

“HELL-HOLE ON THE BRAZOS”: THE ORIGINS OF SUGAR LAND, TEXAS, AND
THE IMPERIAL SUGAR COMPANY 1832-1914

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INTRODUCTION

In the chapters that follow, I attempt to reconstruct the linked histories of the Texas prison farms of the upper-coastal Brazos River valley, the Imperial Sugar Company, and the town of Sugar Land, with an eye to accounting for the emergence of the “progressive company town” in the former “Hell-Hole on the Brazos.” The primary sources upon which I rely are the Governor’s Records and Penitentiary Board Archives housed at the Texas State Library and Archives in Austin, Texas, the newspaper collections, vertical files, and John A. Lomax manuscript collection at the University of Texas’s Center for American History, also in Austin, and the Imperial Sugar collection at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center in Houston, Texas. Through an examination of prison records, correspondence between convict laborers and various governors and penitentiary boards, court records, Imperial Sugar Company archives, and local newspapers, a picture quite different from that found in standard histories of Sugar Land emerges.

The historiography of Sugar Land is still in a formative stage. Other than the monograph penned by former Imperial Sugar Company manager R.M. Armstrong, the only work that treats the history of Sugar Land in any detail is Harold Hyman’s *Oleander*

Odyssey.¹ Hyman's work is a valuable source of information and insight into the lives of the Kempner family of Galveston and Houston, and includes several chapters on the Imperial Sugar Company and the development of Sugar Land. Nevertheless, Hyman's tendency to focus on family solidarity and ethnicity as explanatory factors in a capitalist success narrative, as well as his business history methodology, limits the usefulness of *Oleander Odyssey* for "history from below"-oriented students of Sugar Land.

The literature on Fort Bend County, into which Sugar Land falls, is not much more elaborate than that on Sugar Land itself. There is little recent research to supplement the two older monographs on Fort Bend County, Clarence Wharton's *Wharton's History of Fort Bend County* and Pauline Yelderman's 1979 monograph, *The Jay Birds of Fort Bend County*, (which draws heavily on Wharton's work). Both Wharton and Yelderman offer a thoroughly white-supremacist interpretation of the origins of Fort Bend County and Texas history. Nevertheless, we may glean some useful details regarding the politics of Gilded Age Fort Bend County from Yelderman's research. Especially in light of Yelderman's glaring racism and questionable conclusions, Linda Anne Lovett's recent MA thesis on the pivotal Jaybird-Woodpecker conflict of the 1880s is an extremely welcome and valuable contribution to the historiography of Fort Bend County. Michael Emerson's Ph.D. dissertation on the development of Fort Bend County's educational infrastructure has also been a useful resource in making sense of the history of the County.²

¹ R.M. Armstrong, *Sugar Land, Texas and the Imperial Sugar Company* (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., 1991); Harold Hyman, *Oleander Odyssey: The Kempners of Galveston, Texas, 1854-1980s* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990).

² Pauline Yelderman, *The Jay Birds of Fort Bend County* (Waco: Texian Press, 1979); Clarence Wharton, *Wharton's History of Fort Bend County* (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1939); Leslie Anne Lovett

Given the centrality of sugar as a crop and commodity in the history of the Americas, it is surprising that there is not more historical research on sugar legislation, labor in the sugar industry, and the political economy of sugar. The classic work on sugar in the United States South, J. Carlyle Sitterson's *Sugar Country* remains valuable but is by now badly in need of an update. Alfred S. Eichner's *The Emergence of Oligopoly* and J.H. Galloway's *The Sugar Cane Industry* are also useful, although neither treat the Southern sugar industry in much detail. By far the best work on southern sugar is John C. Rodrigue's recent Ph.D. dissertation "Raising Cane: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880," although due to its geographic and temporal specificity is only of limited use to historians of the post-1880 period.³

Unlike sugar, the history of prisons in the United States has been a popular topic for researchers over the past several decades. The Texas prison system has been treated to a book-length study, Donald R. Walker's *Penology for Profit: a History of the Texas Prison System, 1867-1912*. Walker's study covers the institutional developments well but suffers from a lack of theoretical sophistication and a tendency to presume good will on the part of prison officials. Much better are the two recent Ph.D. dissertations concerning Texas prison history, Robert Reps Perkinson's "Birth of a Texas Prison Empire" and Paul Michael Lucko's "Prison Farms, Walls, and Society: Punishment and Politics in Texas,

"The Jaybird-Woodpecker War: Reconstruction and Redemption in Fort Bend County, Texas, 1869-1889," (MA thesis, Rice University, 1994). Michael D. Emerson, "Changing Landscapes: The Legacy of Frontier, Plantation, Company Town, and Suburbanization on the Fort Bend County Independent School District" (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 1994).

³ J. Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar country; the cane sugar industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Lexington; University of Kentucky Press, 1953); Alfred S. Eichner, *The Emergence of Oligopoly; Sugar Refining as a Case Study* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969); J.H. Galloway *The Sugar Cane Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); John C. Rodrigue, "Raising Cane: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1993).

1848-1910.” Both of these studies provide a critical analysis of Texas prison politics, and have been valuable references for this study.⁴

I regret that perhaps the most interesting part of the Sugar Land story—how the folks lured there to work in the refinery and related industries created a community, established a culture of solidarity and organized a union in 1938—will have to await future studies. Despite the fact that the present study does not concern trade unions or strikes, it is grounded in the methods and interpretive framework of “new labor history.” As has been noted many times, what distinguishes the “new labor history” from the older institutional labor history is its focus on the self-activity of rank-and-file workers rather than the careers of union leaders.⁵ If there has been a blind spot for “new labor history,” it has been its problematic relationship to Marxist historiography and historical materialism. While I do not wish to delve into thorny philosophical questions of determination and causality here, I think it can be fairly asserted that “new labor history” has operated from a markedly voluntaristic perspective. Too often, historians concentrate solely on the strength and cohesion of the collective will of a given group of workers to account for success or failure of working-class struggles.⁶

⁴ Donald R. Walker, *Penology for Profit: a History of the Texas Prison System, 1867-1912* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1988); Robert Reys Perkinson, “Birth of the Texas Prison Empire” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2001); Paul Michael Lucko, “Prison Farms, Walls, and Society: Punishment and Politics in Texas, 1848-1910” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas Austin, 1999).

⁵ See J. Carroll Moody, “Introduction” to J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, eds. *Perspective on American Labor History. The Problems of Synthesis* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1970).

⁶ Ironically, the historians most often cited as the inspiration for American “new labor history,” E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, were extremely sensitive to the complexities of historical determination. This study draws from the extensively on the theoretical foundations laid out in Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1963), *Whigs and Hunters: The origins of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon, 1976) and *Cultures in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1993). Also formative in its influence on my thinking is Gutman’s work, especially the articles and essays collected in *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, Ira Berlin, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

This study attempts to avoid the pitfalls of voluntarism by situating the social history of upper-coastal Brazos River valley workers within the shifting dynamics of large-scale structural economic, political, and social forces. The first chapter lays theoretical foundations and frames the larger narratives of race and working-class formation in Sugar Land.

Chapter Two charts the emergence of dominant and subordinate classes in Sugar Land in the wake of Federal Reconstruction. Sugar Land emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, during the earliest phase of working class formation in the upper- coastal Brazos River valley. This was also a time of elite class consolidation in the area, which can best be seen in the organization of the Jaybird Democratic Party in Fort Bend County. The attempt by the elite class to reassert its customary authority in the wake of Federal Reconstruction manipulated racial prejudice and class resentment and created a new white supremacist Jim Crow regime in the 1890s.

Chapter Three explores the history of Sugar Land in light of the exigencies of the refined sugar cane industry. As Sidney Mintz has noted, no crop has been more intimately linked to coerced labor and slavery than sugar cane.⁷ Harvesting cane requires massive teams of workers laboring at one of modern agriculture's most onerous tasks—chopping stalks of cane with a long-blade knife. But the harvest season lasts only a few months: from late October, to early January. Sugar planters wishing to extract a surplus from the cultivation of cane thus had a strong material incentive to keep slaves—the need to secure a labor force at harvest time.

⁷ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

After the Civil War, sugar planters faced a labor crisis that was explicitly also a crisis of class. Most former slaves aspired to peasant-proprietorship, not the harsh realities and insecurities of wage labor. Thus, the dominant class, acting as a class, attempted to convince and coerce various segments of subordinate classes to trade aspirations for independence for the dubious satisfactions of the paycheck. When this attempt failed, Texas sugar planter elites enlisted the State's criminal justice system to capture the laboring bodies of the poor. In district courts throughout Texas, newly freed slaves were tried and convicted on charges of "theft of a beef," "riding a horse without owners' permission," and other absurdities and sentenced to "two years confinement." In the upper-coastal Brazos River valley, most of these convicts were sent directly from the courts to sugar plantations, where they worked as virtual slaves. The "making" of the upper-coastal Brazos River valley working class therefore took place as this struggle over who would work the cane fields and under what conditions was played out.

The use of convict laborers to solve the sugar cane planter's quandary only lasted until 1914, when the Texas legislature finally managed to outlaw the leasing of prisoners on sugar cane farms. Local industrialists after 1914 needed to turn to other varieties of coercive labor control. The most effective of these was the "progressive company town," which Sugar Land's owners pursued with relish. Chapter Four details the emergence of post-convict lease Sugar Land as a segregated, company-owned, single-industry fiefdom of the Imperial Sugar Company.

Chapter Five concludes this study with an investigation of the links between changing attitudes towards prison, parole and pardon, rooted in the turbulent political economy of Progressive Era Texas, and the rise of an industrial working class in the

upper-coastal Brazos River valley. This chapter closes with a consideration of the iconic figure of Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, who served as an inmate of Sugar Land’s Central State Farm for eight years. Leadbelly’s music and persona serve as a cipher to decode some of the hidden dynamics of everyday resistance on the part of Texas’s convict sugar workers.

I elected to organize the present work thematically, rather than chronologically. Separating the thematic strains that contributed to the making of Sugar Land will, I hope, lend some clarity to an interpretation that relies on a dialectical interpretive approach.

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: RACE, CLASS, AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SUGAR LAND

One recurring impulse animated the drive to create the post-bellum Texas prison empire: the desire to turn the state prison system into a profitable source of revenue. A corollary objective, in the eyes of the elite white lawmakers, was the opportunity to enforce a disciplinary corrective against the aspirations to mobility and self-expression of poor whites and newly enfranchised blacks.⁸ In the towns of the upper-coastal Brazos River valley sugar bowl, where the Lone Star State's nascent prison empire was centered, conflicts raged between elite and less privileged Texans throughout the nineteenth century. By the time the Imperial Sugar Company was founded in Sugar Land in 1907, the social landscape of Fort Bend County had been molded by a half-century of intense class struggle.

To effectively analyze the links between penology, racism, and class struggle, it is crucial to abandon, as Martha A. Myers cautions, "the commonsense notion of a simple

⁸ See Perkinson, "Birth of the Texas Prison Empire." The classic treatment of penology as a state apparatus of disciplinary control is that of Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1993). While Foucault's theory has been posited as a challenge to Marxist interpretations of crime and punishment, lately there have been attempts at a rapprochement between the two schools. See, e.g. Dario Melosi's introduction to the 2003 edition of Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer, *Punishment and Social Structure* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

equivalency between criminality and punishment.” The exigencies of political economy are often more meaningful than the alleged social need to punish offenders, and it is therefore equally important to distinguish between the different strategies used by the state in relation to prisoners and prevailing labor-market conditions. When workers are in short supply, prisoners are looked at as labor-power resources for employers, and the language of “rehabilitation” is often invoked to justify the exploitation of prisoners. Conversely, when the labor supply outpaces demand, mass incarceration prevails, and the theme of “deterrence” tends to dominate the penological discourse.⁹

A comparison of the culture of punishment in post-Civil War Texas, when employers were desperate for workers, and that of the contemporary United States, shaped by the very different “problem” of a large reserve army of unemployed young people, reveals that the methods and indeed the very meaning of punishment have changed dramatically over the course of the past hundred-plus years.¹⁰ It is tempting to regard this change as a positive one, especially given the continuing popularity of the “Whig” interpretation of the history of prisons as one of gradual reform. But a glance at today’s staggeringly high rates of incarceration, the waste of human potential inherent in draconian drug laws and “three-strikes-and-you’re-out” sentencing, and disturbing trends towards privatization of prisons all suggest that things are as bad as ever, if they have not gotten worse. This study proceeds from the perspective that the transformation of prisons

⁹ Martha A. Myers, *Race, Labor & Punishment in the New South* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 7, 34-37.

¹⁰ See Angela Davis, “From the Convict Lease System to the Super-Max Prison,” in Joy James, ed., *States of Confinement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 60.

owes its origins to the emergence of a new “logic of power,” not from a tendency towards progressive enlightenment in the criminal justice system.¹¹

The term “logic of power” is borrowed from philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who marry a Marxist theory of the State with the insights of poststructuralist thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault.¹² Hardt and Negri emphasize the importance of the interrelation of power and knowledge in shaping the terrain of social life. This approach allows for a consideration of politics at a more intimate scale than that is limited to a discussion of political parties and parliaments: at the level, for example, of the bodies of subjects. Hardt and Negri pay particular attention to Foucault’s discussion of the transition from the paradigm of “disciplinary power” to that of “societies of control.” The period under consideration in this paper—the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the American South—witnessed the emergence of manifold “disciplinary” apparatuses and institutions: prisons, factories, asylums, hospitals, and schools.¹³

The criminalization of previously non-criminal behaviors must therefore be analyzed in light of the synchronization of available techniques of knowledge-gathering, social engineering, and the “common sense” that prevails in a given society. In the words of Hardt and Negri, “Disciplinary power rules in effect by structuring the parameters and limits of thought and practice, sanctioning and prescribing normal and/or deviant

¹¹ The literature on the contemporary crisis in American prisons is vast. For a good introduction, see David Lapido, “The Rise of America’s Prison-Industrial Complex,” *New Left Review*, 7, January-February 2001, 109-23.

¹² See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially the discussion of “biopolitical production” on pages 22-41.

¹³ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 22.

behaviors.”¹⁴ The normalization of new modes of punishment must similarly be examined in relation to the social distribution of power, and in particular to the monopolization of the means of violence by corporate bodies, especially the State, in their efforts to compel obedience to legal and juridical norms. The process through which certain kinds of knowledge are legitimized is intimately related to the ways in which the State, through its deputies, is entitled to exercise or threaten violence against the bodies of subjects who fall under its jurisdiction.¹⁵

Whereas contemporary Americans tend to regard incarceration and the deprivation of freedom and mobility as the essence of punishment, Texas lawmakers in the 1880s and 1890s assumed that prisoners repaid their debt to society in the form of a discrete period of time in which they owed their labor-power to the state. While the discourse surrounding incarceration in the mass media and bourgeois politics often paints labor within prisons as an opportunity or even privilege for inmates, such a notion would have struck both prisoners and wardens as patently absurd for most of the history of Texas. Everyone understood that the compulsory labor performed by prisoners *was* their punishment.

It is important to distinguish here, however, between *productive* and *non-productive* compulsory labor. These terms are used here in their classical Marxist sense, meaning labor that allows a capitalist to realize value from the labor worked up in a commodity, rather than in the everyday sense of utility, functionality, or desirability.¹⁶

The disposition over the productive labor-power of the prisoner that the state gained

¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : the Birth of the Prison*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1979) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), Ch. 6.

¹⁶ See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 272-273.

when the prisoner donned the striped uniform was akin to that of master over slave, although indeed “worse than slavery” because of the absence of paternalistic reciprocal obligations. The Texas prisoner who worked in the sugar cane fields in the 1880s and 1890s was an essential factor in the production of the refined sugar commodity. Without the labor of prisoners, sugar industrialists would have been unable to harvest, mill, and refine the sugar cane crop during the intense late autumn “rolling season.”¹⁷

The global sugar market at the turn of the century was such that locally grown Texas sugar was more expensive than the raw cane grown offshore. Following the Spanish-American War of 1898, and partially as a result of federal tariff policies, sugar produced by workers in Cuba, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico was available at a cheaper rate than could be obtained by working convicts on the plantations of Fort Bend and Brazoria counties, even after transportation and shipping costs were factored in. In 1917, T.G. Locke, the editor of Sugar Land’s newspaper, *Texas Farm and Industrial News*, noted that the “greater part of the raw sugar used by the Imperial Company is imported in ship loads from Cuba, though all of the cane growth in this section is purchased by the company and converted into manufactured products.”¹⁸

Furthermore, by the first years of the twentieth century, soil exhaustion had begun to turn the rich alluvial sandy loam soil of the Brazos river bottoms barren. When prisoners at Sugar Land’s Central State Farm sang the traditional Texas cane-harvesting song, “Ain’t No More Cane on the Brazos” into John A. Lomax’s Presto recording

¹⁷ The notion that prison labor was “worse than slavery” makes the most sense in light of the culture of paternalism described by Eugene Genovese in his classic works *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), and *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon, 1969). Genovese’s insights into the antebellum period, however, cannot be taken to speak for American slavery writ large. I am grateful to Dr. James McWilliams for helping me clarify this point.

¹⁸ *The Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), June 15, 1917, 1.

machine in 1933, they were reporting on a permanent condition, not simply the end of the harvest season. By the late nineteen twenties, the last sugar mill in Sugar Land had been dismantled, the surest sign of the failure of sugar cane culture in the region. Why then did prisoners continue to work the cane fields throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, as if nothing had changed since the days of slavery?¹⁹

With the advent of industrial capitalism, prison work underwent an alchemical transformation akin to the passing into obsolescence of other forms of skilled craft and agricultural labor. Whether as a result of mechanization, technological innovation, or the division of labor in detail resulting from scientific management, many traditional occupations became outmoded in the early decades of the twentieth century. Following the contours of this trajectory, field labor in the upper-coastal Brazos River valley ceased to be profitable and therefore, in theory, should have withered away in the same fashion as blacksmithing or coopering. The persistence of sugar cane work on Texas prison farms testifies to the power of the internal contradictions of the capitalist work ethic. Gradually, the State began to understand that if compulsory labor was no longer essential to the realization of sugar profits, it could still be a means to punish prisoners.²⁰

This transition generated an unforeseen ideological dilemma: if work was punishment, what would that imply for the sacred ethic of hard work at the center of the new capitalist mindset? Was capitalist work supposed to be a source of pride, or a badge of shame? Was wage labor a purely contractual exchange of time for money, or a new

¹⁹ Ernest Williams and group, "Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos," *Deep River of Song: Big Brazos, Texas Prison Recordings, 1933 and 1934* (Rounder CD 11661-1826-2). The greatest example of continuity in labor practices from the nineteenth century to the nineteen sixties can be found in the cane-cutting songs sung by prisoners. See Bruce Jackson, *Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Worksongs from Texas Prisons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

²⁰ See Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974, 1988).

form of slavery? Did wages correspond to the difficulty and degree of skill required to complete a task, or was the worker also compensated for sacrifice of comfort and dignity and wear and tear on the body?²¹ These contradictions were inherent in the discourses of populism and the labor movement as well as the ideology of *laissez-faire* capitalists. So long as working-class movements remained “producerist,” committed to the “manliness” of the laboring body and targeting the unproductive “parasite” class of financiers and bankers, they sutured themselves to the values of capitalist managers. By the same token, so long as managers attempted to differentiate free labor from slavery and serfdom, they committed themselves, at least in principle, to a measure of workplace democracy.²²

In the South, as in the rest of the United States, these contradictions were interwoven with the paradoxical thematics of race and essentialist clichés regarding orientation towards work and leisure. As David Roediger points out, the Northern artisan who spoke the language of “wage slavery” used the example of “real” slaves—African Americans in the southern states—to differentiate and distinguish themselves from pre-capitalist workers. As blackface minstrel shows disseminated the racist images of African Americans as shiftless, childlike, and perennially loafing, the white working class began to craft a self-image based on industriousness and sobriety. Roediger points out that it was not coincidental that as the white working class lost its customary privileges such as

²¹ The classic work on contradictions in the free labor ideology is Eric Foner *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, 1995). Foner's *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1998) contains some valuable discussion of the theme of “wage slavery” in the post-bellum era.

²² For a valuable discussion of the “producerist” ethic and the labor movement see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 13, 49-77. Daniel T. Rodgers's *The Work-Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) is a helpful overview of attitudes towards work in the industrializing northeast. For a good introduction to C. Wright Mills's critique of the “labor metaphysic,” see Andre Gorz, *Reclaiming Work*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), Ch. 3. Daniel Bell's essay “Work and Its Discontents,” in *The End of Ideology*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1960; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard, 1988) remains relevant.

“St. Monday” and the rights to arrive at work late, celebrate week-long weddings and religious holidays, and set aside certain afternoons for light cleaning work, it became increasingly obsessed with the allegedly slack work habits of African Americans.²³

After emancipation, a new set of contradictions emerged around the figure of the sugar worker. The prison system had to convince itself that it was teaching “love of work” to convicts, but also acknowledge that this “white” value did not translate into the desire for white workers. Everyone agreed that African Americans were the only workers suited to the backbreaking and intense labor of sugar cultivation and harvesting. The impact of these contradictions on the formation of Sugar Land and the Texas prison system are explored further in Chapters Four and Five.

While some reform-minded activists urged lawmakers to abandon convict leasing in favor of centralized prisons, it is not at all clear that this was indeed a more “progressive” option. Robert Reps Perkinson provides a suggestive quotation from an 1898 article in the Huntsville *Prison Bulletin*: “It is not the work that hurts... No, it is the constant, galling sense that every movement is restricted, that freedom is lost.” While labor in the camps was brutal and often lethal, the absence of prison walls meant that escape was much easier for “outside” workers than for those confined to the penitentiary. And while overseers in the camps could be notoriously cruel, the architecture of the camp barracks and the nature of gang work offered more protection for prisoners than was available to those confined to cells. The fluidity of the social structure in towns like Sugar Land meant that some male prisoners could form relationships with women in town,

²³ David R Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991). For a valuable critique of Roediger’s thesis, see James R. Barrett, “Whiteness Studies: Anything Here For Historians of the Working Class?” *International Labor and Working Class History*, Vol. 60, 2001, 33-42.

establish families, and stay connected to their communities— tasks that were difficult if not impossible in the homosocial milieu of the walled prison. Finally, the overlapping cultures of solidarity generated by collective labor meant that prisoners and local residents could find respite from their everyday oppression in parties, music-making, and dancing.²⁴

One potent example of resistance to the dehumanizing conditions of the prison farm is provided by the case of Charlie White, a “trusty” on the Terrell sugar cane farm in 1907. L.T. Jones, the sergeant in charge of the Terrell farm who was accused of using excessive force to discipline White, wrote to the Penitentiary Commissioners to defend his actions. Jones wrote that “a few days after I had taken charge here this convict, Charlie White came to me and asked me if I would allow him to walk around on Sunday afternoon and some times at night and I told him I positively would not allow him to run about over the country with free negroes and that he must conduct himself as a convict trusty should do.” From this report we can infer that prisoners who were long-time residents on upper-coastal Brazos River sugar cane farms were sometimes granted permission to socialize with African Americans in nearby towns during their off-hours.²⁵

Jones continued, recounting how he followed White after he ran off one morning: “I trailed him with dogs to a Negro woman’s house in the free labor quarters and she, the woman, said that he had been there that morning. I learned later that he, Charlie White, was keeping this woman, furthermore I suspected this trusty of packing off provisions from the camp and giving it to these women.” Apparently, this had not been an isolated

²⁴ Robert Reps Perkinson, “Birth of the Texas Prison Empire” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2001), 286. Rates of escape in Texas prison camps were notoriously high. See Donald Walker *Penology for Profit: A History of the Texas Prison System 1867-1912* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1988), Table 11, 125.

²⁵ L.T. Jones to Board of Penitentiary Commissioners, Thomas Mitchell Campbell Records, Mar 27-May 21, 1907, Texas State Archives and Library, Austin, Texas. Hereafter referred to as TSLA.

incident: “A week or ten days before Charlie White run away on the 26th he made a visit to the free Negro quarters with out my permission to do so and on his return I positively told him that he must not do this again.” ²⁶

Jones hypothesized that the reason White was caught out of the camp was that “on the morning of the 26th he went again and my supposition is that he overstayed himself and saw that it would be impossible to make it back to the camps at the proper time.” The Penitentiary Commissioners were assured that, despite his propensity for disappearing into the community of free African Americans, White was, in Jones’s opinion “a good negro.”²⁷

Sifting through the records of the Fort Bend County District Court, one encounters a preponderance of minor property crimes and a relatively small number of serious offences in the 1890s. Following the model of the Mississippi “Pig Law” of 1876, southern states drafted criminal codes that criminalized black survival strategies and effectively conscripted thousands of African Americans back into the collective involuntary labor from which they had recently been emancipated. The idea of punishing prisoners by means of solitary confinement would have seemed absurd; the whole apparatus of punishment by forced labor, and the ideology that made it seem both natural and just, was motivated by the desire for laboring bodies on the part of Texas elites. The most important maneuver in this process of ideological legitimization involved the conjugation of attitudes regarding race and labor with new economic and political realities. The synthesis was therefore both radical and protean. Charting the career of this

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

ideology provides an essential component of the history of Jim Crow and the emergence of a racially stratified working class in twentieth-century Texas.²⁸

For most of its history, Texas had only one traditional prison building: a dilapidated structure in Huntsville, known as "the Walls." Legislators attempted to combine the physical concentration of prisoners with disciplinary industrial management in the Rusk ironworks in 1875. Over the long term, the Rusk experiment proved to be a costly failure. Thus, the vast majority of productive and profit-reaping work was done on contract, with the state leasing teams of laborers to agricultural employers, and later on the series of farms purchased by the state that came to form Texas's "prison archipelago."

These farms were all sugar plantations in Fort Bend and neighboring Brazoria counties. The Central State Farm was actually located in Sugar Land, and many of the others were within short traveling distance, such as the Harlem State Farm and Imperial State Farm. Central State Farm's relationship to the orderly company town that it bordered remains mysterious. Seldom mentioned in press descriptions of Sugar Land, the Farm initially provided a substantial portion of the refining plant's raw sugar. The Imperial Sugar Company worked both free laborers and convicts side by side in its mills and refinery. Additionally, the Central State Farm and Sugar Land shared a doctor and other important services. The gruesome reality of life on the prison farm, which included frequent escapes, shootings, desperate acts of self-mutilation, and organized brutality and resistance could not but help to shape the psychological character of the company town.

²⁸ Fort Bend County District Court Minutes, Volume K, 1892-1896, Microfilm Roll No. 7. George Memorial Library, Richmond, Texas. For discussion of the "criminalization of black survival strategies," see Perkinson, "Birth of the Texas Prison Empire." The Mississippi "Pig Law" is discussed in David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 40-41.

A short article about the prison camps in the Fort Bend County newspaper, the *Texas Coaster*, illustrates the cognitive dissonance that prevailed in the minds of the Sugar Land residents in relation to the convicts laboring in their midst: “Over on the State Imperial farm the crops are looking up and Capt. A.K. Addison, the general manager, is wearing a broad smile that will not come off.” The article continued: “This is a model farm, and the good natured, genial, and accommodating Captain Addison as manager and sergeant, is the right man in the right place. The order in all the three camps he has charge of is most excellent. The abolishment of the ‘bat’ had no effect here, as it has not been used for a long time anyway... The Imperial camp now has about 500 prisoners. It is the largest of any one division of the great prison system, even including the Walls.” It is as if the *Coaster* wished to reassure the local Babbity that it could take boosterist pride even in its neighborhood prison farm.²⁹

As important as the physical proximity of the prison farm was the use by Imperial Sugar Company founders I.H. “Ike” Kempner and W.T. Eldridge of the farm as a source of laborers for the Imperial Sugar mill and refinery. As evinced by entries in company employee ledger books, Imperial managers made note of the race of each worker (“white,” “mexican” and “negro”), and indicated when a new worker was a former prisoner, inscribing their old prison identification number in a separate column.³⁰ Thus, an important component of the town's population, particularly those resident in “Mexico,” the segregated bottoms where black workers lived, was made up of prisoners who traversed the psychological distance from inmate to putatively free worker, carrying with

²⁹ *Texas Coaster* (Richmond), June 7, 1912.

³⁰ Company ledger book, Imperial Sugar Collection, Box 2, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas. Hereafter referred to as HMRC.

them prison folklore, traumatic stores of memory, and intimate relationships and friendships with prisoners still confined to the Farm.

The turn to the “progressive company town” form and an exclusively free labor force was clearly motivated by two developments: the changing nature of the national sugar industry, and the rise of a Progressive prison reform movement in Texas. Founded in 1906, Imperial Sugar employed convicts from the state of Texas. Their contract with the Board of Prison Commissioners stipulated that the State would furnish food and clothing, while Imperial would provide “housing and bathing facilities.” Much to their chagrin, the Texas legislature passed legislation in 1908 prohibiting “the use of convict labor on private property.”³¹ As a way around this legislation, Imperial Sugar and the Board of Prison Commissioners arranged a sale of Imperial’s farmlands to the State, which allowed prisoners to continue working on Imperial’s plantation. The reform legislation of 1908 was slow to be implemented, and the real phasing-out of convict leasing required the activity of several additional commissions and the agitation of Progressive reformers.

The years 1909 and 1910 witnessed a hue and cry about the dismal condition of Texas prisons, and intense criticism of the cronyism inherent in the State’s contracting policies. The administration of Governor Oscar B. Colquitt, a moderate progressive, prioritized prison reform, and sought a way out of the long-term partnership with Imperial Sugar. The State of Texas, having “bought” the massive farm properties from Kempner and Eldridge after the successful sugar cane seasons of 1908 and 1909, no longer needed to maintain the partnership. Imperial sued the State in 1912, and in the wry

³¹ *Houston Business Journal*, “Imperial Sugar Co. tale is one of sweet success,” September 1, 1986.

language of Imperial's last president, Denny Kempner, "the State declined to be sued." Eldridge maintained a bitter campaign against the State until the end of his life, waged in the pages of Texas newspapers, but never succeeded in gaining recompense for the alleged "taking."³²

Why did the otherwise savvy businessmen Kempner and Eldridge put themselves in a position wherein the State could default on their obligations? The details of the various arrangements made between Imperial Sugar and the Texas Board of Prison Commissioners between 1908 and 1912 can be difficult to untangle. Much of the confusion stems from a dispute between Imperial Sugar and the state regarding property rights to the farm lands of Fort Bend and Brazoria counties that Kempner and Eldridge had acquired from Col. Edward H. Cunningham. While Imperial had entered into its contracts with the State under the assumption that their relationship was one of landlord and tenant, the State believed that its contracts with Imperial essentially transferred the deed of ownership from Kempner and Eldridge to the Board of Prison Commissioners.

One valuable source of information regarding the original agreement between Imperial Sugar and the State is a lawsuit launched by the company against the Board of Penitentiary Commissioners in December of 1911. The *Houston Chronicle* described the case as a "suit for the recovery of more than five thousand acres of land." The Penitentiary Commissioners, Ben Cabell, Robert W. Brahan, and Louis W. Tittle were named as the defendants. According to the *Chronicle*, the legal action was "in reality a suit to recover lands sold the state amounting to 3435 acres." A careful reading of this

³² Donald R. Walker, *Penology for Profit*, 183-190; Denny Kempner, "Ain't no more Sugar in Sugar Land," interview by Wayne Bell, KUHF radio, Houston, Texas, February 27, 2003. Raw interview transcript audio CD in possession of the author; M. Armstrong, *Sugar Land, Texas, and the Imperial Sugar Company*, 115. I am grateful to Dr. James McWilliams for providing me with this CD.

article fills in many details regarding the history of the negotiations between the Imperial Sugar and the State.³³

Early in 1908, after lengthy negotiations, the state of Texas, acting on behalf of the penitentiary system, purchased 5435 acres of cane land in Fort Bend County for \$160,000. These lands were sold on credit, with no money down, with forty percent of the crops grown on the lands pledged for payment. According to the *Chronicle*, “the lands were very successfully handled during the year 1908 and 1909 and the cash realized from cane and cotton and other crops grown by convict labor paid the purchase price of the lands,” that is, \$160,000.³⁴

The source of the conflict between Imperial and the state was the clause in the contract that stipulated that in exchange for the transfer of lands, the state “agreed to plant a minimum cane crop of 2250 acres each year for ten years and deliver the cane to the Imperial Sugar Company at an agreed price, varying with and controlled by the sugar market.” This ten-year contract, expected by Imperial Sugar to gross at least \$500,000, was, in the company’s words, “the most important consideration in selling the lands to the state.” Imperial Sugar lawyers charged that “this cane contract has been disregarded and that the present penitentiary commissioners claim the right to ignore the contract.” They further claimed that the “cane acreage specified in the contract was not planted last year... nor were deliveries made according to contract” and that “the penitentiary

³³ “Suit Is Filed On State Lands. Imperial Sugar Co. Claims Penitentiary Commissioners Breached Contract. Cane Not Delivered. Part of Consideration in Land Sale Was Ten Years Contract on Cane Crops—Big Sum Is Involved,” *Houston Chronicle*, Dec. 21, 1911, Colquitt Records, Dec. 17-26, 1911, TSLA.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

commissioners have stated that they have no intention of carrying out the contract or trying to do so.”³⁵

The Board of Prison Commissioners’ severing of ties with Imperial was a mixed blessing. Without the cooperation of a refining concern, the upkeep of the prison laborers began to cost the State of Texas a great deal of money. Without a state income tax or other stable sources of revenue, the support of a large body of convicts was a crisis waiting to happen. Compounding this instability was the fact that competition from imported raw sugar and Western beet sugar manufacturers was beginning to make the maintenance of the sugar cane fields of Fort Bend County too expensive to justify.

The transition from domestic sugar cultivation to imported tropical raw cane sugar from Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii was quite advanced by the early nineteen teens. In 1911, the *Texas Coaster* heralded the arrival of massive amounts of raw sugar from Cuba: “A recent press dispatch from Galveston stating that 15,000 sacks of raw sugar will be imported into Galveston from Cuba to be refined at Sugar Land is an important announcement to the people of Texas.”³⁶

An article in the *Coaster* several months later also celebrated the arrival of Cuban sugar at Galveston, and elaborated on the benefits of imported sugar to the economy of Texas. The *Coaster* trumpeted the arrival in Galveston of the British steamship *Indianapolis*, bearing 20,000 bags of sugar from Havana, worth approximately \$300,000. Noting that the cargo was destined for Sugar Land to be refined, the *Coaster* boasted of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Texas Coaster* (Richmond), April 14, 1911.

the reciprocal trade opportunities that were created by importing raw cane, as if to comfort readers inclined to be suspicious of foreign rather than homegrown sugar.³⁷

As long as the plantations of Hawaii and the *colonos* of Cuba restricted their output to raw, rather than refined sugar (and thus did not compete with the American firms in the direct-to-consumer market), the economic circuit between imperial protectorates, American urban hubs, and foreign markets functioned fairly well. This arrangement was, in the long term, highly unstable because of labor struggles in the island nations, and the lack of a disincentive for tropical entrepreneurs to enter the refined sugar market in the 1930s, which they did with a vengeance. But in the first decades of the twentieth century, the *hacendados* of the tropics wielded sufficient exploitative advantage to render the harvesting of cane sugar in the upper-coastal Brazos River valley region uncompetitive.

Imperial's shift to imported raw cane was eased by the combination of Kempner's port connections at Galveston, and Eldridge's control of short-haul railroads. Nevertheless, the tight profit margins in the industry meant that sugar refineries on deep-water ports, such as Baltimore's Domino plant or the Yonkers National plant, began to gain competitive advantage. Ships from the tropics unloaded the raw cane directly onto the loading docks of these facilities, and thus eliminated both railroad shipping fees and labor costs in the unloading of cane at inland refineries. The gradual supersession of Galveston by Houston as the Gulf Coast's most active port in the first several decades of the twentieth century compounded Imperial Sugar's difficulties in trying to remain

³⁷ "Cuban Sugar." *Texas Coaster* (Richmond), Sept. 22, 1911.

competitive in a changing industrial environment. The circumstances that might have initially seemed auspicious for Sugar Land's success-- the availability of convict labor, the control over the Galveston waterfront, the physical plant inherited from the Cunningham company-- were quickly neutralized by external factors. As these pressures cut into profits, attempts to control the work force within the company town intensified.

After 1913, the production of raw sugar in the upper coastal Brazos River valley began to decline precipitously. By 1912, boosters of the Lower Rio Grande Valley sugar industry could boast that "the planter in the Lower Rio Grande Valley... has an advantage over his brother planter in the matter of labor."³⁸ This claim might have been shocking only a few years earlier, when sugar and convict labor were inextricably linked in the popular imagination, but by 1913, a different workforce was being celebrated by agricultural capital: "ample Mexican labor is easily obtainable during harvest season for this work at 75 cents a day."³⁹

Having assumed complete control of the farm laborers of the Texas prison farms, the Texas legislature faced the unenviable circumstance of having to support a massive army of workers, without a cash crop, and with no capital. Ben Cabell, the director of the Board of Prison Commissioners in 1911, wrote to the other board members that "heavy losses" in the State's cane crop occasioned by a bad freeze had complicated the long-term economic planning of the Board. Compounding this crisis was the loss of revenue from the convict lease, which amounted, in Cabell's estimation, to "several thousand dollars."

³⁸ *San Antonio Express*, "America's Greatest Sugar Country: The Big Modern Mill and Field at San Benito," September 6, 1912, "Sugar Industry" vertical file, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas. Hereafter referred to as CAH.

³⁹ *San Antonio Express*, "America's Greatest Sugar Country."

The losses were great enough to sink the Board deep into debt, and to bring about a crisis grave enough to force the Prison Commissioners to seek financial help from the Legislature “to properly operate the Prison System for the coming year.” Since the Legislature was accustomed to seeing the penal system as a chief revenue provider, rather than a revenue seeker, this no doubt was an eventuality feared by every Board member.⁴⁰

Without a clear plan regarding the reaping of profits from prison laborers, Ben Cabell and Governor Oscar B. Colquitt opted for the only plan that made sense: releasing the convicts. The legislature revamped the parole system to accommodate the release of thousands of prisoners. Instead of laboring on centralized farms, these paroled inmates would be sent to Texas employers, who pledged to the Parole Board that they would provide work for the ex-convicts. If any event in Texas penal history can be pointed to as one that mocked the platitudes of scientific penology, it was this economically motivated large-scale release policy.

The years after the expiration of the lease saw the release of thousands of convicts by pardon and parole. This was a convenient solution to implement, since it required very little bureaucratic finagling—it could be effected more or less by governor’s fiat. As Norman D. Brown notes, “Texas was one of the few states that placed almost total pardoning power in the governor’s hands.” In 1893, the Texas legislature had created the Board of Pardon Advisers, but the power to exercise “executive clemency” remained more or less at the discretion of the governor. While Governor Thomas M. Campbell issued a comparatively modest 783 pardons during the years in which Imperial Sugar held the convict lease, his successors wasted no time doubling and tripling this rate.

⁴⁰ Cabell to Board of Prison Commissioners, Dec. 4, 1911, Colquitt Records, Correspondence: Board of Prison Commissioners, TSLA.

Between 1911 and 1915, Governor Oscar B. Colquitt issued 1,575 pardons, while Governor James E. Ferguson released 2,253 prisoners between 1915 and 1917, and W.P. Hobby, pardoned 1,518 prisoners and paroled about 200 more in the three and one-half years between 1917 and 1920. There is no rational explanation for this exponential increase in pardons and parole other than changes in the profit structure of prison-based sugar production.⁴¹

An illustration of the cozy relation between parolees, upper-coastal Brazos River valley employers, and the State is provided by the first round of mass parole in 1911. Prisoners were eligible for release if they had been “endorsed for parole by their Managers and Sergeants,” had received favorable reports from the Sheriffs of the counties in which they were convicted, and most importantly, had “good offers of employment” from “responsible parties duly vouched for by the County judge of their respective counties.” W.A. Wallace and Frank Smith met all of the above conditions, but since they had yet to be offered “suitable employment,” they remained on the prison farm. Two other prisoners, John Allen and Arch Bowens, were luckier: they had been offered jobs by Fort Bend County sugar company and convict lessees A.J. Adams & Brothers at \$15.00 per month with board and lodging. Also fortunate was George Johnson, who was offered work in J. Tom Pickard’s oil mill in Weatherford, Texas, at a wage of \$1.50 per day. Employers were primarily interested in prisoners as farm workers, but a handful of industrial concerns, railroads, and even employers seeking house servants applied for and were granted parolee workers in December of 1911.⁴²

⁴¹ Norman D. Brown, *Hood, Bonnet and Little Brown Jug: Texas Politics, 1921-1928* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1984), 26.

⁴² Colquitt Records, Correspondence: Board of Prison Commissioners, Dec. 6-10, 1911, TSLA.

As a *Houston Chronicle* article stated on October 24, 1926, Eldridge and Kempner had "labored for twenty years to build success where threatening clouds had adumbrated failure." These "threatening clouds" consisted of "transportation problems," "unfair, crushing competition by a great sugar monopoly," and "occasional tilts with political elements." The item at the top of the list of plagues to be staved off seems to have been conspicuously placed by the article's author: "labor troubles." While no evidence survives of labor agitation in the first two decades of Sugar Land's history, it is probable that company authorities dealt with labor representatives in the same manner described by Ruth Allen in regard to the speedy ostracism of Brotherhood of Timber Workers and IWW organizers from the lumber towns of East Texas.⁴³

The work of creating a controlled company town as a means to ensure labor discipline and productivity was immediately transformed into a homespun mythology of Sugar Land's redemption-- from "hell-hole on the Brazos" to idyllic haven for the families of sturdy, uncomplaining workers. This founding myth became the cornerstone of Imperial Sugar's corporate ideology. In language that unintentionally exposed the authoritarian underside of the company town, the *Houston Chronicle* reporter marveled at the way "this suburban community is entirely devoted to the service and interest of the Imperial Sugar Company and the Sugar Land Industries."⁴⁴

The *Chronicle* reporter described the success of Kempner and Eldridge in transforming the town from antediluvian bog to thriving community, noting that the "Sugar Land of today stands in radical contrast to the Sugar Land of 20 years ago, when

⁴³ *Houston Chronicle*, "Many Changes Wrought In Sugar Land During Last Quarter Century," Oct. 24, 1926; Ruth Allen, *East Texas Lumber Workers*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), 188.

⁴⁴ *Houston Chronicle*, "Many Changes."

the present management took charge.” Pointing to the reputation of modern Sugar Land for peace and order, the *Chronicle* reporter took pains to remind the reader of the town’s turn-of-the-century origins as a miasma of barefoot laboring convicts “dying like flies in the periodic epidemic of fevers” and suspicious free laborers “suspected of hiding out from some sin of commission or omission.” Sugar Land was not only a shanty town filled with shady characters, but was menaced also by “alligators and poisonous creepers.” Such a place was clearly “not a place for women” and the “right kind of men” would not stay. The piece finishes with a salutary evaluation of the progress of Sugar Land: “Today, 20 years later, the extent of the success of this undertaking can best be judged by a visit to Sugar Land, by a brief but intimate contact with the hundreds of contented people who have supplanted the unhappy, scourged convict.”⁴⁵

A good deal of mystery continues to enshroud the story of the origins of Imperial Sugar and the city of Sugar Land. While it is tempting to imagine a grand scheme of sinister design dreamed up by Kempner and Eldridge, it does not advance our understanding of Imperial Sugar’s history to presume a conspiratorial cast to the actions of these Texas capitalists. On the contrary, all available evidence points to the improvisatory nature of Kempner and Eldridge’s plans, particularly as their business decisions were made in an atmosphere of economic turbulence and rapidly changing social mores.

What can be concluded with reasonable certainty is that the original motivation for acquiring the Sugar Land properties hinged on the availability of convict labor. The progressive reform movements that sought to outlaw the convict lease presented a

⁴⁵ Ibid.

challenge to Imperial Sugar's profit-seeking intentions, and the company therefore entered into a pact with the state to rationalize and centralize the sugar cultivation activities of Texas prisoners. The State's machinations in 1912 and 1913 left Kempner and Eldridge with substantially reduced property holdings and with little to show from their convict leasing experiment.

Sugar Land, like most localities in sugar growing regions, had been a company town for decades, and probably would have continued to be a rough shantytown for as long as convict laborers were available for the harvest season. What was unique to Sugar Land was its character as a "progressive company town." This designation was embraced by the town's elites in the years after the expiration of the convict lease. In the words of newspaper editor and town booster T.G. Locke, "Sugar Land's claim to a high niche among the progressive and up-to-date towns of the country is indisputable."⁴⁶

Far from representing a philanthropic donation to the people of Fort Bend County, Ike Kempner's "progressive" renovation of Sugar Land after 1912 was a pragmatic business decision. With the failure of the convict lease, the "progressive company town" emerged then as the "next-best" option: a means to secure dependable labor and create an orderly environment for the community of loyal workers. After the fact, the story of Sugar Land's origins was revised and reframed to present the creation of the "progressive company town" as a testament to the foresight and altruism of Kempner and Eldridge.

In the final analysis, Kempner and Eldridge's complacency in regard to the brutality of the Texas prison system, like their adherence to prevailing Jim Crow

⁴⁶ *The Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), June 15, 1917, 1.

practices in the construction of their company town, can only be evaluated as an ethical failure. The history of Imperial Sugar and Sugar Land provides many examples of the everyday evil that can take root under the innocuous cover of “progressive” business practice in an economic system that, whatever its alleged merits, lacks any overriding ethic apart from the virtue of accumulation and the sanctity of free competition.

CHAPTER 2

THE FORT BEND COUNTY CONTEXT: ANTEBELLUM ORIGINS TO THE POST-RECONSTRUCTION ERA

Despite some uniquely “Texan” features, the upper-coastal Brazos River valley region, including Fort Bend County and neighboring Matagorda, Wharton, Waller, Austin, Grimes, Washington, and Brazoria Counties, is unquestionably “Southern” in character. Following the criteria for determining the “southern-ness” of different Texas counties established by Randolph B. Campbell in his *Grass-Roots Reconstruction in Texas*, two aspects of social life in this region stand out as especially significant: the degree to which cotton dominated the agriculture of the region, and the size of the unfree African American population.⁴⁷ In the upper-coastal Brazos River valley region, the dominant sugar and cotton culture mirrored trends common in the Lower South throughout the nineteenth century. Most importantly, the plantations of the area depended on the labor of large numbers of enslaved African Americans. Furthermore, the Old South character of the region was exaggerated because of its popularity as a haven for slaveholding southerners fleeing real and imagined threats to the continued protection of property in slaves in the years leading up to the Civil War.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Randolph B. Campbell, *Grass-Roots Reconstruction In Texas, 1865-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 27.

⁴⁸ According to Leslie Anne Lovett, Fort Bend and neighboring Brazoria counties had the highest percentage of slaves, and the most slaveowners who owned more than five slaves in Texas. Leslie Anne

Not coincidentally, this region was a center of political ferment throughout the ante-bellum period. It served as an incubator of popular passions and as the base of the leadership of the Texas Revolution. Perhaps most notably, Sam Houston established his headquarters at Washington County's Washington-On-The-Brazos. Randolph B. Campbell writes that "in the early fall of 1835, the fears of Anglo-Texans focused on the Brazos River area where slaves were most numerous."⁴⁹ A rumor spread among Revolutionary leaders that Mexican troops planned to attack via the Brazos River and foment a slave uprising. Campbell describes a large-scale slave uprising in October of 1835, drawing its inspiration from news circulating among Brazos River-area slaves of an imminent Mexican attack. The contemporary report by B.J. White cited by Campbell illustrates the class tensions in the region: "A postscript by White added that the plotters had planned to divide the cotton farms, make the whites work for them and ship cotton to New Orleans."⁵⁰

Following the Texas Revolution, Fort Bend County became a stronghold of Confederate militancy, an incubator of Jim Crow techniques of political disfranchisement, and the epicenter of the state's prison farm system. Because the town of Sugar Land remained a tiny hamlet for most of the nineteenth century (and primary documents directly related to Sugar Land prior to the turn of the century are scarce), this study will consider trends in Fort Bend County as suggestive of the climate of the region in general.

Lovett, "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War: Reconstruction and Redemption in Fort Bend County, Texas" (MA thesis, Rice University, 1994), 13.

⁴⁹ Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 41.

⁵⁰ Campbell, *Empire*, 41.

The Fort Bend County site of Imperial Sugar is reportedly the longest ongoing industrial operation in Texas. The origins of the Texas sugar business lie in the antebellum small-scale operations of Fort Bend landowners William Stafford and S.M. Williams. Stafford, a native of Tennessee, founded the first sugar mill in 1834 near modern-day Sugar Land.⁵¹ During the war with Mexico, General Antonio López de Santa Anna's troops burned Stafford's mill to the ground, and thus Judge S.M. Williams, who had erected a sugar mill later in the 1830s in Sugar Land (later the site of Cunningham Sugar in the late nineteenth century and Imperial Sugar in the twentieth), became the founding father of the Texas sugar business.⁵²

The Williams property was purchased in several installments in 1852 and 1853 by William Jefferson Kyle and Benjamin Franklin Terry. It was Kyle and Terry who changed the name of the town that was then called Oakland to Sugar Land in 1853. Sugar Land began to take on the features of a classical antebellum plantation locale under the reign of Kyle and Terry, who aspired to the genteel lifestyle of the southern aristocracy. By some estimates, the cane crop had come to dominate the area by 1861, challenging the cotton monoculture, and flourishing in the contiguous counties of Fort Bend, Wharton, Brazoria and Matagorda. Relying overwhelmingly on slave labor, the plantation managers had by the start of the Civil War established thirty-five mills devoted solely to milling raw cane.⁵³

⁵¹ William R. Johnson, "A Short History of the Sugar Industry in Texas," *Texas Gulf Coast Historical Association Publications*, Volume V, Number 1, April, 1961, 12.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Imperial Sugar Co. tale is one of sweet success," *Houston Business Journal*, September 1, 1986, "Imperial Sugar Company" vertical file, CAH.

Leslie Anne Lovett notes that “by the eve of secession, Fort Bend had grown into one of the largest and most prosperous slaveholding communities in Texas.” The citizens of Fort Bend County voted unanimously for secession. But Lovett also points out that “the same conditions that made the county into a stronghold of secessionist sympathy also fostered a post-war climate ripe for Republican success.” The most significant of these conditions was the overwhelming demographic advantage of African Americans, who made up over eighty percent of the county’s population.⁵⁴

The Civil War drastically altered the social terrain of Sugar Land. The end of slavery brought about a swift decline in the profitability of sugar production, with only six mills still in operation in 1870.⁵⁵ Thousands of slaves, brought to Texas by southern slave-owners in flight from northern armies were introduced to a landscape already marked by extreme class inequality and caste hierarchy. The ratio of white to black inhabitants of Fort Bend County was extremely skewed towards an African American majority that became increasingly numerically dominant throughout the post-Reconstruction era.⁵⁶

Three interrelated phenomena, which coalesced in the late 1880s and early 1890s, reflect this demographic trend: 1) the development of a new post-slavery coercive labor regime by area capitalists in the sugar fields of Fort Bend County, 2) the purchase of contiguous and neighboring plantation properties by the State of Texas in order to solidify its prison farm system, and 3) the perfection of techniques of official

⁵⁴ Leslie Anne Lovett, “The Jaybird-Woodpecker War,” 2.

⁵⁵ “Imperial Sugar Co. tale is one of sweet success.”

⁵⁶ Yelderman, *The Jay Birds*, 41.

disfranchisement of African American and poor white voters by Fort Bend County's "white man's union," the so-called "Jaybirds" of the state's Democratic Party.

The painful transition to capitalist social relations in Fort Bend County occurred, as in the rest of the South, simultaneously with the emancipation of the area's slaves. For the twenty-plus years following the Civil War, a more or less egalitarian social order seemed a distinct possibility. Not yet incorporated within a capitalist market, and against the background of a series of national economic depressions and the rise of the Populist movement in the Southwest, the poor whites and African Americans of the upper-coastal Brazos River valley region adjusted relatively painlessly to interracial cooperation in civil society and public life. In Lovett's words, "unlike other Texas black-belt counties, Fort Bend enjoyed an unusual level of peace and cooperation during the post-bellum era."⁵⁷

It is therefore all the more tragic that Fort Bend County was the epicenter of the movement to create the All-White Primary in the 1880s. This institution, one of Texas's most notorious contributions to the catalog of Jim Crow legal shenanigans, would keep the Texas polls the domain of propertied whites until the 1944 US Supreme Court decision *Smith v. Allwright* declared it unconstitutional. The background to the implementation of the All-White Primary in Texas was the class conflict between the reigning "Woodpecker" faction of Fort Bend County, described by Charles Zelden as an alliance between the white working-class faction of the Democrats and the local African Americans, although more commonly explained as a catch-all term for Republicans, and the elite white landowners, who organized as the "Jaybirds."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Lovett, "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War," 3.

⁵⁸ Charles Zelden, *The Battle for the Black Ballot: Smith v. Allwright and the Defeat of the Texas All-White Primary* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 38. See also Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: the Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

The elites of Fort Bend County adjusted easily to the realities of Reconstruction. Leslie Anne Lovett notes that “between 1869 and 1889 no fewer than forty-men served Fort Bend at all levels of county government in such varied roles as sheriff, county commissioner, justice of the peace, and constable. At the height of Texas Reconstruction, Fort Bend’s black officials held more than 50 percent of the county’s offices.”⁵⁹ This history of cooperation gave rise to the racist myth-mongering of historians like Wharton and Yelderman, who lamented the tragedy of elite acquiescence to “the corrupt and inefficient county government... filled with corrupt white and illiterate, incompetent negro office-holders”⁶⁰

Fort Bend County was distinguished by its successful twenty year experiment in biracial politics. From 1869 to 1888, African Americans and whites cooperated in governing the County.⁶¹ Yelderman suggests that it was not the elders of the white planter aristocracy who began the push to eliminate local democracy, but their sons: “A group of angry young men of Richmond thought enough was enough. These young men were just reaching manhood... They were sons of the First Families—old plantation families. They had been schooled out of the country and were well informed and intelligent.”⁶² These men “had a great deal of leisure time,” according to Yelderman, and “spent much of it in Henry Frost’s ‘genteel’ saloon, the Brahma Bull and Red Hot Bar,” meeting in a room above the saloon to plot the elimination of the “unholy coalition” entrenched in the courthouse.”⁶³ Frost was a well-known white supremacist who had

⁵⁹ Lovett, “The Jaybird-Woodpecker War,” 3.

⁶⁰ Yelderman, *The Jay Birds*, 55.

⁶¹ Lovett, “The Jaybird-Woodpecker War,” 55.

⁶² Yelderman, *The Jay Birds*, 62.

⁶³ Ibid.

been arrested in 1867 for assaulting a freedman, an employee by the name of John Ballas.⁶⁴

These saloon meetings led to the formation of a political organization, “The Young Men’s Democratic Club of Fort Bend County” in 1888.⁶⁵ On July 7 of that year, the Young Men’s Democratic Club held a festive first meeting in Richmond, at which a constitution was read aloud and signed by at least 226 of the County’s elites.⁶⁶ Wharton notes that among the signers was Colonel Edward H. Cunningham, whom he calls “the founder of Sugar Land,” as well as Cunningham’s father-in-law, Major T. Haywood Brahan, who served as Financial Agent of the Texas Penitentiary Board in the 1880s and 1890s, and whose son Robert W. Brahan would later be involved with the Texas Board of Prison Commissioners and Sugar Land, Texas in a variety of capacities. Another founding member, Wharton Bates, an attorney from Brazoria County, would later serve as an inspector for the prison system.⁶⁷

Although committed to the attenuation of African American political power in Fort Bend County, the Jaybirds (as the Young Men’s Democratic Club came to be known, borrowing its name from a doggerel poem attributed to an “old half-crazy negro” by Wharton) were not initially drawn to the outright disfranchisement of the local black population. According to Wharton, the July 7 meeting in Richmond included discussion of “an active campaign to win the colored voter” and a plan to host a series of barbecues at which he would be fed roast beef and exposed to Jaybird speakers. The temptation to

⁶⁴ Lovett, “The Jaybird-Woodpecker War,” 68.

⁶⁵ Yelderman, *The Jay Birds*, 65. Lovett points out that an organization bearing the name Young Men’s Democratic Club of Richmond was organized by Henry Frost three years earlier, in 1885. Lovett, “The Jaybird-Woodpecker War,” 68.

⁶⁶ Yelderman, *The Jay Birds*, 64, and Wharton, *History*, 194.

⁶⁷ Wharton, *Wharton’s History*, 194; Walker, *Penology for Profit*, 153.

demagogue the black vote was so strong that Charles Zelden interprets the All-White Primary as a kind of “self-denying ordinance” on the part of the planter elite, established in order to deprive the right and left factions of the new political establishment equally the votes of African Americans and poor whites.⁶⁸

The events that followed the Richmond meeting are a complicated web of vendettas and counter-vendettas, narrowly averted lynchings, mass arrests, and street shoot-outs. The initial trigger was the murder of a local planter, J.M. Shamblin (described by Lovett as “an active leader of the Young Men’s Democratic Club”). The alleged perpetrator, William Caldwell, was an African American sharecropper who worked on Shamblin’s plantation. A great deal of mystery surrounds this case, and the historical record suggests that many Fort Bend County residents did not believe that Caldwell was culpable for Shamblin’s murder. On September 3, 1888, saloon-keeper Henry Frost was gunned down in front of the Brahma Bull, and three local African Americans were immediately arrested, with rumors circulating that this shooting was a gambit in the Republican-Democratic conflict.⁶⁹

The Frost shooting precipitated a wave of mob intimidation on the part of disgruntled area white Democrats. They targeted the African American settlements of Kendleton and Pittsville; fear of racist violence permeated the African American enclaves of Fort Bend. The net effect of this agitation was that African American political leaders of Fort Bend County were intimidated by the Jay Bird mob into leaving the area. By October of 1889, the “white citizenry once more controlled the government.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Wharton, *Wharton’s History*, 195-196; Zelden, *The Battle*, 38.

⁶⁹ Lovett, “The Jaybird-Woodpecker War,” 72.

⁷⁰ Pauline Yelderman “Jaybird-Woodpecker War” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, (<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/JJ/wf.1.html>), 2.

Wharton may not have been correct in calling Colonel Edward H. Cunningham the “founder of Sugar Land” when describing the signatories of the Jay Bird constitution, but nevertheless, it may be accurately said that the history of modern Sugar Land begins with Cunningham. A wealthy speculator who took advantage of the desultory state of the sugar industry in the Reconstruction era to amass a small empire, Cunningham invested widely in down-at-the-heels sugar plantations, spending over one million dollars acquiring contiguous properties that could be grouped together, and splurging on up-to-date fixed capital investments.⁷¹

With fellow Confederate veteran Col. Littleberry A. Ellis, Cunningham purchased the plantation properties of the Kyle and Terry heirs in 1875. The business model developed by Cunningham and Ellis involved two stages: first, they consolidated their properties in Fort Bend County, putting together a 5,300 acre plantation known by the nickname “Sartartia,” and second, they contracted with the state of Texas to assume sole control of its convict labor force.⁷²

At the time of the granting of the convict lease to Ellis and Cunningham, there had been a growing public reaction against the dismal reputation-- replete with tales of flagrant prisoner abuse and squandered resources-- of the convict lease system under the first lease proffered by the Texas state legislature on April 29, 1871, which had been awarded to the Ward-Dewey company of Galveston. An unmitigated disaster, the Ward-Dewey lease was characterized by massive rates of escape and death. The Ward-Dewey

⁷¹ "Imperial Sugar Co." *Houston Business Journal*.

⁷² Paul Michael Lucko, “Prison Farms, Walls, and Society: Punishment and Politics in Texas, 1848-1910” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas Austin, 1999), 217-218; R.M. Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 25.

lease was canceled in 1877, after an investigatory commission formed in 1875 issued a damning report condemning the miserable conditions endured by prison laborers.⁷³

Cunningham and Ellis signed a contract with the state of Texas in December 1877 to run the prison system for five years. Under their shrewd oversight, the system began to generate massive profits from the exploitation of prisoner labor. The rate per prisoner per month was set at \$3.01, and the controversial practice of subcontracting prison labor-- which essentially returned African American prisoners to a state of slavery, working individually or in small groups for capitalist farmers entirely unsupervised by State agencies-- was outlawed. This provision worked to the advantage of large landowners like Cunningham and Ellis, who were seeking to squeeze profits out of a cheap labor force on the plantation model. The losers in the regime were those who had profited by acting as middlemen between the state and smalltime operators, and, of course, the small time operators themselves, now no longer able to hire a few convict laborers to help out with a busy season.⁷⁴

The Ellis-Cunningham regime was indeed profitable. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue flowed into the state's coffers, and prisoners were sent to work on the massive buildup of railroad track infrastructure and other large-scale projects. Robert R. Perkinson estimates that by 1880, the lessees were working 1,044 convicts on their own lands, and Paul M. Lucko suggests that the company had placed over 350 convict laborers on their properties at Sugar Land. Ellis and Cunningham's venture capitalism

⁷³ Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 171; Walker, *Penology for Profit*, 31, 43; Perkinson, "Birth of a Texas Prison Empire," 69, 76.

⁷⁴ Walker, *Penology for Profit*, 49; Perkinson, "Birth of a Texas Prison Empire," 85.

paid off handsomely in the form of profits, which added up to about \$500,000. The state of Texas reaped an estimated \$358,000 in payments from the lessees. Mancini reports that Cunningham and Ellis were delivering monthly payments to the Legislature that were roughly equivalent to the annual payments made by Ward-Dewey. Although subleasing was technically supposed to be obsolete under the new management, Ellis and Cunningham apparently flouted these reforms. They hired out 1,113 convicts to other Texas employers, and in Lucko's words, "played a critical role as developers of an industry that required a large, permanent, coerced labor force."⁷⁵

Given the success, in financial terms, of the Ellis-Cunningham lease, it is not surprising that it was renewed in 1883, even as humanitarian reform movements in Texas began to take aim at the worst abuses of the system. In a twist of fate, the lease was lost following an imbroglio known as the "Austin poker scandal": the revelation of improper influence-peddling and hints of graft on the part of Ellis, Cunningham, and state lawmakers. As a result, the state of Texas took over the convict lease until the entry of I.H. Kemper and W.T. Eldridge into the business of prisoner custodianship in 1907.⁷⁶

The failure of the Cunningham-Ellis lease created a managerial dilemma for the Penitentiary Board. In 1884, Financial Agent Haywood Brahan posed the central problem to the other Board members: "What shall we do with out surplus labor to make them self-sustaining and if possible, yield some revenue to the State? We cannot hire them for wages on farms at prices that would support them."⁷⁷ Brahan indicated that some piecemeal arrangement had been made to lease teams of between seventy-five and one

⁷⁵ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 174; Lucko, "Prison Farms, Walls and Society," 218; Perkinson, "Birth of a Texas Prison Empire," 85-86, 91.

⁷⁶ Perkinson, "Birth of a Texas Prison Empire," 92, 96; Walker, *Penology for Profit*, 74.

⁷⁷ Texas, Penitentiary Board, *Biennial Report*, 1882-1884, "Report of Financial Agent," 51, TSLA.

hundred “second class negro convict men, and boys” to the Fort Bend county farmers William Hearne, Colonel John D. Rogers, and James A. Hill. It is clear, however, that the loss of the Cunningham-Ellis lease had created a vacuum for an organized convict labor regime that as yet was unfilled.

Texas legislators returned obsessively to the notion that convicts could be contained within prison walls as factory workers by leasing the labor-power of prisoners to entrepreneurs who would capitalize workshops within different areas of the prison at Huntsville, or by leasing the state-run ironworks at Rusk Penitentiary. The financial success of the Cunningham-Ellis lease created a false sense among Texas lawmakers of the profits that could potentially be reaped from the “inside” labor of prisoners. Assembling prisoners in factories, where they would be under the supervisory scrutiny of prison guards appealed to government officials. Given the immature state of capitalist social relations in the South, it is not surprising that legislators made consistently bad gambles in regard to reaping profits from convicts.

As the experience of the other former states of the Confederacy continued to demonstrate, prisoners were only effective sources of revenue under certain conditions: in coal mines, sugarcane fields, and turpentine camps; laying rail, dredging swamps, and working on road crews. This was work that was underpaid, subsidized by the state, and extremely dangerous. Much of the potential financial advantage deriving from the use of convict labor hinged on the disposability of workers. The title of one work about the

convict lease system in the South quotes a Georgia planter and lessee to capture the shared attitude of employers towards their laborers: “one dies, get another.”⁷⁸

Even if the state declared its commitment to the protection of the convict, the system of subleasing meant that convicts worked for bosses only tangentially accountable to any authority. Convict workers toiled far away from the gaze of state inspectors, under supervisors who were frequently sadistic and brutal. The clipped prose of the Penitentiary Board report isolates the root cause of the oppression experienced by Texas prisoners: “at outside camps it is very difficult to secure sergeants who have the tact to keep good order and get good work done without much punishment.” Of the abuse of convicts in labor camps, the report curtly states: “This cannot be altogether prevented where power has to be delegated to so many different kinds of men.”⁷⁹

The plans to employ convicts in industrial pursuits became increasingly complicated by the spread of Jim Crow in the late 1880s. Most significantly, attitudes towards the adaptability of different races to different varieties of work began to harden. By the 1890s, racist caricatures regarding the essential characteristics of African American workers appealed to many Texas whites as eternal, immutable truths. At the core of these caricatures was a set of deep contradictions—African American workers were both congenitally idle and naturally endowed with superhuman strength. African American convict laborers were said to lack a work ethic and yet commanded wages

⁷⁸ See Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), David Oshinsky, *“Worse Than Slavery”: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996), Matthew Mancini *One Dies, Get Another*, Edward Ayers *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), and Alexander Lichtenstein’s *Twice The Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Leasing in the New South* (London: Verso, 1996).

⁷⁹ Texas, Penitentiary Board, *Biennial Report, 1880-1882*, “Report of Penitentiary Board,” 12, TSLA.

(which were of course pocketed by the State) that matched or exceeded those earned by white workers.⁸⁰

Haywood Brahan's prospectus on the future of the Texas prison system reflected both a concern with the excesses of the lease system and imbrication in the network of racist values that shaped the elite Texan worldview. As Mancini notes, Texas "had the lowest proportion of blacks among its prison population of any Southern state." Nevertheless, the fields of Texas convict labor camps could easily be mistaken for those of Mississippi, because African American convicts were all sent to work in the fields, while white and Mexican prisoners worked on roads or in the Huntsville and Rusk facilities.⁸¹

Brahan wrote in 1884 that "a large part of our criminal population have been used to agricultural pursuits, and that the terms of the sentences of about one-third of the convicts received run from one to two years." This "class of convicts," in Brahan's estimation, could "never be made profitable in manufacturing enterprises" because they "do not learn enough about any particular trade to make their labor profitable before their sentences expire." Brahan's suggestion was to petition the Legislature for funds to "purchase a number of larger farms in different sections of the State, where the lands are rich and productive "and for the "necessary appropriations to also to stock them with necessary teams and farming implements." Working prisoners as convict laborers on state-owned farms would solve the Penitentiary Board's fiscal crisis and provide a stable foundation for the future of corrections in Texas. Brahan predicted that "a few years of

⁸⁰ For discussion of these stereotypes, see Gerald Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Ch. 2, and Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble In Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage, 1998), Ch. 3.

⁸¹ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 176.

good management would reimburse the State, and afterward pay a good profit on the investment.⁸²

Here we see the sowing of the first seeds of what would bloom into the upper-coastal Brazos River valley prison farm regime. The next year, the state purchased the 2,450-acre Harlem plantation in Fort Bend County, contiguous to Sugar Land. As the population of prisoners continued to swell through the rest of the decade, and through the 1890s, the enlargement of the Brazos prison plantation became foreordained. In 1899, the state purchased the 5,500-acre Clemens farm. The purchase of the Imperial and Ramsey farms in 1908, which brought Imperial Sugar into the mix, was thus simply the final stage of a process that began with the expiration of the Cunningham-Ellis lease. From a purely economic point of view, and leaving aside ethical considerations, Brahan had in fact been very astute in his advocacy of the expansion of the upper-coastal Brazos River valley prison plantation. These farms proved to be a stable source of revenue for the State; all of the Texas prison system's future financial problems would stem from mismanagement of its industrial facilities.⁸³

Despite his penchant for managerial innovation, Cunningham never recovered from the economic blow of the loss of the convict lease in 1883. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century he invested heavily in bringing the refinery on his plantation up to date, a project that ate up millions of dollars. Plagued by delays and accidents, Cunningham's decades-long improvement project emptied his once-bulging purse but provided the infrastructure necessary for Imperial to enter the refined sugar market and the final desperation in the first years of the twentieth century to sell his

⁸² Texas, Penitentiary Board, *Biennial Report*, "Report of Financial Agent," 1882-1884, 55. TSLA.

⁸³ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 179.

properties to I.H. Kempner and W.T. Eldridge. The machinery in which Cunningham invested was the product of very new technology. As a result, a great deal of trial and error was required to set up the sugar refinery.⁸⁴

An appraisal of the Cunningham plant, prepared in 1905 by Edward Lasater for the prospective buyers Kempner and Eldridge, sheds light on the circumstances of the physical plant that Imperial Sugar would inherit in 1907. Lasater noted that extensive repairs and additions to Cunningham's machinery were necessary in order to operate "more efficiently and at full capacity." Citing "improper water supply and numerous breakdowns which are constantly occurring in the machinery," Lasater emphasized that the refining methods employed at Sugar Land were far too costly. In particular, the labor costs associated with the need for frequent repairs were seen to be particularly onerous. The plant itself was poorly laid out, creating too much distance between superintendent and worker, and the sleeping quarters for the workmen were inadequate, and "in such condition as to make it difficult to keep good men." Lasater estimated that at least \$80,000 worth of repairs would be necessary to get the refinery into efficient working order.⁸⁵

Before considering the nature of the arrangements made between Imperial Sugar and the State, it is worthwhile to review the history of the entrepreneurs who presided over the convict lease and oversaw the growth of modern Sugar Land: W.T. Eldridge and I.H. "Ike" Kempner. W.T. Eldridge, the more controversial and colorful of the two, was

⁸⁴ Ibid., 31, 35-38; R.M. Armstrong, *Sugar Land, Texas and the Imperial Sugar Company* (Houston: D. Armstrong Co, 1987), 28-31.

⁸⁵ "Report on Sugar Factories Owned by Edward H. Cunningham & Co. (Ed C. Lasater, Receiver) Sugar Land, Texas Feb. 8. 1905" in Imperial Sugar Company Collection, Box 2, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

born in Washington County, Texas, on September 8, 1862. His early life, at least as he narrated it, followed a course that could properly be described as a New South “Horatio Alger *bildungsroman*,” drifting from county to county as a young man on the make, constantly improving his luck through thrift, charm and native intelligence.⁸⁶

Eldridge gained experience in the company town milieu in the late 1890s. He partnered with an eccentric landowner and convict lessee, Capt. William Dunovant, and established a town called “Bonus” near Eagle Lake, Texas. Imperial Sugar historian R.M. Armstrong’s description of the “Bonus” company town model, replete with payment in scrip, adumbrates some of the features that would be refined in Sugar Land. Bonus had nearly 2,000 acres in cultivation, with 200 employees who resided in company-built cabins. Additionally, Eldridge built a cotton gin, rice and corn mills, and a company-owned general store in Bonus.⁸⁷

The relationship between Eldridge and Dunovant was extremely volatile. Souring in the late 1890s, the partnership soon devolved into a blood feud. Dunovant and his cronies hatched plans to assassinate Eldridge, succeeding several times in hobbling him with gunshot wounds. Eldridge shot and killed Dunovant at close range in a dramatic shoot-out on a moving railroad train on August 11, 1902. This led to Eldridge’s first murder trial, as well as his acquittal. Several years later, Eldridge shot and killed W.T. Calhoun, an associate of Dunovant’s, who was allegedly bent on carrying out a vendetta against Eldridge. The Calhoun shooting was followed by Eldridge’s second trial and acquittal. In the meanwhile, Eldridge had become interested in the Sugar Land project,

⁸⁶ Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 45-48.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 50.

and began discussions with I.H. Kempner regarding the purchase of the Cunningham and Ellis properties.⁸⁸

Capt. Dunovant's surviving relatives waged a smear campaign against Eldridge in the years after Dunovant's murder. The most interesting document reflecting the depth of their animus is a pamphlet written by Dunovant's sister, Adelia, entitled *Who is W.T. Eldridge?* Seeking to convince the reader that Eldridge's designs on the convict labor force of the state Penitentiary were both sinister and cynical, Dunovant advocated "the absolute divorce of the management of the penal system from all corporations." She accused W.T. Eldridge of association "with numerous monopolies or corporations" and urges his disqualification from the bidding process so that "the State would be spared the absolute rule of the apocalyptic 'Beast,' Trustism."⁸⁹

Recounting the murder of her brother, Adelia Dunovant accused Eldridge of having plotted the crime as a means of aggrandizing his own fortune, and of having further proved himself obnoxious by bilking Dunovant's heirs (including, not surprisingly, herself) of their rightful inheritances. Dunovant suggested that Eldridge was floating a scheme to assume shared control, with the governor of the pardoning process, "the creation of a sort of co-governorship, by dividing with the Penitentiary Board (as Eldridge suggests) the Governor's statutory prerogative-- the pardoning power." Dunovant charged that Eldridge was a man "who under the guise of planning for the State's welfare, plots the establishment of a virtual empire within a Republic or State-- an empire of the lawless element, with himself as the grand Mogul!" Finally, she warned that Eldridge, bobbing on a "frothy wave of self-advertisement as the proposed Moses of

⁸⁸ Ibid., 58, 69-70.

⁸⁹ Adelia Dunovant, *Who is W T. Eldridge?*, 2.

the penal institutions of Texas" would "OVERTURN STATE CONSTITUTION; DIVISION OF THE GOVERNOR'S PREROGATIVE-- THE PARDONING POWER; A MAMMOTH TRUST; A HIDDEN HALTER FOR CIVILIZATION."⁹⁰

It is difficult to imagine a less likely set of business partners for a rough character like Eldridge than the Kempner brothers—Dan, Lee, and I.H. “Ike”- of Galveston, Texas. Firmly ensconced in the culture of Galveston’s “born on the island” elite families and one of only a handful of prominent Jewish clans in early twentieth-century Texas, the Kempners managed a wide portfolio of business interests, including a cotton firm and shipping facilities in the port of the Oleander city. While very different in character, “Ike” Kempner, the family’s man in charge of Fort Bend County interests, and Eldridge forged a functional business relationship. This relationship may in fact have thrived precisely because Kempner spent very little time in Fort Bend County, while Eldridge established himself permanently in Sugar Land. In his memoirs, Ike Kempner described his family’s skepticism regarding Eldridge: “My mother was extremely concerned about our association with Eldridge who she feared would not hesitate to shoot one of us, but we had no trouble or serious difference of opinion in our business affairs and attendant personal relations.”⁹¹

Harris Kempner, Ike’s father, arrived in America in 1854, fleeing conscription in the Russian army, which at the time amounted to a death sentence for a young Jewish male. Kempner accumulated a small fortune in his first years in the United States, initially by peddling dry goods, and then by operating a general store following his move to Cold Spring, Texas, a few years after his arrival. While running his store, he also

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁹¹ I.H. Kempner, *Recalled Recollections* (Dallas: The Egan Company, 1961), 43-44.

established connections with the region's farmers, selling goods door to door. He invested most of his money in real estate, and upon his death in 1894, had established a sizeable fortune upon which his sons "Ike," Dan, and Lee drew to fund their various enterprises.⁹²

The Kempner brothers, who began purchasing small properties in the Fort Bend area in the 1890s, came into possession of the Ellis plantation in the first years of the twentieth century. Ike Kempner wrote in his memoirs that the family company, sometime prior to 1908, "purchased the old Ellis Plantation in Fort Bend County, a historical landmark in that locality, and had also bought Palo Alto Plantation which in pre-civil war days was called the Darrington [...] Plantation in Brazoria County; both of which we undertook to work with convict labor." W.T. Eldridge approached the Kempners with a proposal "to become interested in the Ellis Plantation." Seeing in Eldridge a business partner who could properly manage the sugar cane cultivation and milling, the Kempners joined forces with him and consolidated their sugar holdings by adding the Cunningham Sugar Company lands to their list of properties.⁹³

It is instructive to examine the rhetoric and ideology at work in the promotional language used by W.T. Eldridge in 1906, when the Imperial Sugar project was being launched. The Fort Bend county newspaper, the *Texas Coaster*, gave Eldridge a podium from which to boost his new Sugar Land project and indulge in a bit of hortatory New South rhetoric: "The Southern people, as a whole, have been overlooking their opportunity. They have labored under the delusion that the large plantation was the only

⁹² Harold Hyman, *Oleander Odyssey: The Kempners of Galveston, Texas, 1854-1980s* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1987), 3-6.

⁹³ I.H. Kempner, *Recalled Recollections*, 42-43.

way to cultivate the soil." The details of the plan laid out by Eldridge, however, were misleading at best: "The new company, known as the Sugarland Improvement Company, intends to divide the entire Cunningham plantation into small farms and place on it an immense irrigation and drainage system, the company to hereafter purchase their cane from small farmers instead of growing their own products as heretofore." Eldridge stated: "Since our acquirement of sugar land properties we have been doing some experimenting and are now convinced that the most successful plan for us to pursue is to divide our lands into small farms and buy our cane from small individual growers."⁹⁴

Eldridge did not follow through on this plan; in fact, the next few years demonstrated his fealty to the large-plantation business model. Prison labor also proved crucial to the fulfillment of Eldridge's "Sugar Land scheme." After deals were finalized with the Prison Commissioners, the State agreed to furnish the "labor and services" of at least 250 "White, Mexican and Negro" convicts. Furthermore, the State agreed to appoint a Sergeant to oversee operations and a sufficient number of guards "to keep securely said convicts and to maintain amongst them proper industry and good discipline." Convict workers were to be clothed and fed "in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Penitentiaries" and to be furnished "with bedding, tobacco, with medicines and medical attention."⁹⁵

Eldridge and the Imperial Sugar Company promised to supply 7,000 acres of land "on the Sugarland farm in Fort Bend County." The land was to be "already cleared, fenced and in good state of cultivation" and proximate to the Prison buildings housing the

⁹⁴ "Eldridge's Big Sugarland Scheme: Irrigation and Drainage System to be Established," *Texas Coaster*, Richmond, Texas, n.d.

⁹⁵ "Imperial Sugar Company Contract," in Colquitt Records, Feb. 2, 1910, TSLA.

convicts. It fell upon Imperial to provide all of the wagons, plows, hoes, and other farming implements (“all of the best kind”) necessary for the cultivation, harvesting and marketing of the crops grown on the farm. The contract also stipulated that the Imperial Sugar Company purchase cultivators “and other such modern labor saving implements and machines” as the Superintendent of Penitentiaries considered “necessary to the proper and economical cultivation” of the Sugar Land farm. “Good comfortable quarters” were to be provided by Eldridge to the Sergeant and guards, who were also to be furnished horses and saddles by the Company. The housing of the convicts was also put in the hands of Imperial, who were to provide the domiciles, heating supplies, and gardening resources necessary for the survival of the convict workers.⁹⁶

The State expected that Imperial would repay all “running expenses” that had been advanced to the Sugar Land farm operation “for the purpose of maintaining work and guarding said convict force” by the Financial Agent the previous month. A sixteen-dollar-per-month ceiling was established per convict, which the company was obliged to pay to the State, but which the State agreed to repay the company out of the proceeds of final crop sales, at an interest rate of six percent per annum. Additionally, the company was required to pay one dollar per day per worker to the State in the event that a convict was employed in labor outside the bounds of the contract. If extra hands were needed and free labor was to be hired, the contract stipulated that the State and Imperial Sugar were to share expenses in proportion to their interests in the crops.⁹⁷

The aspects of the contract that detail treatment of the convict workers are especially interesting. The Imperial Sugar Company agreed to transport the convicts to

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

the nearest Penitentiary at the end of the contract. The Board of Prison Commissioners made sure to specify that the “Penitentiary officials shall have entire control of the discipline and treatment of the convicts, and it is their duty and especially the duty of the Sergeant and the guards in charge to require that each and every convict herein contracted, when physically able, shall do and perform good and sufficient work.” The Superintendent of Penitentiaries reserved the right to remove and replace any convict.⁹⁸

The contract presented the economic relationship between the State and Imperial Sugar as one of reciprocal exchange. The State agreed to sell to the Imperial Sugar Company “all of its shares of the cane raised on the said Sugar Land Plantation” and Imperial Sugar agreed to pay for the cane at the rate of \$3.25 per ton, loaded on cars (provided by the company) on the Sugar Land Railroad or the tram road connecting the prison farm and sugar mill. This clause essentially outlined the formal relationship between the prison laborers as producers of raw cane, and Imperial Sugar as millers of the cane. The cane was therefore demanded to be “cut not higher than the last red joint, to be reasonably free from trash, and in such condition in this respect as cane is usually received at the sugar mills in this State.” The contract was very specific in regard to the terms under which Imperial could reject raw cane—if it had been “materially damaged by frost or other causes to such an extent as to render it unmarketable.”⁹⁹

Following the souring of the contract between Imperial Sugar and the State of Texas, the company town model would emerge as a means of salvaging the failing Sugar Land enterprise. If the coerced labor of manual workers could not ensure profitability, Kempner and Eldridge gambled that the coerced labor of industrial workers might. The

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

company town model provided a means to insure control of the workers' activities, and also served as a financial hedge. An insurance company appraisal of the Imperial Sugar Company properties from the early nineteen-twenties illustrates the quasi-feudal character of Sugar Land as a component of Kempner and Eldridge's property holdings. The report states that with "its graded and affiliated high schools, bank, stores and factories and a population of two thousand five hundred," Sugar Land is a "valuable asset."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰"Contract No. 8947: The Sugarland Industries, Sugar Land, Texas," Appraisal by the Coats & Burchard Company, Chicago, September 30, 1922, Box 4, Imperial Sugar Company Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

CHAPTER 3

THE “PROGRESSIVE COMPANY TOWN” COMES TO SUGAR LAND

As Edward Ayers notes, the economic and disciplinary institutions of the New South should not be seen as discrete and unrelated phenomena. The convict lease system adopted by every southern state after the Civil War, for example, was part of a “continuum of forced labor in the New South, a continuum that ran from the monopolistic company store, to the coercions of share-cropping, to peonage, to the complete subjugation of convict labor.” Ayers further emphasizes that “the roots of such forced labor reached into slavery, not only for the work force itself but also for the habits of thoughts that encouraged employers to turn so readily to such heavy-handed means of securing labor.”¹⁰¹

We should not be surprised that company towns such as Sugar Land evolved out of the “forced labor continuum” of the upper coastal Brazos River Valley region. Before considering the nature of Sugar Land as a company town, we should explore the character of the company town form and its role in American history. David Corbin’s expert discussion of the company towns of West Virginia, which dominated the entire

¹⁰¹ Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 191.

Appalachian coal-mining region, can be seen as presenting a Weberian “ideal type” of the company town form.¹⁰²

Corbin writes that “upon moving into a company town, a miner had to live in a company house and sign a housing contract that the courts of West Virginia subsequently rule created a condition not of landlord and tenant, but of ‘master and servant.’” The coal companies were therefore able to intervene in the private lives of employees and arbitrarily search employee residences. They could also evict by fiat. While company town ideology would often present the charging of “non-economic” rents as a sort of gift or incentive to workers, this economic “sacrifice” was more than recouped in the powers that management thereby gained. The undemocratic structure of West Virginia coal towns was defended as a necessary element of a business reliant on hundreds of imported laborers.¹⁰³

Perhaps the most notorious aspect of the coal company town was the peculiar currency—metals and papers printed by the company-- with which employees were paid, called “coal scrip.” Corbin writes that “because only the company that printed the coal scrip honored it, or would redeem it, the coal miner had to purchase all his goods—his food, clothing, and tools—from the company store.” As a result, the prices at company stores were much higher than those charged by non-company local stores. For all intents and purposes, the coal workers lacked access to democratic representation, because the company towns were unincorporated. Joe Trotter, another historian of company towns, notes that “Through the control of jobs, the press, police, and even local postmasters, coal

¹⁰² David Allan Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

¹⁰³ Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion*, 9-10.

companies monitored the political behavior of workers. In county, state, and national elections, the companies' privately employed guards often served as pollsters, diligently working to regulate the political activities of miners." Trotter concludes that these "conditions gave a kind of feudal quality to political life in the coal-mining towns."¹⁰⁴

The coal workers who lived in company towns resisted the intrusion of management into every corner of life by retaining and reshaping pre-industrial traditions. This was a powerful arena of cultural solidarity for recently proletarianized workers. Activities such as gardening and raising livestock, and the maintenance of traditional celebrations around feast days, religious holidays, and life-cycle events such as weddings and wakes, provided a supplement to the low wages paid by the company and a crucial sphere of autonomy for workers. An ironic side-effect of the rigidity of the company town form was that the "divide-and-conquer" strategies used by other employers to stoke ethnic and racial tensions among workers were much harder to implement.¹⁰⁵

In the New South, company towns were common wherever the manufacture of textiles predominated. While not as common in Texas as they were in the textile hubs of the Southeast and bituminous coal regions of Appalachia, company towns sprouted up in the Lone Star State in a number of industries. The Coleman-Fulton Pasture Company established a company town in Taft, Texas, in 1903. In 1907, entrepreneur H. Dittlinger established the company town of Dittlinger, near New Braunfels in Comal County.

¹⁰⁴ Joe William Trotter, *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 15.

¹⁰⁵ Corbin *Life, Work and Rebellion*, 34-35; For an excellent discussion of the "divide-and-conquer" theme and the economics of racial discrimination, see Michael Reich, "Who Benefits from Racism? The Distribution Among Whites of Gains and Losses from Racial Inequality," *The Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 13, No. 4, (Autumn, 1978), 524-544, and Michael Reich, David M. Gordon, and Richard C. Edwards, "A Theory of Labor Market Segmentation," *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 63, No.2 (May 1973), 359-365; Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion*, 61.

Houston lumber magnate built the relatively populous company town Wiergate around a large sawmill near Beaumont in the nineteen-teens. Thurber, a coal mining town near Fort Worth, was established in the 1880s, and became a full-fledged company town in the decades after the 1890s under the management of the Texas and Pacific Coal Company.¹⁰⁶

The dominant theme of company town political organization was “paternalism”: workers were alleged to prefer being taken care of by their employers, and to willingly accept the trade-off in terms of restrictions on democratic means of self-expression. The contradictions of “paternalism” were as acute in the case of company towns as in the cases of slave plantations or the worker recreation programs at Henry Ford’s River Rouge automobile plant in Detroit. In fact, the company towns initially resembled plantations as “total institutions,” and later adopted the tactics of Progressive-era “welfare capitalism” in the late nineteen-teens and twenties. The benevolent self-image crafted by company town officials often exaggerated the scope and significance of these quasi-altruistic “welfare capitalist” gestures, such as sponsorship of company picnics, baseball teams, and support of institutions such as schools and churches.¹⁰⁷

Economist Gerald Jaynes offers a theorization of post-bellum Southern corporate paternalism at a somewhat higher level of abstraction. Jaynes draws parallels between the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham (also a touchstone of Michel Foucault’s analysis

¹⁰⁶ See Dolores Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender and Class in a New South Community*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985. For sources on Texas company towns, see Keith Guthrie, “Taft, Texas,”; Oscar Haas, “Dittlinger, Texas,”; Robert Wooster, “Wiergate, Texas”; James C. Maroney, “Thurber, Texas” in *The Handbook of Texas Online*.

¹⁰⁷ See James Weinstein *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (New York: Beacon, 1968), and Gregg Andrews *City of Dust: A Cement Company Town in the Land of Tom Sawyer* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996).

of the advent of the prison), the paternalistic town planning schemes of antebellum utopian industrialist Robert Owen, and the emergence of an industrial working class in early eighteenth-century England. Jaynes draws on E.P. Thompson's discussion of Owen in order to formulate a general formula of the tendencies of employers to tame the pre-industrial work habits of newly proletarianized workers through paternalistic social control.¹⁰⁸

The novelty of Jaynes's analysis is the way in which he connects the powers of surveillance and monitoring of workers by management (or Benthamite "panopticism") to the molding of the new industrial class by American industrialists such as George Pullman, who founded the model factory town of Pullman, Illinois, in the 1880s. In Jaynes's analysis, Pullman's mania for census-taking, and sponsorship of theatres, reading rooms, billiard parlors, and sports represented a particularly robust version of the "panopticon principle." Hoping for a concomitant decline in drinking, wasteful work habits, and retention of foreign customs, Pullman's scheme can be seen as paradigmatic for industrial company towns.

The Sugar Land created by the Kempners and Eldridge was one of Texas's most famous company towns. I.H. "Ike" Kempner was a well-known "progressive" in Galveston who pioneered the city-commissioner form of municipal government in the wake of the disastrous hurricane of 1900. Prior to settling in Sugar Land, W.T. Eldridge had gained experience running a company town for William Dunovant and the Fabor Planting Company in Bonus, near Eagle Lake, Texas. Eldridge remained absentee-president even as he assumed his responsibilities for Imperial Sugar. Of great relevance

¹⁰⁸ Gerald Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 79.

to the evolution of the Sugar Land business model is the fact that Fabor's Eagle Lake facilities employed a substantial number of convict laborers. Eldridge was, in effect, the manager of these convicts as well as the overseer of the company town.¹⁰⁹

Because Sugar Land had acquired a reputation as the "hell-hole on the Brazos" before Kempner and Eldridge entered the scene, it would be logical to assume that the introduction of company town policies by Kempner and Eldridge represented a novel phenomenon. This does not seem to have been the case. Despite attempts by Kempner biographers like Harold Hyman to depict the creation of company town infrastructure by Kempner as a charitable endeavor, much of the skeletal structure of Sugar Land was in place before their arrival. According to one account, Col. Edward H. Cunningham built a complete company town at Sugar Land. Another report states that "the town has been a company-run operation from its beginning." Cunningham pioneered the management innovation of coupling unfree convict labor and enforcing tightly controlled monopsony conditions on the resident-workers that would later characterize Sugar Land.¹¹⁰

When Eldridge and the Kempners assumed control of Sugar Land, they continued to refine Cunningham's business strategy. After they lost access to the state's prisoners, they increasingly concentrated on the development of Sugar Land. From the mid-teens until the 1950s, Sugar Land was "in short, pretty much a company-operated town." Reflecting the atypicality of company towns in Texas, a *Houston Chronicle* reporter described Imperial Sugar and its parent firm, Sugarland Industries, as having "one of the

¹⁰⁹ David G. McComb, *Galveston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 134-35; *The Prison Commission v. The Imperial Sugar Company*, No. 4126, Walker County District Court, Walker County, Texas, September 1912, 139. Trial transcript in Box 5, Imperial Sugar Company Collection, HMRC.

¹¹⁰ "Imperial Sugar Co.," *Houston Business Journal*; "Company-Operated Town of 2400 Looks to Industry for Livelihood" *Houston Chronicle* (n.d.), in "Sugar Land, Texas" vertical file, CAH, Austin, Texas.

most unusual business operations in the country, raising or producing a multiplicity of items from beef cattle to spinach.” The reporter noted that Sugarland Industries operated most of the retail stores in town and that together with Imperial Sugar it owned most of the homes. Additionally, lights, gas, and water were provided by a subsidiary of the Imperial Sugar Company called the Fort Bend Utilities Company.¹¹¹

Not surprisingly, the article trumpets the fact that “the companies have taken a paternal interest in the community” and emphasizes the “altruism” of Imperial Sugar and Sugarland Industries in helping to fund the school system. The reporter asserts that “the sugar companies have played a big role in the building up of a school system” and adds that they contributed to the establishment of three schools “for whites” and two “for Negroes.”¹¹²

Reflecting on changes that had taken place in Sugar Land over the past quarter-century, a 1926 article from the *Houston Chronicle* also helps flesh out our understanding of the inner workings of the company town. This article describes Sugar Land as a “suburban community” that is “entirely devoted to the service and interest of the Imperial Sugar Company and the Sugarland Industries.” Perhaps protesting too much, the article states that “the affairs of the community are conducted on a very democratic basis, since the management and the employed residents work harmoniously to serve the ends of both the industries and the employees.”¹¹³

The fact that pre-Imperial Sugar Company Sugar Land was so inhospitable to family life (at least by reputation) was one of the greatest challenges to those wishing to

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ “Many Changes Wrought In Sugar Land During Last Quarter Century,” *Houston Chronicle*, Oct. 24, 1926, in “Sugar Land, Texas” vertical file, CAH, Austin, Texas.

create an efficient and orderly climate of industry and sobriety among Imperial Sugar's workers. By the time that the various negotiations with Cunningham concluded in 1908, Kempner and Eldridge owned essentially all 18,500 acres of land within Sugar Land's city limits. Their first order of business was to close the bar and brothel that had been operating in "Mexico," the town's red-light district.

In Armstrong's account of the town's origins, Eldridge attempted to speed this process by luring talented "young men of solid background and training" to work for Imperial Sugar and Sugarland Industries. The new recruit who was ultimately to prove most important for the town's future was Gus Ulrich, a twenty-six year old from Schulenberg, Texas. By 1917, Ulrich was firmly established as Eldridge's deputy. Eldridge wrote a note to all area businesses to the effect that "Ulrich was his personal assistant and that anything ordered by Ulrich was to be accepted as having come from Eldridge himself."¹¹⁴

Ulrich reputedly acted as a labor-agent for other young emigrants from the Schulenberg-Flatonia area of Texas. In fact, "Little Schulenberg" became a common nickname for Sugar Land in its early years. Many of these new residents were predominantly of German and Czech background. In a statement that simultaneously draws on ethnic stereotypes regarding the German and Czech character and underlines the authoritarian aspirations of Eldridge and Kempner, Armstrong writes that these newcomers were "the solid, conservative, hard-working people (Eldridge) needed."¹¹⁵

As Sugar Land's population began to swell, the character of everyday life in the isolated hamlet became firmly established. Kempner and Eldridge favored a blend of

¹¹⁴ Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 75, 77.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

social control strategies and “welfare capitalist” worker participation schemes to encourage an atmosphere of sober industry. In an adumbration of the rigid upkeep policies of later suburban planned communities like Levittown, Sugar Land authorities demanded that residents attend to the appearance of their homes: “The orders were to keep all company property in tip-top condition. Anything like a broken front door or a faulty water heater was repaired quickly.” Company officials encouraged residents to participate in beautification schemes. Armstrong writes that “occupants of company homes were encouraged to plant trees, shrubbery and flowers to beautify the property,” and to compete for prizes “given to the most attractive decorative gardening and landscaping.”¹¹⁶

Many features of Sugar Land seem to have been designed to reinforce subservience to the company and its managers. The Imperial Sugar refinery was in the town center, and the houses built “within a block or two of the refinery,” with the farthest “little over a half mile away.” Not only social space but also social time was subject to the organizing influence of panopticism. In Sugar Land, a loud steam whistle at the power plant in the refinery was heard four times per day throughout the town to signal shift changes and the noon hour.¹¹⁷

All of the town’s retail shops, restaurants, and offices could be found in a two-block long row in front of the Imperial Sugar refining plant. These included the large general store, the Imperial Mercantile Company, as well as a lumber yard, meat market, bakery, restaurant, barber shop, small hotel, shoe repair shop, drug store, soda fountain,

¹¹⁶ Ibid. On the origins of American suburbia, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: the suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

beauty parlor, and rooming houses. Armstrong insists that the Imperial Mercantile Company store did not gouge employees on prices, maintaining the same price levels as Houston general stores. There is little reason to doubt that this is true: the “progressive company town” model was not based on the temporary profits of price-gouging but on the margins accruing to long-term labor control advantages. Or, as Armstrong puts it, “Kempner and Eldridge were far ahead of their times in realizing the benefit to be derived from caring for loyal employees.”¹¹⁸

Imperial Sugar and Sugarland Industries did, however, issue company scrip in the form of coupon books and aluminum coins redeemable only at the company store. Armstrong suggests that this currency was most often used as a means to advance wages to workers. Cash-strapped workers could also charge a wide variety of goods and services to their “monthly accounts”: rent, utilities, groceries, drugs, fuel, and gasoline. In the case of both the scrip and the purchases on credit, Imperial was more or less guaranteed repayment: “Everyone knew that if he wanted to keep his job he had to pay his bills.”¹¹⁹

At some point early in Imperial Sugar’s history, W.T. Eldridge moved the Ellis mansion from the Ellis Plantation that the State took over in 1908 to the Imperial Sugar refinery yard. E.P. Thompson has noted the importance of these sorts of gestures to the “theater” of class struggle. It was obviously convenient for Eldridge to live on the Imperial Sugar compound, but it was also a living testament to workers of his authority and omnipresence. Armstrong provides a description of Eldridge’s managerial *modus*

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 79-97.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

operandi that is, at least from the perspective of the workers on the shop floor, frightening.¹²⁰

Eldridge, in Armstrong's words, "loved to roam through the plant, the offices and business establishments, taking a detailed interest in everything that went on." Working for Eldridge must have been a harrowing experience. As Armstrong explains, "It was well known to the employees that Eldridge and Ulrich, who watched every detail, were intolerant of any form of waste." This meant that "bent or used nails, bolts, pipe, lumber or worn out machinery" were to be saved for some future use. One unfortunate executive was apparently "reprimanded personally by Eldridge for nervously bending paper clips." Eldridge's micro-management reportedly extended to the lavatory, with apocryphal stories in circulation regarding "signs in the restrooms placing a maximum on the number of sheets of toilet paper per use."¹²¹

Prior to 1914, the state of medical care in Sugar Land was primitive. In 1909, workers could only receive medical treatment by traveling to Houston or Richmond. In the dangerous work of sugar refining, this meant that virtually any serious industrial accident emergency could prove fatal. The first town doctor moved to town in 1914. Dr. Wells, who was the prison doctor on the now state-owned Ellis Plantation, agreed to see non-convict patients from Sugar Land. He was shortly succeeded by Dr. Deatherage, who established an office in Sugar Land on the second floor of the drug store building. In 1922, Eldridge and Kempner built a modern hospital, at a cost of \$15,000, and in 1923 established a health insurance program for Sugar Land workers. For \$1.50 per month,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 84; For discussion of the "theatrical" dimension of class struggle see E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: The Merlin Press, 1991).

¹²¹ Ibid.

Sugar Land residents could purchase insurance for “complete medical and surgical treatment, medication, eye glasses, artificial limbs, and one year of hospital confinement.”¹²²

The renovation of the town’s educational facilities became a top priority in the first years under Kempner and Eldridge’s control. When Kempner and Eldridge assumed control of Sugar Land, there was only one school to serve the area’s children, with provisions to support one teacher for African American students. After the loss of the convict lease in 1913, Kempner and Eldridge’s plan to modernize Sugar Land and transform it into an exemplary company town included an ambitious program to update its schools. Milton Wood, an engineer who had worked for the Cunningham Sugar Company, was brought in by the Imperial Sugar Company in 1916 to oversee construction of new school facilities. A storm the previous year had damaged the structure that had served as school and church for Sugar Land’s residents. Wood presided over the design and construction of an impressive, visually appealing facility, completed in 1918, that was capacious and modern enough to serve as both a community meeting hall and a movie theater. The pride taken by Sugar Land’s boosters in the school system ignored the harsh realities of educational segregation. The town’s African American students learned in two separate facilities, which were inadequate and poorly maintained, and its Hispanic children were similarly segregated until they became honorary “whites” in 1930, when they were allowed to study in the same classes as the white students.¹²³

¹²² Ibid., 91-92.

¹²³ Michael W. Emerson, “Changing Landscapes: The Legacy of Frontier, Plantation, Company Town, and Suburbanization on the Fort Bend County Independent School District” (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 1994), 49-51.

Despite the fact that Sugar Landers had a reputation as pious and god-fearing, the town did not have any resident clergy in its first decades. The religious needs of the community were therefore served primarily by traveling preachers. The pages of the *Texas Farm and Industrial News* in the years 1917 to 1919 trumpet many Baptist and Methodist revivals. The conservative and stolid character of the town was no doubt attractive to religious proselytizers. In Armstrong's words, "Once established in Sugar Land, few people ever left." Imperial found other employment for workers laid off as a result of technological changes, and recruited executives from within its ranks.¹²⁴

The social life of young people in Sugar Land was decidedly orderly. "Young people," writes Armstrong, "tended to socialize together within the town." Few went away to college: most expected that "upon graduation from high school, they would go to work for the Imperial Sugar Company or the Sugarland Industries and marry a fellow graduate of Sugar Land High School." Armstrong reckons that as a result of this "mechanical solidarity," morale in Sugar Land "was high, and the end product was a work force which appreciated the efforts of the owners to provide comfortable living and working conditions."¹²⁵ Had these workers felt differently (and, in light of the near-universal propensity of workers to resist paternalistic controls and resent aggressive labor discipline, they undoubtedly did), it was unlikely that the Panglossian fantasies of the town ideologues would have been much disturbed. Given the authoritarian attitudes of the town elites, Sugar Land's emergence as a utopian "progressive company town" was more or less a self-fulfilling prophesy.

¹²⁴ Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 98.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

In order to differentiate Sugar Land from the feudal company towns of other single-industry regions, town boosters like *Texas Farm and Industrial News* publisher T.G. Locke fostered a “progressive” ideology among the town’s residents. In his inaugural editorial of 1917, Locke wrote that “we believe that Sugar Land is the most progressive and up-to-date little town in the South.” Locke boasted that Sugar Land’s “manufactured products run into the millions of dollars annually, and that these manufactured goods are constantly increasing in volume.” The *Texas Farm and Industrial News* was a short-lived enterprise, but its issues provide a wealth of detail about Sugar Land in the first decades of the twentieth century. The newspaper also reveals a good deal about the perspective and ideology of Kempner and Eldridge, since it was published by “the Sugar Land Printing Company” and an enterprise that, “like other Sugar Land industries” was “under the direction of” and bearing the “support of the allied interests of the town.”¹²⁶

The Imperial Sugar Company was naturally the main focus of the boosters’ hype. Celebrating Imperial’s status as Texas’s only sugar refinery, Locke boasted that the refinery was running at a full capacity of 1600 barrels per day, and celebrated the imminent increase of capacity to 2000 barrels per day. This was likely to increase in time, as the demand for Imperial Crown Brand Sugars was “ever increasing.” Locke bragged of the 130,000,000 pounds refined annually, which was “shipped as far West as Denver, North as far as St. Paul and Minneapolis, and East to St. Louis and Chicago and their territory.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ *The Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), June 15, 1917, 1.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

Other industries operating in the town by 1917 were the Sealy Mattress Factory (the Sealy family were long-time friends of the Kempners and fellow “born-on-the-island” Galveston elites), and a host of Imperial Sugar Company/Sugarland Industries-owned concerns: the Sugar Land Bank, Sugar Land Manufacturing Co, Sugar Land Railway, Sugar Land Cotton Gin, in addition to the Imperial Dairy and Creamery, Machine and Blacksmith Shop, and Electric Light Plant. Sugar Land’s self-promoted image as a haven for the sober and hard-working permeates the prose of an article entitled “Advantages Offered by This Community”: “At Sugar Land and its environs there is employment for those who are conscientiously and sincerely seeking it, from the skilled artisan to the day laborer, and at wages in keeping with a man’s abilities and capacities.” Boasting “over 700 people on their pay roll... who are paid twice a month, and a number of them oftener,” Imperial Sugar had purportedly created a locality with “more modern conveniences for the comfort and pleasure of the people” than any comparable town.¹²⁸

Whatever the merits of Sugar Land’s booster rhetoric as an account of the everyday life of whites living in Sugar Land, the town was much less comfortable for its African American and Latino residents. Since the *Texas Farm and Industrial News* was only published for a few years in the late nineteen-teens, the Richmond-based *Texas Coaster* was Sugar Land’s newspaper of record for much of the Progressive era. The *Coaster* served all of Fort Bend County, and its racial politics were in line with the reputation of the County as a hotbed of anti-black racism.

¹²⁸ Ibid; “Advantages Offered By This Community,” *Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), June 15, 1917.

For example, an article in the *Coaster* on Friday, January 20, 1911, delighted in perpetuating the racial stereotype of the African American-as-criminal: “Ike Davis a darkey living at Sugar Land felt the need of more bed clothes during the recent cold spell so, it is alleged, he entered the home of B.S. Crabbe the state cane weigher and is said to have helped himself quite liberally to ‘kivers.’ At least they were found in his possession tho he claims to have bought them from another darkey.”¹²⁹

A seemingly innocuous article in the *Texas Farm and Industrial News* reporting on the impressions of tourists visiting from Chicago reveals a great deal about the racial status quo in Sugar Land. Mr. and Mrs. George F. Lazear, newlyweds who elected to honeymoon in Sugar Land in the summer of 1919, sent their recollections to the *Texas Farm and Industrial News*. Commenting on the social life of Sugar Land, the Lazears made note of the racial diversity of the town’s denizens: “Saturday afternoon downtown in Sugar Land could properly be termed the ‘Melting Pot,’ for there I saw Mexi-colored as we call them, but in your language ‘niggers’ and white people representing—perhaps—almost—every nation on earth.”¹³⁰

R.M. Armstrong concedes that “from the start, like other small Texas towns of the time, this was to be a segregated community.” He estimates that the population “stabilized at about fifty percent white, twenty-five percent black, and twenty-five percent Hispanic.” On the white-only, east side of Sugar Land, hundreds of new modern houses were built for the Imperial Sugar workers. African American and Latino workers were shunted to the west side of town, “in the bend of Oyster Creek where the old slave quarters had been located in pre-Civil War times.” Armstrong describes the domiciles in

¹²⁹ “Court News.” *Texas Coaster* (Richmond, Texas), Jan. 20, 1911.

¹³⁰ “Chicagoans Like Sugar Land,” *Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), September 4, 1919.

this ghetto as “liveable,” but without electricity, gas, or indoor plumbing, and furnished only with a single water faucet on the back porch. He attempts to find a “progressive” policy in the racially skewed rent differential: “Rents on the houses in the quarters were set at less than half the level applied to those on the east side, although wage rates for labor were the same for blacks and Hispanics as for white employees.”¹³¹

In 1919, two years after the famous race riot in nearby Houston, and on the heels of much-publicized race riots in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and dozens of other cities, a number of Sugar Land’s prominent African Americans, including E.A. Mitchell, G.H. Williams, Gus Patterson, J.C. Crowell, Joe Landix, J.M. Brand, and Andrew Pope, wrote an open letter to the town’s white citizens, published in the *Texas Farm and Industrial News*. They reported that the “Colored Citizens of Sugar Land” had assembled in a mass meeting and pledged to express their “sincere regret” over “race riots and mobs taking place” in many sections of the country. Furthermore, they promised to avoid listening to or endorsing “any speeches calculated to create feelings between the races,” to assist the local police in “ferreting out crime,” and to beg that the white citizens of Sugar Land not hold them responsible “in case some irresponsible negro commits crime.” From these pledges made to the white community, we can infer that these black community leaders feared that they would be targeted by white vigilantes. At a moment when the revived Ku Klux Klan was ascendant in the Lone Star State, the predominant mood in African American neighborhoods was no doubt that of apprehension if not outright terror.¹³²

¹³¹ Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 77-79.

¹³² “To The Citizens of Sugar Land and Fort Bend County,” *Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), August 1, 1919. For an excellent discussion of racial terror and black militancy in Texas in the period under consideration, see Steven A. Reich, “Soldiers for Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for Citizenship, 1917-1921” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 82, No. 4. (Mar., 1996), pp. 1478-1504.

CHAPTER 4

“HALF FED AND POORLY CLOTHED AND WORKED TO DEATH AND FOR WHO?” LABOR AND PROFITS IN THE TEXAS REFINED SUGAR BUSINESS

Prior to considering the nature of the labor system developed in the Texas sugar bowl, it is worthwhile to problematize the connection often made between agricultural variables and the organization of human work. Historians have emphasized that a primary reason for Sugar Land's more or less uninterrupted reign as Texas's sugar bowl over the past century and a half has been the agricultural advantage proffered by the rich alluvial soil of the Brazos River bottoms. It is undeniable that the adaptability of this land to sugar cane and the steady profits that could be reaped from cane are significant factors to be considered in any historical analysis. Historians have also considered the role played by declining profits in cotton in the 1840s in giving a boost to the cane sugar industry. William R. Johnson suggests that an infestation of cotton worms in the 1840s gave sugar cane cultivation "a tremendous boost" in the 1840s.¹³³

There are several problems with the emphasis placed on the adaptability of the soil to sugar cane in accounts of the rise of the Texas sugar bowl. The most significant of these is the skirting of the political and sociological dimensions of the antebellum sugar economy. As Gavin Wright notes in his study of the New South, "To an economist,

¹³³Johnson, "A Short History," 13.

whether soil is fertile or mediocre and whether resources are abundant or sparse will be determined not by intrinsic physical properties of the land, but by the level of demand, the state of knowledge, and the organization of property rights and markets.” Before entrepreneurs can take advantage of soil, they must secure the rights to the landed property (and if necessary work to establish a legal order that will protect this property by force), and in the case of a labor-intensive crop like sugar cane, to a large and cooperative work force (and if necessary, engage in a cooperative project with fellow dominant-class members to engage in a class struggle with subordinate classes in order to maintain favorable terms of exploitation).¹³⁴

Johnson notes that in the years between 1840 and 1861, Texas planters who experimented with sugar cultivation needed large amounts of capital and substantial slave workforces. He estimates that the average sugar planter would have needed to capitalize his operation at a minimum of fifty thousand dollars. Johnson emphasizes one detail in particular: “A large force of Negroes was considered imperative for the cultivation of cane on a commercial scale.” Gavin Wright underlines the same point, stating that sugar “virtually required large-scale investment and coerced labor for successful cultivation.” The implication for the class structure of the Texas sugar bowl was acute, with extreme stratification and a very high degree of inequality between affluent and poor whites, and with slave labor forces that were unusually large for the region.¹³⁵

A monograph on the history of Fort Bend County penned by the Texas amateur historian Clarence Wharton in 1939 supports the view that sugar’s dominance in the

¹³⁴ Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 6.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

region was predicated on a reliable supply of African American slave labor. According to Wharton, Brazos River cotton and sugar growers made a habit of illegally importing slaves from Cuba throughout the antebellum period. Wharton writes that “the anti-slave importation acts were flagrantly violated,” and describes one “Monroe Edwards of Chenango plantation, down in Brazoria,” a slave trader who “brought in shiploads of these poor creatures whom he bought from other slave traders in Cuba who had bought them from African Chiefs along the African coast.” Wharton also provides an anecdote, presumably meant to amuse the reader, about one Major Fort Smith, a hapless Brazos River area planter, who had gone to pick up fifty slaves arriving at a port on the Gulf and become lost, with fifty naked African slaves in tow, on the way back to his plantation.¹³⁶

The farmers of Fort Bend County were thus confronted with a major dilemma in the wake of emancipation and the Civil War. Sugar and cotton, crops that were developed in the heyday of slavery, and which were clearly contingent on the labor-power that could be extracted from slaves, were now of dubious value. Sugar, which required a seasonal labor force during harvest times, was especially difficult to adapt to the “free labor” model.

Ralph Shlomowitz captures the dilemma faced by the post-bellum sugar industry in his discussion of the aversion of freed blacks to cane field and mill labor. He writes that “contemporary perceptions of the freedmen’s attitudes to rice and sugarcane farming were that they were widely considered to be among the most irksome of all branches of field labor and, accordingly, to be more dependent on the compulsion of the slave labor system than any other type of agriculture.” Shlomowitz further notes that “the two-

¹³⁶ Wharton, *Wharton’s History*, 43-44.

month harvesting-cum-milling season was particularly onerous; the manual harvesting of sugarcane and the loading of the cut cane on punts or carts were among the most physically exhausting and punishing tasks in agriculture, and milling involved long hours of labor, including night work.”¹³⁷

The central question in localities like Sugar Land was thus that of how workers would be compelled to work for four months out of the year, starve for the remaining eight, and return again to renew the cycle. How would the mass of workers be discouraged from overturning the established social order and implementing a more democratic and equitable distribution of social power and capital?

The short answer is that those wishing to preserve the old order in fact could not maintain the relations of dominance and subordination that prevailed in the period before the Civil War. Not only were the African Americans of Fort Bend County part of the new Reconstruction political establishment, but the black population refused to submit to the labor discipline that had driven the area’s antebellum sugar and cotton industries. Rather than attempt to set up these industries on a free labor basis, sugar and cotton entrepreneurs worked to simultaneously roll back the advances of Reconstruction and secure a docile work force through an aggressive reshaping of the Texas legal code. Black prisoners sentenced to two-year terms for dubious crimes became the cornerstone of the Texas sugar and cotton industries in the years after 1877.

These years also witnessed massive transformations in both the production of and market for refined sugar in the United States. While we are accustomed to associate sugar

¹³⁷ Ralph Shlomowitz, “‘Bound or Free’? Black Labor in Cotton and Sugarcane Farming, 1865-1880,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 50, (Nov., 1984), 581.

with the granulated variety sold to the consumer in paper bags at grocery stores, the appearance of sugar in this format is in fact a fairly recent phenomenon. During the antebellum and immediate post-bellum decades, frontier Americans favored unrefined brown sugar and blackstrap molasses to the refined white sugar that has been common in American kitchens since the turn of the century. Numerous technological developments in the mass production of food during the industrial revolution contributed to the rise of refined white sugar. Foremost among these was the introduction of refined white flour to American diets at the end of the nineteenth century. This stimulated the demand for white bread, which supplanted the traditional black and brown breads of Europe. White refined sugar became an essential staple for cooking and especially baking.¹³⁸

The wave of technological and managerial advances that had made mass production of refined white flour a reality also deeply affected the refined sugar industry. The massive apparatus required to boil the raw sugar and filter out impurities became the centerpiece of the modern sugar factory, and the nature of shop-floor work in the refined sugar industry therefore became characteristically "Fordist." Because the refined sugar industry has an agricultural staple as its raw material, it is easy to forget that from the late nineteenth century onward, the species of labor essential to the profitable maintenance of refined sugar plants was fundamentally industrial, rather than agricultural, in nature.

It is helpful to keep this reality in mind when analyzing the history of Sugar Land in the context of the wider domestic sugar industry. While the raw cane fields can be located in proximity to the refining plant, as was the case in Sugar Land in the first few years of Imperial's existence, there was no intrinsic need for the two facilities to be

¹³⁸ J.H. Galloway, *The Sugar Cane Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 192.

geographically proximate. Once the sugar cane was milled, it could easily be transported in cargo ships. As a nonfood grade product, milled raw sugar did not demand the same costly packaging provisions of refined sugar. The raw sugar offloaded from Cuba or Hawaii could, plausibly, be roughly competitive price-wise with that harvested next door to the Imperial refining plant. Additionally, the nature of sugar horticulture is such that a local crop will only yield a season's worth of raw material for the refining plant. As it was economically unfeasible for a modern factory to stay idle for three-quarters of the year, most American sugar refineries imported raw sugar from tropical locales in an attempt to keep plants running year round.

The sugar industry was plagued with a central structural weakness: very low profit-margins, which could be reduced to nothing by the entrance of an aggressive competitor. Because the machinery needed to mill sugar cane was more or less equivalent throughout the industry, the value added to the final consumer price sugar was derived entirely from labor and transportation costs. Increasing competitiveness was thus equivalent to increasing productivity and minimizing transportation costs of raw cane to the factory and refined cane to market, which translated in real terms of power and control to squeezing more labor out of workers on the shop floor and jockeying for favorable railroad shipping rates. A third and occasionally significant competitive factor was the relationship between refiner and wholesale grocer. Since all sugar needed to pass through wholesale grocers in order to make its way to market, price wars were all mediated through these "middle men."¹³⁹

¹³⁹Eichner, *Emergence*, 81.

The intense competition in the sugar industry led to a situation of chronic overcapacity. To make sense of the logic that guided refined sugar executives like Kempner and Eldridge, one must recall the massive extent to which capital was "sunk" in the physical plant of the refinery. The cost of walking away from the sugar business was always higher than the revenues that could be generated if the refinery merely broke even, or even operated at a moderate financial loss.¹⁴⁰

When Kempner and Eldridge began Imperial Sugar in 1908, reliance on the local sugar crop meant that "the huge sugar refinery" stood "idle and unproductive for some 200 days per year."¹⁴¹ Drawing on the expertise of "sugar technologists, mechanics, managers and foremen" recruited from Louisiana sugar concerns, Kempner and Eldridge initiated a plan to increase productivity and modernize the production process. Remarkably, by 1910, they were running the refinery ten and a half months out of the year, which indicates the degree to which they had made the transition from locally grown to Cuban raw sugar. The raw sugar mills became increasingly superfluous. A 1914 fire reduced milling capacity by one half, but had little impact on raw sugar supply. By this time, the capacity of the refinery had leapt from 500,000 pounds per year to 750,000 pounds per year.¹⁴²

Armstrong insists that "once it was able to operate year round, the sugar refinery became quite profitable" but cautions that "profits varied considerably from year to year

¹⁴⁰ Imperial Sugar's final CEO, Denny Kempner provides valuable insight into the degree to which Imperial Sugar "operated on margins" for much of its history. Denny Kempner, "Ain't no more Sugar in Sugarland," interview by Wayne Bell, KUHF radio, Houston, Texas. Aired February 27, 2003. Raw interview transcript audio CD in possession of the author.

¹⁴¹ Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 113.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 114-116.

due to the constraints of the markets, competition, and sugar legislation."¹⁴³ Imperial's profitability in "good years," however, was entirely a result of protectionism and government assistance, whether as a result of wartime embargos and stimulation of demand or the intervention of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in the 1930s. The tariff and related sugar policy were indeed hardest on small cane sugar refiners, but the root causes of the pain that they inflicted lay in structural economic conditions that gave a competitive advantage to beet sugar and tropical sugar cane producers.

Complicating this situation for small producers like Imperial Sugar was the spectre of the "sugar trust," the oligopolistic consortium of sugar refiners formed in 1888 as the American Sugar Refining Company under the leadership of Henry O. Havemeyer. Armstrong writes that Eldridge waged a long battle against the trust, which "had come to control the pricing and marketing of refined sugar generally from the East Coast to West Coast." Eldridge "refused to be told by the trust how to price and where to market his refined sugar." In turn, the trust "responded by an open attack in which they reduced the price of refined sugar in the Southwest while maintaining a higher price elsewhere in the country."¹⁴⁴

As the sugar trust forged innovative new forms of corporate organization and perfected the art of price warfare to ensure market and dominance and elude Progressive anti-trust laws, the sugar industry itself continued to rely on the most primitive and grueling variety of work to produce its raw materials. Workers who toiled for the refined cane sugar industry can be grouped into two categories: those who planted and/or harvested the crop in the fields, and those who milled and refined the raw cane. At

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Galloway, *The Sugar Cane Industry*, 167; Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 115.

Imperial Sugar, the outside work was traditionally done by the prison workers of Sugar Land, although increasing amounts of raw cane from Cuba came to supplant the locally grown drops in the first decades of the twentieth century.

While the refining of cane sugar underwent a series of technological innovations over the course of the nineteenth century, the process by which cane was planted, harvested, and milled changed little. The demand for workers varied greatly depending on the season. Many fewer hands were needed during the winter and summer than were required during the harvest and milling season of late autumn. A “perennial” crop, sugar did not need to be planted every year; each planting yielded several harvests, called “stubble” or “rattoons” over subsequent years.¹⁴⁵

The work cycle began in January with plowing and planting, which lasted until March. Sugar was planted in deep furrows, dug six feet apart. Small segments of previously harvested cane were then dropped lengthwise into the furrows and covered them with dirt. The spring season called for maintenance labor such as weeding and hoeing, draining of ditches, and clearing canals. The summer is traditionally a slow season on sugar plantations. On antebellum Louisiana sugar cane farms, slaves planted other crops, such as corn and peas, and worked at gathering wood which was required to power the boilers during the harvest.¹⁴⁶

Work remained light until the late autumn, when the “rolling season” began. Planters varied the start time of this season, putting to use centuries of accumulated knowledge regarding sugar cane botany. Cane chopped too early would not be as high in

¹⁴⁵ John C. Rodrigue, “Raising Cane: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1993), 36.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-38.

saccharine content as that left on the field until the last possible moment; consequently it would be less valuable on the market. However, the longer that cane was left on the field, the higher the probability of damage by frost, a constant scourge of the sugar planter. In order to save the cane from frost, sugar planters would sometimes have field workers “windrow” the cane stalks, by chopping them, laying them in stacks, and covering them with leaves. Cane stalks so “windrowed” could survive a frost, but an unexpected thaw would ruin them.¹⁴⁷

Once the decision was made to begin the “rolling season,” a circuit was established between field and factory which had to remain intact if the planter wished to maximize profits. Cane left unmilled for more than a day was useless, and a mill without cane was a financial disaster. Field workers took to the fields in gangs, hacking the tall stalks of cane with long-blade machetes and gathering them in stacks in the “turn rows.” On slave plantations and later on prison farms, the pace was set by the fastest cane cutter, the worker in the “lead row.” This season lasted for two months, with work being done virtually twenty-four hours a day.¹⁴⁸

In November of 1911, an anonymous prisoner who had been transferred to the State Penitentiary at Huntsville from one of the Brazos River farms for “rolling season” wrote these chilling words to Governor Oscar B. Colquitt: “I am a human but not (...) respected as a human, and am in a very sickly condition.” He continued to describe “how brutally and cruelly these poor unforgotten prisoners get treaded on the state farms.” The prisoner complained that he and his fellow prisoners were “nothing but slaves for the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 40-42, 44.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 42. Excellent sources on sugar cane fieldwork “from below” are Alex Wilkinson, *Big Sugar: Seasons in the Cane Fields of Florida* (New York: Knopf, 1989), and Sidney W. Mintz, *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History* (New York: Norton, 1974).

state... we get nearly wept (whipped) to death, from 30 to 50 licks on the back if we cant work as much as the gards wants us to work. I rather take my life and be in my grave as to geth transferd back to the farmes, and I hop that you will do a little for those poor slaves on the state farmes and I hop that you will investigate this slavery bussines, and demand them gards to cut out the wiping. I am not able to put my name to this letter and signed it if the gards would find out that I had written this letter I surely woul geth kild.”¹⁴⁹

Another anonymous African American prisoner on the Clemens State Farm wrote to Gov. Colquitt a few days later, on November 18th, 1911. His letter also addressed the cruelty of the guards and the harsh conditions under which the prisoners labored during the “rolling season.” He began by telling the governor that he was a member of a group of fifty prisoners who had been transferred to the Clemens Farm to take care of the sugar crop. The prison workers had been “working over time,” without pay, in all kinds of weather without sufficient clothing, “nothing but rags.” The prisoner reported that “all of good clothes” had been taken away from the convicts, and that when their clothing got wet they were unable to change into dry apparel. This no doubt created a condition of permanent discomfort, and must have increased the rate of disease among the convict population.¹⁵⁰

The prisoner described the guards as “a mighty hard class” of “old time hard hearted mens” who “just look at a negro and don’t like him and will have him punished for nothing.” Expressing frustration with the lack of oversight of the prison farms by the

¹⁴⁹ Anonymous letter, in Colquitt Records, Nov. 23-25, 1911, TSLA.

¹⁵⁰ Anonymous letter, Clemens Camp No. 1, Brazoria, Texas, Nov. 18, 1911, Colquitt Records, Nov. 26-29, 1911, TSLA.

state government, the prisoner complained, “We wants some protections while here and we can not get a letter a way from here unless we slip it a way and never see the inspector here and cant get a chance to talk to the commissioners when they come.” For this reason, the letter concluded with a plea to the governor to “send some one here look over this” (making sure to remind the governor that the visit should be a surprise, so the farm officials did not have opportunity to cover their tracks) and a reminder that the prisoners were owed \$17.00 in overtime pay.¹⁵¹

An all-too-common way of avoiding the murderous conditions of the cane field during “rolling season” was self-mutilation. On Texas prison farms, convict laborers frequently cut their “heel-strings,” rendering themselves immobile. In an attempt to undermine the credibility of three Mexican prisoners who complained of abuse by guards, farm commissioner J. Herring wrote to Governor Campbell in 1907: “I cannot help but think that the complaint was written by a Mexican who went out a few days ago, and was instigated by the men who inflicted self-punishment, to keep from doing labor that is necessarily demanded of them.”¹⁵²

In response, Campbell warned Herring that the very fact that self-mutilation was commonplace constituted a serious humanitarian crisis. Campbell in effect acknowledged that the labor demanded of the prison farm workers was the catalyst of this extreme form of workplace resistance: “The fact that a man reaches such a stage of desperation where he will cut his heel strings to escape a burden more than one does such a thing under the same stress of circumstances, indicates a situation unusually rigid. That sort of thing is

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Herring to Campbell, Campbell Records, Aug. 19-Sep. 14, 1907, TSLA.

out of the ordinary, and I hope that you will see to it that the Sergeant will take a special interest in the welfare of the convicts under him at this place. They should be made to work, of course, but they must be treated humanely”¹⁵³

A letter from John Tardy, the head nurse at one of the sugar cane prison farms, provides an account of labor discipline and exploitation refined to a level of unfathomable brutality. Tardy recounts the treatment of J.H. Foster, a prisoner who died on the Whatley and Jones farm:

I will give you Mr. Foster's dying statement as he made it to me. He was whipped with a rope as he was hoeing his row; beat till he fell then stripped and put in an Ant bed and they stung him till he could not walk. Then they put a chain on his neck and dragged him to the camp. He lay there for ten days with rough food and cruel treatment. They then sent him to the Hospital. His back was perfectly blue where he had been beat and great splotches all over him where the ants had stung him. They have killed three other men on that farm this last spring that I know of and that is Mr. Herrings farm, the man our Christian Governor has appointed to manage about four thousand men. These men are making millions of dollars every year and not one dollar ever gets into the treasury of this State. Who gets the money? This is a question for the people to solve. These men are half fed and poorly clothed and worked to death and for who?¹⁵⁴

A letter to Governor Thomas Campbell from a former prisoner named G.E. Dery sheds additional light on the nature of work on contract sugar cane farms in the early years of the twentieth century. Dery wrote of “a hellish system to further enrich a set of men who desire to make money off of a lot convicts who can not help themselves” and cited “at least two instances during Gov. Lanham's administration, where two convicts who were leased were beaten so that they died from the effects thereof.” Taking issue with muckraker George Waverly Briggs, who had recently published fiery exposes of the Texas prison system in the *San Antonio Express*, Dery insisted that conditions for

¹⁵³ Campbell to Herring, September 5, 1907, Campbell Records, Aug. 19-Sep. 14, 1907, TSLA.

¹⁵⁴ John Tardy to Mrs. V.J. Douglas, Palestine, Texas, September 16, 1907, Campbell Records, Correspondence: Penitentiary, September 19-30, 1907, TSLA.

laborers on the farms of convict lessees were much worse than on State-run farms.

Whereas Briggs supposed that sergeants on State farms must “work the very life” out of convicts in order to secure their positions with the State bureaucracy, and that overseers on contract farms “would not allow convicts to be overworked,” Dery protested that “to retain his position, a sergeant must please the owner of the plantation, and, to do this, must he not work the convicts to the very limit, regardless of all else?”¹⁵⁵

Begging Governor Campbell to use his influence to “secure the abolishment of the lease system and the working of every convict on State work, *only*,” Dery implored: “How would you feel to be placed in a position where you could not help yourself and where you were absolutely sure that no thought whatever was taken in regard to your reformation, as the State claims to do when a man is sent to the pen, but that the only thing considered was the amount of money that could be made out of your labor, regardless of the physical or moral results of the operation?”¹⁵⁶

Robert Brahan, son-in-law of Colonel Edward H. Cunningham, and by 1912 a member of the Board of Prison Commissioners, offered some interesting details regarding the mobilization of workers for the punishing “rolling season.” Different farms were worked by different classes of workers, each of which was designated by a racist marker: “first class nigger force,” “second class nigger force,” “Mexicans,” “whites,” etc.¹⁵⁷ Brahan noted that workers on the Eldridge Farm constituted “a first class nigger force.” In contrast, the force on the Imperial State Farm “was a dumping ground.” Brahan said that he and his colleagues used the Imperial State Farm “to concentrate men” and

¹⁵⁵ Dery to Campbell, Jan. 4, 1909, Campbell Records, Correspondence: Penitentiary, Jan 4- March 28, 1907, TSLA.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ For a discussion of the classification system on prison farms, see Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 39.

that the prison and county courts “would send them white men, Mexicans and niggers all there” so that they could “draw from there and send them to other places.” These “other places” were smaller sugar cane plantations in Fort Bend and Brazoria counties, all convict lessees: the Bassett Blakely, Dew Brothers and Harlem Farms. Brahan recalled that once they put 50 or 60 men on the Sugarland Railroad that ran through the region, and that at times Captain A.K. Addison’s force was brought over to the Imperial Share Farm when frantic cane-cutting and windrowing was required.¹⁵⁸

Of the available labor resources that he and Eldridge could access, Brahan explained that “I was in Sugar Land one day and Mr. Eldridge was telling me that he could get Mexicans pretty easily.” Since their cane crop was the heaviest in the region, and owing to the dominant classification of workers by race, Brahan wished to swap these “Mexicans” for African American workers concentrated on another farm. Brahan found that Captain Mills, the manager of this camp, was reluctant to make the trade: “About that time, Capt. Mills came up and we told him about it, and he didn’t seem to like it. No man that has ever worked niggers likes to work Mexicans or white men”¹⁵⁹

Brahan pointed out that the reason for the constant shuffling of prisoners was inclement weather: “I think there were the worst weather conditions I ever saw to move a cane crop in. It would get cold and then it would rain and warm up again and it was an unusual winter.” It is unclear from the trial transcript if Brahan was describing the

¹⁵⁸ Robert W. Brahan testimony, *The Prison Commission v. The Imperial Sugar Company*, No. 4126, Walker County District Court, Walker County, Texas, September 1912, 262-263. Trial transcript in Box 5, Imperial Sugar Company Collection, HMRC, Houston, Texas.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

harvest of 1910 or 1911, but there is some evidence to support the case that 1910 had a particularly harsh “rolling season.”¹⁶⁰

Brahan provides an apt description of the difficulties presented by “killing frosts” especially when insufficient labor was available: “I think half of that cane could have been hauled off to the mill before the freeze easily. The Penitentiary Commission didn’t have sufficient labor there to handle this cane... The mill could have taken care of a good deal more than we got. I suspect they could have delivered more than they did deliver, if they had had the force there.” Brahan reported that there were only two hundred convicts working during the “rolling season,” one hundred and fifty fewer than were necessary. Of this force of two hundred, there were “only a little more than 100 able-bodied men.” The rest of the force consisted of “thirty or forty cripples there, one-legged men etc.”¹⁶¹

Once the stalks had been chopped down, they were delivered to the sugar mill. There the juice was squeezed from the cane and turned into sugar. In the mill, the stalks were passed through multiple rollers, and the juice delivered to large, shallow vats. Once the sugar was in juice form, it was heated and impurities skimmed off the top by workers wielding ladles. This process was repeated a number of times in order to maximize the purity of the liquid sugar. The extreme heat meant that the purification process was among the most dangerous in the entire sugar-making operation.¹⁶²

The final stage in the production of raw sugar was granulation, or in the parlance of sugar makers, the “strike.” Once it had been determined that the liquid sugar, now in

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 264.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁶² Ibid., 45-46.

the form of syrup, “had reached a consistency sufficient to granulate” it was struck, “poured into a set of large, shallow, wooden vats, called ‘coolers,’ to a depth of two or three inches, and stirred.” Following the “strike,” crystals began to appear, and successive layers (up to four) were poured over the first. The complete “strike” process lasted anywhere from six to fourteen hours.¹⁶³

After the “strike,” sugar was prepared for shipment—carried in tubs to wooden barrels, capable of holding about 1,100 pounds of sugar, called “hogsheads.” Once potted in the hogsheads, the sugar sat for about a month, while molasses (an important and valuable byproduct) was allowed to drain through a hole in the hogshead into a separate container. The molasses was then collected, and the sugar was ready to be sent off to refiners, where it went through the final stage of refining, after which it was ready for market.¹⁶⁴

The transition to imported raw cane added another variety of backbreaking labor to the equation: that of workers unloading the three-hundred pound bags of raw cane from freighters. A report on labor in the nation’s refining industry prepared in the late 1930s by the Sugar Institute (a corporate lobby association aiming to combat the threat of offshore refined sugar from the tropics) broke down the various aspects of the unloading work. Describing the “labor involved in getting this crude product from the holds of the boats into refineries” as “highly skilled,” the report listed the tasks integral to the removal of the raw sugar: stevedores, samplers, weighers, cargo repairmen (coopers), scalemen, checkers, and lightermen. Three gangs of laborers worked each ship, which translated

¹⁶³ Ibid. 46.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 46-47.

into about 118 men. The 1936 estimate of the time required to discharge a ship was two ships per week per three gang crew.¹⁶⁵

The industrial refining operations consisted mainly of overseeing the washing, melting, purification, refining, and crystallization of the raw sugar into different types and grades. Most refineries had a strict separation of labor according to gender, with women responsible for sewing the bags in which the refined sugar was packed. As the report noted, “Because the elaborate mechanism making up a refinery is kept in good mechanical order,” refineries needed to employ “highly skilled mechanics, electricians and engineers.”¹⁶⁶

Sugar refineries were extremely hot, dangerous, and foul-smelling. Accidents were not uncommon. A notice in the *Texas Farm and Industrial News* reported that “by an accident at the Sugar Refinery last Monday, John Cofield, an employee, was severely burned, and was carried to a Houston hospital that afternoon.”¹⁶⁷ Mr. and Mrs. George Lazear, Chicagoans who honeymooned in Sugar Land in 1917 wrote that “the men at work in the intense heat of the upper floors of the plant will need have no horrors of the hereafter.”¹⁶⁸

For inland refineries like Imperial Sugar, a second and third stage of manual labor was introduced: loading the bags onto railroad cars from the port of Galveston, and unloading the bags from the railroad cars to the refining facility. This work was of the same type as that which constituted the final stage for refineries: hauling the cane from the refinery to market. In the early twentieth century, this hauling and transportation was

¹⁶⁵ “Labor in the US Sugar Refining Industry,” Sugar Institute, 1937. In Imperial Sugar Collection, Box 5, HMRC, Houston, Texas.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ “Local and Personal,” *Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), June 15, 1917.

¹⁶⁸ “Chicagoans Like Sugar Land,” *Texas Farm and Industrial News* (Sugar Land), September 4, 1919.

overwhelmingly oriented towards railroads. As the century progressed, however, trucking became an increasingly important means of transporting the refined sugar.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: PAROLE, PARDON, AND THE CASE OF LEADBELLY

On June 13, 1907 Mrs. Will Davidson of Lioga, Texas came across an eye-catching notice in the *Houston Post*: “To Receive Bids For Convicts: Proposals Not to Be Considered for Less Than \$26.50 Per Month.” Mrs. Davidson’s husband was a convict in the Texas prison system. As the article did not specify that inquiries had to be from prospective employers, she wrote the Board of Penitentiary Commissioners to see if she could pay the fee herself and win her husband’s freedom:

Up there, where it says about the bid, does it mean we have to bid? Please explain this as fully as you can to me for if we have to do anything please tell me for I want my husband to get to come home, please do explain, whether it’s the convicts folks that has to make bids to get them out in July I hope and pray my husband will get to come home I guess if you have a wife at home, you know how it would be if you was away from her, how you would like for someone to help you please help me all you can.¹⁶⁹

Mrs. Davidson’s letter illustrates the fundamental tragedy of Texas prison history: if convicts were mere commodities to be bought and sold on the open market, why couldn’t relatives pay for the release of loved ones? Once sugar cane cultivation became unprofitable, and the prison system began hemorrhaging money, why was the charade of punishment and rehabilitation maintained? Now that economic rationales were obsolete,

¹⁶⁹ Mrs. Will Davidson to A.M. Barton, Campbell Records, Correspondence: Penitentiary, June 21-25, 1907, TSLA.

what possible purpose was served by depriving families of husbands and fathers who had been convicted of minor crimes, at an astronomically high cost to the state?

The end of convict leasing witnessed the transformation of prison labor from a system based on the leasing of convicts outright by businesses, to a practice governed by the more subtle adaptation of the governor's pardoning power and parole system to accommodate the needs of employers. The end of the convict lease in 1912 should not therefore be regarded as a defeat of the forces who regarded themselves as customarily entitled to the labor of the State's proletarians. On the contrary, it was the end of the convict lease in its classical form in Texas that paved the way for the emergence of an industrial working class in the Lone Star State. Once the dust kicked up by this transition settled, the resultant stabilization of labor markets allowed the state's ruling class to transition easily from plantation barons into managerial capitalists. The final years of the convict lease played a crucial role in reifying the hierarchical racial division of labor in Texas. As Neil Foley has argued, this process was crucially dependent on the creation of a shared sense of fictive Anglo identity—"whiteness"- by poor white Texans. The history of labor in the prison farms of the upper coastal Brazos River valley region played an essential part in the evolution of the peculiar psychological mapping of race and labor in twentieth century Texas.¹⁷⁰

The parole system that allowed for the transfer of prisoners from prison farm to factory was designed to encourage the exploitation of ex-prisoners. The key condition that potential parolees had to meet when applying for parole was sponsorship by a capitalist employer who pledged to hire them. In many cases, this led to a nominal

¹⁷⁰ See Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

transfer in status that meant little in terms of practical improvement of the everyday lives and work demands of former prisoners.

As Texas labor economist Ruth Allen noted in her pioneering work on East Texas lumber workers, the period in which Imperial Sugar began to make use of the parole system to flesh out its work force was one in which national concern regarding the return of southern debt peonage mounted. Allen writes that the Congressional Immigration Commission investigated the condition of immigrant labor in the South and found that peonage occurred in almost every industry.¹⁷¹ Allen also quotes an observation made by an anonymous writer for the *Nation* on May 10, 1906 (one with great relevance to the history of Sugar Land), which "attributed peonage to the benevolent practice whereby white men volunteered to pay the fines of Negroes convicted of minor crimes, and thus got them out of jail."¹⁷² This "benevolent practice" formed one of the pillars of Imperial Sugar's labor recruitment and control policies.

A telling indicator of the degree to which the capitalist-oriented parolee-sponsorship model had become normalized in Texas can be found in the response to Depression-era proposals to refashion the cronyist parole system into one that was more rational and fair. A *San Antonio Express* story quotes Governor James V. Allred, speaking to a convention of Texas voluntary county parole boards: "Of the thousands of prisoners who had been paroled *to board members*, not one had come back to prison for murder or bank robbery."¹⁷³ Allred's casual usage of language suggesting the parole system was little more than a glorified employment agency for politically connected

¹⁷¹ Ruth Allen, *East Texas Lumber Workers*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), 162.

¹⁷² Quoted in *ibid.*, 162-63.

¹⁷³ *San Antonio Express*, "Power to Parole Asked for Courts: Changes in Texas Prison Suggested by County Groups," June 18, 1938, my emphasis in "Prisons to 1939" vertical file, CAH, Austin, Texas.

business people points to the ubiquity of this view. Similarly, in the same article, O.J.S. Ellis, the general manager of the prison system painted the prison system as a disciplinary apparatus for the instilling of Protestant work ethic in the heretofore shiftless: "One cause of crime is the desire to escape work... we are trying to teach the men to work at some productive trade until they have formed the habit of doing their daily duty."¹⁷⁴

Correspondence between Prison Board officials and the office of Governor Oscar Colquitt relating to the new prison reform laws enacted by the Texas State Legislature in 1910 offer suggestive evidence of the adaptation of businesses to a changing environment. The letters demonstrate a two-stage process at work in the birth of the new convict labor regime: first, the sharpening of racial lines and consolidation of a fully segregated labor force, and second, the molding of the parole system to accommodate the staffing needs of Texas capitalists.

In a letter to the Governor March 21, 1911, Prison Farm Commissioner Robert W. Brahan reported progress in regard to the first stage of the process delineated above: "I feel that we will be able to take all the white men off the contract and share farms by the 1st of January, 1912. We are now at work getting all the Mexicans, as far as possible, separated from the negroes, and we are also getting them separated from the whites as fast as practicable at the farms, and our efforts in this direction seem to be appreciated by the Mexicans and whites, as well as the negroes."¹⁷⁵

A letter from Prison Commissioner Ben Cabell on March 23, 1911, illustrates the preparations that were being made for the second stage of the process. Cabell informed the Governor that he was "bending every effort towards systematically getting the records

¹⁷⁴ *San Antonio Express*, "Power to Parole."

¹⁷⁵ Brahan to Colquitt, Colquitt Records, March 21-23rd, 1911, TSLA.

of all convicts.” Cabell presented a scheme to modify the parole law to both serve the needs of Lone Star State entrepreneurs and provide “a great advantage in discipline and future conduct of convicts.”¹⁷⁶

Cabell proposed the systematic announcement of the details of the new parole law, which pivoted on demonstration of “meritorious conduct” to prisoners in the Texas penal system. This would encourage the “meritorious convict” and serve notice to the “trouble breeder” that “he must be well behaved in the future to receive attention.” Cabell was certain that this new parole law would “create a great feeling of hope in the mind of the convict” and “aid very much in the discipline that is so necessary.”¹⁷⁷

The aspirations for this “magnificent policy” alluded to in this passage by Cabell were modeled on the perceptions of successes achieved by other southern states in turning prisons into hiring halls for the local bourgeoisie. A Houston newspaper feature based on a *New York Times* Story of 1911, apparently republished widely throughout the South, illustrates a number of these features. In an ironic twist, the article begins by singling out for praise one of the most notorious and brutal prisons of the South, Mississippi’s Parchman Farm: “It has remained for Mississippi to demonstrate that a criminal population may be taken in hand, improved mentally and morally, built up physically, taught habits of regularity and industry, and turn those criminals from the penitentiary at the end of their terms to be eagerly sought by the planters of the State as laborers.” The writer picks up this theme later in the article, noting that African American graduates of the Mississippi penitentiary were highly sought after as workers and sharecroppers by white planters. The ex-convict’s training “in the habits of regularity and

¹⁷⁶ Cabell to Colquitt, Colquitt Records, March 21-23rd, 1911, TSLA.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

industry,” “cheerful submission and a proper regard (for authority)” and the correction of inefficient work habits by “firm, inflexible” discipline, have made him an exemplary servant of Southern commercial agriculture.¹⁷⁸

The contemporary reader cannot help but recoil at the severe dissonance between the vapid bootstraps philosophy espoused in the last sentence and the brutal realities of violence and intimidation faced by Progressive-era Mississippi blacks. This article presents, in an unusually distilled form, the precepts of the parole-oriented convict lease system of the post 1900-era. The Progressive mantras of good government and the gospel of efficiency are seen here to dovetail nicely with the coercive and authoritarian racism at the heart of Southern penology.

No figure better exemplifies the contradictions inherent in the notion of Southern prison farms as schools for training wayward African Americans in the capitalist work ethic than Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter. Leadbelly’s music and self-presentation owed a great deal to his seven years on the Central State Farm in Sugar Land. By creatively seeking out these origins, we may learn a great deal about the life of Sugar Land’s African American convict laborers. It is therefore appropriate to conclude this study with a brief consideration of his life and music.

As Ioan Davies wrote, “One of the central tasks... of reading prison literature is to uncover the silences of those who do not write, and about whom no one has written.”¹⁷⁹ Along with a handful of other Sugar Land convict musicians “discovered” by Texas song collector John A. Lomax, (most notably Moses “Iron Head” Platt), Leadbelly was one of

¹⁷⁸ “Convicts Who Are In Demand After Serving Terms: Mississippi Trains Negro Criminals To Be Such Good Farmers That They Quickly Secure Places—Penitentiary Farm Pays and Makes Money.” *Houston Daily Post*, Sunday Morning, June 18, 1911, Colquitt Records, June 20-29, 1911, TSLA.

¹⁷⁹ Ioan Davies, *Writers in Prison* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 8-9.

the few survivors of the Texas prison system to report on life on the farm in musical recordings and performances. To cite Davies again, the prison writer (a category into which Leadbelly fits, even though his signature texts were musical rather than literary) “is one who seeks to preserve himself and others from the obscurity to which the law and the condescension of Letters has sentenced him or her and to overcome the many damnations to which he or she is subject.” We owe to the convicts whose lives were wasted in the upper-coastal Brazos valley prison farms every effort to save them from the obscurity to which they were damned by white racism and “market forces.”¹⁸⁰

Huddie Ledbetter, born in January, 1888, in Caddo Parrish, Louisiana, spent his early years as a farm worker in Louisiana and Texas, and as a young adult he became a musician, drifting in and out of the African American entertainment districts of Shreveport, Louisiana, and Dallas, Texas. In Dallas, he teamed up with the legendary Texas blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson, and spent several years as an itinerant busker, playing for spare change on street corners. Quick-tempered and prone to violence, Ledbetter often ran afoul of the law, and on December 17, 1917, under the assumed name of “Walter Boyd,” he murdered a man named Will Stafford. Shortly thereafter arrested, he began his odyssey in the Texas prison system.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 70-73. On Leadbelly’s tenure with Blind Lemon Jefferson, see Kip Lornell, “Blind Lemon Meets Leadbelly,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Blind Lemon Jefferson (Spring, 2000), 23-33.

In 1920, the legendary prison warden Bud Russell transported Ledbetter from the Shaw prison farm to Sugar Land's Central State Farm. Thirty two years old when he arrived at Sugar Land, Ledbetter quickly acquired the prison nickname "Leadbelly."¹⁸² Because of his experience and endurance, Leadbelly was made a group leader on the rows of cane and cotton fields. He also leveraged his skills as a musician and entertainer to gain privileges from the prison staff and to make the brutal routine more bearable. According to Leadbelly's biographers Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, Captain Flannigan, the overseer of Central State Farm, permitted him to "travel around unguarded to other camps on the farm every Sunday," where he "would entertain the men with songs and spin yarns."¹⁸³

The most famous "privilege" reaped by Leadbelly from his skills as a musical entertainer was a pardon from Governor Pat Neff on January 16, 1925. The circumstances surrounding this pardon are somewhat cloudy, and because Neff had campaigned as a "no-pardon" politician to distinguish himself from political opponent Jim Ferguson (a notoriously generous granter of pardons), the myth of Leadbelly's "singing his way to freedom" seems too good to be true. Neff did pardon "Walter Boyd" in 1925, but this act of clemency occurred well after Neff first heard Leadbelly sing and play, and, moreover, Neff shaved only a few months off Leadbelly's seven-year sentence.

Perhaps more interesting than the myth of Leadbelly "singing his way to freedom" are the details surrounding the musical culture of Central State Farm that emerge from reports of Neff's visits to Sugar Land. In January of 1924, Governor Neff

¹⁸² Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 78-79; For a valuable analysis of prison nicknames in Texas prisons, see Bruce Jackson, "Prison Nicknames" *Western Folklore*, Vol. 26, No. 1. (Jan., 1967), pp. 48-54.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 81.

took a tour of the Texas upper-coastal Brazos River valley prison farms. Leadbelly was summoned to play for Neff, and allegedly pulled out all of the stops in an effort to win the governor's sympathy. He sang hillbilly songs, extemporized lyrics about Neff and his entourage, and even danced a frenetic pantomime of sugar cane field labor, which he called the "Sugarland Shuffle." Leadbelly's performance charmed the governor, and Central State Farm became a regular venue for African American folk entertainment.¹⁸⁴

Audiences came from Houston by the carload. The fact that the entertainers were inmates in one of the country's most oppressive and deadly labor camps seemed not to bother them. Nevertheless, from the reports of these concerts, a contradictory image of Sugar Land's prison culture emerges. On the one hand, it reminds us of the nightmare boxing match that opens Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; and on the other, it suggests opportunities for parody and resistance within the enclosure of the "total institution" of the prison farm. Leadbelly's "Sugarland Shuffle" certainly seems like a classic example of subaltern irony and dissimulation: a performance that distilled the cruel contradictions of elite white attitudes toward African American labor.¹⁸⁵

Leadbelly was "discovered" by Texas father-and-son song collecting team John and Alan Lomax in prison, but not in Sugar Land. Having found himself on the wrong side of the law again, Leadbelly was in Louisiana's Angola prison in 1933 when the Lomaxes arrived in search of African American folk songs. According to Lomax's records, Leadbelly reprised the theatrics of the "Sugarland Shuffle" (or a variation on the

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1952, 1980). On strategies of irony and dissimulation, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994, 1996). Kelley's work draws heavily on the insights of James C. Scott, particularly those presented in the now classic *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

same themes) when he sensed that the Lomaxes might be willing to serve as his sponsors and help him win parole.¹⁸⁶

Leadbelly spun an elaborate sales-pitch rooted in the competitive and ironically self-aggrandizing African American oral traditions of toasts, boasts and “signifyin’ monkey” stories. He began by appealing to the (racist) sympathies of his white would-be emancipators: “I ain’t a bad nigger, Jes’ got into trouble f’om drinkin’ too much co’n whisky and gin...” Leadbelly then moved into high hyperbole: “I’s de best nigger in de world; I’m de best car driver in de world; I’s de best cook in de world; I’s de best bed-maker in de world...”¹⁸⁷

Freely mixing claims regarding his domestic skills, musical prowess, and work ethic, Leadbelly continued, “I’s de best guitar-picker in de world: Start my ol’ twelve-string box to twangin’ in any town in dese Nunitied States an de people’ll come a-runnin.’” He told the Lomaxes “I’ll make you a lot of money” and insisted that they needn’t share the profits with him “’cept a few nickels to send my woman.” The Lomaxes would indeed hold him to this pledge in the years to come, giving him at most one-third of the money earned from performances. He insisted “I’s a hard-workin’ nigger, too” citing the fact that he “always takes de lead row in de field.”¹⁸⁸

For Leadbelly, the Lomaxes were clearly in the mold of other southern industrialists who toured prisons looking for workers. The fact that the work he was to perform was “cultural” rather than manual was purely incidental. The degree to which the work was in fact significantly different from that done by other freed convicts in the

¹⁸⁶ John A. Lomax, notes for *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1936), Lomax (John Avery) Family Papers, Box 3D187, folder 7, CAH, Austin, Texas.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

South is debatable. It is well known that after the Lomaxes arranged for Leadbelly's release from Louisiana Governor O.K. Allen, he served as their chauffeur on their long road trips through the South, and to some extent as their personal servant.¹⁸⁹

A frequently obscured fact in scholarly writing on Leadbelly is the precise nature of the musical work the Lomaxes expected of him. While John Lomax eventually became Leadbelly's impresario as he toured the Northeast, Leadbelly was "hired" initially to motivate other African American prisoners otherwise reluctant to sing the "right" material for the Lomaxes. Lomax laid this plan out in an article that attempted to address the skepticism of his Ivory Tower colleagues in the effete business of folk-song collecting towards the value of studying the music of black southern prisoners. He wrote, "Why should a man who claimed to be an honest and legitimate collector of folk songs deliberately associate himself with the ("murderous"—crossed out and changed to "ex-convict") Leadbelly?"¹⁹⁰

Answering his own highly patronizing question, Lomax noted that "I found it easy to get Negroes to sing for me the songs that they thought I wanted to hear, songs fresh from the radio, songs that came from the printed page, or some current jazz tune." Lomax encountered difficulty, however, in coercing convicts to sing "the old tunes, the crude dynamic creations of their own folk," which the prisoners tellingly could not believe "were 'fitten' for any white man to hear." Lomax's writings betray little sensitivity to the dynamics of power and resistance inherent in the prison situation. As Hazel Carby notes, they suggest that he regarded southern prisons as "part of the native

¹⁸⁹ Benjamin Filene, "'Our Singing Country': John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No.4 (Dec. 1991), 611.

¹⁹⁰ John A. Lomax, notes for *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1936), Lomax (John Avery) Family Papers, Box 3D187, folder 7, CAH, Austin, Texas.

habitat of black people.” Lomax did not interpret prison songs as tools of resistance as well as expression. Had he been more sensitive to this sub-textual dimension of prison music, he no doubt would have immediately understood why black southern convict laborers were reluctant to reveal to white authorities the inner workings of their prison argot and subculture.¹⁹¹

Lomax lamented, “Rarely could I make any Negro understand just what I wanted.” In contrast, Leadbelly “knew and enjoyed singing the very songs that I most prized...” Taking Leadbelly from one prison to another throughout the South served as a competitive spur to other convicts: “When any group of Negroes heard Lead Belly... sing, their competitive spirit was aroused instantly.” According to Lomax, the typical prisoner would then be motivated to prove his superiority to Leadbelly: ‘Lemme git at that machine, boss. I’ll show them Texas niggers what a Louisiana man can do.’”¹⁹²

Though Sugar Land was but one phase of Leadbelly’s career, much of the repertoire that he would later make famous in concerts and on recordings derived from his tenure at Central State Farm. Support for this argument can be found in the recordings that the Lomaxes made in Sugar Land in the early 1930s and in research conducted by Bruce Jackson in the 1960s among the prisoners of Sugar Land. A number of Leadbelly’s most famous songs, such as “Midnight Special” and “Shorty George” memorialize aspects of the Central State Farm experience.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ John A. Lomax, notes for *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1936), Lomax (John Avery) Family Papers, Box 3D187, folder 6, CAH, Austin, Texas; Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 103.

¹⁹² Lomax, *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ See *Deep River of Song: Big Brazos, Texas Prison Recordings, 1933 and 1934* and Bruce Jackson, *Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Worksongs from Texas Prisons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

In “Midnight Special,” Leadbelly warns his listeners that if they went to Houston, they’d better “walk right,” or else they would be “Sugar Land bound.”¹⁹⁴ The “Midnight Special” itself was a train that would cross the Sugar Land junction late at night, and stood as a symbol of freedom and mobility that taunted the prisoner. Leadbelly also memorialized another train: the “Shorty George,” a “short train” that “brought wives, families, and lovers to the men at Sugar Land” on Sundays.¹⁹⁵ Other songs about the vicious prison dog “Old Rattler” and the tree-cutting song “Old Black Diamond” preserve memories of Leadbelly’s seven-year Sugar Land stint. Like the workers of the chain gang in Georgia, who became folk heroes to a generation of rural African Americans, Leadbelly was able to transcend the stigma of the prisoner and transmit an identity as both a heroic worker and resistant rebel. Through an ironic burlesque of work, Leadbelly was able to critique the hypocrisy of white prison managers’ attitudes regarding black labor (and by extension, that of Southern industry in general) without sacrificing dignity and self-respect or inviting brutal punishment.¹⁹⁶

As Benjamin Filene’s groundbreaking work on American roots music has demonstrated, it is impossible to separate an “original” Leadbelly from the persona created by Huddie Ledbetter at the urging of song collectors John and Alan Lomax. Audiences came to know a Leadbelly whose image had been significantly shaped by John Lomax’s marketing vision and his son’s Popular Front politics.¹⁹⁷ At a moment

¹⁹⁴ See discussion of Leadbelly’s “Midnight Special” in Chandler Davidson, *Biracial Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Metropolitan South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 17.

¹⁹⁵ Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend*, 82.

¹⁹⁶ The “chain-gang worker as folk hero” trope is discussed in Alexander Lichtenstein, *Twice The Work of Free Labor*.

¹⁹⁷ Filene, “‘Our Singing Country’: John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec. 1991), 609. See also Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the*

when the American working class was in need of an iconic laborer to represent the dignity of toil, Leadbelly emerged as a nearly perfect totem. As Filene explains, Leadbelly's posed portrait on the cover of the Lomaxes' *Negro Folk Songs* was meant to sell Leadbelly as a laboring everyman "in overalls rolled up to reveal bare feet, with a hankerchief tied around his neck."¹⁹⁸

The irony of Leadbelly's emergence as an iconic worker within the image-system of the Popular Front is that Leadbelly had little, if any, experience as an industrial laborer. As far as the admittedly incomplete historical record can be trusted, Leadbelly never saw the inside of a factory, punched a time card, or worked on an assembly line. Leadbelly's overalls and handkerchief hardly signified "modern worker" in the way that the hardhat and lunch pail would later symbolically function as metonyms of working-class identity. Unlike other African American singers also popular in the Popular Front era, like Paul Robeson, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington or Josh White, Leadbelly did not present a genteel public persona.¹⁹⁹ On the contrary, at the urging of John Lomax, Leadbelly's violent past was reaped for maximal sensationalistic publicity. As Filene notes, "Long after Leadbelly had been freed, Lomax insisted that Leadbelly perform in his old convict clothes, even though he hated them."²⁰⁰

Eric Hobsbawm's short essay on the gendering of labor iconography from the republican movements of the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century offers a

folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Ch. 2.

¹⁹⁸ Filene, "Our Singing Country," 610.

¹⁹⁹ See Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: New Press, 1989); David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 309-319; and Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁰⁰ Filene, "Our Singin Country," 611.

number of clues to the riddle of Leadbelly as Popular Front figurehead. Hobsbawm raises the provocative question of why the labor iconography of post-Industrial Revolution European (and, by extension, American) working class movements was so dominated by the image of the muscular, shirtless, male worker—"the proletariat as Greek athlete." Prior to the 1930s, the vast majority of trade unions and socialist parties were dominated by skilled craft workers, not the unskilled "abstract" laborers whose work was entirely the product of muscular effort. Why would the working class have so identified with images that objectified them as "sheer muscular effort" and "brute strength" rather than bearers of intelligence, skill, and experience?²⁰¹

Hobsbawm suggests three answers to this riddle. The first is that "for most workers, whatever their skill, the criterion of belonging to their class was precisely the performance of manual, physical labor."²⁰² A second, related reason was that these movements wished to be as inclusive as possible, while a third explanation looks to the discourse surrounding the true revolutionary subject within Third International Marxism. As Hobsbawm explains, "The relatively unskilled, purely manual laborer, the miner or docker, was considered more revolutionary, since he did not belong to the labor aristocracy with its penchant for reformism and social democracy. He represented 'the masses' to whom revolutionaries appealed."²⁰³ All of these factors played a part in Leadbelly's elevation to iconic status among the American Left of the 1930s. What needs explication, of course, is the fact that Leadbelly was a middle-aged African American, not a lithe Olympian. As such, Leadbelly's signifying potential was articulated through

²⁰¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Man and Woman: Images on the Left," in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London: Abacus, 1998), 148.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 149.

dominant attitudes regarding African Americans, convict laborers, and folk and blues musicians.

First and foremost, with his Stella 12-string guitar, suit and bowtie, and repertoire of songs based around semi-improvised AAB stanzas, Leadbelly cut the figure of a rural bluesman. As Richard Middleton points out, the rural bluesman, far from sharing any family resemblance with the prototypical worker "was typically a wanderer, often a social misfit or problem, and regarded by many with distrust, equivocation or even as a demonic figure." Contrary to the solidarity and community celebrated in labor songs, standard themes in the blues singer's songs concerned "loneliness, alienation and travel." The "manliness" of the craft union and socialist tradition, predicated on stoicism and self-control, stands in contrast to the blues singer's performance techniques, which "generally suggested great emotional involvement." In Middleton's words, the blues singer was "an outsider, a marginal figure who breaks folk norms" and thus "to some degree a *critic*-- a licensed critic, since he was also often regarded as a culture hero; he revealed an area of experience neglected by the everyday 'folk' world, his individualism contrasting with its drive for conformity imposed by the reality of segregation and oppression, and making him its conscience or memory."²⁰⁴

Why would such a marginal figure rise to prominence in the symbolic matrix of the Popular Front left? On the one hand, there is the explanation favored by Filene, that Leadbelly's debut in New York during the mid-1930s coincided with a vogue for "outsider populism" among Left intellectuals generally. We could similarly invoke Michael Denning's powerful theorization of the "proletarian grotesque" in his discussion

²⁰⁴ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 144.

of working-class and radical literature of the Popular Front era to account for the popularity of Leadbelly as a survivor of two horrific prison camps.²⁰⁵

On the other hand, these explanations occlude Leadbelly's "blackness," which was surely a central component of his signifying potential. As Robert Cantwell writes, "Leadbelly was a living representative of an inaccessible past in which blackness could be contemplated as a universal condition, signifying a temporal as well as a social boundary, at once a mask, a surface, and a stain, not of a personal but of a collective curse and a collective guilt as well as a potential power."²⁰⁶ Cantwell draws attention to the cardinal importance of "racial mimesis" to the process of symbolic identification with racial "others." White workers in America, in particular, have employed many varieties of imitation, parody, and ventriloquism of imagined African Americans in order to construct and reaffirm their identities.²⁰⁷ Cantwell therefore urges us to place Leadbelly within this theoretical rubric in order to fully understand his symbolic significance.

Among the most fascinating aspects of Leadbelly's performance practice was his song repertoire and public persona. Playing his "windjammer" accordion, delighting children with his nursery-rhyme songs, and singing cowboy songs closer to the musical world of Gene Autry than that of a hardcore bluesman like Robert Johnson, Leadbelly's concerts were celebratory and light-hearted. In contrast to Paul Robeson's solemn renditions of art songs, Billie Holiday's evocation of lynched bodies hanging from trees, and Woodie Guthrie's wry narratives of Okie resistance, Leadbelly's approach to music-making seems even more anomalous. This is the final piece of the puzzle of Leadbelly—

²⁰⁵ Filene, "Our Singin' Country," 611; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 118.

²⁰⁶ Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 75.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

beneath the laboring body lay a reserve of resistance to work discipline and social constraints (even, as his imprisonment indicated, proscriptions against violence). In Leadbelly, the refusal of work discipline embodied in the peripatetic rounder and the prison camp's "three-time loser" finally found politically effective expression.

At the extreme opposite end of the sociological pole from Leadbelly were the free, property-owning African American residents of Sugar Land. Deprived of political rights, and no doubt under great pressure to comply expertly with the codes of Jim Crow etiquette, some of these individuals did manage to achieve financial independence. For example, a notice entitled "Progressive Colored Farmer" in the *Texas Coaster* described the achievements of Joe Whitehead, an African American resident of Sugar Land:

Joe Whitehead, a long-time colored subscriber to the Coaster, while in town last Saturday exhibited a deed to 61.4 acres of land five miles north of Sugarland. Whitehead made a \$1000 cash payment on this land which was formerly the property of the late G.M. Short. When the colored man becomes the owner of his own home it is as good as a certificate of good character, for he is almost invariably a decent law-abiding citizen, and the more of these colored land owners there are in the county the more the county will prosper. The transient farmer, white or black, is no good to himself or anyone else. We commend Whitehead's example to every colored man who has any ambition to rise above the common level."²⁰⁸

This article is permeated with the characteristic racism of the Sugar Land area, one that did not perceive a threat in African American social mobility, but at the same time would have frowned on any militant demands for voting rights or an end to segregation in public facilities. Nevertheless, the desire on the part of town elites for class allies in upwardly mobile African Americans like Joe Whitehead indicates a level of racial egalitarianism rare for the time period and area.

²⁰⁸ "Progressive Colored Farmer," *Texas Coaster*, April 28, 1911.

Post-WWI Sugar Land was hardly the worst product of incipient Texas capitalism. In some ways, conditions there were undoubtedly among the best. The town was not overtaken by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s as was so much of Texas. The “progressive company town” form undoubtedly made life easier for residents during the frequent economic slumps that would mark the ensuing decades. And whatever the aversions of Kempner and Eldridge to labor unions in Sugar Land in the first decades of Imperial Sugar’s existence, a CIO-affiliated union local was ultimately formed there in 1938.²⁰⁹

This unionization of Sugar Land was not destined to last long. Between the internal crisis of the CIO in the 1940s, in which communists were purged from unions, and unionists were made to sign loyalty oaths, and the aggressive attacks on labor unions from the Right (concretized in the 1947 Taft-Hartley law), CIO unions endured two decades of tumult before the merger of the CIO and AFL in 1955. In Texas, attacks on unions were severe and well-organized. Like the Klansmen of the 1920s, the one-hundred percent Americanist anticommunists of the 1940s and 1950s did the bidding of the capitalist elites, and quashed the labor unions of the upper-coastal Brazos River valley.²¹⁰

In an ironic twist of fate, Sugar Land’s company town past became in retrospect legendarily “liberal” in the ultraconservative decades that followed. Sugar Land is now most famous as a bedroom community for staunchly conservative Republican-voting Houston professionals, and as the stomping ground of reactionary politician Tom

²⁰⁹ Armstrong, *Sugar Land*, 132-133.

²¹⁰ See George Norris Green. *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), and Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

DeLay.²¹¹ The eighty years that the “Hell-Hole on the Brazos” served as the home of the Imperial Sugar Company has entered the annals of Texas history as an anomalously “progressive” chapter.

²¹¹ See Lou Dubose and Jan Reid, *The Hammer: Tom DeLay, God, Money, and the Rise of the Republican Congress* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

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