Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set

The Great Depression and Southern Sharecroppers

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/great-depression

Teaching Tips

The sources in this set are composed of original interviews for a documentary titled The Great Depression (1993). All of the interviewees lived during the Great Depression and New Deal; some were sharecroppers or children of sharecroppers, some were bankers, some were landowning farmers, and some were children of parents who helped to organize the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union. Their firsthand accounts allow students to go beyond textbook narratives to more fully understand this period in U.S. history as well as the unique experiences of southern sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

Background Information

Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:

- the Jim Crow South and the economic, social, and political restrictions imposed on Black southerners
- the cash crop system and the South’s economic reliance on cotton and tobacco (Prices for cotton, still the mainstay of the southern economy, plunged from 18 cents a pound in 1929 to six cents in 1933. Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers were reduced to starvation or thrown off the land.)
- major causes and effects of the Great Depression
- the New Deal and its variety of relief, recovery, and reform programs
• the general purpose of a labor union and how it works to extract concessions from business owners and managers to benefit workers

---

**Essential Question**

What led tenant farmers and sharecroppers to unionize?

---

**General Discussion Questions**

• What effects did the Great Depression have on southern tenant farmers and sharecroppers?
• What were the limitations of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in addressing the problems facing southern tenant farmers and sharecroppers?

---

**Classroom Activities**

1. Provide students with a general overview of the topic and source set. Prepare students for the fact that they’ll be watching unedited interviews that were later used in a documentary film on the Great Depression.

2. Divide the class into four groups. Ask each group to watch the sources in their assigned topics, as organized below. They should take notes on their topic and prepare to share their findings with the whole class.

**Group 1: The ways in which southern farmers, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers were uniquely affected by the Great Depression.**

• [Oscar Fendler Discusses Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Sharecroppers (1993)](#)
• [John Twist Discusses Poverty and Hunger (1993)](#)
• [David Groeppinger Discusses Economic Devastation in the South (1992)](#)
• [Nancy Neal Talks About the Missouri Roadside Demonstration (1993)](#)
Group 2: The New Deal and the Agricultural Adjustment Act, its implementation, and its negative impacts on tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

- John Twist Discusses the Agricultural Adjustment Act and Its Consequences (1993)
- Former Sharecropper George Stith Discusses the Agricultural Adjustment Act (1992)
- Oscar Fendler Discusses Evictions of Tenant Farmers and Sharecroppers (1993)

Group 3: The reasons for the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union.

- George Stith Describes the Start of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (1992)
- Nancy Neal Discusses the Formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (1993)
- Nancy Neal Talks About the STFU’s Decision to Be Interracial and Nonviolent (1993)

Group 4: The violent resistance to the union and the union’s legacy.

- Miller Williams Discusses a Violent Response to the Union from White Southerners (1993)
- Nancy Neal Discusses the STFU as a Model for Change to Come (1993)

3. Bring the groups back together for a discussion guided by the following questions:

- How were Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers affected by the Great Depression? To what extent were their conditions unique?
- Why was the Agricultural Adjustment Act, a program specifically designed to assist and bring relief to farmers, so harmful to tenant farmers and sharecroppers?
- Why did the tenant farmers and sharecroppers resort to forming the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union? What did they hope the union would do for them?
- Why was it important to make the union interracial and nonviolent, even in the face of violent white resistance?
- How does learning from first-hand interviews add to your understanding of this period in U.S. history? What insights did you gain that you could not from a secondary or tertiary source?