp commander ordered it to stop because it violated the terms of the labor contract for the Wynne POW Camp that stipulated that the POWs could only be used in agriculture. The labor contracts specifically stated that work, such as carpentry, masonry, and other skilled building trades, could not be filled by POWs without authorization and certification of need by the War Manpower Commission.<sup>72</sup> In response, Gieseck and her business partner, Neil Hamill Park, sent an angry telegram to Congressman Gathings in protest and blamed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for these restrictions. Gieseck and Park stated, “Also we wish vigorously to protest the CIO running the Army and dictating the use of war prisoners labor and will appreciate appropriate action in our behalf.”<sup>73</sup> In turn, Gathings sent a complaint to the Wynne County Prison Camp and a telegram to the Eighth Service Command commander in Dallas, Texas. After all the political pressure, the Eighth Service Command rescinded the regulation on Gieseck and allowed the Lansing Company to complete their project.<sup>74</sup> In response to the Gieseck POW carpentry incident, Colonel Daniel B. Byrd of the Eighth Service Command wrote to Congressman Gathings, “You will note that I am making this a personal rather than an official letter. I believe we had a complete understanding on this some time ago. Please feel free to call upon me when I can be of service to you or your friends.”<sup>75</sup>

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72. Colonel Daniel B. Byrd to E.C. Gathings, letter September 30, 1944. Gathings Archive.

73. Mabel H. Gieseck to E.C. Gathings, telegram September 29, 1944. Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

74. E. C. Gathings to Mabel H. Gieseck, telegram September 29, 1944. Gathings Archive.

75. Colonel Daniel B. Byrd to E.C. Gathings, letter September 30, 1944. Gathings Archive.

After learning some of the POWs' skills, many other farmers and planters used them for their skilled labor, as relations relaxed between the planters and POWs. However, the carpentry incident and the use of POWs as skilled laborers highlights the political influence and collusion between the planter elite and the government. In this case, the CIO lobbied for not allowing POWs to fill skilled labor positions, and the government and military agreed, putting it in their labor contracts, which the POW camp then enforced. However, those fell to the wayside once the planters and their politicians applied pressure. In policy, it still remained even in the memo sent February 1, 1946, to "all users of prisoners of war" at the Wynne POW Camp that "Prisoners of War will not be sent out in an answer to a call for carpenters, brick-masons, electricians, plasterers, painters, plumbers, or in any category of skilled labor."<sup>76</sup> The policy tamed the labor unions, but in practice, the planters continued to utilize the cheap POW labor as they pleased with meager resistance.

In another instance, Congressman Gathings sent a telegram to E.D. Hollan of Wynne, Arkansas, explaining his successes in influencing policy. Initially, a typical POW would pick about 40-50 lbs. a day of cotton without a quota. The planters needed to mandate a quota system of at least 100 lbs. per POW a day to make it profitable, so they had Gathings petition the government. Eventually, the OPMG and the War Department made it compulsory for POWs to pick 100 lbs. of cotton a day to receive their daily allowance of 80 cents, and later the quota was moved to 120 lbs. a day. With the quota increase, the planters could maximize profits, as they still paid the same wages to use POW labor.<sup>77</sup>

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76. Harold R. Richardson to "all users of prisoners of war," memo February 1, 1946.

77. E.C. Gathings to E.D. Hollan, telegram September 26, 1944. Gathings Archive.

Additionally, the typical workday for a civilian cotton picker would generally be 10-12 hours a day, but POWs typically worked 8-hour days. Gathings and the planters successfully lobbied to increase the workday for POWs to 10-12 hours during the harvest season. On such matters, Gathings received a copy of a letter from Judge A.W. Oliver of Proctor, Arkansas, written to Congressman Clifford Davis of Mississippi regarding influencing the hours POWs could work, and he promised his support and assistance in the issue. Judge Oliver's letter stated, "The Prisoner of War Camps seem to have gotten into the hands of Eight Hour Boys from the guards on up . . . The attitude of the Army seems to be that the Farmers are a lot of Slave Drivers and that it is their duty to protect the Prisoners from hard work."<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, W.B. Proctor, Cross County Agricultural Extension agent, and J.E. Hollan, Cross County Famers Association and Wynn Prison Camp Association president, co-wrote numerous letters on Arkansas Extension Service letterhead to Congressman E.C. Gathings and Colonel Daniel B. Byrd, the commanding officer of the Eighth Service Command in Dallas, Texas, to request not only an additional branch camp at nearby Parkin, AR, but also an expansion to the Wynne camp to add 300 to 400 POWs. In response, Colonel Byrd stated that Arkansas already had nearly 30 branch camps and four base camps and that "While the Service Command is governed by the recommendation and request of the State Extension Director, it would appear to be a good policy not to approve the establishment of new branch camps to house prisoners that would have to be moved from camps already established . . . At this time the demand is not only greater than the supply, but far in excess of what we may reasonably expect in the near future."<sup>79</sup>

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78. Judge A.W. Oliver to Congressman Clifford Davis, letter May 4, 1945. Gathings Archive.

79. Colonel Daniel Byrd, Eighth Service Command to Hon. E.C. Gathings, letter January 31, 1945. Gathings Archive.

In one letter to Col. C.S. Urwiller of the OMPG, Gathings made one of his constant lobbies for more POW labor stating that Eastern Arkansas typically relies on 10,000 cotton pickers from the Memphis area for the cotton harvest; however, “This year the War Manpower Commission office states we will not get over a thousand to fifteen hundred, and they will be the old, women and children. Am just writing this to remind of our problems so that if you are in a position to place additional prisoners of war, we will certainly need them.”<sup>80</sup> Col. Urwiller worked for the OPMG in the Prisoner of War Division and helped determine the supply of POWs to the Service Commands. Col. Urwiller became Gathings' go-to man on matters involving POW labor in D.C. after they met with the delegation sent by the Agriculture Council of Arkansas in July 1944. Col. Urwiller told them in that meeting, "being a Georgia farmer and having been stationed for the past two years in Memphis, he felt he understood our problem very well."<sup>81</sup> Thus, Gathings found his contact in Washington, D.C., to affect POW policy in the OPMG, but he continually lobbied the military officials for more.

In one case, Major General Richard Donovan of the Eighth Service Command reoutlined the process for the planters and associations to request POWs, going through the county agent of the Extension Service and certification by the War Manpower Commission, all seemingly in an attempt to stop Gathings from constantly bombarding his office with letters and requests. General Donovan concluded his letter by stating, "I am mindful of the numerous requests and demands made on you by your constituents for prisoner of war labor, and I felt that with the above information at hand, you would be in a position to give them prompt and accurate

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80. E.C. Gathings to Col. C.S. Urwiller, letter August 19, 1944. Gathings Archive.

81. “Joint Committee Report” Agriculture Council of Arkansas, H.R. Adams, no date, 2. Gathings Archive.

information."<sup>82</sup> The general tone of the letter reads as an appeal for Gathings to stop sending so many requests for POW labor.

### **Lt. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge**

To get things done quickly in Arkansas, Gathings would continually protest on behalf of the planters to Lieutenant Colonel Glenn C. Rutledge of the U.S. Army and the Commanding Officer (CO) of the POW camp at Camp Joseph T. Robinson. Camp Robinson housed the largest POW camp in Arkansas. Over 4,000 POWs mainly worked in the service of Robinson's Infantry Replacement Training Center, which trained an estimated 750,000 soldiers during the war.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, Col. Rutledge and POW Camp Robinson administered over the 9,000 POWs held in 24 branch camps built by the planters and farmer associations throughout eastern and southern Arkansas. Thus, Col. Rutledge played an influential role in developing the POW labor program in Arkansas from April 1944 until his retirement in October 1945, when he then began working for the Extension Service in Arkansas.<sup>84</sup>

Glenn C. Rutledge, born in Pine Grove, Louisiana, understood the planter elite's role in controlling the Mississippi Delta. He graduated from Louisiana State University and served as an

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82. Major General Richard Donovan to E.C. Gathings, letter March 15, 1945. Gathings Archive.

83. Steve Rucker "Camp Joseph T. Robinson." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified October 24, 2017. <<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/camp-joseph-t-robinson-2262/>>.

84. "Biographical Note," Glenn C. Rutledge Papers, 1943-1952, *UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture*, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock.



editor for the *Daily Herald News* and as a captain in the local National Guard in Gulfport, Mississippi.<sup>85</sup> Then, during the war, Col. Rutledge first commanded POW Camp Howze in Texas before becoming the CO at POW Camp Robinson in April 1944. Col. Rutledge became Congressman Gathings' go-to contact to lobby and protest for the Arkansas planters over anything involving POWs.

In one instance, Dave Block of Wynne, Arkansas, used eight POWs from the branch camp to clean up the remains of his store that burnt down the previous year. Col. Rutledge personally visited the work detail, and the following day it was shut down by Major Newman, the CO of the Wynne POW Camp. Block wrote to Gathings to intervene on the matter and speculated, "The real meat in the coconut of this thing is that both he [Major Newman] and Rutledge are deathly afraid of some complaint being filed by some of the labor organizations. You know of course how the unions have opposed these prisoner of war camps, but I cant[sic] figure by any stretch of the imagination how any labor organization could complain about these men loading bricks and rubbish in wheel burrows and trucks."<sup>86</sup> After Gathings intervened, Col. Rutledge wrote back to Block and explained that it was shut down for two reasons. One is that the Wynne POW Camp only had an agriculture contract for POW usage. So, they would need to secure a certificate of necessity from the War Manpower Commission to use POWs for industrial labor. The other concern was that the "location of the job is not desirable for prisoners of war labor because it is difficult for us to provide the protection from public curiosity which the Geneva Convention guarantees."<sup>87</sup>

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85. "Biographical Note," Glenn C. Rutledge Papers.

86. David Block to E.C. Gathings, letter December 12, 1944. Gathings Archive.

87. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge to David Block, letter December 16, 1944. Gathings Archive.

It is uncertain if Block received the certificate of necessity from the WMC. However, in a similar situation, almost a month later, Gathings intervened again, this time on behalf of the Forrest City School Board, to clean up their burned-down building. Again, Rutledge responded to Gathings, saying they may use POW labor if they got a WMC certificate of need.<sup>88</sup> However, Gathings translated that to mean yes, and wrote back to Superintendent M.S. Smith, saying, “I am pleased to note that Colonel Rutledge states in this letter that the School Board may use prisoners of war labor in connection with the work of cleaning up and salvaging the debris from the burned school building at Forrest City.”<sup>89</sup> Gathings never even mentioned the WMC certificate of necessity requirement.<sup>90</sup>

In some instances, Col. Rutledge pushed back against Gathings’ demands; for example, in the debate over the shutdown of POW Camp Knobel in Arkansas. The Knobel Rice Growers’ Association had constructed Camp Knobel, but its proximity to the rice fields increased the risk of malaria for POWs and guards.<sup>91</sup> Worried that the camp administrators failed to provide adequate screens, Army officials conducted a study on the camp conditions and sanitation and deemed them too dangerous. The actual final straw for the POW camp's closure came after the association fell delinquent for two labor payments and bounced a check to the telephone company. For these reasons, Col. Rutledge wrote to E.C. Gathings reprising the events leading to

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88. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge to E.C. Gathings, letter January 22, 1945. Gathings Archive.

89. E.C. Gathings to M.S. Smith, letter January 24, 1945. Gathings Archive.

90. It is also uncertain if M.S. Smith and the Forrest City ever secured the WMC approval to use POWs on their burned buildings, but since there was no longer any correspondence on the matters, it is safely assumed they used POWs for their projects. Additionally, the War Manpower Commission manager in Forrest City, Arkansas, was G.W. Baskin. As discussed in Chapter 3, Baskin, a puppet/enforcer for the planters, stopped the four truckloads of men on the highway heading to Memphis in transit to work for the Campbell Soup Co.

91. Lt. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge to E.C. Gathings, letter February 3, 1945. Gathings Archive.

the camp's closure and noted that the POWs from Camp Knobel would be transferred to Florence, Arizona. He reminded him that Arkansas was already over its POW quota, seemingly preemptively anticipating his appeals from the planters requesting their use elsewhere.<sup>92</sup>

After the security worries early in the war waned for Col. Rutledge and the OPMG, the self-sufficiencies of the camps and the financial success of the POW labor program became of the utmost importance. In one instance, Col. Rutledge wrote a draft to Col. Graham about how to answer public questions over the use of POW labor. Rutledge said to focus on the stipulations of the Geneva Convention that allowed such labor utilization and show how financially successful the POW labor program had become. Rutledge wrote:

The fact that the labor of prisoners of war is being utilized is proven by recent figures which show that \$25,000,000 was paid into the Treasury of the United States for their labors during a period of six months. In my own command here, including branch camps, we have turned in to the Finance Officer at Camp Joseph T. Robinson as high as \$175,000 in a single month. We have earned as high as \$10,000 in a single day. The clamor for more prisoners in Arkansas seems to keep Congressmen from this State busy.<sup>93</sup>

Overall, instead of Geneva Convention and CIO concerns, financial success became the measure by which Col. Rutledge and the military gauged the POW labor program. The labor program kept the POWs occupied, aided in the war effort, and eased labor shortages with seemingly no national security concerns. The agreement was also a favorable quid pro quo for the planters, who had a stable but temporary labor source that helped ease the transition towards a post-war economy where they expected an increase in the availability of cheap labor once again and the transition to machine cotton pickers.

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92. Rutledge to Gathings, letter February 3, 1945. Gathings Archive.

93. Col. Glenn C. Rutledge to Col. Graham, memo February 18, 1945. Glenn C. Rutledge Papers.

For his efforts in running a profitable POW labor program, Col. Rutledge received praise from the Eighth Service Command headquarters. As Lt. Col. Alexander Adair put it, “The results have obtained in requiring prisoners of war to perform greater tasks can be judged by statements of employers and supervisors of work details that the prisoners efficiency has been raised from about 50% of common free labor in early 1944 to a present standard which calls for their replacement by civilian labor on an average basis of one for one.”<sup>94</sup> This really means that it increased the profit for the planters, as it allowed them to utilize more POW labor and pay them less than civilian labor to get the same quality of work in picking cotton. Additionally, Col. Adair commended Col. Rutledge for helping make the labor program a success and for keeping the “correct accounting for thousands of dollars income to the Government each.”<sup>95</sup> It shows that the military officials viewed the POW labor program as a success because of the money it generated without considering its impact on local Mississippi Delta wages.

After his Army retirement in October 1945, Rutledge remained active in the Army Reserve and accepted an editor position for the *Arkansas Extension Service*, the editorial for the University of Arkansas System Cooperative Extension Service of the USDA. Although he served as an editor in Gulfport, Mississippi, before the war, Rutledge's time as CO of the state's largest POW camp and in charge of most of the branch camps helped him build a strong relationship with Arkansas's Extension Service and its planter cohorts. In 1948, Rutledge became the head of the editorial department of Mississippi State University's Agriculture Experiment Station, a position he held until retirement in 1970.<sup>96</sup>

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94. Lt. Col. Alexander Adair to Col. Glenn C. Rutledge, letter September 17, 1945. Glenn C. Rutledge Papers.

95. Adair to Rutledge. September 17, 1945. Glenn C. Rutledge Papers.

96. “Biographical Note,” Glenn C. Rutledge Papers.

## Conclusion

Despite the nonuse policy and the planters having to pay industrial wages in the compresses, the constant demand for more POW labor in the cotton fields continued, as it was the cheapest labor option. Even months after the POWs' repatriation process began at the war's end, Gathings and the planters pled to keep the POWs for as long as possible. In one instance, Philip Hicky of the Forrest City Cotton Oil Mill, in some sort of delusional plea, wrote to Congressman E.C. Gathings on March 1, 1946, "We are still technically at war with Germany and, while there may be a few of the prisoners who are desirous of returning to their homeland, we know that a large percentage of them would much prefer staying in this country, even though in prison camps."<sup>97</sup> Hicky represents just one of the planters' many desperate and nonsensical appeals for keeping POW labor, illustrating how they desired to maintain their cheap labor well after the war's end. Someone in the OPMG compiled several of Congressman Gathings' letters and forwarded them to Provost Marshal General B.M. Bryan, who responded:

Because of the continued strong demand for prisoner of war labor in agriculture, it has not been possible at any time to furnish the full number required in any service command. However, it is pointed out that the allocation to the Eighth Service Command.<sup>98</sup> for agriculture is larger than that made to any other command . . . The importance placed on prisoner of war labor by many farmers thus appears to be greatly out of proportion to the number of prisoners of war

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97. Philip Hicky to E. C. Gathings, letter March 1, 1946. E. C. Gathings Archives, Special Collections, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University

98. Arkansas falls under the Eighth Service Command of the Office of the Provost Marshall General, with its headquarters in Dallas, Texas. It includes the states of New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

employed. The report also discloses that the greatest demand for prisoner of war labor comes from the States with the lowest wage rates.<sup>99</sup>

General Bryan seemed to understand what had happened in Arkansas concerning the low wages for local labor, but he did little to remedy the situation. The planters' constant squawking for more POW labor and the lobbying by influential politicians combined with the military's desire for full labor utilization led to 1/7<sup>th</sup> of all POWs being sent to the Mississippi Delta. Despite General Bryan recognizing the low wages being paid in the cotton fields, in the same letter, he promised Congressman Gathings that POWs engaged in agriculture in the northern states would be repatriated before the southern states. It is unknown why General Bryan repatriated the northern states first. It may have been better logistically, or it could have been to silence the planters unrelenting pleas for more POW labor.

The issue of labor control revealed the strains within the southern rural labor systems, and POWs, as the cheapest labor source available, filled a void as cotton harvesting transitioned from labor-intensive sharecropping into a structure dependent on seasonal wage labor and mechanization.<sup>100</sup> POWs became a viable labor resource to ease the transition between a period of civilian labor shortage and the return of U.S. soldiers. Many POW camps remained in operation for nearly a year after the war in Europe had ended, with the last POWs leaving Arkansas in the spring of 1946, despite some planters petitioning to keep them into 1947.

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99. Office of the Provost Marshal General B.M. Bryan to E.C. Gathings, letter November 30, 1945. E.C. Gathings Archive.

100. Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990): 886-911.

## Chapter 5 - Prisoners in America: POW Labor and Race Relations

### DEFEAT

On a train in Texas German prisoners eat  
With white American soldiers, seat by seat,  
While black American soldiers sit apart,  
The white men eating meat, the black men heart.  
Now, with that other war a century done,  
Not the live North but the dead South has won,  
Not yet a riven nation comes awake.  
Whom are we fighting this time, for God's sake?  
Mark well the token of the separate seat.  
It is again ourselves whom we defeat.

-Witter Bynner<sup>1</sup>

“There is the completion of the axis . . . and the two groups don’t like each other,” remarked POW camp’s commander, Lt. Colonel George Ball, in an interview for the *Des Moines Register*. The colonel was referring to the use of German POWs to supervise the work of 50 Japanese POWs digging ditches at Camp Clarinda in Iowa.<sup>2</sup> As thousands of German, Italian, and Japanese prisoners of war began settling into prisoner life in the United States, to make the best of the labor pinch, the War Department allowed for only the use of German and Italian POWs to fill the labor shortages off of military posts in the civilian sphere. Excluded from these coveted and profitable out-of-camp labor opportunities were the nearly 5,000 Japanese POWs being housed in the U.S. As Lt. Col. Ball showed, even in ditch digging duties at the POW camp, race often dictated roles in the military systems, so the German POWs supervised the work of the Japanese POWs and never the other way around.<sup>3</sup>

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1. “DEFEAT” by Witter Bynner, *Take Away the Darkness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 12.

2. “Germans Supervise Japs at Work in Iowa Prisoner of War Camp,” *Kearney Daily Hub*. April 9, 1945. Camp Clarinda in Iowa and Camp McCoy in Wisconsin became the only two camps to hold both Japanese and German POWs.

3. “Germans Supervise Japs at Work in Iowa Prisoner of War Camp,” *Kearney Daily Hub*. April 9, 1945.

The final two chapters of this study examine how race, citizenship, and the efforts to maintain White supremacy impacted labor utilization during the country's time at war. In the Mississippi Delta, laborers received different pay and treatment based on their condition of servitude and their race and citizenship, whether they were: free Whites, White prisoners at a state-run plantation, free Blacks, Black prisoners on state-run penal plantations, Black servicepersons, Japanese American war internees, Mexican braceros, undocumented Mexican workers, or Japanese, German and Italian POWs. Many of these groups felt like prisoners in America's labor systems and in the segregated military and larger society.

The American labor market, especially in cotton-growing regions, became even more multi-faceted in the course of World War II. During the war the U.S. military on American soil interned roughly 375,000 Germans, 50,000 Italians, and 5,000 Japanese POWs. The Department of Interior interned 120,000 relocated Japanese Americans or persons of Japanese descendants due to Executive Order 9066, in addition to the nearly 150,000 American citizens—White, Black, Latino, and otherwise—already incarcerated as a punishment for crime, though with a disproportionate preponderance of Black men, especially in the South.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, a final injection of racialized labor came via the nearly 250,000 Mexican nationals who would enter the U.S. for emergency farm labor as a part of bilateral agreements that became known as the Bracero program, with another 75,000 Bahamian and Jamaican workers brought in under similar arrangements.<sup>5</sup> In Arkansas and the South, segregation heavily influenced labor policies, and

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4. Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1996). Additionally, Arnold Krammer in "Japanese Prisoners of War in America," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Feb. 1983), 83. Patrick A. Langan et al., "Historical Statistics on Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions, Yearend 1925-1986," *U.S. Department of Justice*, May 1988.

5. Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte, NC: McNally and Loftin, 1964), 53. Cited in Barbara Heisler Barbara Schmitter Heisler, "The 'Other Braceros': Temporary Labor and German Prisoners of War in the United States, 1943-1946," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 31 (Summer 2007), 246.



concerns about maintaining the racial hierarchy rendered complex racialized labor regimes, including creating the anomalies cited above: of African American soldiers treated worse than German POWs or German POWs being placed in command over Japanese POWs.

Chapter 5 focuses on POW labor usage, both in the United States more broadly and in the Mississippi Delta more specifically during World War II. The primary focus is on the racist manner in which US military officials deployed this labor force, which exacerbated racial tensions in the country. In some cases, these policies even led to reprisals and violence, given that White German and Italian POWs received preferential treatment as opposed to Japanese POWs, Black American civilians, Black prisoners on state-run penal plantations, and Black U.S. servicepersons.

### **German POWs vs. African Americans**

At times, German POWs would point out Americans' hypocrisy in their treatment of African Americans in the segregated South. The idea that African American workers were treated as "prisoners like us" became a recurring theme from empathetic POWs complaining about Blacks' poor treatment in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>6</sup> Despite Black migrant laborers doing more work with higher cotton-picking quotas, the employers and planters, due to their racial preference and in an order to maintain White supremacy, continually praised the German POWs for their efforts and depicted them as saviors of the crops. To offset the lower production by

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6. Matthew J. Schott, "Prisoners like Us: German POWs Encounter Louisiana's African-Americans," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Summer, 1995), 277-290.

POWs and to maintain their presumed racial superiority, the employers usually stressed the higher quality of work and the superior work ethic of the POWs. In reality, the planters preferred paying the lower wages for POW labor and receiving the government allowances for transportation.

In Louisiana, the planters expressed gratitude for the POWs' helping hands, as if they were the salvation of Louisiana agriculture. In "Prisoners like Us: German POWs Encounter Louisiana's African-Americans," Matthew Schott describes how county agents reported on how the "admirably industrious and disciplined German workers enabled the planters' good war efforts to proceed on a patriotically profitable scale. At the same time, they alleged that shiftless and ungrateful African Americans were being drafted by inconsiderate draft boards, or that blacks unpatriotically ran off to towns to work in defense plants."<sup>7</sup> After visiting a factory in Georgia, a Swiss Legation official reported that,

Once shown the task required of them, they [the German POWs] work with commendable diligence, require little supervision or further instruction, and in general become more proficient than the blacks who are ordinarily hired for such work. Furthermore, they are on call when needed . . . The Negroes are not. For when a cold snap comes or a few extra dollars, have been laid by, the Negro fails to show up for work.<sup>8</sup>

Often Black civilian workers would be separated from the POWs, for example, at the Mullens Plantation in Mississippi, where the first Italian POWs worked in the cotton fields while the regular Black crew worked across the railroad tracks in another field to compare their efficiency. However, in plenty of instances, both groups interacted closely together when

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7. Schott, "Prisoners like Us," 277-290.

8. Report on the visit at Fort Benning and side camp Americus, GA, on 11–12 Dec. 1944 by Dr. Rudolph Fischer, Swiss Legation, Benning, Georgia, NARA, quoted in Matthias Reiss, "Solidarity Among 'Fellow Sufferers,' 531-561.

unsupervised. Working side by side with African Americans who had stayed behind and shared the same and often unpleasant working conditions seemed to create a sense of mutual solidarity. In "Solidarity Among Fellow Sufferers," Matthias Reiss argues that the German POWs and African Americans found themselves at the bottom of the economic hierarchy in American society with a shared oppressed status. Typically, working side by side led to harmonious relationships.<sup>9</sup>

This study shows that despite the shared oppressed status, the White POW in the racial customs and hierarchy in the South enjoyed lighter workloads and better treatment than African American workers. In the South, many African Americans resented the privileges afforded to the POWs, as African American veteran Nathan Harris recalled that "if you was a black boy here in Mississippi, when they brought those Germans over here as prisoners they got more privilege than you did as a citizen."<sup>10</sup> Stories circulated of German POWs eating in Jim Crow cafes while their African American guards stayed outside. Moreover, there were instances where German and Italian POWs were allowed to enroll in correspondence courses through segregated Southern universities that barred African American and Japanese American citizens.<sup>11</sup>

The racial tensions and hierarchy in America during the 1940s did not escape the attention of the POWs. In one instance at a branch camp for Camp Blanding in Florida, an American Army chaplain held lectures extolling the goodness of America and democracy, and

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9. Matthias Reiss, "Solidarity Among 'Fellow Sufferers': African Americans and German Prisoners of War in the United States During World War II." *Journal of African American History* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 531-561.

10. Neil R. McMillen, "Fighting for What We Didn't Have: How M Veterans Remember World War II," found in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 102.

11. James M. Ward, "'Nazis Hoe Cotton': Planters, POWs, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Fall, 2007): 471-492. Also found in Morton Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," *Stanford Humanities Review* 2:1 (1991): 38-64.

on at least one occasion pro-Nazi POWs began asking him questions about America's racist policies and treatment towards persons of color to expose the hypocrisy of many Americans. It forced the chaplain to storm off and end the lecture.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, in some instances, German POWs tried to use the racialized labor regimes and emphasis on White supremacy for their own benefit, to get themselves out of fieldwork duties. Under the Geneva Convention, "no prisoner of war shall be assigned to labour which would be looked upon as humiliating for a member of the Detaining Power's own forces," so some POWs felt certain tasks that were typically performed by African Americans fell into this category. For example, in June 1943, at Camp Huntsville, Texas, the POWs claimed that "white men do not work in the fields in Texas," so they should not have to either. In Georgia in September 1943, an American officer reported that "some German prisoners had refused to work on the peanut harvest, stating . . . it is menial work since it usually is performed by Negroes."<sup>13</sup>

The POW protests on this point never became too serious, as many POWs welcomed an opportunity to work, leave the camp, and earn a wage, and the quotas for local labor were almost double. However, the fact that the POWs replaced Black men now serving in the armed forces or the defense industry did not escape them. As one POW said, "While we were in America, we did the Negrowork. The slavework. We replaced the Negroes, nothing else."<sup>14</sup> The dependence on POWs to replace the predominately Black wage laborers transformed the plantation labor system and facilitated the end of sharecropping. However, the archaic plantation system indeed never

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12. Robert D. Billinger, Jr., "With the Wehrmacht in Florida: The German P.O.W. Facility at Camp Blanding, 1942-1946," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 58 (October 1979): 160-173.

13. Matthias Reiss, "Solidarity Among 'Fellow Sufferers,' 531-561.

14. Matthias Reiss, "Solidarity Among 'Fellow Sufferers,' 531-561.

died and still exists in some forms on the penal plantations of the Mississippi Delta, where to this day, one can find imprisoned Americans hand-picking cotton for no pay.<sup>15</sup> Arkansas's history and accepted use of convict leasing and inmate laborers on state-run penal farms eased the transition to the utilization of German and Italian POWs in the cotton fields.

### **Arkansas's Penal Plantations**

When labor became scarcer during the war and before POWs arrived, many planters looked to the state penitentiary for labor, whether trying to reestablish the now-illegal convict leasing system or petitioning for prisoner release.<sup>16</sup> One Bolivar County planter, Walter Sillers Jr., petitioned Mississippi Governor Thomas Bailey to release two black prisoners from Parchman State Prison; both were serving a ten-year sentence for stealing a cow in 1939. Sillers argued they had served enough of a sentence and were "sorely needed by their respective families in the conduct of cotton farming operations in this time of labor scarcity."<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Oscar Johnston, president of the National Cotton Council and the manager of the largest plantation in Mississippi, on two separate occasions, called for the release of former

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15. Today the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas do not pay prisoners for labor. Beth Schwatzapfel, "Prison Money Diaries: What People Really Make (and Spend) Behind Bars." *The Marshall Project* (August 4, 2022).

16. Arkansas outlawed convict leasing in 1912 and, in the same year, bought more land to house all the prisoners on state-run penal farms. Alabama was the last state to abolish convict leasing in 1928. See more on convict leasing in Calvin R. Ledbetter, Jr. "The Long Struggle to End Convict Leasing in Arkansas." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Spring 1993): 1–27.

17. Walter Sillers, Jr. to Governor Thomas Bailey, letter April 4, 1944, cited in Nan Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 206.

workers or sharecroppers. In one case, Johnston wrote Arkansas officials on behalf of Willie Hobbs, who had served two years of a life sentence for murder, to secure his return to the plantation. Due to the death of Hobbs's father, his family needed help harvesting the crop. In the other instance, Johnston hired a lawyer to secure the release and three-year probation in his custody for one of his sharecropper's sons, who was indicted for manslaughter in Chicago. Johnston wrote and thanked the lawyer for the "pains you have taken to help our 'nigger' who is paying probably a well-deserved penalty for leaving his 'kith and kin' and going off to live up there among a lot of 'yankees.'"18

By manipulating the legal system in these ways, the planters of the Delta maintained some modicum of control over their predominantly Black labor force. The Arkansas government willingly allowed planters to exploit the labor situation during the war in part because the state already utilized their own forced labor to harvest cotton at two facilities: the 16,500-plus-acre penal plantation using primarily incarcerated African Americans at the Cummins Prison Farm (now Cummins Unit), and the 4,500-acre Tucker Unit, mainly for White prisoners. In 1944, lawyer Byron R. Brogard said that Arkansas prisons were "little improved over the Medieval system," with a prime transgression being the use of "slave labor for the production of cotton rather than to rehabilitate the men."19

Additionally, William J. Farmar, in his study *The Delta Prisons: Punishment for Profit*, found evidence that during the 1940s, prisoners would sometimes be leased off prison grounds

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18. Oscar Johnston to James R. Leavell, letters September 15 and 24, 1942, Oscar Johnston Papers, General Correspondence, Delta and Pine Land Company Papers, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville. Also, cited in Nan Woodruff, *American Congo*, 206.

19. Colin Woodward, "Cummins Unit." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified July 15, 2021. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/cummins-unit-7607/>

for their labor by nearby planters, which could be considered convict leasing or peonage, both illegal.<sup>20</sup> Officially, Arkansas abolished the convict lease system in 1912, but the Cummins prison became known for being notoriously corrupt. Farmar found correspondence and investigation reports at the State Board of Pardons and Paroles that indicated how influential citizens could obtain “‘likely Negroes’ to work on their farms and the system would oblige by arranging paroles or indefinite furloughs for ‘boys’ who met the plantation owner’s requirements.”<sup>21</sup>

Arkansas's Cummins Unit housed mostly Black inmates until the 1970s, using barrack-style living spaces with bunks instead of individual cells. The prison relied on trustees/trustees (armed inmates) to oversee the work done and to maintain control over the prison and barracks. The officials expected the penal plantations to be self-sufficient in growing some of their own food and churning a profit with cotton production.<sup>22</sup> Often trustees abused their positions of power, controlling the mail and food, using bribery, and inflicting punishments in the form of whippings, beatings, shootings, and the infamous "Tucker Telephone."<sup>23</sup> Named after Arkansas's Tucker Unit, this type of torture consisted of an old-fashioned crank telephone wired in sequence

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20. William J. Farmar, *The Delta Prisons: Punishment for Profit* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Council, 1968).

21. Farmar, *The Delta Prisons*, 16. The use of “likely Negroes” is a dated expression that stems from “likely slaves” in American history pre-Civil War to describe the finest quality in an enslaved person or someone without fault, but they are not perfect due to their race. For more information, see Willis Brown, “A LIKELY NEGRO AND WITHOUT FAULT.” *Negro History Bulletin* 18, no. 8 (1955): 177–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44176905>.

22. Woodward, "Cummins Unit." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*.

23. Woodward, "Cummins Unit." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*.

with two batteries attached to a prisoner's big toe and genitals to send an electric shock through the prisoner's body.<sup>24</sup>

The Arkansas prison systems did not undergo reform until the late 1960s and 1970s, following the discovery of almost 200 bodies on the prison grounds. Some suggested that these were the remains of murdered inmates, while others claimed they belonged to paupers buried there before the penal plantation. In 1970, federal judge J. Smith Henley declared the entire Arkansas prison system unconstitutional, citing the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments' prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Although he did not find that the inmates' involuntary servitude in the fields violated the Thirteenth Amendment, he determined that the state could not protect the inmates from harm and possible death. Moreover, in 1970 the Cummins Unit housed approximately 1,000 prisoners, but it only had thirty-five paid staff at the prison, including eight guards, of which only two were on night duty.<sup>25</sup>

Arkansas's prison system did not stand alone with its penal plantations in the Mississippi Delta; both Louisiana with Angola Plantation and Mississippi with Parchman Farm operated their own 18,000-acre prison farms, each utilizing inmate labor. They both have a checkered past with notorious instances of brutality and terrible living environments, and still today are centerpieces of prison reform efforts. Parchman, famously referenced in songs and movies, such as *Cool Hand Luke*, sits on 20,000 acres in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and consists of 15 work camps. David Oshinsky, in *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow*

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24. The staff of the CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas, "Tucker Telephone." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified January 18, 2023. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/tucker-telephone-4923/>

25. Dorothy S. McClellan, "Holt v. Sarver." *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Last modified April 11, 2022. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/holt-v-sarver-4165/>. Also, see Colin E. Woodward, "At Cummins Prison: Johnny Cash and the Arkansas Penitentiary" (*Pulaski County Historical Review* 62 Fall 2014), 85–92.



*Justice* details the gruesome cruelty inmates faced and how each of the 15 camps/farms operated much like an antebellum slave plantation, complete with forced laborers in gang system with “trustees” armed with whips serving as overseers and slave drivers, and other armed and mounted inmate guards serving as “shooters” and “gunmen” in order to chase down and shoot anyone who runs or crosses the borderline.

From its beginnings, in 1906, Governor James K. Vardaman turned Parchman into a prison farm designed to operate “like an efficient slave plantation.” It would benefit society by teaching African Americans “proper discipline, strong work habits, and respect for white authority.”<sup>26</sup> With such parallels to a slave-style labor system, after Parchman's first year of operations the State of Mississippi earned \$185,000 from their plantation. Oshinsky described that Parchman became “a giant money machine: profitable, self-sufficient and secure.”<sup>27</sup> However, for those imprisoned at Parchman, nearly 90% of whom were Black, it legalized torture, where inmates became subject to terror, rape, beatings, and whippings into submission. Known as “Black Annie,” a leather strap, three feet long and six inches wide, which hung from the belt of the trustee inmates, symbolized the connection between inmate labor and slavery. Flogging and lashings came to be described as the “perfect instrument of discipline in a prison populated by the wayward children of former slaves.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite the terrible conditions at both Cummins and Parchman, *Collier's* magazine, in November 1952, declared Louisiana's State Penitentiary, known as Angola Prison, “America's

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26. David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 110.

27. Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 155.

28. Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 151.

Worst Prison.”<sup>29</sup> Angola derives its name from the Angola Plantation that predated the prison, named after the territory/country where most of the enslaved laborers came from that worked on the plantation.<sup>30</sup> After visiting Angola, the *Collier’s* authors detailed the horrific circumstances inmates faced, including their visit to the hospital to see nearly a dozen men who had cut their heel tendons to get out of work. When asked why they did it, the inmates responded, "to get out from under that stick."<sup>31</sup> Angola had a long history of brutality, abuse, rape and sexual humiliation, overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and all under a harsh inmate labor program that also utilized armed inmate trustees.<sup>32</sup>

At all of the state-run prison plantations in the Mississippi Delta during World War II, the same concerns with a profit-driven, white supremacist-inflected system of abuse were evident. Kenneth Toler, a staff correspondent for the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, in March 1943 compared Parchman and Angola and found that Mississippi had been blinded by the "money-making abilities" of its penal system, since the profits went back into a state general fund and not the farm.<sup>33</sup> In Louisiana, the profits, if any, from their sugar cane and cotton went back into the facility for education and rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, the civilian guards at Angola received a 50-100% higher salary than their Mississippi counterparts. The armed trustee inmates

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29. Edward W. Stagg and John Lear, "America's Worst Prison." *Collier's*. November 22, 1952, 13-16.

30. Farmar, *The Delta Prisons*, 5.

31. Stagg and John Lear, "America's Worst Prison." *Collier's*. November 22, 1952, 13-16.

32. William P. Quigley, *Louisiana Angola Penitentiary: Past Time to Close*. Loyola University New Orleans College of Law Research, 2018.

33. Kenneth Toler, "Louisiana Snubs Money Making and Centers on Rehabilitation," *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, TN, March 21, 1943.

also earned a \$2 a month salary in commissary to help boost morale in the facility.<sup>34</sup> It was this Mississippi model that Arkansas followed, both at Cummins and in the penal farms operated by some Arkansas cotton-growing counties. For example, Blytheville housed the 640-acre Mississippi County penal farm. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported on February 6, 1945, how this farm earned a profit of \$27,000 by selling 272 bales of cotton, soybeans, and some hogs from the 1944 harvest.<sup>35</sup> The county penal farm utilized its inmates' labor to raise the crop.

The war years, however brought a striking anomaly to Blytheville: a certain number of POWs entered the camp to labor alongside the prison's predominantly Black inmates. County Judge Roland Green noted that with too few prisoners during the harvest season, they also employed German POWs to help pick the cotton.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, however, with the protections of the Geneva Convention, the POWs working in Arkansas received far better treatment than the imprisoned American civilians. Picking cotton for the primarily Black inmates on the penal plantations was seen as a punishment and task done without pay. For the White POWs, now used in a resurrected convict leasing system, the planters depicted them as the saviors of the cotton crop while the POWs earned a base wage of \$0.80 per day in canteen script. Although cotton picking is one of the least desirable jobs, most POWs enjoyed breaking the boredom of imprisonment with the opportunity to leave the camp and earn some money.

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34. Kenneth Toler, "Louisiana Snubs Money Making and Centers on Rehabilitation," *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, TN, March 21, 1943.

35. "\$27,000 Profit at County Penal Farm," *Arkansas Gazette* Little Rock, AR, February 6, 1945.

36. "\$27,000 Profit at County Penal Farm," *Arkansas Gazette* Little Rock, AR, February 6, 1945.

### **“Nazi-South Segregation”<sup>37</sup> - Black Soldiers and POWs**

Another way in which the war presented challenges to the intermingled factors of race and labor was in POW camps themselves, when Black US military servicemen transported and oversaw White German and Italian POWs laboring in the South’s cotton fields. At the beginning of the war, the segregated policies of the U.S. military—in effect as much in the North and West as in the South—did not offer much opportunity for interactions between Black soldiers and POWs on the home front. At this time, Provost Marshal General Allen Gullion, who served as the head of the Military Police and the POW camps in the U.S., refused to accept African American soldiers for POW guard and escort duties because he feared it would invite enemy reprisals. General Gullion never spelled out what he meant. One possible theory again is based on the Geneva Convention’s ban on “humiliating and degrading treatment” of captured enemy personnel. However, by 1944, wartime military personnel needs increased, and African American soldiers started to guard POWs in the U.S., North Africa, and Europe.<sup>38</sup>

During interactions in the United States, many African American soldiers felt that the POWs received better treatment than they did themselves. One of the most widely publicized events happened in El Paso, Texas, in April 1944. At the El Paso train station's restaurant, a group of nine African American soldiers were denied access during a stopover, while soon after,

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37. L.J. Perry, in “German Prisoners Put Nazism into Practice in U.S. Hospital” for the *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, KS), January 19, 1945, first called it “Nazi-South segregation” to evoke the similarities between Nazism and the Jim Crow South in segregation and the treatment of African Americans.

38. Matthias Reiss, “Solidarity Among ‘Fellow Sufferers,’ 531-561.

International Committee of the Red Cross, *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, July 27, 1929, <http://www.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/305>.

about two dozen German POWs with their White guards entered and dined without an objection. One of the African American soldiers later described the incident, "They entered the lunchroom, sat at the tables, had their meals served, talked, smoked, in fact had quite a swell time."<sup>39</sup> After gaining national attention, the editor of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP) *Crisis* magazine concluded that "nothing so lowers Negro morale as the frequent preferential treatment of Axis prisoners of war in contrast with deprecatory Army policy toward American troops who happen to be Negro."<sup>40</sup>

The shared oppressed status felt by POWs and Black soldiers even spilled over into labor policy, where in 1943, the War Department and the Army attempted to use its soldiers to help ease civilian labor shortages in Arizona. The unit chosen for this task was the 369<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment at Fort Huachuca, the famed predominately African American regiment of World War I, better known as the "Harlem Hellfighters."<sup>41</sup> During the First World War, the regiment consisted mainly of African Americans spent more time at the front than any other American regiment, sustaining 1,500 casualties. Over 170 members received American and French medals, including the first two Americans to earn the prestigious French *Croix de Guerre* for individual valor, Corporal Henry "Black Death" Johnson and Private Needham Roberts. Additionally, President Barack Obama in 2015 posthumously awarded Henry Johnson with the Medal of

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39. Letter Corporal Rupert Trimmingham, Fort Huachuca, AZ, to the editor, *Yank*. Printed in *Yank*, April 28, 1944, 14.

40. "Editor's Note." *The Crisis* 52 (1945): 85.

41. Initially, the 369th was nicknamed the "Black Rattlers." The French referred to the regiment as the "Men of Bronze," while they earned the name "Hellfighters" from the Germans. As most of the soldiers hailed from Harlem, New York, they became known as the Harlem Hellfighters.

Honor.<sup>42</sup> Now during World War II, the once famed “Hellfighters” became tasked with a new assignment, picking cotton in Arizona.

News of this potential assignment spread very quickly due to the inflammatory headline from Kansas City's African American newspaper, *Plaindealer*: “Negro Regiment To Pick Cotton.”<sup>43</sup> Immediately, the NAACP raised protest that not only would it set a dangerous precedent of the federal government and military aiding employers unwilling to pay decent wages to local labor, but that it also made “it impossible to avoid the conclusion that the state was selected because of the presence of a segregated Negro division at Ft. Huachuca.”<sup>44</sup> Drew Pearson, a journalist for the *Dallas Morning News*, speculated on other potential reasons that the Army would use soldiers to pick cotton. Firstly, Pearson reasoned it was a way for the Army to show their support to the farm bloc and to quell fears over too large of a military. Secondly, he speculated that having the Army pick cotton would go disastrously and thereby stop all further agricultural demands on utilizing its troops. Lastly, Pearson noted how the Army’s consideration to help in the cotton fields may have been earnest, but the Arizona planters had turned down local labor demanding a minimum wage of 30 cents an hour. The Arizona planters rejected the minimum wage after receiving a telephone call from Oscar Johnston, the unofficial “king of cotton,” from the Delta Council, National Cotton Council, and the president of the Delta and Pine Land Company.<sup>45</sup> Johnston urged that Arizona and the Delta stick together in resisting such

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42. Edward Mikkelsen Jr., "369th Infantry Regiment 'Harlem Hellfighters'." Black Past. Last modified January 17, 2007. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/369th-infantry-regiment-harlem-hellfighters/>.

43. "Negro Regiment To Pick Cotton." *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, KS), March 5, 1943.

44. "Cotton Picking By Army Postponed Indefinitely; Assignment Is Sought." *Detroit Tribune*, March 13, 1943.

45. Drew Pearson, “The Merry Go Round.” *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), March 2, 1943.

wage demands from labor.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, after the outrage over the news and a protest from chairman Paul McNutt of the War Manpower Commission, the Army postponed the cotton-picking assignment indefinitely, so it never happened. Incidents of this nature forced the War Department to continually investigate such racial tensions for the remainder of the war.

In the segregated South, racial differences between POWs and Black GIs became an issue again in 1945, when African American actress and singer Lena Horne visited Fort Robinson, Arkansas, as a part of a United Service Organizations (USO) tour. On the first night, Horne performed for the White officers and GIs at the post in the auditorium, and then she performed for the German POWs. Upon learning belatedly that the camp also had 50 African American soldiers, many of whom served as guards for the POWs, Horne was denied her request to entertain them in the auditorium. The camp commander instead allowed her to perform for them at the early morning breakfast in the segregated mess hall for the camp's colored troops. However, upon noticing the first few rows being occupied by German POWs, Horne asked them to be moved, to no avail, so she went past the rows of Germans to perform in front of the African American troops. Horne recalled in her autobiography, "I don't think I have ever been more furious in my life, by the third or fourth song I was too choked with anger and humiliation to go on."<sup>47</sup> Horne eventually left the USO because of their policy of segregating audiences and continued to finance her own shows at military camps.<sup>48</sup> The *Plaindealer* stated, "she could not

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46. Drew Pearson, "The Merry Go Round." *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), March 2, 1943.

47. Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena* (New York, 1986), 175. Lena Horne states in her autobiography that the incident occurred in Fort Riley, KS. All primary sources, however, point to Fort Robinson. Also discussed in Reiss, Matthias. "Icons of Insult: German and Italian Prisoners of War in African American Letters during World War II." *American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2004): 539-562.

48. Matthias Reiss, "Solidarity Among 'Fellow Sufferers,'" 531-561.

stand the Army jim crow setup where Nazi prisoners are permitted to see performances in preference to Negro troops.”<sup>49</sup>

The NAACP, the *Plaindealer*, the *Wichita Negro Star*, and other organizations protested such discriminatory practices throughout the war. Highlighting the preferential treatment POWs received was a particularly poignant tactic, given the obvious difference that comes with being an American citizen and soldier versus a wartime enemy. For example, the NAACP protested the segregation of dining halls at POW Camp Florence in Arizona, where African American Army nurses in uniform were segregated into their “jim crow dining room” under the gleeful gaze of German POWs.<sup>50</sup> In Huntsville, Alabama, a White U.S. Army officer drew his pistol on the African American civilian workers at the Redstone Arsenal after they refused to give up their seats in the cafeteria’s segregated corner to make room for the German POWs. L.J. Perry of the *Plaindealer* called it the “Nazi-South segregation,” where a similar segregation policy in Tampa, Florida, led to protests over the treatment of German POWs in relation to military personnel of color.<sup>51</sup> At the base hospital of MacDill Field, the German POWs working in the kitchen refused to work if African American patients continued to eat in the mess hall with Whites. Despite a racial segregation policy already in place, with the mess hall split in half for each race, the base sided with the German POWs and began feeding Black military and civilian personnel in a separate mess hall. As reporter L.J. Perry put it, “The German prisoners of war have started a

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49. "Prisoners Admitted to Show While Colored Troops Shunned; Called a Disgrace." *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, KS), January 5, 1945.

50. "Think on This: NAACP Protests Treatment of Negro Army Nurses in Prisoner of War Camps." *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, KS), January 19, 1945.

51. L.J. Perry, "Force Negroes to Eat with Nazi Prisoners." *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, KS), March 9, 1945.



system of working hand in glove with the Bourbon South in giving the Negro soldier another type of slap to the face.”<sup>52</sup>

For U.S. military personnel and civilians of color working at the camps, depots, and arsenals, the interests of German and Italian POWs got placed above their own. In a letter to Truman A. Gibson, the aide to the Secretary of War, African American Private Burt B. Babero discussed his discontent and maltreatment and wondered whom to turn to for aid. He described signs in the latrines at Camp Barkeley, Texas, that separated one latrine for “Negro soldiers” and one for German prisoners and White soldiers. Babero stated, “Seeing this was honestly disheartening. It made me feel, here, the tyrant is actually placed over the liberator.”<sup>53</sup>

Historian Phillip McGuire, the editor of *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letter from Black Soldiers in World War II*, includes six letters from Black troops detailing the racist policies and mistreatment received, contrasting it to the fairer treatment the POWs received. In one, Cpl. Daniel E. Williams and others wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier* to draw attention to the conditions of White supremacy they faced in the South. Williams, a resident of the Pittsburgh area then serving in the South, worked in flood relief out of Camp Maxey, Texas, or as he called it, “the cracker infested low land of Arkansas along the river of the same name.”<sup>54</sup> Williams described the chain gang system of labor that their commander, Major Sheridan, “a rough dried, leather neck Negro hating cracker from Louisiana,” inflicted upon them. In one case, Sheridan locked

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52. L.J. Perry, “German Prisoners Put Nazism into Practice in U.S. Hospital.” *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, KS), January 19, 1945.

53. Burt B. Babero, letter to Truman K. Gibson, February 13, 1944, letter cited in Phillip McGuire, ed. *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 50-52.

54. Daniell Williams, et al., letter to *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 30, 1942, letter cited in Phillip McGuire, ed. *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 109-110.

and chained a soldier to a tree for days for going off post without a pass, which he denied doing. Williams then immediately stated how the German POWs received fairer treatment and were not handled in such barbaric ways.<sup>55</sup>

### **Race and America's Italian Service Units**

Another moment of contention between African American soldiers and POWs came soon after Italy surrendered to the Allied forces on September 8, 1943, and then declared war against Germany and became a cobelligerent. The War Department continued interning the Italian POWs under the Geneva Convention since not all disavowed their fascist loyalties. Eventually, the government created Italian Service Units (ISU) for those who passed the screening process necessary to serve as a part of the U.S. military in non-combatative labor roles at domestic arsenals, forts, stations, ports, and depots. This move was again justified to free up U.S. personnel for overseas duties. ISU members received American GI uniforms and special privileges allowing them to come and go from the camp somewhat as they pleased, but when in town, they were to be escorted by an officer. This newfound freedom for ISU members led to increased interactions and even illegal courtships with the American civilian population, sometimes creating controversy. John H. Moore's "Italian POWs in America: War Is Not Always Hell" shows how many POWs enjoyed their captivity in the United States, frequently receiving better rations, housing, and pay than their time spent as soldiers.

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55. Williams, et al., letter to *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 30, 1942, letter cited in McGuire, ed. *Taps for a Jim Crow Army*, 109-110.

At the barracks and around the Sioux Ordnance Depot near Scottsbluff, Nebraska, the ISU soldiers could often sing some of their favorites, such as the "Ampolla" and the "Beer Barrel Polka." Citizens of Ordville, nearly a mile from the ISU barracks, often reported hearing the Italians singing. This ample volume increased during the holidays when the Italians were allowed to drink wine. A common saying in the area was that "Italy lost the war because of too many second tenors."<sup>56</sup>The freedoms of the ISU led to increased fraternization with civilians that occasionally led to violence. For example, a tryst of romance caused a disturbance at the Sioux Ordnance Depot. John Underdown, a U.S. Army supply officer at the depot, encountered a fight that erupted over a relationship between an American woman and an ISU member. Underdown recalled the events of that day:

There was one Italian that was probably the tallest one I've ever seen. He was an Italian lawyer and a very well educated man. There was a young lady, a nice looking blonde. She was very much in love with this fellow. They were drinking beer in the post exchange one afternoon. The colored troops, the Italians, and the air force were in there. All at once they got in a fight . . . I walked in the back door, and I hollered, they didn't see me. So I just pulled my old .45 out and blew another hole through the roof . . . These twelve air force boys were the ones who created the problem. They didn't like this girl sitting there with that Italian drinking beer. She was a nice looking lady. She left here, and I was told that she went to Italy and married this fellow. <sup>57</sup>

The fair or gentle treatment of POWs came under scrutiny from some United States citizens and military personnel. Many felt that the POWs, especially ISU members, received more luxuries and freedom than American military personnel stationed overseas. Some of these sentiments reached a boiling point at Fort Lawton in Seattle, where African American soldiers and ISU members worked side by side at the port, at the time the second largest place of

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56. Ralph Spencer, "Prisoners of War in Cheyenne County, 1943-1946," *Nebraska History* 63 (1982): 438-449.

57. John Underdown, "What Did You Do in the War" found in the "The Home Front," *Nebraska History* 72 (1991): 175-204.

embarkation for soldiers and materials. At Fort Lawton, the ISU members received numerous privileges not typically granted to POWs, such as visits to Italian American families and visits to local taverns and the movies. Some Italians even finagled the system to go on dates with local women. The lax treatment towards the POWs created resentment that turned to violence in August 1944, in what became known as the Fort Lawton Riot.<sup>58</sup>

A series of violent events in August 1944 started with a conflict between Black U.S. soldiers and Italian POWs stationed at Fort Lawton. It started on the night of August 14, 1944, when three African American companies stationed at the port held an unauthorized party for two companies that shipped out the next day. At around 11:00 P.M., four African American soldiers who had been drinking left the party and ran into some Italian POWs, after their own unsanctioned night of drinking. After an exchange of words, an ISU member threw a punch at one of the African American soldiers, knocking him down and purportedly leaving him unconscious. The Italians then fled. Within 10 minutes, a mob of angry African American soldiers wielding tools, stones, fence slats, bricks, and knives descended on the Italian POW compound, and mayhem ensued. After the MPs showed up with drawn weapons, they arrested the two companies of African American soldiers and took 32 Italian POWs and three African American soldiers to the hospital. Twelve Italians remained there for months due to the severity of their injuries.

Soon after, a patrol found Italian POW Guglielmo Olivotto dead, his body hung in the camp's obstacle course. In the ensuing hours, Colonel Harry Branson, Fort Lawton's commanding officer, ordered all evidence to be destroyed, and within a day, the damaged barracks were repaired, cleaned, and repainted, ultimately destroying any crime scene evidence.

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58. Chuck Lyons, "Riot at Fort Lawton" October/November 2016, *America During World War II*, 24-29.

The riot led to the court-martial of 43 soldiers based on circumstantial evidence at best, all of them African Americans. It was World War II's largest and longest United States Army court-martial case. In the end, the court found 28 of the defendants guilty of rioting, with two guilty of manslaughter. Within two months after the riot, the ISU was transferred to Mt. Rainier Ordnance Depot. By 1949, the last Fort Lawton defendant left prison due to President Harry Truman's "Christmas clemencies."<sup>59</sup>

In the 1980s, Jack Hamann, news correspondent, documentary producer, and author, began looking into the Fort Lawton Riot and produced a local TV documentary and a book entitled *On American Soil: How Justice Became a Causality of World War II*. In the text, Hamann examined the murder of ISU member Private Olivotto and the injustice that happened during the Fort Lawton Riot.<sup>60</sup> Due to Hamann's efforts 63 years after the incident, all of the defendants' dishonorable discharges were changed to honorable since the prosecution had committed egregious errors.<sup>61</sup> Despite these conflicts, the War Department deemed the ISU program highly successful, as the ISU nationwide performed over 6,000,000 man-days of labor on military installations throughout the country, which released U.S. service personnel for overseas duties.<sup>62</sup> The ISU further highlighted the divisions in trust and treatment towards POWs regarding race, especially compared to the Japanese POWs. Whereas the US military quickly

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59. Chuck Lyons, "Riot at Fort Lawton," 24-29. See also Dominic W. Moreo, *Riot at Fort Lawton, 1944*. (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2004).

60. Jack Hamann, *On American Soil: How Justice Became a Causality of World War II*. (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005).

61. Kim Murphy, "Justice, 64 years later," *The Los Angeles Times*. July 27, 2008.

62. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army 1776-1945*, by George C. Lewis and John Mewha, Washington, D.C: Department of Army, 1955, 150.

trusted and turned the Italian POWs into a viable workforce aiding the war effort, Japanese POWs were excluded from any labor outside of the military camps or bases due to their race.

### **Japanese POWs**

Another instance where race and citizenship became factors in labor can be seen in the direct comparison and treatment of Japanese POWs with German and Italian POWs. While all worked in positions deemed Priority I (work directly connected with military installations) and Priority III (nonessential work on military installations), only the Japanese POWs were denied the opportunity for Priority II options: civilian contracting work or off-post labor, where POWs could be contracted out to local farmers and businesses. German and Italian POWs preferred these Priority II positions for numerous reasons, including more lax supervision by guards; opportunities to see a bit of the countryside and interact with American citizens; and the potential for incentive pay and other unsanctioned perks like receiving extra food and visiting cities, stores, and restaurants. All such opportunities were denied to Japanese POWs. The War Department and the Office of the Provost Marshal General directed all camps to use only German and Italian POWs for civilian contract work because of the feared attacks from anti-Japanese civilians and the alleged increased threat of escape and sabotage.<sup>63</sup>

The War Department's fears over using Japanese POWs were somewhat warranted, as the public's hostility can be seen in certain incidents involving interned Japanese Americans. One example can be seen in the cavalier shooting of Japanese American internees and a soldier

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63. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 100.

in Arkansas (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter). Another example can be seen in the incident in Marengo, Illinois, in April 1943, where angry citizens led by the mayor and the commander of the local American Legion marched three Japanese Americans working in town to alleviate labor shortages back to the train station in protest. As Ray McAndrews, a Marengo restaurant owner, put it, "there will be hell a-popping" unless the Japanese Americans were removed.<sup>64</sup> Other local businesses followed suit and ousted Japanese American laborers; however, Marengo eventually allowed them to work after a town hall meeting detailing how many were Nisei (American citizens born in the US) from California. The Nisei included farmers, university students, veterans, and persons with relatives currently in the American armed forces. Fearful that Japanese POWs would face similar racially charged protests and violence from American citizens, the OPMG decided they should not leave the camps or posts.

John Dower's *War without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* provides a comprehensive study of the roots of racism during World War II between the United States and Japan. Both nations during the war believed they were morally, racially, and culturally superior to their counterpart. While the United States was fighting for democracy, the Japanese justified their actions to combat "white" expansion and colonialism in Asia while liberating other nations. This racism on both sides spawned ferocious fighting and further commitment to a "total war" or a war without mercy. Dower states,

In the United States and Britain, the Japanese were more hated than the Germans before as well as after Pearl Harbor . . . They were perceived as a race apart, even a species apart -- and an overpoweringly monolithic one at that. There was no Japanese counterpart to the 'good German' in the popular consciousness of the Western Allies.<sup>65</sup>

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64. "Marengo's U.S. Born Japs Offered 7 Jobs" *Daily Times*, Chicago, IL. April 26, 1943.

65. John W. Dower. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 8.

These racially charged attitudes affected the battlefields and the home front due to the implementation of President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 and the internment of nearly 120,000 persons of Japanese descent in War Relocation Centers.<sup>66</sup> As the U.S. Army's West Coast Commander Lt. Gen. John DeWitt put it, "In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted."<sup>67</sup> Sentiments such as these were reinforced on the home front through racially charged propaganda, such as war posters depicting the Japanese as monkeys, apes, rats, or large toothed demons. This permeated into the country's treatment towards POWs, placing Japanese POWs below that of their White POW counterparts.

To see how the Japanese and German POWs received different treatment because of their race, one can look at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and Camp Clarinda, Iowa, as these two main Japanese POW camps also held German POWs. Looking at both camps, one can see the race-based preferential treatment given to the German POWs. When a reporter from the *Des Moines Register* asked Lt. Colonel George Ball, the commander of Camp Clarinda in Iowa, as to which race of POW was the most disciplined, the colonel responded, "handling these little yellow

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66. Japanese Americans' situation in Arkansas will be discussed in Chapter 6 of this study. For more on Japanese American internment during World War II, see *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*, by Rodger Daniels, or *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America*, by Greg Robinson.

67. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch. *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*. (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 208.



monkeys is a lot different than handling German prisoners . . . The German was far more desirable, they looked you in the eye, the Jap doesn't."<sup>68</sup>

Partly this could have been due to the Japanese military culture and even doctrine during World War II that regarded surrender as a fate worse than death. Surrendering was seen by the Japanese to bring shame upon themselves and their families, so the military doctrine forbade it. The *Senjinkun*, or the 1941 "Code of Battlefield Conduct," established the regulations and standards of behavior for Japanese troops to improve discipline and morale within their military. Additionally, it expressly forbade retreat or surrender and repeatedly emphasized to "never live to experience shame as a prisoner" and that death by the enemy or suicide was preferred instead of becoming a POW.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Japan implemented a propaganda campaign for the military and civilians that celebrated people who had fought to the death rather than surrendered, stressing that the Allies would torture and kill them anyways if captured. The latter did have some truth to it. At times, U.S. military forces refused to take prisoners and had them killed. For example, commanders sometimes issued camouflaged orders to kill POWs by ordering troops to escort the prisoners to a regimental headquarter that might be 30 minutes distant but to return in five.<sup>70</sup> The cover meaning was to execute the POWs and be back as soon as possible.

In an article in the *Yank* about the fighting on Bougainville, the author noted that ". . . our men preferred killing Japs until a case of beer was offered for each captive," an offer made

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68. Lt. Col. Ball in "Tough with Japs at Clarinda," *Des Moines Register*, April 8, 1945.

69. Ulrich Strauss, *The Anguish of Surrender: Japanese POW's of World War II*. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003), 39.

70. James J. Weingartner, "Trophies of War: U.S. Troops and the Mutilation of Japanese War Dead, 1941-1945." *Pacific Historical Review* 61 (Feb. 1992): 53-67.

so the prisoners might be interrogated for intelligence purposes.<sup>71</sup> The mutilation of Japanese dead for souvenirs or trophies became popular, with skulls, noses, ears, teeth, and other portions of the Japanese anatomy became prized as symbols of victory against an inhuman foe.<sup>72</sup> President Roosevelt even received a letter opener made from the bone of a Japanese soldier's arm from U.S. Representative Francis E. Walter of Pennsylvania, which Roosevelt ordered be returned and properly buried.<sup>73</sup>

When the U.S. military began imprisoning Japanese POWs, many prisoners used false names during interrogations to ensure their families would never hear about their capture. Among the most popular fake names given were Miyamoto Musashi (the famous swordsman), Hasegawa Kazuo (a male movie idol), and Inano Kantaro (a fictional member of the infamous mafia group, the Yakuza). Japanese American Nisei soldiers served as translators and interrogators during the war and proved to be quite valuable not only linguistically but also for their ability to understand Japanese culture. The falsified names usually did not escape the notice of many Japanese American soldiers in interrogation, but the POWs would also use names of deceased friends or slightly change their names.

Additionally, many Japanese POWs falsified their names to protect themselves from other inmates. The Japanese government did not usually distribute the International Red Cross

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71. Barrett McGurn, "Second Battle of Bougainville:" *Yank*, 19 May 1944.

72. James J. Weingartner, "War against Subhumans: Comparisons Between the German War against the Soviet Union and the American War Against Japan, 1941-1945." *The Historian* 58, (1996): 557-573. Other work on the atrocities and mutilation can be found in John Dower's *War without Mercy*, Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York, 1989), Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York, 1985), and Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York, 1985).

73. Weingartner, "Trophies of War," 67.

nominal rolls of captives.<sup>74</sup> Many journalists took the opportunity to point out the weird juxtaposition many Japanese POWs faced, with a military doctrine forbidding surrender, a country not acknowledging their captives' existence and actively hiding it from their families, all the while now being held captive in the U.S. Some writers began to call them the "walking dead." The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported, "The prisoners are 'walking dead' to relatives in Japan, the Japanese government and themselves. All have refused the privilege of writing home."<sup>75</sup> The article further states how many POWs wished to inhabit some Allied-mandated island exclusively for Japanese prisoners after the war instead of going home to save themselves and their families from the shame of being a POW. The article also outlined the harsh treatment the camp commander Lt. Col. George Ball, gave the Japanese POWs. Lt. Col. Ball stated that the Japanese POWs came to him as a "very dirty lot," and they have now been drilled into neatness. When it came to negotiations with the POW leadership, Ball found "no" to be the only answer to Japanese POW requests because he said they were "notorious bargainers and 'if you give them an inch, they will take everything.' If the idea has merit, it will be put into effect without the prisoners asking for it."<sup>76</sup>

Playing on the racial stereotypes of the time, the local papers warned the community near Camp Clarinda and Camp McCoy that "The Japanese, with their reputation for trickiness and sneakiness, are apt to make a greater attempt to disturb our home front security than the Germans

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74. Ulrich Strauss, *The Anguish of Surrender: Japanese POWs of World War II*. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003), 123-124.

75. Don E. Huth, "Jap 'Walking Dead' in Iowa Live Under Strict Regime, Work Hard at Assigned Tasks." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 8, 1945.

76. Don E. Huth, "Jap 'Walking Dead' in Iowa Live Under Strict Regime, Work Hard at Assigned Tasks." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 8, 1945.

ever did.”<sup>77</sup> These racially driven fears resembled the War Department’s policy towards Japanese POWs, denying them the opportunity to work outside of the camps, while the German and Italian POWs could be leased out to civilians with few or in some cases no guards. Japanese POWs instead mostly worked in the camps and military installations under strict supervision at all times. They repaired and rebuilt outpost and range roads, constructed fire lanes; cut pulp wood; and worked on soil erosion, stream conservation, and the salvage of materials for reuse.<sup>78</sup>

Inside the camps, Japanese POWs worked in the same job areas as German POWs, but they did not always receive the same wages. Every Japanese POW received the mandatory payment of 10 cents per day, but they maxed out at an additional 20 to 30 cents per day for certain types of advanced work. Since the Japanese government had signed but not ratified the Geneva Convention of 1929, the U.S. government could use different rules in the treatment of Japanese POWs. Thus, the War Department initially chose not to pay the Japanese the 80 cents per day that German and Italian POWs received for work. Eventually, they decided to pay the interned Japanese POWs the same 80 cents a day to increase productivity.<sup>79</sup> The pay for officers, who could not be forced to work under the Geneva Convention, further highlights the disparity. For example, German Lieutenants made \$20 a month; Captains made \$40, and Majors \$50. However, Japanese officers received \$5 a month less per grade.<sup>80</sup>

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77. Arnold Krammer in “Japanese Prisoners of War in America,” 84.

78. Adam Rock, "The American Way: The Influence of Race on the Treatment of Prisoners of War During World War Two." Master's Thesis at the University of Central Florida. 2014.

79. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army 1776-1945*, by George C. Lewis and John Mewha, Washington, D.C: Department of Army, 1955, 150.

80. “Geneva Agreement on War Prisoners Followed by U.S.,” *Stamford Advocate*. Stamford: CT. May 5, 1944.

Withholding pay also became how a camp commander could reprimand POWs in protests or labor strikes. Also, in how the military handled such strikes, one can see the differences in treatment between German and Japanese POWs. Nearly all camps holding Japanese POWs reported some protest, whether it be a slowdown, feigning illness, or outright refusal. Many POWs protested because they believed their labor would assist the American war effort.<sup>81</sup> Before October 1943, the camp commanders could only reprimand or withhold privileges from POWs for not working or not complying with camp regulations; alternatively, they could use special courts for more serious offenses. These proved to be useless gestures, as normally POWs only had a few privileges and did not regard these admonitions and restrictions as too terrible. However, in October 1943, the Provost Marshal General's Office interpreted Article 27 of the Geneva Convention as permitting the detaining power to work POWs and to use reasonable means to force them to comply with a work order. Therefore, it adopted an "administrative pressure" policy that authorized the camp commanders to withdraw pay and certain privileges and impose a restricted diet (usually a bread and water-only diet) on those who refused to obey a lawful order, including work orders. Thus, most camps adopted a "no work, no eat" policy for all POWs.<sup>82</sup>

One of the more extensive tests of the "administrative pressure" policy came in May 1944, at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, when the Japanese POWs refused to work. Camp commander Lt. Colonel Horatio Rogers issued orders for all able-bodied enlisted POWs to participate in a 40-hour work week at the post. There are mixed reports on the true impetus of the

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81. Arnold Krammer in "Japanese Prisoners of War in America," 82.

82. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army 1776-1945*, by George C. Lewis and John Mewha, Washington, D.C: Department of Army, 1955, 150.

work strike. Part of it was that the POWs, led by their officers, protested the lack of labor opportunities outside the camp. Then, the Japanese POWs were assigned to clean out tents and barracks of American GIs headed to fight in Germany. The POWs protested with a work stoppage and refused the call to mess, feeling that the labor aided in the war effort and was illegal. In response, Colonel Rogers placed the Japanese POWs on a diet of bread and water and detained the officers, but the strike persisted.<sup>83</sup>

The next day, Colonel Rogers ordered an infantry unit from the camp, not the typical guards or MPs, to be brought in to force the POWs back to work at the point of bayonets. The work entailed the prisoners marching at the double to the work site five miles away, working all morning without the usual 10 minutes of break every hour, and returning to the camp at the double at noon. By the end, some POWs became exhausted and needed to be picked up by a truck, while 12 Japanese POWs had to be sent to the infirmary for the treatment of "minor bayonet wounds."<sup>84</sup> In an attempt at peace, the camp spokesman soon noted that the strike had ended and there would not be another incident. Despite the bloodshed, a later investigation by Red Cross representative Señor Gonzales approved the actions taken.<sup>85</sup> However, the U.S.

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83. Betty Cowley, *Stalag Wisconsin: Inside WWII Prisoner-of-war Camps* (Oregon, WI: Badger Books Inc., 2002), 39.

Arnold Krammer in "Japanese Prisoners of War in America," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Feb. 1983), 83.

84. Betty Cowley, *Stalag Wisconsin*, 39.

Arnold Krammer in "Japanese Prisoners of War in America," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Feb. 1983), 83.

85. Hong, Howard. *Reports on Visit to Prisoners of War Camp, Camp McCoy, Sparta Wisconsin, January 5-7, 1944, Inspection Reports: Camp McCoy*. Records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, Prisoners of War Division, 1941-1946; Special Projects Division, RG 189. National Archives.

military never subjected German and Italian POWs to similar violence when refusing to work, instead resorting simply to bread and water diets.

The Japanese POWs were restricted to only jobs at the bases or camps, so they had very little interaction with American citizens. However, following the war's end, on August 15, 1945, the POWs began the repatriation process. Japanese POWs were first relocated to camps near the Pacific coast, one place in particular, Lamont, California. With the war now over, many farmers and the OPMG wanted to use the Japanese POWs to fill agricultural labor shortages, particularly in the cotton fields. It was first falsely reported that California Governor Earl Warren supported using the Japanese POWs, but he released a statement that he did not, as it "would upset California's effort to welcome and take care of Japanese-Americans being resettled from the WRA centers."<sup>86</sup> Despite objections from Governor Warren, some local citizens, and the POWs themselves, a little over 3,000 Japanese POWs began picking cotton in the San Joaquin Valley.

In California in the harvest of 1945, it was determined that the daily quota for Japanese POWs should be 250 pounds of cotton per POW, while they still received their standard \$0.80 a day work wage, while the civilian wages were around \$2.25 for 100 lbs. cwt.<sup>87</sup> This was significantly higher than the 100-120 cwt. quotas set for German and Italian POWs picking cotton.<sup>88</sup> With the Japanese POWs being banned from such labor in the past, they had little to no experience with agricultural work and could barely pick 70–80 pounds of cotton a day. For German and Italian POWs to meet the quotas, farmers would incentive them with additional pay

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86. "Jap Prisoners to Do Farm Labor in California," *Riverside Daily Press*, Riverside, CA. October 1, 1945. "Governor Warren Objects To Use Of Japanese Pow's," *Newell Star*, Newell, CA. October 12, 1945.

87. Ulrich Strauss, *The Anguish of Surrender*, (2003), 226-227.

88. James M. Ward, "'Nazis Hoe Cotton': Planters, POWs, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Fall, 2007): 471-492.

or food for meeting or exceeding the quotas. In an attempt to meet the excessive quotas for the Japanese POWs, the camp commander at Camp Lamont began to have the Japanese prisoners work 13-hour days without lunch breaks. Many POWs began to overwhelm the camp's medical facilities to avoid the hard labor, or as some called it, "slave labor." However, they found little refuge at the medical centers and were promptly ordered back to work.<sup>89</sup>

The camp commander's attempt to increase productivity to meet the 250-pound quota failed, leading to an unfortunate incident. After one day of work, while the rest of the POWs and crew headed back to the camp, one prisoner stayed in the fields. At night, he set fire to several bales of cotton and committed suicide by hanging himself from the tripod used to hang the scale to weigh the cotton sacks for daily quotas. The camp spokesman for the Japanese POWs gave a Nisei interpreter, Yoshiteru Kawano, a letter believing it to be the deceased POW's last testament. Kawano stated in the letter that the POW apologized for the "cowardly act" that he planned to commit and that he "felt unable to meet the quota and did not want to be responsible for lowering the average for his group," which meant they would be denied food privileges.<sup>90</sup>

Kawano says everything changed for the POWs at Camp Lamont after this incident. The camp commander was an inexperienced lieutenant, and he became unnerved by the suicide and never went out to inspect the work in the cotton fields again and spent his nights drinking. After a few weeks, the lieutenant was relieved of his command, and the new commander increased the medical treatment and food rations, lowered the daily cotton quota per POW to 180 pounds in an

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89. Ulrich Strauss, *The Anguish of Surrender*, (2003), 226-227.

90. Yoshiteru Kawano, "Experience with Japanese Prisoners of War," unpublished memoir, n.d., given to Ulrich Strauss with permission from the family, cited in Ulrich Strauss, *The Anguish of Surrender*, (2003), 226-227.



eight-hour workday, and allowed those who finished their work early to return to camp.<sup>91</sup> The quota was still much larger than any for the German and Italian POWs.

### **Conclusion**

“The Japanese complain too much, some Germans are too pleased, while the Italians are too affectionate. But, by and large, the Army is handling its captives sternly, quietly, fairly,” remarked Robert Devore for the magazine *Collier’s*. Devore investigated the POW camps to see if the U.S. government coddled its enemy prisoners, which he concluded they did not. This chapter has shown that Devore’s conclusions masked ample differences in the stern and “fair” treatment between the German, Italian, and Japanese POWs on account of race. The American military provided better treatment to German and Italian POWs, allowed them to participate in a greater variety of jobs, gave additional access to educational opportunities, and allowed them to be more vigorously incorporated into re-education programs than Japanese prisoners.

In the South, the utilization of POWs reinvigorated the convict leasing system, but their treatment was vastly different from the decades-old practice facing American prisoners on penal farms. The archaic plantation system still remains in some forms on the penal plantations of the Mississippi Delta, where imprisoned Americans hand-picking cotton for no pay. Today, Angola remains the largest maximum-security prison in the U.S., with over 5,000 inmates sitting on its

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91. Yoshiteru Kawano, “Experience with Japanese Prisoners of War,” cited in Ulrich Strauss, *The Anguish of Surrender*, (2003), 227.

18,000 acres planting and harvesting crops, including hand-picked cotton.<sup>92</sup> Cummins and Parchman also operate penal farms today, growing and harvesting farm goods and cash crops, such as hay, corn, cotton, and rice. As of July 2022, Parchman finally received air conditioning for the first time in 121 years of operation that will cool 40% of its inmates, as a 2019 U.S. Department of Justice report indicated that temperatures at one point reached up to 145 degrees.<sup>93</sup>

During the war, German POWs and African Americans found themselves at the bottom of the economic hierarchy in America's racialized labor force, sharing a similarly oppressed status. However, due to the racial customs and White supremacist hierarchy in the South, German and Italian POWs enjoyed lighter workloads and better treatment than Black workers, whether free or incarcerated. Additionally, African Americans, even those serving in the military, resented the privileges afforded to the POWs and Italian Service Unit members, as stories circulated of German POWs eating in Jim Crow cafes while their Black guards stayed outside. For some Black servicepersons, the former enemy POWs now turned ISU members in American GI uniforms further highlighted the racist ideology perpetuated in the military.

The dependence on POWs to replace predominately Black wage laborers ate away at the plantation labor system and facilitated the end of sharecropping. POW labor usage in the United States during World War II exacerbated racial tensions that sometimes led to violence, as it did in the Lawton Riot and Camp McCoy POW strike. In most cases, strikes, riots, or protests at the POW camps were resolved peacefully. However, whether it be misunderstanding, prejudice,

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92. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The End of the Line: Rehabilitation and Reform in Angola Penitentiary," *The Atlantic* September 9, 2015.

93. Mina Corpuz, "After 121 Scalding Mississippi Summers, Parchman Prison is Getting Air Conditioning," *Mississippi Today* Ridgeland, Mississippi, July 19, 2022.

racism, or indifference, differential treatment based on race among the POW groups continually occurred. On one occasion, the Japanese POW spokesman at Camp McCoy presented a long list of complaints to an American officer, among them being the lack of outside labor and the freedoms afforded to the German POWs stationed there. The officer listened and, after losing patience, stated, "The trouble with you people is that you want the world, with a fence around it." The Japanese POW spokesman thought that over briefly and then, allegedly with perfect seriousness, replied, "No fence."<sup>94</sup>

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94. Robert Devore, "Our 'Pampered' War Prisoners," *Collier's*, October 14, 1944, 14.

## Chapter 6 - Racialized Labor Regimes: Postwar Transitions

*“A Jap's a Jap . . . It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not . . . I don't want any of them . . . There is no way to determine their loyalty.”* – General John L. DeWitt, West Coast defense commander.<sup>1</sup>

*“I subscribe to the theory that full rights of citizenship, including the right to hold public office in the USA, should be limited to white gentiles. I should oppose any move to discriminate against any ‘minority group,’ but I do not class as discrimination laws and regulations preventing intermarriage between the races or preventing interracial associations which might and usually do lead to breaches of peace.”* - Oscar Johnston May 31, 1943.<sup>2</sup>

Arkansas in the 1940s held a variety of racialized labor regimes, which planters soon became keen on exploiting to keep cultivation and cotton production costs as low as possible. During the war, the planter elite and government officials came to prefer using POWs as a cheap option to replace the local labor source that fled the cotton fields for higher-paying jobs in the cities and defense industries. The racialized nature of America's agricultural labor market, in which one's racial status opened or closed specific employment prospects, determined one's wage, and factored into the other labor conditions one would face. During the war, the traditional decades-old dichotomy of only White and Black in the labor regimes became tested, as German and Italian POWs, Japanese Americans, and eventually Mexican nationals entered the Mississippi Delta. When designing a postwar future for labor in the cotton fields, the planter elite had to negotiate new labor relationships in which citizenship status mattered just as much as

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1. John M. Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1976), 159.

2. Oscar Johnston to Lamar Fleming, Jr., letter May 31, 1943. Oscar Johnston Papers, General Correspondence in Delta and Pine Land Company Papers, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville, cited in Nan Woodruff, *American Congo*, 225.

racial status in making low-wage, exploitable labor available, all the while seeking to maintain the cotton economy's historical racial hierarchy.

At the core of these adjustments to the racial and citizenship composition of their labor force around World War II was an economic motivation: within the cotton economy of the Mississippi Delta, the planters constantly sought ways to prevail against New Deal-era workers' protections. By the war's end, they had found their preferred – albeit temporary – remedy: to pay German and Italian POWs even less than African American and White wage workers. Ultimately, all the other labor sources became too expensive or less desirable due to their race or citizenship, as was the case for the exclusion of Japanese Americans on Arkansas' cotton plantations despite successful examples of using them for agricultural labor in other states. Of Arkansas's available labor constellations during the war, the planter elite preferred White POW labor, the cheapest and, thanks to the exigencies of the war, most compliant option.

However, the POWs served only as a temporary stopgap in the transition away from the increasingly outdated sharecropping system and towards a postwar future that would gradually embrace mechanization. For example, on the Delta and Pine Land Plantation, the number of occupied tenant houses fell from 850 to 525 between 1944 and 1947.<sup>3</sup> When World War II ended, despite the Geneva Convention's demands for the immediate repatriation of POWs, Germans remained working in the cotton fields until 1946, only after the 1945 cotton harvest was completed. Thereafter, the planters increasingly relied on another group of laborers whose tenuous citizenship status made them exploitable or even deportable if worker demands became

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3. James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 204.

too high or labor surpluses arose: Mexican national laborers—both documented and undocumented—became an increasing feature of Arkansas’ cotton economy.

The planters wanted a similar arrangement to POWs in the postwar cotton fields, in which wage laborers could be hired seasonally and shipped away when the harvest concluded. The first option involved documented Mexican national laborers via the Bracero Program. While seen as too expensive during the war years by most Delta planters, Braceros became more attractive after the war, when the region suddenly lacked POW labor or an adequate number of U.S. citizens, whether White or Black, willing to accept low wages or tenant farming conditions. Like POWs, Mexican laborers could be closely monitored and paid a low wage with a relatively low threat of protest.

As foreign non-American citizens in the cotton fields, whether they had work visas or not, Mexican laborers were, from the planters’ perspective, expendable, removable, and replaceable. After the cotton harvest season or if a problem or protest arose, the laborers would be loaded up in trucks and shipped out of the county without expecting to remain in the area. The Bracero Program in the postwar years was monitored less by the federal government, and, as always, it provided only for seasonal labor. This seasonal aspect made it attractive to planters when compared to US citizen labor (with its implicit commitment to year-round employment, or tenant farming, with its explicit commitment to year-round support). After an initial introduction of Mexican labor in the Delta through the Bracero Program came a rise in the undocumented workforce, which provided inordinately more favorable conditions for the planters, as a completely exploitable workforce due to their status as quasi “illegal.”

Whether documented or undocumented, being non-American citizens made Mexican national labor the most attractive to the planters. The availability of this workforce factored into

why state officials did not allow Japanese Americans to remain at the end of the war, even as some planters wanted them to stay and labor. An example from Florida's Bahamian guestworkers stresses the importance of citizenship, as this wartime labor program excluded workers from Puerto Rico. The president of the Florida Growers' Association wrote to the Secretary of Agriculture and explained why: "The vast difference between the Bahama Island labor and the domestic, including Puerto Rican, is that labor transported from the Bahama Islands can be diverted and sent home if it does not work, which cannot be done in the instance of labor from domestic United States or Puerto Rico."<sup>4</sup>

In Arkansas, precisely because of their US citizenship, Arkansas governor Homer Adkins and others feared having Japanese American internees (or freed Japanese Americans after the war) working in the cotton fields. Thus, as the interned Japanese Americans returned West, the Delta began importing Bracero labor. By the end of the 1948 picking season, a county extension agent in Arkansas wrote how pleased the planters were with the Mexican labor. Smaller farms placed orders for as few as five braceros, while larger planters, such as the Lee Wilson and Company, at times employed up to 2,900 annually, with the median being around thirty braceros per farm.<sup>5</sup> Between 1952 and 1964, Arkansas received some 251,298 documented Mexican nationals to chop and pick cotton, which eased the transition toward mechanization.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, in the immediate postwar years of 1945-1948, the POWs and then braceros served as a crucial stopgap for the planters. They were a cheap and elastic labor source that

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4. United States President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor*, U.S. Government Printing Office (March 1951), 39.

5. Julie Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 85.

6. Arkansas Department of Labor, Employment Security Division, *Arkansas Agricultural Report, 1954-1966* (Little Rock, 1955-67).

undercut local labor wages and bought time for the planters until mechanical cotton harvesters could be mass-produced and ginning techniques could be improved. Many planters hoped for a long-term future with mechanical harvesters, but it could only occur gradually. While a few hired hands with tractors could now handle the planting, cotton still required manual labor for the weed-chopping season in early summer, and some planters still preferred hand-picked cotton for its cleanliness during the harvest season. In 1950, mechanical pickers accounted for only seven percent of the harvest in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>7</sup> Mechanical harvesters picked the cotton with more debris, which required modern and sophisticated gins. Thus, it took nearly a decade and a half for Delta planters to fully transition to mechanical pickers after new developments and improvements in herbicides, defoliant, crop genetics, and ginning techniques.<sup>8</sup> In the gradual transition between the late 1940s and the 1960s, the planters no longer needed sharecroppers permanently on the land; instead, they now needed a temporary labor force for a few months during the chopping and harvesting seasons. By 1967, advancements in technology and chemicals allowed the mechanical harvesters to pick 93% of Arkansas's cotton, which meant the planters would need only a few local wage hands to operate the fully mechanized plantations.<sup>9</sup>

In the meantime, Mexican nationals came to replace the POWs, who had, in turn, replaced plantations' sharecroppers during the war. This trajectory was not immediately evident to the Lee Wilson & Company (LWC), which during the war had attempted to keep sharecropping alive by replacing the predominantly Black labor force that left the plantations with Japanese American internees. When this attempt quickly failed, it further highlighted the

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7. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 203.

8. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 219.

9. Holley, *Second Great Emancipation*, 155.



juxtaposition between the planters and state officials over racial labor regimes. Some planters like LWC wanted to use Japanese Americans in the cotton fields, while Governor Homer Adkins would not allow it. Issues of race and citizenship dominated the discussion over cotton picking. The Arkansas government felt Japanese Americans should be blocked from the cotton fields over postwar fears of them remaining in the state.

### **Japanese Americans in Arkansas**

Governor Homer Adkins, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, adamantly opposed the use of interned Japanese American labor already housed in the state. On the other hand, Adkins and the planters promoted and pled to the War Department for POW camps and their labor.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Adkins signed into law Senate Bill No. 11 in February 1943 that prevented anyone of Japanese descent from owning land in Arkansas.<sup>11</sup> The bill was introduced by Senator Frank B. Williams of Osceola, who stated that it "guaranteed that no Japs can stay in this state on account of their low standard of living and because a white person cannot profitably compete with the Japanese in agriculture or business." Both branches of the Arkansas legislature supported the bill, and it passed the Senate by a vote of 30 to 0 and the House by a vote of 76 to 1.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Patrick G. Williams, "Homer Martin Adkins (1890-1964)" *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*. January 25, 2017. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/homer-martin-adkins-84/>

11. "New Law Will Prevent Japs From Owning Land Here," *Dermott News*, Little Rock, Arkansas, February 18, 1943.

12. James M. Ward, "'No Jap Crow': Japanese American Encounter the World War II South," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (February 2007): 75-104.

The racially charged South struggled even to accept Japanese American military personnel. In November 1942, Private Louis Furushiro, a uniformed Japanese American soldier, was shot en route to visiting relatives interned at the Rohwer Relocation Center in Arkansas while eating in a café. The assailant, W.M. Woods, entered the eatery, saw Furushiro, and asked: "Are you a Jap?" When the soldier replied in the affirmative, Woods opened fire.<sup>13</sup> A few days later, two other Japanese Americans were shot while working on the ditches outside of the relocation campgrounds under the supervision of a War Relocation Authority official. M.C. Brown, returning from a deer hunt on horseback, ran into the Japanese American workers and thought they were escapees, so he opened fire. Authorities later arrested both men from the two separate instances and charged them with assault with intent to kill. In both cases, when the War Relocation Authority refused to withdraw the charges, local authorities arbitrarily reduced the charges to the lesser offense of assault with a deadly weapon. The defendants pled guilty to the reduced charges and were released after paying the minimum fine.<sup>14</sup>

Governor Adkins wanted cheap laborers to appease the planters, but his racial beliefs weighed heavily in his decision-making. Adkins did not want the relocation centers for Japanese Americans in Arkansas and took a very active role in denying employment opportunities for the internees to work outside the camps. As previously discussed in Chapter 4, Adkins prevented Japanese Americans from working on the Norfolk Dam project in the state that offered fair wages, living quarters, provisions, protection, and security from the county sheriff's

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13. "Irate Arkansas Father Takes Shot at Jap in U.S. Uniform," *The News and Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), November 11, 1942.

14. C. Calvin Smith, "The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas 1942-1945," *Arkansas Historical Association* Vol. 58, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 340-366.

department.<sup>15</sup> However, even while denying work to internees, Adkins immediately sent a telegram to the Eighth Service Command requesting POW labor when that program was announced, citing the state's dire manpower shortage.<sup>16</sup>

Adkins thereby played a pivotal role in realigning the racialized labor regimes in Arkansas during the war. In efforts to replace Black tenant farmers emigrating to the North, Japanese Americans were denied opportunities while White German and Italian POWs were cast as the saviors of the Delta's cotton crop. Maintaining white supremacy was an added benefit of this solution, even if it meant relying on actual enemy combatants over Americans of Japanese descent. In a telegram to John H. Tolan, Chairman of the House Committee Investigation National Defense Migration, Adkins stated quite bluntly his intentions and the racial concerns that undergirded them:

Our people are not familiar with the customs or peculiarities of the Japanese. There will not be any way to employ these people in Arkansas. The only way I can visualize where we can use them at all would be to fence them in concentration camps under wire fence and guards. We are anxious to cooperate in any way we can, but our people, being more than 95% native-born, are in no manner familiar with their customs and ways and have never had any of them within our borders, and I doubt the wisdom of placing any in Arkansas.<sup>17</sup>

When the Japanese American internees started arriving in Arkansas, Adkins continuously reaffirmed that they must remain at the relocation centers and would not be allowed to work outside the camps. He once wrote, ". . . it was distinctly agreed upon and confirmed to me

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15. B. Williams, telegram to Governor Homer Adkins, December 2, 1942. Adkins Papers.

16. Homer Adkins, telegram to Major General Richard Donovan, Eighth Service Command, August 20, 1943. RG 211 Records of the War Manpower Commission, National Archives, Washington, D.C., cited in C. Calvin Smith, "The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas 1942-1945," *Arkansas Historical Association* Vol. 53, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 352.

17. Homer M. Adkins, letter to John H. Tolan, February 27, 1942. Adkins Papers.

personally and by telephone that these Japanese colonists would remain in these camps under military guard, would not compete with local labor and would not be allowed to purchase land and would be removed after the war is over.”<sup>18</sup> Adkins hammered these points home through letters and telegrams to every state's representatives in Congress, several officials in the WRA, and various other judges and Senators.<sup>19</sup>

As the war continued—and after nearly two and a half years with the Japanese Americans in the state, used solely as labor at the relocation centers—some planters and cotton compressors wrote to Governor Adkins and their Congresspersons to request that internees fill some of the labor shortages in 1944. Local laborers were making more money picking cotton, which created a shortage at the warehouses and compresses. The compressors also wanted to use the POWs, but many insurance companies did not allow them for a brief stint. After holding a meeting with some of the compressors and Pulaski County's Planters Club, Stanley D. Carpenter, an agent for the Extension Services, wrote to Adkins personally asking for Japanese American labor to help with the manpower shortage. Adkins responded no because, "The Japanese Americans are in Arkansas under an agreement that they would not be permitted to compete with free labor."<sup>20</sup>

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) presented the same argument in 1944 in an attempt to block the use of German POWs in the cotton compresses and warehouses. The STFU argued that German POWs would be competing with free labor. H.L. Mitchell, president of the STFU, explained the situation in protest to WMC Chairman Paul V. McNutt, "In the town of

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18. Homer M. Adkins, telegram to John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War, October 21, 1942. Adkins Papers.

19. Various correspondence found in Adkins Papers.

20. "Planters Call on Hill Areas to Save Crops: Interned Japanese Also Sought," *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, AR, October 13, 1944.

Lepanto, Arkansas, 50 war prisoners are employed each day at the Federal Compress and Warehouse Co. In this town there are not less than 200 unemployed workers who would welcome an opportunity to get a job at this plant."<sup>21</sup> Conservatively, over 1,000 POWs eventually worked in 30 different Arkansas gins, compresses, and mills by 1945.<sup>22</sup> The situation in the compresses demonstrates Arkansas's government officials' hypocritical nature and policy manipulation in its racialized labor constellations. The German war prisoners saved the cotton gins and compresses in an apparent labor pinch. However, the STFU believed they purposefully replaced local labor to use the cheaper POW labor. All the while, the Japanese American internees could not be employed because they would be competing with local labor.

One of the attractions for the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to choose Arkansas to intern Japanese Americans was the amount of federally owned land in the state. In the 1930s, the Farm Security Administration purchased two separate tracts of land, over 10,000 acres each, which became the sites to build the Rohwer and Jerome Relocation Centers.<sup>23</sup> The FSA never used the land until the war, as it often flooded in the winter and was infested with snakes. Also, to use the land, the timber needed clearing, which became the first task of the internees, along with completing the construction of their living quarters. After clearing the snake-infested timbers, the relocation centers were designed to be agricultural colonies to raise their own crops

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21. H.L. Mitchell to Paul V. McKnutt, letter January 5, 1945. STFU Papers.

22. Merrill R Pritchett and William L. Shea. "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1978): 3-22.

For more details on the compressor issue and the fight between STFU, WMC, and the compresses, see the section entitled "Inefficiency, Industry, and Agriculture" in Chapter 4: "Arkansas Officials and Military Officers: POWs as Band-Aid of Temporary Low-Cost Labor."

23. C. Calvin Smith, "The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas 1942-1945," *Arkansas Historical Association* Vol. 53, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 340-366.

and livestock to be as self-sufficient as possible. For their efforts, the internees working in agriculture and other jobs in the camps received a standard flat rate salary from the WRA at intervals of \$12, 16, or \$19 a month, depending on specialization and difficulty. At many other relocation centers, the WRA allowed seasonal leave for harvest work where Japanese Americans could earn more than the monthly salary. By late fall 1942, some 10,000 were out of the centers temporarily, making the prevailing wage throughout the western states.<sup>24</sup> Yet, Arkansas did not allow these opportunities for Japanese Americans, and it came down solely to Governor Adkins's decision.

After a meeting with the War Relocation Authority, H.K. Thatcher, Executive Director of the State of Arkansas Agricultural and Industrial Commission, wrote to Governor Adkins to explain how the WRA recommended the relocation centers be placed in the state, so the internees could work in the fields, picking cotton, harvesting nuts, or any other type of labor available in the area. The WRA outlined several different ways the Japanese Americans could be used to help alleviate workforce shortages, but Thatcher relayed the message to Adkins that "it would be strictly up to you as Governor" to determine the state's policy.<sup>25</sup> On March 12, 1943, D.S. Myer, director of the War Relocation Authority, notified Governor Adkins of the WRA's takeover of the lands in Arkansas known as the Rohwer and Jerome Relocation Areas.<sup>26</sup> It additionally spelled the WRA's legal right and specified jurisdiction and how it related to the state's law. The notice asked for a returned copy of the notice with the time of receipt and the

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24. Spicer, E.H., et al., *Impounded People: Japanese Americans in the Relocation Centers* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1969), 126.

25. H.K. Thatcher, letter to Homer Adkins, October 23, 1942. Adkins Papers.

26. D.S. Myer, War Relocation Authority, notice to Homer Adkins, March 12, 1943. Adkins Papers.

governor's endorsement; however, the copy in the Homer Adkins Paper in the Arkansas State Archives is unsigned.

Governor Adkins did find support from many local Arkansas residents for his strict stance toward the Japanese Americans interned. For example, a prominent businessman from McGehee, Arkansas (the town near Rohwer War Relocation Center), I.C. Oxner of Gulf Oil Products, wrote to Adkins about how there had been "as many Japanese on the streets of McGehee as there have been our citizens," and their jovial laughter and Japanese language made it seem as if "they were just having a picnic on our city streets."<sup>27</sup> Oxner continued saying the blatant disrespect "is beyond any American's endurance" and asked Adkins to "bring pressure to bear on the proper authorities in charge at Rohwer and Jerome to bring about better control of these Japanese."<sup>28</sup>

The National Japanese American Student Relocation Council contacted Governor Adkins and Arkansas's colleges and universities to hopefully allow Japanese American students to enroll in the state. Adkins contacted John J. McCloy, the Assistant Secretary of War, to protest the Japanese American students for two reasons: "First there would be resentment to take our own sons and place them in the armed services and provide education facilities in these colleges for evacuees. Secondly it would provide an entering wedge for negroes to make application to our state colleges which would further complicate matters."<sup>29</sup> Adkins' use of the resentment argument first off seems strange since some of the state's universities, including the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, began offering correspondence courses for the German POWs in the

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27. I.C. Oxner, letter to Homer Adkins, January 9, 1943. Adkins Papers.

28. I.C. Oxner, letter to Homer Adkins, January 9, 1943. Adkins Papers.

29. Homer Adkins, telegram to John J. McCloy, July 8, 1942. Adkins Papers.

state.<sup>30</sup> Adkins further suggested that Japanese American students should be absorbed into the institutions that already have integrated colleges and universities in other parts of the country.

On the same day, July 8, 1942, Adkins contacted Ralph B. Jones, state commissioner of Arkansas' Department of Education, to inquire about the plans or thoughts of the universities on what to do about the potential of Japanese American students. Three days later, Jones responded with the results of his inquiry, noting how all of the presidents of the state's colleges and universities expressed opposition to the idea of enrolling Japanese American students. Additionally, Jones, speaking for the presidents, suggested: 1. the government subsidize a "weak or defunct denominational school" and send all of the Japanese American students there; 2. allow only extension or correspondence courses from California institutions; 3. send the qualified Japanese American students out of the state to other universities that allow minority racial groups.<sup>31</sup> Adkins and Arkansas preferred the last recommendation that if qualified Japanese Americans could obtain a release from the WRA, they should attend school elsewhere.

Several of the interned Japanese Americans in Arkansas also wrote to Governor Adkins to give their thoughts on his policies of restricting them to remain behind fences under guard instead of being allowed to work. One such letter, signed anonymously as "Ex U.S. Soldier," described Adkin's intransigence. The Arkansas internee said, "Statements of your kind are Hitlerian in every respect. You are helping to lose within our own country . . . When you refuse an American to work in the war effort, thereby hindering production anyway, you are a saboteur, and a saboteur of the worst kind."<sup>32</sup> The letter's author even assured the governor how the

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30. Merrill R Pritchett and William L. Shea. "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946" *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1978): 3-22.

31. Ralph B. Jones, letter to Homer Adkins, July 11, 1942. Adkins Papers.

32. Ex-U.S. Soldier, letter to Homer Adkins, December 7, 1942. Adkins Papers.



Japanese Americans interned in the state would not want to stick around after the war, "Your 'empire', from every conceivable angle is one of the poorest--culturally, economically, socially, and politically. And if it is your fear that we might get involved in your messy social system, then banish that fear, for we are too intelligent, too well educated, and too Americanized to have any part of it."<sup>33</sup>

### **Cotton Picking, a Demonstration of Loyalty**

On September 23, 1942, the *Gila News Courier* reported in its article "Cotton for War," "The acute wartime manpower shortage is affording Americans of Japanese ancestry another opportunity to visibly demonstrate their loyalty and devotion to the country and toward the furtherence[sic] of the nation's war effort."<sup>34</sup> In places like Arizona, government officials and white planters viewed cotton picking as an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to the country for Japanese Americans. However, Arkansas's governor felt his state's duty to the war effort involved keeping their interned Japanese Americans under strict military surveillance without any opportunities to leave the camps. On September 25, 1942, 200 Japanese American volunteers from the Gila River Relocation Center picked cotton at the Smith and Thornburg Ranch near Casa Grande, AZ, marking one of the first experiments in utilizing internees in the cotton fields. The Japanese American pickers worked without incident under the supervision of

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33. Ex-U.S. Soldier, letter to Homer Adkins, December 7, 1942. Adkins Papers.

34. "Cotton for War," *Gila News Courier*, Rivers, AZ. September 23, 1942.

the WRA guards and an escort from the highway patrol.<sup>35</sup> The *Coolidge Examiner* detailed the plan to use Japanese Americans in picking the essential long-staple cotton, as it is used in making parachutes, balloons, gliders, and other implements of war. Additionally, the plan indicated that "the evacuee labor must be paid the prevailing wage for comparative work in the area in which they are employed." It would be up to the War Relocation Authority to maintain the wage.<sup>36</sup> The WRA established the wages at three cents a pound or \$3 per 100 lbs. of cotton picked, but they additionally charged the internees 15 cents for breakfast, 25 cents for lunch, and 15 cents for dinner.<sup>37</sup>

Hearing of the news of available laborers, in October 1942, the cotton planters around Parker Valley, Arizona, sent urgent word to the administrators of the other internment camp in Arizona, the Colorado River Relocation Center, renamed the Poston War Relocation Center. They asked for Japanese American laborers due to an absence in the usual migratory labor, stating they would lose their entire crop unless the internees would pick it. The *Gila New Courier* article put the impetus on the Japanese American internees themselves, "The next move is up to the evacuees themselves. Military and other officials had stressed that recruiting will be carried forward at Gila River and Poston on strictly voluntary basis. There is no compulsion, other than that compulsion shared by every loyal American to do his part in the winning of the war."<sup>38</sup>

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35. "200 Japanese Start Picking Cotton in Valley Monday," *Coolidge Examiner*, Coolidge, AZ. September 25, 1942.

36. "Japanese at Sacaton to Aid Cotton Harvest," *Coolidge Examiner*, Coolidge, AZ. September 18, 1942.

37. "Women urged to Work," *Gila News Courier* Rivers, AZ, September 23, 1942.

38. "Cotton for War," *Gila News Courier*, Rivers, AZ. September 23, 1942.

The administrators at Poston and in the War Relocation Authority agreed that utilizing some of the nearly 17,000 interned Japanese Americans in the area to pick cotton could serve several beneficial purposes:

1. If the evacuees saved the crop of the Parker Valley farmers, goodwill toward them would be stimulated locally, and consequently, public relations in the Parker area would be improved.
2. Participation in the salvage of a crop of some wartime importance would demonstrate to the people of the United States generally that the Japanese Americans were not all saboteurs.
3. The influx of cash into the [Poston] Center would supplement the small amounts paid to the evacuees as wages and thereby help to ease some of the tension resulting from the frustration of confinement.<sup>39</sup>

However, the Poston officials faced many problems regarding the communal factors in the relocation centers. Government regulations set them up based on approximate income equality for all evacuees. The income from cotton picking would vary significantly among individuals and families that could not send people out to the fields, disrupting the relocation center's routine functions with people leaving their current jobs for this new work. The Poston administrators decided to present to the Japanese American community leaders the plan for a Community Trust Fund that stressed the importance of cotton picking as a community affair and an opportunity for bettering the general welfare of the camp.<sup>40</sup> The individual Japanese American internees would receive a monthly base salary of \$16-19. However, all earnings from cotton picking over the salary would now be added to the camp's trust fund.

In Arizona, cotton picking faced a mixed reaction from the Japanese American leadership. Some among both Issei and Nisei were initially enthusiastic and accepted the full

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39. E.H. Spicer, "Reluctant Cotton-pickers: Incentive To Work in a Japanese Relocation Center," 41-54 in E. H. Spicer, ed. *Human Problems in Technological Change* (Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1952), 48.

40. Spicer, "Reluctant Cotton-pickers: Incentive To Work in a Japanese Relocation Center," 41-54.

view of the WRA plan. In contrast, others professed astonishment at what they called the administration's "socialistic proposal" for handling the wages in a trust fund.<sup>41</sup> Discussion, however, resulted in a general acceptance of the administration's position by the Japanese American leaders, but few believed in cotton picking as a demonstration of loyalty. When it came down to the day to load the trucks to head out to the cotton fields, only the community leaders and a handful of Japanese Americans showed up. Most seemed apathetic to picking cotton and did not care for the idea of their hard days' labor being put into a general trust fund.

The Poston officials then changed the direction of the funds towards smaller block/neighborhood trusts, where the workers could help dictate distribution for more immediate needs and improve their specific blocks or parts in the camp, such as hosting parties and building churches, mess halls, and schools.<sup>42</sup> This change allowed for a shift in the attitude of the workers as numbers in cotton picking grew. Additionally, the blocks began posting lists of names of those going out to pick cotton on bulletin boards, which were seen as contributing to the community. It applied public pressure to the issue, and over a few days, the numbers picking cotton quadrupled.<sup>43</sup>

Conversely, the diary of Charles Kikuchi, a Japanese American internee at the Gila River Relocation Center in Rivers, Arizona, indicates that the public pressure tactic to get more volunteers led to resentment between the farmers at the camp who had a staffing shortage and the

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41. Spicer, "Reluctant Cotton-pickers," 48.

42. Alexander H. Leighton, *The Governing of Men: General Principles and Recommendations Based on Experience at a Japanese Relocation Camp* (Princeton University Press, 1945), 137.

43. Spicer, "Reluctant Cotton-pickers," 51.

cotton pickers.<sup>44</sup> Kikuchi detailed how “The farmworkers are extremely jealous of the cotton pickers here, and they have been led into this strike without knowing what it is all about by a few of the hotheads who call them 'suckers' and 'yellow Americans' who KA<sup>45</sup> the administration and that they are damn fools for working hard.”<sup>46</sup>

Eventually, the strike passed after only a few days with better work conditions and the end of the cotton picker plan. After only a month of using Japanese Americans in the cotton fields of Arizona, the War Department, on October 21, 1942, canceled the labor program for the internees. The circumstances of why it ended are not precise. However, the *Gila News Courier* reported that after an investigation by the Arizona Farm Bureau Federation, the use of Japanese American labor in the cotton fields would be dismissed as a "noble experiment" and "absolved the Japanese from blame for the failure."<sup>47</sup> It cited the important work that most of the internees already were employed in agriculture or other jobs at the camps to make them self-supporting. They also would need to redirect Japanese American workers to the camouflage net project for the U.S. Army being placed at the relocation centers in Arizona that would eventually call for over 1,000 employees.<sup>48</sup>

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44. Charles Kikuchi, “Unpublished Diary October 15-31, 1942,” found at the Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study online archive at the Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley.

Charles Kikuchi was born in Vallejo, California, on January 18, 1916. Kikuchi penned over 100,000 pages in his diary over forty-seven years (1941–88). During his internment at the relocation centers at Tanforan, California, and Rivers, Arizona, the wartime diaries were part of Kikuchi's contribution to the Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study led by Dorothy S. Thomas of the University of California Berkeley.

45. Not quite certain of the meaning of "KA" here by Charles Kikuchi in his diary, but "ka" is the English written version of the Japanese word meaning "mosquito."

46. Kikuchi, Unpublished diary entry October 23, 1942.

47. “Rivers Residents Absolved,” *Gila News Courier* Rivers, AZ, October 21, 1942.

48. Lilliquist, *Imprisoned in the Desert*, 363.

Following suit with the Mississippi Delta, Arizona's cotton planters and growers shifted towards POWs as the new preferred supplemental labor. The War Department favored Arizona's deserts as secure locations for POW camps and, as early as January 1942, ordered the construction of a camp in Florence, just outside Phoenix, Arizona. By December 1942, POW Camp Florence housed nearly 6,000 German POWs, and at its peak, it housed 13,000 Italian, German, and Austrian POWs, the largest POW camp in the U.S.<sup>49</sup> The POWs began working in the Arizona cotton fields experimentally in 1943, but by 1945 the *Coolidge Examiner* reported how POWs from Camp Florence and its branch camps picked a combined total of 2,699,000 pounds of cotton in one week.<sup>50</sup>

Similar to the Mississippi Delta, to use POW labor in Arizona, the planters would contact a county agent, in this case from the Pinal County Farm Bureau, who held the contract with the War Department and would arrange the POW labor. The planter would pay \$1.50 per POW per day and an additional five cents going to the Farm Bureau for "operational expenses" for every 100 lbs. of cotton picked by the POWs, with a \$16 advance due when signing the contract.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the cotton planters in Arizona paid \$1.55 per POW for 100 lbs. of picked cotton (cwt.), which was far below the local labor rates of \$2.25-4.50 per cwt. depending on the type of cotton. The Pinal County Wage Board set the prevailing wage rates for cotton picking for short-staple cotton at \$2.25 cwt. and \$4.50 cwt. for long-staple cotton.<sup>52</sup> Arizona and Mississippi Delta

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49. John S Westerlund, "Rommel's Afrika Korps in Northern Arizona: Austrian Prisoners of War at Navajo Ordnance Depot." *The Journal of Arizona History* 39, no. 4 (1998): 405–20.

50. "War Prisoners Pick 2,699,000 Pounds of Cotton in Week," *Coolidge Examiner*, Coolidge, AZ. January 12, 1945.

51. "Arrangements Completed for Use of P.W.s to Pick Cotton Crop Under Farm Bureau Supervision," *Coolidge Examiner*, Coolidge, AZ. August 31, 1945.

52. "Prevailing Wage Rates for Cotton Picking Determined," *Coolidge Examiner*, Coolidge, AZ. February 4, 1944.

planters remained connected through organizations like the National Cotton Council to stay on the same page regarding wages. For example, when Arizona faced a cotton picker shortage in 1944, the Arizona planters turned down local labor for demanding a wage of 30 cents an hour after receiving a phone call from Oscar Johnston, the president of the National Cotton Council.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, akin to the Delta planters, Arizona also established wage ceilings or maximums that could be paid to cotton pickers backed by the War Food Administration below the last season's prevailing rates to help ensure low wages. Depending on the county, they were \$2-2.25 cwt. for upland or short-staple cotton, and \$4 cwt. for American Egyptian or long-staple cotton, and any violators found guilty of paying above the wage ceilings ran as high as a \$1,000 fine and one-year imprisonment.<sup>54</sup>

### **Bracero Program – the Delta’s Postwar Future**

Before the war, the Lee Wilson & Company property, the planter family and company in control of over 65,000 acres based out of Wilson, Arkansas, depended on thousands of sharecroppers and tenants to operate their several plantations.<sup>55</sup> As tenants fled to higher-paying jobs during the war, the Lee Wilson & Company (LWC) used various labor constellations to fill its needs, including sharecroppers, POWs, wage laborers, migrant labor through the Bracero

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53. Drew Pearson, “The Merry Go Round.” *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), March 2, 1943.

54. “Wage Ceilings for Cotton Picking Set and Local Administrator Named,” *Coolidge Examiner*, Coolidge, AZ. October 13, 1944.

55. Cindy Grisham, “Lee Wilson & Company,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Modified February 14, 2022. < <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/lee-wilson-company-4437/>>

Program, and increased mechanization in the cotton fields.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the LWC actively recruited Japanese Americans interned in the state as tenants for the company and sent a pamphlet to the War Relocation Authority to distribute to the internees.<sup>57</sup> The pamphlet indicated the Wilson Plantation would take as many as 1,000 families for a typical 50/50 split for sharecropping, where the LWC would provide all equipment, fertilizers, pesticides, and seeds necessary to grow the crop while the Japanese Americans would provide the labor. The LWC, facing severe labor shortages, wanted to incorporate the internees into the established sharecropping system. They promised to provide the housing and allowed \$2.00 credit per acre to farm at the country store.

In the 16-page pamphlet, the LWC touted the benefits of sharecropping and the benefits of plantation life. They embellished the educational, vocational training, and sporting opportunities at the plantation. Jim Crain promised that “Evacuees have nothing to fear. There is a general good feeling of tolerance and fellowship toward Japanese Americans in this entire section of the country and they can depend on the Wilson Plantation to defend their rights and privileges as citizens and loyal aliens.”<sup>58</sup> However, Jeannie Whayne in *Delta Empire*, the seminal

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56. More studies on the Bracero Program include Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Erasmo Gamboa, *Bracero Railroaders: The Forgotten World War II of Mexican Workers in the U.S. West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016); Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

57. “The Wilson Plantation: Special Arkansas Bulletin,” Lee Wilson and Co. pamphlet sent to War Relocation Authority, July 20, 1945. Lee Wilson and Company Records (MC 1289), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

58. “The Wilson Plantation: Special Arkansas Bulletin,” Lee Wilson and Co. pamphlet sent to War Relocation Authority, July 20, 1945. Lee Wilson and Company Records.



study on the Wilson family and operation, said it was an unsuccessful attempt to secure the use of Japanese Americans, with all returning to the Pacific coast after the war.<sup>59</sup>

In lieu of successfully recruiting Japanese American internees to the sharecropping system, the Lee & Wilson Co. turned towards a wage labor system reliant on the Bracero Program and mechanization to harvest its cotton. The LWC had a history of utilizing alternative labor pools to harvest its nearly 53,000 acres of land under cultivation. Following the First World War, the company sometimes brought in Mexican laborers to help harvest cotton crops. In 1925, the LWC faced an investigation from the Mexican consulate that workers from Mexico had been promised wages of \$1.50 an hour but were being paid sixty cents to a dollar an hour while being forbidden to leave.<sup>60</sup> Two decades later during World War II, the LWC secured the first POW branch camp in Arkansas at the Victoria Plantation in February 1944, thereby adapting to the larger practice detailed throughout this study to use POW labor as the preferred form of labor in the brief but tumultuous years of the war. With the withdrawal of POWs, the LWC and other planters then turned to Mexican laborers through the Bracero Program. To use workers from the Bracero Program, farmers had to provide specific guarantees, such as a minimum wage of 30 cents an hour, a minimum number of working days, paid transportation from recruitment centers in Mexico, decent living conditions, and protection from discrimination, while also placing part of the earned wages into a private savings account in Mexico.<sup>61</sup> For these reasons braceros never

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59. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 216.

60. Grisham, "Lee Wilson & Company," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. The wages seem very high for the time period. It could have been per day instead of per hour, but those are the exact figures from the citation.

61. Barbara Schmitter Heisler, "The 'Other Braceros': Temporary Labor and German Prisoners of War in the United States, 1943-1946," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 31 (Summer 2007), 239-271.

became a significant labor source for Arkansas during the war itself; they were found to command additional costs, high wages, and more bureaucratic entanglement compared to POWs and even local labor.

After the war and with mechanization still not perfected, planters with faced with a reality in which POWs were gone and the sharecropping system now primarily dismantled. The most immediate solution was to bus in local wage laborers. Alternatively, many planters became more dependent on seasonal Mexican laborers. The postwar wages for the harvests from 1946-1948 rose in cotton picking once the POWs had left the country to where local labor would make around \$3.00 per 100 lbs.<sup>62</sup> This wage was now comparable to the minimum guarantee (\$0.30 an hour or the prevailing wage) of the Bracero Program, so planters began to use more braceros at 10 hours a day with a quota of \$3.00 per 100 lbs. Beginning in 1946, the LWC and other planters in the Mississippi Delta hired tens of thousands of Mexican laborers to work the land, while planters began the transition to capital-intensive agriculture.<sup>63</sup> For the harvest of 1948, 2,882 Mexican laborers worked for the LWC, and by January 9, 1948, only three remained on the plantations due to injury.<sup>64</sup> In this statistic is found the primary advantage of bracero labor: the planters saw in them a labor form similar to the POWs, where they could be called upon seasonally to chop and harvest cotton and depart the area for the remainder of the year.

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62. Julie Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 97.

63. Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 219.

64. R.E.L Wilson, III, letter to J.F. Delaney (misspelled supposed to be Delany), January 6, 1949, Lee Wilson and Company Records.

Once braceros were working in Arkansas, the planters manipulated their wages and broke the terms of the Bracero Program by paying below the minimum wage guarantee, claiming it was a comparable prevailing wage to local labor. Planters would also increase the quota to 150 lbs. a day to receive the \$3.00 wage or assign Mexican laborers to second or third pickings on a field where most of the easy and large cotton bolls had been picked. Historian Julie Weise in *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* interviewed former braceros that noted the disparity in pay in 1948, where they received \$2.50 cwt. and local labor received the \$3.00 cwt. The planter-manipulated "prevailing wage" continued to fluctuate in the 1940s and 1950s. With braceros, it added an additional complexity involving negotiations and contract stipulations that also involved the Mexican national government. In 1953, the braceros' minimum wages for cotton picking were negotiated at \$2.50 cwt., when the local wages in some places were only \$2.00 cwt.<sup>65</sup> Thus, in some cases, Mexican laborers were used to undercut the wages of local laborers, but in others, it allowed local labor to raise their wages to that of the braceros. Weise concluded that the "Mexicanization" of Arkansas allowed for some cultural and racial reform for all races, and "at key moments in the early 1950s, braceros did force white planters to pay a minimum wage in agriculture—the first in the state's history—not only to braceros but, inadvertently, also to black and white workers."<sup>66</sup>

In 1948, the Delta planters faced a crisis in the fields, where they were forced to pay high cotton-picking wages to local labor because recruiting in Mexico only delivered less than half of the 25,000 braceros expected.<sup>67</sup> Many of the Mexican laborers were concerned over the

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65. Julie Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 102.

66. Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910*, 117.

67 "New Picker Gateway Will Open at Juarez," *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, TN, October 5, 1948.

undetermined wages and had grown to distrust words that they would be paid the “prevailing wage.” The President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, tasked with looking at how the Bracero Program functioned over the last few years, found:

The point we do wish to emphasize is that the “prevailing wage,” as currently in vogue in seasonal migratory farm employment, is in some respects worse than meaningless. The recruitment of the labor supply prior to the opening of seasonal work obviously requires some sort of a wage quotation. When this wage quotation is set by agreement among farm employers alone and with little or no regard to whether it is a sufficient wage to attract workers, it cannot very well serve as the price to equate the supply of and demand of labor.<sup>68</sup>

During the early part of the cotton harvest of 1948, a scene emerged straight out of the planters' nightmares as many Mexican laborers refused to come to pick cotton in the Delta because of the uncertainty or low wages offered. With no braceros, the planters began to bid against one another and increased the wages to \$4-5 per 100 lbs. when the expected prevailing wage was supposed to be \$3-3.50. Eventually, the United States Employment Service (USES) came to the planters' rescue. Gerald L. Dearing from the *Commercial Appeal* praised Walter Erb from USES in his article for "his handling of the problem" and said that Mexican laborers would be clearing immigration at a rate of 1,000 a day to enter the U.S. contracted at a rate of \$2.50 per hundred.<sup>69</sup> The Mexican laborers, via the Bracero Program, were arriving to undercut the local laborers' wages. Dearing explained, "Up to now the pickers have gotten more than their share. From this point on, if it can be arranged, it should be different. The sharecropper and the planter hope to

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68. United States President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor*, U.S. Government Printing Office (March 1951), 60.

69. Gerald L. Dearing, “Cotton Comment,” *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, TN, September 26, 1948.

share the profits of their work with the picker, instead of giving the picker all the cash and leaving nothing for themselves. The feeling is mounting that \$3 a hundred is generous."<sup>70</sup>

As Arkansas farmers began to use braceros more heavily, constant reports over wages, poor working conditions, unsanitary living quarters, life-threatening transportation, and deep-seated racial discrimination, some individuals and counties in Arkansas joined Texas in becoming blacklisted by the Mexican government.<sup>71</sup> Although the Bracero agreement had provisions pertaining to health, housing, sustenance, compensation, work schedule, and a mandate to refrain from discrimination, many of the planters disregarded these terms. At the LWC, bracero Apolinar Zaomora said the plantation lacked adequate medical access and that he and others were treated "like pigs . . . were forced to sleep on the floors of the stables covered in sacks of cotton."<sup>72</sup> The Mexican laborers in Arkansas suffered all types of abuses, not only from racial discrimination, with some restaurants and theatres with posted signs prohibiting the entrance of Mexicans or denoting segregated areas for Mexicans and African Americans. Nevertheless, unlike Arkansas's African American population, who were U.S. citizens but faced long-standing Jim Crow laws and a lethargic government, the Mexican braceros had citizenship rights in Mexico and treaty rights in the US, allowing them to turn to their government for assistance.<sup>73</sup>

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70. Gerald L. Dearing, "Cotton Comment," *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, TN, September 26, 1948.

71. J. Justin Castro, "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton: Agricultural Labor and Civil Rights in the Post World War II South." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 75 (Spring 2016), 27-46.

72. Castro, "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton," 35.

73. Julie Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 97.

During the negotiations over the Bracero Program in 1943, Mexico was afforded the opportunity to exclude or blacklist companies, counties, or even states for mistreatment or discrimination. For the program's first five years, Mexico blacklisted Texas for the longstanding negative relationship between the two and the state's history of discrimination towards Mexicans and Mexican Americans. In Texas, planters worked around the ban by employing "wetbacks" or undocumented immigrants, which held no guarantees or expectations of fair treatment or wages for the workers.<sup>74</sup>

In the years after 1947, due mainly to the continuous influx of undocumented immigrants, Mexico gradually removed its ban on utilizing the emigrant braceros to Texas.<sup>75</sup> Now postwar, Arkansas feared it might find itself on the blacklist, which some planters, companies, and counties did. Mexican laborers would complain to their consulates, and they would investigate the matters of mistreatment and discrimination, both of which were common occurrences in Arkansas. For example, in 1948, a report from the Mexican consul in Memphis found growers in the Pine Bluff area provided inadequate and unsanitary medical and housing facilities for its braceros, so the Mexican government demanded the return of its 2000 laborers in the vicinity. Additionally, the Mexican officials through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs blacklisted planter A.W. Barnhill from hiring braceros for breaches in contract over transportation, housing conditions, and the unfair arrest of three Mexican workers who fled his

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74. Otey M. Scruggs, "Texas and the Bracero Program, 1942–1947," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 32 (1963), 251–264.

75. Timothy J. Henderson, "Bracero Blacklists: Mexican Migration and the Unraveling of the Good Neighbor Policy," *The Latin Americanist*, Vol. 55, No. 4, (December 2011), 199-217.

farm.<sup>76</sup> After threats of being blacklisted, most Arkansas planters and local officials worked to improve the conditions in their areas.<sup>77</sup>

In November 1948, the Lee Wilson & Co. received several complaints from the Mexican consul in New Orleans, Rafael Jimenez Castro, about the operations at the Wilson Plantation and the unfair or unsafe working conditions. Firstly, Consular Castro mentioned the problem with laborers returning to Mexico and never receiving their 10% of the wages withheld and noted three laborers who were owed money by name.<sup>78</sup> A representative of Lee Wilson & Co. responded, "It is our understanding that when a laborer absconds he has broken the terms of the contract therefore forfeiting his 10%."<sup>79</sup> Then, on November 19, 1948, Castro replied: "that whenever one of the Mexican laborers protests against ill-treatment or violations of his contract, he is told that if he does not like the conditions under which he is working he may return to Mexico at his own expense and that he will not be give the 10 saving fund to which he is entitled, despite the sacrifices and sufferings which he must withstand in order to save that money."<sup>80</sup>

Castro sent another letter that same day detailing how a Mexican worker while traveling in the back of a company truck transporting him to the Wilson Plantation, was jolted and thrown

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76. Castro, "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton," 36.

77. Eventually, by 1949, the Mexican government lost the right to blacklist entire areas and could blacklist only individual employers and, by 1954, relinquished the right to unilaterally blacklist altogether. See Julie Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 102.

78. Rafael Jimenez Castro, letter to Lee Wilson & Co., November 13, 1948. Lee Wilson and Company Records (MC 1289), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

79. Lee Wilson & Co., letter to Rafael Jimenez Castro, November 16, 1948. Lee Wilson and Company Records.

80. Rafael Jimenez Castro, letter to Lee Wilson & Co., November 19, 1948. Lee Wilson and Company Records.

out onto the highway.<sup>81</sup> The man was placed in a nearby hospital to recover, but nobody from the company had come to see him about the accident, so Castro demanded they look into the matter and make sure he received adequate medical attention. On November 26, J.E. Crain, the son of Jim Crain and the head manager of the Wilson Plantation, wrote back to Castro enclosing checks for nine Mexican laborers who had yet to receive their 10% withheld. Crain also noted how the workers refused to work for several days and left the plantation on their own accord and would not return, so Crain stated, "I feel that we are not prepared[sic] at this time to reimburs[t] [sic] them their transportation and subsistence to Mexico."<sup>82</sup>

The Lee & Wilson Co also found other difficulties in utilizing Mexican labor on their plantations. Many refused the terrible working and living conditions and used the opportunity to escape to other parts of the country. Each month the company notified J.F. Delany, the officer in charge of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in New Orleans, the names and passport numbers of all Mexican workers employed, returned to the border with or without fulfilling their contract, and those who deserted their job. For example, on December 1, 1948, Lee Wilson & Co. provided J.F. Delany with a list of 240 Mexican agricultural laborers that "have deserted their jobs" and had been returned to immigration authorities at Laredo, Texas, by company transportation.<sup>83</sup> The next day, they sent a list of 34 names of former laborers that had "absconded" or ran away, and "their whereabouts are unknown however it is thought they have gone to Chicago, ILL."<sup>84</sup>

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81. Castro, letter to LWC, November 19, 1948. Lee Wilson and Company Records.

82. J.E. Crain, letter to Rafael Jimenez Castro, November 26, 1948. Lee Wilson and Company Records.

83. Lee Wilson & Co., letter to J.F. Delany, December 1, 1948. Lee Wilson and Company Records.

84. Lee Wilson & Co., letter to J.F. Delany, December 2, 1948. Lee Wilson and Company Records.



Many of the country's planter and grower associations wanted an expendable or removable labor force if something were to go wrong, just as they had with the POWs. Given the issues that arose with braceros, undocumented Mexican workers offered another exploitative opportunity for the planters. Utilizing these laborers, known derogatorily as “wetbacks,”<sup>85</sup> allowed the planter to bypass both nations' governments and the protections offered by the Bracero Program. They could be paid less, treated worse, had no legal rights, and if there was any protest or the season ended, they could be deported or shipped away. Due to the arrangement's transactional nature, the number used in the cotton fields is uncertain. However, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was a significant influx of these undocumented immigrants.

The President's Commission on Migratory Labor questioned and received testimony from the district director for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in El Paso, Texas. The unnamed director testified that in his 26 years with the INS, nearly every year during cotton chopping and harvest time, the planters would complain and protest to D.C., then “[e]ither I get word from some higher official to go easy until cotton-chopping time was over, or cotton-picking time was over; or the men who were doing the work would be so upset by the investigation that they would go easy on their own.”<sup>86</sup>

The Migratory Labor Commission found that in almost every hearing for farm employers or their representatives to testify, they spoke on how the domestic labor supply was inadequate or

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85. The term “wetback” to mean an undocumented Mexican national in the U.S. originated from how the Rio Grande River forms much of the long border between the U.S. and Mexico and how many persons without documentation entering the country have crossed into the U.S. by swimming or wading the river.

86. United States President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor*, U.S. Government Printing Office (March 1951), 75.

unreliable and that they must have foreign labor, regardless of if they worked legally or not. One unnamed Arkansas planter interviewed by the commission stated:

As I said there a while ago, cotton is a slave crop; nobody is going to pick it that doesn't have to. Now these Texas Mexicans have found out that there are many other things that they can do that they are ready to do than pick cotton, and the [Mexican] national is about the only reservoir of labor that we know of that really wants to pick cotton because he gets more money than he ever saw in his life before, or ever expected to see, and people that can get anything else to don't want to pick cotton.<sup>87</sup>

The report by the Migratory Labor Commission also provided a growing concern over the magnitude of undocumented immigrants in the country, with an estimate that at least 400,000 of the migratory farm labor force of one million in 1949 were undocumented workers.<sup>88</sup> Historian Mae Ngai, in *Impossible Subjects*, offered the best explanation for why the US government authorized a nuanced crackdown on undocumented migrants while still striving to forge a stable and inexpensive labor force. Ngai argues that the US government, through the INS, used a “carrot and stick” method. They wanted to encourage farmers to hire workers legally through the bracero program but ended smuggling operations and using undocumented workers.<sup>89</sup>

To combat the number of undocumented immigrants in the country, on June 9, 1954, INS Commissioner General Joseph Swing commenced the pejoratively termed "Operation Wetback." Its effectiveness depended on publicity and extensive media coverage that often exaggerated the strength of the Border Patrol and gave the impression of a greater force, which convinced thousands to repatriate voluntarily. From Texas alone, more than 63,000 individuals returned to

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87. Commission on Migratory Labor, 20.

88. Commission on Migratory Labor, 69.

89. Mae Ngai *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 152.

Mexico of their own volition, and an INS report later indicated that the agency apprehended nearly 1.1 million individuals.<sup>90</sup> With Operation Wetback serving as the stick, the INS also reported the carrot side with a 100% increase in the number of bracero contracts.<sup>91</sup>

The Bracero program continued until December 1, 1964, 22 years after its impetus as a wartime labor shortage relief program. It ended after civil rights and labor leaders, such as Cesar Chavez, targeted the frequent abuses migrants suffered from wage manipulation and terrible living conditions. Arkansas's poor treatment of its laborers led to a meager number of braceros staying in the state. Julie Weise in *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* found that “probably fewer than ten [braceros], out of hundreds of thousands that had passed through—remained in Arkansas.”<sup>92</sup>

The end of the Bracero Program meant some planters would rely more on undocumented workers; however, mechanization by the 1960s offered a superior alternative. Western cotton growers embraced mechanization earlier than the Delta planters; by 1951, more than half of California’s cotton crop was mechanically harvested.<sup>93</sup> Over two decades of advancements since the Hopson Plantation experiment, which was the first ever fully mechanized cotton crop, cotton plant breeders had developed hybrid varieties that produced bolls higher off the ground and ripened more uniformly so that they could be picked more easily by machine. Writing amidst the

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90. Kelly Lytle Hernandez, “Operation Wetback,” Immigration History. Last accessed March 18, 2023. <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/operation-wetback/>

91. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 156.

92. Weise, *Corazon De Dixie*, 116-117.

93. United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. *Statistics on Cotton and Related Data, 1920-1973*, Statistical Bulletin No. 535 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1974), 218.

delay of bringing such innovation into the Delta, the President's Commission on Migratory Labor also commented on the slow transition for some planters in the region:

There are evidently several reasons why mechanical pickers in the Delta are not in full use and for the slowness in mechanization. Adaptations to climate and environment have been more difficult. Wet weather, high humidity, rank growth of the cotton plant, and weeds are all serious problems. Lower wages are undoubtedly an additional and significant reason. With wage rates for cotton picking at present levels, there is little incentive to turn to machines because the costs of hand picking and machine picking are too nearly equal.<sup>94</sup>

As the Bracero Program ended in 1964, herbicides such as Treflan emerged to control the weed problem in the cotton fields, eliminating the need for workers in the early summer cotton chopping season. Then, advancements in technology and chemical defoliant allowed the mechanical harvesters to pick cotton more cleanly, so by 1967, machines now picked 93% of Arkansas's cotton.<sup>95</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As they had done with the introduction of POWs into the cotton fields, organized labor protested and wanted to end the Bracero Program, as many felt the planters began to prefer imported labor over local labor. H.L. Mitchell, former general secretary of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, now served as the president of the National Farm Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor. In 1949, Mitchell gave a speech before a conference on "The

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94. United States President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor*, U.S. Government Printing Office (March 1951), 15.

95. Holley, *Second Great Emancipation*, 155.

Church and Migratory Labor," sponsored by the Home Missions Council of North America. Mitchell's provocative words were publicized by the *New York Times* on how agricultural employers prefer Mexican laborers "because they are more easily controlled," and they "dare not protest wages, working or living conditions, because the threat of immediate deportation hangs over their heads."<sup>96</sup> Mitchell further stated, "These workers are brought across the border, employed at low wages, charged high prices for necessary food and clothes, and at the end of the season, thrown back into Mexico, often without being paid the wages due them."<sup>97</sup> Mitchell's speech resonated with the conference members, and Louise Q. Blodgett from the Department of Labor pressed for federal and state legislation to protect American migrant laborers.

H.L. Mitchell's response to the continued use of braceros was unsurprising, as he faithfully served as a stalwart in agricultural labor organizations fighting in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta for the past 15 years. However, a bit more astounding is the fact that the *New York Times* article can be found in the records of the Lee Wilson and Company clipped to a letter from Homer M. Adkins, former Arkansas governor now administrator for Employment Security Division. Adkins wrote a letter to Jim Crain, the manager of the Lee Wilson & Co., to inform him of labor movements and a proposed resolution against Arkansas planters, but "Fortunately, I was on the Resolutions Committee and was able to get them to recommend its disapproval, and when it reached the floor of the meeting the resolution was tabled."<sup>98</sup>

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96. "Employers scored on Migrant Labor: Mexicans Preferred Because They Dare Not Protest, Church Parley Is Told," *New York Times* September 29, 1949.

97. "Employers scored on Migrant Labor: Mexicans Preferred Because They Dare Not Protest, Church Parley Is Told," *New York Times* September 29, 1949.

98. Homer M. Adkins, letter to Jim Crain, October 10, 1949, Lee Wilson and Company Records.

After a failed run for the U.S. Senate in 1944, losing to J. William Fulbright, Adkins, after his governorship, was appointed administrator of the Arkansas Employment Security Division, the agency responsible for worker's unemployment insurance. In this role, he still defended the planter elite and their control over labor in Arkansas. In his adieu to Jim Crain, Adkins wrote that he was "trying to render you every service possible," and "when we can be of further service to you, please command us."<sup>99</sup>

In conclusion, the planters worked to hold onto cheap hand labor, utilizing POWs and migrant laborers while planning to replace this labor with machines. The planters relied on their political support in the state government and Congress to manipulate the military and government agencies to secure and retain POWs and eventually foreign migrant labor postwar to suppress the wages of local labor until efficient mechanical harvesters could be produced. The racialized nature of America's agricultural labor market, coupled with its increasing use of discrimination based on one's citizenship status, rendered a reality in which both one's racial and citizenship status opened or closed certain employment prospects, determined wages, and factored into the other labor conditions one would face.

Cotton picking was sometimes seen as a punishment or job for the lower class of citizenry or race. For Japanese Americans interned in Arizona, the WRA proposed it as a demonstration of loyalty to aid the war effort, while in Arkansas, it was vehemently blocked. Some Arkansas government officials' prejudices could not concede any potential openings for Japanese Americans in labor or education, fearing it would serve as a wedge for African Americans to challenge Jim Crow laws and segregation. In spite of some of these actions, many

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99. Homer M. Adkins, letter to Jim Crain, October 10, 1949, Lee Wilson and Company Records.

of the interned Japanese Americans demonstrated their loyalty by enlisting in the military. From just Arkansas's Rohwer Relocation Center alone, the *McGhee Times* reported 866 service members in the U.S. military, with 21 killed in action, 33 wounded, two POWs in Germany, and one missing in action.<sup>100</sup> Two servicemen with families at the Rohwer Center also received high military honors, including a Silver Star and the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), the nation's second-highest award.

Sgt. Togo S. Sugiyama posthumously was awarded the DSC, for in one day of fighting in the Italian campaign, he knocked out four machine gun nests, killed their five gunners and three snipers, and took one POW. Sugiyama later died fighting in the campaign, so the Army present the award to his father, Yasukichi Sugiyama, at the Rohwer Center. Sgt. Masakazu Nishi received the Silver Star for bravery in fighting in France, where on two occasions, he advanced alone to cover his men, knocked out tanks, machine gun emplacements, and took POWs.<sup>101</sup> Despite the valiant service and contribution of many Japanese Americans, Arkansas blocked any opportunities for them in the state and, after the war, they were removed by train to California. The War Relocation Authority officially closed on November 30, 1945, with the Tule Lake Segregation Center as the last camp to close.

The November departure of Japanese Americans fell at an interesting moment in agriculture and labor throughout the country and the Mississippi Delta. The war in Europe had concluded six months earlier, and the war in the Pacific finished two months prior. German and Italian POWs continued to pick cotton throughout the Mississippi Delta, prevailed upon to finish

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100. "Rohwer Relocation Center Contributes 866 Men to Service in the U.S. Armed Forces," *McGehee Times*, (n.d.). Newspaper microfilm collection, Arkansas State Archives, Little Rock, Arkansas.

101. "Military Minutes: Silver Star, D.S.C. Awarded 2 Soldiers from Rohwer Center," *McGehee Times*, June 14, 1945. Newspaper microfilm collection, Arkansas State Archives, Little Rock, Arkansas.

the harvest by the desperate and incessant appeals from the planters and their representatives for more labor. At the same time, in the California cotton harvest of 1945, Japanese POWs, previously banned from such labor opportunities, entered the cotton fields with unreasonable quotas doubled that of their White POW counterparts. Back in Arkansas, the *McGehee Times* reported Rohwer's closure and described the 4,600 Japanese American persons as "Unemployable."<sup>102</sup> It mostly meant they were the elderly and children that could not leave earlier to find work. However, the title "unemployable" seemed ironic, given their nearly three-and-a-half-year confinement in a state that blocked every proposal to employ them off campus. This was an apt postscript to a multi-year wartime experience that highlighted how race and citizenship status factored into the labor constellations of the Mississippi Delta.

While the planters' appeals to the military failed to keep POWs for the 1946 harvest, many focused on their postwar future. The Lee & Wilson Co. failed to replace the Black sharecroppers that left during the war with Japanese Americans, so they, like many others, began the move towards mechanization. Due to cultural traditions, concerns for cotton purity, and emerging techniques in weed control, this process had to be gradual and ultimately lasted into the 1960s. With local labor not returning to the cotton fields after the war, Mexican braceros or undocumented workers came to replace German and Italian POWs as the planters' only option for an inexpensive and removable labor force. These deportable Mexican nationals (documented or undocumented) gave the planters a labor source that still maintained Arkansas' historical racial hierarchy. This was the final form of racialized, citizenship-determined seasonal labor that

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102. "Rohwer Camp to Close by December 15: Center Houses 4,600 Persons, Most of Whom Are 'Unemployable,'" *McGehee Times*, July 19, 1945. Arkansas State Archives



held planters over until mechanical pickers and chemical agents improved to allow full mechanization by the mid-1960s, just as the Bracero Program concluded.

## Conclusion

Chapter One of this study started with the odyssey of German POW Edwin Pelz, a native of Waldfrieden, Germany, and a ground radio operator for the Luftwaffe captured in Normandy. In fewer than six weeks, Pelz transitioned from a soldier fighting in France to a POW cotton picker in the Mississippi Delta for the 1944 harvest.<sup>1</sup> Pelz and nearly 63,000 POWs in the Mississippi Delta became a valuable labor resource for the military and the planter elite, but how did the POWs feel about their experience? Pelz felt a sense of pride for completing the difficult task of picking cotton, but he enjoyed even more the opportunities to leave the POW camp to socialize with locals. He recalled how frequently the trucks hauling POWs would stop at roadside diners and stores for the guards and drivers to grab drinks and food. In the meantime, the POWs would chat with the locals; Pelz reminisced, "I cannot remember them ever insulting us or harassing us. The first thing these strangers usually did was to come over to see us and offer us cigarettes, then some of them would go into the store and buy us chocolates, candies, fruit, and such like things. I was very touched by their friendliness and thoughtfulness toward us – their former enemies."<sup>2</sup>

Such socialization opportunities allowed some POWs to immigrate to the United States after the war through sponsorships from connections made while leased out as labor. Arkansas planter Mabel Gieseck stayed in contact with several POWs who worked on her plantation. Former POWs would send letters asking for money, food, aid, or even sponsorship for their immigration applications. To those who wrote, Gieseck sent relief through \$10 food packages

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1. Edwin Pelz and William Shea, "A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 42-55.

2. Pelz and Shea, "A German Prisoner of War in the South," 53.

through the Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe organization (CARE).<sup>3</sup> In addition to sending CARE packages to POWs, Gieseck did sponsor one former German POW named Roman Wirski, who returned to Arkansas and worked on her plantation.<sup>4</sup> Numerous other letters indicate that Gieseck also helped other nearby planters with immigration paperwork to bring in other former POWs.

In one instance, former German POW Rudolf Zeuke wrote to Gieseck about his discontent with her not replying to his letters and requests for aid. Zeuke wrote that she must not have received the letter, “Or is it really like they say here, that the capitalistic America kept her prisoners of war only for the purpose of exploitation?”<sup>5</sup> Zeuke asked Gieseck to send two bicycle tires with tubes to help him get around to find work. It is unclear if Gieseck ever responded to him, but Zeuke also noted how he still had a check from his days laboring in the U.S. as a POW, one amounting to \$72. Of course, this was not life-changing money, but the POW labor program allowed some savings for when they returned to their war-torn homes. In comparison, these forms of cooperation and kindness never occurred for Japanese Americans interned in Arkansas. Governor Homer Adkins prevented this perceived enemy from working or staying in the state. Internees thereby also were prevented from interacting with locals the way German and Italian POWs did. POW Peltz said in his memoir, “It had felt at home there - I had never felt that we

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3. CARE was founded in 1945 to deliver food aid to individuals in war-torn Europe, such as canned meats, powdered milk, dried fats, chocolate, coffee, and cigarettes.

4. Mabel Gieseck, letter to Mr. and Mrs. Nicholson, dated August 1, 1949, Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

5. Rudolf Zeuke, letter to Mabel Gieseck, not dated, Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

were enemies. It was all like a dream and that is how it remains in my memory. I was not ashamed of the tears which were running down my face that day as we all said our goodbyes.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, beyond this sentimentality lay a series of economic calculations that reworked cotton labor constellations across the Mississippi Delta. The beneficiaries of the POW labor program, the cotton growers and planters, received the cheapest possible labor source, while politicians like Congressman Gathings pleased their influential bases. Those Arkansas planters and growers who used POW labor instead of local labor or braceros saved between \$0.44 - 0.69 a day per person (depending on whether they were a member of the POW camp association, members paid a \$0.05 fee, nonmembers paid a \$0.20). The money saved started to add up for these planters, because large plantations and farms regularly utilized hundreds of POWs a month during the picking and chopping season. For example, between October 16 and November 15, 1944, Mabel Gieseck and the Lansing Company used 953 POWs as labor on their farm.<sup>7</sup> For their work, the POWs received their 80 cents daily in canteen script, and the remaining balance was sent home with them in a check. The War Department and the Office of the Provost Marshal General helped offset the cost of housing POWs by leasing their labor to others for a fee. These organizations also received a substantial workforce to be used at military bases. In Arkansas,

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6. Pelz and Shea, “A German Prisoner of War in the South,” 54. Pelz left the U.S. in March 1946, was handed over to British military forces, and placed in the British prisoner-of-war camp at Vilvoorde, Belgium. Pelz described it as “hell” compared to the comfortable American facilities. “Food was short and we lived in a hole in the ground with a piece of tent overhead. Eight men lived in each hole, almost as bad as in a Russian camp.” Pelz volunteered to drive a truck for his captors to get out of the camp as much as possible. Eventually, he was transferred to Munster, Germany, and released in August 1947. Edwin Pelz and his family returned to visit the Mississippi Delta several times.

7. R.A. Fisher, letter to Lansing Co., n.d. Mabel Gieseck/Lansing Archive.

Camp Robinson trained an estimated 750,000 US soldiers, using nearly 4,000 POWs to help fill many of the day-to-day labor roles on the base.<sup>8</sup>

In 1955, the U.S. Department of the Army published a work examining prisoner of war utilization from the country's founding until the end of World War II to aid future officers, entitled, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army 1776-1945*. It was written by George C. Lewis and John Mewha, who found the employment program during World War II to be a great success. As many as 95.6% of POWs worked in some capacity, whether for private contractors or in military establishments, with only a minimum of disciplinary problems. The POW labor performed in agriculture and industry from 1943 through 1945 accounted for approximately 34 million man-days of work.<sup>9</sup> Lewis and Mewha concluded, "The most important lesson of all to be remembered is that the use of prisoners of war during World War II was essential to the welfare and economy of our nation. U. S. military personnel were released for combat duty, and civilians were transferred to essential work. Crops vital to the economy of our nation were harvested that otherwise would have spoiled, and war industries were able to continue operations in the face of the civilian manpower shortage."<sup>10</sup>

Lewis and Mewha additionally acknowledge that the military's labor programs did and, in future instances, would cause labor unions to protest using POWs. As it suggests for the future officers reading their work, it states, "Organized labor, especially, must be acquainted with the basic fact that in time of all-out mobilization all labor, including that of prisoners of war, is

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8. Steve Rucker, "Camp Joseph T. Robinson," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*. Last revised March 1, 2023. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/camp-joseph-t-robinson-2262/>

9. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army 1776-1945*, by George C. Lewis and John Mewha, Washington, D.C.: Department of Army, 1955, 264.

10. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 265.

essential.”<sup>11</sup> The Southern Tenant Farmers Union, sharecroppers, and other local laborers (who were predominantly Black) fared the worst of those impacted by the POW labor program. It destroyed the tenant or sharecropping system, replacing these 12-month laborers with seasonal workers who received planter-manipulated wages that were backed by federally set wage ceilings. As a result, instead of tolerating these turbulent and oppressive agricultural positions, many local laborers fled the South for higher-paying industrial jobs in the North in what the STFU called the New or Second Underground Railroad. In total, the STFU arranged transportation for over 12,000 workers to higher-paying jobs in Arizona, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Florida, and California in 1944 and 1945.<sup>12</sup>

As thousands of experienced cotton laborers fled the South, Arkansas's Governor Homer Adkins and Congressman E.C. Gathings continually appealed to the military for more POWs to labor in the state. However, maintaining the racial hierarchy took precedence over filling these purported manpower shortages, as the state would not accept just any labor. For example, Governor Adkins blocked the use of the interned Japanese Americans housed in Arkansas, despite very lucrative offers from construction companies and positive examples from elsewhere of internees picking cotton. While simultaneously blocking the labor opportunities for Japanese Americans, Arkansas continued to operate its penal plantations for Cummins Prison's predominantly Black inmate population and Tucker's largely White convicts. Indeed, the state now redoubled its commitment to convict leasing by utilizing German and Italian POWs. In adding a peculiar wrinkle to the “peculiar institution” of convict leasing—with its roots in the

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11. U.S. Department of the Army, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, 264.

12. H.L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, (Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979). 215.

immediate post-slavery years—Adkins and many other planters took issue not only with the race of Japanese Americans but also their citizenship status. Because many were American citizens, Adkins and others feared the internees would be at liberty to remain in the state after the security crisis that precipitated Executive Order 9066 had expired, so they blocked every labor opportunity for them. Of course, planters benefitted immensely from leasing POW laborers, since these did not have citizenship rights and had no leverage to negotiate wages. They hoped to find a similar arrangement after the war with Mexican laborers, whether braceros or undocumented, and they did indeed have some success in exploiting these groups in a similar manner.

During the war, Arkansas planters rarely used—and sometimes outright refused—Mexican migrant labor via the Bracero Program because the federal government guaranteed their wage rate and also forced planters to pay for their transportation and housing. After the war's end, however, the Bracero Program lost most of its stringent federal government oversight. Hence, the planters began to manipulate wages for braceros to make them a viable labor option for the harvest of 1946, the same year the POW repatriation was completed. These cheaper and deportable Mexican laborers in the postwar years allowed the planters to gradually transition to mechanical harvesters over the next two decades.

In his memoir, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, STFU leader H.L. Mitchell poignantly titled his second-to-last chapter, "Nostalgia, Meet Reality." While the chapter omits consideration of Mexican laborers, it does describe the longer-term dynamic at work in the 1940s and 1950s, with tenant farmers and sharecroppers virtually disappearing, replaced by mechanical harvesters:

The harvest hand and the migrant worker are rapidly being displaced by machines. Today, machines are used to plant, cultivate and harvest most fruits and

vegetables. The Agricultural Experiment Stations maintained by the United States Department of Agriculture developed the cotton picking machine that displaced hundreds of thousands of family farmers and hired workers.<sup>13</sup>

Mitchell bemoaned how planters and the government had worked together to facilitate the tenant farmer's downfall, brought on by the Delta Council and its influence on the USDA's Agriculture Experiment Station. The same Delta Council sponsored both the first POW labor experiment in the cotton fields at the Mullens Plantation in June 1943 and, in 1944, they harvested the first fully mechanized crop of cotton at the Hopson Plantation.

In conclusion, this dissertation argues that the cotton plantocracy of Arkansas during World War II, with the help of county and state officials, manipulated the military and federal government to use prisoners of war (POWs) to suppress the wages of local labor and set up their postwar future. The South's Jim Crow ideology influenced labor policies by creating peculiar, racialized labor regimes that were also attuned to differences in citizenship status. This ideological system allowed only certain people to labor in the cotton fields, with Japanese Americans in Arkansas fully excluded and largely African American sharecroppers and tenant farmers increasingly forced out. Local planters, agriculture organizations, and state representatives in Arkansas, such as Congressman E.C. Gathings and Governor Homer Adkins, exaggerated their labor needs and continually lobbied for more POWs to undercut the wage demands being promoted by labor unions and organizations like the STFU to protect local laborers. Then, as the move towards mechanization continued at a gradual pace after the war, undocumented Mexican nationals or braceros came to replace German and Italian POWs as an

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13. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 341.



inexpensive and removable labor force that the planters could employ to manipulate local labor wages. Finally, mechanical cotton harvesters entirely replaced all hand labor by the mid-1960s.

After a lifetime of fighting in labor unions and organizations, H.L. Mitchell concluded his autobiography with his dying wish: to be a thorn in the side of the planter elite for generations to come. Mitchell remarked, “When I shall have lived out my life (100 years, more or less), I have asked that my body be cremated, and that my ashes be scattered in the wind over Eastern Arkansas. Then, if any one of the plantation owners or their descendants who know of me still survive, may they some day look up to the sky, and if something gets in their eyes, they can then say: ‘There is that damned Mitchell again.’”<sup>14</sup>

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14. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 380.

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