“LAY DOWN THE SHOVEL AND HOE”: THE DELTA COUNCIL AND COTTON MECHANIZATION IN THE YAZOO-MISSISSIPPI DELTA, 1942-1955

by

DEVIN MICHAEL JEROME

(Under the Direction of Cindy Hahamovitch)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the efforts of local planters, economic elites, government officials, and agricultural scientists in remaking the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta in the aftermath of WWII. Spurred to action by increased labor costs caused by the mass-outmigration of black farmworkers, local reformers worked through a regional development organization called the Delta Council to pursue a shift from labor-intensive to mechanized capital-intensive cotton production in the region. On one hand, they sought to improve production methods through the integration of cutting-edge science and technology. On the other, they pursued initiatives to engineer the region’s black workforce to better suit a new emerging economy. These reformers aimed to perpetuate the region’s Jim Crow status-quo beyond the economic relations underpinning it and against the rising expectations of the region’s black residents. Although Delta reformers promised that mechanization would create shared prosperity, prosperity only materialized for the region’s ruling elite.

INDEX WORDS: 20th Century United States, Agriculture, Capitalism, Labor, Mississippi, , Race, African-American History, Jim Crow, Science and Technology, Cotton, , Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, Mechanization, Migration, Business History

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B.A., University of Mississippi, 2017

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2020

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August 2020

DEDICATION

For Gracie.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A master's thesis takes a village, so I have many people to thank. First, I want to thank Grace for empowering me to pursue my dreams. I wouldn't be here without you nor would I want to be. Likewise, I want to thank my family — parents, grandparents, siblings and more — who instilled in me a love of learning and who were always willing to make personal sacrifices to ensure that I had access to the best education possible. I hope you share in my success and claim it as your own. It belongs to you too. The same goes for a number of wonderful friends who have supported me along the way. If you're reading this by choice, I mean you.

A master's thesis takes a great deal of expertise, a resource I'm personally in very short supply of, but of which a few historians have shared generously with me. First, I must thank Dr. Cindy Hahamovitch, who has shepherded my project to fruition from a nebulous interest in my maternal grandmother's homeland. Dr. Hahamovitch has been everything I've needed in a thesis director over these past two years. She's been patient, resourceful, creative, firm, demanding, and kind, and all in the right measure and at the right time. I'm also grateful to Dr. Scott Nelson, who taught my first research seminar at UGA. His expertise in project organization made this thesis possible and he broke me of some (but not all) of my worst writing habits early on. As a member of my committee, he's invested considerable time and energy toward making this all makes sense for me and my readers. I want to thank Dr. Oscar Chamosa for his work on my committee and for designing and teaching a directed readings course on rural Mexican history for me. Our weekly conversations that semester influenced this project immeasurably. Finally, I want to thank the entire faculty and staff of the history department at the UGA for their various

contributions big and small. I especially want to thank Dr. Chana Kai Lee, Dr. John Short, Dr. Daniel Rood, Dr. Stephen Mihm, Dr. Brian Drake, and Laureen Kane for their considerable contributions to this project and to my postgraduate education so far.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to a number of professors at the University of Mississippi for making the pursuit of history possible for me. Thanks to Dr. Jarod Roll, who taught me to love labor history and who believed I could be a historian before I did. Thanks also to Dr. Marc Lerner and the late Dr. John Neff who taught me amazing undergraduate classes at UM and who vastly overstated my qualifications in letters of recommendation for graduate school. I would never have had this wonderful opportunity without their support and the support of other UM historians.

This thesis draws on research from four archives and I'm grateful to the entire staffs at Archives and Special Collections at the University of Mississippi, the Special Collections Department at Mississippi State University, the Charles W. Capps, Jr. Archives and Museum at Delta State University and the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I would especially like to thank Emily Jones at Delta State and Dr. Leigh McWhite at the University of Mississippi for helping me navigate the collections they manage. They showed uncommon generosity in lending me their labor and expertise and this project is stronger for it.

Finally, I would like to thank my classmates at the University of Georgia for the constant intellectual stimulation, the reading suggestions, the workshop sessions, and the sense of community. It truly does take a village, and I'm immensely proud to be a member of this one. I would not trade our journey for anything and I wish all of you the best in your current and future endeavors.

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"Lay Down the Hammer and Hoe"

Introduction

"The lessons of the past should provide adequate proof that mechanization of any industry or commodity has never resulted in anything other than progress — progress, in the long run, for management, labor and the consumer."[1] So spoke a tall bespectacled man to a room full of farm equipment industry representatives, cotton planters, scientists, and land-grant college administrators on a sweltering Delta evening in the summer of 1947. The man was Oscar Goodbar Johnston, 68, cotton planter and president of the National Cotton Council of America. The occasion was a banquet for the Beltwide Cotton Mechanization Conference at the Hotel Greenville in the Mississippi Delta. American cotton was on the edge of revolution and the men gathered saw themselves as its vanguard.[2]

Johnston's speech was one of many events at the National Cotton Council's first ever Beltwide Cotton Mechanization Conference. The two-day conference also featured a speech by Mississippi State College president Dr. Fred T. Mitchell; talks by International Harvester Company President John L. McCaffrey; observations from agricultural experiment station directors; technology field demonstrations at the Delta Branch Experiment Station in Stoneville, and a panel discussion on increasing the incomes of farm workers.

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[1] Oscar Johnston, "The Cotton Industry's Responsibility in Mechanization," in *Report of the Proceedings of the Beltwide Cotton Mechanization Conference* (National Cotton Council of America: Stoneville and Greenville, Mississippi, 1947), 34.

[2] "Council Told Mechanization Brings Prosperity," *The Greenwood Commonwealth*, August 19, 1947.

An eager crowd gathered in a Delta field the morning after Johnston's speech to watch engineer W.E Meek's demonstrate twelve machines, two planes, and one helicopter at the Delta Branch Experiment Station in nearby Stoneville. Before the demonstrations, the humble engineer gave a short speech in which he previewed his demonstrations, summarized recent scientific advances in mechanization, and joked that he was nearly too bashful to speak at all. Nevertheless, he continued, sure that he saw "too many . . . ex-bosses in the audience" to abandon the rest of his speech.[3] His demonstration of three separate flamethrowers — a flame cultivator, a ditch-bank burner, and a torch for late-stage vine and weed control — won especially high praise from the audience. After Meek completed the field demonstrations, the delegation retreated from the fields to the main highway to watch Meek pilot two planes and a helicopter. A photograph of Meek flying the helicopter low above the research station's cotton fields while applying chemical defoliant to the cotton below adorned the fourth page of the nearby *Leland Progress* under the title "Dusting the Modern Way."[4]

Although the conference was intended as an essential step forward for the entire cotton industry, the event was an especially important showcase for planters in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, a low-lying floodplain that spanned parts of eighteen counties in the northwestern corner of the state. The Delta Council, a regional development association composed largely of cotton producers, served as local sponsors for the event. Banquet speaker Oscar Johnston had long been a spokesman for king cotton. He helped found the Delta Council and the National Cotton Council, all while managing the largest cotton plantation in the United States in nearby Scott. The experiment station that hosted the event symbolized the Delta's investment and faith in

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[3] W.E. Meek, "Research and Present Accomplishments in Mechanization," in *Report of the Proceedings of the Beltwide Cotton Mechanization Conference*, 26.
[4] Ibid., 26-31; "Dusting the Modern Way," *Leland Progress*, November 27, 1947, 4.

scientific progress. In the late 1940s, Delta planters understood that a scientific revolution in cotton agriculture was imminent and they intended to guide it.

Cotton production was labor-intensive, a fact demonstrated by the resurgence and spread of chattel slavery as a labor system in the American South after the invention of the cotton gin, which mechanized the separation of seeds from plants. Ironically, cotton's first mechanized revolution created more demand for land and labor, leading to the westward expansion of the slave plantation regime to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and beyond. Despite the abolition of slavery and gradual improvements in production processes and plant genetics, cotton harvesting continued to be done entirely by hand until the advent of the Second World War.[5] Slaves became tenant farmers and sharecroppers but the planting, weeding, and harvesting work remained largely unchanged. Early twentieth-century cotton planters found mechanized production an unnecessarily costly measure in a society rich in labor and poor in capital. This equation began to change in the during World War II when rural farmworkers left the countryside in large numbers to fight in foreign fields and to seek economic opportunities in industrial centers. Almost none returned.[6] Those who left increased bargaining power and wages for the farmworkers who remained behind. Planters who feared that their future profits would be squeezed by higher labor costs and competition from foreign cotton and synthetic fibers began to see mechanization as the ticket to securing high profits. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Delta planters and their state allies attempted to transform the cotton industry completely, from the plant itself to the

[5] On the ties between "Second Slavery" and Cotton Production in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta see Alan Olmstead and Paul Rhode, "Biological Innovation and Productivity Growth in the Antebellum Cotton Economy" *Journal of Economic History No. 68* (Dec., 2008), 1123-117; Anthony Kaye, "The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World" *Journal of Southern History* 75*,* (August 2009), 627-650; Scott Reynolds Nelson, "Who Put Their Capitalism in My Slavery" *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, (June 2015), 289-310.
[6] In 1940, the Delta's population numbered 650,426. By 1950 it had fallen to 607,741 with high natural increase (birthrate minus death rate) partially offsetting massive outmigration However, high rates of natural increase obscure high migration rates in the overall numbers. From 1940 to 1950, the state of Mississippi lost 391,280 residents from net migration but only 4,882 total population.

people who labored in the region's fields. This thesis follows the Delta's transformation in the decade-plus following the end of WWII. It investigates how reformers and business interests brought mechanization about, how agricultural laborers reacted to it, and what the displacement of a racialized agricultural workforce meant to the making of a region so long defined by it.[7]

I argue that insiders managed this agricultural revolution in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Global forces shaped the conditions that encouraged cotton mechanization, but local actors led and directed the transformation. Historians have traditionally and correctly understood the region's cotton planters as conservative and reactive, but Delta planters in the wake of WWII adopted and espoused surprisingly cutting-edge ideologies about scientific agriculture. They believed in scientific research, scientific management, and a scientific ordering of their society. They continued to lobby for their interests, as they had in earlier periods, but they also began creating detailed plans and implementing programs to bring about a new vision of capitalist modernity in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Such plans included engineering the region's workforce alongside plants and machines—to preserve Jim Crow into a new era of thoroughly modern cotton production. Delta planters discussed cotton mechanization as a revolution and spoke of themselves as revolutionaries. This rhetoric, however, belied their conservative aims and efforts to preserve Jim Crow. The mechanization of cotton agriculture was a revolution, but planters and their state allies sought to manage it tightly rather than bring about its most radical consequences.

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[7] Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 3-22; Robert Baker Highsaw, *The Delta Looks Forward* (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1949), 100; William Kling, "Report of the Fact-Finding Committee on the Development of Mississippi Resources," (Jackson, Miss, 1957), 34.

This study focuses on the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, a large low-lying floodplain that owes its rich black soil to the persistent flooding of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers.[8] The Delta, as one native son put it, "begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg."[9] No poetic equivalent exists for the east-west dimensions of the region, but the Mississippi River forms the region's meandering western border and the east is marked by raised bluffs that run parallel to the river, approximately five miles east of the river at the Tennessee state line and extending up to thirty miles from the river at its widest point near Greenwood.[10] Part of a larger Delta region that includes traditional cotton-producing regions along the Mississippi river in Missouri, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta was notorious for having an remarkably oppressive system of Jim Crow. The 18-county region had 247 "racial terror lynchings" between 1877 and 1950, representing nearly 38 percent of Mississippi's nation-leading 654 reported lynchings.[11] In 1943 sociologist Frank Alexander observed of the Delta: "there are two very distinct caste groups - white and Negro" and "patterns of racial segregation are strictly adhered to."[12] During this period of technological upheaval, Delta planters went to extraordinary lengths to preserve the region's racial hierarchy. Delta planters also played an outsized role in the mechanization of cotton in the Delta and

[8] "Mississippi Delta" and "Delta" also refer to a broader region that includes the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta. I use the three interchangeably here for Mississippi-Yazoo Delta unless otherwise noted.
[9] David Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1948), 12. The Peabody Hotel occupied a culturally significant space as the base of operations for cotton business in the region. It was just down Union avenue from the cotton exchange. In 1936, Oscar Johnston and important cotton men from across the south and southwest formed the National Cotton Council of America in the famed hotel.
[10] This study employs the use of the Delta Council's definition of the Delta region. Statistics include the entirety of the 18 following counties unless otherwise stated: Bolivar, Carrol, Coahoma, Desoto, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, LeFlore, Panola, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tate, Tunica, Warren, Washington, and Yazoo.
[11] Equal Justice Initiative, "Racial Terror Lynchings," *Lynching in America*, accessed May 13, 2020, https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/explore
[12] Frank D. Alexander, "Cultural Reconnaissance Survey of Coahoma County, Miss," (USDA: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, December 1944), 17-18, in the Arthur Franklin Raper Papers, Box 737.

nationally, especially through the National Cotton Council. For these reasons and more, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is an ideal subject for the study of cotton transformation.

Historians have consistently argued that the invention and widespread implementation of the mechanical cotton harvester from the 1940s to the 1960s precipitated a veritable revolution in the American South. Historian Gavin Wright wrote that "the mechanization of the cotton harvest was the dominant regional development," marking the elimination of a distinct "colonial economy" in the South and long-awaited integration into the national economy.[13] By eliminating the most significant bottleneck of the production cycle, the mechanical harvester made possible a transition from labor-intensive to capital intensive production that resulted in increased yields, increased labor productivity, land consolidation, labor displacement, and urbanization among many other consequences associated with modernized capitalist agriculture. In 1955 Merle Prunty, Jr. coined the term "neoplantation" to describe this ascendant form of agriculture. Since then, a number of historians have contributed to a growing body of knowledge on cotton's post-WWII revolution in the South. Some historians have written overarching synthetic histories of this transformation, while others have maintained a broad regional focus, but engaged in narrower debates.[14] My thesis moves to a more granular level. Instead of lingering over well-trod territory, I seek to determine how the Delta's reformers brought mechanization to fruition in the

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[13] Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 241.

[14] For the former, see Wright, *Old South, New South*; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985);* Jack Temple Kirby*, Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987);* an intense matter of debate for the latter is whether cotton mechanization replaced or displaced black southern labor. On this debate see Wayne Grove and Craig Heinicke, "Better Opportunities or Worse? The Demise of Cotton Harvest Labor" J*ournal of Economic History* 63 No. 3 (Sep. 2003), 736-767; Willis Peterson and Yoav Kislev, "The Cotton Harvester in Retrospect: Labor Displacement or Replacement" *Journal of Economic History* 46 No. 1 (1986), 199-216; Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

Yazoo-Mississippi Delta's cotton industry and what its consequences were. I focus primarily on the efforts of powerful cotton planters and their allies in government who went well beyond simply buying and using farm machinery in their efforts to manage agricultural revolution in the region. Working through several institutional channels, Delta planters ensured the development and transmission of techniques and technologies such as chemical fertilizer, work-skills training, and plant genetics that made full mechanization possible. At the same time, Delta planters worked to reengineer the region's black workforce through education, health, and industrialization initiatives. Why this happened is quite clear: the Second World War created unusual labor demand that spurred planters to shrug off their traditional resistance to change. But how it happened is less well known. This paper will reveal how planters transformed their industry and how black workers in the Delta reacted to it.

My thesis is in close conversation with two very different explorations of this transformation in the Mississippi Delta. Donald Holley's *The Second Great Emancipation* places emphasis on the development, mass-production, and adoption of the moistened spindle-type cotton harvester. First invented by John Rust in 1928, and finally mass-produced by International Harvester in 1949, this machine was the first to harvest cotton at a competitive cost in labor-plentiful regions like the Southeast and Mississippi River Valley. Holley argues that this technological innovation, in large part, "freed the Cotton South from the plantation system and its attendant evils — cheap labor, ignorance, and Jim Crow discrimination."[15] This interpretation, however, minimizes the fact that black farm workers who left the Delta for better opportunities elsewhere were not rescued by mechanization. Instead, they helped bring mechanization about. Just as emancipation during the Civil War occurred largely as a result of enslaved people's

[15] Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), xiv.

efforts to free themselves, mechanization occurred after World War II because so many black sharecroppers saw an opportunity to find better paying work in the North or in Southern cities and seized it. Holley also argues throughout the book that mechanization and its consequences were overwhelmingly good. In the preface he asserts, "The transition from hand-picking to machine-picking resulted in improvements in the lives of everyone who depended on cotton for a living."[16] This optimistic interpretation glosses over many very real consequences of mechanization for the Delta's black majority, for those who left and especially for those who stayed. Although mechanization meant increased profits for the region's planter class, it created a cataclysmic reduction in the number of jobs in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Meanwhile, the region's few black independent farmers were disproportionately pushed aside by farm consolidation, unable to afford heavy capital investment. In 1945 there were 210,737 cotton farms in Mississippi. By 1959 only 77,390 remained. This thesis does not gloss over the less-palatable facets of agricultural transformation for the region.

Rather than seeing mechanization as universally welcomed, Nan Woodruff views it as the source of conflict between black farmworkers and white planters.[17] Woodruff convincingly argues that "Delta planters in the 1940s wrestled with how best to modernize the plantation economy while preserving a society based on a definition of citizenship that excluded a majority of the population." To accomplish this, "they mixed paternalism with business acumen, seeking to reform the plantation without changing the power relations that defined it."[18] I arrive at many of the same conclusions as Woodruff, but my thesis takes a more focused look at the substantial

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[16] Ibid, xii.
[17] Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization and Civil Rights in the 1940s," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (May 1994): 263-284; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003)
[18] Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization and Civil Rights in the 1940s," 263.

role Delta planters played in bringing about mechanization. In Woodruff's work, mechanization is an exogenous force that becomes an avenue for race and class struggle. She describes the Delta Council as a "forum" for planter debates about the Delta's future, but crucially misses that the Delta Council functioned a vehicle for mechanization, as well.[19] Some of the most important cotton mechanization research in the U.S. happened in Stoneville, Mississippi, facilitated and championed by Delta planters. Moreover, Delta planters were responsible for crafting ideological and rhetorical messaging for cotton mechanization nationwide. They did not merely react in preservation of Jim Crow during this fundamental economic transformation, they attempted to engineer a cotton revolution and preserve Jim Crow simultaneously.

Who or what was behind the mid-twentieth century cotton revolution has long been debated. Most studies of agricultural transformation in the rural South cite the role of the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Agency (AAA), suggesting that federal actors transformed a South resistant to change.[20] Planters came around eventually, but the feds were the initials instigators. In *Rural Worlds Lost,* for example, historian Jack Temple Kirby describes this state-aided process of agricultural modernization as "the federal road to rural development;" defined by grower organization, cooperation with government agencies (especially the USDA), and effective lobbying by planters. From the New Deal on, cotton planters in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta collaborated closely with government agencies to maximize private profit. From 1933 to 1936 the federal government paid $2.5 million to Mississippi planters for cotton acreage reductions, and Oscar Johnston, who managed the Delta's largest plantation, served as a high-

[19] Ibid, 264.
[20] See Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War*; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880*; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South*, *1920-1960*; and Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration and How They Shaped the Modern South.*

level administrator in the AAA. Although historians have rightfully focused on the novel intervention of the federal government during this early period, cotton's transformation also required and received sustained support from state and local governments. To this point, Yazoo-Mississippi Delta planters held considerable sway in state government, where powerful planter-politicians like Walter Sillers, Jr, (who served as Speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives from 1944 to 1966) advocated fiercely for the interests of cotton planters and appropriated significant sums toward cotton research and development.[21] Delta planters frequently acted in the capacity of state officials, blurring the line between state and planter. This study pays close attention to the role of the state and the relationships among various government entities and Delta reformers during WWII and its aftermath.

Delta planters worked primarily through two local institutions to bring about and manage mechanization in the region: the Delta Council and the Delta Branch Experiment Station. Leading planters and businessmen formed the Delta Council in 1938. By 1948 it counted 3,000 dues-paying members, many of them powerful government officials. Primarily a lobbying body, the Delta Council won significant state and federal appropriations for the study and development of cotton mechanization, however, it also functioned as a clearinghouse and distributor of scientific advances in agriculture. The Delta Council's Advisory Research Committee charged itself with suggesting studies to the Delta Branch Experiment Station and disseminating its findings to the public. Founded in 1905 as a branch of the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station at Mississippi State College (later Mississippi State University in Starkville), the Delta Branch Experiment Station in Stoneville had long been the region's scientific focal point. During

[21] Benjamin O. Sperry, "Walter Sillers and His Fifty Years Inside Mississippi Politics," *Mississippi History Now*, accessed June 5, 2020, http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/356/walter-sillers-and-his-fifty-years-inside-mississippi-politics

World War II, the Experiment Station engaged in key research on the mechanical picker. After the war, the Experiment Station shifted efforts toward complementary technologies like pesticides, chemical defoliants, and flamethrowers. Many Delta Branch scientists, most notably Charles R. Sayre, moved into the private sector after World War II. Although these two institutions did not by any means constitute the totality of planter mechanization efforts, my analysis recognizes their centrality to cotton mechanization.

Delta planters actively worked toward cotton's mechanization as part of a conscious modernization project. They began this work in earnest during the Second World War, but wartime steel shortages delayed the mass production and diffusion of harvesting technology. In the immediate postwar period, planters and their allies developed and nurtured something akin to "high-modernist" ideologies surrounding the transformation of cotton production.[22] They understood that the mechanization of cotton agriculture would have profound consequences for the region and took advantage of the opportunity to transform their society comprehensively, but in ways that preserved Jim Crow. One planter argued that the region's transformation would bring "higher standards of living, better educational opportunities, improved health, and greater freedom for economic development." Another concurred, "Mechanization is progress and progress is inevitable."[23] Aware of the potential benefits of scientific rationalization well before the widespread adoption of capital-intensive production, Delta reformers did not mechanize until

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[22] James C. Scott has called high modernism, "a strong . . . even muscle-bound, version of self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws." James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 4. In a committee-wide discussion of this piece, Dr. Nelson suggested the term "low modernism" to describe the relatively diffused nature of this ideology compared to James Scott's subjects of inquiry. Many thanks to Dr. Nelson and Dr. Chamosa for wonderful discussion on how to best incorporate this concept, which I intend to do in this project's next iteration.

[23] Robert Baker Highsaw, *The Delta Looks Forward*, (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1949) v; Oscar Johnston, "Will the Machine Ruin the South?" *Saturday Evening Post*, 1947, 95, in Delta and Pine Land Company Records, OS Box 43.

it made business sense to do so. Once begun, they understood mechanization as a developmental imperative, and embraced it with an optimism bordering on utopian.

The Delta's technocratic reformers understood that mechanization would lead to a wholesale revolution in the region's political, social, and economic realities and in the postwar period they made comprehensive plans to guide these transformations. The Delta's reformers believed that a remaking of the harvest would also require a remaking of the human harvester. Planters simultaneously sought to preserve Jim Crow while modernizing black labor. They invested in segregated black education, most notably by founding a vocational college in Itta Bena and "tractor schools" across the region. They engaged in numerous public health campaigns under the assumption that healthier workers would be more productive than unhealthy workers. Delta planters also sought to attract industrial employers to raise the region's standard-of-living. They hoped that they could turn the region's agricultural workers into industrial workers who could provide peak agricultural labor when called upon. Some of these initiatives could individually be categorized as successful, schools were built, public healthcare was expanded, and industrial employers relocated to the region. As a whole, however, they failed to fully mitigate many of mechanized cotton's revolutionary consequences. Rural black labor continued to leave the region at high rates throughout the fifties and sixties and living conditions and incomes did not improve dramatically for those who stayed behind. The utopian promises of capitalist modernity never materialized for the Delta's black majority. They were never meant to.

Transforming the Harvest: Wartime

World War II changed the world in innumerable ways; in the Mississippi Delta it created labor conditions that finally made the mechanization of cotton in the region economically

feasible. With outmigration at an all-time high, agricultural workers who remained in the region leveraged their relative scarcity for increased wages and improved working conditions. A 1943 survey of Coahoma County found that the county's population decreased from 48,333 to 44,271 from 1940 to 1943. This 8.3% decline in just three years came despite a population increase in the county seat of Clarksdale. Some of those departing the countryside settled in Delta towns like Clarksdale, Greenville, and Cleveland while others migrated northward to cities like Memphis, Chicago, and Detroit. At the same time, farm wages increased considerably. In 1943, Delta wage workers were reportedly earning two-and-a-half times their customary $1.00 per hundred pounds for cotton picking. In 1944, the average picking wage in Coahoma county rose as high as $3.25, leading a number of sharecroppers to neglect their own harvests to pick for wages. Moreover, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union ramped up organizing across the region, threatening to further erode planter control over labor.[24]

Delta planters attempted many solutions to their labor problems. They spread anti-union propaganda over the radio, employed prisoners-of-war and Mexican migrant workers, and colluded to set wage ceilings on picking rates. In 1943, Coahoma County planters gathered a number of black leaders to ascertain the causes of mass-emigration in hopes of stemming it. The black leaders produced a statement with six main causes for the outmigration: 1) pursuit of economic opportunity, 2) violence and threats of violence, 3) lack of educational opportunity, 4) loan sharks, 5) racketeering, and 6) lack of sanitary facilities. Although the white attendees were initially furious and "ready to walk out," over what they perceived as undue criticism, cooler heads prevailed, and the meeting progressed to a discussion about improving black school

[24] Woodruff, *American Congo*, 191-196; United States Employment Service and Delta Council "Report of Activities for Delta Harvest 1942" in Walter Sillers Papers, Box 29; "Current and Anticipated Rural Migration Problems," 1-3, in the Arthur Franklin Raper Papers, #3966, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Box 737.

facilities. Delta planters experimented with a wide-range of fixes for their labor troubles during WWII, but for long-term solutions to their labor problems, they turned to agricultural science and the mechanical cotton picker.[25]

Founded in 1905 as a branch of the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station at Mississippi State College (later Mississippi State University in Starkville), the Delta Branch Experiment Station in Stoneville had long been the region's scientific focal point. During World War II, the station actively promoted mechanization. In 1942 Oscar Johnston and the Delta Council formed the Research Advisory Committee to suggest valuable research projects to the experiment station and disseminate the station's research findings to the broader population. In 1944, a year after launching a crop diversification project to develop soybean agriculture in the region, the experiment station adopted a cotton mechanization project under the leadership of superintendent J.E. Adams and funded in part by the Rockefeller Foundation's General Education Board (GEB). The experiment station teamed up with International Harvester to produce an entirely machine-produced cotton crop on an 80-acre section of the Hopson Plantation in Clarksdale. In addition to its advisory role, the Delta Council supported the station financially, both directly and by lobbying governments and nonprofits (especially the GEB) for appropriations. In 1945, the Delta Council secured additional funds and equipment from "a group of cotton producers and an implement company" in order to expand the research station's work on mechanized cotton. This close public-private partnership would prove foundational in the Delta's forthcoming agricultural revolution.[26]

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[25]Hugh Gary, "The Answer is Not Unionization" (Memphis: WMC Radio, July 18, 1941) in Walter Sillers Papers, Charles W. Capps, Jr. Archives and Museum, Delta State University Libraries Box 29; "Current and Anticipated Rural Migration Problems," 7-9, in the Arthur Franklin Raper Papers, Box 737.

[26] "Delta Council History, 1938-1943," 2-6, 22; "Annual Report of Delta Council, 1943-1944," (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1944), 17, in Delta Council Collection, Box 1; "1945-1946 Annual Report of the Delta Council" 5. D&PL Papers, Box 26; "Mechanized Cotton Production Peps up Cotton Prospects" *Hattiesburg American*, Thursday, October 12, 1944.

The successful mechanization experiments at the Hopson plantation engendered a massive groundswell of enthusiasm for mechanization across the Delta. Rural sociologist Frank Alexander reported that "people from all over the Delta and even beyond are attending these demonstrations, so that literally the area has become a diffusion point for mechanization of cotton farms."[27] He explained further, "even planters who have actually increased their number of tractors and other machinery very little are possessed by the 'machine psychology' and are definitely anticipating a strong trend toward mechanization."[28] While Delta planters initially pursued mechanization as a response to labor scarcity, they quickly cultivated ideological justifications for the undertaking.

Despite planters' enthusiasm, wartime steel shortages prevented the mass-production of affordable farm machinery necessary for widespread mechanization. International Harvester had developed a spindle-type cotton picker for mass production by 1941, but in 1943, the War Production Board rejected the company's application to build a factory in Memphis for mechanical cotton harvesters. The war created labor conditions that convinced Delta planters that mechanization was necessary, but it would need to end before planters could purchase the machines needed to bring mechanization about. In 1946, the Delta Council petitioned the War Production board to "speed conversion of manufacturing concerns formerly making war machines to production of farm equipment," signaling an enthusiasm for mechanization that would accelerate throughout the postwar period.[29]

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[27] Frank D. Alexander, "Cultural Reconnaissance Survey of Coahoma County, Miss," (USDA: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, December 1944), 9, in the Arthur Franklin Raper Papers, Box 737.
[28] "Current and Anticipated Rural Migration Problems," 3.
[29] "1945-46 Annual Report of the Delta Council," (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1946), 6, in Delta and Pine Land Company Records, Box 27.

Transforming the Harvest: Postwar

In 1947, Oscar Johnston, the most powerful cotton man in the Delta, announced his full-throated support of mechanization through an article originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In "Will the Machine Ruin the South?" Johnston definitively rejected fears that the "mechanization of Dixie [would] produce violent upheaval, [and] serious dislocations in a much beloved way of life."[30] Johnston allayed fears of labor displacement from mechanization, fears that he himself had publicly expressed during the previous decade. Mechanization would replace labor rather than displacing it, he argued. Johnston recounted that before the war, some 850 tenant families lived on the Delta & Pine Land plantation, but wartime labor opportunities had resulted in the permanent vacancy of 300 homes. In this telling, mechanization was purely a reactive measure to labor shortage. Johnston outlined his plans for mechanization on the Scott plantation, framing the process as "a slow, long range program . . . being developed as rapidly" as the machines could be acquired. Still, he insisted that he planned to employ farm laborers at Scott even after mechanization's completion. Johnston acknowledged later in the article that many plantations in the cotton belt would eliminate manual labor altogether, but unless government acreage reductions limited the acreage planted to cotton (and it later would), the Scott plantation would not displace labor through mechanization. Despite Johnston's reassurances, Delta & Pine Land abandoned tenant labor completely after the 1957 season.[31] While much of Johnston's article promoted a conservative vision of cotton mechanization to allay fears of displaced labor and social upheaval, his conclusion espouses a much more utopian vision of mechanization:

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[30] Oscar Johnston, "Will the Machine Ruin the South?" *Saturday Evening Post*, 1947, 36, in Delta and Pine Land Company Records, OS Box 43.

[31] Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press), 243, fn. 50.

> The Cotton Belt is moving toward an economy in which the machine will become tremendously important. There are a thousand uncertainties . . . but out of them is coming a new South. We can't hide our heads under the covers. We can't regard mechanization as a terrible force threatening to wreck our people and upset our economy. Mechanization is progress and progress is inevitable. There may well be a difficult period of transition, but I feel sure that the final outcome will be a greater prosperity for all of us in the Cotton Belt, and better, cheaper cotton goods for all the world.[32]

Johnston's endorsement of mechanized cotton production marked a major departure from his previous reluctance to mechanization. In 1937 author Jonathan Daniel waxed poetic that "Johnston had a sense of the integration of man, animal, and earth."[33] Ten years later, the Mississippi Delta's most important cotton man threw his considerable influence behind the machines, signaling the beginning of a new era of cotton production in the region.

Figure 1: Machine versus man in Oscar Johnston's "Will the Machine Ruin the South?"

[32] Oscar Johnston, "Will the Machine Ruin the South," 36-37, 94-95. Quote from 95.
[33] Jonathan Daniel, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, (New York: MacMillan, 1938), 191.

Figure 2: A photograph of the Mays family, DP&L tenants, in Johnston's "Will the Machine Ruin the South?"

Johnston's article is representative of the renewed enthusiasm in mechanization expressed by planters in the immediate aftermath of WWII. In the spring of 1947, the Delta Council made headlines by inviting Harry Truman to the Delta for its annual meeting so that the President could "see the mechanization and cotton research being done here."[34] Although the president reneged after initially accepting the offer, he sent Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson in his stead, a prestigious guest, nonetheless.[35] In August of 1947, the National Cotton Council, the Delta Council, and the Delta Branch Experiment Center collaborated to host the first annual Beltwide Cotton Mechanization Conference, drawing over 200 planters, scientists, and implement dealers from across the country to the Mississippi Delta to discuss how to bring about a technological revolution in the industry. In 1948, International Harvester finally began mass-production of combine harvesters at its Memphis factory. That same year, Delta Council President Ellis T. Woolfolk wrote, "The Delta is entering into, at an accelerated rate, a new type of farming system. The Delta is becoming a mechanized area and one no longer dependent upon a single crop."[36] Over the next twenty years, the portion of machine-harvested cotton grew from a small fraction of the harvest to nearly all of it: from 5% in 1948 to 45% in 1956 and finally to 95% in 1967.[37]

During the postwar period, the Delta Branch Experiment Center used local contributions to expand on earlier federal and state investments in agricultural science. The federal government

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[34] Dorothy Lee Black to James Eastland, February 24, 1947, in James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 10.
[35] During his keynote address on May 8, 1947, Acheson gave a preview of the Marshall plan before an enthralled audience in the Teacher's College gymnasium in Cleveland.
[36] Ibid., 1.
[37] Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation*, 102-104; "1951 Mississippi Farm Labor" (Jackson: Mississippi Employment Security Commission, 1952), Table, IV; Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station, "Bulletin 575: Labor and Cotton on Selected Cotton Plantations in the Mississippi Delta," (State College, Mississippi: Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station, 1959), 5; Ralph Alwine, Jr., "The Changing Characteristics of the Mississippi Delta," in Department of Labor, *Farm Labor Developments* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1968), 35.

had established the U.S. Cotton Ginning laboratory at Stoneville in 1931 and established the U.S. Cotton field station in 1935. In 1948 the Delta Council helped win a $16,000 appropriation from the state of Mississippi that doubled office and laboratory space at the center. In 1951, the Delta Council raised funds locally and purchased a 466-acre tract of land, donating it to the Stoneville experiment station for crop-diversity research on heavy-clay "buckshot" soil. The accumulated investment of federal, state, and private dollars at the Stoneville experiment station was fundamental to the modernization of agriculture in the region, and a boon to local planters.[38]

Personnel exchanges formed an important facet of the relationship between Delta planters, the Delta Council, and the Delta Branch Experiment Station during this period. In 1946, mechanization project engineer Thomas L. Baggette resigned from the experiment station "to act as contact man for the development of flame cultivators" for New Holland Machinery.[39] The Experiment station hired his replacement, William Meek, from International Harvester. In 1951, Experiment Station Superintendent D.W. Miley resigned to manage the Panther Burn plantation near Leland. Dr. Grady B. Crowe served on the Delta Council's Advisory Research Committee while simultaneously conducting research on Flame Cultivators for the USDA. Several employees of the experiment station served on the Delta Council's Advisory Research Committee while employed at Stoneville. This revolving door of expertise, flowing primarily from government entities to private ones, demonstrates the increasingly symbiotic relationship between cotton planters, corporate farm supply companies, and state research promoting the modernization of farming in the Delta.[40]

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[38] "Delta Experiment Station Expands Services, Grows in Its 52 Years," Jackson, Miss., *Clarion-Ledger*, December 2, 1956, 47; "Delta Experiment Station Research Works for Delta," *Leland* (Miss.) *Progress*, October 9, 1947.
[39] "T.L. Bagette Resigns Post at Experiment Station," Greenville, Miss., *Delta Democrat-Times*, March 7, 1946.
[40] "Dr. Wm. L. Giles, New Director at Stoneville, is Soil Expert," Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, December 23, 1951; "BAE Forecasts Regional Planting," *Leland Progress*, March 20, 1947.

Charles R. Sayre was the most important of the Mississippi Delta's agricultural scientists during the postwar period. Born in Illinois, the adopted southerner came to the Mississippi Delta in 1946 to head the experiment station at Stoneville. In 1948 he earned a Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University with an award-winning dissertation on cotton mechanization in the Delta. After completing his Ph.D., Sayre accepted a post heading the Cotton Division of the USDA's Bureau of Plant Industry. In 1950, Sayre made a triumphant return to the Mississippi Delta, this time to replace Oscar Johnston as head of the largest cotton plantation in America, Delta & Pine Land Company in Washington county. In 1953, the Delta Council elected Sayre as its President.[41]

Sayre literally wrote the book (or at least the dissertation) on cotton mechanization in the Mississippi Delta. He participated actively in public discussions of mechanization, becoming a prominent booster for agricultural advancement. He frequently gave speeches, wrote articles, and published in academic journals on the subject. While superintendent at Stoneville, Sayre gave an address on the "Economics of Mechanization" at the 1947 Beltwide Mechanization Conference. The main thrust of his argument was that widespread adoption of mechanization required close scientific guidance and expertise:

> Mechanization will 'make' the cotton farmer. It could 'break' a high portion of them financially before they develop a low-cost approach to full utilization of the potentialities of mechanization. It is the responsibility of the cotton industry, the land-grant colleges, the Department of Agriculture, and the implement industry to minimize these risks and to maximize the benefit which can accrue from mechanization as a generating force in the development of an agriculture in cotton growing areas in which net incomes will approach those obtained in other segments of our economy in which better living—with richer and fuller lives—will prevail on cotton farms.[42]

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[41] "Annual Report of Delta Council, 1953-1954," (Stoneville, Miss.; Delta Council, 1956), 1, in Delta Council Collection, Box 1; "Dr. Sayre Elected New Delta Council Prexy," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, May 21, 1953; Charles R. Sayre, "The Past and Future of Cotton," *The Delta Review*, May/June, 1967, 60-63, in Delta Council Collection, Box 2; Charles R. Sayre, "Cotton Mechanization Since World War II," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 53, No.1., (January 1979), 105-124.

[42] Charles R. Sayre, "Economics of Mechanization," in *Report of the Proceedings of the Beltwide Cotton Mechanization Conference*, 11.

Delta planting interests trusted the Ivy-league credentialed Midwesterner's insistence on scientific expertise, and in elevating Sayre to top positions within the private sphere, paid handsomely to make use of it. Sayre repaid this debt by working tirelessly toward bringing about and publicizing the scientific transformation of cotton agriculture in the Delta.

Agricultural reformers like Sayre understood mechanization as more than the simple replacement of labor by machines in the production of cotton. Instead, they viewed mechanization as an important facet of a broader scientific rationalization of agriculture, and their modernization efforts reflected that fact. Delta reformers also sought to use science to better manage plant genetics, crop diversification, fertilization, weed-control, and pest-control initiatives.

As in other agricultural revolutions, scientific rationalization of the plant itself formed a key element of agricultural reform in the Mississippi Delta. Although selective breeding of the cotton plant in the Mississippi Delta had a history dating back to at least the 1820s, intensive scientific breeding of cotton in the Mississippi Delta began in the 1910s as a response to boll weevil infestation. During this time, late-blooming, slow-growing, and low-yield varieties of cotton grown in the Mississippi Delta allowed weevil infestations a wide window to take root and destroy a large portion of the precious lint. Through many years of selective breeding, Delta and Pine Land Company plant geneticist Early C. Ewing managed to breed out these disadvantageous qualities, creating the boll-weevil resistant breeds that came to dominate the region's fields.[43]

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[43] Alan Olmstead and Paul Rhode, "Biological Innovation and Productivity Growth in the Antebellum Cotton Economy" *Journal of Economic History No. 68* (Dec., 2008), 1123-1171; "Biggest Cotton Plantation," *Fortune*, May 1937, 125-132; 156-160, in Delta and Pine Land Company Records, Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Libraries, OS Box 43.

Ewing was one of the first participants in the experiment-station-to-plantation pipeline. He came to the Delta Branch Experiment Station in 1911, just thirteen years after the advent of scientific cotton breeding. Four years later, Delta & Pine Land Company hired him away to manage its breeding program. At D&PL he continued the development of a widely-planted strain of cotton called Deltapine — on its fifteenth iteration by 1948. Ewing also had a hand in creating the Stoneville strain of cotton. In 1947, these two Delta-produced strains accounted for 83 percent of the Cotton planted in the entire Mississippi River Valley. Plant geneticists like Ewing performed valuable work toward the rationalization of agricultural production in the Mississippi Delta, both at the Stoneville experiment station and at D&PL.[44]

By the late 1940's, the Delta's agricultural reformers in the Delta were looking to geneticists to create plants better-suited for mechanized harvesting. In a 1948 panel speech at the Cotton Spinner-Breeders Conference in Stoneville, Ewing emphasized the importance of striking balances between contradictory characteristics in plant physiology for mechanization's sake.[45] Plants that produced high grades in machine-picked cotton were largely those with smooth leaves and stems. Unfortunately, these types typically had drawbacks: late maturity, low yield, and weak fiber. Ewing was optimistic that plant science could overcome these challenges. A decade later, the Delta Council discontinued its Spinner-Breeder Conference in 1958, having largely accomplished their goal of breeding machine-friendly plants.[46]

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[44] Early Ewing, "History of Cotton Varieties" Presented at the *Fifth Annual Spinner-Breeder Conference, Stoneville Mississippi, September 20-22, 1948*, in Delta Pine and Land Company Records, Box 27.

[45] In 1943, the Delta Council founded a subcommittee focused on the promotion of cotton breeding. One of their chief aims was achieving strain uniformity. The subcommittee's primary function was hosting the annual Spinner-Breeder conference, beginning in 1944 and designed to coordinate discussions on plant genetics between breeders and textile manufacturers so that geneticists could create strains of cotton that met manufacturers' needs. The first four conferences were held in the Mississippi Delta; it began visiting different cities in the south after that initial period.

[46] "Annual Report of Delta Council, 1943-1944," 19; Early Ewing "History of Cotton Varieties," 1-4.; "Parrish Announces Cotton Group, Meet," *Greenwood Commonwealth*, June 11, 1958.

Insect and weed management occasionally moved beyond the study of pesticides, flamethrowers, and cross-cultivation techniques in the Mississippi Delta. On one occasion where science fell short in providing a solution to the pink bollworm, the Delta's most pressing agricultural problem, the region's reformers wrangled the powers of the state government to protect cotton producers from a threat frequently compared to the dreaded boll weevil. In 1951, Dr. Sayre traveled to the USDA's experiment station in Iguala, Mexico to study the bollworm on behalf of the National Cotton Council. Meanwhile, the looming threat inched along the path blazed by the boll weevil some 50 years before — north and east from Mexico, through Texas, and toward Mississippi. Unable to develop an effective pesticide for the bollworm, the Delta's powerbrokers pursued state action to protect the region's cotton production. In 1954 the Mississippi State Plant Board set up vehicle inspection stations at the Natchez, Vicksburg, and Greenville crossings on the Mississippi River to intercept and destroy infested cotton entering the state. This primarily consisted of taking souvenir cotton from tourists on their return trips from Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, but it also included searching migratory farm laborers who sometimes used raw cotton to fill pillows and mattresses. The quarantine checkpoints successfully intercepted and destroyed a significant volume of bollworm-infested cotton before falling victim to state budget battles, ultimately closing in 1976. Whether these inspection stations prevented infestation is unclear, but the pink bollworm never crossed the Mississippi River at any point. The episode demonstrates the willingness and ability of the Delta's cotton lobby to marshal the powers of the state to protect their interests when scientific solutions were slow to arrive.[47]

[47] "Dr. Sayre Off to Study Control of Pink Boll Weevil," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, August 13, 1951; "Pink Boll Worm Battle Described," *Clarion Ledger,* July 2, 1954; "Auto was Crawling: 114 Live Bollworms Found by Inspector" Clarion Ledger, August 29, 1956; Tim Parker, "Pink Bollworms," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, October 20, 1957; Kim Eisler, "Agricultural Inspection Stations Closed," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, July 8, 1976.

Transforming the (Human) Harvester

Delta Planters in the postwar era were concerned with the economic consequences of mechanization but they also understood mechanization as an opportunity to bring about a social transformation in the region. Delta reformers — whether planters, scientists, or bureaucrats — embraced a collective vision of the Mississippi Delta's future that included automated farms, industrialization, shared prosperity, and market freedom. This ideology manifested itself through both rhetoric and action as reformers in the postwar era sought to transform the Delta's racialized workforce through education, public-health, and industrialization initiatives.

In 1947, Birmingham writer John Temple Graves gave an extraordinary and poetic speech about the promising future of southern agriculture at the Beltwide Mechanization Conference in Greenville. In "Lay Down the Shovel and Hoe," Graves crafted a utopian vision of a post-mechanized southern society and emphasized the centrality of science and the Mississippi Delta's leadership to that vision. He began, "I never come to the Delta without feeling that . . . this is not the South. This is the South died-and-gone-to-heaven. It is the South as it could be if we had the money, the black gold. It is the South as it is going to be if we are scientific now about our science."[48] Next, he mourned the loss of "gentilities" that accompanied the destruction of slavery, before making the disturbing claim that these "Lost Cause" gentilities of slavery could be reclaimed by "the labor of sciences captured and made our slaves."[49] Graves then argued that work-saving science in the form of mechanization would bring about a

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[48] John Temple Graves, "Lay Down the Shovel and Hoe" in *Report of the Proceedings of the Beltwide Cotton Mechanization Conference*, 21.

[49] John Temple Graves, "Lay Down the Shovel and Hoe," 21. Although Graves did not explicitly define gentilities in this speech, his journalist father became famous for tying the New South to the "idealisms of the 'Lost Cause.'" Graves the younger was likewise known for promoting a suite of manners, customs, and ideologies that lionized the Slave South in ahistorical fashion. Grace Elizabeth Hale's *Making Whiteness* demonstrates how cultural productions of Lost Cause Ideology (most famously in *Gone with the Wind*) made race in the Jim Crow South.

revolution, displacing labor but improving the lives of all: "The picker, the flame cultivator, the tractor, and these other things are going to put people out of work, yes. But they are going to put them out of miserable work in miserable circumstances, and they are going to take royal care of all who remain."[50] Then, he heralded the Cold War anticommunist possibilities of mechanization: "it can save us from radicals with collectivist hearts, law-passing minds, goose-stepping feet, who are laying their plans," before finally imploring the audience to take a chance on "science" as America had taken a chance on the atomic bomb, a newly-proven technology that Graves argued had analogous creative and destructive potentials. Graves's speech imagined a utopian South with the Mississippi Delta at its center, where capitalists harnessed the power of science for prosperity, where labor-saving technology allowed for a renaissance of work-free planter gentility, and where surplus black workers were exported to other sections of the country. Whether influenced by Graves's speech or not, the Delta's reformers spoke about and pursued similar visions of scientific progress in the postwar period.[51]

Delta reformers in the postwar period deemed education central to the scientific transformation of the Delta, although the education for which they advocated was vocational and segregated rather than liberal and integrated. Throughout the period, the Delta Council worked with agricultural extension agents and the Stoneville experiment center to help disseminate the latest scientific advances in agriculture. The Delta Council frequently distributed educational pamphlets on pest control, weed control, and other farming issues. In May of 1947, the Delta Council sponsored a demonstration of anhydrous ammonia fertilizer attended by more than 1,000 farmers. In 1948, they published a pictorial review titled "Science for Better Farming at

[50] Ibid., 22.
[51] John Temple Graves, "Lay Down the Shovel and Hoe," 21-23.

Stoneville, Mississippi, U.S.A."[52] The Delta Council and Delta Branch Research Station hosted the first five Spinner-Breeder Conferences as well as the National Cotton Council's 1947 and 1950 Beltwide Mechanization Conferences.

The Delta Council also made concerted efforts to reach black farmers in the region, bankrolling 4-H activities, including agricultural yield contests and tractor schools. Some of the region's black extension agents shared the Delta Council's enthusiasm over mechanization. In a 1951 annual report, C.H. Burton, Washington county's black extension agent, proclaimed that "mechanization will give the south a new agriculture and a new day." He looked forward to mechanization's displacement of labor allowing "children . . . time to attend school."[53] Burton's sentiment is unsurprising when considering the role of black extension agents within Jim Crow agriculture. Historian Jeannie Whayne argues that the actions of Southern black extension agents were similar to those of "indigenous officials" within imperial regimes: "the subaltern practices the art of negotiation, both rationalizing and justifying the agenda of the dominant partner in the relationship but in such a way as to transform it into a form of resistance."[54] Unfortunately for black Deltans, a different set of historical circumstances meant that these "politics of negotiation" did not contribute to the demise of Jim Crow domination as it did at the end of post-WWII colonial rule. Instead, extension agents looking to improve conditions for black farmers through scientific management, helped create conditions for mechanized agriculture that pushed them off the farm.[55]

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[52] "Delta Council Annual Report, 1947-1948: Progress for Tomorrow," 9, in Delta Council Collection, Box 1.
[53] C.H. Burton, "Annual Narrative Report of Washington County Mississippi: December 1, 1950 to November 30, 1951," 20, in Cooperative Extension Service Records, Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Libraries, Box 5.
[54] Jeannie Whayne, '"I Have Been Through Fire:' Black Agricultural Extension Agents and the Politics of Negotiation," 160, in R. Douglas Hurt, ed., *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 152-188
[55] Ibid, 152-188.

The most ambitious education initiative championed and won by the Delta's reformers was the establishment of black vocational college at Itta Bena. In 1944, the Delta Council had submitted a recommendation to the state legislature for "a college for the training of Negro teachers, said college to place emphasis on vocational training."[56] In 1946, the legislature authorized the college, but disputes over its location delayed its opening until June 1950. By 1952 Mississippi Vocational College (present-day Mississippi Valley State University) boasted six buildings, 38 students, and a reported value of $750,000. The aims of the institution were consistent with Mississippi's separate-but-equal Jim Crow order as well as Delta planters' reform vision. The college hired Dr. J.H. White as its first president. White, who consciously modeled himself after Booker T. Washington (the New South's most famous black racial accommodationist), proclaimed in a 1952 speech that "the problems of Negro education in Mississippi can best be solved by conservative Negro leaders working with understanding whites."[57] A monumental achievement for the Delta's segregationist reformers, the black vocational college at Itta Bena served their economic vision of the new Delta, while at the same time protecting its rigid social order.

Like education, public health was an area where the region's reformers, especially within the Delta Council, sought to negotiate racial control over the Delta's black citizens. One of the Delta Council's earliest public health initiatives highlights this dynamic. Alarmed by high rates of venereal infection leading to frequent rejection of black draftees, the Delta Council in 1942 cooperated with state and county health officials to ensure that their tenants sought medical treatment for sexually transmitted infections. In addition to seeing this public health issue as a labor productivity problem, Delta Council President Walter Sillers, Jr. feared that if too many

[56] "Delta Council Annual Report, 1943-1944," 35.
[57] "Conservative Leaders Needed for Schools," *Delta Democrat-Times*, March 7, 1952.

black Mississippians were rejected by the military, white Mississippians would be drafted disproportionately to replace them.[58] While most of the Delta Council's public health initiatives operated under similar Jim-Crow logic, many of them genuinely sought to improve the overall well-being of the Delta's rural working-class in less racially-explicit ways. In the postwar period, these initiatives included distributing educational pamphlets and videos, running health articles in the organization's newspaper, and donating the Delta Council's radio program to public health officials once a month. In 1945, the Delta Council secured an $80,000 grant from the GEB to train twenty white and twenty black health educators in the Delta. This program was renewed until at least 1951. Although relatively modest compared to other initiatives, the Delta Council's work in public health (and its cooperation with the GEB) highlights public health as an important piece of a comprehensive modernization project in the Delta.[59]

In 1947, the Delta Council commissioned a study of resources in the Mississippi Delta (funded in part by a $2,500 GEB grant) as a guide to rational management of the region's assets, especially for the purpose of industrialization. Published in 1949, University of Mississippi sociologist Robert Baker Highsaw's *The Delta Looks Forward* offered a full accounting of agricultural, forest, mineral, water, labor, and transportation resources in the region. A forward by Delta Council President W.M. Garrard reveals that the inventory was intended to serve as a guide for contending with the labor consequences of mechanization. Garrard's faith that mechanization and industrialization would bring "higher standards of living, better educational opportunities, improved health, and greater freedom for economic development" were counterbalanced by Highsaw's more somber findings that the Delta lacked "the basic resources

[58] Walter Sillers to Acree and Godbold, April 13, 1942, in Walter Sillers Papers, Box 14
[59]"Delta Council 1943-1944 Annual Report" 17, Delta Council Collection, Box 1; "Delta Council 1947-1948 Annual Report" 17, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 33; "$80,000 Granted Health Education in Delta Region" *The Delta Democrat-Times*, February 28, 1945.

and social developments necessary to sustain heavy industry" and "accumulated wealth."[60] Highsaw understood the Delta as an economically dependent region that could develop slowly through raw production, outside capital, and careful resource management. Although less optimistic than the study's clients would have hoped, *The Delta Looks Forward* signals that the Delta's reformers began building a forward-thinking rational program of regional development well before the adoption of cotton mechanization accelerated in the region. The Delta Council commissioned the study in 1947. When it was published in 1949, just under 7% of the region's cotton crop was harvested mechanically but mechanization would accelerate quickly in subsequent years.[61]

Delta reformers anticipated that the mechanization of cotton production would destroy a substantial number of jobs in the region, so they embarked on an industrialization campaign to offset lost farming jobs with higher-paying ones in manufacturing. *The Delta Looks Forward* was the Delta Council's first significant step forward in a campaign of regional industrialization focused on providing data, propaganda, and tax incentives to recruit manufacturing employers to the region. The Council worked closely with a government agency called the Mississippi Agricultural and Industrial Board in efforts to "Balance Agriculture with Industry." Former Delta Council President Walter Sillers sat on the board of the government agency, tasked with increasing the level of manufacturing activity in the state. One of the first Southern states to explicitly use tax subsidies to attract manufacturing businesses, historian James Cobb contends that "Mississippi's pioneering role in state-supervised, publicly-subsidized economic

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[60] Robert Baker Highsaw, *The Delta Looks Forward*, Quotes from v and 135-136.
[61] "Council Gets Grant for Research Study" *Leland Progress*, July 24, 1947; W.W. Brierly to Ellis T. Woolfolk, Jr, July 7, 1949 in Walter Sillers Papers, Box 30, Highsaw, *The Delta Looks Forward*; Mississippi Employment Security Commission, "Mississippi Farm Labor 1951," (Jackson: MESC, 1952), 14-16, in Thomas G. Abernethy Collection, Archives and Special Collections, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Box 370

development programs" was not due to the ideological flexibility of its citizens, but because of elite embarrassment and concern over the state's ranking at the bottom of nearly every measure of industrial development.[62] Many reformers within the Delta Council certainly fit that description. A principal outcome of this collaboration between the Delta Council and the BAWI board was the creation of a "Plan-of-Action for Community Development," designed to guide municipalities and streamline their efforts to attract manufacturing businesses. These efforts were successful in attracting a number of new manufacturing employers, its backers more than happy to trade tax subsidies for payroll. As a consequence, manufacturing employment in the Delta nearly doubled from 1948 to 1960 and nearly doubled again between 1960 to 1970.[63]

Planters' efforts to reform the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta responded to local contestations over labor and racial control. Although the Delta's planters had considerable power to implement their plans, they did not do so in a vacuum. A week after the 1947 Beltwide Mechanization Conference, President H.L. Mitchell of the National Farm Labor Union (renamed from STFU in 1945) gave a speech to the Georgia Workers Education Conference. Mitchell maligned the "farm machinery exhibit held . . . down at Stoneville" where "all the big cotton planters, farm experts and their apologists gathered . . . to watch equipment companies unfold the future."[64] After deriding the utopian visions of mechanization put forth by Oscar Johnston and "Ivory towered" John Temple Graves, Mitchell offered an alternative vision for a mechanized Cotton South. First,

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[62] James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 32.

[63] "Report of Delta Council to Mississippi Agricultural and Industrial Board" (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1953), 1-19 in Delta Council Collection, Box 1; Mississippi Agricultural and Industrial Board, "Plan of Action for Community Development" in Walter Sillers Papers, Box 29; Delta Council, "1985 Economic Progress Report" (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1985), 3-12 in Delta Council Collection, Box 1; Highsaw, *The Delta Looks Forward*, 85.

[64] H.L. Mitchell, Georgia Workers Education Conference, August 27, 1947, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Records #3472, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Box 26.

he suggested that the federal government invest in "a system of organized transfer of . . . displaced workers to industry."[65] As for the "workers who remain on the farms as mechanics and hired hands," Mitchell advised that they organize under the banner of the NFLU. Over the next few years, the NFLU more-or-less ordered its operations in the region around the first half of this model, shifting its focus in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta from direct confrontation with planters to operating as a labor placement service, providing thousands of temporary workers to factories and farms across the northeast. In its former life as the STFU, the NFLU organized both black and white farmworkers extensively in the Mid-South. But after moving the national headquarters from Memphis to Washington D.C. in 1948, the union focused primarily on national fights over farm labor legislation, providing little more than summertime employment for its members in the Delta.[66]

Black Mississippians' attitudes toward mechanization in the Mississippi Delta were more varied than organized labor's, with those in close proximity to white centers of power more supportive of it than the average farmworker. A number of prominent Black Deltans supported mechanization. Reverend H.H. Hume, for example, frequently collaborated with the Delta Council through the Race Relations Committee and implored farmworkers not to migrate northward in his newspaper, the Greenville *Delta Leader*. In a 1949 meeting of the Delta Council's Race Relations Committee, Ben F. McLaurin, superintendent of the Coahoma Negro Vocational High School counseled planters to dial back their rhetoric on mechanization. McLaurin stated, "It's best to discuss mechanization with someone who understands it. . . . when you go to talking about mechanization to a hundred Negroes on a plantation they think, what am

[65] Ibid.
[66] Hazel Whitman, "Report on the National Farm Labor Union Convention, November 12-14, Cincinnati, Ohio," in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union Records, Box 27.

I going to be doing five years from now? I'll move to Clarksdale and build me a home and nobody can take that from me."[67] According to McLaurin, the average sharecropper held dim views on mechanization if he held any at all. The *Jackson Advocate*, a black newspaper in the state's capital, frequently carried the latest developments on cotton mechanization. In addition to featuring news stories with charged titles like "Mechanization of Dixie Farms Plans Havoc with Negro," the paper also carried the latest academic studies and featured a number of editorials on the subject.[68] The newspaper's tone on mechanization was generally negative but largely resigned to confronting the consequences of mechanization rather than stopping them altogether. A 1945 editorial urged black workers displaced by the "cotton picking machine" to join the labor movement in Mississippi's other industries: "seek a living wage scale, stable employment, proper working conditions, and other benefits . . . through the Principle of Collective Bargaining, the sum and substance of the Organized Labor Movement."[69]

Some Black Deltans took advantage of the upheaval caused by mechanization to push for full civil rights, with one group even co-opting the Delta Council's branding and social engineering initiatives to do so. In December 1951, a Mound Bayou physician named T.R.M. Howard began sending out press releases and invitations for an organizational meeting on December 28 at the "Cleveland Colored High School." He called for the creation of a "Delta Council of Negro Leadership" explicitly modeled after the original all-white Delta Council, but that sought full-citizenship rights for Black Deltans.[70] Dr. Howard reached out to the Delta Council for support and played up the relationship between the two organizations in the press,

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[67] Nan Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization and Civil Rights in the 1940s," 282.
[68] *Jackson Advocate*, "Mechanization of Dixie Farms Plans Havok with Negro," January 6, 1951.
[69] *Jackson Advocate*, "Negro Labor and Mechanized Farming," March 21, 1945.
[70] "Bolivar County Invitational Committee of the Proposed Delta Council of Negro Leadership" December 12, 1951. Walter Sillers Collection, Box 30.

claiming that Delta Council president Maury Knowlton had promised the Delta Council's full "cooperation and encouragement."[71] This misrepresented endorsement did not sit right with Delta Council leaders who were uncomfortable with the aims and branding of the incipient organization. On the morning of December 28, 1951, the Delta Council's lone representative to the Delta Council of Negro Leadership's organizational meeting, B.F. Smith, delivered a cordial three-part disavowal of the new organization in a prepared statement. First, he claimed that Howard's organization was redundant because the Delta Council already had "four major projects for the economy of the Negroes." His second point was that although the Delta Council did not oppose "the organization of any worthy agency to obtain the same objectives," it did not endorse such organizations either. His final argument was that Howard did not have permission to use the name "Delta Council.[72] With the Delta Council's opposition registered, the hundred-or-so black leaders present elected Dr. Howard as their president and named their organization the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL).[73]

On Friday, May 2, 1952, a crowd estimated from five to ten thousand gathered under a massive circus tent in the Bolivar County town of Mound Bayou, for the first annual meeting of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. The event featured band concerts, a parade, a performance by nationally-famous gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, and a 45-minute keynote speech by Chicago congressman William Dawson. Voter registration was the order of the day. Dawson urged those in attendance "to take his place as a first class citizen by registering to vote, even at the cost of "pay[ing] the poll tax three times if that's what it takes."[74] In the opening address, Dr. Howard pointed to the example of black-governed Mound Bayou as proof "that we

[71] "Fresh Reassurance" Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, December 19, 1951
[72] "Smith Explains Council's Work to Negro Group" Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, December 31, 1951.
[73] "New Negro Council Elects Dr. Howard" Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, December 31, 1951.
[74] "Racial Hatred Great Menace, Dawson Says" Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, May 4, 1952.

have demonstrated to the entire world that the Negro is capable of self-government . . . and can make progress if [we] want to do so."[75] At the top of the agenda, the meeting passed a voting and registration resolution recommending that influential white organizations like the Delta Council appeal to law enforcement to mitigate intimidation at the polls. The RCNL also initiated a boycott against businesses who refused to provide equal — if separate — services for black customers. The rise of the RCNL highlights the rising expectations of Black Deltans. Although the RCNL pushed for the abolition of Jim Crow, it did so in an incrementalistic fashion that put the Delta's white reformers in a difficult position. The Delta Council's paternalist reforms were necessary to protect Jim Crow in the context of mechanization, but they also opened space for black leaders in the Delta to pursue increased civil rights in pseudo-partnership with white reformers. Against the wishes of white reformers, African Americans in the Delta refused to stay silent. They demanded a dramatically increased role in the region's post-mechanized future.

Conclusion: The Unkept Promises of Agricultural Modernity

In 1959, the Industrial Development Department of the Delta Council published "A New Way of Life in Northwestern Mississippi," a recruiting pamphlet designed to attract manufacturing investment in the region. The pamphlet included testimony from local farmers, bureaucrats, and manufacturing CEOs interspersed with flashy illustrations and photographs. With labor displacement from mechanization and cotton acreage reduction in full swing by 1959, much of the testimony highlighted the region's excess (and therefore inexpensive) labor with a new sense of urgency. A farmer named Luther Wade contended that workers displaced by "labor-saving machinery" benefitted from local employment options in industry: "These people

[75] "Negro Council Asks Equality Within The Law" Greenville *Delta Democrat Times*, May 4, 1952.

want to live at home, but countless numbers have been forced to migrate to industrial centers. I have seen the plight of people forced to leave and the better situation for those who have found employment in the new factories which have come to our area." Agricultural extension agent L.H. Mosely concurred that "opportunities for employment in nearby industrial plants for young farm people" was the solution to the massive displacement of farm labor wreaked by mechanization.[76]

The Delta achieved modest gains in industrialization during the postwar era, but not enough to offset the losses in agricultural employment. Baxter Laboratories (a manufacturer of pharmaceuticals and intravenous solutions) moved to Cleveland in 1951. Later that year, Clevelanders voted 837 to 7 to raise a $250,000 bond for a remodeling and expansion of warehouse space for the company. In 1955, the Griffin Lamp Company came to Shelby from Hamilton, Ohio, to make commercial vehicle safety lighting. Delta communities invested significant local capital in these industries. In 1958, a tile company named Misceramic (a contraction of Mississippi and ceramic) opened in Cleveland. Misceramic's owners raised their $1 million in startup capital exclusively from stock sales to Mississippians, with over 2,500 Mississippi residents investing directly in the company. Misceramic claimed that they selected Bolivar County as the site of the facility because its people bought the company's stock so enthusiastically, unsurprising given the Delta Council's influence in its home county.

Manufacturing employment in the Delta grew from 8,487 in 1948 to 15,666 in 1960 to 27,651 in 1970. Although industrial employment more than tripled across those two-plus decades, it fell well short of offsetting the massive reduction in total employment driven by farm mechanization. Total employment in the region fell from 266,763 in 1948 to 165,219 in 1960 to

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[76] "A New Way of Life in Northwest Mississippi" (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1959) quotes from 3, in James O. Eastland Collection, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 10.

143,300 in 1970, with almost all of these losses from farm employment. Although industrial employment offset some job losses in agricultural production, predictions that industrialization would bring about "a second phase of Mississippi's economic maturation" fell disastrously short of the mark.[77]

When Oscar Johnston invoked the "lessons of the past" to contend that the "mechanization of any industry or commodity has never resulted in anything other than progress" he likely had in mind the agricultural transformations of wheat and corn in the American Midwest. Upon close inspection, the Mississippi Delta's cotton transformation has less in common with these revolutions than with Green Revolutions in Global-South regions like Mexico, India, and Colombia. Johnston's faith in cotton mechanization, however, was not entirely misplaced. Scientific and technological innovation in agriculture contributed to increasing economic diversity in agriculture and in other sectors of the Delta's economy. In 1962, the Mississippi Delta produced 136,000 more bales of cotton on 226,500 fewer acres of land than in 1947. The value of rice production in the region grew from $8 million in 1960 to $111 million in 1980. The Delta's median income rose from just 38.7% of the national median in 1960 to 68.6% of the national median in 1980. In recent years, however, the gap between the Delta's and national figures on income has again widened. Of the Delta Council's eighteen counties, eight had median incomes less than half the national median in 2017. Holmes County, the second poorest county in America in 2017, had a median household income of $24,783, just 40.3% of the national median. Even as the economic situation briefly improved in the immediate aftermath of mechanization, The Delta's population (and political power) continued to decline

[77] "Bolivar Countians Active in the Development of Economic Potentials," *Delta Council News*, April 1958, Stoneville, Mississippi in James O. Eastland Collection, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 10; "Clevelanders Vote 836 to 7 For Expansion," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, February 21, 1951; Highsaw, *The Delta Looks Forward*, 100; Quote from "Misceramic A Story of Mississippians," *The Delta Democrat-Times*, September 29, 1957.

precipitously. The Delta's population was 607,741 in 1950, by 1970 it had declined to 498,010 with a net outmigration of 203,156. Between 1950 and 1970, Mississippi lost two of its seven congressional districts, in no small part due to black outmigration in the Delta.[78]

The mechanization of cotton fell far short of the utopian aspirations of the Delta's planters, scientists, and bureaucrats. Mechanization only took "royal care" of the farm implement dealers and planters who could afford to invest in the new technologies required for scientific, capital-intensive production. Mechanization put people out of difficult work and contributed to massive outmigration as promised but did very little to alleviate poverty in the region. Still, the efforts and achievements of Delta reformers demonstrate the capacity of local agents to manage systemic change. Delta planters and their allies reacted to global market forces but also worked together through powerful local institutions to guide their region's transition to capital-intensive agriculture. Their faith in the power of technological modernization to fix entrenched socioeconomic problems was naive, but also commonly-held among the architects and collaborators of the globe's Cold-War-Era Green Revolutions. Modernization here, as in other cases, was profitable for the region's ruling class, but failed to make good on any promise to reduce the suffering of the Delta's agricultural workforce and their families.

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[78] Delta Council, "1985 Economic Progress Report" (Stoneville, Miss.: Delta Council, 1985), 3-12 in Delta Council Collection, Box 1; "The Changing Characteristics of the Mississippi Delta," in Department of Labor, *Farm Labor Developments* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1968), 32-35; Census Quick Facts, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/holmescountymississippi/INC110217; Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation*, 193.

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