

From The Daily Press/Virginian-Pilot Sunday Break

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Lifestyle HR History

The saga of sharecropping: Reflecting on its tolls and the tenacity of family that helped build Virginia and the South



Virginia Beach resident Randy Everette holds a photograph of his parents taken during a visit to a farm on which his grandfather sharecropped in eastern North Carolina. (Kaitlin McKeown/Staff)

Denise M. Watson, Amy Poulter Staff writer

This time of year always finds James Daniel in his Norfolk backyard starting his watermelon, cucumber and cabbage seedlings. Once they are big enough, he'll drive four hours south to Riegelwood, N.C., to plant them on his farm.

As a child, he worked on land in the same county alongside his family but found little pleasure in it. The land belonged to someone else and most of the profits the family pulled from the acres of tobacco, peanuts, corn and cotton went to the landowner under a system called sharecropping.

At least the family earned a few dollars: Nearby is the former plantation where Daniel's great-grandfather worked as a slave.

Daniel can't not farm; it is too much in him. He even gets bothered when young people don't appreciate the history of it, how it built the country and continues to feed it.

"If you gave people 40 acres and a mule now, they wouldn't know what to do with it," he said, recently.

Still, he wouldn't wish the sharecropping way of life on anybody now.

Agriculture has always ruled the south; it remains the No. 1 private industry in Virginia. And though machinery and technology have made farming easier, farming has never been easy. Not even for those who owned their property and its profits, however meager they may be.

That is why those who remember sharecropping like Daniel say it was more brutal. Sharecropping started after the Civil War among landowners who needed to keep, but had to pay, former slaves. Poor white families, though, were also snared into sharecropping.

Landowners provided seed and materials on credit and promised workers a share of profits at season's end. Landowners, however, dictated the costs, could charge astronomical interest rates and refuse workers their fair share.

Some local families remember the cycle of debt and destitution lasting into the 1960s.

The Virginian-Pilot and Daily Press asked readers who were part of a sharecropping family to share their experiences. Here are their stories.

**"Heartbreak was the yield" As told by Jamesetta M. Walker,
Virginian-Pilot and Daily Press features editor**

Plantation life as a sharecropper wasn't all that long ago. Mom was born into it; this way of subsistence had been passed from generation to generation for as long as she, the granddaughter of a slave, had known. I barely evaded that system in the Mississippi Delta, being born just a mere five years after its demise. It fizzled in the mid-1960s.

Yet I feel the pain of that legacy because my mother, now 72, remains so very affected by it, yet so resilient. She has never shied from sharing her family's experience.

My mother, Victoria Williams Hall, speaks of their giving everything and getting little — if anything — in return. Heartbreak was the yield.

In one way or another and with little regard to age, workers always were in the cotton fields — weeding, planting, chopping, picking, and in all manner of conditions. They lived in drafty, cramped shacks, were burdened with heavy sacks, encountered poisonous snakes and risked molestation by overseers and their underlings. And whom could they tell about the abuse without sparking racial retaliations that could turn deadly? No one. Best to pretend it didn't happen, was the reasoning.

Today, dogs have it better.

By the time Mom was in ninth grade she had attended seven schools, having never stayed at one for more than two years because of the cycle of moving from plantation to plantation. And this is when she and her siblings — eventually 14 in all — could even go to school: Sharecropper children weren't allowed until after the harvest, around Thanksgiving.

It wasn't until she was in fourth grade that she realized not all blacks lived this way. She was at the home of her teacher and saw an Ebony magazine filled with photos of celebrities and notables. It opened her eyes. Mom, the first in her family to go to college, made it her goal to do whatever it took to get a full education.

Yet she cannot salve the contempt. Those wounds are too deep.

A piece of cotton is not a thing of beauty to her. She cannot stand to pass by a cotton field. She is disabled now because of repeated bouts of **pneumonia** that led to congestive heart failure. She was much more susceptible because of damage to her lungs from years of working in the fields and being sprayed with pesticides and herbicides spewed by cropdusters. Her illness cut short her teaching career. Today, when she's solicited by charities, she wonders why there was no such awareness when poor sharecropper children needed aid.

And she especially wonders how any man, with a straight face, could tell another that not only was his family not going to receive any of what they'd earned, but that they actually owed him? This, after everyone old enough to hold a hoe had put backbreaking work into the fields for an entire year. There would be no choice but to labor some more to pay off the debt and keep the family marginally fed. Then, you moved on to another plantation at the end of the next year to start fresh.

But it was hardly an escape. It was a sad cycle of indignity that finally came to an end for my family in December 1965. That's when my grandfather got off the plantation for good. President **Lyndon B. Johnson** had signed the Education Act, and that was the virtual death knell for sharecropping. Plantation owners could not keep children out of school anymore.

Samuel Williams, my grandpa, moved his family out of the county into the city — "the "birthplace of the blues," Clarksdale, Miss. He'd found a house to rent, but there were no jobs for displaced farm workers. Grandpa had been working the fields since about 1919 when he was 2 and given a hoe cut to fit him. So he and one of his older sons went to Florida in search of migrant work, but got rained out for a month and earned nothing. By then, the junior college back home had started a program to teach basic skills. Grandpa, who had reached only eighth grade, returned and signed up. He was fortunate to get hired part time as a custodian for the white VFW — walking some seven miles a day to get there. He also worked full time as the health department's custodian. It was this job, his credibility and the hard work of my grandmother that provided the means to move to a better part of town and buy a three-bedroom house on a corner lot. Mom fondly remembers move-in day: Jan. 1, 1967. Before, at the first of the year they likely would have been moving to another plantation. Not this year.

Grandpa held his job at the health department until he retired in 1980. My grandmother, Hattie, worked as a domestic and later as a cook at an elementary school where one of my aunts had become the cafeteria manager. For Grandma, who had been plowing with a mule since she was a pregnant 14-year-old, this was less strenuous.

And the irony is that after Grandpa and Grandma left the last plantation, its overseer allowed the family to use the land free of charge. We grew whatever we wanted for as many years as we wanted. This is how I came to know about growing your own food. I spent summers on the land as a youngster, picking

vegetables and fruit for fun, not knowing the real toil that had preceded me just a decade earlier.

If anything good at all came from this for my family, it is the work ethic my maternal grandparents passed to their family. Grandpa, who'd developed a tumor on his back from the years of driving a tractor, didn't miss any aspect of work after he retired. He preferred to while away the days sitting on the porch entertaining with his tall tales, drinking coffee or under the mimosa tree helping me look for four-leaf clovers. (I never found a single one.)

Yet he was proud that he knew how to work with his hands. He'd built a good reputation; he could merely sign his name and get most anything we needed for the the white clapboard house with green shutters that he and Grandma made into a home. With this ethic, his children and grandchildren no longer had to work in cotton fields but instead entered the fields of medicine, education, community service administration, ministry, journalism, culinary arts, technical repair and more. Remember that junior college that taught my grandpa "basic skills"? My father became its president.

Grandpa took me with him the day he went to the bank and paid his last mortgage note, the same year he retired. It was \$40, I think — more than he and his entire family cleared sometimes in a whole year of sharecropping.

I'd never seen a man look so fulfilled.

"I was called a good picking negro" As told by Linfred Moore, Portsmouth

I was born in 1934 on the George White cotton farm in York County, S.C. There were six of us kids, and I'm the oldest — four girls and two boys. My parents, Faye and Willie Edward Moore, and my grandparents, Alice and

William Moore, all lived on the same farm in two separate houses, if you could even call them houses. They were more like shacks.



Linfred Moore, 84, is photographed in his Marines uniform at Portsmouth City Park. Moore, the oldest of six siblings, grew up helping his family sharecrop in Rock Hill, S.C. (Kaitlin McKeown/Staff)

As a little boy on the farm, I had to work. We didn't have tractors or trucks. Everything was done by hand. We plowed a mule, or used a one- or two-horse plow. I could use both. We'd turn the ground up and plant cotton, corn and cane. We'd plant hay. We'd put the cotton seeds out by hand and cover it up. When it sprouted, we'd have to thin it out, two rows at a time. Now, they have cotton picking machines, but back then, we were the machines. There were hundreds of black folks all over the field. And white people, too. There was a farm next to us where white people sharecropped, and they were just as dirt poor as we were. And we got along fine. Nobody had anything. You talk about poor? We had nothing.

But after we'd get the cotton planted, it was time to get the corn in. Everything had a certain season and it had to be done just so, otherwise the rains would

catch you before you got it out and you wouldn't have a good harvest. My daddy knew that and how to time the seasons.

When it came to picking cotton, we all had to pick cotton. Every morning, we'd go to the fields, my mother and all of the kids. We all went. No one stayed back. Babies were put underneath the trees on the peach fields. That's how my baby brother was raised. But I was called a good picking negro. We'd put on cotton sacks and pick two rows at a time, back and forth. I'd get on my knees and crawl, use both hands and when my cotton sacks were full, I'd go dump them out on a big sheet in a pile.

Half of everything we made went to the boss. He took it, and he gave us what he called half. Our goal every year was between 12 and 15 bales of cotton. Each bale weighed about 500 pounds. If you could get 12 or 15 bales, that was a good year. We were allowed to keep the cotton seeds and we could sell them to get extra money. But in sharecropping, the boss on the farm would provide us with fertilizer, seeds and cane. At the end of the year, we'd owe him. So to get our half of the profits, we'd have to pay him what we owed. The money would just go right back to him.

Everything else was done by hand on the field, too. Daddy and I would go out to the woods to cut down trees. We'd cut them down, haul them up on a wagon and carry them back to the yard to chop up. We'd used that wood for the stove and the fireplace to keep the house warm. There was never a day where there was nothing to do. Only on Sundays were we able to do anything else — we went to church. I went to school through the 8th grade, but the farm owner didn't want me to go to high school. He said he didn't need any educated negroes to pick his cotton.

My father died when I was 15. I became the man in charge, but I was just a boy. Two years later, my mother got word that a Marine recruiter was taking some black men into the Marine Corps. We went to Rock Hill to speak with the recruiter, and because I was educated and could read, they let me in. I was

put on a midnight bus to Paris Island for boot camp. I had to make it. I couldn't go back to the fields picking cotton and my mother was determined that I got as far away as I could. I spent 31 years in **the Marines**. I became a battalion sergeant, regimental sergeant major and sergeant major of the 1st and 3rd divisions.

"When our backs were hurting, we would crawl and pick" As told by Gary McDaniel, Newport News

My father, Willard McDaniel, was a sharecropper on a farm owned by Lonnie Chambers in Wheeler County, Ga., starting around 1938. My sister Janice and I started helping daddy by the time we were 5 or 6 years old. We farmed cotton and tobacco mostly.

When the cotton was ready for picking, it was mainly our daddy, my sister and I that did the picking. I always picked more in a day than Janice, but never could beat Daddy. We would start early in the morning when the stalks were wet from the dew. By 9 or 10 a.m., the air was humid and the temperature was already in the 90s. When our backs were hurting, we would crawl and pick. We made pads to protect our knees.

We always stopped at noon to eat dinner — the word lunch was not in our vocabulary. Daddy would take a nap on the floor until about 1 p.m. and then it was back to field. We took our drinking water in a half-gallon fruit jar filled with water and ice. It was put in any shade we could find at the end of the cotton row. After picking down a row and back we would take a drink out of the jar. As the day went on, our drinking water got warm.

Daddy told time by the sun. When the sun was just above the horizon, my sister and I would pray that the end of the day was over. Daddy would look

toward the sun and say, "Let's get another row and that will be it." Days were repeated until most of it was picked.

Most of our crops were gathered before the school started in the fall. However, if there was scattering cotton — late blooming cotton on the ground resulting from rain and stormy weather — Janice and I would have to pick after school. Mama and Daddy had the foresight of the importance of education. Daddy graduated from high school; his 5 siblings did not.

We were kept out of school one day in the spring to pull tobacco plants from a bed about 20 miles south of our home. We pulled enough to plant about 5 acres of tobacco. Normally we grew our own plants, but once we came up short and had to buy them from another farmer.

When we were caught up picking cotton, I would pick on other farms and get 2 cents a pound. I would make about \$4 a day. The nearby local country store let me run an account where I would buy an R.C. Cola, sardines, crackers and a slice of hoop cheese for my noon day meal. At the end of the week after being paid I settled my account at the store.

A dreaded job was suckering tobacco. Once the tobacco plant has just about reached maturity, a large bouquet of flowers would bloom from the top. These are broken off and the leaves would become larger and fuller, but leaf suckers emerged. They would have to be removed, and it was stifling hot in the July Georgia sun with the huge plants around you.

All of the hard work put a roof over our heads, food on the table and some clothes, though we wore a lot of hand-me-downs, and sometimes a picture show on Saturday nights.

**"My father did not like owing money" As told by Sandra Mathis,
Virginia Beach**

I was born and raised in Surry in the area called Bacon's Castle. My father, Marion Pierce, Sr., was a World War II veteran, and had some land and built his own home. He needed more money and from 1952 until the mid-1960s, he worked as a sharecropper.

The owner of the property supplied the equipment — tractors, fertilizer, grain, etc. Peanuts, corn, soybeans, barley and wheat were grown. The owner, however, did not do any of the work himself. At that time, my father was solely responsible for farming more than 100 acres, rising early in the morning around 5 or 6 a.m. and returning from the fields before darkness settled in. My family, including my oldest brother, Marion, Jr.; my mother; aunts; and cousins who lived nearby, helped with chopping peanuts. In addition, my father would pull corn by hand using a mule and cart until the owner rented a corn picker. The landowner would pay my family members as hired help.

My father was paid after the crops were harvested at the end of the year. The money had to last all year long. He supplemented his income by raising hogs and selling smoked meat to provide for his wife and nine children. We had our own cow, chickens and pigs, so we always had lots of food. My mother always canned vegetables and fruits in preparation for the winter.

Regardless of what was earned, my father had to reimburse the landowner for the use of the equipment and the materials needed, but my father was always left owing money that was added to the next year's bill. Over time, my father accumulated a debt of \$2,500 for fertilizer and supplies. The landowner was very nice to him and was more interested in my father paying other debtors — hospital and doctor's bills — and told him not to worry about paying him until he was able to do so. However, my father didn't like owing the money. In 1959, my father went back to a previous job he had at a packing plant and worked the 3 p.m. to 12 a.m. shift. He would come home to sleep and hit the field in the morning. We didn't see Daddy until the weekends.

My father paid off the debt and stopped sharecropping. He continued to work at Smithfield Packing for 38 years until his retirement as a supervisor in 1993.

"A thick, dark purple goo would stick to your hands " As told by Randy Everette, Virginia Beach

By the 1960s, the paternal side of my family had been living in eastern North Carolina for more than 170 years. At that time, I was in elementary school and my grandfather, Rufus Everette, was still sharecropping tobacco. He had eight children and my dad was the fourth child and second son. They were dirt poor. They each had only one pair of socks, so every night my grandma would wash all the socks so the kids had a clean pair of socks for school each day.

When my dad was a small kid in the early '40s, he once fell off one of the wooden carts that were used to haul the picked tobacco leaves from the fields to the sheds. He broke his neck. There was no ambulance service so they put him in a car and took him to the hospital. As an adult, my dad did not want to farm and joined the Air Force.

In the '60s, he was stationed at an Air Force base 30 miles from my granddad's farm in Pitt County. Every Sunday we would drive to visit. I would play in the trees, barns, corn cribs at the farm. I dreaded summers there; summer was tobacco field work time. It was hot, sticky work and everyone from grandparents to little kids was expected to help. Non-family students would be hired on for summer jobs. My family was white but many black people were hired to work in the fields, too.

Starting when I was about 6, we'd walk the fields to "suck" and "prime" tobacco. Sucking tobacco meant pulling off the small leaves because they were "sucking" the nutrients from the bigger leaves. Your arms and hands got sticky and itchy. Priming tobacco meant breaking off the top of the stalks when they got a certain height so that the big leaves would get even bigger by getting more nutrients. This was worse than sucking tobacco because it was even

sticker and itchier and a thick, dark purple goo would stick to your hands. It was hard to clean off. Throw in the heat and humidity and it was miserable work.

"Putting in" tobacco meant picking it off the plants, tying the leaves to sticks, "stringing tobacco," and hanging them in the barns to cure. All that was left after curing was to take it out of the barns and auction it. Hanging the sticks in the barns and getting them back out was dangerous. Men always did this work and injuries were common. They had to climb rafters to hang hundreds of sticks. One of my uncles once fell doing this.

**"It's hard to explain to my grandkids what my childhood was like"
As told by Dorothy Hamilton Smith, Chesapeake**

I was born in Smithfield, N.C., where my parents, Flossie and Hunter Hamilton, were sharecroppers. My parents farmed cotton and tobacco. They had 14 kids including me. I started working in the fields when I was just 5 years old.

We lived in sharecropper shacks — these didn't have running water or electricity. When it was hot outside, it was hot inside. Same in the winter. We had to heat the house with the fireplace. There were only a couple of rooms. All the girls slept in one room and the boys slept in another room. We used well water for everything, for drinking and bathing.

Farming was really tough times. We didn't have any equipment. We had to do every single thing by hand and with mules and plows. The farm and house we lived in was owned by Mr. Thomas. My mother was crippled, and my father left us. After that, we kids worked every day. And the conditions were terrible. Nowadays, it's hard to explain to my grandkids what my childhood was like.

Back then, we'd wake up before the sun came up, get dressed and go out in the field to pick cotton. You had to try and get out there before the sun first comes up so you could get the dew off of it. We'd pick it and bring it up to the house. It'd take us all day long. We'd start work in the dark and finish work in the dark. When you're farming, you just don't stop.

Picking tobacco was the worst because it was sticky. We would rub kerosene on our hands to get the stickiness off. And when it came to curing it after picking the leaves, you would string them up on poles and hang the poles up in the barn. Once they were dried, you would take them down and lay the leaves out. We couldn't let the leaves get too dark because then they would fall to pieces and that meant less money. And it wasn't a lot of money to begin with.

We couldn't always get to school during busy seasons. If it rained, we could go to school. And on Sunday, we went to church. Sunday couldn't come fast enough. It was the only day my brothers and sisters could do what we wanted and have some fun.

Everything we ate, we grew it ourselves. We didn't always have as much food as we would have liked, but we managed. We couldn't afford to buy much from the store and when we did, it was always bags of flour. That's about it.

I stopped working on the farm when I was 16. I met a guy from Chesapeake and he asked me to marry him. My mom wanted me to because she didn't want me to have to keep farming. I would still go down to help out when I could, though. It was hard, but I look back at it now and remember the good times. I still don't think there's anything prettier than riding down a country road and seeing a big tobacco or cotton field.

"We were working so hard and the farm owner's family was getting all the money" As told by Annie Williams-Madojemu, Portsmouth

The true meaning of sharecropping hit me as I listened to the Farmer's Home Administration's loan officer tell my father, Thomas Williams, why he did not qualify for a loan to buy the farm he had lived on in Roxboro, N.C., for almost 40 years. We had to move from the only home we had ever known, and my father was devastated. My dad only had girls. And as young kids in the '70s, that tobacco farm was our whole world. I thought the land as well as the old house with electricity, but no running water, indoor plumbing, heat or air conditioning, belonged to us.

Our lives were hard there. Our drinking water came from a well, which we kept in buckets in the kitchen. It was common for the water to freeze in winter. Sometimes we would find drowned rats in the frozen water.

Saturdays were spent cutting down trees for wood, which was used for cooking and heating. All winter, my parents would keep the fire burning throughout the night and we would sleep in the same room to stay warm. In summer, fans could do little to stop us from sweating as we slept. To use the bathroom, we had to go to an outhouse during the day and use a chamber pot at night.

From spring until fall, our lives revolved around tobacco. About age 3 or 4, we handed tobacco leaves in batches of three to be strung on sticks, which would later be placed in the barn. A fire would be used to cure the tobacco until it turned a golden brown so it could be sold in the fall. We started working in the field at 5. In the spring, we would plant the tobacco slips by dropping them into a metal planter. As the plants grew, we would use hoes to pull the dirt around the plants as our father plowed the fields first with a mule and plow, and later with a tractor. We would also apply fertilizer and pesticides. Later, we'd remove the suckers and break off the top of the plants to stop them from growing. From August to September, it was time to starting pulling tobacco. The black wax from the leaves took some time to remove from your hands and using gloves slowed you down. As long as there was light, we worked.

Although my father would sell his crop in September, we did not have a lot of money. My mother had a garden and canned and preserved whatever she could. We had hogs and a smokehouse, chickens for eggs and a cow for milk. When the food supply was low, my father would buy canned mackerel to get us through. I would often hear my mother say how we were working so hard and the farm owner's family was getting all the money. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew that my father would go to this man and get money in the spring most years and we would start planting.

We were able to buy some used farm equipment, cars and trucks. We would get clothes from the catalog sometimes, but most of the time from dime stores like Roses and Pope's. We did not get new furniture. We were able to get drywall for the room we all slept in during the cold, but nothing was ever done to improve the house.

When the owners of our farm decided to get rid of the land, my father was given the first opportunity to buy since he had been there for so long. When he could not secure the financing, the farm was put up for sale. People worked hard, as my father did, and at the end of the day would have nothing to show for it. I realized then that sharecropping was such a lopsided arrangement.

**"The best time of day was lunch" As told by Yvonne Madison,
Norfolk**

Many members of my family were sharecroppers in South Hill, Va., in the 60s. I grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., but for four years starting in 1960 when I was about 7 years old, I was sent to help out during the summers. I would help with tobacco crops.

Each day, we would get up before day break and go out into the fields to plant and pick the tobacco. Inside a barn used for curing the leaves, I would hand

my cousins three large leaves of tobacco at a time. They were tied to a long stick with string so they could be dried. I remember my hands would be so green with a pasty substance. My grandfather would put me on his shoulders and we'd walk through the fields. I would pull the suckers off the tobacco plants to stop them from blooming. I also had to remove the tobacco worms. They were short and very thick. My grandfather would take them off the plant and squeeze their heads.

The best time of day was lunch. My aunt, Rosalee Simmons, would cook for everyone each day. We would eat homemade scratch biscuits and fresh churned butter and lots of vegetables, chicken and frog legs.

**"12 hours a day, day in and day out" As told by Carol Davanay,
Newport News**

My father, James Taylor Fielder, Jr., was born in Crosby, Texas, on Aug. 4, 1921. When he was in eighth grade his father deserted the family, forcing my dad to leave school and go to work to support them. They worked cotton fields as sharecroppers near Taylor, Texas, and he spent many summers working 12 hours a day, day in and day out in the hot sun.

Even as a small boy, he was expected to fill 80-pound bags of hand-picked cotton. He slept on the floor of his family's cabin and he never wore shoes in the summer. His feet were so cut and sore from walking barefoot in the stubbed fields, he said the only comfort he found was walking through the cool cow "paddies." He told me that he decided in those fields, filled with flies, mosquitoes and snakes, that he would do whatever he needed to do to never pick cotton again. And he did.

He enlisted in the Army — where he was known as "Tex" despite never owning cowboy boots or a hat — just before Pearl Harbor and was taught cartography.

While in the service, he earned his GED and went on to work for what would become Exxon. He retired in 1980, but passed away a few years later. He suffered from pulmonary issues due in large part to the effects of inhaling cotton fibers in the fields.

"Winters could be rough" As told by Harold Pittman, Hampton

My grandparents, Clarence and Eva Pittman, were sharecroppers in Micro, N.C. My grandfather raised tobacco — the money crop — as well as corn, melons, tomatoes, wheat and cotton. We had a few pigs and chickens. It was hard work in the hot sun. I remember seeing his shirt totally wet with sweat as he followed the mule — he had only one mule and one plow. Farming is not for the faint of heart.

In 1944, I lived with my grandparents after my parents moved to Portsmouth, so I saw farming first hand. As I grew older, I helped my grandparents with the tobacco crops. There were about eight steps from planting the seeds to taking it to market.

Winters could be rough as there was no electricity. Water came from a hand pump, light came from kerosene lamps and heat came from a big fireplace. Some years were good, but some were not so good. If the weather was good that year, the tenant and farmer made money. It was all about weather, bugs and weeds.

"The only playtime we had was on Sunday after church." As told by Emma Jean Claud, Suffolk

Growing up on a farm as a sharecropper's daughter was not easy. We had to get up every morning before daylight and make a fire, feed all the animals and milk the cows. During fall, we had to help get the cotton picked and the peanuts shucked and stacked. In spring, we had to prepare the fields and sow

the seeds. When we did go to school, we had to work in the field after, pulling grass and chopping weeds. The only playtime we had was on Sunday after church because Grandma told Daddy that no one was working on the Sabbath day.

After all the cotton was picked, there were still bits of cotton left in the field and the kids were allowed to gather them up and take them to the cotton gin to sell. On the coldest days of the year, we would kill the hogs. Big pots of water would be set to boiling over fires and the hogs were hung and slit open. The women would empty the guts we didn't want into the pots and then into a trench, then begin butchering the hogs. It was good eating that day — we ate the liver and haslets. After that, we made sausage and cracklings. By the time we were done, the pots of water would be cold because it was so cold outside.

**"Hired out to work as 'tobacco hands' at age 5 or 6." As told by
Emma Robinson, Virginia Beach**

I was born in 1948 to sharecropper parents in Chatham, which is in the Piedmont area of Virginia. We lived a good distance off the main red clay dirt road. A creek ran in the woods nearby our small, gray unpainted sharecropper home. The creek was the source of drinking water and household needs. A lot of laundry was done close to the creek.

The small house had a loft for sleeping quarters above the kitchen, living area and parents' bedroom. Oil lamps and a wood stove were our essential utilities. Chickens and hogs were raised and lots of vegetables planted.

The landlord did not live on the property. Relatives came and helped with the tobacco harvest, the cash crop. I'm sure this help was reciprocated. Grass or weeds did not grow close to the home. Instead there was a dirt yard that we swept with a homemade straw broom.

In 1955, the house was already in horrible shape but became unlivable and we had to leave. Rain was leaking from the roof. I remember my mother saying something about a hurricane. My parents had nine children when we left that home; one child had died before we left in 1954.

We became sharecroppers with another landlord a few miles down the road. The landlord lived in a nice home on the property, close to the main road. He apparently was monitoring my father's comings and goings as I recall my father complaining about the landlord speaking to him about the matter. We left that sharecropper home during the late winter/early spring before it was time to plant the new tobacco crop.

We left that home and moved into our own home in 1956. Another child had been born. My parents and two older brothers, ages 11 and 12, built our new home. I'm sure my father must have had some help from other men in the community. The construction of the new house was incomplete, though. The sheetrock had been nailed on and there was no exterior covering until later when a wooden shingle exterior was added. It was very cold in the home and I recall work being done during the night hours to ward off the wind and cold.

After my family stopped sharecropping in 1956, we made a living by various means. My father rented an acre or two of land from an African American landowner for a few years, cut timber and hauled it to the market. He also dug wells and then went "up north" and stayed with relatives to work on construction sites for short periods. In our new home, we grew lots of vegetables and raised chickens and hogs. I recall that one day our mother canned 69 half gallons of blackberries, which we children had picked.

But our family income had always been supplemented by us children being hired out to work as "tobacco hands" at age 5 or 6.

"Required to work as soon as they were old enough to walk" As told by Jack Adams, Yorktown

My family was a sharecropping family in Columbus County, N.C., from 1935 until the late 1940s.

All five of the children were required to work as soon as they were old enough to walk steadily, boys plowing behind a mule when they could barely see over the plow handles. I assisted the family in growing and harvesting cotton, tobacco, corn, sweet potatoes, strawberries, etc., including the family garden from which we had to eat and preserve for the winter. At the time, tobacco was flue-cured with wood that we gathered during the winter. We also had to gather wood for the cook stove. When we got home from school, we had cooked sweet potatoes and fried fatback waiting for a snack then were required to head to the fields or wherever work was taking place that day.

Tobacco in those days was extremely labor intensive. Usually there was no money given for labor whether you worked for your family or a neighboring family on a swap basis. The landlord provided the land, did none of the work and received half the money earned. As a sharecropper, my father had to negotiate the best deal he could for his family. He at least owned his own mule; many did not. We used two mules to clear land to have the tobacco allotment increased since the majority of money made was from the sale of tobacco. Most often there was credit extended by stores until the sale of tobacco the next season. My father worked odd jobs to help clothe and feed the family. My mother made the clothes we wore. We only bought sugar and few other staples from the grocery store and everything else was raised on the farm, hunted, fished and preserved. There was no electricity in our house or running water, no indoor bath nor central heat. In the summer, we filled tubs of water to warm for the night's bath. There was also no automobile.

My father sharecropped until he had enough money to pay down on a small tract of land. What I learned growing up a sharecropper's son: a strong work

ethic, strong family values, strong faith and a desire to work hard to provide for a family of my own.

"I had never seen people like that except in sitcoms or movies." As told by Louis Wilson, Norfolk

My family sharecropping experience occurred decades before I even knew that term. I was a teenage city girl from Norfolk visiting my grandmother's Raleigh home in 1957 for a funeral. Among the somberly and professionally attired people at the funeral were two generations of cousins who lived on nearby tobacco farms. I had never seen people like that except in sitcoms or movies. I found them rather scary. Their hands were embedded with black tobacco gum (which I thought was dirt) and they were missing many teeth; they also had an accent which I could barely understand. The women wore print dresses and the men wore overalls. To my horror, they invited me to spend the night and my parents insisted that I accept. During that night, their genuine welcome was compelling.

I spent that summer and the next three summers on the farm until I went to college in the fall of 1960.

Cousins Bessie and Casey owned their own farm, but the younger cousins, including some of Bessie and Casey's children, were sharecroppers.

To get to the farm, I would catch the Trailways bus from Norfolk. The trip took seven hours. When I got to Raleigh, I would call my uncle on a payphone and he would drive me to the farm. My arrival was never announced beforehand. I would slam through the back screen door, shout that I was there and be greeted by hugs and screams. My happiness was profound.

Casey's old frame house, which was more than 100 years old, was my base. I spent days and nights at sharecropper farms when workers were needed.

The work was the same except that sharecroppers could only keep a portion of what they made from the crops. The rest went to the landowners.

We were in the tobacco fields before sun rose to pick the sucker leaves off of the plants; sucker leaves deprived larger leaves of nutrients. This required us to crawl, but we would stand at times to stretch our backs and catch a breeze. Soon my hands were coated with tobacco gum, like those of my cousins. Sometimes there were moccasins or rattlesnakes coiled at the base of the plants, which terrified me so someone would inspect the row before I worked it. If a snake was seen, someone would shout, "Somebody get a hoe!"

On "barning" days, we rose at 4 a.m. to empty the curing barn. Men climbed in the rafters to hand down poles of cured tobacco to the women and children below. We wore kerchiefs because of the heavy dust that rained down.

Everyone worked, regardless of age and ailment, of which there were many including **diabetes**, asthma, migraines and arthritis. Casey's 3-year-old grandson drove the tractor, inching little by little in the rows, beside the tobacco pickers. He was too small to reach the pedals if seated, so he stood all day.

The women and children stayed in the shed and tied the leaves. I was a handler earning 50 cents an hour. Tying speed was a source of pride and recognition among the women. For a short, mid-morning break, someone would drive to the country store and get Moon Pies and Pepsis. The driveway was packed with cars and pickups, all with keys on the seat. Whoever went on an errand would take whatever vehicle was most convenient.

Before noon, women would go to the house to prepare lunch. Lunch and supper had the same menu served family style on the long kitchen table, including ham, chicken, corn, tomatoes, greens and sweet tea. We had dessert if we were at Casey's.

We would sit in rocking chairs on the porch after dinner, talking, relishing the tranquility, a dishpan of peas for shelling on each lap. The mood was mellow, the crickets were loud. We watched the sun set over the fields. Casey would utter his customary line: "This is God's country."

"Everyone in the field was poor and appreciated the opportunity to work." As told by Eugene White, Chesapeake

My mother-in-law, Shirley Pugh Walston, was born in 1928 into a small farming family. When she was a toddler, the family moved to the Tulls Creek area of North Carolina where her father borrowed money to own his own land. Between the Depression and bad crop years, they lost the farm by 1931. Her father borrowed \$300 from a neighbor and moved into a tenant house owned by her grandfather.

She does not remember the size of the farm, only that her father raised potatoes and cotton and that he farmed the land by himself with a mule and a plow. They lived in poverty; the county health department put screens on the windows because there were none to keep out bugs and the diseases they carry. Heat came from a stove fueled by wood her father cut from the trees behind the house. Coal oil was used in the lamps, carried home from the store by her or her brother in exchange for eggs from the farm.

As a young girl, she helped her mother more than going to the fields. She does remember picking up potatoes after the main harvest with her brother for her family's use. She was very young because it took both her and her younger brother to lift the foot tub to dump the potatoes into a gunny sack. They would have been on their hands and knees digging up the missed potatoes from the first harvest. It was a gleaning of the field.

When she got older, she picked cotton for neighbors for spending money. In those days, picking cotton was a community effort with neighbors helping or hiring neighbors to get the crop in. Black folks and white folks worked side by side. Everyone in the field was poor and appreciated the opportunity to work. She went to the fields early in the day and wore old gloves to keep the sharp edges of the cotton bolls from scratching and cutting her fingers as she reached in to remove the cotton from the boll. She would have been paid at the end of the day by how many pounds she had picked. Most of the money earned was set aside for school clothes and supplies but she was allowed to spend a small amount at the country store on whatever she liked.

The father's \$300 debt was paid off month by month throughout the Depression. It was such a struggle for her father that he never borrowed money again for the rest of his life. Whatever was needed was saved for, be it a car, house or tractor. Her father sharecropped until he was able to get a job as a shipfitter at Norfolk Naval Shipyard at the beginning of World War II.

Shirley Walston is now 90 and lives in Chesapeake.

"I am proud to have grown up as a sharecropper" As told by Billy Turner, Seaford

I was one of five boys and three girls who, with our parents, made a living by working a landowner's farm in Bertie and Chowan counties in North Carolina.

The landowner furnished housing, some facilities and money, when needed, to be paid back at harvest time. All expenses were split, such as cost of seed, fertilizer, etc. In the early years we worked mules and in the late '50s we used a tractor. The landowner allowed the sharecroppers a plot of land for their own use. Resourceful sharecroppers would raise hogs, chickens and vegetable gardens to sustain the family during the year. My family raised some "trucking

crops" such as melons and beans to be sold before the fall of the year. I remember raising sugar cane to get molasses for the family. Pork was our main source of protein as was chicken. We killed and dressed our own hogs, cured the meat for a year's consumption. Hams, however, were always sold. Fried chicken was a luxury for Sunday dinners or to serve to occasional guests. The chicks were ordered by mail and we were careful to eat the roosters only as they matured.

The landowner kept a record of the expenses and at the end of the year came "settlement" time. If you were lucky and did not overextend your borrowing, you would get modest or no income for all the hard work you performed. The sharecropper was always in debt. It is true that picking cotton is cruel to the hands and pulling tobacco is rough on the back. So, moves for better outcomes were needed.

My labor was occasionally hired out to other farmers to provide extra income. My first grade school clothes were purchased from money picking cotton. But my real exposure to "money" happened when I was 16. I traveled by car to Canada to pull tobacco. To my surprise and my father's shock, I returned home with more money than my family had ever had.

We never knew we were poor or thought that way. I changed schools five times in my youth; we had to move to where the jobs were. My 12 years of education became 11 due to the fact that I had to put extra time to satisfy the necessary work at the farm. From the eight children, three are university graduates, three are high school graduates, and two did not complete high school.

I am proud to have grown up as a sharecropper. Hard work helped shape my character and personality, gave me a work ethic, love of family and closeness to God.

"A silent prayer of thanks that we survived" As told by Wilhelm Gabber, Norfolk

I'm a 75-year-old immigrant who came to America in 1957 when I was 13. From age 10 to 13, I worked with my mother and stepfather in the American-occupied zone in upper Austria trying to scrape a living from the earth by planting and harvesting tobacco. American cigarettes were expensive by our standards and many men smoked. I'm guessing that Austrian tobacco was a stopgap until conditions in Europe improved. The location was not too far from Salzburg. Think Mozart, think "The Sound of Music." Tobacco?!? You've got to be kidding!

After the war, life was rough and people did what they had to do to survive. My stepfather found an Austrian farmer who was willing to plant tobacco. We were farmers in our homeland of Transylvania, Romania, and were used to the rigors of farming. Tobacco, however, was new to us. We built glass-covered hotbeds, raised seedlings, transplanted them to the field and prayed. We did a lot of weeding, hoeing, watering and using copper sulfate as an insecticide. If a plant died, I'd look underneath and frequently find that grubs had chewed the roots off.

We'd pick the leaves in the late summer and early fall. I'll remember the feel of sticky sap and the smell as long as I live, along with the labor involved in hanging the leaves to dry. After they dried, the leaves would be sorted along some quality guidelines and then bundled, weighed and shipped off. There is really no comparison between what we produced and the high quality tobacco I saw in Virginia years later.

The money earned was meager. It was supplanted by us raising our own vegetables; we had a few chickens and a couple of pigs. My mother made sauerkraut for the winter. The labor-intensive process, meager payoff and reliance on adequate weather — things that all farmers deal with — convinced me that I didn't want to be a sharecropper or farmer. In the mid-1990s I

brought my mother from **Canton**, Ohio, and showed her the tobacco fields in the South Hill area.

I think we both offered a silent prayer of thanks that we survived those times.

**"The landlord criticized my father for allowing us to go to college."
As told by Alma Anderson, Chesapeake**

My daddy, Lemuel Jarman, was a second generation sharecropping/tenant farmer who labored in the tobacco fields for more than 20 years in Jones County, N.C. He and my mother moved into a two-room hut built on a tobacco farm where his father, brothers and sisters already lived and worked.

It was hardscrabble, laborious, dirty work with long hours and, at times, inhumane landlord expectations. You had to be available whenever the landlord needed you. In exchange, the tenant got a place to stay, partially cleared land to grow a garden, space for a pigpen and a cow pasture, plus a piddling allowance early in the year to buy necessities until harvest which, for tobacco farmers, started in late August and September.

The landlord supposedly kept an account that had to be repaid out of the tenant's share of whatever was received from the sale of his part of the tobacco sale. Frequently the tenant received little after the bills were paid. As I grew up in the 1940s, we mostly ate what we grew, vegetables like white potatoes, green peas, squash and tomatoes. We always had pigs and a cow that was given as a gift from my maternal grandparents; it gave us milk and butter. We had chickens for laying eggs.

Women's work on the farm started with weeding the tobacco and corn fields. By July 4, everyone — men, women and children — was busy from before daybreak to sundown to get the tobacco out of the fields into the barns for curing. Men took turns checking the curing process during the night. After

curing, the tobacco leaves were moved to storage and grading before being sold.

After the tobacco harvest, there were corn, peanuts, sweet potatoes and soybeans to be brought in from the fields. Then there was hog-killing time, which was a family affair. It had to be cold enough to avoid spoilage while handling the pork, and much of the cleaning and removal of entrails was done outside. Hams, shoulders and sausage were smoked for the winter, and bacon and other cuts were packed in barrels in salt.

Dad hunted rabbit, squirrel, raccoon and deer. Our Thanksgiving "turkey" was usually barbecued raccoon. In early spring, Dad went fishing at night for shad.

Our school was a one-room building with a potbellied stove. Many children of tenant farmers frequently had to stay out of school to work or keep younger children while their mothers worked. My sister and I rarely had to stay home during school. The only time I can remember my Dad spanking us was when he needed us to stay home to help get the tobacco to market and we put up a fuss. But my mom's father owned his own farm and she had a different outlook on life; she insisted that we go to school.

Later, partial scholarships in hand, my sister and I went to college and it was rumored that our landlord was criticized for allowing us to go to college as we were not available to work the farm much of the year. The discord that arose caused my Dad to leave farming for unskilled labor jobs. It had to have been painful for him as he had never known anything but tenant farming. But he was eventually able to buy a home where he could have his own garden.

**"He was paid only 92 cents for that year of hard work."As told by
Loretta Davis Khan, Virginia Beach**

Through our childhood experiences, my sister, JoAnne Hainesworth, and I came to understand that sharecropping is akin to slavery minus the whips. The two of us lived with our grandparents, Manison and Mozelle Revell, now deceased, on two farms in rural Rocky Hock, N.C. They were longtime sharecroppers. We lived in an unpainted, tin roof house with no indoor plumbing and no electricity while the "patron family" lived in relative luxury. The land had no trees and, therefore, no shade. In the summer we played under the house, which was propped up on stones.

Our grandparents worked very hard. We remember our grandfather working dawn to dusk in the heat of summer farming several acres of land with just a plow and a mule. We were tasked with taking him cold water or iced tea, and sometimes we had to help with picking cotton or other crops.

Our grandmother planted a garden and raised chickens and our uncles and grandfather raised pigs. So we ate well and never went hungry. Vegetables were canned and hams smoked for winter eating. She devoted one day each week to laundry, an all-day outdoors affair of pumping water from the well, heating it in huge cast iron pots, then washing and rinsing everything by hand and hanging it to dry. She had a Singer sewing machine she used to make our clothes and darn my grandfather's.

It appeared to us my grandparents were always working.

Our aunt, Anne Marie, recently shared that our grandfather once told her that after "squaring up" — the selling of the crops at the end of the year — he was paid only 92 cents for that year of hard work. He was charged for rent on the house, all supplies, seeds and more. We have learned that nobody, no matter how hardworking, can lift himself to independence by sharecropping.

Conditions improved for my grandparents after our three uncles, one by one, were drafted into the military during World War II. They all sent allotments to their parents. In 1952, when we were 10 and 12, our grandparents purchased

their own farm. They had their first kitchen sink and first bathroom installed. My grandfather bought a used truck, no longer having to use a mule and cart to go places. They were among the first African American households to own a TV and on Sunday afternoons friends and neighbors would dress up, come over and watch the tiny black and white screen.

We joined our mother in Norfolk when we were 6 and 8 but continued to spend summers on our grandparents' farm until our mid-teens, and continued to visit several times a year.

We have fond memories of hearty meals, days playing in the shade and big family reunions. And we will always treasure the time spent with our hardworking, nurturing grandparents.

"White neighbors were envious of his success and burned the house down" As told by Kathy Dews, Hampton

My grandfather, John Wilkes, was a sharecropper during the Jim Crow era. He lived in Oak Park, Ga., with his wife and children. He was allowed to build a shanty for his family on the property of the landowner. The land was rich and he was successful at yielding crops such as tobacco, cotton and vegetables. The family story is that white neighbors were envious of his success and burned the house several times during the time he lived there. He always rebuilt it. The last time the house was burned he was run off and his life was threatened. He left his family with relatives and went to Cincinnati, Ohio, and found work as a builder. He built a church and a house and sent for his family. Shortly thereafter he died of pneumonia. The house still stands and is a reminder of the impact that his sharecropping experience had on our lives.

"Crop failure was a constant threat, and when it happened, it was devastating." As told by Bettie Gray Culverhouse Allen, Virginia Beach

I was born in 1938, the youngest of eight children, to Joseph and Bettie Gray. The farm my father worked from the '20s to '40s was located just outside of Newsoms in Southampton County. Our wooden frame farmhouse was painted dark red and much of the paint was peeling. There was a small front porch with wooden steps, which were broken and cracked in many places, giving rise to many splintered feet in the summer when we were allowed to go barefoot.

My sister, Joyce, and I — the youngest two — were never required to miss school to work on the farm. My dad and the other tenants worked from sun up until sun down. There was no tractor or machinery. The farming was done with mules, plows and a few other tools. They grew mainly cotton, peanuts and corn. Spring planting was done by hand. Summertime meant endless chopping, fertilizing and cultivating. In the fall, peanuts were dug with a pronged fork, laid on top of the ground to dry, then shocked around a pole. The whole family picked cotton. After school, Joyce and I would have a cold biscuit with delicious homemade fig preserves, grab our burlap bags with the printed shoulder straps mama made for us and head to the fields. I remember the integral part weather played in the results of the fall harvest. Crop failure was a constant threat, and when it happened, it was devastating.

In the summertime, we drew buckets of ice-cold water from the well, filled Mason jars and carried them to my daddy and brothers in the field.

Wintertime meant bringing up many arms full of wood for the woodburning heaters and the cook stove. Almost all of our food was grown on the farm. We had chickens, eggs, milk, pigs, vegetables, fruit and potatoes.

"My grandfather simply could not make enough money" As told by Michael Brown, James City County

My maternal grandfather, Alvin Dean, was born in 1884 on a farm near Florence — today it is Williamson County, Texas. He never farmed land that he owned. He plowed by mule and planted seed by hoe and hand.

With his wife and children, they chopped cotton under the hot Texas sun, continuously hoeing weeds in the planted fields. When the cotton crop was ready for harvesting, that was done by hand also. They slung 15-foot cotton picking bags across their shoulders and moved down each row, picking the cotton from all the dried bolls on each plant. When the bolls ripened and opened, the dried outer husks were iron hard and sharp, so even when they wore gloves, their hands would end up bloody every day.

The Great Depression was a disaster for the family. By the late '30s, the unmarried family children were sent elsewhere in the county to live with relatives because my grandfather simply could not make enough money farming to feed them. He worked where and when he could, doing whatever provided any meager pay or food.



Four men cutting tobacco in Southside Virginia, circa 1900. (Va. Museum of History&Culture)

When it came to picking cotton, we all had to pick cotton. Every morning, we'd go to the fields, my mother and all of the kids. We all went. No one stayed back. Babies were put underneath the trees on the peach fields. That's how my baby brother was raised. But I was called a good picking negro. We'd put on cotton sacks and pick two rows at a time, back and forth. I'd get on my knees and crawl, use both hands and when my cotton sacks were full, I'd go dump them out on a big sheet in a pile.

Half of everything we made went to the boss. He took it, and he gave us what he called half. Our goal every year was between 12 and 15 bales of cotton. Each bale weighed about 500 pounds. If you could get 12 or 15 bales, that was a good year. We were allowed to keep the cotton seeds and we could sell them to get extra money. But in sharecropping, the boss on the farm would provide us with fertilizer, seeds and cane. At the end of the year, we'd owe him. So to get our half of the profits, we'd have to pay him what we owed. The money would just go right back to him.

Everything else was done by hand on the field, too. Daddy and I would go out to the woods to cut down trees. We'd cut them down, haul them up on a wagon and carry them back to the yard to chop up. We'd used that wood for the stove and the fireplace to keep the house warm. There was never a day where there was nothing to do. Only on Sundays were we able to do anything else — we went to church. I went to school through the 8th grade, but the farm owner didn't want me to go to high school. He said he didn't need any educated negroes to pick his cotton.

My father died when I was 15. I became the man in charge, but I was just a boy. Two years later, my mother got word that a Marine recruiter was taking some black men into the Marine Corps. We went to Rock Hill to speak with the recruiter, and because I was educated and could read, they let me in. I was put on a midnight bus to Paris Island for boot camp. I had to make it. I couldn't go back to the fields picking cotton and my mother was determined that I got as far away as I could. I spent 31 years in the Marines. I became a battalion sergeant, regimental sergeant major and sergeant major of the 1st and 3rd divisions.