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"A Dress of the Right Length to Die In": Mortuary and Memorial Practices Amongst Depression-Era Tenant Farmers of the Piedmont South

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**“A dress of the right length to die in”:
Mortuary and Memorial Practices Amongst Depression-Era Tenant Farmers
of the Piedmont South**

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Vienna, Ohio

Bachelor of Arts, Mercyhurst College, 2010

**A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

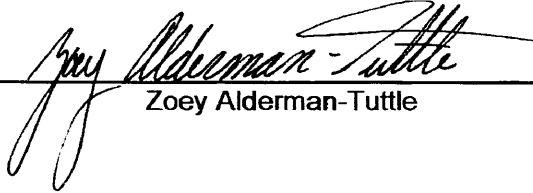
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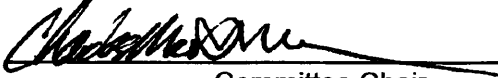
APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of


Master of Arts


Zoey Alderman-Tuttle

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ABSTRACT PAGE

This thesis discusses white tenant farmers in the 1930s in the Piedmont of the Southern States. Specifically, it explores the mortuary and memorial practices of this group as impacted by poverty and frequent movement. To this end, the paper addresses: 1.) the general condition of tenant farmers in the region, including morbidity, lifestyle, and religion; 2.) the requirements for what was socially understood as a proper burial; 3.) the way in which the desires of the dying for those requirements were expressed and the conditions met by survivors; 4.) the morphology, decoration, and visitation of graves; and 5) the use of heirlooms and other portable memorials to assist the living in remembering the deceased.

Originally, the project included a study of African American tenant farmer mortuary and memorial practices as well. However, examining two groups proved too unwieldy for the length of the project. More importantly, significant literature exists on the topic for African Americans. In contrast, it seems that no published scholarly literature exists that focuses on burial and remembrance among white tenant farmers. Therefore, the mortuary and memorial practices of white tenant farmers have become the sole focus of this thesis.

This lack of scholarship has not proved a deterrent. Instead, the project employs primary source material such as WPA narratives, memoirs, and photographs in conjunction with literary sources and secondary sources on the Appalachians. The latter served an extrapolative purpose, as many Piedmont tenant farmers of the 1930s had recent origins in the Appalachian region. Further research on the topic is encouraged, as it may help to shed light on the memorial practices of other impoverished, highly itinerant groups, including migrant workers.

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DEDICATION

To my grandfathers,

Roscoe C. Alderman,
for his stories about the Depression,

and

Ausmer B. Tuttle,
for the days spent in cemeteries looking for family.

Also to my family and close friends,
who are unfailingly willing to hear about my research on death and remembrance.

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I am grateful for the supportive community in the American Studies Program at the College of William and Mary, particularly the support of my cohort, Femke Bunsow, Jan Hubenthal, Ed Hunt, Laura Keller, Kate House Previti, and Janine Yorimoto. I am also unerringly appreciative of the time and efforts of my advisor, Professor Chandos M. Brown, and co-advisor, Professor Grey Gundaker, as well as that Professor Scott Nelson, who served on my thesis defense committee. Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, Bret Larson, and my parents, Gary Tuttle and j'Nice Alderman-Tuttle, for their continued support, love, and encouragement.

Introduction

Following the end of slavery in the South, Southern landowners instituted a new (or, some would argue, a modified) economic system, the tenant system, aimed at solving the post-emancipation labor shortage.¹ In the end, this system proved a greater boon to most landlords than to the farm laborers they employed. Degraded land, isolation, and corrupt landlords combined with other factors to create and perpetuate a tenant class whose lives were often filled with extreme poverty and itinerancy. The poverty frequently amounted to near debt peonage, and the itinerancy was, in some places, on the order of annual or biannual movement from the purview of one landlord to another, though seldom over great distances. The onset of the Depression in the 1930s, compounded with the pre-existing agricultural depression of the 1920s, further exacerbated the situation, as did the New Deal. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (1938), for example, favored landlords, many of whom forced their tenants off the land following the implementation of the law.²

Such was the economic system in the southern Piedmont states. Writers traversed the region during the Depression, gathering information about the tenant underclass [Figs. 1 and 2]. Often these writers were sympathetic and aimed to help. Sometimes they were engaged in ethnographic work. On occasion, the writers demonstrated their own unwillingness to understand the culture of those they studied. Despite the portrayals by

¹ Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, *And Their Children After Them* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), xvi.

² Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1937), 47.

some writers, tenant farmers possessed both pride and dignity.³ As other writers and the tenants' own words show, they refused to allow the poverty and itinerancy that characterized their economic situation during life to define them in death. This thesis proposes to explore the ways that tenant farmers mitigated the constraints of poverty and itinerancy on mortuary and memorial practices. They continued to adhere strongly to conservative, regional mortuary traditions, on which poverty had little impact, while using traditional heirlooms in conjunction with newer mainstream memorial practices such as photography to remember and honor the dead from whose graves they were increasingly separated by space, even as they were paradoxically united by a multi-generational pattern of itinerancy.

³ For the sake of brevity, the term "tenant farmer" is used hereafter to encompass tenant farmers and various degrees of sharecroppers, unless otherwise noted.

CHAPTER I. THE CONDITION OF TENANT FARMERS

After the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction in the South, Southern landowners were faced with a shortage of cheap labor and the need to replace slavery in order to continue the tenuous agricultural system that served as the basis of traditional Southern economics.⁴ At the same time, the South was moving into a period of increased industrialization, as the North and many Southerners pushed for the creation of a “New South” based on industry, not agriculture. This industrial movement created new factory and mill jobs in cities and towns that provided jobs for newly emancipated but often unskilled African Americans as well as poor whites. Some of the white families had lived in the area for many generations; others, especially in the Piedmont, moved from the Appalachian Mountains to the Uplands. The latter were particularly interested in farming opportunities.⁵ Therefore, many became tenant farmers while others sought work in factories. The migration of poor whites out of the mountains increased during the late 1920s, when the formation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park led to the forced removal of numerous white families from the mountains and into the Uplands.⁶ During the Depression, other public works projects also displaced huge numbers of people.⁷ Such movements provoked increased competition among poor whites for tenant farms, which

⁴ Anthony M. Tang, *Economic Development in the Southern Piedmont, 1860-1950* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 38.

⁵ Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), xvii.

⁶ Alan Jabbour and Karen Singer Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 92-93.

⁷ See Walter L. Creese, *TVA's Public Planning: The Vision, the Reality* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990) and Michael J. McDonald and John Muldowny, *TVA and the Dispossessed: The Resettlement of Population in the Norris Dam Area* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982) for elucidation of the policy and practical issues in planning for and resettling people from the Appalachian region designated for flooding.

compelled many tenant farmers to eke out a living on marginal or nearly exhausted soil. Traditional large-scale agriculture in the South involved monocropping cotton, tobacco, peanuts, or corn without rotating crops or leaving the land fallow [Fig. 3]. Without these practices, crops had to be coaxed from increasingly infertile land plied with ever-increasing amounts of guano fertilizer until the land gave out entirely and had to be abandoned [Fig. 4].⁸

Additionally, the tenant system discouraged change, even that needed to improve the land. This was due partly to the poverty and itinerancy of the tenants, and partly to the reluctance of the landlord, further augmented by general factors contingent with the economic system and poor education. With labor at a premium while working in the fields, tenants seldom had the energy needed to make improvements. Few saw the benefit of enhancing land that they might be leaving in a year or two. Improvers also ran the risk having their rent raised because of changes they themselves had initiated, funded, and completed. Of course, tenant farmers seldom had the ready funds needed to implement changes anyway. Additionally, the landlord seldom had interest in encouraging new ways of farming. New methods of farming could be seen as too risky or too expensive; tenant farmers as too dim or slovenly to learn; or the landlord simply might not be abreast of changes. Therefore, as soil was depleted and eroded, and cotton prices and profits declined. Labor needs, low prices for crops, and poor soil forced entire families to work in the fields in the hopes of making a profit.

⁸ Frederick Law Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 411.

For many landlords seeking to make a profit from those same fields, exploitation of tenant farmers became a key practice in the tenant system.⁹ To that end, landowners frequently sought to replace white tenant farmers with African American tenant farmers, whom the landowners could more easily exploit without repercussions, given the prevailing racist social conditions.¹⁰ African American tenant farmers were often rented better farmland, in part because landowners felt that they were more likely to work productively than poor whites. White tenant farmers were widely perceived by other whites as lacking commonsense and intellect. Poor whites were also perceived as lazy and undisciplined. During Frederick Law Olmstead's travels through the South on the eve of the Civil War, he recorded numerous unfavorable remarks regarding poor whites. They were "said to be extremely ignorant and immoral, as well as indolent and unambitious."¹¹ One landowner stated that "he did not see how white labourers were ever going to come into competition with negroes here, at all. You never could depend on white men, and you couldn't *drive* them any; they wouldn't stand it."¹² In the 1930s, Hortense Powdermaker observed that poor whites were universally scorned by the middle

⁹ Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, xvii.

¹⁰ African Americans were easier to exploit than poor whites due to their extreme marginalization in Southern society. The Jim Crow laws enacted systematically from the late 1880s through the 1920s prevented African Americans from serving on juries, among numerous other disenfranchisements. Marginalization in the legal system meant that African Americans were less able than poor whites to appeal to the courts should their landlords cheat them. Furthermore, the atmosphere of violence against African Americans made protest in the courts or at all a life-threatening proposition. Lynching and other racial violence was appallingly common, and served as a means by which the landlords could exploit their African American tenants without legal repercussions. Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 11; Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1939), 20.

¹¹ Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 65.

¹² Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 65.

and upper classes of whites, as well as by African Americans. She wrote that the middle class whites felt “that they could not get along without the Negro, whereas they would gladly dispense with the Poor Whites, whom they decry as untrustworthy tenants, treacherous and ‘ungrateful.’”¹³

Frequently, others saw the conditions in which tenant farmers lived as evidence of their general lethargy. Their poverty was seen as resulting from a lack of will to improve. Outsiders frequently perceived dirtiness, ramshackle houses, and worn clothing to be a sign of lack of moral and mental soundness. Unfortunately, the crushing poverty in which most tenants lived left them little opportunity to improve the conditions that others took as evidence of laziness. The exploitive tenant system, combined with unproductive land (as discussed earlier), insufficient food, shelter, and chronic disease (as will be discussed later), virtually ensured the continued poverty of tenant families.

In the tenant system, a tenant or cropper entered into a contract with a landlord, in which the landlord provided farmland and a house in return for payment with some portion of the tenant’s crop. The landlord often provided these farmers with work animals, machinery, seed, and sometimes fertilizer for a set interest rate, usually of ten percent. Additionally, the landlord furnished his tenants with food during the spring and summer months, as well as clothing and occasionally medical and burial expenses. These were also provided at a ten percent interest rate. Credit at the store (which generally belonged to the landlord) was typically suspended during the winter months.¹⁴ During

¹³ Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 20.

¹⁴ See Harry Harrison Kroll, *The Cabin in the Cotton* (Cornwall, NY: Ray Long and Richard R. Smith, 1931) for a literary view of the workings inside a landlord’s general store.

that time the tenant had to provide for his family on whatever money was left over after selling his portion of the crop and paying what debt he could.¹⁵ Until the debt incurred was paid off, tenants could not legally leave to farm elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, many landlords adjusted the account books to keep their largely illiterate tenants in debt. Some tenants might not receive cash from one year to the next and subsisted entirely on credit, creating a form of debt peonage that trapped these tenants on the land.¹⁶ After the Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed in 1938, many of these tenants were either forced off the land or told to keep acres out of production. Those who limited production often found themselves denied the payments for doing so, which had been sent to (and kept by) the landlord for distribution.¹⁷ Ultimately, many of those forced off the land would become a new underclass of migrant workers.

The circumstances of tenant farmers' lives necessitated itinerancy. Dissatisfied landlords could force their tenants to move by cutting them off from credit at the store. Tenants might also move if they found a better landlord who was willing to pay off their debt to the current landlord.¹⁸ Some tenants moved constantly in search of better land or a better landlord, managing to stay sufficiently out of debt to permit this movement, as N.

¹⁵ Melissa Walker, ed., *Country Women Cope with Hard Times: A Collection of Oral Histories* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004); Powdermaker 82; Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Communities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936); David Eugene Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 7.

¹⁶ Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1978); Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 7.

¹⁷ Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 52.

¹⁸ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001).

Ruth Phillips Heath's father did.¹⁹ Arthur Raper discovered in Greene and Macon counties in Georgia that white sharecroppers had spent an average of slightly less than two and a half years living in the same house.²⁰ Most of the moves were local, though, which helped to maintain community or family ties. Vance noted that “[o]nly a fifth of 1,370 moves in a Georgia county were found to involve distances of ten miles or over, while 29 per cent were for less than two miles.”²¹ Heath's family moved at least seven times before she was fifteen; the distances between residences were typically about a day's travel on land.²² A WPA study of rural migration stated that the “economic advantages to be gained from more remunerative employment in another locality are weighed against the advantages of existing social relationships.”²³ Although the sample areas in the WPA study were scattered across the country, such considerations were almost certainly on the minds of tenant farmers. It is reasonable to assume that tenant farmers attempted to stay near family or other relations, and in doing so, they may have considered that they were within visiting distance of family members' graves. Whether deliberate or coincidental, the result was the same: to remain close to the family was to also dwell among the family dead.

¹⁹ N. Ruth Phillips Heath, *Forever Down the River: Memoirs of a Sharecropper's Daughter* (Charlottesville, VA: BookSurge LLC, 2006).

²⁰ Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 61, Table XIII.

²¹ Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography of the South: A Study in the Regional Resources and Human Adequacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), 202.

²² See Heath, *Forever Down the River*, throughout for discussions of time spent at each location and frequency of movement.

²³ Charles Elson Lively and Conrad Taeuber, *Rural Migration in the United States*. Research Monograph. United States. Works Progress Administration. 1939 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 86.

Tenant farmers were often profoundly isolated from their neighbors and the outside world. Distance could not be measured merely in miles because travel was difficult, slow, and time-consuming, especially for people who had very little available time. Roads were rough and frequently impassible to animal, wagon, or car. Dale Maharidge describes the condition of many rural roads, noting that

[t]he side roads were a web of red dirt that fingered without rhyme between large empty spaces on the map. A lot of real estate separated families from one another...A man on a mule or on foot was locked in a small world that did not extend much beyond the patch of cotton he raised, especially during the rainy months when the lanes were rendered ribbons of mud. In the best of weather, it was an all-day trip to get into town and back.²⁴

These roads inhibited school and church attendance, diminishing a sense of community that was already tenuous. As a further deterrent, the hard work required of all members of the family limited time spent in school, as exhaustion (and, sometimes, the lack of appropriate Sunday clothing) suppressed the inclination to attend church.

With few activities other than work and little leisure time, the daily lives of tenant farmers were difficult and monotonous. Their lives were also profoundly unhealthy. Tenant farmers and their families suffered from disease and inadequate food, shelter, and clothing. Caldwell and Bourke-White provide a succinct summary of the conditions, observing that tenants “work for from fifty cents to a dollar a day, from three to six months a year, and who are forced to live in a dwelling detrimental to health, to wear insufficient clothing in cold weather, and to exist on an insufficient quantity and variety

²⁴ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 67.

of food. These are the people who develop pellagra, and who use snuff to deaden the desire for food.”²⁵ Tenant farmers lived in flimsy cabins furnished with few belongings [Fig. 5]. (Itinerancy and poverty combined to limit material acquisitions.) Nixon relates two sayings from the lower Piedmont regarding tenant farmers’ houses. The sayings observe “with a mixture of truth and exaggeration, that such a farmer could study astronomy through the roof and geology through the floor, and that when he moved all he had to do was to call the dog and spit in the fire.”²⁶

Tenant farmers subsisted on the Southern frontier diet, composed predominantly of fatback, cornmeal, and molasses. There was little variation to their diet. Many landlords, interested in getting the largest possible crop, forbade their tenants from growing gardens. The unhealthful, monotonous diet combined with a general lack of fruit, vegetables, or sufficient proteins frequently resulted in generation after generation suffering from diseases resulting from malnutrition, including rickets and pellagra. Some tenants were able to supplement their diet through hunting, the addition of poultry, or vegetables acquired through trade or from gardens where these latter were permitted. By and large, though, tenant farmers were undernourished if not malnourished, which increased their vulnerability to disease.²⁷

²⁵ Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 47.

²⁶ H.C. Nixon, *Lower Piedmont Country*, ed. Erskine Caldwell (New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1946), 133.

²⁷ Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, 379.

CHAPTER II. TENANT FARMERS, DISEASE, AND MEDICINE

Pellagra and rickets were chronic diseases afflicting many members of the population [Fig. 6]. Malaria and hookworm had largely been eradicated by the 1930s, but pulmonary diseases continued to take an impressive toll.²⁸ Pneumonia and tuberculosis, for example, were rampant, the leading causes of death from disease in the state of Virginia throughout the 1930s [Fig. 7].²⁹ The region seemed particularly susceptible to disease, as Vance observed, stating that “deaths from tuberculosis, typhoid, pellagra, influenza, childbirth, and in infant mortality, southern states uniformly exceed the national average.”³⁰ Tenant farmers had a high birth rate, but, as Vance’s statement indicates, deaths among children were similarly high. Child mortality resulted in great measure from accidents, malnourishment, disease, and poor prenatal health.³¹ General cleanliness was also a factor at times. Some tenants, such as Heath’s mother or Annie Mae Gudger, willingly sacrificed what little remained of their energy to ensure that their homes and children were as clean as they could be given the circumstances.³² Others, such as Fred Ricketts, believed that “[i]t is foolish to waste money that can be eaten with

²⁸ James O. Breeden, “Disease as a Factor in Southern Distinctiveness,” in *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South*, ed. Todd L. Savitt and James Harvey Young (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 1-28.

²⁹ Bureau of Vital Statistics, Virginia Department of Health, *Virginia Health Bulletin: Report of the Bureau of Vital Statistics, State Department of Health* (Richmond, VA: Office of Publication, January 1932 – January 1940).

³⁰ Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, 376.

³¹ With all able family members needed in the fields, there was often no one left to closely watch infants or crawling babies. Children often rolled into fires, fell into wells or creeks, or ran afoul of farm animals, to provide a few examples. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 70. Margaret Jarmon Hagood, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman*, 1939 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 155.

³² See Heath, *Forever Down the River*, and Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for more details on the effort involved in maintaining such cleanliness.

on soap when any fool knows there is nothing cleaner than water.’’³³ In unsanitary conditions like those found at the Ricketts’ home, disease could easily spread.³⁴

Given the dearth of medical knowledge, the availability of treatment, or the money needed to pay for treatment, relatively benign diseases could advance to a point of deadliness. Hospitals were seldom nearby, especially considering the terrain of the Piedmont. Doctors could be similarly distant, and were often not sent for until the crucial moment had passed and the patient had begun declining towards death. Unfortunately, waiting to send for the doctor or take the sick individual to the hospital frequently reinforced belief in the medical establishment as a waste of time, money, and effort. When the patient died, having been unattended until it was too late for the doctor to assist, the family might be even more hesitant to send for the doctor in the next, similar situation, since he was perceived to have failed in the first.

Having to pay for medical treatments that failed could also seem as if the medical practitioner was taking advantage of the tenant farmer, serving as yet one more deterrent in the future for seeking medical care [Fig. 8]. One tenant family, the Childresses were distressed that they had to pay the hospital bill although the hospital had not saved their child. If the service expected was not rendered (in this case, curing their child), why should they pay? As Lula Childress said, “Joe didn’t want to pay ‘em because they’d let my third baby die. But the hospital people said it didn’t make any difference. They kept sendin’ us a bill for the rest of the money.” Adding to their troubles was the insufficient profit from the wheat crop that year (due to low prices), which rendered paying the

³³ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 36.

³⁴ See Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 172-176.

hospital from the crop earnings impossible. It is likely that the Childress family had to go into debt for a hospital visit for which they had nothing to show.³⁵ Given all of the above factors, it is perhaps of little surprise that many tenant farmers chose not to get seek medical treatment.³⁶ As will be discussed at length later, religiously based fatalism (or faith in God's plan) also acted as an inhibitor in seeking medical assistance.

Considering the views with which outside medical treatment was often regarded, home treatment became the most important means by which tenant farmers could treat their sick. Family members frequently doctored each other, to varying degrees of success. N. Ruth Phillips Heath describes the continual treatment of continual ailments in the winter:

The elements were hard to get used to, but even harder to get used to were the everlasting smells of ointments and home remedies that Mama was always mixing and cooking to cure colds, coughs, and Papa's annual pleurisy....The smell of one brew or another wafted throughout the house and nauseated me. On the whole, our house stunk. I hated the smells of onion or mustard poultices. I also hated the odor of camphor and goose grease ointments. One or another of these treatments covered someone's chest and neck most of the winter. The only good smelling

³⁵ Joe Childress and Pelvie Childress, "The Story of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Childress, Farm Tenants in Yadkin County." Claude V. Dunnagan. WPA. Yadkinville, NC. 3 November 1938. In the Federal Writer's Project papers #3709 (Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), 3.

³⁶ The Farm Security Administration was especially important in providing rural health services during the Depression, while the Red Cross likewise continued to play an important role in rural health. Health bureaus had been established more widely during the 1910s and 1920s. Despite these services, and the public awareness poster campaigns of the Work Projects Administration, many tenants were unaware of public programs or unable or unwilling to take advantage of those programs.

medicine was the wild cherry cough syrup brewed especially for the croupy ones.³⁷

Those who could often bought patent medicines from the landowner's store [Fig. 9].

The isolation from medical care (both in terms of distance and poverty) and distrust of the medical profession typically led tenant farmers to treat illness at home using natural remedies or patent medicines until the situation of the sick individual became acute. At that point, the doctor might be sent for, but he was typically called too late to effect a cure. The reliance on self-doctoring and the relative rarity with which tenant farmers took their sick to the hospital resulted in many, if not most, tenants dying at home. Agee fancifully imagined those deaths, describing the Gudgers' house as having "another and special odor, very dry and edged: it is somewhere between the odor of very old newsprint and of a victorian bedroom in which, after long illness, and many medicines, someone has died and the room has been fumigated, yet the odor of dark brown medicines, dry-bodied sickness, and staring death, still is strong in the stained wallpaper and in the mattress."³⁸ As Orville Vernon Burton observed, "[d]eath, more than any other single event, linked family and community in the rural South."³⁹ This is particularly true for tenant farmers; although tenant farmers might not know their income or their address from year to year, they knew that death was bound to come eventually.

³⁷ Heath, *Forever Down the River*, 97.

³⁸ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 136.

³⁹ Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 236.

CHAPTER III. TENANT FARMERS, FUNERALS, AND BURIALS

As the narratives collected by the Federal Writers' Project workers attest, death was a topic frequently on the minds of the interviewed tenant farmers. At a time when the middle and upper classes were rapidly removing death and dying from their homes into specially designated spaces such as hospitals and funeral parlors, tenant farmers continued to care for their sick, dying, and dead at home. This was partly attributable to lack of money needed to use hospitals or funeral professionals. For example, Raper found in 1934 that white croppers in Greene and Macon counties had approximately \$86.22 and \$454.92 in cash remaining respectively after yearly expenditures for food, tobacco, and clothing.⁴⁰ Caldwell and Bourke-White observed one woman in Alabama with children who lived on two to three dollars a week.⁴¹ Also working in Alabama, James Agee and Walker Evans noted that the Gudger family of six, the Woods family of six, and the Ricketts family of nine lived on ten dollars a month or less per family for food four months out of the year.⁴² From whatever cash balance remained after meeting debt obligations and purchasing the necessities for life, the tenant farmer had to pay for seed, equipment, fertilizer, animal feed, doctor's bills, and any church or school costs.⁴³ Little was left, then, to pay for the necessities of a funeral. Consider that A.K. Harris, a white undertaker interviewed by the FWP, said that a nice casket cost a minimum of \$500.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 44.

⁴¹ Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 27.

⁴² Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 103.

⁴³ Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 47.

⁴⁴ A.K. Harris, "A.K. Harris, Undertaker." Bernice Kelly Harris. WPA. Seaboard, NC.

No date

given. In the Federal Writer's Project papers #3709. (Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), 5420.

For the Joads in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, forty dollars was not enough to spare the grandmother from a county burial.⁴⁵ The average cost of a funeral for a white person in the Southern states ranged from \$175 to \$209.⁴⁶ Again, the white cropper in the 1934 in Greene County, Georgia, had less than ninety dollars remaining after paying *only* for the very basic requirements of life. It quickly becomes clear that the type of funeral that professionals such as Wilson touted was simply not an option for the majority of tenant farmers.

Tenant Farmers and Religion

Largely unaffected by middle and upper class funeral trends or the professionalization of funeral directors, tenant farmers continued to practice the same funeral and burial rites that their families had in the past. Mortuary practices are the most conservative of all traditions, and, in the case of tenant farmers, were intertwined with conservatism of religion and of culture.⁴⁷ Tenant farmers had little need or desire for such elaborate funerals, which did not reflect the value they placed on self-sufficiency, the simplicity respected by their faith, or the Calvinist rejection of elaborately ritualized sacraments.

Religion was important to many tenant farmers. Tenant farmers often found in religion "a release and escape.... Once a week he [could] hear the minister promise him a

⁴⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939. New York: Bantam, 1969), 264.

⁴⁶ Charles R. Wilson, "The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 67.1 (Spring 1983): 49-69. p. 65.

⁴⁷ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten* (New York: Anchor Press, 1977); Terry G. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 6.

new life in another world. It [gave] him something to look forward to during the other six days of hard labor when he and his family do not have enough to eat.”⁴⁸ Even those who lived too far to easily attend church frequently instructed their children at home [Fig. 10].⁴⁹ The vast majority of Piedmont tenant farmers were Protestants, and most were of a Calvinist bent. Calvinism in the mountains had embraced a more positive and personal relationship with God after the Great Awakenings, and one in which prayer and belief did have the ability to affect one’s fate [Fig. 11].⁵⁰ Furthermore, “the strong conviction of a heavenly afterlife serve[d] to give meaning to the present. Simply put, the heavenly sphere [became] the plane of authentic existence; present reality pale[d] in comparison. Indeed, even the constant struggles of everyday existence here and now [took] on fresh meaning when viewed from the perspective of eternity.”⁵¹ As Leonard notes, salvation included the promise of leveling, socially and economically, in the hereafter.⁵² In this view, religion served many as a justification of their value as human beings and a promise of reward after a frequently dismal, monotonous, and brutal life.

Death was always near, and one’s time was predetermined, but many looked forward to that death as a release from the sufferings of their monotonous, often brutal lives. As one woman reflected, “All I feel like doing most of the time is finding me a nice

⁴⁸ Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 39.

⁴⁹ Heath, *Forever Down the River*, 42; Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 28.

⁵⁰ Charles H. Lippy, “Popular Religiosity in Central Appalachia.” In *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999, 40-51), 44.

⁵¹ Lippy, “Popular Religiosity in Central Appalachia,” 46.

⁵² Bill J. Leonard, ed., *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), xxvii.

place to lay myself down in and die.”⁵³ Another recalled life before going on Federal relief, saying that “I used to think there wasn’t nothing in life but to wait and hope for heaven.”⁵⁴ White tenant farmers had no qualms about talking about death, which was a common occurrence and hence a significant concern.⁵⁵

Tenant Farmers and Proper Burial

For tenant farmers, poverty and prejudice often limited a person’s self-pride during life. Thus, mortuary practices became a predominant way for tenant farmers to honor the deceased. Many of the FWP interviewees expressed a yearning for death and a release from the hardship of life, as discussed previously, and for a proper burial or some component thereof. With such poverty, however, many of the interviewees feared that their family would not be able to afford the burial that they desired. Indeed, the inability to provide that burial often appeared to be a regret of survivors. White tenant farmers in the Southern Piedmont during the Depression had a clear notion of what constituted a proper burial. For tenant farmers, providing a proper burial was often the last and best act they could perform in memory of the deceased.

Memory plays a key role in the transmission of burial rituals among tenant farmers, as will be discussed; it plays a similar role in transmitting the nature of proper burials. Participants and community members attended funerals, recalled details, and often passed judgments on the success or failure of the funeral. The details of a proper

⁵³ Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 34.

⁵⁴ Joe Childress and Pelvie Childress, “The Story of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Childress,” 5.

⁵⁵ Loyal Jones, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 47-48.

burial may be ascertained, it is true, from attending a funeral. However, where great value is placed on fulfilling the last wishes of the dying and the community is largely illiterate, remembering the details of those last wishes or of hints over the years regarding the desired type of funeral becomes paramount. Illiteracy and poverty result in a scarcity of written wills; there are few belongings to be divvied up, and the means of distribution likely to be remembered (properly or improperly, as serves the needs of those recalling or forgetting). Thus, repetition of their burial wishes by the dying or those looking towards their death also become vital in bringing about the desired funeral. As the narratives show, the importance of having a proper burial cannot be trusted to one utterance and the hope of remembrance; it must be carved deeply into the mind of a person's family. Suitably, the characteristics of a proper burial can be readily articulated, as interviewees often demonstrated for the FWP interviewers. This seems to stem from recalling the repeated, explicit utterances of older family members in conjunction with recollecting past funerals and the judgments family members gave regarding those funerals.

Family was important, and neighbors often helped with the washing of the body, but it is clear from the narratives that white tenants could not always expect an outpouring of support. As Charles Tucker recalled, when his two children died, no one came to help which left the parents with the terrible burden of obtaining coffins and burying them.⁵⁶ Itinerancy compounded the problem; Nixon noted a sharecropper who "had been at our place only for the year" when his wife died and that the "neighbors

⁵⁶ Charles Tucker, "Charles Tucker Life History." Leila Blanche Bess. Potts Creek, Virginia. 6 May 1940 (Richmond, VA: Library of Virginia. Online), 5-6.

considered him ‘curious’ and rather neglected him in the emergency.”⁵⁷ If a tenant family lived too far from extended family when a death occurred, they were likely to find preparing and burying the deceased much more burdensome.

The desired burial trappings were simple, as was the funeral, if there was a funeral *per se*. Many times, the family buried the deceased alone or with help from a few of the closest neighbors; by and large, there was no large community turnout for a funeral [Fig. 12]. Often, there was no preacher, either. This is at least partly attributable to Calvinism, which scorned the interventions of ‘priests,’ and which found the rituals and sacraments of the Catholic faith abhorrent. Baptism for them was the sole commanding sacrament. Even Communion was dispensable.⁵⁸ There was no shame in not having a large funeral or no funeral at all. Such elaborate, religious-based events could easily make people uncomfortable with the allusions to ritual. Thus, burials frequently occurred without much ado.

Preachers were seldom a great concern for a proper burial, though a prayer over the deceased was typically desired. A sermon might acceptably be preached weeks or months after the funeral. The preacher might come to the deathbed or to the house rather than to the church; he might even go to the church but not to the graveyard. If a preacher could not be found, a family member or neighbor might pray or speak over the grave. A.K. Harris, a white undertaker, regretted that he “hadn’t trained myself to pray; it’s not so bad to see no flower, but I like to put folks away with some Scripture and a prayer.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Nixon, *Lower Piedmont Country*, xvii.

⁵⁸ Leonard, *Christianity in Central Appalachia*, xxviii.

⁵⁹ A. K. Harris, “A. K. Harris, Undertaker,” 5419.

Hearses were uncommon and by no means necessary for a proper burial for white tenant farmers, for whom wagons generally sufficed.

More emphasis was placed on the appearance of the body and the dress in which the body was buried, reflecting a belief in a physical resurrection. Burial clothing was an essential part of a proper burial for a white tenant farmer. Ada Lester harped continually on her desire for “a dress of the right length to die in” in Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*.

Initially, this appears to be a humorous literary trope. Upon a cursory perusal of the FWP narratives among white tenant farmers, however, it is clear that Ada’s obsession is no mere device, but an actual source of concern for numerous tenant men and women. It is worth quoting Caldwell at length; he gets at the frustration and fear of tenant women who hoped for a dress to die in, yet knew it was unlikely they would get one. He writes that Ada

wanted a silk dress, and it mattered little to her whether the color was red or black, so long as it was stylish in length. Ada had a dress she had been keeping several years to die in, but she was constantly worried for fear that the dress might not be of the correct length. One year it was stylish to have dresses one length, and the next year they were mysteriously lengthened or shortened several inches. It had been impossible for her to keep up with the changes; consequently, even though she had a dress put away, she still tried to make Jeeter promise to buy her a new one that would be in style and in keeping with the times when she should die.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*. 1932 (Savannah, GA: The Beehive Press, 1974), 71.

The emphasis placed on appropriate dress relates to the belief in a physical resurrection on the Last Day. The importance of proper dress for a burial is illustrated in Heath's memoir. When her father's sub-tenant's daughter died, the girl did not have anything suitable to wear. Heath, therefore, "agreed to let Belle wear my blue Sunday dress to heaven" although she and her mother knew fully that her father would not buy or pay for a replacement dress.⁶¹ Heath believed at the time that Belle would wear in heaven the clothes in which she was buried. During the Last Day, it would be more important to look presentable than it ever had been in life. For women, proper burial dress included shrouds, burial robes, wedding dresses, baptism robes, or fashionable new dresses. Women were typically buried in white or black, and their garments were more likely to be homemade than those of tenant men.⁶²

For men, suits or burial robes were acceptable; overalls and work clothes were not. Many men feared being buried in their "overhauls." Jeeter Lester "had made [Ada] promise to buy him a suit of clothes. If that was impossible, she was to go to Fuller and ask some of the merchants to give her an old suit for him. Lov, too, had had to swear that he would see that Jeeter was buried in a suit of clothes instead of overalls."⁶³ Ada's repetition of her desire aimed to ensure that everyone around her would remember her wish when she died and hopefully fulfill it. Other women (and sometimes men) repeated, to interviewers and to family, the type of clothing they desired to be buried in or noted the outfit or shroud they had set aside for the purpose. Like the coffins prepared before

⁶¹ Heath, *Forever Down the River*, 139

⁶² James K. Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia: Changing Attitudes and Practices* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 33.

⁶³ Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*, 72

death, older women often made shrouds in which they and their husbands or family members would be buried.

There was great emphasis, however, on the manner in which the body should be treated and where it should be buried. The premise for Faulkner's nightmarish novel, *As I Lay Dying*, is Addie's vindictive wish to be buried some forty miles away in Jackson with her family, and her husband Anse's insane devotion to fulfilling her wish. Similarly, Jeeter in *Tobacco Road* was as obsessed with not having his body placed in a corncrib before burial as Ada was with having a proper dress (and repeated his preference with a similar mnemonic purpose). In Jeeter's case, memory plays an explicit role. He recalled that his father's body had been locked in the corncrib to keep it safe while the mourners went to town. When the party returned, they found that "a rat had eaten away nearly all of the left side of his father's face and neck."⁶⁴ Jeeter was filled with horror – at his own failure to properly attend to his father's body, and at the possibility that such a thing might happen to him. The true issue in a situation such as this, however, is unspoken in Caldwell's work. Believing in a literal physical resurrection on the Last Day very probably meant to Jeeter that his father would be resurrected without the left side of his face and neck.⁶⁵ He remembered it constantly, and constantly repeated his wishes to his family in the hopes that they too would remember. His son-in-law sought to reassure him, saying, "'You don't need to worry none...I'll dig a hole and put you in it right after you're gone. I won't wait for the next day, even. I'll put you in the ground the same hour

⁶⁴ Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*, 73.

⁶⁵ Belief in the bodily resurrection complete with imperfections was by no means universal or even standard teaching. Heath, for example, makes it clear that she believes Belle is in heaven without her disabilities (Heath, *Forever Down the River*, 139).

you die, almost. I'll take care of your body.'"⁶⁶ The strong emphasis placed on treatment of the body and the burial dress is in part a consideration of and desire for dignity, but there is an underlying concern for the resurrected body that one will occupy on Resurrection Day.

White tenant farmers placed little emphasis on a store-bought casket, though burial in a box was a crucial part of the proper treatment of a body and of proper burial. A furniture or coffin-maker in town might be employed to make a plain box, or a simple lined box might be purchased from the undertaker or funeral director in town. If the purchase of a coffin might incur further debt and a neighbor or family member had some skill with carpentry, the coffin could be made at home [Fig. 12]. Coffins made at home also emphasized self-sufficiency. In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie's son Cash made her coffin while she was still alive, holding the boards up to the window for the dying woman's inspection and approval.⁶⁷ In the Appalachians, it was not uncommon for older men skilled in woodwork to make their own coffins or those of their wives in anticipation of the terminal event.⁶⁸ Sources from the Piedmont are silent on this, but it is possible that it was continued following movement out of the mountains. Coffins might be purchased whenever a tenant had the money to acquire one. One funeral director recalled a man with a drinking habit coming in to buy a coffin for his wife because he was afraid he would not have the fifty dollars whenever she died and "he wanted to be sure she got put away all right."⁶⁹ Thus, money was not always available to spend on store-bought

⁶⁶ Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*, 74.

⁶⁷ William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. 1930 (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 2.

⁶⁸ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 18-20.

⁶⁹ A.K. Harris, "A. K. Harris, Undertaker," 5421-5422.

caskets, but coffins could be acquired in a number of different ways prior to or on the occasion of death. The “laying away” of coffins and determination to have a coffin when the time came speaks to the value placed on being buried in a box, rather than directly in the ground in a shroud. Even the very poor tried to purchase or make a coffin, in which they might be placed in a quilt or a blanket.⁷⁰ The importance of coffins is underlined by stories such as that shared by Heath in her memoir. She recalled her stingy father going in debt to provide a coffin for a sub-tenant who could not afford to bury his own daughter.⁷¹ That she recalls this without a hint of surprise in her otherwise bitter recollections of his abuse and stinginess shows that a coffin was seen as a necessity for decency, not a luxury, and one that should not be begrudged others. The awareness that death might come at any time, and the work towards preparing for it accordingly when the money was available, helped tenant farmers adapt to conditions of poverty.

White tenant farmers were unlikely to belong to a burial society or to maintain a life insurance policy, practices that helped their African American counterparts to mitigate the cost of burial. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that interviewees’ requests and wishes for the (minimal) trappings of a proper burial took on an urgent tone. Without the safety net of these policies, white tenant farmers had to fund the burial out of their meager funds, borrow from the landlord, or leave the body to the county for disposal. The latter was a practice that most tenant farmers abhorred, frequently viewing it as a failure to provide the minimum requirements for their relative’s proper burial.

⁷⁰ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 58.

⁷¹ See Heath, *Forever Down the River*, for a full elaboration of Sam Phillips’s treatment of his family.

At times, the burials of white tenant farmers reflected a certain value placed on self-sufficiency if it allowed for the avoidance of increased debt. A coffin or casket of some sort, the fulfillment of the deceased's wishes about body treatment after death, and suitable burial dress were the requirements of a proper burial for a white tenant farmer. A preacher seems to have been desired but not by any means necessary.

CHAPTER IV. TENANT FARMERS' CEMETERIES

White tenant farmers continued to follow mortuary and memorial practices with long cultural histories. These practices may have differed from the mainstream trends of white middle and upper class Americans, but they were more suitable for reflecting the experiences and outlooks of tenant farmers as well as requiring less monetary output to memorialize the burial sites of the dead.

Tenant farmers came from a cultural tradition in which burials took place on the land the family owned. At times, these family plots grew into community burial grounds. As landownership declined, however, whites began to bury more in community or church plots, often in town, and less on the land. A tenant couple interviewed by the FWP buried their child in a church cemetery.⁷² Lov in *Tobacco Road* buried Jeeter and Ada on the land where they had sharecropped, “in the blackjack grove, because if some one [sic] did decide to farm the land that year or the following ones, there would be no danger of the grave being plowed up so soon.”⁷³ In this case, the burial was “at home” but the spot chosen was selected in such a way as to ensure the protection of the grave.

The burial traditions from the Appalachians continued in the Uplands. White tenant farmer cemeteries in the Piedmont frequently have all the characteristics of Jeane’s pioneer folk cemetery model, the name of which serves as an indicator of when these practices came to the area [Fig. 13]. As the second half of Jeane’s article shows, these practices came from the pre-medieval past in the British Isles and were brought over by

⁷² Lula Sizemore, “Life Story of Lula and Allison Sizemore.” Claude Dunnagan. WPA. Longtown, NC. 8 November 1938. In the Federal Writer’s Project papers #3709 (Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), 3.

⁷³ Sizemore, “Life Story of Lula and Allison Sizemore,” 3. Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*, 180.

the Scotch-Irish and English ancestors of the white tenant farmers on the Piedmont. In the Appalachians, whites sited their cemeteries on hills. In the Piedmont in Alabama, the Gudger, Ricketts, and Wood family plot was situated on the top of Hobe's Hill, where the families lived.⁷⁴ (Bud Wood's family had come from the Appalachians, as had Fred Ricketts.⁷⁵) Burial on a hill may have been symbolic of putting the dead closer to God. More practically, it may have helped diminish standing water on the graves as well as making use of land unsuitable to farming. Little describes rural white graveyards in North Carolina succinctly, observing that the

cemetery occupies a cleared area, landscaped with a few shrubs and trees. The ground is left in its natural, sandy state, with no grass planted. Sometimes the ground is actually scraped clean so that only bare dirt or sand remains. Graves are oriented head to west, feet to east, and arranged in rows by family groups. If walls or fences are constructed, the unit of enclosure is the family plot rather than the individual grave.⁷⁶

Jabbour and Jabbour similarly note scraping and enclosing for the Appalachian region.⁷⁷ In an FWP narrative, the Childress couple noted that "we go to the graveyard and clean off the weeds" from their child's grave.⁷⁸ It is clear from the photographs Walker Evans made of sharecropper graves in Hale County, Alabama, while on assignment for *Fortune* magazine with James Agee, that sharecroppers in the Piedmont were also practicing

⁷⁴ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 130.

⁷⁵ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 22.

⁷⁶ M. Ruth Little, *Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 237.

⁷⁷ Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 59, 64.

⁷⁸ Childress, "The Story of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Childress," 3.

scraping, linear burial, and some landscaping [Figs. 14-18].⁷⁹ Agee observed that a church graveyard with mixed burials of tenants and small landowners was enclosed in a wire fence and was “all red clay” (scraped); the only trees were a lemon verbena and a magnolia.⁸⁰

Along with scraping, one of the clearest hallmarks of these cemeteries is the practice of mounding. Both mounding and scraping hailed from burial practices of the British Isles.⁸¹ Mounding was particularly common in the overwhelmingly white-populated Appalachians. Jabbour and Jabbour discuss the practice in the Great Smoky Mountains at length. They observe that mounding has an aesthetic and customary value in addition to the practice’s functional purpose of counteracting sinking and erosion; they write that mounding “seems proper, and it is beautiful and moving to people accustomed to it.”⁸² The mounds at white cemeteries are reworked yearly, which suggests a symbolic reburial while also serving as a way “of connecting with and touching the deceased once again.”⁸³

Caldwell and Steinbeck both mention mounding in their respective literary works; when the Joads cannot mound the grandfather’s grave for fear that it will be identified

⁷⁹ Walker Evans, *Sharecropper’s grave, Hale County, Alabama*, 1935-1936. (Library of Congress. Call no. LC-USF342-008176-A); Walker Evans, *Sharecropper’s grave, Hale County, Alabama*, 1935-1936. (Library of Congress. Call no. LC-USF342-008175-A); Walker Evans, *Sharecropper’s grave*, 1936. (Library of Congress. Call no. LC-USF342-008273-A); Gilles Mora, Gilles, and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 208.

⁸⁰ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 383.

⁸¹ D. Gregory Jeane, “The Upland South Folk Cemetery Complex: Some Suggestions of Origin.” In *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*, ed. Richard E. Meyer. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989. 107-136), 122.

⁸² Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 25.

⁸³ Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 25.

(another indicator of the use of mounds as markers), Pa Joad complains that “[it] ain’t right to leave a grave unmounded.”⁸⁴ Along with Evan’s photographs, Agee’s observations in the Hale County cemetery clearly support the presence of mounding on tenants’ graves in the Piedmont. He describes the mound: “[w]hen the grave is still young, it is very sharply distinct, and of a peculiar form. The clay is raised in a long and narrow oval with a sharp ridge, the shape exactly of an inverted boat.”⁸⁵ The functional purpose of mounding was of greater use for white tenant farmers, whose lessened membership in burial societies and insurance companies left the majority without the sturdy caskets that helped to prevent the mounds from sinking below ground level. When Maharidge and Williamson returned some fifty years later to the cemetery that Agee had described and Evans had photographed, they found that the mounds, so clear in Evans’s photographs, had entirely settled and eroded, leaving “depressions where water gathers, most six feet long, some shorter ones that represent the resting places of children.”⁸⁶ Yearly tending of the graves was necessary to maintain them.⁸⁷ As Jeane noted, in the Uplands, a “sunken grave, particularly one that caved in and exposed the burial, was simply unacceptable.”⁸⁸

The mounds also served to mark the graves of white tenant farmers.⁸⁹ Typically, tenant farmers made do with no marker, plank markers, cast concrete markers, or, on some occasions (most of them predating or postdating the Depression), small tombstones

⁸⁴ Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*, 180; Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 158.

⁸⁵ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 385.

⁸⁶ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 249.

⁸⁷ Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 13, 25.

⁸⁸ Jeane, “The Upland Cemetery Folk Complex,” 113.

⁸⁹ Little, *Sticks and Stones*, 238; Jeane, “The Upland Cemetery Folk Complex,” 113.

[Figs. 14-18]. The Sears & Roebucks Catalog in 1901 advertised a gravemarker “special”: \$20.70 plus six cents per word.⁹⁰ Presumably by the Depression the price had risen. Furthermore, a tenant farmer had to be able to read and write to fill out the order form, unless they had someone else who could do it for them. Sometimes the lack of a permanent, identifying marker was merely temporary, until times improved. More likely, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, the absence was permanent and the stone viewed as excessive or at least unnecessary. Tenant farmers identified the graves in other ways.

To mitigate the poverty they experienced, many tenant farmers “made do,” creating their own identifying markers for family members. While these markers seldom bore inscriptions, they were often composed of objects of importance to the deceased, which provided, perhaps, a better idea of the personality of the deceased individual.

According to Agee (and supported by Evans’s photographs), graves were marked by

a fairly broad board...driven at the head; a narrower one, sometimes only a stob, at the feet. A good many of the headboards have been sawed into the flat simulacrum of an hourglass; in some of these, the top has been roughly rounded off, so that the resemblance is more nearly that of a head and shoulders sunken or risen to the waist in the dirt. On some of these boards names and dates have been written or printed in hesitant letterings, in pencil or in crayon, but most of them appear never to have been touched in this way. The boards at some of the graves have fallen slantwise or down; many graves seem never to have been marked except in their won carefully made shape...⁹¹

⁹⁰ Little, *Sticks and Stones*, 28.

⁹¹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 384.

Again, the impermanence of these markers was noted in the 1980s by Maharidge and Williamson, who wrote that the graves were “now unmarked, the names and dates of birth and death once noted on standing boards of pine that have long since rotted.”⁹²

Evans’s photographs also show that tenant farmers were marking the graves with head and footstones made of fieldstone, as Jeane observed was commonly the practice in the Upland South Folk Cemetery Complex.⁹³

White tenant farmers seem to have been a fairly isolated group practicing grave decoration in the larger white society of the Piedmont. This reflects the movement of many poor whites from the Appalachians to work as tenant farmers, creating a different cultural grouping within broader Piedmont society. There were three primary types of grave decoration: grave coverings, flowers, and objects. Little has been written on this type of grave decorating among whites, so the reasons behind many of the practices are unknown. The mounds might be covered in eggshells, shells, or white gravel.⁹⁴ White is the color of purity in Christianity. Around the Second Great Awakening, many whites began to use white marble tombstones to represent that purity and a more hopeful view of the afterlife. At least two of Evans’s photographs show marble headstones on sharecropper graves. One, judging from the weathering and shape of the stone, is likely from the mid to late nineteenth century, while the other is still very white and has a more

⁹² Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 249.

⁹³ Mora and Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, 208; Jeane, “The Upland Cemetery Folk Complex,” 114.

⁹⁴ Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 25; Little, *Sticks and Stones*, 239, 241.

modern shape [Figs. 14 and 16].⁹⁵ The covering of mounds with white substances such as eggshells or seashells may have had a similar representative purpose. They also prevented erosion to a certain extent, keeping the mound intact longer. Agee observed white clamshells on the ridges of some white tenant mounds. The covering of graves also served to “suppress grass...[and distinguish] the gravesite from surrounding areas.”⁹⁶

White tenant farmers placed objects on the graves of adults and children. As Jeane notes with the Upland South Folk Cemetery Complex, “those of children [were decorated] more frequently and with a greater variety of items. Items peculiar to an adult’s grave could include eyeglasses, eyecups, mugs, shaving articles, or other personal items. A child’s grave might have marbles, toys, or dolls. It is not uncommon to discover toys placed on adults’ graves as well.”⁹⁷ Again, most white tenant graves had only one or two items placed in the middle of the grave, which acted as both identifier and marker of individuality in lieu of an inscribed marker. The graves that Agee and Evans saw in Hale County had a similar or even broader array of items when taken in the context of the cemetery as a whole. These graves had such objects as blown-out electric light bulbs, horseshoes, insulators, smoking pipes, bottles (including Coca-Cola bottles), and, in one case, a design made of buttons. Agee identified women’s graves as those having at the center of the mound “the prettiest or oldest and most valued piece of china”, further supported by Evans’s photographs.⁹⁸ One of the photographed graves has a plate set directly in the middle of the mound, while another has a pile of broken shards next to the

⁹⁵ Evans, *Sharecropper’s grave*, 008273-A; Evans, *Sharecropper’s grave*, Hale County, Alabama, 008176-A.

⁹⁶ Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 29-30.

⁹⁷ Jeane 114.

⁹⁸ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 385-386.

grave mound, presumably gathered there from the mound after the dish broke [Figs. 15 and 16].⁹⁹ Children's graves had smaller glass and china dishes or toys and figurines made of rubber, glass, or china, as well as bottles.¹⁰⁰ Agee imagined that the tea set he and Evans had purchased for Clair Bell Ricketts would soon be placed on her grave mound or, as he fancifully worded it, "I knew in the buying it what daintiness it will a little while adorn her remembrance."¹⁰¹

Grave visitation was an important practice for white tenant farmers. The value placed on visiting and tending to the grave, as well as the importance of being buried with family, may have had a significant impact on curtailing the distances tenant farmers moved. Graves provided social legitimation for many tenant farmers, staking a claim to a region and community in which the living had no definite, fixed abode.¹⁰² Graves also operated to tie people to ancestral lands. When necessary, great distances might be travelled to pay respect to the dead and reinforce those ties. For example, the people Jabbour and Jabbour interviewed in the early twenty-first century continue to return annually to their ancestral cemeteries in the Appalachians from their homes in the Piedmont to which they had been forced by the formation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the late 1920s.¹⁰³ The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was also forced to make numerous concessions when removing and reburying the dead from the Norris Basin area in preparation for flooding [Fig. 19]. Uprooted families objected to the

⁹⁹ Evans, *Sharecropper's grave, Hale County, Alabama*, 008175-A; Evans, *Sharecropper's grave*, 008273-A.

¹⁰⁰ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 385-386.

¹⁰¹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 386.

¹⁰² McDonald and Muldowny, *TVA and the Dispossessed*, 195.

¹⁰³ Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 92-93.

TVA's plan for a national cemetery. This eventually forced the TVA to provide families who wished to have their dead buried elsewhere with funds equal to the cost of removing the dead to the national cemetery.¹⁰⁴ The incident makes clear that the social value placed on the location of the dead by the people of the Appalachians and Piedmont was significant enough to result in government concessions and substantial monetary output.

For tenant farmers, a typical visitation to the graves of deceased relatives involved tending to the grave and leaving flowers [Figs. 17 and 18]. Flowers serve as symbols of resurrection and new life, as well as demonstrating continued respect, care, and remembrance of the dead in the white tenant community. A major practice during Decoration Day in the Appalachians involves covering the grave mound of deceased relatives (and neglected neighboring mounds) with real or crepe paper flowers.¹⁰⁵ The Childress couple and the Sizemore couple, both tenant farm families in the Piedmont, observed in their narratives that they take flowers to the graves of their small children. The Childresses did so "[w]henver we [got] time,"¹⁰⁶ and Lula Sizemore took flowers to her small son's grave every Sunday.¹⁰⁷ In the 1980s, elderly Margaret Ricketts still walked to the church to visit the grave of her deceased infant relative, while her half-cousin Emma continued to visit her son's grave and leave flowers because she felt he

¹⁰⁴ McDonald and Muldowny, *TVA and the Dispossessed*, 195-214.

¹⁰⁵ Jabbour and Jabbour's work demonstrates the great value placed on tending to graves among these people, who have fought the Park Service and U.S. Federal Government since the 1930s for the construction of roads leading back to the cemeteries. This is of course an extreme example, but it does illustrate some of the difficulties brought about by movement and, by extension, itinerancy. Jabbour and Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, 32-33.

¹⁰⁶ Childress, "The Story of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Childress," 3.

¹⁰⁷ Sizemore, "The Life Story of Lula and Allison Sizemore," 3.

“would want his [grave] to be pretty.”¹⁰⁸ Agee likewise noted graves decorated “with shrunken flowers in their cracked vases and with bent targets of blasted flowers...”, and Evans’s camera lens captured the subject of Agee’s description as well as an empty floral wreath holder [Figs. 17 and 18].¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 100, 200.

¹⁰⁹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 385; Mora and Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, 208.

CHAPTER V. TENANT FARMERS AND PORTABLE MEMORIALS

The lives of tenant farmers were punctuated with itinerancy, often yearly, as tenant farmers moved around the land in search of a kinder landlord, better land, or any land, if they had been evicted. The high rate of movement discouraged the accumulation of excessive or large possessions, the establishment of strong ties with the larger community through school and church attendance, and land or house improvements undertaken by tenants. Itinerancy also inhibited their ability to grieve at and visit the graves of their deceased relatives. This was a trying limitation for tenant farmers that localized movement helped to relieve, but they particularly valued remembering the dead at the graveside and tending to the grave over time. Thus, as they moved away from their family graves, heirlooms and photographs, the common possession of all classes, acquired an especial significance for them. They were portable and thus sacred to the mourning and remembering of the deceased.

Tenant Farmers and Heirlooms

The use of heirlooms to remember the dead or to serve as an attachment to the past is, of course, widespread across all classes and groups of Americans. Given the itinerancy and poverty of most tenant farmers, however, these heirlooms took on special meanings. Tenant farmers had few belongings, so the objects that were kept and passed on were of particular sentimental value. If the heirloom had monetary value, such as a piece of jewelry, a conscious decision was made at least once, but probably numerous times, to keep it within the family rather than to sell it to meet some obligation.

Heirlooms serve as objects imbued with memory of the person or people who have used

them in the past, treasured them, and passed them on to current generations. They are seen implicitly to have a connection to people in the past who used them and perhaps to pass the characteristics of that person or family to the descendants. As Lillios writes, “[h]eirlooms not only evoke the sentimental feelings an heir may have had for a particular parent or grandparent, but also represent links to an ancestral past, to a place filled with relationships that transcend the bounds of human lifetime and memory.”¹¹⁰

The heirloom may be passed directly from the original owner to a related individual, usually a child, during life. In other situations, an object may be identified as an heirloom by the simple act of survivors taking up an item used by the deceased and designating it as such.¹¹¹ Heirlooms may have long histories, having been retained in the family, out of circulation, for generations. The following discussion draws upon Lillios’s definition of heirlooms as objects that are portable, have been inherited by a family member before or after the death of the owner, and have been “maintained in circulation for a number of generations.”¹¹² No studies have been made of tenant farmers’ portable memorials.

However, from literary sources and WPA photographs of the interiors of tenant farmers’ homes, combined with extrapolation from broader research on heirlooms and repeated objects listed in narratives and other works, it is possible to develop a fuller notion of tenant heirlooms. Two invaluable sources are Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Agee and Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Major categories of heirlooms include

¹¹⁰ Katina T. Lillios, “Objects of Memory: The Ethnography and Archaeology of Heirlooms.”

Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory 6:3 (September 1999): 235-262. p. 243.

¹¹¹ Brad Weiss, “Forgetting Your Dead: Alienable and Inalienable Objects in Northwest Tanzania.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 70.4 (October 1997): 164-172.

¹¹² Lillios, “Objects of Memory,” 243.

letters, Bibles and books, glassware and figurines, clothing and other personal items, jewelry, and hair.

It is worth quoting at length two passages in Steinbeck that form a starting point as an exemplary list of objects tenant farmers may have valued. The first is from one of the work's interjectory, broad-scale passages, relating the impressions of tenant farmers-cum-migrant workers poring over their possessions as they prepare to leave for the west: "This book. My father had it. He liked a book. *Pilgrim's Progress*. Used to read it. Got his name in it. And his pipe – still smell rank... Think we could get this china dog in? Aunt Sadie brought it from the St. Louis Fair. See? Wrote right on it... Here's a letter my brother wrote the day before he died. Here's an old time hat."¹¹³ The passage makes clear several points. First, the book has been kept because it belonged to the tenant's father. That book also relays certain information about the father and his identity to future generations – "He liked a book." Secondly, three of the five objects listed contain writing. Most tenant farmers were illiterate, but not all. Also, handwriting is evidence of a person's existence, the closest that the living can come to witnessing again the movement of the deceased. Thirdly, two of the objects are personal and came in contact with the body. The pipe has a smell that conjures up memories of the father. The hat belonged to someone (apparently forgotten), but initially saved perhaps because it bore the imprint of someone's head, or because the poor seldom discard what might again become useful. All of these objects were dear to the tenant farmer, and most were even dearer because they had been valued or used by someone before the current owner. Similar objects were stored in Ma Joad's stationary box, including "letters, clippings, photographs, a pair of

¹¹³ Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 96.

earrings, a little gold signet ring, and a watch chain braided of hair and tipped with gold swivels.”¹¹⁴ These two passages form a fairly representative list of tenant farmers’ heirlooms when taken with the evidence from photographs and other sources.

Letters are mentioned in each of Steinbeck’s passages. In a WPA photograph of a tenant farmer who has taken to the road in search of work, a man stands at the back of his jalopy looking at the contents of a box, which, to all appearances, are comprised of letters.¹¹⁵ For literate tenant farmers, letters enabled them to hear the dead speak anew. For both literate tenant farmers as well as illiterate tenant farmers with literate forbearers or kin, letters also permitted a certain closeness to the movements of the now-deceased. Books took on an almost talismanic significance for those who could read and those who could not, as Steinbeck suggests in the scene containing *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bibles were, of course, the storehouse of records and small memorial objects of the deceased. Crissman mentions Bibles explicitly, and Agee notes Annie Mae Gudger’s painful scrawl in the Bible given to her by her husband, recording her marriage and the births of her children.¹¹⁶ Bibles also frequently held locks of hair.¹¹⁷

Clothing and other personal effects that had been in contact with the body of the deceased were also particularly valued, especially for surviving spouses and children. Steinbeck mentions the hat. Agee notes the presence of a hat at the Gudger’s as well,

¹¹⁴ Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 118.

¹¹⁵ Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935-1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 127.

¹¹⁶ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 24, 144-145; Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 72.

¹¹⁷ Helen Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 74.

which he postulates in Annie Mae's wedding hat.¹¹⁸ Although she is not dead, it is not inconceivable to imagine it will remain in the house until her passing, when her children may save it in her memory. A WPA photograph of a tenant widow in her house in Oklahoma shows her husband's shoes, still under the bed [Fig. 20].¹¹⁹ Crissman noted that quilts belonging to the deceased were frequently given in the Appalachians to survivors, but that survivors also made memory quilts from the clothes of the deceased.¹²⁰ Quilts appear frequently in WPA photographs, but since they were practical items as well as being used periodically to pad the coffins of the very poor, little more than their existence can be gleaned from the photographs.

Glassware and figurines were other heirlooms, passed particularly from mothers to daughters. While pieces of glassware and figurines were placed on white tenant farmer graves, it is clear that the Gudgers at least had enough to pass on even following several deaths. Agee's list includes a "small pincushion made of pink imitation silk with the bodiced torso of a henna-wigged china doll sprouting from it, her face and one hand broken off. A cream-colored brown-shaded china rabbit three or four inches tall...one ear laid awry," a "small seated china bull bitch and her litter of three smaller china pups...given to Louise last Christmas," "two small twin vases," and "a fluted saucer with a coarse lace edge, of pressed milky glass, which Louise's mother gave her to call her own and for which she cares more dearly than for anything else she possesses."¹²¹ Powdermaker and Steinbeck also note the presence of glassware and figurines, and a

¹¹⁸ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 145-146.

¹¹⁹ Russell Lee, *Widow, tenant farmer, in her home in McIntosh County, Oklahoma*, June 1939, (Library of Congress. Call no. LC-USF34-033537-D. Online).

¹²⁰ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 142, 139.

¹²¹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 142-143.

WPA photograph of a tenant house interior in Missouri shows two dog statues on a dresser [Fig. 21].¹²²

Jewelry is another heirloom, judging from Steinbeck's recitation. The gold earrings in Ma Joad's stationary box transfer to her daughter, Rose of Sharon, explicitly as an heirloom during the novel's progression.¹²³ The intriguing aspect of the jewelry generally, and of Steinbeck's portrayal in particular, is that the Joads are in severe straits economically and often without food, yet Ma Joad retains these earrings as too valuable to sell. As Lillios notes, heirlooms are transferred intergenerationally "because they possess an inordinate value to their owners, not simply because it is *economical* or practical to do so."¹²⁴ A similar observation may be made regarding the Woods family's possession of "a Civil War sword that belonged to some relative of Mrs. Woods..."¹²⁵ This sword is not only an heirloom from a family member, it also has the added value of legitimating the right of these poor whites to be on the land, since their ancestors fought for it, just as the landlord's ancestors may have done.

A corollary category to jewelry is that of hair. Steinbeck mentions the hair watch chain that Ma Joad had. Hair jewelry, popular among Victorians, had fallen out of mainstream favor by the 1910s, but those who possessed such pieces did not always discard them. Hair jewelry was typically the purview of the middle class, and Sheumaker claims that the lower class did not have the money to participate, but she also notes that

¹²² Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 87; Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 95, 96; Russell Lee, *Southeast Missouri Farms. Children of FSA (Farm Security Administration) client, former sharecropper, in bedroom of shack home. Note sign "God bless our home."* May 1938 (Library of Congress. Call no. LC-USF34-031205-D. Online).

¹²³ Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 190-191.

¹²⁴ Lillios, "Objects of Memory," 243; my emphasis.

¹²⁵ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 59.

hair jewelry was frequently made at home after the 1850s and that Godey's Lady's Magazine produced a manual for hairwork in 1862 that cost \$1.25.¹²⁶ Hair was free and, for white tenant farmers, generally plentiful. The value of hair pieces was that they "physically manifested [the grief of loss] and provided a constant reminder of the reality of the experience" as well as representing the deceased person and permitting the living to continue to touch the individual who had passed on.¹²⁷ Tenant farmers and others also saved hair by sewing it onto pieces of paper or placing the locks in the Bible.¹²⁸ Hair might be saved, but not necessarily in the form of jewelry.

Tenant Farmers and Photography

One final, crucial way of remembering the dead was widely utilized by tenant farmers: photographs. Photography had been popular from the outset, when daguerreotypes cost a quarter. Tintypes were affordable for "[e]ven the least affluent person, and photographs at itinerant photographer's studios ranged from five to ten cents.¹²⁹ This popularity made photography widely available. Foresta notes that the "passionate regard for the keepsake, which lodged near the heart of the average American's love of photography, encouraged entrepreneurs to open photography studios across the country... Itinerant practitioners traveled rural roads in search of paying

¹²⁶ Sheumaker, *Love Entwined*, xiii, 69, 53.

¹²⁷ Sheumaker, *Love Entwined*, ix-x; Marcia Pointon, "Materializing Mourning: Hair, Jewelry, and the Body." In *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (New York: Berg, 1999. 39-57), 46.

¹²⁸ Sheumaker, *Love Entwined*, 69, 74.

¹²⁹ Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1995), 43; Alma Davenport, *The History of Photography: An Overview* (Boston: Focal Press, 1991) 21.

customers. Anyone with a few cents to spare could possess a mirror image of their dearest loved ones...”¹³⁰ Photographs ensured remembrance of deceased children, a likeness to cherish, and an image of the deceased that was in some ways tangible and touchable.¹³¹ As Foresta succinctly but aptly observed, “[p]hotography provided even the most average person with a permanent record of having been.”¹³²

Two developments in photography greatly enabled tenant farmers to participate in the trend of photographing loved ones. The first was the appearance of itinerant photographers, who traveled the countryside [Fig. 22]. Itinerant photographers stayed a few weeks or a few months and generally charged their customers only if the sitter was satisfied with the photograph.¹³³ In the Appalachians, photographs were made of the deceased if an itinerant photographer was in the area at the time of a death or funeral.¹³⁴ These photographs were particularly valued if no photograph had been made during the deceased’s lifetime.

The second crucial development was the Kodak camera, sold for \$25 by George Eastman. The camera initially came with film for 100 pictures; the whole unit was to be sent to the factory for exposure at a rate of \$10.¹³⁵ By 1894, Eastman had developed modern film, which lowered the cost because the camera no longer needed to be sent in

¹³⁰ Merry A. Foresta, *At First Sight: Photography and the Smithsonian* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 146.

¹³¹ Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory.” In *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley. (New York: Berg, 1999. 221-236), 228; Karla F.C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (London: Duke UP, 2002), 30.

¹³² Foresta, *At First Sight*, 30.

¹³³ Harvey S. Teal, *Partners With the Sun: South Carolina Photographers, 1840-1940* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 350.

¹³⁴ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 74.

¹³⁵ Davenport, *The History of Photography*, 23.

for development.¹³⁶ It is easy to imagine that the snapshots observed by Evans and Agee in tenant homes were taken with someone's Kodak camera, bought in a flush year [Fig. 23].

Regardless, tenant farmers embraced photography just as mainstream America did. Photographs provided memories of people, living or deceased. In *The Cabin in the Cotton*, the protagonist, Dan Morgan, reflects on the "enlarged crayon portrait of his daddy [that] hung above one of the beds. Dan Morgan was remembering the weeks and months she [his mother] had saved and hoarded and denied herself snuff, swapping eggs at the store, until she had accumulated the \$16.98 it had cost."¹³⁷ For the man's widow, the sacrifice is worth having a permanent image of her deceased husband, as many tenants no doubt would have agreed.

Many WPA photographs of the insides of tenant houses captured the likenesses of family members hung on the walls. Some were taken in portrait studios while others were snapshots. Agee described the snapshots at the Gudgers' in great detail:

a fading box-camera snapshot: low, gray, dead-looking land...twenty yards back, one corner of a tenant house, central at the foreground, two women: Annie Mae's sister Emma as a girl of twelve, in slippers and stockings and a Sunday dress...and their mother, wide and high, in a Sunday dress still wet from housework...her face fainted away almost beyond distinguishing, as if by her death and by some secret touching the image itself...had softly withered...¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: A Short Critical History*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 60.

¹³⁷ Harry Harrison Kroll, *The Cabin in the Cotton*, 149-150.

¹³⁸ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 143-144.

The photograph contains an image of the mother, dead from lung cancer, still alive, and Agee's description seems to reference the value of a photograph as a touchable image. For some members of the tenant families with whom Agee and Evans stayed, Evans's photographs became the images of now-deceased parents. These included the fortuitously taken images of Sadie and Fred Ricketts that Margaret Ricketts had framed, and of Bud Woods that Emma had framed.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Maharidge and Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*, 169, 189.

Conclusion

Despite extreme economic hardship and frequent movement, tenant farmers found ways to honor and remember their dead through the provision of a proper burial and an appropriately decorated gravesite, and the development and use of portable memorials. In some ways, their practices mirrored those of their ancestors; in others, their practices were those of mainstream, middle class America. In still others, the practices were their own.

Tenant farmers' lives were frequently visited by illness and death. The conditions that rendered existence so tenuous were imposed by the economic system under which they worked. Insufficient clothing, food, and shelter left tenant farmers and their families subject to a host of diseases, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, and pellagra. Poverty and isolation discouraged many from sending for a doctor until the situation was too advanced for intervention. Many distrusted doctors and others placed their hope for restoration in the hands of God alone. With frequent reminders of death's nearness and faith in a better heaven, tenant farmers sought to bury their dead in a dignified manner in accordance with the last wishes of the dying.

Tenant farmers relied on the repeated words of sickly, elderly, and dying family members to provide a similar burial to that used in the Appalachians and the Upcountry by their Scotch-Irish and English forebears. For most, this proper burial consisted of a container for burial, appropriate burial dress, and appropriate handling of the body. This type of burial required a fairly small cash investment and kept a rapacious funeral industry at bay. This reflected the value tenant farmers placed on self-sufficiency and dignity. Even more than money, self-sufficiency, or dignity, however, it reflected the

religious beliefs of the predominantly Calvinist tenant farmers. Included in this is their belief in physical resurrection on the Last Day, distaste for ritual, and frequent yearning for death as an escape from suffering in this world.

Tenant farmers' cemeteries followed the Calvinist leanings of the Appalachian people who had moved into the Piedmont after the Civil War. These cemeteries were scraped with grave mounds decorated with flowers and a few sparse belongings; the mounds seldom had any inscribed marker. Whenever possible, family members would tend to the grave into perpetuity. Graves were mounded and scraped. Objects belonging to the deceased were commonly placed on the mound, and flowers were frequently left during visits. The objects and mounds typically served as markers. Inscribed markers were uncommon, and markers generally exemplified the tenant values of "making do" and self-sufficiency.

Tenant farmers used the same portable means of memorialization available to broader society, including heirlooms and photographs. Photographs were cheap, but they proclaimed loudly that the likeness they preserved had undeniably lived. Heirlooms were consciously cultivated and saved, from clothing worn by the deceased to locks of hair to china dog statues.

In short, tenant farmers successfully mitigated both poverty and itinerancy through self-sufficiency and making do. They drew upon older traditions for funerals and graves that continued to be meaningful while remaining within the tenant's limited means. To counter their growing itinerancy, they attempted to move within local areas that enabled them to continue visiting the graves of family members. They continued broader trends of creating and retaining heirlooms despite poverty. Finally, they adopted

new trends, shared with mainstream, middle class America, such as photography, which was cheap while providing simultaneously an indelible proof of existence to counter the silence of the sinking, unnamed graves.

FIGURES

Introduction.



Fig. 1. Walker Evans, *Sharecropper's Family, Hale County, Alabama, 1936*, in *Walker Evans*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971), 88.



Fig. 2. Walker Evans, *[Bud Woods and Family]*, 1936, gelatin silver print, in Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

FIGURES

Chapter I. The Condition of Tenant Farmers.



Fig. 3. Dorothea Lange, *Oldest son of a sharecropper family working in the cotton. Chesnee, South Carolina, June 1937*, nitrate negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF34-017371-C).



Fig. 4. Arthur Rothstein, *Erosion. Jackson County, Alabama, February 1937*, nitrate negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF34-025437-D).

FIGURES



Fig. 5. Dorothea Lange, *House of cotton sharecropper (white) near Gaffney, South Carolina*, July 1937, nitrate negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF34-018111-E).

Chapter II. Tenant Farmers, Disease, and Medicine.



Fig. 6. Marion Post Wolcott, *Part of RR (Rural Rehabilitation) family, now dropped, children have hookworm, mother pellagra and milk leg, according to nurse's report. Father works on WPA (Work Projects Administration). Coffee County, Alabama*, April 1939, safety film negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF34-051435-D).

FIGURES

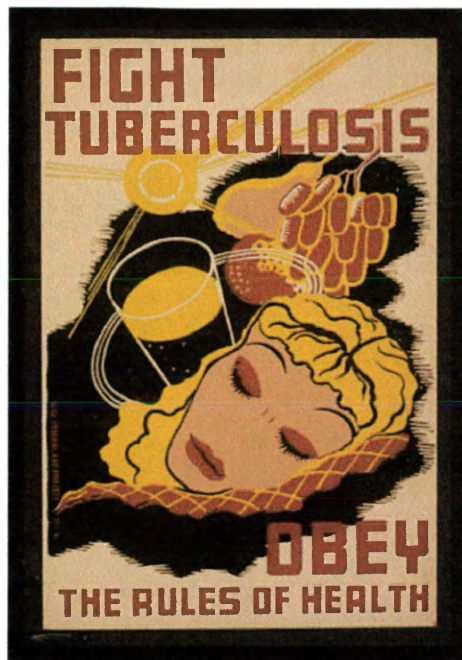


Fig. 7. Work Projects Administration, *Fight Tuberculosis – obey the rules of health*, 1936, color silkscreen poster (Work Projects Administration Poster Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USZC2-5308).

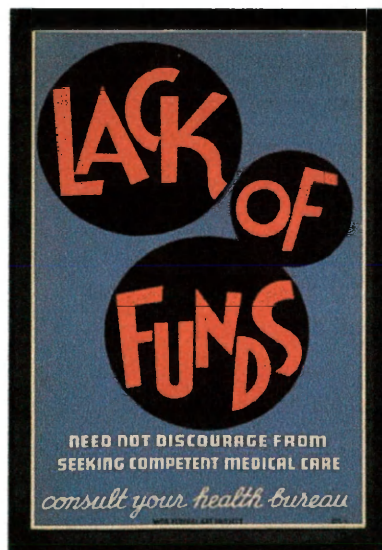


Fig. 8. Work Projects Administration, *Lack of funds need not discourage from seeking competent medical care consult your health bureau*, 1939, color silkscreen poster (Work Projects Administration Poster Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USZC2-5334).

FIGURES

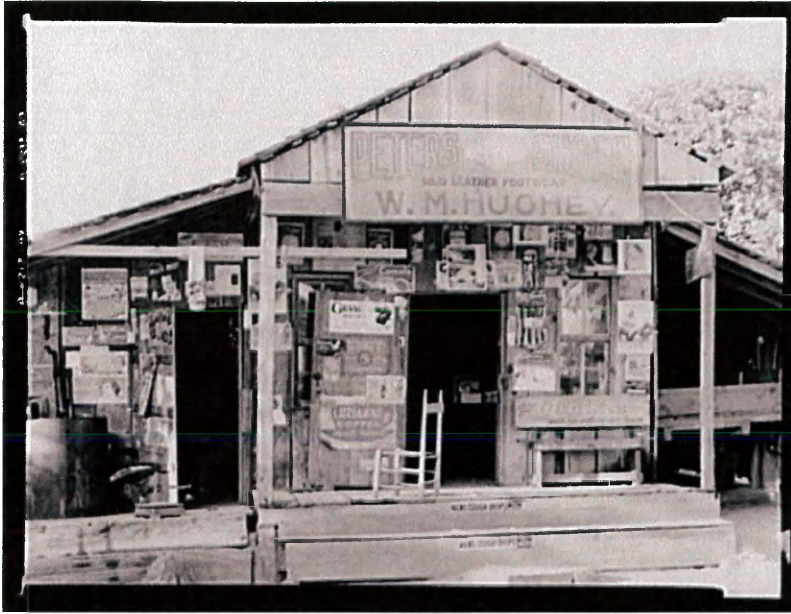


Fig. 9. Walker Evans, *Country store near Moundville, Alabama*, [Note patent medicine advertisements on the walls], 1935 or 1936, safety film negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF342-T01-008159-A).

Chapter III: Tenant Farmers, Funerals, and Burials.



Fig. 10. Walker Evans, *[Church, Beaufort, South Carolina]*, 1936, in *Walker Evans*, edited by Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff L. Rosenheim, Douglas Eklund, and Mia Fineman, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), plate 77.

FIGURES



Fig. 11. Marion Post Wolcott, *The poorer the land, the more frequently one sees religious signs along highways. Alabama, May 1939, safety film negative* (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF34-051806-D).



Fig. 12. Marion Post Wolcott, *Mountain people carrying a homemade coffin up creek bed to the family plot on the hillside where it will be buried. This section is too isolated to hold any formal funeral services immediately. Up South Fork of the Kentucky River near Jackson, Kentucky, September 1940, nitrate negative* (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF33-031060-M4).

FIGURES

Chapter IV: Tenant Farmers' Cemeteries.



Fig. 13. Walker Evans, [*Country graveyard, Southeastern U.S.*], 1936, safety film negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF342-008275-A).



Fig. 14. Walker Evans, *Sharecropper's grave. Hale County, Alabama*, 1935 or 1936, nitrate negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF342-008176-A).

FIGURES

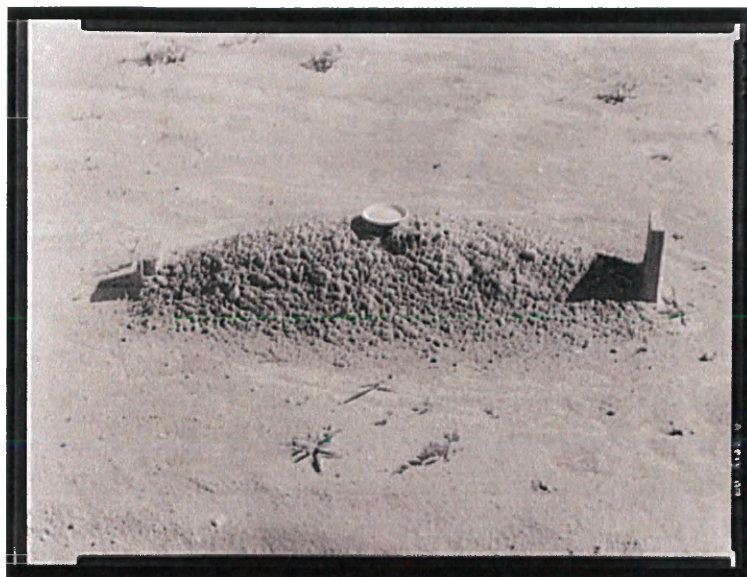
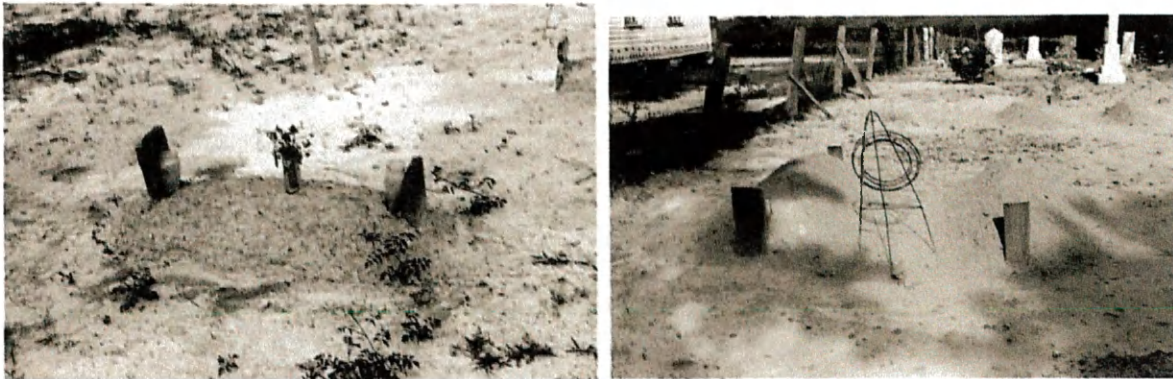


Fig. 15. Walker Evans, *Sharecropper's grave*. Hale County, Alabama, 1935 or 1936, nitrate negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF342-008175-A).



Fig. 16. Walker Evans, *Sharecropper's grave*, 1936, safety film negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF342-008273-A).

FIGURES



Figs. 17 and 18. Walker Evans, *Graves, Hale County, Alabama, 1936*, 35mm, in *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, edited by Gilles Mora and John T. Hill (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 154.



Fig. 19. *Grave Removal. A disinterment in old Baker's Forge Cemetery being inspected by the Campbell County Baptist Association, November 1934*, in *TVA and the Dispossessed: The Resettlement of Population in the Norris Dam Area*, edited by Michael J. McDonald and John Muldowny (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 205.

FIGURES

Chapter V: Tenant Farmers and Portable Memorials.



Fig. 20. Russell Lee, *Widow, tenant farmer, in her home in McIntosh County, Oklahoma*, June 1939, safety film negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF34-033537-D).



Fig. 21. Russell Lee, *Southeast Missouri Farms. Children of FSA (Farm Security Administration) client, former sharecropper, in bedroom of shack home*. Note sign "God bless our home," May 1938, safety film negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF34-031205-D).

FIGURES



Fig. 22. Russell Lee, *Steele, Missouri*. A crowd in front of an itinerant photographer's tent, August 1938, nitrate negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF33-011592-M3).



Fig. 23. Walker Evans, *Family snapshots on wall of room in Frank Tenge's home*. Hale County, Alabama, 1935 or 1936, nitrate negative (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USF342-008153-A).

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