

I learned that **Rev. Milligan Newsome**, her husband and my grandfather, was a **SPECIAL** kind of person who took **GOD'S** work **VERY SERIOUSLY**. He was a **preacher, educator, teacher**, and one who felt that *it was HIS DUTY TO LOOK OUT FOR ALL THOSE WHO LIVED in Spindle Bottom*. Everyone loved and depended on him. **ALL** this land around our houses, church, and school **ONCE** belonged to him. . . .

*"When the **WHITE** community saw the **PROGRESS** that your grandpa was making, they tried to **FORCE** him to **SELL ALL** of his land. He **REFUSED** to even discuss it with them. He then began to **ADVISE** others **NOT to SELL** their land." . . .*

My grandmother stood and walked over to where I was sitting. She placed her arm around my shoulder and said, "Naomi, your grandfather was a wonderful, stubborn, **BLACK INDIAN, GOD FEARING preacher** who did NOT fear what man could do to him.

Within a year the **HEAD** of a **PROMINENT WHITE** family came to him and let him know that **IF** he did **NOT** sell his land, he would be **KILLED**. Your grandfather **LOOKED** him **STRAIGHT IN THE EYE** and said,

'If I don't sell, you're going to KILL me. If I sell, you're STILL GOING to KILL me. Therefore, I'M GOING to DIE STANDING like a GIANT for my GOD.'

Shortly after this encounter, your grandfather went down by the covered bridge to cut firewood. **Your PAPA**, who was **ONLY SEVENTEEN** years of age and **very devoted**, went with him. The man who had **VOICED the THREAT** came by the house and asked me where had **that NIGGER** gone. He was **carrying a RIFLE** and a **BASEBALL BAT**. *He stated that he only wanted to talk to that STUBBORN BOY...*

As the **WHITE** man walked away from me, I knew within my heart that *your grandfather would be killed*. When he **FOUND** your grandfather and **SHOT** him, your papa stood and watched. Your papa helped his dad to climb into the wagon. Your grandpa **ALWAYS carried** the **HOLY BIBLE** with him. *He took the Bible from the wagon and stumbled into the house to let me know that he had been SHOT*. Your papa and I put him in the bed. He asked me to place the Bible under his pillow, but he could hardly speak as he said,

'My love, TEACH our FIVE children NOT to HATE anyone.'

He then **gasped for breath** and **FELL ASLEEP."** - - *Naomi's Story – You Don't Have To Be Broken* - - Note: Naomi Newsome Brookins is Vogel Denise Newsome's Aunt/Father's Sister.

WHY THE ASSASSINATION / MURDER OF MILLIGAN NEWSOME:

- For **IMPLEMENTATION** of the **"Burke Act"** in the South...
- For **IMPLEMENTATION** of the **"Tenant Purchase Program"**
- For the **THEFT / STEALING** of Lands and Territories from Natives and **SELLING** it back to them through **RACKETEERING** Schemes/Scams... known as Mortgages, Deed of Trust, Quick Claims....

The following article is the **WHITE Man's** Version of the ASSASSINATION and MURDER of Community Activist / Minister Milligan Newsome:

PHOTO ESSAY
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“A Piece of Your Own”

The Tenant Purchase Program in Claiborne County

by **David Crosby**

photographs by Roland L. Freeman

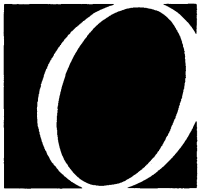
KILLING NEAR MARTIN

J. A. ROAN KILLED M. NUSOM

TROUBLE OVER BOARD TREE

Last Saturday J. A. Roan, white, shot and killed M. Nusom, colored, both of the fifth district. The trouble arose over a board tree belonging to one of the participants. The men had quarreled prior to the killing, and when they met on the road the trouble was renewed. It is said that Nusom advanced on Roan with a heavy stick, when the latter seized a rifle lying in his buggy. Nusom, it is claimed, caught the gun, and a scuffle ensued. Finally Roan got the muzzle turned toward Nusom and fired, the wound producing death soon after.

Roan had a preliminary hearing before Justice Mitchell and was discharged.



On 3 January 1907, this news story appeared on page one of the Port Gibson Mississippi *Reveille*. Although the bare recital of facts and allegations attempts to conceal more than it reveals, it does betray its intention. The swift dismissal of the charges against Roan, the polite concealment of the names of witnesses who “said” or “claimed” that Min Newsome was the aggressor, and the lack of specificity about who owned the board tree suggest that it was safer to be a white man than a black man in Claiborne County, Mississippi, around the turn of the century. No great news there, I suppose, but when I heard the Newsome family’s version of the story from Min’s son Milligan, it occurred to me that this single tragic incident epitomized a set of conditions that led directly to the Tenant Purchase Program of the New Deal Farm Security Administration.

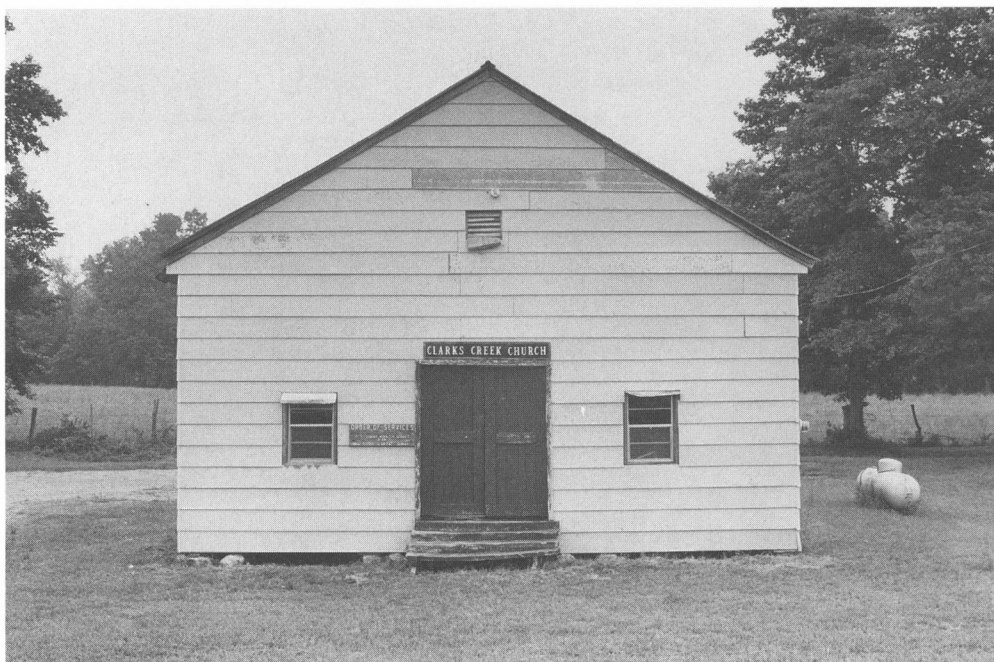
But let me continue the story of Min Newsome. When the Reverend Milligan Newsome related the story to me in 1979, he was seventy-nine years old. At the time of his father’s murder he was six, so the version I heard had been handed down in the family and was clearly polished from much telling:



Milligan Newsome, at seventy-nine, narrating the family's oral history of his father's murder by a white man who didn't believe a black man should own land. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.

Well now, my daddy, he was a prosperous colored man, and down where I was bred and born, going out towards Brandywine, where you go across the bridge across Clark's Creek, my daddy, he [had] a hundred and sixty acres back here in the swamp. And my daddy purchased that. And back yonder, they didn't want to see a man to have a horse back in that day. He was a prosperous—now he was a Joseph. He would work night and day in the swamp, with cutting and digging and what not, and piling brush and what not kind. And then he just had him a new-ground plow with a colt on it, and everybody around him would come to him and get corn, across the winter. And then he had a mill, and he had molasses. He had two mules and a black mare—and he kept them so a fly like to set on them, so to say. And then we had a wagon and a double surrey, and when they started it, back yonder, he started taking his *Reveille*. And so [John Roan] wanted the place, and he just thought it was too good for a black man to have.

A tornado or slycoon or whatever you call it had come through here and just laid the trees down where you could walk across from here to the graveyard, without getting on the ground . . . and some of them [oaks were so large that]



This church near Clark's Creek marks the spot on Highway 547 in Claiborne County where John Roan shot and killed Min Newsome on 29 December 1906. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.

you couldn't hardly see the man—putting a crosscut saw across—you couldn't hardly see the man on the other side.

And so in 1906, December 29, 1906, [my father] had went to Utica to take Christmas with his father-in-law. So when my mama was there sewing, this man come up there, he asked had my dad got home. So she said no. So they went on back a way, and it was a big tree laying down there and he claimed that he wanted to see him about getting the tree, to cut some boards.

That evening he came back and my mama was sitting at that sewing machine, and he hailed out there at the gate. Mama say, "See who that is." My aunt Ethel, she say, "That's that John Roan." And she say, "Well, really, ask him what he want and tell him that my husband, the train must have left him, 'cause he hasn't come." And he say, "All right. Well, I'll see when he come." And he turned round, she say he had his pistol in his back pocket.

They had a boarding house just where you get to the fork, here, when you get in Pattison. And [my father] would furnish that boarding house with milk and butter and beechwood—they cooked on a wood stove—and chickens and everything of that kind. He got up that [next] morning and got his mule, and he hitched the mule to the wagon and load up a load of beechwood. I think he had about eight or nine pounds of butter and so much buttermilk and sweet milk, and thing kind, and load it on that wagon. And he gets out to go to the boarding house.



The boarding house in Pattison that Min Newsome furnished with milk, butter, chickens, and firewood was similar in date and style to this house, which still stands near the fork of the highway. A yard sale was in progress the day it was photographed. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.

This man [Roan] he was sitting on [his] porch and he had gotten his men. . . . He had his buggy hitched up, and his Winchester sitting right down here side him, like that, and he sitting right there at the door. And when [my father] come on out, then he went on down the road. And we were building a church down there and so he passed the church and had to come back through a little old bridge here—King Iron Bridge—and by the time he had got through there past the Church, he overtake him.

The colored man [Monroe Shaker] driving, and [Roan] told him to cut across the road, and he cut across the road. So he got with his Winchester and asked my dad how come he didn't come home yesterday morning. And he tell him, "Well, the train left me and I couldn't get in till last night."

And he said, "Don't you know I'm gonna kill you?" He said, "You god damn sanctified son-of-a-bitch, you know I'm gonna kill you?"

He said, "What did I done to you? I haven't done nothing to you for you to kill me."

And my dad had so much religion, till he ain't try to do nothing. And he tried to persuade him not to shoot him, [but] he see he was aiming to shoot, and he threw the gun up. And he jumped back and shot him right through his living life—through and through. And then he wanted to shoot him again, and my dad begged him don't shoot him no more.

And so [Roan] asked him, "Do you want me to send you back home?"

And [Newsome] said, "I thank you."

[Roan] loaded him back on that wagon, turned that wagon around, that colored man did, and he brought him back home. My mama says, "What's the matter?" Monroe Shaker was assisting him, you know, had him by the arm assisting him, and he's walking along with him.

And he says, "I'm shot."

And she says, "Who shot you?"

And I thought he said John Roan. I thought when I heard him he said John Roan.

And mama say, "What did he shoot you for?"

And Monroe Shaker say, "For nothing." Just like that.

So my dad come on in and they pulled his clothes off, put him in the bed. He had a double house, a four room house with a hall all the way through it and a chimney on each house, you know, in the two big rooms. Now he would get up and go to the fireplace and spit, just spit up wads of blood.

So when [Roan] run, he went on down to Pattison and he went to the magistrate and he told him, "Arrest me, arrest me. I done shot that nigger, that nigger Min Newsome."

And so the magistrate jumped—he say, "You shot Min Newsome? You'd shoot as good a nigger as that?"

Then [Roan] say, "You'd speak in defense of a nigger?" So he told Monroe Shaker, "Now, if you don't swear that Min Newsome had a axe at me trying to kill me, and I had to shoot him, I'm going to kill you!"

And so that's where he got out of it. My dad died that twenty-ninth day in [December], 1906.¹

The Newsome family's version of the story and the *Reveille* article agree that there was a board tree involved in the episode, but Milligan Newsome sees it as a mere pretext for a murder whose real motive was rooted in jealousy and racial prejudice. The upshot of the story is that Min Newsome's wife and family lost the quarter section of land that he was working so hard to buy at the time of his murder. According to chancery court records in the Claiborne County courthouse, W. R. Trim filed suit in April 1908 to recover the land that Newsome had contracted for in February 1906. The terms of the deed called for a selling price of \$1,675, payable in five yearly installments of \$335 plus 10 percent interest on the unpaid balance. A vendor's lien attached to the deed specified that in case of payment default, the remaining balance would become due and payable immediately. A 10 percent penalty would be added if the debt had to be collected in court. In his petition to the court, Trim alleged that Newsome had made one payment of

\$200 in December 1906, the month of his death, and that no payments had been made since. He further petitioned the court to find that since Newsome was now deceased, it was unlikely that his widow and children would ever be able to satisfy the debt. The total amount claimed, including remaining principal, unpaid interest, and collection penalty, came to \$2,033. The court issued a summons for Mrs. Newsome and her minor children to appear to answer the suit. Court documents claim that she failed to appear, and the court issued a summary judgment in favor of Trim and ordered the property sold at auction to satisfy the indebtedness. The property was auctioned on June 15, and the highest bid of \$1,750 was made by the same W. R. Trim. Since this was not enough to satisfy the full indebtedness, the implication is that Mrs. Newsome was left with nothing to show for her husband's initial investment.

This episode, as recorded in public documents, seems to be a rather typical, if personally tragic, story of failed ambition, occasioned by a completely unforeseen and arbitrary act of violence. In the Newsome family's oral tradition, however, the story ends somewhat differently. As Milligan Newsome related nearly seventy-five years later, it is a moral tale demonstrating the collusion of white folks and the law against black ownership:



The steps of the much-restored Claiborne County courthouse, where Min Newsome's widow, according to her son, sat on the day she expected to get the title to her home. Instead, the court awarded it to the former owner and lien holder, W. R. Trim. From these same steps the sixty acres of land were auctioned to the highest bidder, also W. R. Trim, for \$1,750 on 15 June 1908. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.

And [my daddy] had paid enough money on that place for Mama by right to get the home seat—forty acres and the home seat. But she had nobody to fight, and didn't know nothing about no law. And when they did 'cide to do something about the place, they got Roan to hold the horse—he brought Mr. Trim—and when they made the deed, made a deal with the man some way or another, they tells me. Well, anyway, they sent for Mama to meet court—her and the children, bring the children—and meet court, chancery court. And that was where they proposed to give her the forty acres deed—the forty acres of land and the house seat. And Mama and us set right down inside the courthouse, right there in Port Gibson. I've never forgot it. We set right down on the steps all day and late that evening before they got ready to close up, the chancery clerk come in and told Mama that Mr. Trim wasn't going to get there and he left some package there for her. And Mama didn't know no better and took it. What do you reckon it was? A little old box with about \$25 of nickels, pennies, and quarters and things like that in it, and that's all Mama got.

Despite the murder of his father and theft of his family's farm, Milligan Newsome was able to purchase his own farm more than thirty years later (6 January 1940) through the Tenant Purchase Program (TPP), a small-scale land-reform project initiated during the New Deal to attack the cotton-tenancy system in the South. The sharecropping system, as it operated in the cotton belt of western Mississippi, had the effect of holding a large population of landless agricultural workers, most of them black, in thrall to a few landowners, most of them white. Several of Franklin Roosevelt's advisors, especially Rexford Tugwell, felt that this system was not only morally repugnant but at the root of the economic problems plaguing the South. The Great Depression seemed to provide an opportunity to put idle land and idle workers together and to promote a return to the Jeffersonian ideal of the family farmer who is a productive, reliable citizen with a personal stake in society.²

Beginning in 1935, the Resettlement Administration began to resettle former tenants and wage hands on productive land, but resistance developed quickly from conservative farm interests when the government began purchasing large plantations, dividing the land into family-sized farms, and leasing these farms to previously landless workers under long-term lease-purchase agreements. The communistic implications of government land ownership and workers' cooperatives, though appealing to Tugwell and other braintrusts, were anathema to large segments of the American public. Congress balked and refused to authorize further resettlement projects. A compromise was reached with the passage of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act of 1937, which established the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and specifically authorized the TPP. Rather than purchase



A few black families had managed to hang on to their land through the backlash period following Reconstruction. Sophie Wilson told how she inherited this cabin and approximately sixty acres from her father, who bought it shortly after the Civil War and had to fight to retain it. Her nearest white neighbors eventually sold their large plantation to seven black families through the Tenant Purchase Program. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, June 1981.

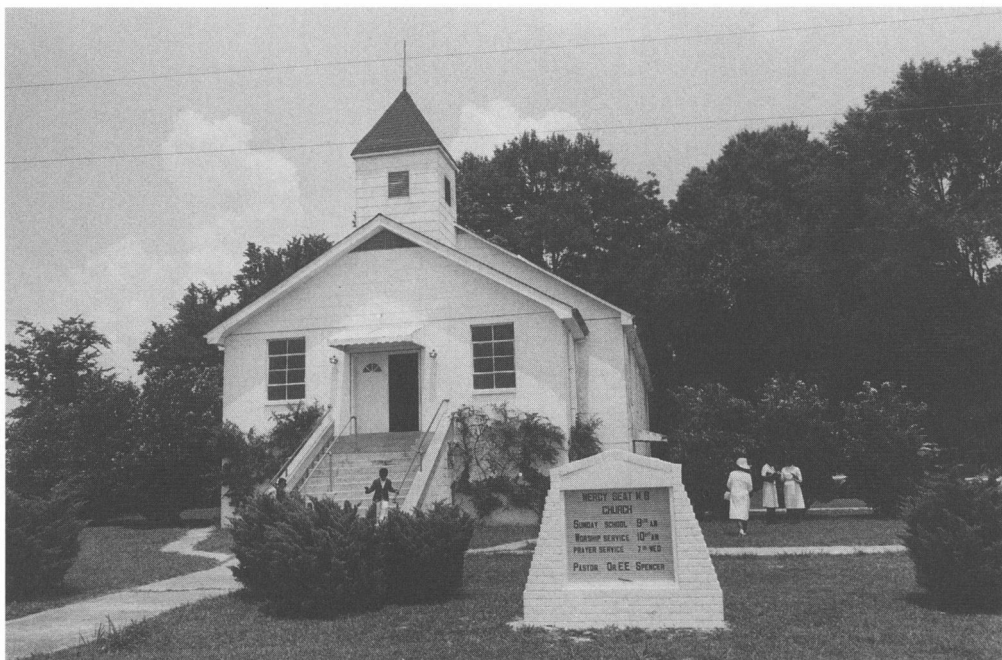
land and lease it to individual farmers, the government began to act as a broker and middleman, locating suitable acreage, recruiting eligible buyers from the ranks of landless tenant farmers, lending mortgage money to the purchasers for long terms at low interest, and providing home, farm, and credit supervision for the new owners.

Many writers who have examined the New Deal agricultural programs have dismissed the TPP, suggesting that it was too small, that it was directed at only the top levels of the agricultural working class, and that it did not achieve significant black participation. In short, they see it as a kind of placebo offered in place of the bitter medicine that might have overturned the caste and class system of southern agriculture once and for all. But these writers did not look closely at the experience of a single county's TPP over a long period of time to see if some desirable economic, social, and political objectives were met.³ Nor did they examine the Tenant Purchase Program from the point of view of the participants

themselves to see what impact it had on their lives and on the lives of their families, neighbors, and communities. In Claiborne County the land records in the courthouse and oral histories collected from many of the original TPP participants contradict these conclusions.

Between 1939 and 1942, twenty-four family-sized farms were created and purchased in Claiborne County through the TPP. Seventeen of these farms were carved out of three plantations, and the remaining seven were scattered, individual plots. The farms ranged in size from 60 to 160 acres, with an average size of 99 acres; prices ranged from \$830 to \$3,400, with an average price of \$1,900 or \$19 per acre. The mortgages on these farms fell between \$3,615 and \$4,838, averaging \$3,621, and in most cases included money to construct a house, barn, poultry house, and smokehouse, to dig a cistern, and to fence the land. In round figures, the average purchaser paid \$1,900 for a 100-acre farm and added \$1,700 worth of improvements.

Of the original twenty-four families, twenty were black and four were white. Their oral histories suggest that the motives of black and white purchasers and their attitudes toward the land were distinctly different. Blacks almost unanimously testify that getting a farm of their own had been an overriding ambition since childhood. The TPP allowed them to fulfill a dream that had begun with



As in many rural communities, the church was the social and political as well as the spiritual center of life. Mercy Seat Missionary Baptist Church was the home church of many black sharecroppers who became the early participants in Claiborne County's Tenant Purchase Program. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.



The pastor of Mercy Seat was the Reverend Eugene Spencer, who became a tenant purchaser because he “had seen another minister pass on to his reward and his family suffered. And this motivated [him] to try to buy a home and fix it so that [his] family would at least be cared for.” Seated to Spencer’s right is Sampson McGriggs, who also became a tenant purchaser and raised a large family on his sixty-acre farm. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.



Members of the Mercy Seat congregation leaving services. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.

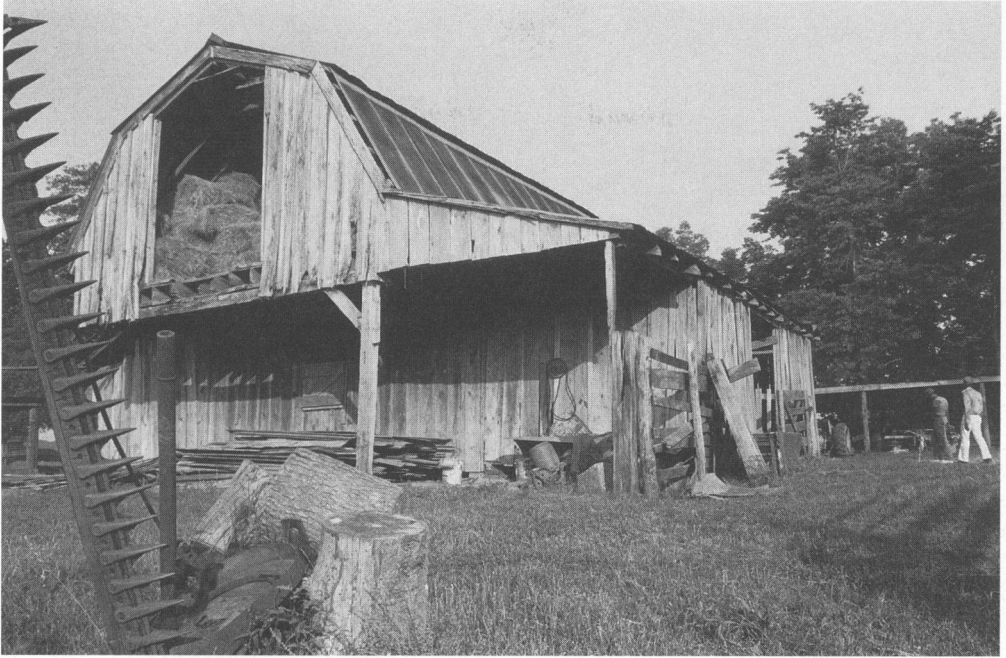


*George and Willie Aikerson, near neighbors of Milligan Newsome in the Westside community of Claiborne County, pose beside their mint condition 1953 Chevrolet. The Aikersons farmed their Tenant Purchase acreage until shortly before their deaths and passed the land on intact to their children.
Photo by Roland L. Freeman, June 1981.*

their sharecropping grandparents. David Moore, the son of a participating African American family, described his family's attitude toward sharecropping this way:

Well, the little I heard them, just wasn't nothing in sharecropping. You worked the whole year and at the end of the year when you go to the settle with the man, if you made ten bales of cotton, he'd always say you almost got out of debt. And that was every year. And back then, I used to always hear my mother say, they would give them the worst. He'd go buy a old poor mule and bring them and charge them what you would pay for a good mule. And they never would come out of that. I used to always hear my mother say, "He would always say, 'You almost got out of debt this year.'" Regardless what you made.

Mrs. Osborne Burkes joined the program with her husband in 1944 and remembers well his motive for signing up: "And my husband, his daddy was a sharecropper, and he always said that he was gon' buy him some land. He didn't



A Tenant Purchase barn still in use, this one on the farm purchased by Eddie and Martha Moore and now owned by their son, David. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.



The benefits of the Tenant Purchase Program extended into the second generation. David Moore, the son of an original Tenant Purchase family, commuted to a day job in a factory but continued to live at home and raise sweet potatoes on the family farm with the help of friends and neighbors. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, June 1981.



After the field has been rowed up by a middle-buster, young friends and relatives of David Moore dig holes and add water in preparation for planting. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.

want to rear his family up sharecropping like he was brought up. And he always look forward to it, and he worked to that end — that he could own a home for his children, his family, and that's what he did.”

White participants in Claiborne County, on the other hand, viewed the program as a temporary answer to the difficult economic times of the depression — something to tide them over until better times and better opportunities came their way. It is not surprising, then, that two of the four white families defaulted before the first harvest and left the county to join relatives in other states. Their farms were immediately resold through the program to black families. The remaining two white families continue to own their farms today, although after a few years of farming they found other employment and rented out their land. Neither family currently resides in the county.

Three black families left their investments in the first three years and were immediately replaced by new applicants. One found work in the steel mills in Gary and moved north with his family; one lost his wife in a fire, left the children with relatives, and took a job with Uniroyal in Detroit; the third went back to sharecropping in another part of the county because his wife did not like the new farm



Mrs. Osborne Burkes and her granddaughter check the mail in front of the Tenant Purchase house she and her husband moved into in 1944. One of the advantages for those who participated in the program was the opportunity to keep family together on land they owned. Mrs. Burkes's daughter and her husband live in a house they built on the family property. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.

and wanted to be closer to her relatives. The families who replaced them enjoyed a windfall, having only to assume the unpaid balance of the mortgage.

We can gauge the full success of the program only by examining the histories of the participating families, but statistics give some idea of its accomplishments. By 1945 the TPP in Claiborne County had established twenty-four new farms occupied by twenty-two black families. In 1982 twenty of those twenty-four farms were still owned, in whole or in part, by the Tenant Program purchaser, his widow, or sons and daughters. Only two of the farms, a mere 8 percent, had reverted to their original status as part of larger, white-owned plantations. The other two farms not still owned by family members were sold, after the government mortgage had been satisfied, to other black families. This remarkable retention rate flies in the face of national trends that show a persistent decline in black farm ownership.

Min Newsome's story provides a clue to the strong feelings about land ownership motivating Claiborne County's black community. I'm sure Newsome would have agreed with Mrs. Burkes. "It was wonderful," she said. "A piece of your own is better than a whole of somebody's else."

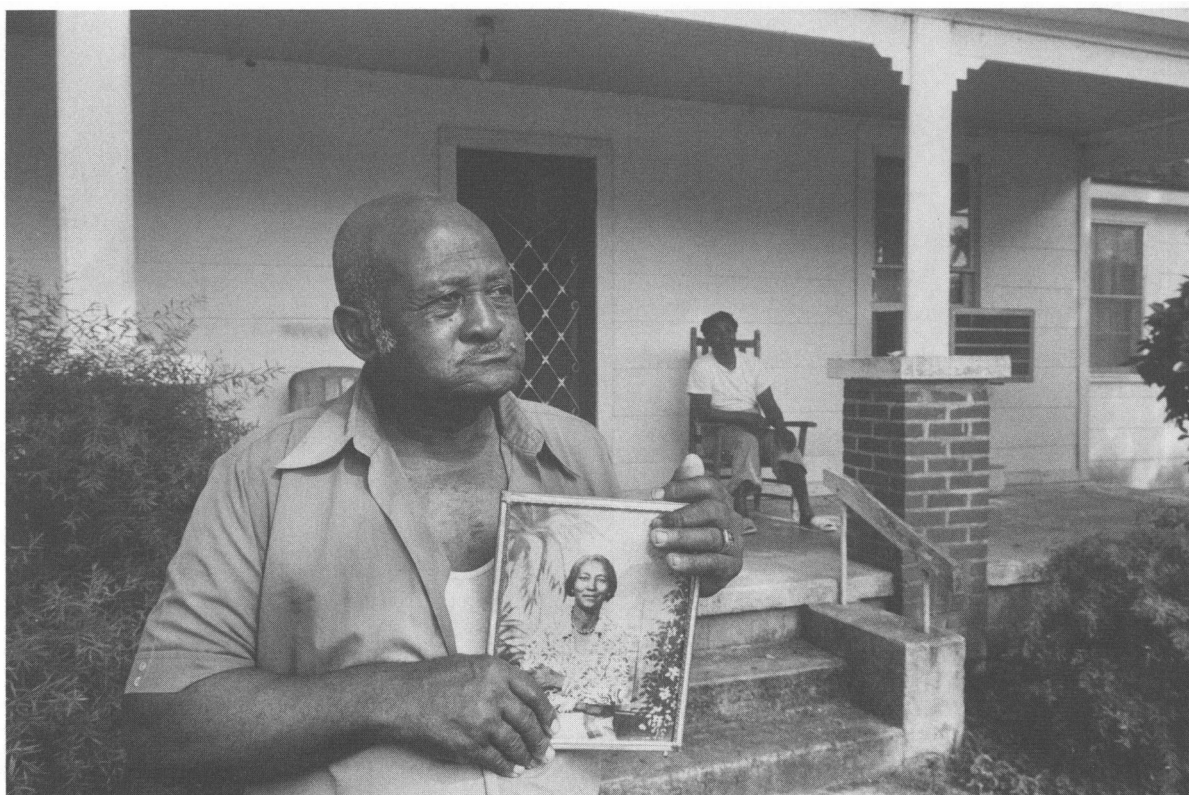
A final bit of irony: after Trim repossessed the land from Newsome, he sold it to a white man from the next county, who held it until 1932 when the Federal



In the rural areas where the Tenant Purchase Program operated, little was thrown out that could be reused. A gas station on U.S. Highway 61, one mile north of Lorman, Mississippi, uses old tin cans to fashion a newspaper pickup station for farmers in the area. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, May 1982.



The Tenant Purchase Program didn't work out for everyone. Ida West did not like her new farm, which was in another part of the county from where she grew up and her friends and family lived. In 1944 they left the farm (which was purchased by Osborne Burks) and returned to sharecropping. Many years later Mrs. West relaxed on her front porch in Pattison. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, June 1981.



The land purchased through the program continued to provide a positive benefit even after it was no longer competitive to operate a family farm on it. Jesse Johnson, pictured here with a photograph of his deceased wife, Elnora, began subdividing and selling lots in 1968, nearly 30 years after buying his farm. Between 1968 and 1977 he sold 32 parcels, totaling 88 of his original 94 acres, generating income for himself and allowing other black families to fulfill their dream of owning a piece of land to build on. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, June 1981.

Land Bank in New Orleans foreclosed on a later mortgage. The bank sold it to Lorene and Tom Furr, who sold it in 1939 to two families through the Tenant Purchase Program. I wish I could report that they still own it, but they both sold to a white neighbor in 1962, and the land is now a large pasture on a cattle ranch.

NOTES

All photographs © 1999 Roland L. Freeman

1. Tapes and transcripts of the interviews quoted in this article are in the possession of the author. The research conducted for this study was funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture administered by Alcorn State University.

2. For statistics on sharecropping, see Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), 112–13.

3. Most critics of the TPP find it too limited to have accomplished much in the way of social change. See, for example, Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 38, and Lester Salamon, "The Time Dimension in Policy Evaluation: The Case of the New Deal Land-Reform Experiments," *Public Policy*, 27 (Spring, 1979): 146.