

Unions had existed in the United States for decades, mostly among **industrial** workers. They tended to be fairly organized and operated on a membership basis, with members paying dues to support union activities. **Farmer unions** differed from industrial unions in that they lacked a clear **hierarchy** to fight against, and their demands tended to be broader. While a union of miners could go directly to their boss and ask for better wages, farmers had to contend with shifting crop prices, expensive processing and transportation costs, and even competition from other farmers—issues which have many causes and few clear solutions. Still, farmers unions emerged across the country. In Oklahoma, with the state’s strong agricultural base and labor reform history, unions had a favorable environment for farm labor activism.

Though there were organizations that spoke to the general experience and struggles of all farmers, many Oklahoma unions focused on helping tenants. As these organizations looked beyond the day-to-day struggles of the farmer and began to question the fundamental power relations at play in a tenant system, they became increasingly **radical**. This radicalism and the backlash it aroused, along with the decline in tenancy that occurred during the 1930s and 1940s, effectively killed these tenant-focused organizations, while the less radical, more general unions survived.

The history of Oklahoma’s farm unions demonstrates the power and potential of community activism to enact change. Though these organizations had various levels of success in achieving their goals, they were all initially inspired by a shared desire for individual and community betterment. Many people today can empathize with that desire and, hopefully, learn from the past to change the future.



Members of the Muskogee chapter of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union attending a meeting (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Early Farmer Advocacy

The Grange

Farming is a difficult profession, both physically and financially. Though their labor is essential to nourish, clothe, and support the nation, farmers have historically received little thanks or support and often struggle to make ends meet. This was certainly true for the farmers of the late 19th and early 20th century, who struggled to afford the seed, machinery, and land necessary for farming with the meager profits they were able to make on their crops. This was due to a variety of different factors, from low prices and high **railroad rates** to poor crop yields brought on by **drought** or **soil depletion**. To make a profit, farmers had to produce as much as possible, leading to an excess of crops on the market, causing prices to drop even further.



Oklahoma tenant farmer tilling the soil using a horse-drawn plow (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Because there were so many factors, it was difficult for farmers to organize and fight against any particular issue. Education was sparse, so few understood the concept of supply and demand or best practices when it came to crop planting and soil management. Still, some groups did form to encourage farmers to organize and advocate for common goals.

The Grange first emerged in the 1860s as a social and educational group, providing farmers a sense of community and a space to air their complaints. Through these discussions, farmers found that their neighbors struggled with many of the same issues. One major challenge was the expense of getting one's crop to market, as railroad companies charged high rates to transport goods. Farmers depended on the railroads, as, even with high rates, it was much more profitable to sell their crops across the country than in their local farming communities, which already had an excess.



Promotional prints for the Grange movement depicting farm life, group events, and political slogans (images courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Frustrated with this unfair situation and inspired by a new sense of unity, members of the Grange began **lobbying** the government to limit railroad companies and make them decrease rates. Politicians on both the state and national level passed “Granger Laws,” regulating fare prices and combatting price-setting between different railroad companies.



The Grange was a popular organization in Oklahoma, and *The Chickasha Star* was its official paper.

Another focus of the Grange was the establishment of **communal** (shared) **grain elevators**, which were essential to the storage of farmer’s crops but were often owned and operated by businessmen who charged extremely high rates. If all the members of the local Grange chapter contributed some money, they could purchase their own grain elevator, allowing them to avoid paying high rates of those that were privately owned. This is an early example of a **cooperative** farming enterprise, which proved essential to later farmers’ unions in Oklahoma and beyond.

The Grange achieved moderate success, helping to bring about railroad reform and easing the burden on struggling farmers through the use of communal resources such as grain elevators. Perhaps its greatest accomplishment was the 1876 US Supreme Court case *Munn v. Illinois*, which concerned state regulation of a privately owned grain elevator. The lower court concluded that this was allowed, and decided that states could regulate private property “when such regulation becomes necessary for the

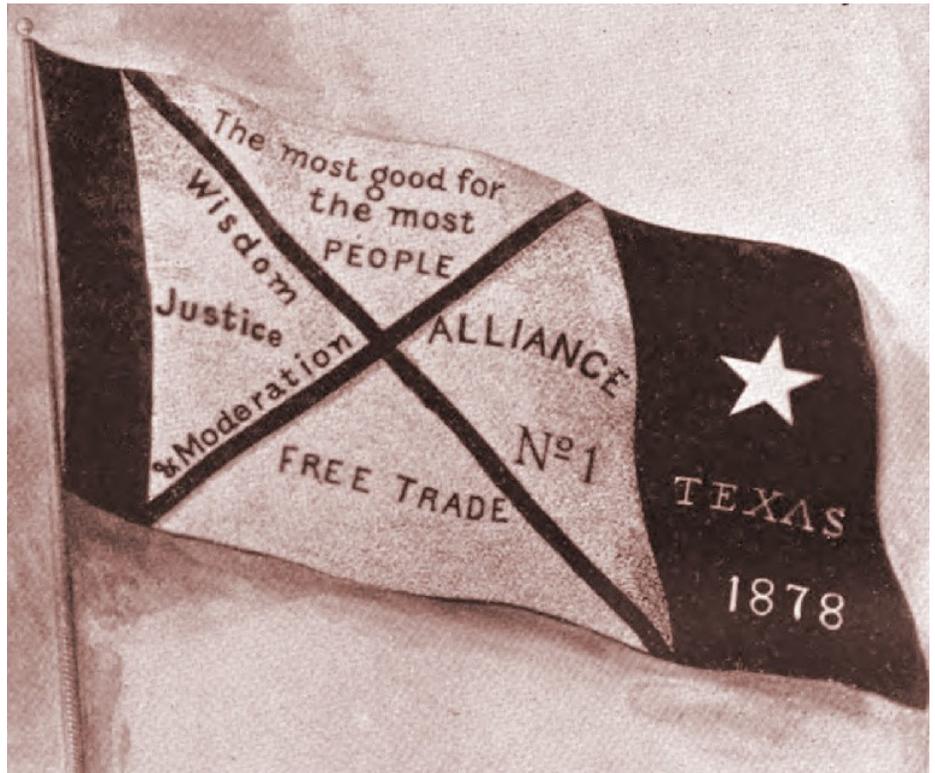
public good.” This decision was later overturned by the Supreme Court, but it served as a testament to the Grange movement and its impact on the national political stage. It also set the precedent for later **government regulation** of commerce and industry because the court’s decision did not object to government regulation; they simply said it was the federal government’s job instead of the states. The Grange served as an early example of farmer-led advocacy, inspiring many other similar movements and organizations.



A 1930s-era grain elevator in Idaho (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Farmers' Alliance

The **Farmers' Alliance** was one such movement, with its northern organization developing in the 1870s directly from the Grange. A southern counterpart would emerge in Texas and spread to surrounding states, and this organization's refusal to admit non-white farmers would lead to the formation of yet another Farmers' Alliance, this one for African American farmers. These three organizations mostly operated separately but were united by a common interest in helping poor farmers, establishing cooperatives, and increasing government regulation of business.



Early banner of the Southern Farmers' Alliance displaying core beliefs of the organization (image courtesy of Wikimedia).

Building upon the legacy of the Grange, local Farmers' Alliance chapters established numerous communal grain elevators, as well as cooperative stores. These stores provided an alternative to the **exploitative crop-lien system** where farmers promised a **merchant** a share of their crops in exchange for farming supplies, as well as household goods and living necessities. If they were unable to pay their share at the end of the year, the debt rolled over. Then, the farmer was not allowed to shop anywhere else until the debt was paid. This trapped many poor farmers in an unending cycle of borrowing. Cooperative stores were significantly cheaper and run by the farmers themselves, providing customers an escape from the exploitative alternative.

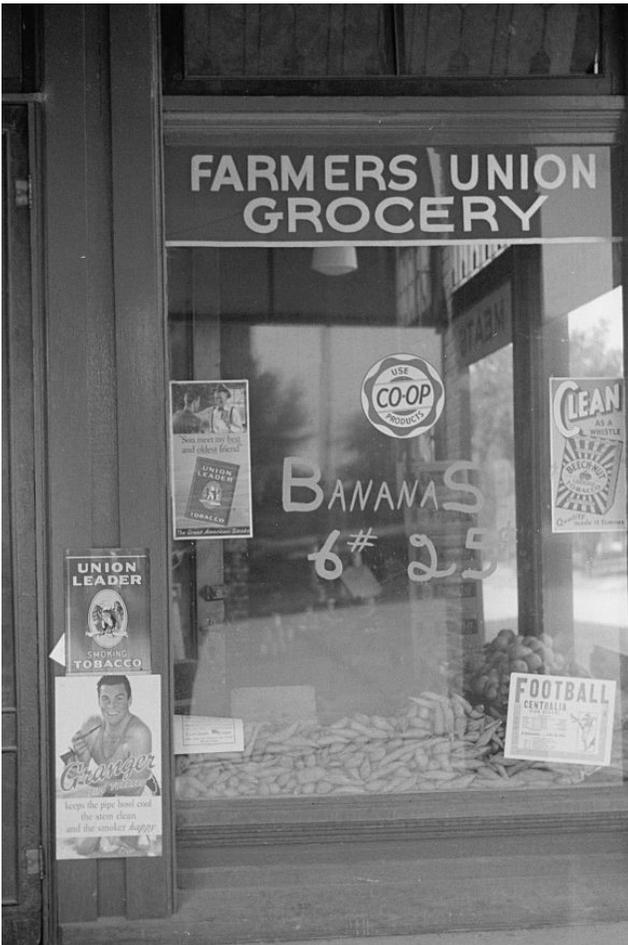
Whereas, the general condition of our country imperatively demands unity of action on the part of the laboring classes and the dissemination of principles best calculated to encourage and foster agricultural and mechanical pursuits in order that they may derive a just remuneration for their labor and to secure for the laboring and agricultural classes the greatest amount of good, hold to the principle that all monopolies are dangerous to the best interests of the country and if fostered will eventually enslave a free people and subvert and finally overthrow the great principles bought and paid for by the blood and treasure of our forefathers. We therefore, adopt the following as our declaration of principles:

(1). That believing in the doctrine of equal rights to all and special privileges to none, we demand that the legislation of the Cherokee Nation shall be so framed in the future as not to build up one industry at the expense and injury of others, and we are opposed to the monopoly of land, water and all other gifts of nature;

(2). That we believe that the money of the country should be retained in the hands of its people; therefore we demand that all national revenues shall be limited to the necessary expenses of the nation, economically administered; and that we are unalterably opposed to a national interest-paying debt;

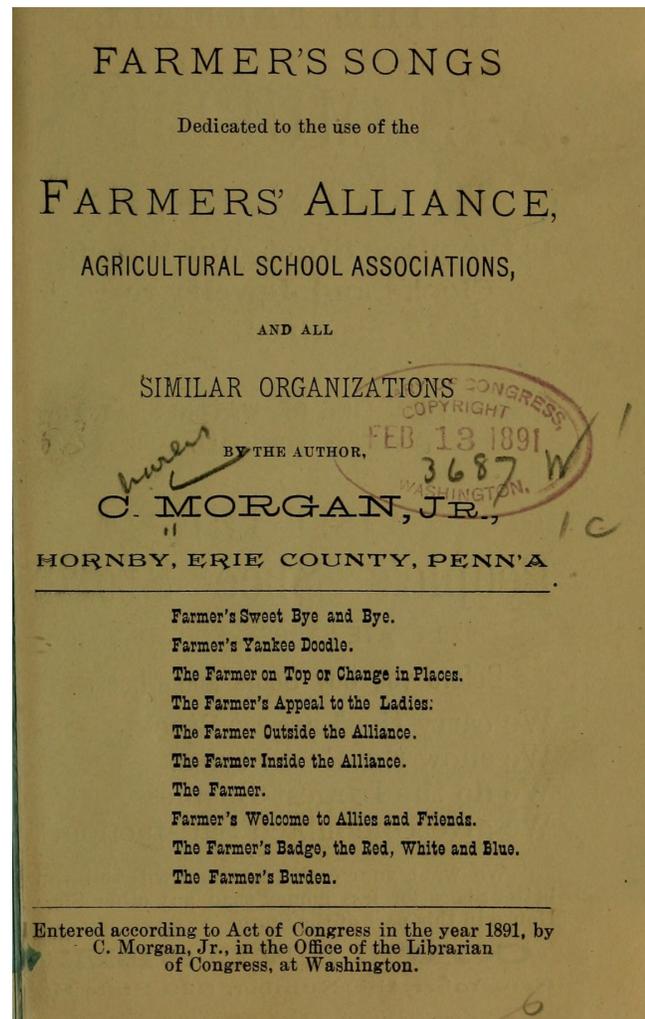
(5). That the revenues for the support of any government should bear equally upon those that receive its benefits, and realizing the present mode of raising revenues in the Cherokee Nation is unequal and unjust. That we are in favor of a direct tax on property and incomes and withdrawing all funds belonging to the Cherokee Nation, paying it our per capita ----and except an ample and sufficient fund for educational purposes, and for the support of our orphans and their education;

Excerpts from a Cherokee chapter of the Farmers' Alliance, established in 1891. Published in the *Indian Chieftain* newspaper. (1981.105, Federal Writers' Project Collection, OHS).



This cooperative store was founded by a later group, the Farmers' Union, in Kansas. The sign on door says "use co-op products" (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Along with these forms of local action, a major policy focus of the Farmers' Alliance was the reform of US **currency**. Farmers and other poorer Americans advocated for the purposeful **inflation** of the US economy, most often in the form of unlimited silver coinage. They believed this would increase the general money supply and make it easier for them to pay back their debts. These calls directly led to the growing **Populist** movement, which would come to be a dominant political force of the 1890s. Over time, the Farmers' Alliance was overshadowed and absorbed into the Populist Party but proved fundamental in the initial shaping of the movement.



This 1891 book of farmer songs is dedicated to the Farmers' Alliance (image courtesy Library of Congress).

Populism

Populism was a political ideology that emerged in the 1890s, largely in response to the tide of **modernization** that had just swept America and the many resulting social and political issues that emerged in its wake. The People's Party, as the movement's political arm was known, railed against unchecked industry, corrupt politicians, and abuses of the common working man. Some of their primary demands included free and unlimited coinage of silver, regulation of railroads, and the creation of federal warehouses. Many of these populist demands come directly from the ideas and policies of the Grange and the Farmers' Alliance.

Though the Grange and the Farmers' Alliance sometimes involved themselves in politics, they were primarily focused on the life and finances of the farmer. The People's Party was a full-fledged **political party** with a unified **platform** and **aspirations** toward all levels of the federal and national government. It also welcomed a more **diverse** group of **constituents**, from silver miners to urban industrial laborers, along with farmers. These different groups were united by a common desire for change and advancement, and by working together, they were able to make great strides towards these goals.

The populists saw moderate success at a local and state level but were unable to secure the presidency in the noteworthy election of 1896. This led to the collapse of the party, though many of its ideas influenced the Progressive movement of the 1910s and, later, New Deal policies implemented to aid farmers and poorer Americans during the **Great Depression**. The Populist movement represents a coming-together of Americans from different backgrounds for their common good, also indicating a growing desire for power to be in the hands of people.



In this People's Party cartoon from an 1895 issue of *The Populist*, a Stillwater newspaper, the branches on the tree read, "Government ownership of telegraph, anti-land monopoly, temperance, \$50 per capita, government ownership of mines, government ownership of mines."

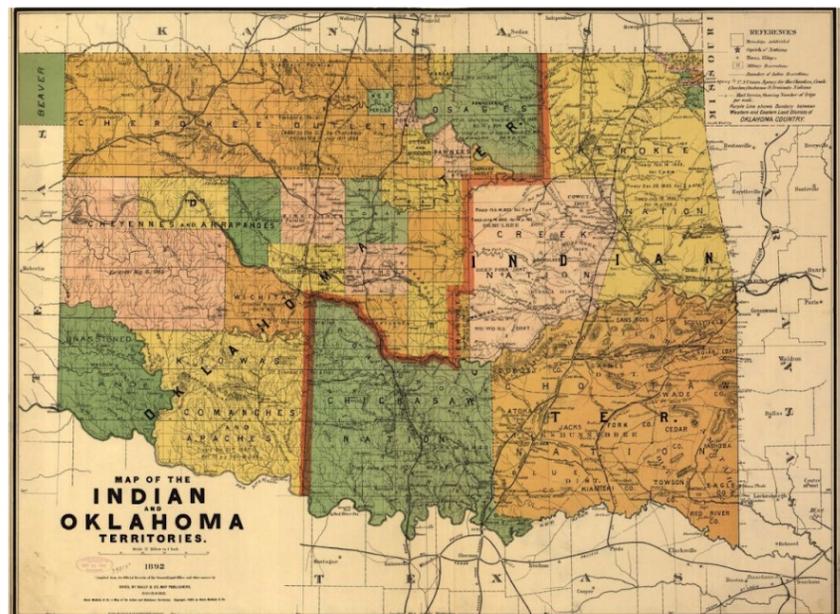
Farming Culture in Oklahoma

Agricultural trends in Oklahoma were fundamentally shaped by the political history of the region. In early territorial days, white farmers were explicitly banned from owning land in Indian Territory. Therefore, their only option was to become a tenant, giving them access to the land in exchange for a portion of their crop or a fee paid to the tribal nations whose lands they inhabited, most often the Five Tribes. These tribal lands proved suitable for growing cotton, quickly establishing it as the primary crop in the eastern and southern regions of Oklahoma. Cotton was in high demand and could be stored for long periods, making it ideal for tenant farming communities. Wheat and corn were also grown, but cotton would prove to be the primary driver of tenancy in the state.



A tenant family standing outside of their home near Sallisaw, Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Early Indian Territory renting agreements were generally fairly favorable for both parties and gave the tenant a great degree of personal and economic freedom. Although American Indians didn't believe in personal land ownership, individuals were able to settle a portion of the tribal land for their farm and homestead. Extra land within these **plots** could be rented to tenants, and, due to the lack of strict ownership laws, contracts tended to be loose and informal. Tenants were encouraged to improve the land and stay in one area for long periods of time, providing stability and a sense of **stewardship**, if not ownership.



An 1892 map of the Oklahoma and Indian Territories, with a bold red line dividing the two (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

This changed with the Dawes Act of 1887 and the Curtis Act of 1898, which, in combination, broke up tribal lands and shifted ownership solely to the individual Native landowner, many of whom were pressured or tricked into selling their land to incoming white settlers or **speculators**. These sales were rife with exploitation and abuse, allowing some wealthy settlers to amass huge land empires for cheap.

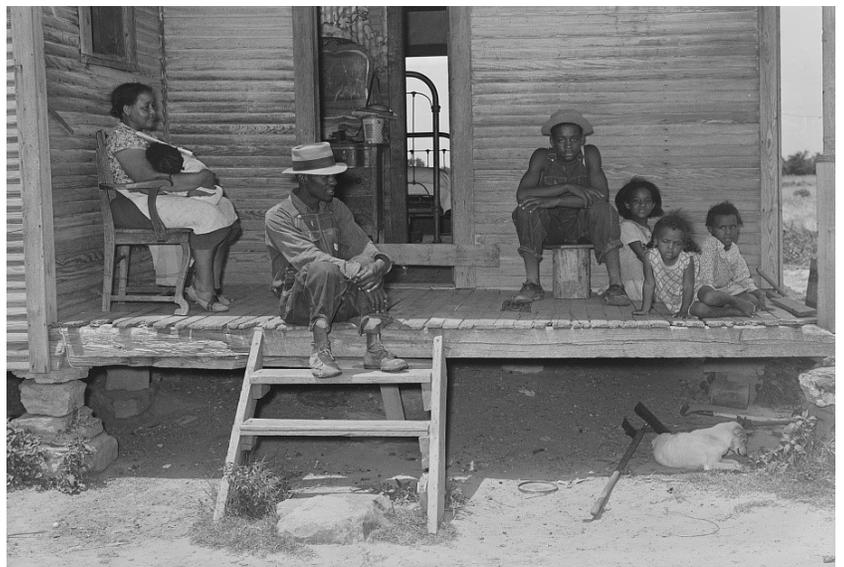
These speculators became the early tenant **landlords** and applied this same **savvy**, cutthroat business sense to their farming operations, conspiring to keep their tenants poor and powerless. Tenants were pressured to farm as possible, resulting in a shift towards solely growing **cash crops**. This also led to massive soil depletion, as land was overfarmed and stripped of its nutrients. Regular farm owners felt similarly pressured, if only to support their families and keep up with competition.

Tenant farming peaked in the 1910s and 1920s, as an unstable economy and **ecological** challenges such as droughts made it difficult for small farm owners to hold onto their land, pushing them into tenancy. Tenant farmers faced a number of challenges that prevented them from escaping tenancy and buying their own farm. These included vague one-year leases preventing long-term improvement or cultivation and an unfair **credit system** marked by **high-interest loans**. For the next 30 years, census data would show that a majority of all farmers in Oklahoma were tenants, with some having been tenants since their arrival and others falling into tenancy due to economic hardship.

Interestingly, tenancy rates were significantly higher among white farmers than African American farmers, setting Oklahoma apart from the South, where the tenancy system evolved directly out of slavery and **disproportionately** affected African Americans. Still, despite not being the majority, there were many African American tenants in the state, in addition to American Indians, creating a tenant culture that was uniquely diverse.



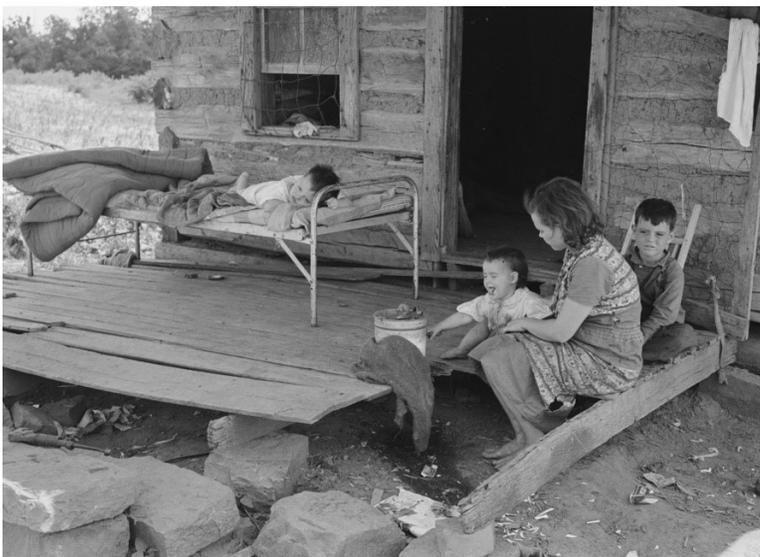
Owner and tenant discussing farming practices (2019.061.B1.01267, Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society Collection, OHS).



African American tenant family on their porch in Wagoner County, Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Young children of tenant farmers on their home's back steps (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Oklahoma tenant family on their front porch. According to the photo description, the child on the bed suffers from tuberculosis of the spine (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

The tenant lifestyle was difficult and unsettled, as families moved extremely often. Homes tended to be extremely poorly maintained, lacking basic necessities such as running water or electricity. Landlords were largely indifferent to these inadequacies, and the tenant themselves had little incentive to improve the home or land, as they knew they would soon move on, only to be replaced by a new family with the same mindset. Tenant farmers were forced to plant the same cash crops in the same fields year after year, whereas farm owners had the time and financial freedom to grow a variety of crops, switching fields often to avoid nutrient depletion. Over time, these **unsustainable** farming practices caused tenant plots to become less productive, forcing tenant families to farm even more intensely to support themselves.

Tenancy also took a psychological toll. Because they were constantly moving, tenant families never had enough time to settle into a home or community, leading to a feeling of isolation. Children were constantly forced to switch schools and were frequently called away from their studies to help with farm labor. Many families couldn't afford quality food or medicine, leading to **malnutrition** and disease.



An American Indian mother and son living in a tenant home near Sallisaw, Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Tenants were not the only people to struggle with poverty, poor living conditions, and other related challenges during this time. Small farmers also had to deal with low prices and the challenges of farm life, in addition to the financial strain of land ownership. However, tenancy promised that these problems would never be solved, as it was nearly impossible for families to hold onto anything, be it land, money, or a sense of home. Their constant mobility kept them from putting down roots that would allow them to gain financial security. A primary and often overlooked role of farm unions and other similar organizations was to provide a sense of community and belonging that tenants often lacked. Additionally, it gave them a feeling of ownership, if not of the land than of the movement in which they participated.



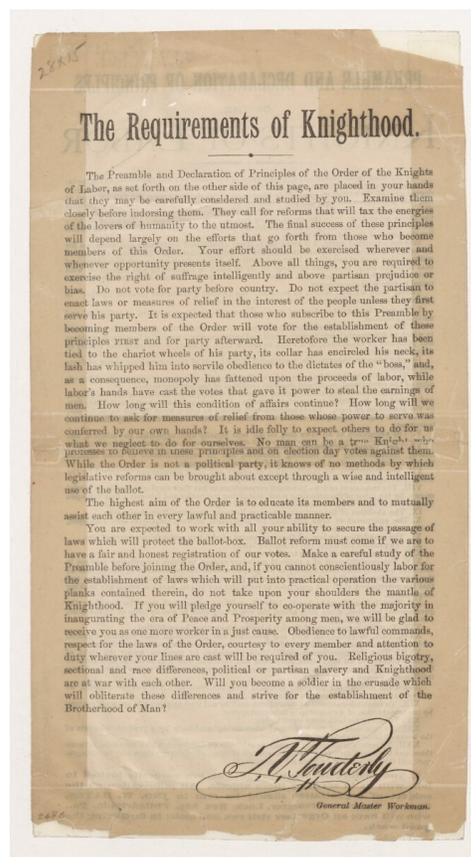
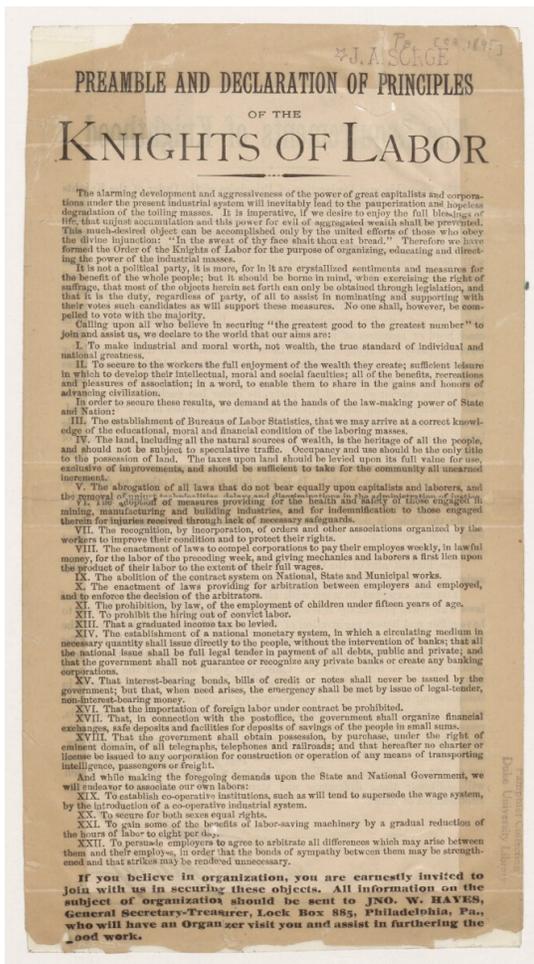
A widowed tenant in her home in McIntosh, Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Early Union Activity in Oklahoma

Organized labor has a strong history in Oklahoma, with the first unions emerging to support miners as far back as the 1880s. Various groups would launch their own unions in coming years, advocating for better working conditions, fewer hours, and higher pay. Unions often planned and engaged in protests, some of which were successful and resulted in concrete change, while others were violently suppressed or simply ignored. These organizations were often inspired by the Knights of Labor or the American Federation of Labor, two national labor unions that paved the way for later advocacy. These organizations show two different approaches to union activism; the Knights of Labor embraced laborers across a variety of disciplines, hoping to unite the working class to achieve common goals. In contrast, the American Federation of Labor represented a smaller and more select group of skilled workers and had more practical aims of ensuring better working conditions for its members. The question of whether to accept a wide variety of people or limit membership to a specific group would continue to be an issue for unions across time and geographic regions including in Oklahoma.



Logo of the American Federation of Labor. Note that their motto, "Labor Omnia Vincit" or "Labor Conquers All", is the same as that of the state of Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

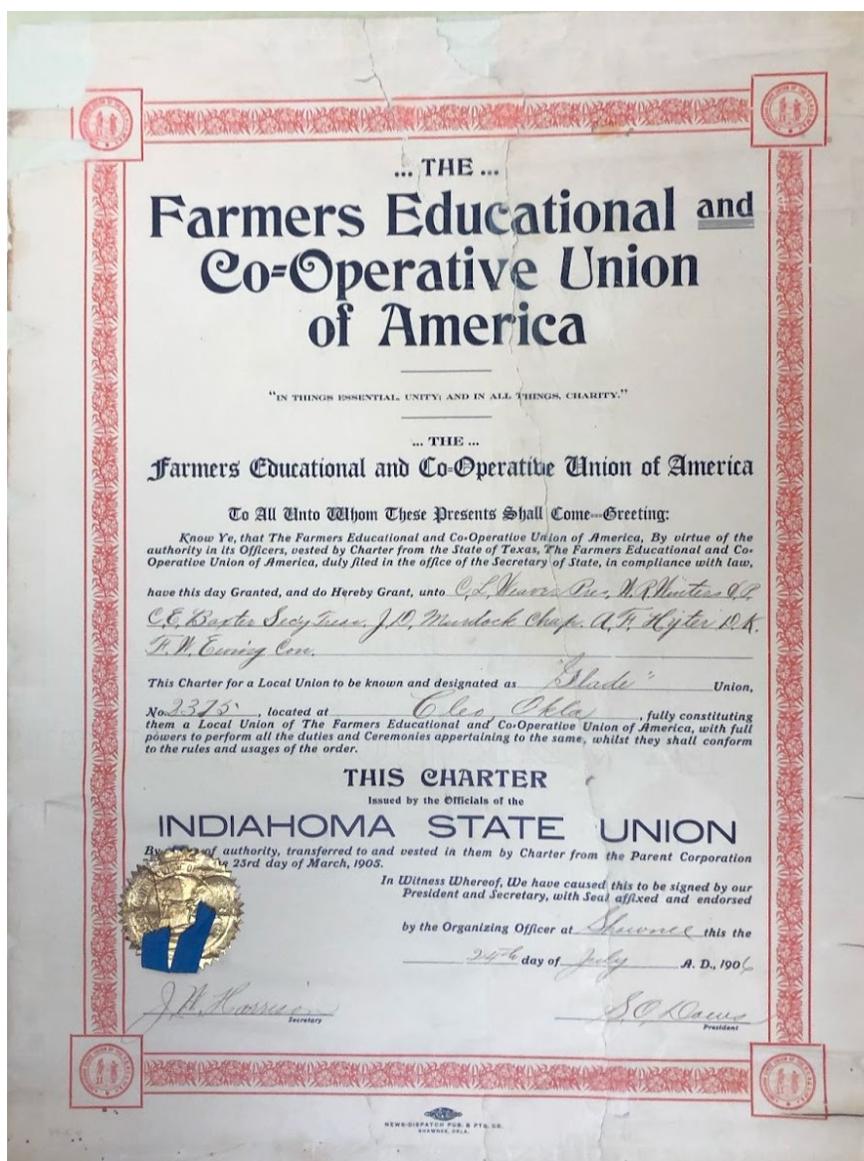


A flyer promoting Knights of Labor principles (image courtesy of Duke University Libraries).

Agricultural Unions

The **Farmers' Union** is an example of a more generalized union that found great success by advocating for the practical needs of all farmers. Though it was founded in Texas in 1902, the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America, commonly known as the Farmers' Union, quickly made its way to the Oklahoma and Indian Territories. After a brief period of separation, the two branches united into one organization, first called the Indian Territory Farmers' Union and eventually simply the Oklahoma Farmers' Union.

This union was heavily modeled after the Farmers' Alliance, with a primary focus on the establishment of cooperative businesses ranging from grain elevators and stores to insurance companies and newspapers. The business enterprises helped farmers escape the exploitative systems that trapped them in debt, while the union newspaper provided political content alongside practical farming tips.



Indian Territory Farmers' Union charter for a union chapter in Cleo, Oklahoma (M1989.011, Katie Edwards Bemo Mitchell Collection, OHS).

The Farmers' Union advocated for small farm owners and tenants equally, recognizing that they shared many similar problems and could work together to improve their collective lot. They railed against the greed and exploitation of bankers and land speculators—enemies of both groups—and explicitly banned them from joining the organization.

Still, the Farmers' Union remained largely **apolitical** in practice and kept their advocacy in the range of the current political and economic system. Whereas other unions argued for the end of **landlordism** and the **redistribution of land**, the Farmers' Union provided economic support in the form of communal resources and a sense of **camaraderie** between small farm owners and tenants. This strategy proved fruitful, and the Farmers' Union remains in operation today.



A Farmers' Union grain elevator in Kansas (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Men stand in front of a Farmers' Union office in Louisiana. A handwritten sign on the window says "We get our berries sold for 13 cents. Coop Auction" (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

The Shawnee Demands

In 1906, as the Twin Territories prepared to become one state, different interest groups met to prepare for the Constitutional Convention. Different groups had their own goals for what the Constitution of the State of Oklahoma would eventually look like, and this included the unions such as the Farmer's Union. The Twin Territories Federation of Labor, the Oklahoma Farmer's Union, and several groups of railroad workers met in August to discuss what they wanted in the Constitution and how they should make sure their views were included. At this meeting, which took place in Shawnee, these groups agreed on the "24 Demands" or, as they are now known, "The Shawnee Demands."

These groups supported goals that benefitted labor, farmers, and the general public, such as the demand for free textbooks and mandatory education. Populists desire for election reform appeared in the demands for the initiative, referendum, recall, and a primary for statewide elected offices. They opposed banning the state from any engaging in any kind of industry. They supported early worker's compensation reform by allowing compensation if a worker was injured by another worker's error; in most states, courts found that the employer was not at fault in those cases. These groups supported an eight-hour workday for several different industries. The Shawnee Demands included sought significant regulation and oversight by the government in the economy and people's lives, including electing commissioners of labor and agriculture, a mine inspector, a corporation commission, and a tax commission. All of these regulators would have the power to compel corporations and owners to comply with their demands. They supported health inspections of homes and businesses.

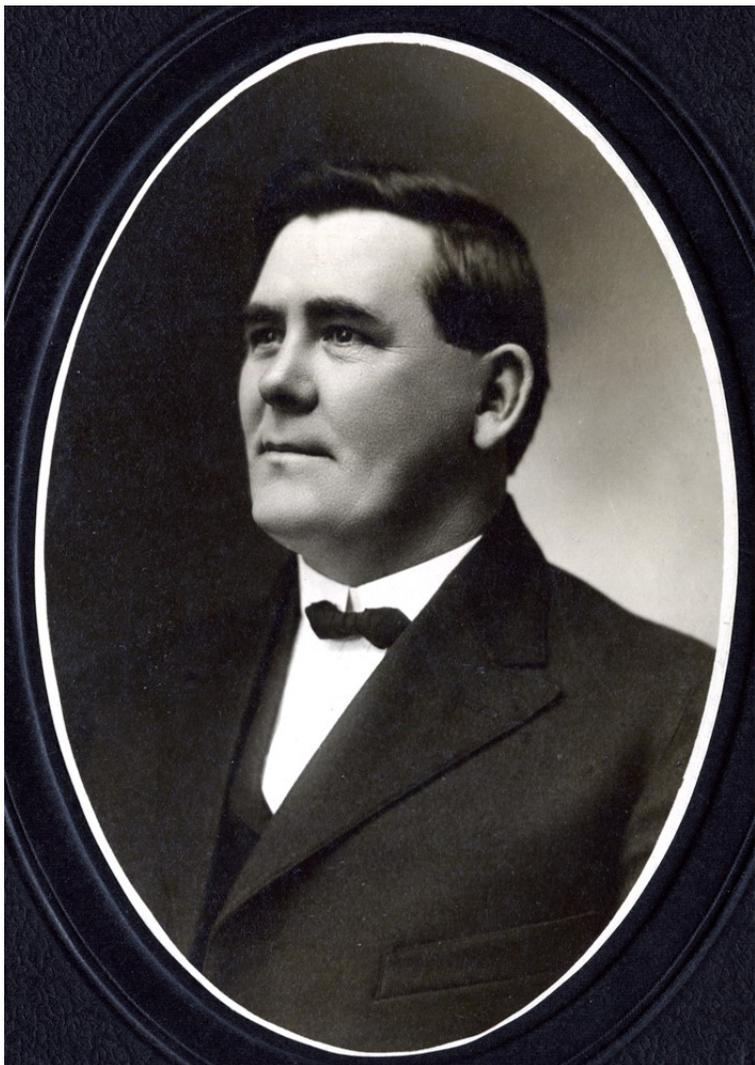


Many newspapers published the demands in full for their readers to review, such as this issue of the *Edmond Sun*, September 19, 1906.

The authors of the Shawnee Demands also opposed several policies. They wanted to ban child and convict labor, with the exception of allowing prisoners to work on road maintenance. They wanted to ensure that employees could make their own political and economic decisions, free from the interference of their employers. They opposed speculation in farm products and wanted the practice to end. They also supported a range of limits on corporate behavior, from banning railroads from owning mines to requiring corporations to acquire a charter before they could do business in the state.

Once these demands were arrived at, local newspapers debated the points through articles, announcements of candidacy, and letters to the editor. The decision of these organizations to create a platform with their preferences for the constitution before delegates were elected meant supporters of the demands could assess each candidate according to how warmly they supported the list.

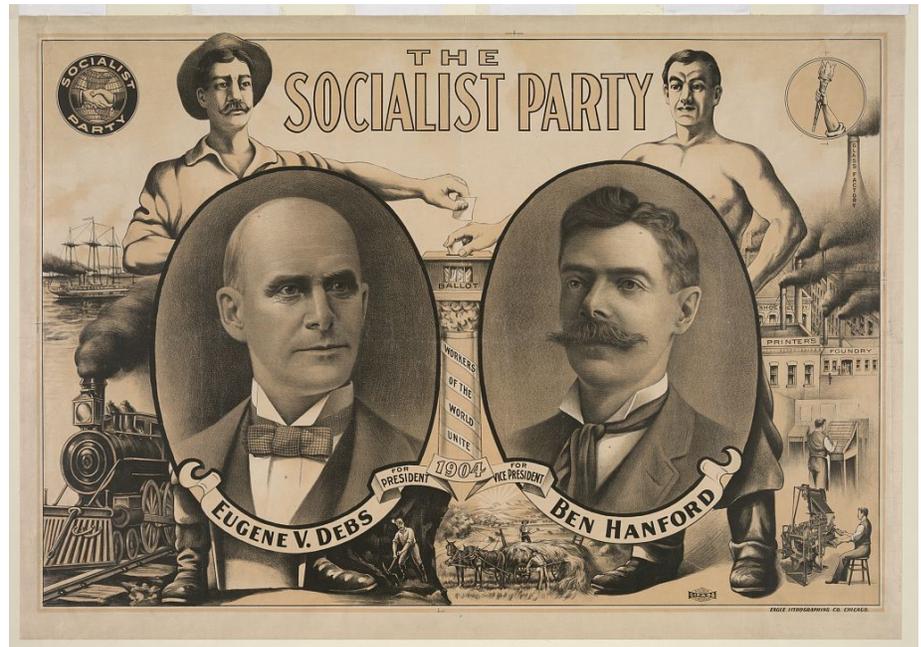
These demands were shared with potential delegates to the Constitutional Convention, and most Democrats often proudly campaigned on their support of them in their effort to be elected to the Convention. A total of 70 delegates—67 Democrats and three Republicans—that had committed to the Shawnee Demands were elected out of 112 seats. The vast majority of the Shawnee Demands were incorporated into the Oklahoma Constitution, a major achievement for both the Farmer's Union and the labor unions. The result of farmer and labor advocacy was the most progressive state constitution written up to that time.



Peter Hanraty, union leader and delegate to the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention, helped write the Shawnee Demands (4566, Frederick S. Barde Collection, OHS).

Tenant Unions

Alongside general unions such as the Farmers' Union, there were a number of unions that expressly and solely advocated for the tenant farmer. These groups began to question the power relations of tenancy and propose increasingly more radical measures. They were often inspired by or directly associated with the **Socialist Party**, which had started to grow in popularity in Oklahoma and the United States as a whole.



Socialist Party poster for the election of 1904 (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Oklahoma Renter's Union

The **Oklahoma Renters' Union**, founded in 1909, was one such

group. They evolved directly from the Oklahoma Socialist Party and had high hopes of ending land competition between tenants, abolishing landlordism, providing tenants with better housing and education, and, eventually, creation of a program where tenants could rent and buy state land at reduced rates. **Recruitment** proved difficult, however, due to **discrimination** by landlords, with many refusing to rent land to tenants who were members of the organization. Additionally, the group would not allow African American or American Indian tenants to join, limiting their support base. These **external** and self-inflicted challenges made the organization largely ineffective, and the Renters' Union soon faded into **obscurity**.

The Renters' Union was not the only group to restrict membership based on race. Many labor organizations refused to admit African American farmers, despite sharing similar struggles and desires for change. Some groups did allow American Indian farmers to join, but this often came with more subtle forms of prejudice, as can be seen in a Farmers' Union constitution specifying that American Indian members must be of "industrious habits." Later activists, most notably the founders of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, realized that class united the farmers more than race divided them and welcomed diversity in their organizations. Still, it's notable that even amongst those who were economically progressive for their time, racism was still prevalent.

ARTICLE I: Members

Section I. All persons are eligible to membership who are of sound mind and over the age of sixteen years, who are white -- or Indian of Industrious habits -- who believe in a Supreme Being are of good moral character, and employed as farmers,

Excerpt from an Oklahoma Farmers' Union constitution outlining membership requirements (1981.105. Federal Writers' Project Collection, OHS).

Working Class Union and the Green Corn Rebellion

While some organizations mainly engaged in the **theoretical**, others focused on actions over ideals, such as the **subversive** and ultimately explosive **Working Class Union** (WCU). Founded in 1913, the WCU rejected the **doctrine of nonviolence** embraced by similar groups. The WCU was formed after the Industrial Workers of the World, a prominent national labor union, refused to admit tenant farmers. The platform of the new union differed little from similar organizations of the time, advocating for the end of tenancy and various improvements to working conditions. Still, the WCU is distinguished by its use of violence and **conspiracy** to achieve its aims. Members would harass landlords and even rob banks, in addition to more conventional political action.

The unconventional advocacy of the Working Class Union would reach its peak with the **Green Corn Rebellion** of 1917, an armed revolt protesting the **draft** for World War I. Aside from arguments about personal liberty and opposition to the war itself, tenant farmers also feared the loss of a significant portion of their labor force. With crop prices increasing rapidly due to wartime demand, farmers needed their young men more than ever. However, no exemptions came, and thousands of men were called to fight.



Young man resting after working in the fields on his family's farm (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Sheet music cover of a patriotic song by Andrew B. Sterling and Arthur Lange (image courtesy Wikimedia Commons).

Fight they did, though not against the Central Powers. Instead, on August 2, 1917, hundreds of men gathered at a farm in central Oklahoma with a plan to march from Oklahoma to Washington, DC, where they would demand an end to the war, surviving on green corn along the way. Obviously, this was impossible, and they instead began destroying public property before being met by a local militia. The ensuing conflict left three protestors dead and many others arrested. This event, though highly localized and minimally destructive, caused a great media frenzy and resulted in the collapse of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma, and the Working Class Union itself. This event reveals the deep discontent and instability felt by the state's tenants, and the power of collective organizing to mobilize a large group towards a common, if misguided, goal.



Participants in the Green Corn Rebellion of 1917 (image courtesy of the California Digital Newspaper Collection).

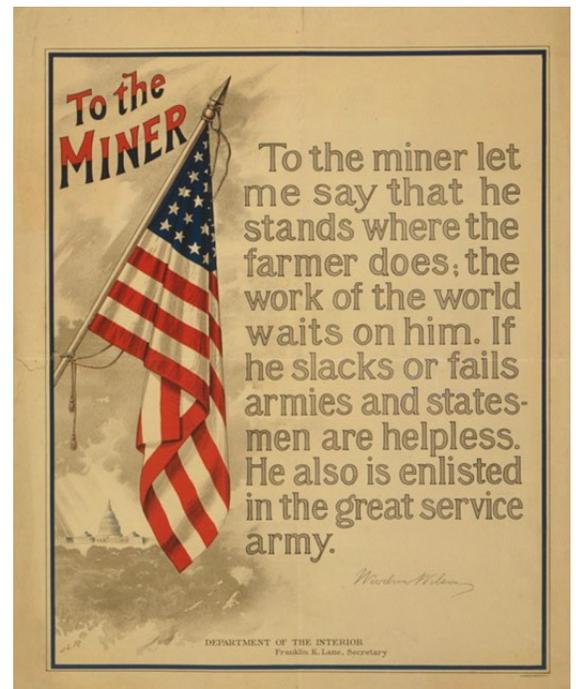
World War I

Despite the protests of some, World War I did offer a brief period of relief for struggling farmers as prices increased due to wartime demand. Farmers and other workers were targeted with patriotic calls to support their nation through their labor and were urged to put aside their activism for the sake of the country. This period saw a lapse in union involvement, as there wasn't a pressing economic burden that needed addressing. A fundamental driver of labor reform is simple financial need, and farmers found themselves in a good position, if only temporarily.

This prosperity was not to last, however. In response to the high crop prices brought on by the war, many farmers greatly increased production, sometimes by purchasing expensive machinery on loan. This resulted in an excess crop supply, causing prices to plummet. This event would herald a period of deep economic hardship for farmers that would linger through the 1920s and 1930s, only ending with the rise of a new model of agriculture that made tenants unnecessary and pushed family farms out of business.



Barnyard of an Oklahoma tenant farmer (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



World War I posters directed at farmers and other workers, tying their work to the war effort (images courtesy of the Huntington Library and the Library of Congress, respectively).

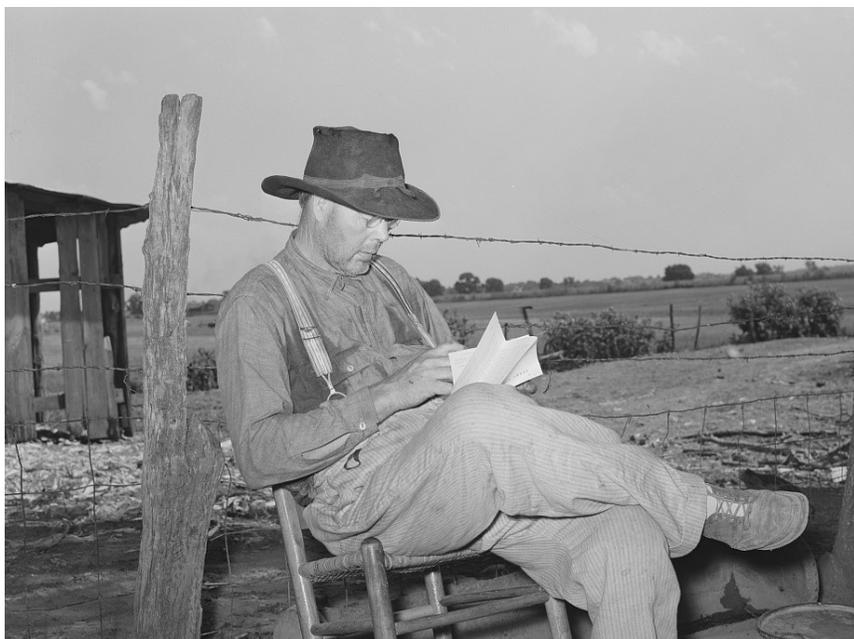
Economic Hardship and the Great Depression

The 1920s were a difficult time for farmers in Oklahoma and beyond. Prices were low, forcing farmers to produce more to support their families. This overproduction led to a surplus, causing prices to go even lower. The fields which had once been fertile and reliable had become depleted of their nutrients after generations of over-farming, causing crops to fail. Scientists preached crop diversity, but the average Oklahoma farmer simply couldn't afford to produce anything besides cotton. They also couldn't afford the new technologies of the era designed to make farming easier and more efficient, forcing them to work even harder to keep up with the competition.

The Great Depression made things even more difficult, as getting the loans farmers had come to rely on became significantly harder. Since cash was in short supply, lenders required **collateral** such as livestock or machinery, things tenants often lacked and family farmers couldn't afford to lose. However, many had no choice and were forced to take out these loans, causing them to lose everything when they inevitably **defaulted**. This resulted in a significant rise in Oklahoma's tenancy rate, with thousands of families losing the farms they had worked for generations.



Crude water hauler used by an Oklahoma tenant farmer (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



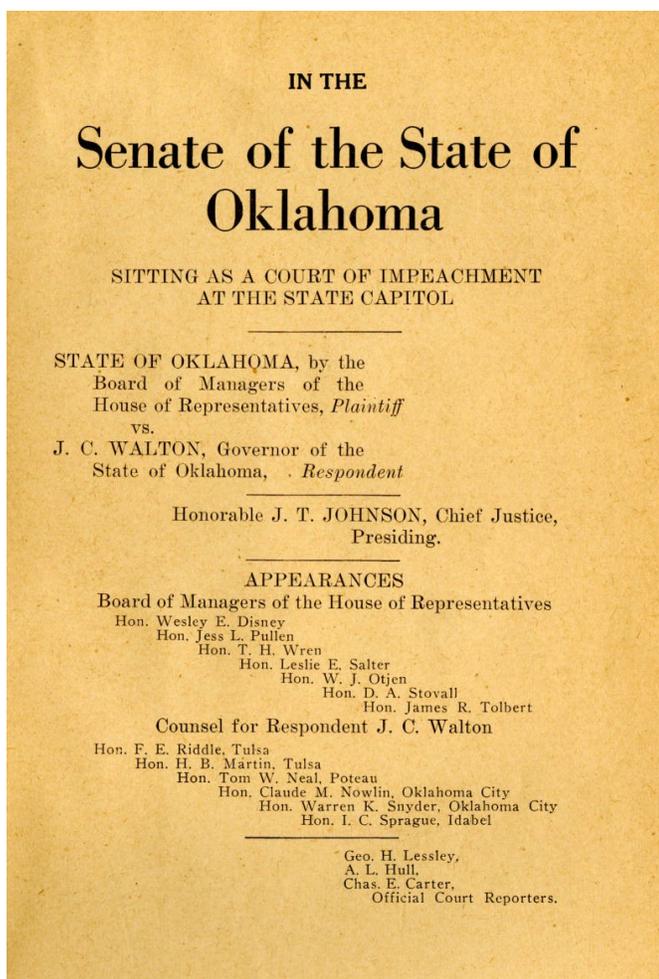
Oklahoma tenant farmer looking through the mail (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League

As financial instability returned, so, too, did the labor movement. Some organizations from the past experienced resurgences, as was the case for the Oklahoma Farmers' Union. Others emerged specifically in response to the conditions and landscape of the time, such as the **Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League**. Founded in 1921 by a group of Farmers' Union representatives, Socialists, and labor activists, this organization sought to pool support behind Jack Walton, a Democratic candidate for Oklahoma governor. They hoped that Walton would support their platform in exchange for their combined support, which included calls for state-owned grain elevators and mines, free textbooks, and a home-ownership program for tenants.



Jack Walton, union-supported gubernatorial candidate (13054, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).



Front page of Governor Walton's impeachment trial transcript (image courtesy of Oklahoma Digital Prairie).

Though they succeeded in getting Walton elected, he proved unpopular with the state legislature and was eventually impeached. Still, in his short time in office, he passed several laws benefiting farmers, supporting cooperatives, and establishing state agricultural warehouses, in addition to a campaign seeking to expose and eradicate the Klu Klux Klan in the state. Unfortunately, Walton's impeachment and the conflict between the different groups it encompassed caused the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League to crumble.

Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association

While some activists advocated for political solutions to farmers' financial woes, others focused on establishing cooperatives in their communities. These enterprises provided direct economic support to tenants and farm owners alike, and even helped to raise crop prices and reduce processing rates at non-cooperative businesses.

With the success of local cooperatives, calls emerged for larger, state-wide organizations. The **Oklahoma Cotton Growers' Association** was established in 1922 and quickly amassed 52,000 members, including many tenants. Cotton growers would pool their cotton to be sold at a set price, thereby reducing competition between individual farmers. The cotton was stored in association-owned warehouses until the market was best for selling, resulting in a higher profit for all members. However, this also meant a delayed profit, which was unattractive to landlords and tenants alike. Many tenants abandoned the association as they believed the benefits they were promised had not appeared. Despite this, the Cotton Growers' Association would continue serving Oklahoma's farmers for many years. It would prove to be a robust model of cooperative marketing on a state-wide scale.



Children and adults harvesting cotton in an Oklahoma cotton field (23359.1, Oklahoma Historical Society Friends of the Archive Collection, OHS).

The New Deal

As the Great Depression wore on, farmers continued to suffer. Crops were failing, prices were low, and increasing numbers of families were being forced into tenancy or out of Oklahoma altogether. Finally, in the early 1930s, the government began to address farmers' troubles on a larger and more substantial scale.

Oklahoma's state government had made various attempts at helping struggling farmers, such as by introducing regulations on ginning rates and improving rural roads. There was also a short-lived homeownership program, which provided tenants loans to buy their farm. However, demand for these loans was much higher than the money allotted, meaning only a small number of farmers actually received the aid.

Despite these gestures, the state government simply didn't have the funds to support all those in need. The federal government, on the other hand, did. In response to the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt championed the **New Deal**, which included a number of programs to provide financial relief and aid to struggling farmers. However, Oklahoma farmers were unable to reap the benefits of this program for a number of years, as then-Governor William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray resisted the implementation of New Deal policies in the state, believing that relief money should be administered solely by states. It wasn't till 1935, the end of Murray's term, that New Deal aid would enter the state. These programs had varying levels of success, with some providing concrete aid and others undermining the very industries they had set out to help.



Oklahoma tenant mother and children (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Franklin D. Roosevelt campaign button featuring New Deal slogan (image courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History).

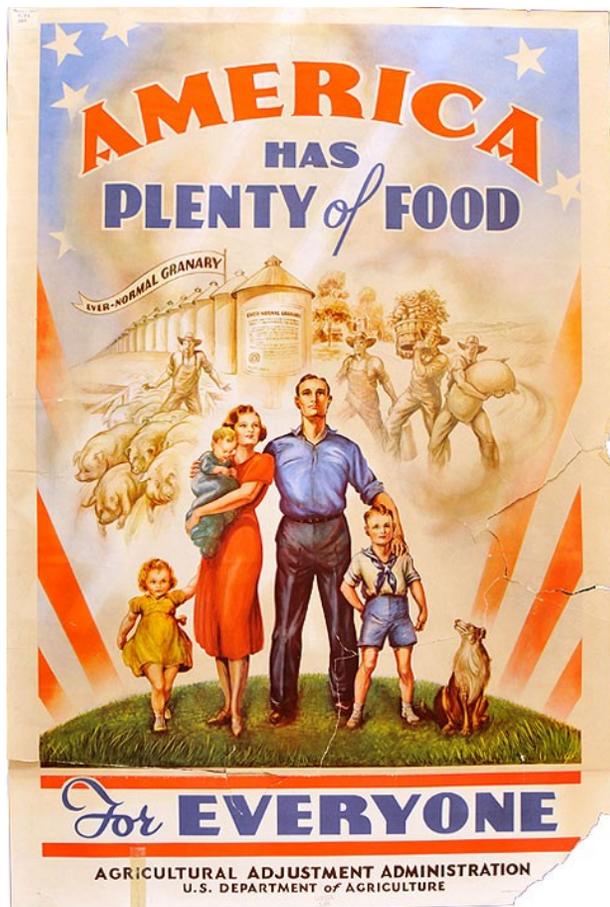


William H. Murray, governor of Oklahoma from 1931 to 1935 (image courtesy of the Oklahoma Digital Prairie).

Agricultural Adjustment Act and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union

The **Agricultural Adjustment Act** (AAA), passed in 1933, was meant to curb agricultural overproduction by paying farmer owners to reduce their farmed acreage. Officials hoped this program would reduce the crop surplus and give over-farmed land a much-needed break. Additionally, they intended for the payments to be split between farm owner and tenant, helping both parties.

Though the AAA did help curb overproduction, it proved disastrous for tenants. Landlords realized that instead of reducing their own production, they could simply evict their tenants, thereby reducing the total farmed acreage and allowing the landlord to pocket the total payment. This caused a huge **displacement** of tenant families, many of whom were forced out of the state entirely in search of jobs in the West. This mass exodus of Oklahoma **migrants** is often blamed on the Dust Bowl, but a vast majority of those leaving the state were tenants who had been evicted from their farms more due to AAA and the changing economy than the drought.



A poster intended to quell distrust of the AAA (image courtesy of the National Agricultural Library).



A migrant family preparing to leave Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Odis Sweeden (right), charismatic leader of the Oklahoma Tenant Farmers' Union (image courtesy of University of North Carolina Libraries).

The poor execution of the AAA, as well as the general state of tenancy during the Great Depression, prompted a group of cotton farmers in Arkansas to form the **Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU)**. This group, founded in 1935, advocated for tenants and sharecroppers and was particularly notable for its lack of segregation, making it the first **interracial** farm labor organization in the United States. The group quickly gained footing in Oklahoma, in large part due to the tireless work of Odis Sweeden, (Cherokee) who united white, Black, and Native tenant farmers across the state into one unified group.

The STFU directly participated in a state commission on tenancy, which resulted in the Landlord Tenant Relationship Act of 1937. This act sought to improve relations between the two groups, encourage long-term tenancy, and establish Landlord-Tenant Relationship Department. Unfortunately, this act was repealed in 1939, but it still represents one of the most concrete products of farm union advocacy in the state. In the following years, STFU would undergo a series of mergers with other organizations, accompanied by dramatic splits, that rendered it

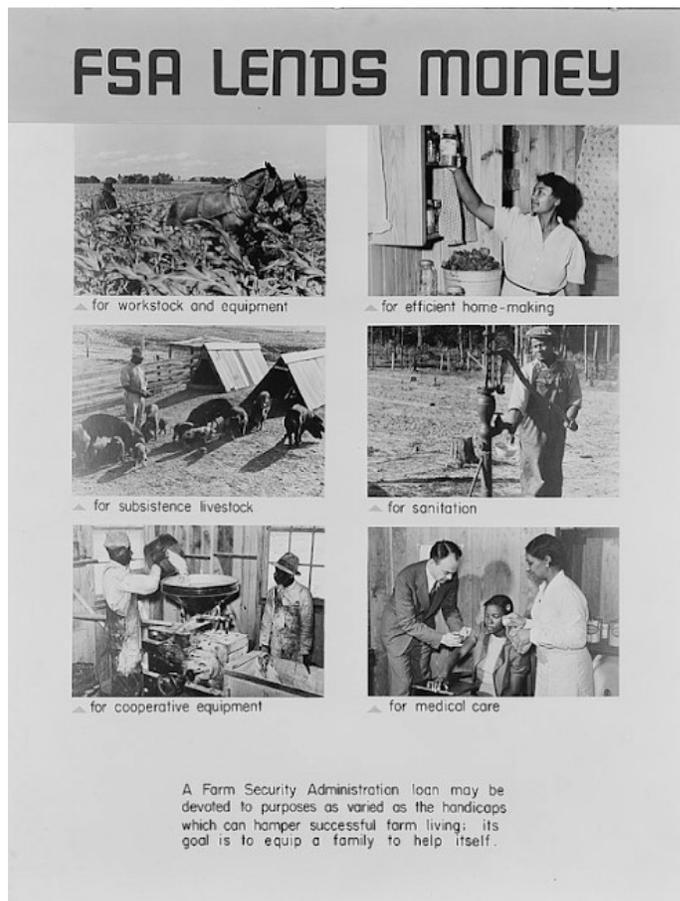
somewhat ineffectual. The Oklahoma branch would fade with the loss of its charismatic leader, Odis Sweeden. However, its legacy of multi-racial, unified advocacy remains an inspiration to this day.



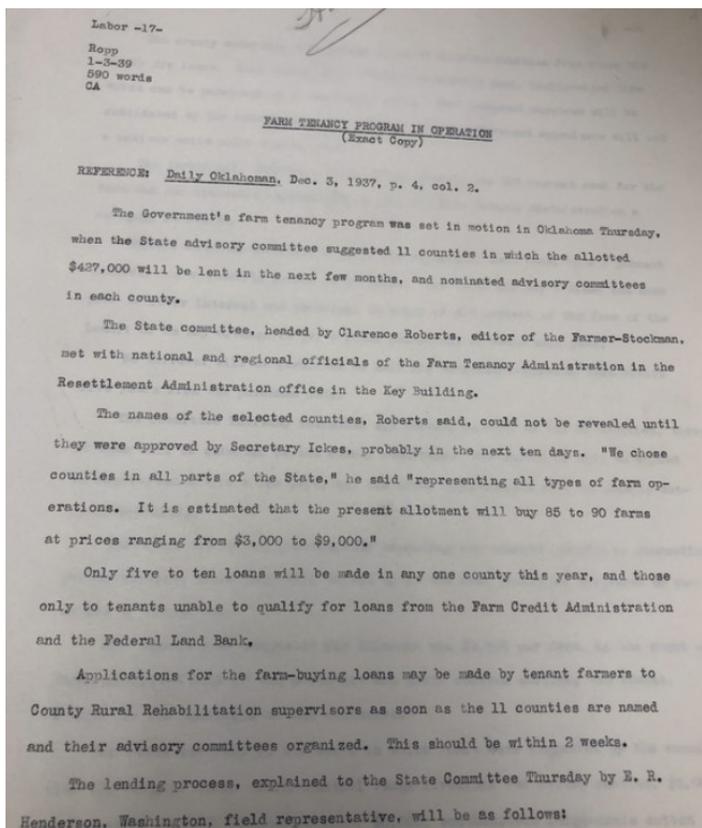
Members of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union picketing in Arkansas (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Other New Deal programs implemented in Oklahoma included small loans for livestock and machinery and the establishment of federally-owned cooperative farms. One property, the historic 101 Ranch, was split amongst a number of tenant families who paid rent directly to the government in exchange for a plot. Though the rollout was limited, this demonstrates an attempt by the government to help tenants through unconventional means.

One New Deal program that actually helped tenants on a larger scale was the **Farm Security Administration's** homeownership loan program. This program provided tenant families long-term loans to buy their farm, an idea that had been tried before in Oklahoma but failed due to insufficient funds. Created in 1937 and operating until 1944, the Farm Homes Corporation gave out loans resulting in the purchase of 16,000 farms, with nearly 3,000 tenants receiving support in Oklahoma.



Poster describing various loans available from the Farm Security Administration (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Newspaper excerpt detailing the implementation of the FSA's tenant homeownership program in Oklahoma (1981.105, Federal Writers' Project Collection, OHS).

The intended recipients were struggling, though not **destitute**, farmers who had lived on one farm for an extended period and planned to continue living there for at least five years. This excluded many of Oklahoma's poorest tenants who weren't considered established or industrious enough. Despite the definite positive effect on those who received these loans, the implementation was not widespread enough to help the state's many struggling tenants.



A tenant in her kitchen near Muskogee, Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

The Decline of Farm Unions



Friends waving goodbye to an Oklahoma family departing for California (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Oklahoma migrant family looking for agricultural work in California (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Oklahoma's poorest tenants felt that they were out of options. They had suffered through an unstable market, been pushed off their farms, and advocated all they could, yet, they had nothing to show for it. Their only choice was to move to where the jobs were, often westward to California. There, they became migrant farmers, even more mobile and placeless than they had been in Oklahoma. Tenancy in Oklahoma was not so much overcome as it was **rendered obsolete**.

Small farm owners didn't have it much better, as a new agricultural model emerged—that of the **agribusiness**. These family farmers couldn't afford the new technologies employed by large-scale farming corporations, pushing them out of the market in much the same way as the tenant.



Delegates of the first Southern Tenant Farmers' Union convention (image courtesy of University of North Carolina Libraries).

As tenant farming disappeared, so, too, did the tenant unions. They simply lacked a base to draw from, as all their members flocked west or to the cities. Some broader organizations were able to stay afloat, such as the Farmers' Unions, which remains in operation today. However, these organizations no longer play as large of a political and social role as they once did. As awareness of unions and labor activism dwindles, people lose a blueprint for creating change in their industries and in their lives. Although the economic and social landscape has changed, one can still look to the farm labor activist of the past to see the power and potential of community activism and cooperative action.



Oklahoma tenant farmer looking out from his nearly-collapsed porch (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Activities

Using Data Spatially: Mapping Farm Ownership in Oklahoma, 1910

FARMS OWNED AND RENTED IN OKLAHOMA.

This Table in Reference to Farms Owned and Farms Rented in Oklahoma Is Taken From the Quarterly Report of the Oklahoma State Board of Agriculture for the Quarter Ending September 30, 1911, Page 48.

Counties	Number of Farms Owned	Number of Farms Rented			
Adair	306	372	LeFlore	574	1,868
Alfalfa	1,907	989	Lincoln	2,340	1,660
Atoka	290	770	Logan	1,663	794
Beaver	2,768	669	Love	183	1,020
Beckham	1,184	606	McClain	336	1,068
Blaine	1,432	995	McCurtain	185	297
Bryan	518	1,023	McIntosh	601	1,523
Caddo	2,014	1,831	Major	1,812	633
Canadian	1,256	806	Mashall	208	817
Carter	474	1,763	Mayes	712	767
Cherokee	543	912	Murray	171	777
Choctaw	338	829	Muskogee	870	1,497
Cimarron	827	132	Noble	1,252	837
Cleveland	1,195	917	Nowata	453	785
Coal	114	459	Okfuskee	334	991
Comanche	2,022	3,204	Oklahoma	1,572	907
Craig	803	856	Okmulgee	330	1,013
Creek	436	1,576	Ossage	74	610
Custer	1,771	961	Ottawa	437	817
Delaware	580	417	Pawnee	980	941
Dewey	1,853	912	Payne	1,625	1,117
Ellis	2,269	670	Pittsburg	10,790	17,883
Garfield	3,696	1,376	Pontotoc	429	1,429
Garvin	574	1,940	Pottawatomie	2,912	1,670
Grady	820	1,355	Pushmataha	175	644
Grant	2,391	1,253	Roger Mills	1,972	457
Greer	989	718	Rogers	615	833
Harmon	835	473	Seminole	323	1,678
Harper	1,378	800	Sequoah	814	1,527
Haskell	258	839	Stephens	894	1,433
Hughes	515	1,893	Texas	2,331	627
Jackson	1,123	964	Tillman	1,383	819
Jefferson	335	1,169	Tulsa	398	900
Johnson	316	1,234	Wagoner	380	1,020
Kay	1,702	1,215	Washington	246	446
Kingfisher	2,172	1,052	Washita	2,023	1,054
Kiowa	680	673	Woods	2,312	978
Latimer	169	464	Woodward	2,197	877
			The State	88,178	93,896

The number of renters in the state at this time is 104,000, an increase of almost 11,000 since 1911. All are chattel mortgaged. Of the farmers that own farms, 80 per cent are mortgaged, the first mortgages ranging from 40 to 60 per cent of the cash value of the land. How the 20 per cent escaped mortgage I will explain hereafter.

Pittsburg county is in error. Nagle, P. S. *The Tenant Farmer*, September 1912.

Use this table or the Excel file below to learn about the **prevalence** of tenant farming in Oklahoma during early statehood. Use the table to determine whether the number of owned farms is greater or lesser than the number of farms operated by tenants. Assign a color for the counties with more owned farms than tenant farms and a different color for the counties with fewer owned farms than tenant farms. Use that data to create a map.

Don't forget to include a title and a map key!



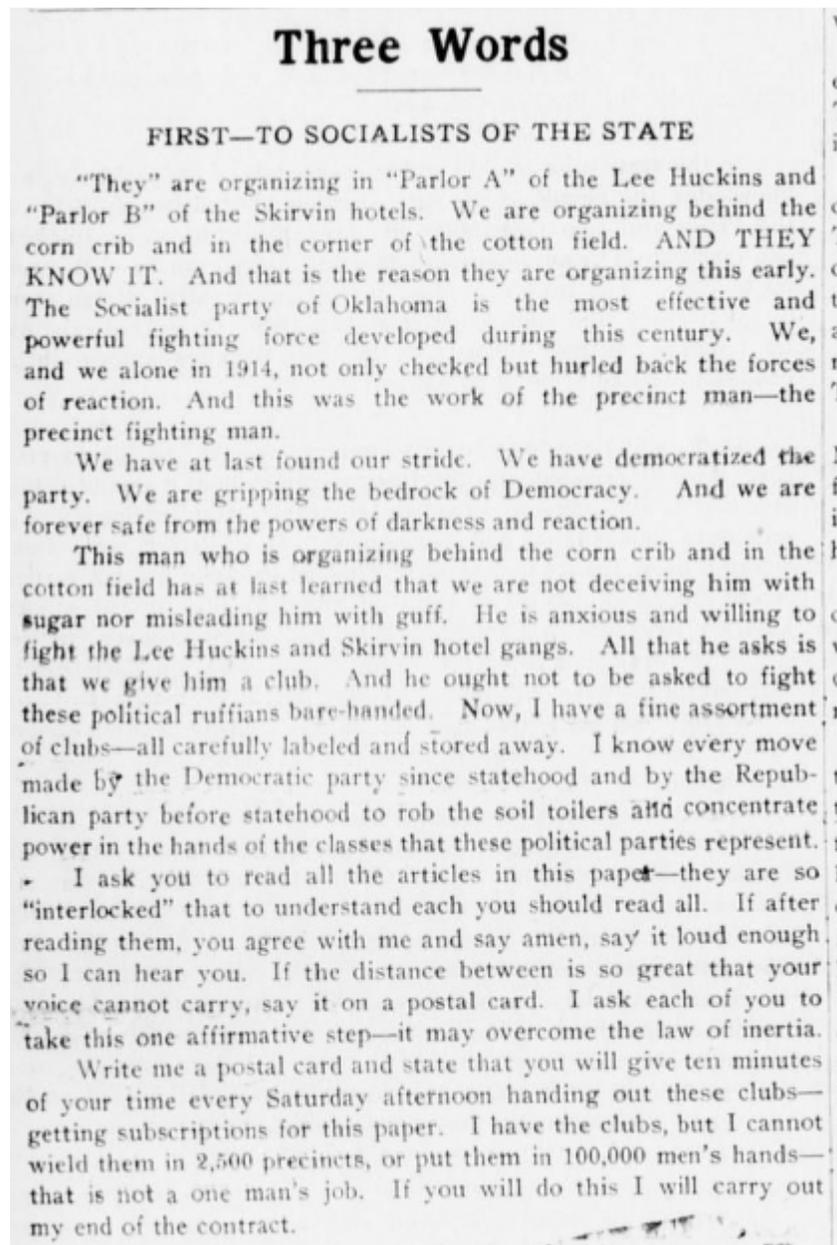
Do you notice any patterns as you look at this information spatially that were not obvious on the table? Can you draw any conclusions about farming in Oklahoma based on this data? What questions do you have about farming in Oklahoma after creating this map?

Did you know that Oklahoma still has tenant farmers?

Check out this report from the Oklahoma State University County Extension: extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/oklahoma-cropland-rental-rates-2020-21.html.

Analysis: What does it mean to be a responsible citizen?

The idea of citizenship has changed over time, in particular, who should have it and what it means. At the end of the 19th century, unions, farm organizations, and the Socialist Party formed into large, national organizations. Each of these groups developed ideas about citizenship that went beyond voting every couple of years. Read the excerpts below and find examples of what they believed good citizens should and should not do.



Nagle, P. S., *The Tenant Farmer*, May 1915.

THE FOUR FATAL BLUNDERS MADE BY THE FARMER'S UNION

The Farmer's Union made four fatal blunders: (a) admitting the landlord, banker and political newspaper men to membership. An industrial organization must be a class organization—and this strictly; (b) Excluding the Negro farmer and making no effort to organize him. When the organized white farmer held his cotton, the unorganized black farmer sold his and broke the pool; (c) Using a press financed by the exploiters. The farmer under the existing order is a goose to be plucked; and it is the business of the county seat newspapers to keep him from squawking while being plucked—and they are paid for this—they get a handful of the feathers; (d) The plan of co-operation was unworkable. In fact, it was not co-operation at all except in name. It was born of the economic necessity of the landlord and farmer banker class of the South.

Nagle, P. S., *The Tenant Farmer*, May 1915.

Things citizens should do:

Things citizens should not do:

Summarizing: Cotton

Summarization is an important communication skill. Summarizing means providing a shortened version of a longer piece. When you summarize, you are trying to give the reader or listener a basic statement about the main ideas, or the most important information from a longer work. It is important that your summary is accurate and that you do not add information. You also need to put it in your own words. A good way to practice is to read an article or watch a video and write down the main ideas. Once you have the key information, you can put it in your own words. Try to practice your summarization skills as you learn about cotton:

The importance of cotton as a crop to the United States can not be overstated. Cotton production caused many Southerners to enslave a large number of people and forced them to work on cotton plantations. The desire for land to expand cotton production was a major reason for the removal of American Indian Tribal Nations in the southeastern portion of the United States. The wealth generated from cotton as a cash crop resulted in the capital, or money that can be invested, to start the industrialization of the country.

The History of Cotton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsz1PA-JYKU>

Growing and Harvesting Cotton

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICidlr_pbl4

Life on the Plantation as Told by Elvin Shields

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hof7n6VdiEE>

Now, take your notes and create a summary of these videos. You can write your own summary or present your summary in a video.



Cotton headed to the gin in Muskogee, Oklahoma, c. 1899 (14542.0, Heye Foundation Collection, OHS)

(By P. S. Nagle)

The momentous day in the life of the tenant farmer is not the day of his marriage or of his birth or the birth of his children. It is not Christmas or the Fourth of July. It is a day fixed by the statute. It is "Movin' Day."

On this day, if so ordered by his landlord, he must put all his earthly effects in a wagon with his wife and children—take to the highway and hunt for another "home"—a wagon tramp

He cannot leave the county with his earthly effects without the written consent of the bank that holds the mortgage. If he should, he goes to jail.

And the new "home" that he goes to is a one-room shack with a lean-to decorated with woodpecker holes in the roof and rat holes in the parlor floor

And in his new "home" he works from can to can't—from the time he can see until the time he can't see. He is an eight hour man. He works eight hours in the morning and eight in the afternoon.

And his wife works four hours at "shack work" and ten hours in "choppin" and "pickin."

And every child over six years of age takes a vacation from September the 1st to January the 1st, and from April the 1st to September the 1st.

And their play-ground during the first vacation is the dreary cotton field. And these children pick cotton for a brutal and ruthless landlord class until the blood drips from the ends of their fingers. And in the cotton field they take their second vacation. "choppin" and "hoein". And if caught in a high wind the rags they wear would whip them to death.

Nagle, P.S. "An Eventful Day in the Life of the Tenant Farmer", *The Tenant Farmer*, October 1, 1914.

Glossary

activism: the action of advocating for political and social change.

agribusiness: highly commercialized form of agriculture dominated by large corporations and high-tech practices, which often excludes and pushes out smaller farmers.

agriculture: the science and practice of farming, including the growth of crops and raising of livestock.

Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA): law passed in 1933 as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, which paid farmers to reduce their production in the hopes of reducing supply and increasing prices. It played a large part in the end of tenancy, as it prompted widespread tenant evictions.

apolitical: not involved in politics.

aspirations: goals, intent towards.

camaraderie: a sense of community and shared goals.

cash crops: a crop specifically grown to be sold, such as cotton, wheat, or corn; cash crops are often grown in large amounts and as a farmer's main or sole crop.

collateral: physical objects such as a home or livestock promised in case the borrower fails to pay back a loan.

collective: shared by a group of people. In farm business, can either refer to a resource such as a grain elevator that is partially owned by lots of farmers giving them all access, or to a situation where multiple farmers pool their crops to be sold together for a better price.

communal: similar to collective. Something a whole community can share.

conspiracy: illegal or destructive action planned in secret.

constituents: the people or groups a political party caters to.

cooperative: similar to collective, but more strictly business centered. A cooperative business is one that is owned and operated by its members, granting them all equal access to the services or profits provided.

credit system: loans and how they are administered. For example, a banker might give someone \$100 with the condition that they pay back that \$100 in two years, plus an extra \$20 as interest. A different banker might ask for an additional \$40, making it a high-interest loan and potentially a bad deal.

crop-lien system: a system in which farmers would promise merchants or store owners a certain portion of their crops in exchange for seed, machinery, groceries, and other necessities. If, at harvest time, they couldn't pay back the crops they had promised, their debt rolled over.

crops: plants grown on a farm; in particular the final product that is harvested.

currency: money, especially physical money.

defaulted: when someone can't pay back their loan.

destitute: extremely poor and in bad living conditions with little chance for significant improvement.

discrimination: unfair treatment or exclusion due to a person's identity or background.

displacement: when a large group of people leave or are forced out of their homes, often without a clear destination.

disproportionately: out of proportion, at a higher rate than would be expected.

diverse: representing a wide variety of people or things.

doctrine of nonviolence: belief that groups or movements should never engage in violence.

draft: a policy enacted in wartime that requires people to go to war and fight, potentially against their will.

drought: a period marked by significantly little rainfall, which can lead to widespread plant die-off and other issues.

ecological: relating to the environment or the natural world.

exploitative: unfairly taking advantage of someone or something, often for financial gain.

external: coming from outside.

The Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League: a group formed in 1922 by people from many different backgrounds with the primary goal of getting Jack Walton elected as governor of Oklahoma. Walton's impeachment, as well as differing goals and ideas between the groups different members, resulted in the league's collapse.

The Farmers' Alliance: an 1870s farmer advocacy movement that argued for free and unlimited silver, in addition to establishing cooperative business. Technically, it comprised three separate groups: one for the North, one for the South, and one for African American farmers due to discrimination by the Southern branch.

The Farmers' Union: a specific group formed in 1902, which catered to the needs of all farmers through cooperative businesses and community building. It embraced tenants and farm owners alike and remains in operation today.

farmer unions: general term for unions formed by and for farmers.

Farm Security Administration: agency established in 1937 as part of the New Deal that provided some farmers with loans, including some intended to help tenant farmers buy their land.

government regulation: when the government involves itself in commerce by giving business rules they have to follow.

grain elevator: storage building for grain. Necessary for farmers to sell their crop, but could be expensive with owners charging high rates for usage. Cooperative grain elevators—elevators owned by the farmers who used it—became a popular tool of farmer advocacy groups and unions.

The Grange: one of the first farmer advocacy groups in America, formed in 1867. In addition to establishing cooperative grain elevators, Grange advocates succeeded in getting a number of “Granger Laws” passed, which regulated railroad rates and increased the government’s ability to regulate commerce.

Great Depression: a period of great economic hardship that gripped the nation in the late 1920s, lasting until the late 1930s. Many people lost their jobs or couldn’t afford to support their family. It ended only with the implementation of New Deal aid policies and the start of World War II.

Green Corn Rebellion: a 1917 armed uprising organized by the Working Class Union in central Oklahoma to protest the World War I draft. Although it was quickly suppressed, it became national news and resulted in the collapse of the WCU, in addition to the Oklahoma Socialist Party.

hierarchy: a clear ranking of authority, with various levels and degrees of power.

high interest loans: loans where the borrower must pay back the initial amount, plus a high portion of the original amount as interest. For example, if someone took out a loan of \$100 with 40 percent interest, they would have to pay back \$140.

industrial: having to do with industry. Industrial labor tends to be urban and often involves factories or manufacturing.

inflation: when you can buy less with the same amount of money due to a changing economy.

inhabitants: people who live in one place or area.

interracial: including people of different races.

labor advocacy: activism concerning workers’ rights.

landlordism: a system where one person owns land (the landlord) and rents it out to others (the tenants).

landlords: landowners who rent a portion of their land to tenants.

lobbying: advocating for political change, usually by going straight to politicians or lawmakers.

malnutrition: lacking nutrition, which can lead to many health issues.

merchant: someone who sells things, often in a store.

migrants: people who move from one place to another.

modernization: the process of adapting to the modern world, driven by changing technology, cultural ideas, and economic trends. Largely prompted by the Industrial Revolution, modernization transformed the United States from a rural, agrarian nation to one that was increasingly urban and mechanized. However, some were left behind and others saw their way of life disappear completely, leading to social and political angst.

New Deal: a group of programs introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s to combat the Great Depression. Primarily focused on providing aid and improving the economy, many New Deal programs tried to help struggling farmers, with varying degrees of success.

obscurity: no longer relevant or active.

Oklahoma Cotton Growers Association: an organization established in 1922 that allowed cotton farmers to pool their cotton so that it could be sold for higher prices, with this higher profit being split amongst the members. It proved unpopular with tenants and landlords, but remained in operation for many years as a successful cooperative enterprise.

The Oklahoma Renters' Union: a group that emerged in 1902, advocating for radical social and political reorganization. Faded away fairly quickly due to landlords refusing to rent to members of the organization, as well as the organizations refusal to admit Black or American American Indian tenants.

organized labor: when workers join together and advocate for themselves, forming one social or political force.

platform: the issues and beliefs that a political party advocates for.

plots: the land someone inhabits or farms.

political party: a political group formed by people with similar beliefs and interests to accomplish certain goals by getting like-minded people elected to political office.

Populism: a political movement that emerged in the 1890s advocating for power to be placed in the hands of the people. Very focused on the needs of farmers and the working class, and the support of these groups launched them onto the national political stage in the Election of 1896. The loss of their candidate cause the movement to crumble and the party to disappear.

prevalence: how common something is.

protest: to speak or act against the existing political or social structure.

radical: politically extreme.

railroad rates: fees charged by railroads to transport farmers' goods.

recruitment: getting people to join your organization.

redistribution of land: a belief that land should be taken from landowners and split equally among all people.

rendered obsolete: when something is no longer necessary due to modernization or other factors.

savvy: intelligent, wise, especially in relation to business.

Socialist Party: a political party founded in the United States in 1902 that found moderate success amongst working class Americans before being suppressed at the start of World War I. It is based on socialism, a political ideology loosely advocating for community ownership of businesses and land.

soil depletion: when the soil loses nutrients and becomes less healthy due to overfarming.

Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: a union popular during the Great Depression in the south and southwest that sought to improve conditions for tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

speculators: businessmen who would buy lots of land and sell it off for higher prices to poorer settlers. They played a large role in the development of the American West.

stewardship: taking care of the land. Implies some sense of personal, if not financial, ownership.

subversive: undermining convention or authority.

tenants: people who live on land in exchange for a fee or a portion of their crop paid to the landowner.

theoretical: only in theory, not in real life.

unions: groups formed by workers to create change in their workplaces or industries. Members pay dues that support social or political action.

unsustainable: not possible in the long term.

Working Class Union: a tenant-advocacy group founded in 1913, distinguished for its use of violence in achieving its goals. This strategy culminated in the Green Corn Rebellion of 1917 protesting the WWI draft. This unsuccessful uprising resulted in the group's collapse.

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