Sharecropping / Tenancy System of Farming

Sharecropping is an agricultural system which developed in the Southern states during the Civil War. It was a farm tenancy system in which families worked a farm or section of land in return for a share of the crop rather than wages. Sharecropping replaced the plantation system destroyed by the Civil War.

The victorious Federal authorities which occupied the South did not seize plantations, but emancipation meant that the owners no longer had a captive labor force. The former planters, even those actively engaged in rebellion, for the most part still had their land, but no slaves or money to pay wages. The former slaves on the other hand did not have jobs or land and because they had been denied education, had few options.

Sharecropping developed because the former slaves and planters needed each other. The principal crop continued to be cotton. And the planters under the sharecropping system continued to a large degree to control the lives of the blacks working their land. While the system at first developed to obtain black labor, eventually poor whites also entered the sharecropping system. The system varied, but in many cases all the cropper brought to the arrangement was his labor. The planter provided the land, but also commonly animals, equipment, seeds and other items. The land owners also commonly advanced credits for the family's living expenses until the crop was harvested. The system was open to considerable abuse because the croppers were uneducated, commonly illiterate. Almost all slaves in the Deep South following the Civil War would have been illiterate. It was illegal to teach slaves to read. By the 20th century black and white croppers would have had some minimal education, but illiteracy was still high. The land owner marketed the crop and kept all accounts. He charged interests on cash advances, often quite high interest. He also commonly operated a store where the sharecroppers had to make their purchases. The normal arrangement was that the cropper got half the proceeds from the harvest. The landowner then deducted cash advances which because of high interest and dishonest accounting commonly left the cropper very little.

While this sharecropping/tenancy system did benefit the freedmen to some extent, this system continually kept them in debt to the white landowners. The high prices and interest charged on the croppers kept them indebted to the landowners to the point where they could never own their own land for the majority of croppers.