

Plano museum to examine turn-of-century sharecroppers

Research may lead to example of tenant farmer's house

By Virginia Sullivan

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Up until now, the Heritage Farmstead museum of Plano has been able to offer only a one-view glimpse of Collin County's history. Dating back to 1891 and designated as a national landmark, the farm offers a vivid portrait of how local upper-class landowners lived at the turn of the century.

Executive Director Ted Peters is proud of what the museum offers, but explained that wealthy landowners made up only a fraction of Plano's population at that time.

"We've always known the big farms were run by sharecroppers. Most people didn't own their land. They worked the farms," he said. "Each family farmed 30 to 40 acres, right up until tractors were invented. They lived without plumbing or electricity in two-room houses."

The original 365-acre farm included a large Victorian home, three barns and several outbuildings. The preserved homestead remains on four acres just west of Custer Road on 15th Street at Pittman Drive. The city of Plano owns the land and leases it to the non-profit Plano Heritage Association.

The association already had plans to try to convert the museum's current offices into a foreman's cottage where sharecroppers lived while managing the farmstead. However, no one on the museum's staff had the time to devote to the research necessary to complete the project.

Problem solver

The solution presented itself when Heather Brown, a sophomore history major specializing in American studies at Princeton University, contacted the museum. She was looking for a summer internship and her timing could not have been better, Mr. Peters said.

"We thought that someone like Heather — completely new to the area — could come in completely

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— Heather Brown, researcher

made than most, but so far it appears to fall within the "typical" range.

"You can see a lot of clues to where the additions to this house were made," Ms. Brown said. "We crawled under the house through one of the closets — that was a real adventure — and we could see the edge of the old house. It appears to have been about 14 by 18 feet originally."

Changing times

That's just the kind of informational research that Mr. Peters was looking for. "These families today live in \$600,000 homes on the same spot where people raised 10 kids in two rooms without plumbing.

"One of my goals is to have a map of turn-of-the-century Plano that can overlay a map of Plano today," he continued. "I would like visitors [to the museum] to be able to find their home and to see what farmstead it was on."

"People have no idea that these same farmers living in two-room houses raised the people that later became North Texas society," Mr. Peters said. "Most likely, if your grandmother is a local then she was probably a sharecropper. This is our common history."

In addition to her research on the house at Heritage Farmstead, Ms. Brown will study general sharecropping and the specific farming history of Collin County. She will also make a comparison of the small-

es. Tenant farmers were totally dependent on credit. This was one of the ways that they were kept down.

"Another example is that tenant farmers all over the country suffered from hook worms and parasites. Old ads in the Plano paper for hook worm cream shows that they had them here too.

"On the other hand, reading the papers makes it clear that the local farmers were treated fairly well — especially by the churches," she continued. "The survivors that I've talked to don't remember a lot of prejudice or hunger. It's really nice to hear about their positive experiences."

She also explained that the term sharecropping can cause some confusion.

"It's defined as farming on the 'half.' In other words, the farmers shared half of the crops with the land owners. Tenant farmers had all sorts of agreements and usually provided their own equipment and animals. They usually farmed on the 'thirds and fourths,' meaning they gave the landowners a fourth of their cotton and a third of their other crops.

"The majority of local farmers were actually tenant farmers, but most people think of them as sharecroppers," Ms. Brown explained. "During interviews, one of the first things I have to determine is whether we're really talking about tenant farmers. For general purposes though, the term sharecroppers covers them all."

Finding evidence

"We're currently trying to get interviews with as many survivors as we can. Most of them are from the '30s, but things didn't change that much on the farm," she continued. "Poverty kept many living without electricity or plumbing even then."

One of the survivors Ms. Brown will be interviewing is Eddie "Sarge" Stimpson Jr. His memoirs, titled *My Remembers*, chronicle his