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Henry Chappell April 11, 2016

One People, One Protest Movement

The Shared Religious and Survivalist Roots of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939

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Abstract

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When a hungry Owen Whitfield dropped to his knees to cry out to God in the middle of the cotton fields he had spent his whole life working in, he asked for help. He worked fields that could produce huge amounts of valuable cotton crop, yet he could not afford to feed his family. When Whitfield, the preacher and sharecropper, stood up, he went back to his ramshackle home with a drive to claim for himself some of the great bounty the land at the tip of the Mississippi Delta could offer, a bounty he believed God had entitled him to. This dual drive to find enough food to survive and claim what God had intended to give the sharecroppers characterized Whitfield's actions far more than secondary literature on his Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 would suggest as it had quickly been branded a movement with a socialist ideological bent. This paper will show that this religious and survivalist sentiment, and not the socialist politics secondary literature plays on heavily, may have been the driving force behind the rank and file of both the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 in the Missouri Bootheel and the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in nearby Tyronza Arkansas in 1934. Though most secondary sources focused their characterization of both the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 and the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union by highlighting a few leaders who did have significant socialist ideological influence in their thinking and motivation, this paper will attempt to show that this was in fact not the most common reason why sharecroppers in northeast Arkansas and the Missouri Bootheel would form interracial bonds in an attempt to make a better life for themselves. Instead, it was far more likely that religion and a drive to not live in constant fear of starvation that drove them, with the socialist leaders of the Union and politically driven help in the 1939 Strike being more a means of reaching that goal than an ideology to fully believe in.

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Introduction

Hard Living on Soft Earth

> If you go through Arkansas, you better drive fast,
> How the labor is being treated, you better not ask.
> I warn you to give enough money to give bail,
> For if planter law find you in sympathy with labor, they put you in jail.
> It make no difference, white or black,
> If you all in the ring, you all look alak.
> -John Handcox[1]

On Tuesday, January 10th of 1939 a headline appeared across the front page of the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*. "Sharecroppers Evicted, Camp Along Highways" it read in all capital letters.[2] The article went on to describe a chilling scene. Hundreds of families of sharecroppers and tenant farmers in southeastern Missouri had camped along the highways. Most of them had been evicted from the land they worked and now had nowhere else to go. They were neither violent nor blatantly political. They were there, living on the side of the highway for over a week in freezing weather and rain to show the world how terrible their situation was, how desperately they needed change.

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[1] H. L. Mitchell, *Roll the Union On, A Pictorial History of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company., 1987), 88. This stanza is from Handcox's song *Strike in Arkansas,* written for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. H. L. Mitchell and others have referred to Handcox as the Union's "troubador". He wrote many songs about the hard life of sharecroppers and the Union, all of which drew heavily from the rhythm and feel of Black spirituals of the time.

[2] "Sharecroppers Evicted, Camp Along Highways," *St Louis Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), Jan. 10, 1939.

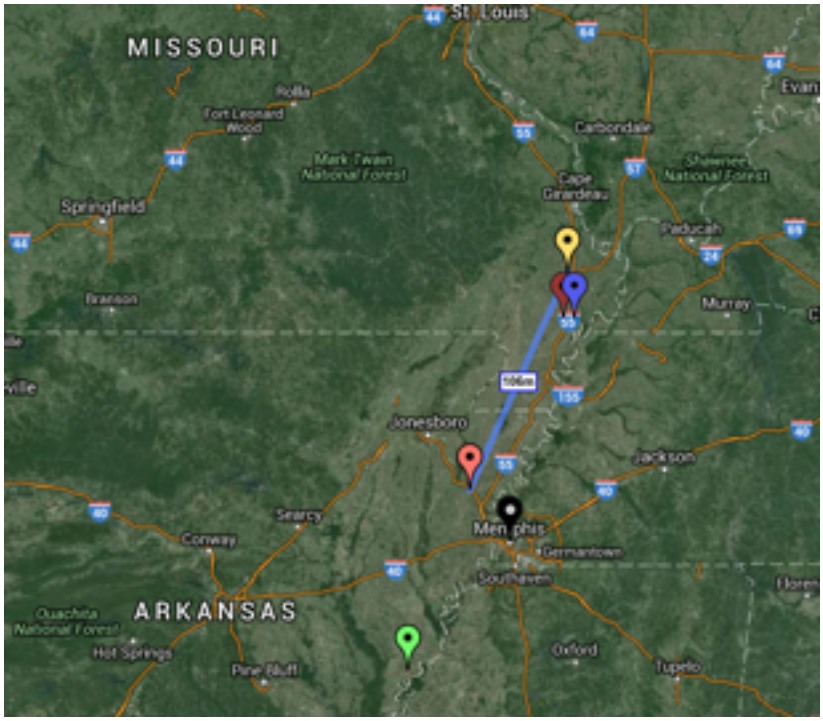

Figure 1: A map of Northeast Arkansas and the Southeast Missouri Bootheel. The pins in the map represent the following areas of interest (bottom to top): Green - Elaine, AK, site of the Elaine Massacre; Black - Memphis, TN, headquarters of the STFU; Red - Tyronza, AK, site of the founding of the STFU; Blue - New Madrid County, MO, Missouri county home to Owen Whitfield and Thad Snow; Maroon - Lilbourn, MO, site of Delmo Housing Corporation headquarters; Yellow - Sikeston, MO, closest town to parts of routes 60 & 61 where the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike took place.[3]

Though this scene was so new to the area that many landowners did not believe what they were reading when they saw the headline in the paper, the sentiment and desperation among the sharecroppers was not. A mere five years earlier in Tyronza, Arkansas, eighteen men gathered in a small schoolhouse to form the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to fight for the same cause, a chance to feed their families and to have some control over the crops they grew and lives they led. Their first leader, H. L. Mitchell, came in to northeastern Arkansas, just a few miles south of where the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 took place, just a few years earlier than the protest and was now looking to start a socialist organization to create a better society for the

[3] Map created by author using Google Maps and zeemaps.com. The blue line labeled 106m is between Tyronza, AK (site of the founding of the STFU), and Sikeston, MO (site of the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939).

sharecroppers. Though the seventeen other sharecroppers in the room agreed to form a union with him, it seems more likely what they saw in Mitchell and his socialism was a new hope. Political ideology took a back seat to survival and religiously driven ideas, to staking a claim to the rich bounty that came out of the land they were on and that God had offered them. If the Lord would help those who helped themselves, they thought, then these sharecroppers would use Mitchell's union to get themselves a little closer to salvation.

To be a tenant farmer in the South during the Great Depression was to lead a hard life. A tenant farmer did not own their own land and had little control over their own existence. H. L. Mitchell lived most of his life as a tenant farmer in Tennessee and Arkansas. He provided a vivid description of the life of a tenant farmer in his book, *Roll the Union On*, where he describes fields that produce two bales of cotton to the acre, where, "the landlord got one bale, and the boll weevil the other."[4] A home was provided for the tenant farmer and his family, but more often than not these homes did not provide any semblance of quality shelter.[5] When the Great Depression hit, the already poor and disenfranchised tenant farmers were hit hard. In 1933, in an attempt to drive up the prices of agricultural products, the federal government offered to pay landowners for, "plowing under [essentially killing before harvest] a third of his crop the first year, and for reducing his average by forty per cent the second year".[6] Ideally, the check sent to the landowner would be broken up and disbursed in smaller increments to the workers who actually did the farming, but this rarely happened. The average yearly earning of a southern

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[4] *Roll the Union On,* 17.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.,* 23.

tenant farmer in 1935 was $225,[7] though little of that money actually went into the pocket of the farmer. Most of the money a tenant farmer made on his goods went to paying for the use of the land and what was known as "the furnish" or the goods and seeds the landowners provided the tenant farmer to produce the crop, along with an interest fee of ten per cent.[8] When land usage was cut the tenant farmer had less work to do while getting none of the subsidy check intended to support him. This was the case in many areas in the south, particularly those dominated by single crop farming, usually cotton.[9] This was true especially in the upper regions of the Mississippi Delta, where the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union had its beginnings.

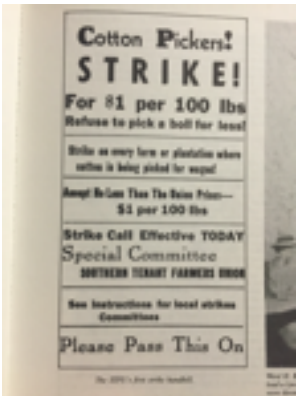

Figure 2: A flyer used to alert sharecroppers in Northeast Arkansas to the STFU's first strike in 1935[10]

Out of these terrible conditions, life became intolerable for the sharecroppers of the region. Mitchell's rally cry to fight back was heard and the STFU launched its first strike in 1935 to partial success. The Union distributed flyers throughout northeastern Arkansas asking sharecroppers and tenant farmers to stop picking cotton until they were offered one dollar per

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[7] Commission on Interracial Cooperation, *The South's Landless Farmers* (Atlanta: Commission on Interracial Cooperation., 1937), 7. In 2016 this would be about $3,891.

[8] *Ibid.,* 8.

[9] United States Chamber of Commerce, *Farm Tenancy In the United States* (Washington: Chamber of Commerce of the United States., 1937), 12-3.

[10] *Roll The Union On, 27.*

bag of cotton, meaning that at an average rate of two bags per day a sharecropper might earn two dollars to go toward paying off their loans and feeding their families. Croppers throughout the area stayed out of the fields at the height of the picking season to force the landowners to comply, and eventually went back to work after they were offered seventy-five cents per bag.[11] Though the protest's goal of higher wages for sharecroppers was only somewhat met, it garnered the interest of unorganized farm labor across the Mississippi Delta region, and membership in the STFU ballooned to approximately 25,000 members by 1936.[12]

In the coming years, however, the promise of a better life and a chance at real agency seemed to fade for some of the Union members, particularly those in the Missouri Bootheel. As indicated in the earlier map, the Bootheel was the area of Southeast Missouri that sits just north of Tyronza and the rest of northeastern Arkansas. Though the STFU's origins in Tyronza were geographically close to the Bootheel and both areas were similarly populated with sharecroppers who worked cotton fields, the conditions in the Bootheel were in some ways even worse. While in the Cotton Belt in general seventy percent of all cotton farmers were sharecroppers or tenants, in the Bootheel the rate was ninety percent.[13] This extra twenty percent contributed to an even greater sense of disenfranchisement and lack of agency amongst the residents of the Bootheel. Owen Whitfield was a Black tenant farmer and preacher in the Missouri Bootheel who worked tirelessly to help his family have a better life to no discernible improvement. He joined the STFU as it was first establishing itself in the Bootheel in 1937 in order to, "obtain what he considered

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[11] *Ibid., 33.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Louis Cantor, *A Prologue To The Protest Movement,* (Durham: Duke University Press., 1969), 13

to be his fair share of the Lord's bounty."[14] He had previously been a prominent member of the Union, traveling with them as far as San Francisco to advocate on the behalf of sharecroppers. He left the Union in 1938 for reasons that he never directly specified, though it can be surmised that he felt the Union was no longer the best way for him to claim the Lord's bounty. Whitfield was a preacher at several black parishes throughout the Bootheel, and thus had broad influence with a large number of poor tenant farmers in the area. He preached what he called "applied religion", a focus on using the teachings of Christianity to be good to one's fellow man and better the lives of people on earth. If the Southern Tenant Farmers Union could no longer support Whitfield's vision of being a self sufficient farmer who could provide for his family, he would find another way to do it.

Both in press coverage at the time of the 1939 strike and in subsequent literature, the motives of the protest were cited as being a mix of leftist ideology and survival. In press coverage, those who were more sympathetic to the sharecroppers tended to speak more of their need for survival and a fair share of their crop, while those who were more critical found ways to paint it as a leftist evil. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union, however, was more associated in subsequent historical accounts as being a much more ideological and socialist organization than

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[14] *Ibid.*, 31.

it may have been.[15] Because its co-founder H. L. Mitchell was literally a card carrying socialist and it briefly joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a labor group that at the time was known to have communist leanings, the organization may have been thought of incorrectly. It seems that the rank and file of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union saw it as a port in a storm, a way out of a truly desperate situation they had been trying to escape for decades with little to no success. If it was a socialist group, so be it. For the average sharecropper, the motives behind the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in 1934 and the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike in 1934 could have been one in the same, freedom from starvation and freedom to keep some of what the land they worked gave them.

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[15] As will be discussed later, several historians have portrayed the STFU as a categorically socialist institution, with little room for much else. Mark Naison in his essay, *The Southern Tenant Farmers and the CIO*, refers to the Union as "a movement that had developed a socialist consciousness." (102) David Conrad talks at length about the Union's reputation as too "red" (104) and their attempts to work against it while Mitchell retained links to socialism without much mention of motives of other Union members. He also cites criticisms of the Union from Agricultural Adjustment Administration officials that the Union was "un-American" and "a pawn of the Socialist Party," with little in the way of arguments to go against it. Howard Kester, a Union member who wrote about the early days of the Union in his memoir *Revolt Among The Sharecroppers,* admitted that there were leftists in the Union but insisted that the Union as a whole was thought of as far more red than it actually was, and should have been understood as a union with some leftists rather than a leftist union. Though some sources acknowledge this issue of perception, like Conrad and Cantor, they fail to offer an alternative explanation with any depth.

Chapter 1

An Agrarian Freedom Struggle
The Founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union

If the planter's in the way,
We're gonna roll it over him. […]
If the boss is in the way,
We're gonna roll it over him. […]
If the governor's in the way,
We're gonna roll it over him,
We're gonna roll the Union on.[16]
-John Handcox

The land of Northeastern Arkansas and the Missouri Bootheel was hit just as hard as the rest of the Cotton Belt by the Great Depression, but the bad situation the sharecroppers there found themselves in was compounded by their location at the tip of the Delta. Their location was in many ways unique to the rest of the Cotton Belt. As Thad Snow, a local landowner sympathetic to the plight of the sharecroppers, often noted in his letters to the *St Louis Post* and various federal officials, the land of the area was defined by its status as a border between two regions, the South and the Midwest. In one such letter, written to an attorney working for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the federal overseers of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, in 1934 points out that "cotton became a major crop in 1924."[17] He also remarks that to the best of his knowledge, the area was, "the most northern of all counties producing cotton as a

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[16] *Roll the Union On,* 90. This is a sampling of the verses of *Roll the Union On,* written by Handcox for use by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. The song is about how no matter what happens, what adversity the Union faces, they will continue to push for what they believe in, they'll roll the Union on.

[17] Thad Snow to Victor Anderson, 20 October 1934, Box 1, Folder 1, Thad Snow (1881-1955) Papers, 1921-1954, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri - St. Louis.

major crop," making it apparent to him that, "our location is neither in the North nor the South."[18]

This status of being new cotton land on the border of two major agricultural zones made life uniquely difficult for the residents. As Snow writes in his letters, that area was determined to be geographically not Southern, meaning that the Agricultural Adjustment Act subsidies would be much lower than subsidies that went to the rest of the very labor intensive cotton farming areas. This area at the tip of the Mississippi Delta was zoned to be Midwestern, which was predominately farmed for corn and wheat, crops whose production was highly mechanized at the time and thus determined to be deserving of smaller amounts of subsidy per acre of crop. More mechanization meant fewer people working the land and fewer people to pay, the federal government reasoned.[19] Smaller parity checks combined with the typical behavior of greedy farmers who would not give the proper share of the checks to the people who actually worked the land. As Snow remarks, "the fact of our location may account in some part for the great errors that have been made" in the misappropriation of AAA funds.[20]

The Agricultural Adjustment Act, passed in 1933, begins with a Statement of Emergency, citing the incredibly low prices of crops relative to supply and the desperate condition of farmers

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[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*

who found themselves unable to buy the supplies they needed to continue farming or survive.[21] The Act then immediately turns to how to handle cotton surpluses, mandating a reduction in the national cotton crop of at least thirty percent. In order for the federal government to incentivize farmers to actually participate they were to be guaranteed that everything they farmed would be sold at the market price, and everything they did not farm in order to comply with the law would be estimated and what they would have made in profit would be given to them in the form of a check from the federal Department of Agriculture.[22] These checks were supposed to go to the "producer" of the product, which in this first iteration of the AAA was interpreted to be the landowner. Landowners were under no legal obligation at this point to give any portion of their subsidy check to the men and women who actually worked the land. There were a few landowners, like the Missouri Bootheel's Thad Snow, who felt a moral obligation to help their tenant farmers, but these were very few and far between.

Smaller acreages being used for cotton farming combined with landowners who were under no obligation to pay their sharecroppers from the federal checks meant that sharecroppers were all too often left with little to nothing to do. In a survey conducted by the Farm Security Administration in 1937 federal officials reported that single-crop farming was very prevalent. This was mostly due to the fact that sharecroppers had little agency in their own lives.[23] They

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[21] *An Act to Relieve the Existing National Economic Emergency by Increasing Agricultural Purchasing Power, to Raise Revenue for Extraordinary Expenses Incurred by Reason of Such Emergency, to Provide Emergency Relief With Respect to Agricultural Indebtedness, to Provide for the Orderly Liquidation of Joint-Stock Land Banks, and for Other Purposes*, Public Law 73-10, (1933): 1. This is the long form name of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, as presented in the bill itself. Thankfully, this is not the commonly used name and is rarely used outside of the document itself.

[22] *Ibid,* 2.

[23] *Farm Tenancy,* 30, 37-42.

worked on land owned by someone else, with tools owned by someone else, under directives and quotas set by someone else. At the end of a given season they were given a share of the crop revenue to do with what they wanted, but usually most of this went to the paying off of loans taken out at the start of the season from the landowner to pay for the seed and tools. Sharecropping was a vicious cycle of loans from and repayment to the landowner. The landowner benefitted, but the sharecropper was destined to live their entire life in the cotton fields.

Sharecropping was incredibly prevalent in Northeastern Arkansas, even more than in other parts of the Cotton Belt. When much of the rest of the south was rich in agriculture through much of the nineteenth century, the areas of northeastern Arkansas and the Missouri Bootheel were swampy and generally unsuitable for crops. The swampland there was, "thinly populated and rich only in virgin timber."[24] Beginning in the1890s rapid clearcutting of timber along with the building of levees to drain the area of excess water opened up the land for agricultural use. By 1905 over half a million acres were cleared and drained in the area, and by 1930 all but 3 percent of the area was able to be farmed.[25] Cotton quickly became the crop of choice in the area. It was highly profitable, the newly cleared land was rich in nutrients, and farmers were being driven out of other cotton rich areas by boll weevil, a beetle that had devastated cotton crops in other areas.[26] Many farmers seeking land to work came into the area, populations increased by as much as 75 per cent in the early twentieth century, but the high costs of clearing and draining the

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[24] Cantor, 5.

[25] *Ibid.,* 5-6.

[26] *Ibid.*

land meant that very few farmers actually owned the land they worked. Unlike most other areas of the country during the time of the Great Depression, land values and production of cotton increased dramatically. Cotton production in the Bootheel jumped from 186,767 acres in 1934 to 230,213 acres in 1939.[27] Wealthy individuals and large corporations bought up the land but did not work it themselves. Instead, poor farmers fleeing abject poverty in other areas came to the Bootheel seeking employment and found work on the land owned by these large landowners. These massive landowners would rent their land to "ginners", middle-men of sorts who operated cotton gins to process the crop being produced. The ginners would not generally work the land themselves, but would rather sub-rent the land to tenant farmers and act for all intents and purposes like a landowner would to the tenant farmer.

As Louis Cantor explains, "in the eyes of the tenant, the over-tenant [the ginner] was the rent collector, cotton buyer, cotton ginner, bookkeeper, and banker."[28] Ninety per cent of the population of the area was employed in tenant farming by 1930, meaning very few people in the region had any agency in what they farmed or how they lived.[29] Communities of tenant farmers were plagued with malnutrition, lack of educational opportunities, and abject poverty. Landowners were largely absent, and farms were controlled by ginners who were unable and unwilling to help these poor farmers.

Sharecroppers had tried to organize to fight for their rights before the Southern Tenant Farmers Union was established in 1934. In the small town of Elaine, Arkansas, in 1919 two

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[27] *Ibid,* 7.

[28] *Ibid,* 9.

[29] *Ibid,* 10.

Black men established the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, an all Black union of sharecroppers whose goals centered around better wages and a generally better standard of living for sharecroppers in the area. On September 30th, 1919 a group of approximately 100 Black sharecroppers and Union members met in a church. Three white men drove up in a car and fired on the church. Armed guards at the church returned fire, killing one of the men in the car. This sparked anger and fear in the white residents of the area, and between 500 and 1000 white men went into predominately Black neighborhoods and areas and proceeded to kill countless people, regardless of their involvement in the shooting the night before. By the time the dust settled on October 2, somewhere between 100 and 1000 Black people had been killed. The military had been called in to quell the violence, but the damage was done nonetheless.[30] This attempt at organization had failed almost instantly in a bloody and horrifying massacre. It sent a clear message to Black sharecroppers in Arkansas that the social order was there to stay.

The founders of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union did not have to worry about the threat of a racially based massacre in 1934 because unlike the 100 sharecroppers who met in the church in Elaine fifteen years prior, H.L. Mitchell and Clay East had the privilege of being white. Mitchell was a self educated, card carrying socialist who moved from Tennessee to Tyronza, Arkansas in 1927. His father had been a tenant farmer, but Mitchell owned a dry cleaner in town and was a respected businessman. He occasionally aroused the suspicion of "some of the 'upper class' women of the town" because he dry cleaned the clothes of African-Americans and whites

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[30] Stockley, Grif. "Elaine Massacre." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture.* Accessed 12/7/2015. http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1102. Reports vary on the number of people killed, but whatever the number it was a great tragedy.

in his store, but in general he was well liked and made a good living for himself at the store.[31] Clay East was also a successful businessman and owner of a gas station in town. He also was the local sheriff. He and Mitchell were good friends, and Mitchell claimed to have converted him to socialism.[32] In the summer of 1934, these two men and a few other members of the community got together in a schoolhouse to discuss the situation of the sharecroppers in the area.

When Mitchell and the eighteen other men from Tyronza met in a schoolhouse to discuss forming a union, the scene was tense. They were coming together to help themselves when no one else would help them, but they still had to agree to work as one. One of the crucial decisions they faced was whether or not to be an integrated organization. Though both Black and white men were present at this meeting, northeastern Arkansas did not have a reputation for interracial harmony, and the memory of Elaine was still fresh for many of the Black sharecroppers. A crucial push for integration in the union came from an unlikely source when Burt Williams, a former Klansman, stood up to give his thoughts.[33] He called for looking past racial boundaries to fight for a better life together, citing his black neighbor Rev. C. H. Smith being in the same situation and a good man, which for him was reason enough to work together in a union. As he said, “This man is my nearest neighbor. We live in the same kind of house, we work for the same plantation owner. Our wives sit on the back porches and talk, drink coffee together, and when we run out of something, we borrow from each other. No man ever had a better neighbor than we do

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[31] Roll The Union On, p.18.

[32] Mitchell references this in his autobiography, *Roll The Union On.* Though this is probably true to some extent, Mitchell has a penchant for self-aggrandizement and it seems more likely that East saw socialism more as a route to a better life for him and his neighbors than a philosophy he really believed in as Mitchell did.

[33] *Roll the Union On,* 23.

in C. H. Smith and family."[34] When he asked the black sharecroppers for their thoughts, however, they were silent. Eventually one black man, Isaac Shaw, stood up and agreed. He said, "I think we are doing the right thing. We have decided to have a legal organization, and that all sharecroppers, black and white alike, are to be members. I think this organization will stand for all time to come if we accept these principles."[35] Mitchell noted too that Shaw had been in Elain in 1919 when the Massacre occurred, and suggests that the memory of the tragedy associated with segregated organizing was on his mind when he spoke up. This was the day the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union was born. Out of a coming together of nineteen sharecroppers in a schoolhouse in northeastern Arkansas was born a union that would bridge racial boundaries to address the terrible situation they found themselves in. The small speech Burt Williams gave, the subsequent silence of the black sharecroppers in attendance, and the response of Isaac Shaw offers great insight into how the racial boundary between white and Black was bridged on that day. What H. L. Mitchell seems to feel in this passage is a triumph and overcoming of racial boundaries for a greater good may not be as triumphant as it seems. The racial positioning and politics at play in H. L. Mitchell's recount of this episode in the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union suggest a retention of the racial hierarchy between white and black while acknowledging a necessity to temporarily lay it aside rather than a radical shift in worldview amongst the sharecroppers.

The above account of the meeting is based on Mitchell's memory of the scene. His remembering of the event seems to be one of only two firsthand documentations of the founding

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[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*

meeting, the other coming from Howard Kester's memoir *Revolt Among The Sharecroppers.* Kester was a white pastor and activist involved in the Union from a very early point. Except for some minor details, he remembers the meeting in much the same way Mitchell does. He does, however, seem to recall a bit more of what Isaac Shaw might have said. Kester recalls Shaw, though he only refers to him as "a member of a black man's union at Elaine" saying, "aren't we all brothers and ain't God the Father of us all?"[36] According to Kester, Shaw then goes on to repeat most of what Burt Williams said about Black and white sharecroppers being in the same terrible situation and needing to look past differences to help each other out. These two accounts together suggest that the farmers had not adopted socialism as wholeheartedly as Mitchell had. Perhaps they saw this union as the means for a better life, and if a better life was not achieved they would continue to starve. Perhaps, like Shaw, they saw a way to avoid the mistakes of Elaine and a chance to embrace their Christian brotherhood for a greater cause. They were poor people in a rich land, looking for a way to claim some of that bounty by any means they could.

According to both Kester and Mitchell's account Isaac Shaw was the only Black man among those present in the room to stand up and respond to Williams. Shaw addressed the situation from a pragmatic standpoint. The reasons he states for his support of the integrated union are not those of sudden feelings of kinship with Williams and the other white sharecroppers in the room. He is in support of interracial cooperation to form the union because he thinks the organization will last longer if it is integrated. Here Shaw has experience and perspective on the dangers of organizing while segregated. He was previously a member of the

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[36] Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press., 1997), 56.

Progressive Farmers and Household Union before it was wiped out in the Elaine Massacre. Shaw knew the potential dangers of a segregated union. The white union may be successful in its struggle for a better life, but if Elaine was any indication an all Black union was destined to end in failure and tragedy. Partnering with unapologetic racists like Williams might not have been an ideal situation, but working with white sharecroppers offered some degree of protection against white suspicion and violence. This does not seem to be a joyous embracing of Williams or of Mitchell's socialism, but rather a pragmatic resignation to the fact that if this union was not to form in this way, Shaw would not be nearly as successful in his struggle for a better life and his life would be in much greater danger.

The motives of these eighteen men were varied. Their justifications for their actions ranged too. Mitchell cited a visit from socialist party leaders earlier in 1934 as the catalyst for his involvement in the union.[37] Burt Williams argued that he was being neighborly. Ike Shaw saw the Union as an opportunity for a better life. All of the men were afraid of starvation and the lack of an honest day's work, and perhaps more interested to work together for religious reasons than any explicitly political ideology.[38] With Mitchell, and East to some extent, as exceptions, these men did not think of themselves as socialists first. Though the Socialist Party of Missouri[39] and

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[37] Southern Tenant Farmers Museum Interview Series, Sam Mitchell. *Founding the Southern Tenant Farmers Union,* Film, Southern Tenant Farmers Museum, 1984.

[38] Kester, 56.

[39] A Letter to the Proletarian Party, by Edgar Anderson, 29 March 1934, Roll 5, Socialist Party Papers 1909-1964. The State Historical Society of Missouri.

some modern scholarship[40][41][42] would emphasize the socialist ideals of the STFU, with varying degrees of fear and praise, primary documentation of the early STFU would suggest otherwise. Thad Snow's countless letters on behalf of the Union and the croppers on his land did not mention socialism unless he was responding to an accusation of it. In a letter to then U.S. Senator Harry Truman in early 1935, Snow wrote about the desire of farmers to do their job. The changes that the Great Depression and the New Deal brought had prohibited farmers from working and was now putting them on the brink of starvation.[43] In a later letter to an official in the Farm Security Administration, Snow implores the FSA to find employees who want to help the sharecroppers. He asks them not only to find people who will offer relief, but who will, "show poor whites and poor blacks how to make a living on land that I wouldn't take as a gift because I haven't learned in 40 years of farming experience how to grow crops on it."[44] Snow was a successful landowner, and his stipulation here that he does not know how to grow crops on his own land is untrue. He is using hyperbole and sarcasm here to say that he, along with everyone else in the area, is very good at growing cotton, but the farming culture is so centered on this

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[40] Cantor, 18.

[41] David Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1965), 93-4.

[42] Kester, 17. Though Kester's *Revolt Among The Sharecroppers* was published in 1936, it was reprinted (this is the version cited in this paper) in 1997 with an added introduction by Alex Lichtenstein. Here Lichtenstein talks at length about how Kester and other higher ups in the Union were socialists and used their ideals to shape the Union, but talks very little about the rank and file members other than to say that they connected well with the social gospel style message the Union leaders like Kester preached. This may suggest that the religious elements were the main draw of rank and file members to the Union, and that the socialist ideals were not the all important factor as this top-down writing style would seem to suggest.

[43] Thad Snow to Harry S Truman, 20 May 1935, Box 1, Folder 1, Thad Snow (1881-1955) Papers, 1921-1954, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri - St. Louis.

[44] Thad Snow to C. B. Baldwin, 1941, Box 1, Folder 3, Thad Snow (1881-1955) Papers, 1921-1954, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri - St. Louis.

inedible cash crop that sharecroppers are starving because they cannot grow any food for themselves on the fertile land. The rest of the tone of that letter shows that his comment about not being able to grow crops is a bit of sarcasm, but this ending to his letter shows importantly that the poor sharecroppers of the area wanted to farm. They wanted to fulfill the longstanding American agrarian ideal of being a self supporting farmer, someone who could provide for their family. Socialist overhaul was not their goal as outside reporters and critics of their work would have suggested, rather the STFU was a means to becoming self supporting, to be able to use the fertile land they lived to the best of their ability, to be able to make something of themselves in an area where they had been systematically beaten down since the land was first drained for farming.

Chapter 2

1934-1939, A Time of Transition and Constancy

> Cotton is King, and will always be,
> Until labor in the South is set free.
> The money spent for decorations and flags,
> Would sure have helped poor sharecroppers who are hungry and in rags.
> -John Handcox[45]

The founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in Tyronza, Arkansas, was a momentous occasion for the sharecroppers of the region and touched off a much larger movement for rights. As will later be discussed, the Union grew dramatically and had some success in raising the wages of sharecroppers. Yet, by the time of the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike the sharecroppers of the Missouri Bootheel, just thirty minutes north of Tyronza, felt alienated from the union and organized on their own to fight for their right to lead decent lives. The eighteen men at the meeting that founded the STFU spoke of a union that would be there to mobilize for the little man. The Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 was organized by a sharecropper named Owen Whitfield, a man who left the Union because he felt it did not pay enough attention to lowly sharecroppers like himself. Though the distance between the founding of the Union and the Missouri strike was only five years and fifty miles, for people like Whitfield there was a huge chasm separating the two.

The five years following the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union saw a boom in the Union's membership and a changing of the character of the organization. As sharecropper and pastor Howard Kester wrote in 1936, "They [the black and white sharecroppers] were slaves. Nearly everybody who worked for King Cotton was a slave. Now the slaves had a union - a real

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[45] *Roll the Union On,* 87. This is one stanza of the song *King Cotton,* by John L. Handcox.

union composed of white and black slaves of King Cotton. That was something new, something worth struggling for, yes, something worth dying for."[46] Kester saw the Union at its founding as the coming together of Black and white sharecroppers who had been enslaved to the land and those who owned it. He saw the two races as old enemies who had finally realized they were in the same terrible situation, and that the only way out was mutual support. This was largely true of the Union in its early years.

Between its founding in 1934 and the time of the 1939 Strike the membership of the union exploded, going from the eighteen initial members to over thirty-five thousand in 1939. The membership spanned over several states in the western and deep South, almost all of the western part of the Cotton Belt.[47] As the membership boomed the Union established a headquarters in Memphis, hired lawyers to defend them in court, and began organizing strikes and lobbying the Department of Agriculture in 1935.[48] One of the Union's first strikes was in 1936. During the cotton picking season, the most crucial and labor intensive time for cotton farming, the Union, which was at this point still almost entirely in northeast Arkansas, called for an increase in pay per cotton bale from $0.60 to $1.[4950] The Union instructed its members to not return to work unless the planters agreed to raise the pay to at least $0.75 per day. The

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[46] Kester, 15.

[47] Cantor, 23.

[48] *Roll the Union On,* 29.

[49] *Ibid.,* 33.

[50] Given the rate of inflation, what was an increase in earnings per cotton bale from $0.60 to $1 in 1936 would be an increase from $10.24 to $17.04 today. According to Mitchell, the average sharecropper could pick about two bales a day, meaning the Union wanted to ensure the daily pay was around $2, or around $34.08 in today's money.

sharecroppers won out eventually, and after that initial strike the Union membership jumped by over twenty-five thousand people.[51]

As membership grew the Union leadership made the fateful decision to try to join the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the CIO. There are varying accounts of the Union's brief encounter with the CIO, but all begin in 1937. According to H.L. Mitchell, the CIO approached the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and offered to let the Union join. If the Union joined the CIO it would have greater bargaining power and access to more resources through being affiliated with a much larger, national body.[52] Mitchell says that the CIO leadership demanded that he become a registered member of the Communist Party. If he did, the STFU could join the CIO and Mitchell would be installed as secretary-treasurer of the CIO affiliate they were to join, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America, the UCAPAWA.[53][54]Mitchell refused to join the Communist Party, but the Union was admitted the UCAPAWA and CIO anyway. Though in his autobiography Mitchell considers this a winning day, that he could remain a socialist party member and have his union join the CIO, it seems to have started the two organizations off on the wrong foot. The CIO made promises that the Union would be able to remain intact and function as it would have anyway, but now would be helped by the added support and national reach of the CIO. In reality, however, the CIO was

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[51] *Ibid.*

[52] *Ibid.,* 46-7.

[53] H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening In This Land* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1979), 166.

[54] The very long acronym UCAPAWA stands for United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America. The organization was a subsidiary of the CIO focused on industries related to all things food related. Though this seemed to the CIO to be the best fit for the STFU, it was still the only rural, agricultural, integrated union in the UCAPAWA.

incompatible with the STFU and the two organizations broke ties a year later in 1938. Mitchell recounts that the CIO's idea of helping the Union was to send all the locals boxes of written materials, ledgers, and other things to organize themselves in the ways the urban industrial unions that made up the rest of the CIO did. This was an issue for the STFU in large part because of the local Union secretaries who received the materials, "most of whom could just barely read and write."[55] According to historian Mark Naison, longtime professor at the University of Indiana, the CIO was also suspicious of the interracial makeup of the Union. Communist Party leaders within the CIO also feared the agrarian bent of the STFU. They believed that true labor reform would come from industrial proletariat, and that any deviation from that message, essentially the entire existence of the STFU within the CIO, was a dangerous threat.[56]

The Union's brief alignment and subsequent troubles with the CIO was not the only thing that changed the state of sharecropper labor organizing in this period. The Agricultural Adjustment Act and how it affected sharecroppers also changed significantly. As we have seen, the AAA was passed in May of 1933 with provisions to go in to effect the following season. For cotton production, that meant the season beginning in 1934 as by May of 1933 the year's crop had already been planted.[57] The Act offered subsidies to farmers in an attempt to incentivize them to not plant up to a third of their normal crop but in reality, especially with cotton farming, the subsidy checks were not passed on to the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who actually

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[55] *Ibid.,* 168.

[56] Mark Naison, "The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the CIO" in *American Labor Radicalism,* ed. David Hall and Daniel Howe (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), 84.

[57] Wayne D. Rasmussen, Gladys L. Baker, and James S. Ward, *A Short History of Agricultural Adjustment, 1933-75* (Washington: Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture., 1976), 2.

worked the land and stayed with the landowner. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union formed in this environment, protesting the way the 1933 AAA was inadequate in helping sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The federal law surrounding farm subsidies, however, quickly changed.

The AAA was challenged in 1935 in front of the Supreme Court. In *United States v. Butler*, the Hoosac Mills Corporation, a cotton processing plant, successfully argued that the federal government was in violation of the Tenth Amendment for trying to regulate agriculture by taxing the cotton mills to pay subsidies to the farmers. The court found that though the federal government did have the power to tax in this case, it did not have the authority to regulate agriculture.[58] The majority opinion in the case referred to the AAA's use of taxation to regulate agriculture as a "means to an unconstitutional end."[59]

The ruling that the AAA was unconstitutional allowed cotton production to spike again. After the 1937 season there was as big a surplus as there had been after the 1932 season, the year that prompted discussion of the AAA in Congress, and President Roosevelt and Congress looked for new ways to take action. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 was the response.[60] The new AAA worked around United States v. Butler by using funds the federal government received via loans, not taxes, to provide parity checks to farmers. This ensured that the federal government was not using taxpayer dollars to directly pay farmers and influence agriculture, and was thus within the bounds of the Constitution.

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[58] Chicago-Kent College of Law at Illinois Tech. "United States v. Butler." Oyez. https://www.oyez.org/cases/1900-1940/297us1.

[59] *United States v. Butler*, 297 U.S. 1 (1936).

[60] Rasmussen, 6.

Two key measures in the new AAA were directly pointed at the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who felt further beaten down by the act that was supposed to lift them up, but on both counts the new bill failed to do any good. First, in order to move even further away from allegations of federal overreach, the new AAA called for the Department of Agriculture to create local committees to oversee the implementation of the Act. These committees were to be made up of local farmers who were elected from among the general population of farmers within a given county. Ideally, this would ensure that a local voice was always present to ensure the AAA was administered fairly and effectively.[61] In practice, the elected committee members in cotton growing areas were of the planter class, not sharecroppers or tenant farmers.[62] Second, the Act called for the protection of sharecroppers and tenant farmers directly, providing that the Secretary of Agriculture, and therefore in practice the local committees "as far as practicable, protect the interests of tenants and sharecroppers."[63] It also stipulated that, "payments made by the Secretary to farmers […] shall be divide among the landlords, tenants, and sharecroppers of any farm, with respect to which payments are made, in the same proportion that such landlords, tenants, and sharecroppers are entitled to share in the proceeds of the agricultural commodity."[64] Though this meant that the committees were legally bound to help the tenant farmer and sharecropper and ensure they received their benefits, it also produced incentives for landowners to mechanize or switch to categorizing their sharecroppers as day laborers, a position that was

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[61] *Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938*, Public Law 430, (1938): 32.

[62] Cantor, 21.

[63] *AAA 1938,* 32.

[64] *Ibid.,* 34.

not accounted for in the new AAA. Even though these provisions were inserted to directly address the problem of the sharecropper, too much local control in the hands of landowners prevented it from being truly effective.

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union was still an effective route for change in 1939, but it was not what it once was. Between its brief dealing with the CIO, the moving of its offices and larger meetings out of Black churches and local farms to Memphis, and the reworking of the Agricultural Adjustment Act to give more power to the local landowners in a way that the Union was new to dealing with, it is possible the Union no longer carried the same hope it once did for the average sharecropper or tenant farmer. If all the men at the Union founding meeting in the schoolhouse in Tyronza were searching for was a better, more stable life, perhaps now faith in the Union was less and less able to help. Certainly in the Bootheel, an area newer to the STFU, this sentiment would have been even stronger. If the sharecroppers and tenant farmers of the Missouri Bootheel were looking for a new route to economic and social security, perhaps they found one along highway 61 with Owen Whitfield, a sharecropper, pastor, and former member of the Union.

Chapter 3

The Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 - Hope for a Better Life

Landless, landless are we,
Just as landless as landless can be.
We don't get nothin for our labor,
So landless, landless are we.
-John Handcox[65]

The legislative and economic landscape that the Southern Tenant Farmers Union was founded to fight against had quickly changed. Though the impoverished, starving, disenfranchised sharecroppers and tenant farmers still existed, the STFU had in some ways lost its voice of hope for the people of the Missouri Bootheel. Though it was a distance of only a few miles and their plight was the same, there was now a great chasm between the two areas. Times had changed. Many sharecroppers in the Bootheel were being kicked off their land. When sharecropper, pastor, and former Union member Owen Whitfield began to organize the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939, he sent a letter to the Union to explain their terrible situation and ask for help. According to H. L. Mitchell's autobiography, Mitchell at the time was an active and influential member of the Union, the letter was marked "file" by the Union president and nothing was done. Mitchell's explanation of this omission in his autobiography does seem to suggest that he is distancing himself from this oversight, but nonetheless he was in New York City at the time and learned of the protest through headlines in the *New York Times.*[66] Being hundreds of miles

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[65] *Roll the Union On,* 90. This is an excerpt from Handcox's song *Hungry, Hungry are We,* which described the desperation of sharecroppers in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. The verses all followed the same format, and highlighted landlessness, hunger, raggedness, and homelessness as the worst issues facing these men, women, and children.

[66] *Mean Things Happening In This Land,* 171.

away and learning about the strike that took months to plan through a newspaper does not suggest that either Mitchell or the Union had been paying much attention to the sharecroppers in the Bootheel. Though members of local Union chapters helped to organize the strike, the Union as a larger entity did not begin to get involved in the protest until it had already started.[67] The president of the Union, a man named J. R. Butler, was in the Union's main office in Memphis and did not know about the strike even though it involved many Union members, was only two hours away, and saw over one thousand seven hundred sharecroppers participate, until Mitchell called Butler to let him know what was being published in the Times that day.[68] Clearly the Union leadership was very out of touch with this large protest getting national media attention just a few miles away from their headquarters. These seventeen hundred families had started to look elsewhere for hope that their lives could be better, and found that hope renewed in Owen Whitfield.

Owen Whitfield was a Black sharecropper, pastor, and labor organizer from the Missouri Bootheel. In the documentary *O Freedom After While* his daughters, who were at this point older women, remembered him as a man who always fought for what he believed in. They recounted the moment when he first decided to become an activist. He had worked all year[69] as a sharecropper and when the time came to collect his pay at the end of the season, the landowner he worked for offered him an old suit. There was a parity check from the government in

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[67] *Mean Things,* 172.

[68] *Ibid.,* 174.

[69] The documentary *O Freedom After While* does not give a year for when this event occurred, but given the fact that this was an event that his daughter recalled being the catalyst for him becoming an activist, it certainly happened before 1937. Towel mentions in his *Delmo Saga,* discussed later in this paper, that Whitfield became a preacher in 1929, which could give a beginning date to when this scene might have unfolded.

Whitfield's name, but the landowner asked Whitfield to sign it and give it over to him, saying times were tough and that this was what needed to be done. In exchange for a year's worth of work and the entire federal check, all Whitfield was offered was a used suit. Whitfield broke down in tears when he got home that day, and he and his wife decided that now, after years of disenfranchisement and strife, this was the final straw.[70] As he said during the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike, he and the other protesters were working to, "free themselves and their wives and children from wage slavery and get some of the things that god prepared for us from the foundation of the world, and that is Land for the Landless, Food for the Hungry, Freedom for the Wage Slave."[71]

Whitfield had previously been a member of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. He was present with H. L. Mitchell when the Union left the CIO in 1938, and saw how caught up in politics and positioning the Union leadership could be.[72] What Whitfield wanted was not posturing. It does not seem that he even wanted radical change to the system that kept him oppressed. He wanted to be able to work freely and to have food and land to provide for his family, as he thought God had intended for him. As another protestor in the 1939 strike said in a report to a government official, they wanted, "any kind of farm job where I can make an honest support for my family."[73] In an interview, Whitfield's daughter Zella recalled that her father joined the Union in 1937 after he had a conversation with God. One of Whitfield's children ran

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[70] *O Freedom After While*, directed by John Patrick Shanley (1990; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2002), DVD.

[71] Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion, Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press., 2010), 1.

[72] *Mean Things,* 170.

[73] Roll, 2.

out of the house to meet their father after a long day of working and told him that they were completely out of food. He dropped to his knees and cried out to God wondering why he worked so hard and yet was constantly in fear of hunger. “I give you enough to fill your barns, as I promised,” Whitfield called out to his Lord, “But you let someone take it away.”[74] According to his daughter this was when he decided that God had indeed provided him with quite a bit, but he needed to be the one to claim the Lord’s bounty for himself.[75] Whitfield called this “applied religion”, the idea that as a Christian he had to claim things for himself, not simply rely on God to sort everything out. He needed to be the one to look out for himself and his fellow man, guided by Christian teachings but in a far more active way than he previously had.

After Whitfield went with the Union to San Francisco in 1938 to see it leave the CIO, he quickly became more and more disillusioned with the group. A strike organized by the STFU in mid 1938 was vehemently opposed by Whitfield, who argued that a traditional Union strike where croppers refused to work would be ineffective in the Bootheel. The strike happened anyway, but Whitfield was proven correct when the landowners in the Bootheel brought strikebreaking workers in from just across the Mississippi River in southern Illinois.[76] Louis Cantor argues that Whitfield became convinced that the STFU had lost touch with what the farm laborers in the Bootheel needed. They organized traditional strikes that occasionally made small gains, but Whitfield wanted a bigger push for a different kind of change. He wanted to use his applied religion to encourage the sharecropper to, “take your eyes out of the sky because

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[74] Cantor, 31.

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] *Ibid.,* 35

someone is stealing your bread."[77] "I'm not preachin' 'bout heaven, no sir! I'm preachin' about brotherhood of man."[78] His applied religion was not something the leadership of the Union fully embraced. His ability to tap in to the religious sentiments of the sharecropper seemed to be uniquely his own. Whitfield did not want a small strike that produced marginal increases in cotton payments as the Union leadership would suggest, he wanted his people to let God help them by helping themselves.

One of Whitfield's earlier endeavors to better his lot after his leaving the Union was to found his own group, the Missouri Agricultural Workers Council in 1938. The group published a document, distributed to other sharecroppers in the Bootheel, outlining what they stood for. The beginning of the document calls for higher wages, the abolishment of farm tenancy and sharecropping, and individual land ownership for all people.[79] These were fairly radical notions for the time. Immediately after that section, however, the manifesto states, "although we are for the abolishment of the tenancy system, we will accept a sharecrop,"[8081] and then proceeds to

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[77] *Ibid.,* 32

[78] *Ibid.*

[79] Owen Whitfield - The Roadside Demonstration - Its Aftermath - Cropperville - Lynching, Series 3, Box 1, Folder Owen Whitfield, Delmo Housing Corporation Files, Washington University Libraries Special Collections, Washington University in St. Louis.

[80] *Ibid.*

[81] For reference, being a sharecropper and being a tenant farmer were relatively similar things. Both worked land that was not their own and paid rent to their landowner at the end of each season, usually along with debts incurred from buying seed, fertilizer, and other materials from the landowner. The main distinction was that the tenant farmer owned their own tools and livestock, and thus had marginally more economic freedom than the sharecropper, who rented everything from the landowner. This marginal degree of economic freedom meant that a tenant farmer could usually sell a portion of their crop on their own and pay their landowner rent in cash, which a sharecropper paid their rent and other fees in the form of a share of the crop they harvested each year. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 had both sharecroppers and tenant farmers working together against their landowners.

outline a platform that focuses more on survival than anything else. Its main demands are the ability to raise livestock, to have a garden plot in which food for the sharecropper and family can be grown, and a wagon or truck to be borrowed from the landowner by the sharecropper for crop transportation purposes.[82] This secondary list of demands, which seem to be the main focus of Whitfield despite his aforementioned lofty ideals, seem to be what he was most actively pursuing. Whitfield and the Workers Council had decided to affiliate themselves with the CIO and UCAPAWA, and the discrepancies between the two sets of demands fall closely along the lines of the goal differences between the CIO and the STFU. It is possible that Whitfield had aligned himself with the CIO to take any help where he could get it, and this duality of desires was acceptable to him as a sort of formality in exchange for assistance. It is unclear exactly why Whitfield and his new organization worked with the CIO when he had just left the STFU because they were not in touch with the needs of the Missouri Bootheel sharecroppers, but perhaps without the tension, discussed earlier, between H. L. Mitchell individually and the CIO it was easier for Whitfield to navigate keeping his own interests alive while acknowledging theirs. As Whitfield said in an interview, he worked to secure the freedom of sharecroppers from the inequities within the plantation system.[83]

Whitfield planned the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike largely alone, though he did have some help from local landowner Thad Snow. Snow, a prominent planter in the Bootheel who was sympathetic to the plight of the sharecropper, allowed Whitfield to meet and plan on his land at a time when it was dangerous for Whitfield to plan and organize anywhere else. Snow's land and

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[82] *Ibid.*

[83] W. Wilder Towle, *Delmo Saga* (Lilbourn, Delmo Housing Corporation., 1983), 11.

local Black churches that Whitfield preached at were some of the few safe havens they had.[84] At the time the protest occurred few people other than the sharecroppers who would participate knew it was going to happen. Whitfield had gotten the word out through his network of Black churches and his Workers Council, Thad Snow knew because Whitfield had told him, and a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was alerted that a protest would be happening in the near future.

Figure 3: A photo of the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 by WPA photographer Arthur Rothstein[85]

In the middle of the night of January 9th, 1939, approximately fifteen hundred families, though reports vary, moved from the farms they had been evicted from to the highways in the Bootheel. They moved so quietly and were so effective in keeping their secret that when the story in the Post-Dispatch broke the next day describing the protest, many of the local

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[84] *Ibid.,* 11-2.

[85] Rothstein, Arthur. *Evicted Sharecroppers on Highway 60, New Madrid County, Missouri*. January, 1939. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Library of Congress, Washington

landowners did not believe it to be true.[86] The protesters were told to simply exist on the side of the highway. They were a showcase, displaying to whoever drove by and the rest of the world the horrible conditions in which they were forced to live. Whole families with children sat on the side of the road, what few possessions they had inside makeshift tents. Farm Security Administration photographer Arthur Rothstein documented the protest with dozens of photographs. His photos, including the one here, illustrate the abject poverty in which these sharecroppers lived. None of the photos have picket signs, none of them show violent confrontation. These men, women, and children are simply displaying their lives.[87] Had demands been displayed at the protest, had picket signs been made, it seems the protest may have drifted from its religious and survivalist roots. As Whitfield's Workers Council said in its founding document, they would accept a sharecrop under the condition that it allowed them the ability to farm for themselves, to ensure they had enough food, could raise livestock and other things to ensure they retained agency in a system that could so easily take it away from them. They did not seem to want a massive overhaul of the system, but they wanted to show the world that they had no place to go and deserved a piece of the land God had placed them in. Perhaps even this religious notion of entitlement to work and benefit from the land they were on, to have some agency in their lives to prosper, was more compatible with capitalism than a controlled socialist structure that might have kept them from the full agency they sought. Thus, it seems for Whitfield and the strikers of the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 a protest that simply showed their desperation and starvation to the world without explicit demands or ideologies was

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[86] *Towle,* 11-2.

[87] Rothstein, *Evicted Sharecroppers on Highway 60, New Madrid County, Missouri*.

the best route to pursue agency and freedom to be on the level playing field they thought God intended for them.

Though it was first picked up in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the news quickly spread to national papers. The *Post-Dispatch* published a front page story on Monday, January 10th, the first day of the protest, describing the scene. The story contained several quotes from protesters describing their situation and lamenting that they had no other place to go. All of the quotes talked about how all they wanted was a place to live and food to eat and that that had been denied to them.[88] *The New York Times* covered the story quickly after it began and kept up with it for the duration of the protest. A report in the Times written on January 10th and published the following day describes the situation in fairly objective terms. They report no violence or disorder, only that the scene was a "distressing picture".[89] The next day the Times ran another story recounting essentially the same information but adding that the weather was bitter cold and the days were rainy. The article also delved in to why the sharecroppers were there, the reporter saying the protesters told them they were objecting to being evicted and landowners switching to day laborers to avoid giving them a fair wage.[90]

The *Post-Dispatch* ran another front page story on January 11th, this time with a large picture depicting several sharecroppers in the protest and their possessions piled on the side of the road. The reporter overheard one of the protesters, a sharecropper and pastor named S. J.

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[88] "Sharecroppers Evicted, Camp Along Highways," *St Louis Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), Jan. 10, 1939.

[89] "Army of Sharecroppers Trek From Homes; Protest Missouri Landlords' Wage Plans," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan. 11, 1939.

[90] "Rain, Snow Defied By Sharecroppers," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan. 12, 1939.

Elliot, leading a prayer service for about three hundred of the protesters. He referenced heavily biblical imagery, comparing their attempt to move from oppression to freedom to Moses and the Israelites leaving Egypt as told in the Book of Exodus.[91] He did not reference any political or social ideology in his service, nor did he reference any kind of vast overhaul of the current social structure. All Elliot spoke of was the need to persevere and believe in God, just as the Israelites had to persevere to make themselves a better life by leaving Egypt for the promised land.

On January 17th, 1939, the protest finally ended. It was not of the accord of the protesters themselves, but the effort was broken up by local police. As a *New York Times* report published on the 17th says, the last of the protesters were escorted off of the side of the highway on that day after local law enforcement acted on the complaints of local white residents. The state health department had determined that the place where they were camping was unfit to be lived on, so they all had to move their things and leave. Some went back to where they had come from, others were taken to more remote areas and dumped there with no food for days.[92] It seemed the health department did not care about the health of the protesters, but instead only wanted them further away from the public eye.

Media coverage continued for a while after the protest even though the protesters had left the highways. The removal of the protesters certainly did help to kill coverage of the protest coming from Missouri, but coverage related to the protest from federal agencies based in Washington continued sporadically. One particularly interesting, albeit rather short, article published in *The New York Times* on March 13th, 1939 said that the Federal Bureau of

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[91] "Evicted Campers On Roads Await Food From State," *St Louis Post-Dispatch* (St Louis, MO), Jan. 11, 1939.

[92] Towle, 12.

Investigation had determined that the protesters were found be violating no laws. The FBI reported that the protesters were fighting, "against the conditions in which they found themselves, which they described as 'economic slavery".[93] Even the FBI, a body notorious for its suspicion of socialism and communism, found no evidence of law violation or suspicious activity, only a group of downtrodden people fighting for their rights.

The protest was relatively short lived, but in some small ways proved to be an effective exercise. The Delmo Housing Project was a direct descendant of the strike. On the momentum built up by the media coverage surrounding the 1939 Strike, a group of twenty-five sharecroppers led by Whitfield went to the Department of Agriculture in Washington to discuss next steps in helping the sharecroppers and tenant farmers of the Bootheel. In January of 1940 they met with the officials of the Farm Security Administration, a division of the Department of Agriculture, to see what could be done. The meeting was unproductive, and the sharecroppers began to consider a second strike.[94] Thad Snow, the sympathetic landowner, heard about the plan and gathered support to contact the governor of Missouri for one last try at talks before the protests started again. The governor convened a meeting of landowners, and a week later of sharecroppers, neither of which found any workable solutions to the problem that satisfied the sharecroppers. Then, on the request of Snow, Bishop William Scarlett of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri contacted the governor on behalf of the sharecroppers and asked to convene another meeting in St Louis to discuss the issue. The Bishop was a friend of Snow's and sympathetic to the cause of the sharecroppers. He, like the sharecroppers, thought along religious and social

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[93] "Absolve Sharecropper Campers," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar. 12, 1939.

[94] Towle, 17.

justice lines and wanted to see the farmers have better lives. This meeting, finally, was a success. The Bishop's unpublished memoirs state that the meeting lasted over twelve hours, but culminated in the governor sending out an urgent request for Bootheel landowners to stop all evictions until a workable solution was found and implemented.[95] The plan they found became the Delmo Housing Project. The sharecroppers, led by Whitfield, worked with the Governor and the federal Farm Security Administration for a solution in which sharecroppers would receive loans from the FSA to buy their own land or have the FSA help them negotiate better terms of rent and employment from landowners. If they chose to rent in this program, the landowner was forced to promise that the farmers could have a garden plot of their own no matter what. The FSA would also issue loans to those who wanted to move away from sharecropping entirely and purchase an FSA constructed home. The FSA would also provide government workers to these new communities who would help with education and community management.[96] All houses built by the FSA were to include a sink and have a well, something that was new to many of the sharecroppers.[97] The homes were built by the FSA and sold to the sharecroppers with loans from the FSA. As W. W. Towle, president of the Delmo Housing Corporation in the 1970s, reported in his documentation of the history of the Project, the houses were complete in 1941, with six hundred families moving in to the new homes. "They were supplied tools for gardening, canning equipment, implements for farming the large surplus acreage, sewing machines and electric irons for general use. […] There was plenty of room for recreation. Each house was located on

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[95] *Ibid.,* 18.

[96] *Ibid.,* 24.

[97] *Ibid.,* 25.

approximately seven eighths of an acre which gave plenty of ground for a large garden."[98] Though these houses only held six hundred or so families of the approximately seventeen hundred who participated in the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939, it was a big step in the realization of what the sharecroppers wanted from their struggle.

Figure 4: A map from W.W. Towle's Delmo Saga *showing the locations of the various Delmo Housing Project communities.*[99]

The other direct housing outcome of the Missouri Sharecropper Strike of 1939 was Cropperville. Before Delmo was established Owen Whitfield worked with the FSA to secure ninety-three acres of land for about three hundred African American sharecroppers to move onto. They built their houses, which were more akin to shacks than anything else, and formed the Missouri Committee for Rehabilitation of the Sharecropper to oversee the new community. The first thing the committee did was establish eight rules for the community. All the rules centered

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[98] *Ibid.*

[99] *Ibid.,* 2.

around living in a community designed specifically for evicted, homeless sharecroppers to live for themselves. This was a community built on mutual trust, care, and respect, something these sharecroppers had never experienced before. As Towle points out, "this was the first time that these croppers had found themselves in community and therefore rules were necessary for good relations. The St Louis committee [Whitfield's Missouri Committee for Rehabilitation of the Sharecropper] found considerable difficulty in managing the program, but on the whole proved valuable as a place for many who found themselves stranded with no place to go after the Roadside Demonstration. These families would not return to the plantation."[100]

Cropperville did not last forever. After a few years it petered out its residents moved elsewhere. It was not a lasting legacy of success for the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939. In some ways it stood for what the sharecroppers wanted. It was a community separate from the greedy white landowners, but it was still plagued with problems. Cropperville was occasionally attacked by nearby white locals who did not like the idea of these Black families living in this community on their own. There residents of Cropperville sent a letter to the director of the FSA in July of 1939 to ask for protection, including "food or some means of earning some" and loans to build cabins to live in.[101] Though these attacks on Cropperville, the requests of the residents to the federal government in response to the attacks are telling. They did not just want protection from the white locals so they could go on living their new communitarian lives. They wanted a

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[100] W. W. Towle, *Delmo Saga,* unpublished first draft transcript, Series 3, Box 1, Folder 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, Washington University Libraries Special Collections, Washington University in St. Louis.

[101] Cropperville Residents to W.W. Alexander, 9 July 1939, Series 3, Box 1, Folder Owen Whitfield, Delmo Housing Corporation Files, Washington University Libraries Special Collections, Washington University in St. Louis.

means to earn their food and loans to make a better life for themselves. Also telling is a letter written, but never sent, by Fannie Cook, a resident of Cropperville, to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch.* In her letter to the editor, dated 1943, she points out that the residents of Cropperville were producing many crops, all of which were foodstuffs and not cotton. She also notes, however, that many of the best farming families in the community have been very happily "resettled on good farms by the FSA and all are doing well."[102] She seems proud to write that, "the FSA has not only helped the helpers but also filled the American food basket," as some of their surplus crops are going to the war effort.[103] It seems therefore that while Cropperville was a good respite from the tyranny and oppression of the landowner class it was perhaps too communitarian for what the sharecroppers really wanted. Judging from the residents requests of the federal government and Fannie Cook's letter, what the croppers in Cropperville wanted was to be able to participate in American life fully by having the agency to grow what they wanted and keep what they grew, away from the oppression of the landowner but without the constraints of an overly communal refuge.

In many ways what Owen Whitfield and his fellow protesters at the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 and the eighteen men at the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in 1934 wanted was fairly similar. The sharecroppers in 1934 in Tyronza saw in H. L. Mitchell and his socialist ideas a route out of their terrible situation. It is possible these men were interested in becoming socialists and implementing sweeping changes, but it seems

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[102] Fannie Cook to *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 8 June 1943, Series 3, Box 1, Folder 13, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, Washington University Libraries Special Collections, Washington University in St. Louis.

[103] *Ibid.*

more likely they saw in Mitchell an opportunity. In light of the Elaine Massacre of twenty years prior that killed hundreds of Black sharecroppers because they tried to organize, the STFU offered another shot at freedom and independence with the added benefit of working with white farmers who could shield them from the worst of the racial violence they might face. Owen Whitfield left the Union in 1938 because he did not think it served his interests as a sharecropper. It seems that in his view it drifted too far from what the men in the Tyronza schoolhouse had envisioned and what his fellow croppers in the Missouri Bootheel needed. He did, however, align himself with the CIO. He seemingly shared none of their communist sympathies, but rather saw a route to freedom through their help. What Whitfield wanted was to claim all of what God had offered him through his applied religion. He worked with the CIO in the implementation of the Strike and with the Governor of Missouri and landowners in the development of the Delmo Housing Project. Whitfield distrusted the Governor, but he knew that he could work with him and use him as a tool to achieve his goal of self sufficiency. Though the founding of the STFU and the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 were in some ways worlds away from each other, they were the same in the desire of the rank and file for a better life, for the fulfillment of their destiny as children of God and farmers to reap what they sowed in the ground year after year.

Conclusion

Different Fields, Different Methods, Same Struggle

> Oh! King Cotton, today you have millions of slaves
> And have caused many poor workers to be in lonesome graves.
> When Cotton is King of any nation,
> It means wealth to the planter - to the laborer starvation.
> -John Handcox[104]

Most of the primary source documentation this paper uses to tell the story of the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 comes from W. W. Towle's *Delmo Saga,* the unpublished notes kept with his original transcript at Washington University in St Louis, and other forms of documentation that is primarily based on one person remembering a conversation he had with someone involved in the Strike. *Delmo Saga* presents the back story of the Delmo Housing Project and its state of affairs up to the mid 1970s. W. W. Towle was the president of the DHP at the time and wanted to document its origins to commemorate the struggle that went in to creating the community he now led. Throughout the footnotes of the document his cited sources are conversations he had with men like Owen Whitfield, Thad Snow, H. L. Mitchell, and others. His retelling of the founding of Delmo is essentially just a compilation of the stories of those who actually did it.

The reasons why someone did a thing like found a union or organize a strike can be hard to pin down if they did not leave much of their own documentation behind or what they did leave was intended to be directed toward a certain audience. Owen Whitfield and other 1939 Strike leaders told their protesters to simply respond, "we had been notified to leave the land and there

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[104] *Roll the Union On,* 87.

was no place to go."[105] This response gives a very simple explanation of the protest and in many ways is accurate, but is certainly a tailored message designed to be delivered to the world at large for maximal effect. Not everyone at the protest had been evicted, some were just neighbors who came in solidarity, but the message was intended to make a certain impact on a certain audience.[106] The organizers of the protest clearly were intelligent and conscious of who they were talking to at all times. If they were speaking to local law enforcement or a reporter from a major city, the way they described what they were doing was quite different and far more controlled than how Whitfield described it to a trusted ally like Thad Snow. W. W. Towle, however, had no interest in exposing these people in any way or criticizing them. As president of the Delmo Housing Corporation nearly forty years after the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939, Whitfield almost certainly would not have had his guard up in the same way that he did so many years before. The stories he and others recounted in the *Delmo Saga* should be thought of as relatively true to how these actors actually felt.

The articles in the newspapers used are also most likely free of Whitfield's fear of being branded something he was not. Though the articles report that state officials accused the protesters of being everything from communist to violent to unsanitary, the reporters seem to present balanced views of the events. They refrain for the most part from any normative judgement, and the quotes they give from the protesters themselves seem candid. Towle reports in *Delmo Saga* that Whitfield and Snow both remember working with the reporter who broke the story for the *Post-Dispatch*. Snow convinced Whitfield to trust this reporter, so the story that was

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[105] Towle, 12.

[106] *Ibid.,* 11.

broken by the *Post-Dispatch* was a fairly candid account of what was happening in the Bootheel. The distance the reporters from the *New York Times* also probably played a role in fostering relative openness between the reporters and the sharecroppers. They were not from Missouri or Arkansas and had no issue in this fight other than to express sympathy and expose the events transpiring.

Given the personal accounts these Strike leaders gave give serious evidence for the weight to the notion that the actions of these sharecroppers were not driven ideologically, but rather by a notion that they were entitled to a life free from starvation and open to all of God's bounty if only they stood up for themselves. H. L. Mitchell's account of the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, however, gives a different perspective. It can be easily deduced from reading his autobiography that he is a socialist and that he assumes others with him buy into his lines of thinking. Mitchell's is the only account of the founding of the STFU that goes into such great detail, and his is the most telling if looked at critically. Though Mitchell does not acknowledge it, no one at the meeting talks about politics or ideology. They talk about working together to get out of a truly desperate situation. Ike Shaw, the only Black man who spoke at the meeting, spoke out in memory of the Elaine Massacre where so many black sharecroppers had been slaughtered for attempting to rise up. Religious elements were present also, as the former Klansman Burt Williams spoke up to talk about how respectable the African American Reverend C. H. Smith was. Smith's designation as a pastor probably contributed to his respectability in the eyes of a former member of the Klan and helped to enable the group as a whole to see themselves as one oppressed group more than as divided along racial lines.

Though the situation of the sharecropper and the legal landscape had changed between the founding of the Union in 1934 and the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939, their land was still the same. The leaders were different, but the people were the same. A state line had been crossed, but the desire of the sharecropper to have some control over the land they worked so hard every day was ever present. These two events were categorized and discussed as though they had far more politically ideological leanings and tendencies than they did. Historian Alex Lichtenstein's commentary on preacher and sharecropper Howard Kester's memoir *Revolt of the Sharecroppers* focuses on the socialist ideology of Kester, and to a lesser extent H. L. Mitchell, without paying any attention to those who had joined the union but were not a part of its socialist leadership.[107] Perhaps the rank and file sharecropper who joined the Union in southeast Missouri or northeast Arkansas felt more of a connection to Kester's identity as a pastor than a socialist, more of a connection to the social gospel than any political pamphlet. David Conrad's monograph *The Forgotten Farmers* similarly seems to focus on the Union leadership without giving much voice to the average Union member other than through the words of the leadership themselves.[108] Mark Naison's essay on the STFU's brief interaction with the CIO takes a similar top down approach to understanding the Union, focusing almost entirely on the viewpoints of the Union leadership. Naison acknowledges difficulties between the STFU and the CIO but always goes back to emphasizing the socialist aspects of the Union while minimizing its religious

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[107] Kester, 18-9.

[108] Conrad, 91-2. The book throughout relies heavily on sources like Mitchell's own words, Howard Kester's *Revolt of the Sharecroppers,* and the memories of other people in the Union leadership along with proceedings from various Union meetings.

roots.[109] Like with many other histories of the Union, most of the information on the organization comes from the personal stories of Union leadership, particularly of socialist and political ideologically driven men like Mitchell. There seems to be little attention paid to the religious aspects of the movement unless it is in the context of socialist thinking like in Lichtenstein's analysis. The discussion in historical accounts of The Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 does a better job of recognizing the various influences and motives of Owen Whitfield and his protesters, but historians like Louis Cantor do not make much attempt at connecting the ideology, religiosity, and survivalism of the protesters to those who had founding the Southern Tenant Farmers Union five years before.[110]

Though the individuals in the schoolhouse in Tyronza in 1934 and on the highways in 1939 and in the Cropperville and Delmo houses in 1943 may have been different, the people were the same. They were a people, Black and white alike, who had experienced decades of oppression and hardship at the hands of greedy landowners. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers protesting at the Missouri Sharecroppers Strike of 1939 wanted much the same thing that the men at the found of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union wanted, a chance at the bounty God had placed at their fingertips. Goals of agency, autonomy, and freedom from starvation were driven in both cases by motives of religious ideology and a need to survive. These may have been different events led by different individuals, but the drive for a better life in the tip of the Mississippi Delta was the same throughout.

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[109] Naison, 104.

[110] Cantor, Chapter 2.

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