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The Persistence of American Oppression After Emancipation

A minuscule cabin, fashioned with newspaper-covered walls and unstained wooden floors. A bathroom, separated only by a curtain with a chamber pot in place of a toilet; no indoor plumbing or privacy amongst family. A bed shared among an entire family, decorated exclusively by a hand-made quilt from scraps of worn-out clothing. The tenants of this cabin worked by the sweat of their brow, picking cotton, making no profit. Surprisingly, these conditions were not from slavery but instead describe a sharecropper cabin from early 20th century Grimes County, Texas. These harsh conditions were faced for decades by sharecroppers and people of color in Texas. Systematic oppression did not end with slavery but instead continues into the modern-day as people of color persist in their push for equality.

President Abraham Lincoln gave the executive order of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st, 1863. However, the order did not free all slaves with union-owned slaves finding themselves exempt from freedom. Furthermore, with little union presence, Texas was viewed as a safe haven for slave owners and their slaves leading to slavery persisting. Over two years later, on June 19th, 1865 the Emancipation Proclamation was finally enforced in Texas by the arrival of General Gordon Granger. General Granger declared equality and freedom for enslaved people, however also stressed they remain in their current location and work for wages. Although the now freed people met this proclamation with celebration, their cheers soon wore off when they realized their freedom did little to improve their circumstances.

As former slave, Felix Haywood said “We soon found out that freedom could make folks proud but it didn’t make them rich.” Knowing they were stuck they had to continue working for their former masters, Mr. Haywood continued, “But we didn’t do it. We couldn’t help stick to our masters. We couldn’t no more shoot them than we could fly. My father and me used to talk about it. We decided we was too soft and freedom wasn’t going to be much to our good even if we had an education.” With little money and education to their name, there were not many opportunities presented to a black person directly after emancipation. Due to this, they were forced to continue on their slave-like conditions even after emancipation technically freed them.

The 1870s gave black people technical freedom, but unfortunately, a new way to control people of color and former slaves was implemented. The era of sharecropping and indentured servants ensured these freedmen were back to work in often the same fields that once held them in chains. Without anywhere to go or any formal job training, there was only one place for these freedmen to return to. Because their former masters were now required to pay them, the former slaves were often given small portions of land to live and work on from their previous masters. Their land ownership came at a price, however, one that must be paid off in labor. This system ensured they would legally be paid but were still working for no wages but instead to pay off an imaginary debt forced on them by their former masters. With this unjust system benefiting former masters so well, other ex-confederates who lost their slaves found their home in the deep south including the state of Texas. Bringing in even more “slaves” who were just previously freed.

Oftentimes, these sharecropping agreements were not as simple as sharing land and an agreement on the harvest. Instead, there were steep rates of interest and the sharecroppers would fall deeper and deeper into debt. Those who would try to escape would find themselves

arrested and sent back to work in harsher conditions such as coal mines. The criminal justice system secured white landowners as above the black freedman. Sharecropping at times was just a rebranded and now legal form of slavery.

The process of indentured servitude took on many forms aside from just former slaves. Mexican “peons” who were fleeing debt in Mexico would come to Texas and often end up working for slightly better conditions than the freedmen would. Some of these Mexican refugees even ended up being the backbone of several Rio Grande area plantations. This process of Mexican migrants working in harsh conditions for low wages is still in effect in Texas today.

Former United States District Judge U.W Clemons gave significant insight about sharecropping when he shared his family history in 2012. He said his grandmother, who was born three years after the civil war ended, continued to live as slaves on the plantations. He recognized sharecropping was just a rebranded form of slavery stating “It was a new form of slavery called sharecropping.” While his family was from Mississippi, the experiences of sharecropping in the was unfortunately universal.

These sharecroppers would work day in and day out, working to produce the cash crops that the United States had been actively producing for centuries prior. Cotton was still “king” and its production was the main focus of most sharecroppers' workload. They would live on small cabins, many of which were former slave cabins. Hoping to one day pay off their debt.

The freedmen who could afford to pay off their debts and leave the brutal fieldwork, found themselves segregated and in previously formed white communities. This exclusion and alienation led to the formation of freedmen towns, communities of former slavery. While one might have hoped their new communities would lead to a final happy ending, the shackles of white oppression only continued. The towns would often be the focal point of the Klu Klux Klan

and other white supremacy groups' violence. Freedmen towns saw the robbery, destruction, torture, and even murders. These groups wanted to intimidate freedmen back into their plantations and harsh working conditions.

The Black Codes were enacted to further deny equality. One of these laws required yearly labor contracts among indentured servants, furthering the cycle of black people working on white-owned plantations for little to no money. As the sharecropping system continued, freedmen found themselves in larger debt than they could pay. This was because, for every acre and tool they rented, they owed a larger and larger amount to their landowner.

As the 1880s ushered in the era of Texas reconstruction, the state had a necessity for a cost-effective labor force to build their needed advancement in infrastructure and keep the sugar and cotton production running. The 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution provided the perfect and legal option for slavery. The amendment allows servitude as a form of punishment for a crime. Convict leasing used this legal loophole and put their prisoners to work, a system still running today. As black people were falsely convicted and put into shackles again, the reconstruction efforts to fund the state government were well underway.

In 1883, Republican leader, Norris Cuney addressed the horrors of convict leasing at the State Convention of Colored Men of Texas stating "When a fresh convict is carried to the farms, he is taken down by the other convicts and beaten, at the command of the guard.... in a few days he is hauled out of his sick quarters and put to work, whether he is physically able to do it or not. In many cases, sick convicts are made to toil until they drop dead in their tracks." This process of using convicts as slaves was not perpetrated by a racist master but instead a racist system.

This system created ways to prevent the black freedmen from obtaining true equality. The Jim Crow era began as early as emancipation but the US Senate elections of white supremacists such as John Henninger Reagan in 1887 brought in racist legislation aimed to keep people of color down. Legislators like him created laws such as the poll tax, grandfather clause, and literacy test designed specifically to prevent freedmen and other people of color from voting. Without the ability to vote, freedmen and people of color had no say in the government that continued to oppress them two decades after their emancipation.

Even when a black person was able to pass every racist prerequisite, they were often declined or intimidated out of the voting booth. NAACP leader, Dr. Lawrence Nixon had passed all of his voting prerequisites, including paying for his poll tax, and yet was still declined his ballot. In 1927, Dr. Nixon brought the case of voting discrimination to the supreme court in the case Nixon vs Herdon. The court ruled unanimously the state of Texas was unfairly discriminating against black people's right to vote. However, the ruling changed very little, and Southern Democrats still prevented black voters from participating in government. With voter discrimination persisting, Jim Crow laws would continue for decades to come.

These Jim Crow laws were enforced by police and white supremacist groups alike. If a black person was seen as acting out of line, brutal lynchings and acts of violence would ensue. As noted earlier, even in freedmen towns, the white supremacy vigilante groups made their case against equality clear.

As another generation of hate continued to pour out upon black people, some who were never slaves still felt the effects. For example, in 1907 a black man by the name of Alex Johnson was attacked by a mob inside his jail cell in Cameron, Texas. He was being held for allegedly attacking a child. Even if he committed this crime, the United States should be a place

of innocence until proven guilty in the court of law. In the Jim Crow era south, however, if even an accusation of a crime committed by a black person occurred, it was almost a certain death sentence. For Johnson, the unavoidable fate came forth when he was hung publicly on an oak tree by this vigilante group. For these hate-mongering racist groups, heinous crimes in the name of vigilantism, including murder were never off the table if it meant persevering their white supremacy state.

As another decade went by, sharecropping began to decline due to advancements in agricultural equipment. The United States now found itself entrenched in the Great War or now known as World War I. Despite the rejection faced by their country, many black men (and some women) stood up to defend their country. However, they were once again pushed aside as white supremacists and the President of the United States Woodrow Wilson led the country further into racism. The United States military segregated their units and even sent their 93rd unit, an entirely black unit to service France abroad. Out of 380,000 black soldiers, 200,000 of them were sent to Europe to be under French Command. More than half of black soldiers still under the command of the United States were put into a labor force to build the necessary infrastructure for war.

Of course, black soldiers wanted to fight and not once again be sent to labor. As Captain Halmiton Fish said , “They weren’t going to put us in a white division, not in 1917, anyway; so our troops were sent in to the supply and services as laborers to lay railroad tracks. This naturally upset our men tremendously.” While serving with the welcoming French army, the black soldiers proved themselves in combat with the Harlem Hell Fighters earning France’s highest military honor. These soldiers also earned 171 independent honors for the service.

Back at home, however, the black veterans found themselves once again as a focal point for racial violence. Tejanos and black people who opposed the war are seen as disloyal to the United States. Their reasons for opposition were not out of treason, but instead, protest because they would not support a war for democracy abroad if they did not reach democracy at home. After the war, the KKK found its peak with its new Texas headquarters in Vidor. Even today, scars from the KKK are visible in Vidor, Texas as strides for equality are still being made.

In 1919, racist mobs broke out causing dozens of cities to have assaults and lynchings carried out. Many of these mobs were started by white servicemen and perpetrated against black veterans. In total there were 97 lynchings recorded that year alone, some of the victims were black veterans in uniform. In Elaine, Arkansas black sharecroppers attempted to protest for better working conditions, however, their protest led to a hate-filled massacre. The massacre lasted three days and took over 200 black lives including children and women. Even after their service in the war, even after years of supposed freedom, simply speaking out against the sharecropping system led to a massacre. With black veterans and sharecroppers unable to speak up, injustice was destined to continue.

By 1930, the Great Depression began in Texas. As farm prices declined, many former sharecroppers now left their land and this marked the start of a migration of former sharecroppers and decedent of slaves from tenant farms to cities. Their goal was to find refuge in big cities such as San Antonio and Houston because historically these towns had a Freedmen's Bureau. A Freedmen's Bureau would allow these people to finally find the resources they needed to get ahead in life. However, segregation was still heavily prominent in Texas cities. Through

redlining, vigilante, and police violence, these people found themselves segregated to corners of the cities.

Ten years passed and once again the United States was entrenched in war. As the Nazis wreaked havoc and white supremacy in Europe, parts of Texas maintained the ideology of white supremacy. Black soldier Bert Babero wrote a letter describing the prisoner of war camps in Texas stating they were segregated in two. One side for the black soldiers, and the other for the white soldiers and the German prisoners. Babero stated he felt the United States betrayed black soldiers stating things in his letters such as “I comprised an important part of this nation and it was my patriotic duty to avail myself when my country was in danger of peril. My attitude now is greatly changed. I’m indifferent toward the whole affair.” and that the United States placed “the tyrant...over the liberator.”

In the post World War II era, sharecropping once again saw another decline due to mechanization of farming equipment. This ushered in a period of time called the Great Migration as sharecroppers headed to the Northern United States seeking better treatment and working conditions. While this may have seemed like the end of sharecropping, sharecropping would continue for decades.

Author Denver Moore tells his story in the Christain book *Same Kind of Different As Me*. Denver was born seven decades after the Emancipation Proclamation and was still raised a modern-day slave. He grew up on a sharecropping plantation where he was forced into work and was even frequently attacked by white supremacists. It was not until leaving the plantation that he discovered the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy was in the process of passing civil rights legislation. Denver was appalled because for his entire life; he was subjected to whatever his landowner demanded. He did not believe equality was close, he did not even know

he was legally free under the Emancipation Proclamation. Denver was also a victim of convict leasing. After being convicted of armed robbery, he was sentenced to hard labor, once again finding himself in slave-like conditions. While Denver Moore's story started in Louisiana, his story gives a first-hand account of the horrors faced by sharecroppers across the south, including Texas.

The Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1968 sought to finally put an end to the vile and racist laws ruling the nation. Texas, who had once been an epicenter for oppression, now brought forth heroes of the movement such as James Farmer, leader of the Congress of Racial Equality also known as the CORE. The CORE brought in peaceful tactics to the movement such as sit-ins and Freedom Rides. These tactics were used famously by Martin Luther King Jr.

Another Texan leader during the Civil Rights Movement was Dr. Hector Garcia. Dr. Garcia worked closely with several presidents but he was closest with President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a relationship beginning after a racial incident in Texas. War hero Private Felix came home in a casket and Longoria's family was refused the use of the chapel for his funeral due to his Mexican heritage. This outraged Dr. Garcia contacted the then-senator from Texas Lyndon Baines Johnson. LBJ then orchestrated a proper funeral ceremony for Private Longoria at Arlington National Cemetery. After this incident Dr. Garcia continued to advise LBJ about Mexican American affairs, helping him run as Vice President. Dr. Garcia helped found the Viva Kennedy Club, which rallied Latino support for the Kennedy and Johnson campaign.

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson was sworn in. Now President, LBJ pushed hard for the passage of his predecessor Kennedy's proposed Civil Rights Act. After pressure by LBJ, congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Nearly 100 years after the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas,

the act delivered equality across the nation. This act prohibited discrimination in the workforce and publicly funded programs. Even though the 15th Amendment gave black men the right to vote, the roadblocks put in place by Jim Crow policies such as the dreaded poll tax finally saw an end with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Today, over 156 years after the Emancipation Proclamation first made its way to Texas, significant progress against injustice has been made. Towns like Jasper which had a recent lynching in 1998 and Vidor, Texas still represent a portion of Texas resistant toward change however a glimmer of hope shines through. In June of 2020, Black Lives Matter protests made their way into Vidor, Texas, the once headquarters of the KKK. Devon Noe, a black Vidor resident who spoke at the Black Lives Matter event stated that he had been a victim of several racial offenses from bottles being thrown at him to people attempting to run him over. Despite these occurrences, he said the town was still a good place to live and stated there were still good people in Vidor. Even in a town where the KKK was once headquartered, there is hope.

This research project was produced in the hope to provide much-needed research on how the effects of slavery and sharecropper still affect people of color in Texas. Texas has historically been a home of racial injustice from the genocide of several indigenous groups, the treatment of slaves and sharecroppers, to the 1998 lynching in Jasper, Texas. However, Texas has also been a foundation in pushing for civil liberties. The Institute of Texas Cultures has been on a mission since 1968 to inform people of the diversity of the great state of Texas. Texans must understand how people have been treated historically, it is only then true advancements can be made.

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