

Sharecroppers

George W. McDaniel

The majority of nineteenth and early twentieth century Southern farmers were landless. Sharecroppers, tenants and wage hands, all had an important place in American history. For this reason the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology has brought into its Hall of Everyday Life in the American Past a sharecropper's house where a special exhibit on sharecroppers will be part of the Festival of American Folklife. Former sharecroppers will be there who can answer from personal experience such questions as what were the daily activities of men and women on farms? What did the children do? How were the rooms furnished? What did they cook with? What did they eat? What crops did they raise, and how did they divide them with the landowner?

This authentic sharecropper house was dismantled and moved from the Mulliken-Spragins farm near Bowie, Md. in 1968. People who lived in a house such as this left no wills, deeds, diaries, tax records or collections of letters that would help us to date its construction, identify its furnishings, or describe the lives of its occupants. Structural details, however, indicate that it was built shortly before 1900. It is therefore not an old house, nor is it typical of the houses of most Southern sharecroppers at that time; most were smaller and more crudely finished.

But the sharecroppers' houses were home. Throughout history, two-parent households lived in them. Most families included many children crowded in two rooms down and two up. The parents and infants traditionally used the smaller side room as their bedroom (which also served as the more formal sitting room), and the children slept upstairs—the boys

George W. McDaniel, an historical consultant and photographer, recently researched this sharecropper's house for the Smithsonian Institution's Department of Cultural History.



The reconstructed sharecropper's house attracts a lot of attention from visitors to the Hall of Everyday Life in the American Past.

Photo by George McDaniel for the Smithsonian.

in one room and the girls in the other. The larger room downstairs was the principal room for family life where food was cooked, meals eaten, vegetables canned, butter churned, bodies bathed, music played, and stories swapped. Babies were born in the house. George Johnson, one of the Festival participants, was born in this house in 1929 and rocked to sleep in a cradle in the side room by his mother, Elizabeth Johnson, also a participant. People died in the house too, as Octavia Parker Proctor, another participant, remembers; as a young girl she lived next door and was brought here to view a deceased daughter of the Wilson family, who resembled a "tiny doll" laid out on a cooling board between two chairs in the front room.

Outside the house, clothes were washed and dried, water carried from the spring, stove wood chopped and stacked, chickens fed and housed, and a path worn to the outside toilet. Beyond the house and vegetable garden, fields of tobacco and corn were

The sharecropper's house just before it was dismantled in 1968.

Photo by George Watson for the Smithsonian.

planted and harvested, and vegetable kilns and cabbage beds dug for winter storage of garden produce.

The house was part of a farm community and one of several tenant houses clustered together. Down the farm lane stood the landowner's large house. Nearby was the community church with the school in front of it and the cemetery behind.

Feel free to ask these participants about their home. Not all of them were associated with this house; some are from St. Mary's and Charles Counties, Md., and one is from Tidewater, S.C. But they all have memories in common and they all have much to pass on. Their experiences are evidence of the "hard times" black sharecroppers lived through, and of the reasons that thousands left the country and moved to the cities in one of the great migrations of American history. Its effects still shape your life, whether you live in the country, suburbs, or city. Some ways of life have been left behind, others have been modified by new circumstances, while still others remain intact.