

## ABSTRACT

ROEBUCK, DAIRE ELIZABETH. Margaret Jarman Hagood's *Mothers of the South* as Sociological Documentary. (Under the Direction of Pamela Tyler).

The purpose of this study is to discuss why and how Margaret Jarman Hagood's 1939 monograph, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman*, was a unique contribution to the sociological and documentary study of the rural white woman in the South during the Great Depression. Hagood's work represents a lasting document of how these women experienced the poverty of the South during the 1930s. *Mothers of the South* is also part of a larger intellectual and aesthetic movement known as documentary. Her work is compared and contrasted with a selection of its predecessors along with how her work was unique in its focus on rural white mothers.

**MARGARET JARMAN HAGOOD'S *MOTHERS OF THE SOUTH*  
AS SOCIOLOGICAL DOCUMENTARY**

by  
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**DEDICATION**

In honor of  
Hattie Mae Williams Ogburn,  
Hannah Wynne Roebuck,  
and all of the North Carolina  
farmwomen  
in my family before them.

## BIOGRAPHY

Daire Elizabeth Roebuck, daughter of Daniel Loys Roebuck and Kathy Ogburn Roebuck, was born in Raleigh, North Carolina on May 19, 1978. She graduated from Myers Park High School in Charlotte, North Carolina in June of 1996. As a Marvin Perry Scholar at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, Daire majored in History, with a concentration in United States history. After completion of her undergraduate thesis on the Depression era photography of Walker Evans, she earned the Department of History's Calvin Prize. She graduated with honors in history and with a degree of distinction in May of 2000 when receiving her Bachelor of Arts. The following April, Daire was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. After working for two years in Baltimore, Daire returned to Raleigh, North Carolina.

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Daire lives in the Raleigh area with her partner, Tara Weaver, and their West Highland White Terrier, Molly Blix. Daire will begin at the University of North Carolina's School of Law in the Fall of 2004.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction	1
Setting the Historical Backdrop for <i>Mothers of the South</i>	4
The Intersection of Documentary and Sociology in the 1930s	24
Hagood's Predecessors in the Sociological Documentary of the South	37
Margaret Jarman Hagood's Unique Contribution	50
Works Cited	73

## **Introduction**

Margaret Jarman Hagood (1907-1963) was a sociologist from a farm in Newton County, Georgia who worked throughout the South in the late 1930s to document the lives and experiences of rural white women who were wives of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. At the time of publication, her 1939 book *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman*, served as an important sociological study of a group which mothered more than their proportionate share of children who grew up during the nation's Great Depression. Using the women's experiences through which the poverty of the South may be understood, her book appealed to the interests of lay readers and an academic audience alike. *Mothers of the South* firmly qualified Hagood as both a sociologist and a documentarian. Furthermore, her study focused on a population not study in the same depth before or since, as the farm tenancy system of that time no longer exists. Her book is still read in history classes today as an invaluable document for social historians.

Margaret Jarman Hagood earned her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1937. Her dissertation, "Mothers of the South: A Population Study of Native White Women of Childbearing Age of the Southeast," allowed Hagood to show her burgeoning authority as a statistician within sociology. In the introduction to her dissertation, she clearly noted the influence of her mentor, Howard Washington Odum and his theory of regionalism. Her work for Odum and his Institute for Research in Social Science, which he founded in 1924, continued the reputation of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as the most progressive institution for the study of sociology within the South. While Hagood would leave North Carolina by the 1930s to

work for the federal government, her work contributed to Odum's legacy as well as the reputation for authenticity set by those published by the University of North Carolina Press.

This study of Hagood's *Mothers of the South* is divided into four major sections. In the first section, I attempt to provide historical context on both a national and regional scale to provide background for the time in which Hagood was working. I have chosen to focus upon Howard Odum's 1936 landmark, *Southern Regions of the United States* and the federal government's 1938 *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* to illustrate to the uninitiated reader how distinctly different the South experienced the Great Depression. Already mired in poverty caused largely by farm tenancy, the mothers whom Hagood would study existed within a world distinctly different from their northeastern urban peers. In the second section, I attempt to discuss the intellectual movement of the time: the development of documentary genre within the arts as it applied to sociological writing. I have chosen to rely heavily upon William Stott's 1973 monograph, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* as well as other writers on the topic to discuss the intellectual influences which seem to have shaped how Hagood approached, conducted, and presented her research. The third section attempts to combine a discussion of Odum's reputation and influence within the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University Press with a selection of documentary antecedents to Hagood's work. I discuss Erskine Caldwell's work not as a realistic depiction of sharecroppers in the South, but as a sharp contrast to how Hagood approached the women who were the subject of her study. Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *You Have Seen Their Faces* are presented as a part of the wide spectrum of documentary writing which sought to portray the lives of rural white sharecroppers to those outside of the

region. Finally, the last section discusses Hagood's 1937 dissertation and her 1939 monograph, both entitled *Mothers of the South* as complementary halves to a whole: the former as the quantitative background for the latter's qualitative approach to the population in which Hagood was so interested. I was able to access the dissertation through the archives of the Institute for Research in Social Science as well as in the Howard Washington Odum Papers, both of which are part of the Southern Historical Collection housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Overall, this study is intended for those interested in the documentary genre as it applies to sociology as well as to those interested in the history of women in the South.

### **Setting the Historical Backdrop for *Mothers of the South***

Sociologist Margaret Jarman Hagood declared in 1939 that “as goes the rural mother in the South, so goes the nation!” Furthermore, she argued, those “Southern tenant farm mothers compose a group who epitomize, as much as any, the results of the wastes and lags of the Region.”<sup>1</sup> Though her declaration may seem overtly presumptuous, by studying the larger picture in which the statement was made, it becomes much more clear why Southern wives of sharecroppers were worthy of such sociological inquiry. Hagood, as a student of Howard Odum at the progressive University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, would have been intimately familiar with Odum’s findings in his earlier *Southern Regions of the United States* which described those “wastes and lags of the Region.” She had also completed an earlier 1937 dissertation and population study of the rural white mothers in the Southeast. Hagood’s statistical and sociological background allowed her to extend President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1938 statement that if the South was the nation’s top economic priority, then the mothers who raised the future population of the South should be studied. But until Hagood’s study, they had been virtually ignored within the larger picture of the country’s experience of the Great Depression.

The Great Depression of the 1930’s deeply affected the American economy and society, with differing ramifications for each region of the country. Federal programs achieved moderate success in addressing the economic problems in the South, yet the South persistently lagged behind the rest of the nation. The underlying problem of the farm tenancy system gripped millions of families in poverty, leading to comparative deficiencies in housing, education, and public health, reinforcing lowered farm efficiency. Southern

sociologists' statistical research preceded *The Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, the federal government's well-known formal report on the desperately poor standard of living. Therefore, before examining Margaret Hagood's illumination of how sharecroppers' wives' experience of the Depression could affect the nation's potential for recovery, it is important to understand how distinctly differently the South experienced the Depression in contrast to the rest of the nation.

In the late 1920s, the American economy was thriving and growing at an unprecedented rate, seemingly without an end in sight. In 1927, the New York Stock Exchange traded an unprecedented 577 million shares. By 1928, less than a year before the crash, overall disposable income in America reached \$77.5 billion, suggesting the staggering spending power of the average American household. In January of 1929, Henry Ford announced that his company would need to hire approximately thirty-thousand additional workers at the River Rouge plant to begin production of the new Model-A Ford. In March of that year, former President and Chief Justice William Howard Taft swore into office Herbert Hoover as the next President. Yet while the economy was growing, signs appeared that it might have grown too fast: more than six billion dollars of stocks bought on margin fueled the stampeding market.<sup>2</sup>

The Depression officially began on October 29, 1929, or "Black Tuesday." In just five hours, ten billion dollars were lost in massive sell-offs as the stock market plummeted. As big business interests scrambled to save their own investments, the ensuing layoffs brought unemployment levels to new heights within the next two years. By October of 1931, unemployment in Chicago alone affected over forty percent of the city's population. The

European economy, still reeling from overwhelming postwar debt, led Congress to pass the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act of 1930, placing taxes on goods imported from Europe. In retaliation to the growing sentiment that capitalism had clearly failed, the Communist Party's American membership and visibility began its ascent in 1930. The years of apple sellers and bootblacks on Manhattan street corners and late-night rent parties in Harlem began, as people in large urban areas hardest hit by unemployment struggled to find new ways to earn money.<sup>3</sup>

Because those first-hit by the stock market fallout were those employed by large industries heavily invested in Wall Street, unemployment was concentrated in urban areas. As many historians now agree, as the American economy increased its reliance upon urban-based industry over rural-based agriculture, the economy became more vulnerable to the variables of the business cycle. Before Black Tuesday, America's worst economic recession was the Panic of 1893, wherein real income dropped 18 percent in the period between 1892 and 1894. Likewise, the rising interests of Progressivism placed increasing blame upon industrialization and its ill effects on the older, more traditional, rural way of American life.<sup>4</sup>

President Hoover was a firm believer in severely limiting governmental interference in the private economy, driven by urban industries. He seemed reluctant to respond to job losses in the wake of the stock market crash. Certain historians, like Robert S. McElvaine, point to Hoover's reliance on voluntarism for the failures in agriculture, industry and banking that prevented recovery. To emphasize attitude over actuality, Hoover chose the term "depression" to describe the fallout rather than to use terms such as "panic" or "crisis." He and his advisors believed that to call this crash by the same name as the earlier Panic of 1893 would align the current setback with older negative notions. Hoover even declared as soon

as May 1, 1930, "I am convinced that we have passed the worst and with continued effort we shall rapidly recover." By contrast, that same month marked the end of the economy's feeble attempt at recovery. The downward spiral still had two more years to go before ceasing; investment totals from 1932 were a whopping 88 percent lower than 1931's dismal numbers. The total level of \$800 million invested in 1932 is paltry when compared to 1929's \$16.2 billion worth of investment.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, great changes came with the Congressional elections of 1930, changes that showed whom the American voters blamed for the lack of recovery. Democrats gained more than fifty seats in the House and eleven seats in the Senate, ousting conservative Republicans and boosting progressives within both parties.<sup>6</sup> Hoover's administration knew it needed to show initiative against the Depression to retain power. In July of 1932, Hoover signed the Emergency Relief and Construction Act to begin the executive response. That same month, Congress also created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to give low-interest loans to farmers hardest hit by the agricultural Depression, where over-production of major cash crops (such as tobacco and cotton) had resulted in substantially lowered market prices.<sup>7</sup> Approximately forty thousand farmers in North Carolina received more than 4.6 million dollars in loans from the RFC.<sup>8</sup> However, the RFC served only to temporarily stall the inevitable collapse of the American banking system.<sup>9</sup>

Voters' response to Hoover's inadequacies created similar results in the next election. By autumn of 1932, the Republican Party had become synonymous with the effects of the Depression. On the other hand, voters viewed the Democrats as an integral part of the solution. Results in the Senate and the House continued to suggest such sentiment:

Republicans won only 6 of the 34 Senate races and Democrats gained an additional ninety seats in the House. The resulting advantage of the Democrats, when combined with the 1930 results, meant that more than half of the Seventy-third Congress was elected as a direct response to the Republicans' perceived shortcomings in addressing the effects of the Depression.<sup>10</sup>

The most easily predictable outcome of the election year was the win by New York's governor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, for the office of President. His campaign paralleled the intent of the RFC: asserting that "insufficient farm income was the root of the Depression," he thought that immediate steps had to be taken to slow further adverse effects in the agricultural market.<sup>11</sup> Thus, within weeks of taking office, Roosevelt signed the Relief Act into law on May 12, 1933. The Act incorporated the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). The AAA's success was less than legendary, although it was hailed as a panacea for the troubled farmers of the country. Considering participation in the AAA was voluntary, it was not as effective as a mandatory program might have been.<sup>12</sup>

The basic problem behind deflated farm prices was overproduction. American farmers had in fact become too productive; an overabundance of crops caused severe declines in the market prices of tobacco, cotton, and peanuts. In response, the AAA was designed to prop up prices through federal subsidies. By paying farmers to take a portion of their acreage out of production and to thus produce less, the intent was to inflate market value of previously over-produced crops. Instead, large landowners took only their poorest land out of production, choosing to concentrate on their better soil more intensively, while

still producing at or close to previous levels. Thus, farm prices did not fully recover to their 1929 levels until the early 1940s.<sup>13</sup>

For a significant number of southern farmers in the sharecropping and tenancy system, the AAA payments to landowners were severely detrimental. When landowners took their poorest acreage out of production, they often chose to evict some of the tenants or sharecroppers farming portions of their land while keeping the AAA subsidy checks for themselves. Consequently, the evicted sharecroppers and tenants left homeless and jobless placed more pressure upon the day laborer pool for agricultural and industrial work within the already tight Southern job market.

During the same month in which Roosevelt created the AAA, Congress created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration as “the New Deal’s first direct answer to the question of absolute need.”<sup>14</sup> Modern readers must remember that in 1932, only eight states provided any form of unemployment payments; FERA attempted to alleviate such inadequacies.<sup>15</sup> The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the first large-scale employment program of Roosevelt’s New Deal, enlisted its first serviceman in April of 1933. The CCC employed young men through federal service to rehabilitate and restore state and national forests and public lands on over one thousand, five hundred camps by the end of July of 1933. In June, Congress created the Public Works Administration (PWA) under the National Industrial Recovery Act. Roosevelt designed the PWA as an urban counterpart to the CCC to repair the physical infrastructure of numerous cities. Roosevelt created the Civil Works Administration (CWA) by executive order by November. The New Deal’s best-

known employment program came in April of 1935 in the Works Progress Administration (WPA), “employing an average of 2.3 million people every year, spending \$11.4 billion by the end of fiscal 1940.” Within the WPA, the National Youth Administration (NYA) was created to employ those young men previously overlooked by other employment opportunities because they were not yet heads of households.<sup>16</sup> Beyond new employment programs, 1935 saw the creation of the Social Security Act to provide for “the care of the aged, unemployed, handicapped, and impoverished.” However, it excluded a large portion of Southerners: those employed in agricultural or domestic wage labor.<sup>17</sup> Many more Southerners in the sharecropping system were ineligible for government assistance.

This litany of employment and relief programs created by the Roosevelt administration immediately benefited millions of Americans hit by the Depression. By 1937, unemployment had decreased from 13 million in 1932 to approximately 7.7 million. The average salary for a factory worker had risen from \$1,086 to \$1,376 and corporate income had recovered by almost \$8 billion dollars over the 1932 level. Though organized labor had experienced a major setback after the Supreme Court overturned the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1935, the passage of the Fair Labor and Standards Act of 1938 established the forty hour workweek and set a minimum wage. Once again, agricultural workers were excluded from the advances of the Fair Labor and Standards Act’s new protections.<sup>18</sup>

The pattern set by New Deal programs continued to mark progress against unemployment in urban areas and industry, yet did not adequately address the needs of most Southerners, employed in some way in the agricultural sector. A full quarter of Americans

lived on farms in 1930, but that proportion represented a drop from forty-one percent living on farms thirty years previous.<sup>19</sup> In 1929, the largely rural and heavily agrarian state of North Carolina already ranked “forty-fifth in per capita income and no better than ninth in the South” out of the eleven states of the former Confederacy. Only because of North Carolina’s already low per capita income level in 1929 could it later claim “the smallest decline in real per capita income between 1929 and 1933 of any state.”<sup>20</sup> North Carolina could boast that because their farmers’ incomes were already so low they did not have far to fall during the Depression. As later government and private inquiry would discover by the late 1930s, Southeastern states could not be ignored if the nation’s overall economic picture were expected to improve. *The Report on Economic Conditions of the South* would further explain the lack of purchasing power in North Carolina and other poor states in the Southeast. Lack of spending power on the part of the state’s huge rural population could have potentially devastating consequences for attracting and retaining businesses. If very few people could afford to buy a product, the owners could not afford to manufacture or sell their products in a state with poor purchasing power.

As mentioned previously, the overproduction of American farmers paralleled the fallout from the crash of 1929. Between the late 1920’s and 1931, the average price for tobacco, the leading crop in North Carolina, dropped from approximately twenty cents per pound to barely more than eight cents per pound. Another important North Carolina crop, cotton, slipped from 16.6 cents per pound in 1929 to just below six cents per pound in 1931. While the cash value of crops produced in the state dropped by more than half between 1928

and 1932, that translated into a loss of more than two-thirds for individual farm income. Overall, for a state with three-quarters of its population in rural areas, the cash farm income dropped from \$321 million to barely \$98 million, signaling a glaring problem for the state's economy.<sup>21</sup>

Like his federal counterpart President Hoover, conservative North Carolina governor Max Gardner disliked governmental intervention in the free market economy, no matter how troubled. Resisting state-level relief or response, he chose to endorse his "Live at Home" program to encourage a return to a self-sustaining lifestyle. The program sought to educate those farmers who had abandoned subsistence farming for reliance on tobacco or cotton income to buy store-bought goods and groceries. To "Live at Home" meant producing most of one's own food products rather than depending upon increasingly difficult attempts to live on groceries purchased by profits from cash crop farming, such as the sale of tobacco or cotton. While certain farmers benefited from such advice, the program "did not cause a sufficient reduction in cotton and tobacco production to affect prices."<sup>22</sup>

On the national level, within the administration of the AAA, North Carolinians and other Southeastern sharecroppers and tenant farmers suffered from oversight. The AAA operated within the Department of Agriculture, reporting directly to both President Roosevelt and his secretary of agriculture, Henry Wallace. As an Iowa native, Wallace knew about corn and hog production, but yet he "had little firsthand knowledge of the problems unique to southern agriculture,"<sup>23</sup> namely the sharecropping and tenancy system that produced most of the Southeast's cotton and tobacco, the commodities produced by most North Carolinian

farmers. Wallace's undersecretary, Rexford G. Tugwell, would later become the director of the Resettlement Administration (RA) within the Department of Agriculture in 1935.<sup>24</sup>

Tugwell was a trusted administrator within Roosevelt's administration as "a firm believer in planning and government regulation of the marketplace to protect the consumer."<sup>25</sup> Thus the RA, like the AAA, struggled to understand and fully address the crippling effects of the tenancy system.

The RA and the AAA attempted to help farmers through two different approaches. The AAA, through subsidies to voluntarily participating landowners, sought to adjust market prices for major cash crops. The Resettlement Administration, as the name implies, helped non-landowning farmers to purchase their own land through moving, or resettling. Though the Resettlement Administration was restructured significantly in 1937 as the Farm Security Administration (FSA), the FSA continued the same mission to help impoverished farmers to buy their own land through low-interest, long-term loans. The RA and FSA helped many to move to resettlement areas, the most famous of which is Greenbelt, Maryland, "the first of three planned towns built and owned by the U.S. Government during the Great Depression."<sup>26</sup> The most successful resettlement in North Carolina was Penderlea, near the state's capital city of Raleigh. Homesteaders at Penderlea, as recipients of loans through the RA were able to pay about \$100 a year for a 30-year mortgage on a new home and twenty acres of land. Many of the homesteaders at Penderlea worked as day laborers, helping to build nearby Camp Davis and Camp Lejeune.<sup>27</sup>

The AAA is also important to many historians of North Carolina as it had the most lasting impact of any New Deal program within the state. At the state level, registration for

the AAA's subsidy program was left to the director of the state agricultural Extension Service, Ira O. Schaub. Schaub was also a dean at North Carolina State College (later North Carolina State University). The connection between the college and the Extension service was an inherent part of the land-grant college system in North Carolina, as the Extension Service employed a field staff capable of administering the relief in AAA programs, without a need for additional bureaucracy. Once again, the AAA relief reached only the landowners and not their tenants, leaving out the non-landowning farmers who populated much of the eastern and piedmont farms of the state. As across the Southeast, landlords receiving AAA subsidies reduced their acreage and evicted their tenants and sharecroppers, not needing their work on the remaining acreage left in production.<sup>28</sup>

Crop prices did not begin to increase until October of 1933. In that month, the AAA and the tobacco industry agreed on "an average parity price of at least seventeen cents a pound,"<sup>29</sup> more than four times the market price only two years earlier. Thanks to rebounding prices for both tobacco and cotton by 1935, Southern farmers showed the support necessary to pass the Bankhead and Kerr-Smith Acts to extend mandatory crop restriction to stabilize agricultural market prices more effectively than the AAA's voluntary enlistment.<sup>30</sup> North Carolina farmers experienced the "highest percentage of increase [in cash farm income] from 1932 to 1934, moving from sixteenth among the states to fifth." In those same two years, crop values had increased by more than 106 percent. Furthermore, tobacco farmers benefited from the passage of the Flanagan bill in 1935, in which Congress called for the government grading of tobacco to further ensure market equity in the pricing of the crop.<sup>31</sup>

Not until the passage of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act of 1937, which created the Farm Security Corporation, did the federal government determine an effective means to help the poorest non-landowning farmers to buy their farms with low-interest, long-term federal loans. The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act also restructured Tugwell's ineffective RA as the Farm Security Administration (FSA).<sup>32</sup> Eventually more than half of the rehabilitation loans and almost seventy percent of the purchase loans provided by the FSA went to Southern farmers.<sup>33</sup> By 1937, \$3.2 million had been loaned to over eight thousand families in North Carolina, while an additional three hundred families received approximately \$70,000 in grants. Between 1938 and 1940, the FSA approved an additional \$3.3 million in loans for more than 690 farm families in North Carolina.<sup>34</sup>

At about this same time, Roosevelt became increasingly concerned with his sloping support in the South. This erosion of support, despite successes by the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act, can be attributed to a combination of factors. Factors included the 1937 economic recession, the rise of organized labor threatening Southern business interests (particularly the textile industry within North Carolina), and the growing resentment of Southern Democrats against perceived radicalism within the Democratic Party through New Deal policy. In response to such concerns, Roosevelt appointed Lowell Mellett as the new executive director of the National Emergency Council (NEC), previously seen as an ineffective fact-gathering agency. With the new leader came new direction: to collect facts about the South to show Southern politicians and voters how New Deal programs benefited the Southern states. The result was *The Report on Economic Conditions of the South*. When the NEC printed 100,000 copies of the *Report* in August of 1938, it was immediately hailed

for “its stylistic simplicity, careful avoidance of polemic, and straightforward presentation of data proved appealing to large numbers of educated southerners.”<sup>35</sup>

President Roosevelt, in a letter accompanying publication of the report, declared the South to be “the nation’s No. 1 economic problem.”<sup>36</sup> The President’s bold exclamation, informed by the statistical report, called the nation to realize that its past record of ignoring the problems of the rural South could continue no longer. If the nation were to fully recover from the Depression, it had to come to terms with its forgotten and overlooked region of the Southeast. The report made several conclusions that had been propounded by southern sociologists (notably Howard Odum and his colleagues at UNC-Chapel Hill) prior to 1938. While declaring the South rich in “its people and its physical resources,” the report found that the South was in fact plagued by its population’s inability to fully utilize its own resources. Since the South’s birthrate far exceeded any other region of the country, the report showed that much of the future replenishment of the nation’s population would come from the South. The report concluded that the population problems faced by the South “are the most pressing of any America must face.”<sup>37</sup> Margaret Jarman Hagood’s 1937 doctoral dissertation, a population study of native-born white women in the South, pointed to a similar, but more specific conclusion. She insisted that to understand the South’s people and resources, the mothers of the South had to be understood as well.

The *Report* presented staggering statistics differentiating the South from the rest of the nation. On a variety of indices, the South was repeatedly determined to be grossly deficient in standards of living when placed in comparison to the rest of the nation. The

report paralleled many of the points made by Howard Odum in his 1936 landmark, *Southern Regions of the United States*.<sup>38</sup> Both the report and Odum's study addressed how the South lagged in income and spending power, in housing (including plumbing and electrical access), and in public health.

The South's exceedingly low income averages, along with the consequently low standards of living and lack of spending power for Southern families, underlay the other problems in housing and public health plaguing the region. The *Report*, in its section on "Private and Public Income," noted that even the richest state in the Southeast could not match the average income of the poorest state in the rest of the country. The average annual income across the rest of the country was just over \$600, while the average for the South was a paltry \$314.<sup>39</sup> Despite less than a five percent differential in estimated cost of living between urban areas in the Northeast and those in the Southeast, Southern industrial workers' wages were "often 30 to 50 percent below national averages."<sup>40</sup> In evaluating the spending power of those crippled by low incomes, the report found that among white farm families living on the average income of approximately \$315, a Southerner could easily spend, "without help, twice that amount for the things he needs and needs badly."<sup>41</sup> Odum's findings published two years earlier than the report were not much different. At least twice, Odum reminded his readers that the South had "the lowest per capita farm income, the lowest income per worker."<sup>42</sup> Including all incomes across the states and averaging by state for per capita wealth, the South was still found to be the poorest and "in general no state outside of the southern regions [ranks] as low as the highest southeastern."<sup>43</sup> In measuring the bank resources held by each region, again the South was lowest and in "per capita bank resources

seven southeastern states record under \$150. No other states are so low.”<sup>44</sup> With comparatively shameful incomes, Southerners were without the economic resources to afford a basic standard of living routinely enjoyed by many Americans in other regions of the country.

Standards of living may be more concretely understood in evaluating housing, such as by access to indoor plumbing and electricity. The *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* addressed the topic of sub-standard housing by finding “direct relationships between poor housing and poor health, and between poor housing and crime.”<sup>45</sup> The *Report* found a general “lack of sanitary flush toilets and sewer systems for waste disposal” leading to higher rates of “hookworm infection and consequent anemia . . . as a result of soil pollution” from the lack of proper sanitation. Most simply, the *Report* concluded that “[h]ouses in the rural South are the oldest, have the lowest value, and have the greatest need of repairs of any farmhouses in the United States.”<sup>46</sup> Of fourteen states identified as composing the South, by 1930 “only 5.7 percent [of farmhouses] had water piped to the house and 3.4 percent had water piped to the bathroom.” Not even screens to protect farm families from mosquitoes and flies were common; more than a third of Southern farmhouses were without window screens.<sup>47</sup> Odum’s conclusion on Southern standards of living poked at the idea of the “New South.” Odum stated that the poverty of the rural South composed the “new agrarian culture . . . fabricated upon the assumption of reasonable advances in rural electrification, good roads, and ample tools and facilities for richer living. Here again the Southeast excels in its natural equipment and awaits only the technics of a new day.”<sup>48</sup>

Whether or not a household had access to electricity, much less the ability to afford electric household appliances, further separated rural Southerners from their urban Northern neighbors. This difference in experience is particularly true for the wives and mothers who often acted as the household managers, overseeing the application of income generated by (and often in partnership with) their husbands. As early as 1925, over half of all American homes had wiring for electricity, with even higher rates in urban areas.<sup>49</sup> The New Deal's Rural Electrification Administration (REA), created in 1935, successfully raised the rate of farm electrification from 10.9 percent in 1935 to 30.4 percent in 1940. The effect in North Carolina was even greater where the rate rose in the same period from 3.2 percent to almost 26 percent of farms. The rate may have been higher if the federal REA had not had to contend with the local complications of the state-level NCREA and privately owned cooperatives that sought to control both placement and delivery of electrical power.<sup>50</sup>

For women, the rate of electrification had definite ramifications, considering the range of timesaving devices already available to many urban housewives in the 1930s. Women of comfortable means and location could choose from an assortment of small appliances such as sewing machines and irons, toasters and waffle irons, and even the larger appliances like refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. Even though the devices were designed to reduce time spent housekeeping, the resulting higher expectations of cleanliness kept the average wife's housekeeping tasks at over sixty hours a week, from food preparation to washing the family's laundry.<sup>51</sup> For wives of sharecroppers and tenant farmers in North Carolina, access to electricity was quite often an impossibility. For urban

wives, it was a comparative luxury to choose to return to mending old clothes and home canning to save money, while for rural wives, it was their existing way of life, with or without the Depression.

Finally, on the index of public health, the *Report* once again found alarming problems in the South. The South was described as “a belt of sickness, misery, and unnecessary death.” The United States Public Health service had recorded higher rates of syphilis and malaria, while private studies found higher rates for pneumonia, tuberculosis, and infant mortality.<sup>52</sup> Odum’s book also studied rates of pellagra and its underlying cause: rampant malnutrition. His findings estimated that between “50 and 90 per cent of southern children in large areas receive inadequate diets for any normal health standard.” Furthermore, he found high rates of “tuberculosis, rickets, anemia, and many other results of poor diet.”<sup>53</sup> To rectify availability of adequate dairy products such as eggs and milk, Odum recommended tremendous increases in production. For minimum requirements for milk consumption alone, Odum recommended that the South produce approximately 1.16 billion gallons more per year over current production.<sup>54</sup> While the *Report* and Odum’s *Southern Regions* addressed widespread nutritional and public health concerns, Hagood’s later study would investigate health problems unique to Southern wives and mothers, such as access to birth control, prenatal care or midwives.

The *Report* only hinted at the underlying system of farm tenancy and sharecropping. The report mentioned, “[h]alf of the South’s farmers are tenants” but dismissed them as having “little interest in preserving soil they do not own.”<sup>55</sup> Considering that half of the South’s farmers were tenants or sharecroppers in 1938, it was only a slight improvement over

the 1930 statistic showing that non-landowning farmers outnumbered landowning farmers by more than one million.<sup>56</sup> Another source estimates that by 1935, the total number of farmers who worked on another's land had grown to compose a 63 percent majority of the nation's tenant farmers.<sup>57</sup> The South could lay claim to having not only the majority of the country's tenant farmers, but also having more tenant farmers than landowners within its own region. The problem of farm tenancy was at epidemic proportion by the mid-1930's, with New Deal programs only encouraging landowners to evict more and more tenants. Some historians credit the New Deal with only collapsing this "old agricultural regime" inadvertently, by encouraging landowners to simultaneously evict tenants and to turn away day laborers in favor of government subsidies and mechanization.<sup>58</sup>

If sharecropping and tenancy were integral to Southern agriculture, then they were integral within North Carolina's economy. In 1935, white sharecroppers and tenants operated 47.2 percent of the state's 300,967 farms while their black counterparts operated an additional 23 percent of North Carolina farms. Within a limited survey of 1,703 rural heads of household in North Carolina that same year, only 29 percent owned the farms on which they worked, while 22 percent were cash tenants and 24 percent were sharecroppers. Meanwhile, 9.5 percent of those who worked on farms were day laborers and another 15.3 percent were day laborers in urbanized industries, such as textiles, in North Carolina. The rates for tenancy were highest in the fifteen eastern North Carolina counties where more than 60 percent of farmers did not own their land. Another thirty-one counties could claim tenancy rates hovering between 40 and 60 percent. Tenancy prevailed on tobacco farms in the eastern counties and on cotton farms of the southern piedmont.<sup>59</sup> It is the white women

of those southern piedmont cotton farms who would form the bulk of Margaret Jarman Hagood's 1937 and 1939 population studies. Rather than assuming that the sharecroppers' wives' way of life was necessarily lacking by comparison to urban women outside the region, Margaret Hagood sought to approach them on their own terms. She sought to explain to the rest of the nation the central importance of their roles as mothers to the South and to the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Jarman Hagood, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 23, 5-8, 13-14, 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 45, 50-51, 111, 75-77.

<sup>4</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-75, 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Watkins, 102.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Carl Abrams, *Conservative Constraints: North Carolina and the New Deal* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 11.

<sup>9</sup> McElvaine, 89.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 122, 128, 134, 146.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-150.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 148, 150.

<sup>14</sup> Watkins, 169.

<sup>15</sup> McElvaine, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Watkins, 162, 189, 178-9, 262-3, 270.

<sup>17</sup> McElvaine, 257.

<sup>18</sup> Watkins, 504-5, 508.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>20</sup> Abrams, 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 39.

<sup>24</sup> Watkins, 354.

<sup>25</sup> McElvaine, 126.

<sup>26</sup> Anita Price Davis, *North Carolina During the Great Depression: A Documentary Portrait of a Decade* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2003), 170.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>28</sup> Abrams, 55, 60, 64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>30</sup> Biles, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Abrams, 80, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Watkins, 389.

<sup>33</sup> Biles, 49.

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<sup>34</sup> Abrams, 101, 104.

<sup>35</sup> David L. Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis, eds., *Confronting Southern Poverty in the Great Depression: The Report on Economic Conditions of the South with Related Documents* (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996), 14-15, 21, 23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936; Durham: Seeman Printery, 1937 reprint).

<sup>39</sup> Carlton and Coclanis, 54.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>42</sup> Odum, 41, 343.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>45</sup> Carlton and Coclanis, 61.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>48</sup> Odum, 57.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 5.

<sup>50</sup> Abrams, 106-110.

<sup>51</sup> Ware, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Carlton and Coclanis, 59-60.

<sup>53</sup> Odum, 51, 53.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Carlton and Coclanis, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Watkins, 341.

<sup>57</sup> Biles, 36.

<sup>58</sup> Carlton and Coclanis, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Abrams, 96-7.

### **The Intersection of Documentary and Sociology in the 1930s**

During development of particular literary, artistic, and intellectual movements, the participants are not always cognizant of their participation in a movement. Instead, the developments within movements often coalesce and become apparent only in hindsight. Other movements, like documentary style in the 1930's, were much more intentional in their development. The novelists, journalists, playwrights, critics, artists, photographers, and even sociologists of the 1930's were determined to frame their response to the Depression within the framework of documentary style. Sociologists like Margaret Hagood attempted to combine both quantitative facts with qualitative descriptions to achieve the artistic realism known as documentary style. Understanding documentary intention and style is necessary to fully comprehend the way in which Hagood studied and presented the white sharecroppers' wives of the South.

Documentary style grew out of earlier Progressive impulses to become an artistic and intellectual movement during the Depression years. Intellectual historian Richard Pells, author of *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (1973), traces the early roots of documentary's growth to Progressivism's search for order. If the stock market crash and its resultant Depression epitomized "the inherent anarchy of economic life," then proper planning and organization by the new class of professionals and managers could bring "stability to industrial capitalism" through "a rationalized economy" and a general "acceptance of bureaucracy."<sup>1</sup> The lasting idea of Progressivism became the belief that sufficient planning and a willingness to implement reform could not only solve the current Depression, but could also prevent another

depression in the future. This concept, according to Pells, assured that the “impulse toward a democratic collectivism was elevated to a cultural as well as an economic ideal.”<sup>2</sup>

Progressivism influenced not only documentary style’s realism, but also the New Deal programs’ reliance on proper planning bureaucracy. Pells qualifies his evaluation of Progressivism by noting that unlike many proponents of Progressivism, Roosevelt’s advisers actually had experience (and thus the wisdom) to know that addressing basics like “housing, health, unemployment, and poverty” was more important than implementing a particular moral order, as prioritized by many Progressives. Roosevelt’s Progressive-minded advisers also felt that national unity through collective democracy “was more compelling than class struggle.” As Pells’ “architects of the New Deal,” the advisers also believed that they could achieve their economic goals “while leaving industrial and corporate capitalism intact.”<sup>3</sup>

The preceding step for the architects of the New Deal before planning and stabilization was of course the evaluation of current conditions. The starting point of evaluation and authentic representation formed the basis for the documentary genre. In the words of Roy Stryker, director of photographers for the Resettlement Administration’s Historical Section, “Truth is the objective of the documentary attitude.”<sup>4</sup> The seminal work in analyzing the development and manifestations of documentary style is William Stott’s *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973). Stott defines documentary as a “genre of actuality . . . a communication not of imagined things, but of real things only,” although in that communication, “feeling comes first.”<sup>5</sup> Stott also quotes Warren Susman who said, “[T]he whole idea of documentary . . . makes it possible to see, know, and feel the details of life, to feel oneself part of some other’s experience.”<sup>6</sup> It is this very attempt to

know the details of the experience of others which informs Hagood's study and presentation of the lives of white Southern women in *Mothers of the South*; hence the term "portraiture" in the sub-title.

Stott, after defining documentary style, analyzes how the "documentary motive was at work throughout the culture of the time," in WPA arts projects, but also in radio broadcasting and popular magazines, as well as newspaper journalism, even sociological case studies. Throughout the many forms of documentary, Stott identified two strains of the style: the quantitative facts to inform the intellect and the qualitative descriptions to inform the emotions.<sup>7</sup> Stott asserts that true documentary necessarily implied social documentary, to show "man at grips with conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time and place."<sup>8</sup> Hagood's study would combine the quantitative population and economic statistics with the descriptive and qualitative portraiture of the women's experience. Her superb crafting of a sociological study in the documentary style showed not only the conditions of Southern sharecropping, but more importantly, that those deplorable conditions were "neither permanent nor necessary," that proper sociological intervention could not only illuminate, but change experience.

Though Stott spends a proportionally small amount of analysis of the documentary motive at work in the social sciences of the Depression, he does agree that documentary style was a central motive for sociologists seeking legitimacy and relevance for their studies of particular populations (such as white wives of Southern sharecroppers). Much of Stott's analysis of writers and reporters can also be said of many sociologists of the era. In any type

of documentary writing, the first concern is to portray accurately the experience of the common man, and if possible, to portray it from the perspective of the common man.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, to portray the experience of the common man and woman accurately, documentary writers, reporters, and photographers quite often lived among the people whom they presented. They did this to better inform their quantitative and qualitative evaluations, to relate not only factual, but also emotional experiences.<sup>10</sup> Pells sees such observer participation as an attempt to “duplicate the pioneer adventure and thereby to reassert one’s identity and heritage as an American – a crucial goal for intellectuals in the 1930’s.” Documentarians, like Progressives before them, wanted to gain a feeling of control in their lives, a feeling that was shattered by the economic chaos and devastation around them.<sup>11</sup> Intellectual historian Terry Cooney emphasizes this attempt towards self-validation within documentary style as representing “the belief that the insights they were gaining into American social relationships confirmed the value of their approach.” By confronting and presenting reality, writers learned of and concentrated on motifs of “resilience or endurance, . . . character and continuity, and the idea of variousness or heterogeneity, seen as a source of democratic vitality.”<sup>12</sup> It is from the approach of embracing, rather than criticizing, the unique way of life for white sharecroppers in the South that Hagood began. Rather than using a moralistic or outsider approach, Hagood did not judge the circumstances under which the women in her study lived. Instead, she chose to show ways in which their circumstances could be understood and then improved.

Ultimately, Pells and Cooney agree on the idea of innate goodness and the inevitable triumph of the common man against his conditions. The triumph represents the ultimately

indestructible nature of mankind, best epitomized in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Though a work of fiction, *Grapes of Wrath* is considered documentary in style because of its intent to inform the reader of others' actual experiences and emotions, to illustrate the victory of common man over economic and physical hardships.<sup>13</sup> Hagood, too, shows how her mothers of the South, despite decided economic disadvantages, still live in stable marriages, raise numerous children, and remain happy rather than completely discouraged or hopeless as outsiders might expect them to be.

Documentary style, like the subjects it encompassed, was not necessarily uniform in how to represent reality. Different approaches could be employed to present varying subjects or intentions. Documentary eventually included not only those who intended to present reality, but also those who wanted to create only the impression of well-researched documentary. Cooney has noted that one such bias at work in documentary would be to assert the vitality and superiority of democracy over fascism and communism. Documentary style could also be used to endorse an assumed mainstream way of life, such as middle-class, northern, urban, white life as naturalized, with all others as necessarily peculiar. For example, when FERA reporters described deviations from a certain standard of living, they implied deviations from northern, urban, white standards of living that they encountered while evaluating Southern diet, clothing, shelter, and employment.<sup>14</sup> Normalization of certain standards of cultural evaluation necessarily made many outsider portrayals of Southern life to seem foreign from American norms. Stott asserts that true documentary, by contrast, sought to retain the perspective of its subjects, to give "the inarticulate a voice."<sup>15</sup> Thus, if a documentary author such as Erskine Caldwell naturalized the perspective of the

outsider (his reading audience), he also necessarily alienated the perspective of the Southern tenant farmer (his subject in *Tobacco Road* and *You Have Seen Their Faces*). Margaret Jarman Hagood chose to portray Southerners from their own perspective, working towards a more realistic perspective for documentary. If Caldwell sought to give only the impression of documentary style, then Hagood's approach necessarily achieved documentary style. Hagood's presentation stands as an important counterpoint to the portrait of Southerners drawn by Caldwell's more popular literature.

Hagood's achievement of a more holistic combination of quantitative and qualitative documentary style was made possible by her training at the University of North Carolina's Institute for Research in Social Science. The University, its Institute, and the University Press together represented the most progressive and impressive social documentary studies of which the 1930's South was capable. The 1920's have been recognized as a decade of significant, liberalizing progress for the nation's oldest public university: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The establishment of the University Press began in 1922, the founding of the Institute came in 1924, and finally by 1930, the renowned Southern Historical Collection was organized. Between 1930 and 1949, the university's president, Frank P. Graham, lent his influence and national reputation as an educator, statesman, and social activist.<sup>16</sup> Howard W. Odum, the founder of the Institute for Research in Social Science, joined the University in 1924 as the chair of the sociology department, the dean of the School of Public Welfare, and the founding editor of the *Journal of Social Forces*.<sup>17</sup> By many estimates, both then and now, if "North Carolina was the most progressive of Southern

states, its university was near the heart of that advance, and Odum was a leader in Chapel Hill.”<sup>18</sup>

On the national level, the same year that Odum founded the Institute for Research in Social Science, sociologist Edward Lindeman coined the popular term of “participant observer,” for the before-mentioned technique of living among those who are being studied, to participate in their way of life to evaluate more accurately experiences from the perspective of fellow participants. It was also during the twenties that American sociologists first began trying the participant observer technique with domestic subjects after first trying it in other countries. Though many sociologists valued the approach, they also realized the intrusion of the participant observer may “somewhat distort the things and people observed.”<sup>19</sup>

While familiar with the participant observer technique, Odum’s forte lay in amassing intimidating amounts of statistical data from which to draw sociological conclusions. His seminal work, *Southern Regions of the United States* became “a manifesto of the newest new South that seemed to speak with the scientific detachment of the sociologist” rather than the more emotionally engaged participant observer, yet firmly placed Odum at the forefront of modern Southern sociologists. Odum’s *Southern Regions* paralleled the impact of *The Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, yet exceeded the report in its scope and detail. Odum certainly geared his work towards a more statistically-inclined academic audience rather than appealing to the lay reader for whom the *Report* was intended to reach.

Thanks in large part to Odum's leadership of the sociology department and Institute for Social Research, his influence was felt not only in *Southern Regions*, but also in almost every other sociological book printed by the University of North Carolina Press. His influence was so extensive that he can be credited with having sired a school within sociological thought, the school of regionalism.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the Press retained its own reputation for authenticity in its publications. One contemporary evaluation of the Press in *Publishers' Weekly* in 1940 concluded that "librarians recommend Chapel Hill books because they recognize that the imprint carries the assurance of authenticity." Such authenticity was recognized on a national scale, as despite being a regional publisher, the press was known to make "every effort to distribute its books on a nation-wide scale."<sup>21</sup> Hagood contributed to the works published by Odum's school of sociology through the UNC Press, and in turn, Odum's school grew out of a combination of older traditions informing the burgeoning field of sociological inquiry.

Howard W. Odum was born in 1884 on a small family farm in Bethlehem, Georgia. His interest in the social sciences began while he was a graduate student in Oxford at the University of Mississippi.<sup>22</sup> Throughout his graduate studies at Oxford (and beyond) he absorbed the teachings of Progressives "who believed that science could reveal the secrets of social phenomena and pave the way for major leap forward in the human condition."<sup>23</sup> After Mississippi, Odum earned his first Ph.D. in psychology at Clark University in 1909 under Stanley Hall, an adherent of folk psychology. He then earned his second Ph.D. in sociology at Columbia University in 1910 under the tutelage of Franklin Giddings.<sup>24</sup>

While Odum was a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia, he encountered (either through friends or lectures) the new theories of noted anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas' theories suggested that "environment, not innate racial traits, was responsible for the cultural and psychological characteristics of ethnic and racial groups." Presumably, from his later work, Odum incorporated these views into his view of the South. After brief stints at both the University of Georgia and Emory University, he moved to Chapel Hill in 1924.<sup>25</sup>

The University of North Carolina was not the first Southern school to have a department for sociological research. By 1918, sociology departments had been founded in both Richmond and Houston. As early as 1916 Eugene Branson had recommended to President Franklin Graham that Chapel Hill should also found a sociology department.<sup>26</sup> By the 1920's the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial fund had achieved particular influence in funding various schools' sociological departments and institutes for research. The most notable recipients of funds from the Rockefeller fund included the nation's regional leaders: Columbia University and Harvard in the Northeast, the University of Chicago in the Midwest, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Southeast. While Columbia, Harvard, and Chicago received funds due to their high numbers of doctoral candidates in the social sciences, UNC was chosen to help "build a regional centre in the south."<sup>27</sup> As Odum depended upon Rockefeller, and not the University, for funding for his Institute, the fund allowed him to lead the way in demographic data for "quantitative delineation of the region."<sup>28</sup> Howard Odum was also an active member of Hoover's President's Committee on Social Trends. By 1933, the Committee published a two-volume report prefaced by former President Hoover who had commissioned the work.<sup>29</sup>

Odum's extensive credentials and involvement in numerous organizations to advance sociological study in the South, particularly within North Carolina, prepared him to formulate his theory of regionalism as propounded in *Southern Regions*. He advocated regionalism in an attempt to re-orient sociological study away from the older, more divisive sectionalism which pitted the Old South against the Northeast rather than moving to a newer framework suggested in regional study.<sup>30</sup> The best-known and most credible co-founder of regionalism was Rupert Bayless Vance, a fellow "scholar, author, and lecturer" during his forty-year tenure at the University of North Carolina. Vance had a bachelor's degree in English literature as well as a master's degree in economics, which educated his view of need for economic reform in the South. He is best remembered for his 1932 opus, *Human Geography of the South: A Study in Regional Resources and Human Adequacy*.<sup>31</sup> Odum's 1929 monograph, *An American Epoch*, encouraged Vance to write *Human Geography*. Together, Odum and Vance worked to secure funding from both the Rockefeller fund and the Rosenwald fund. They worked together to ensure the progressive nature of articles featured in *Social Forces*. That progressive nature was almost too liberal for the conservative state of North Carolina where fundamentalist preachers publicly "denounced Odum, *Social Forces*, modernity, and the university that bred them." Yet with Vance's support, Odum kept the department and the Institute well funded as Odum knew and advised "a succession of state governors" during his years at the University.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, Odum's theory of regionalism was best propounded in *Southern Regions*. In his introduction covering the major points to be discussed in the book, he cited a necessary shift towards "the regional-national viewpoint as opposed to the earlier local-sectional

emphasis” and that the South was the “testing grounds of American regionalism.”<sup>33</sup> Odum sought to explain how, of the nation’s six proposed regions, the Southeast represented “a large and powerful segment of the American people . . . conditioned by complexity of culture and cumulative handicaps as to make the nature of future development problematical.”<sup>34</sup>

Such sentiment would be echoed two years later in the federal *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*. Yet, unlike the report, Odum’s proposed solution was the abandonment of sectionalist resentment in favor of “practical design and planning so geared to regional reality . . . as to insure results . . . in harmony with the living principles of American institutes.”<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, as a student of Odum, Hagood wrote a study which encompassed a group of women in the Southeast joined by occupation and lifestyle, not by state or county lines. One reviewer of *Regions* correctly concluded that “the process of improving Southern conditions is not merely one of bringing the South ‘up’ to modern standards, but of making modern standards worth acceptance by the South.”<sup>36</sup> Yet Odum was not alone in suggesting that modernity was not the immediate solution to the unique problems of the South.

The Vanderbilt “Southern Agrarians,” or “the Southerners” from Nashville, Tennessee, waged an intellectual attack upon the appropriateness of modern industrialism being forced upon the South. When the Southerners published *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930, they assailed the idea that modernism could save the South from itself. In the introduction, the Southerners pit the “southern tradition,” (rural agrarianism) against the “industrial gospel” of the urban Northeast.<sup>37</sup> Their argument against capitalist industrialism’s emphasis upon purchasing labor through wages was qualified by carefully distancing the

group's views from those of socialists and communists of the time.<sup>38</sup> Instead, the Southerners decried the lack of priority given to a "sense of vocation," or any priority given to religion and the arts in the push towards industrial modernism.<sup>39</sup> Many historians now feel that the Southerners endorsed a relatively unrealistic reliance upon Jeffersonian notions of land-owning yeomanry, considering the majority of Southern farmers in the 1930's worked in debilitating poverty as sharecroppers or tenants on land that they did not own. However, the Southerners' statements acted as a necessary counterpoint, questioning outsiders' endorsement of expanding urban industrialism to "cure" the South. Similarly, Odum (and later Hagood) did not necessarily endorse bringing outside cultural values to cure "lag" in the South, but instead endorsed government-funded planning to tailor cures specific to each region.

Hagood's 1939 *Mothers of the South* represents a well-planned and presented combination of documentary and sociology. A doctoral student of Odum's progressive sociology department at the University of North Carolina, Hagood formed her study to conform to the framework of regionalism and presented it in both factual and descriptive style from the perspective of the women portrayed. While Hagood was not the first to compose sociological documentary about subjects in the South, she was the first to focus upon white wives of sharecroppers as her subject of inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>4</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973; 1986 reprint), 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xi, 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

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- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20-21.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 143, 149.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 178-9.
- <sup>11</sup> Pells, 197.
- <sup>12</sup> Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 158, 164.
- <sup>13</sup> Pells, 219.
- <sup>14</sup> Cooney, 165, 168-9.
- <sup>15</sup> Stott, 56.
- <sup>16</sup> William S. Powell, "North Carolina, University of," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*.
- <sup>17</sup> Wayne D. Brazil, "Odum, Howard W.," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South: 1920-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 31.
- <sup>19</sup> Stott, 155, 165, 188.
- <sup>20</sup> O'Brien, 31.
- <sup>21</sup> "North Carolina Press Covers All Markets," *The Publishers' Weekly* (May 11, 1940), 1825.
- <sup>22</sup> O'Brien, 32-3.
- <sup>23</sup> Brazil.
- <sup>24</sup> O'Brien, 34-5.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 38.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 40.
- <sup>27</sup> Jennifer Platt, *A History of Sociological Research Methods in America, 1920-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 144.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 205.
- <sup>29</sup> O'Brien, 48-9.
- <sup>30</sup> Platt, 205-6.
- <sup>31</sup> Elizabeth McGehee, "Vance, Rupert," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*.
- <sup>32</sup> O'Brien, 48, 42, 45.
- <sup>33</sup> Odum, ix.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., ix.
- <sup>36</sup> Donald Davidson, "Howard Odum and the Sociological Proteus," *The American Review* v. 8 no. 4 (February 1937), 406.
- <sup>37</sup> Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930), x.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., xiii.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., xiv-xv.

### **Hagood's Predecessors in the Sociological Documentary of the South**

Southern writer Flannery O'Connor once said, "Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic."<sup>1</sup> Such a statement seemed to hold true for many readers of the documentary style in the Depression era. In the spectrum from fictionalized literature to fascination with photography and feature writing in magazines of the day, readers of popular media craved documentary depictions of life in the South. Documentary, as a style, encompassed the fiction of Erskine Caldwell and his depiction of poor white sharecroppers in *Tobacco Road* as well as the more scientific writing of Margaret Hagood's sharecroppers' wives in *Mothers of the South*. While Margaret Hagood never claimed that she published her study as an explicit response to fictionalized accounts, her book certainly responded in kind with other sociologists of the South who strove to combat negative stereotypes commonly portrayed as documentary of southern sharecroppers.

While Erskine Caldwell's 1932 novel of white sharecroppers in the Deep South, *Tobacco Road*, was written as fiction, it was received as documentary. Caldwell's novel promoted him, according to one reviewer, to the rank of an "American Realist to whom we are going to listen very attentively during the next few years," a writer capable of "explicit portraiture," and who "had the justification of telling the truth."<sup>2</sup> The *Saturday Review of Literature* praised Caldwell's work for its "conviction of authenticity," for telling a story that is "realistic and grimly humorous."<sup>3</sup> The *New Republic* declared Caldwell's depiction as having "caught with photographic accuracy the illiterate and repetitive gibberish . . . the scant

hopes and the ineluctable vassalage of these poor whites.”<sup>4</sup> While more critical of Caldwell’s characterization, the reviewer from *New Masses* still determined *Tobacco Road* to be “a social document of no small importance.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, from today’s perspective, O’Connor’s truism seems to be at work: despite being wholly fictionalized, exaggerated, and grossly distorted, the work was received as a documentary presentation of life for white sharecroppers.

Caldwell presented his novel as a documentary of life in the rural South. From the preface to *Tobacco Road*, he told of his inspiration for writing the story:

It was in the heat of midsummer in Georgia, below the Piedmont, and I was walking along a dusty, weed-bordered, wagon-rutted road. Here I was in my own country, among eroded clay ridges and barren sand hills, a land I had known all my life.<sup>6</sup>

With his credentials as a Southern-born writer firmly in place, he claimed to be necessarily concerned with presenting the rural South realistically.

After this preface, the slow-moving plot unfolds, painting the picture of hapless Southern sharecroppers. They are cursed by physical disfigurement and disease, crippled by ignorance, infantile in their preoccupation with material goods, hunger-stricken, not to mention prone to spousal abuse and child marriage. Once Caldwell finished his picture, if his Northern audience did not already see the Deep South as foreign, both geographically and culturally, they certainly did after reading *Tobacco Road*. Caldwell seemed to have renounced any loyalty to realism in reference to his homeland after he penned this story from the safe distance of Connecticut.

As the story opens, the first character introduced is Lov Bensey, neighbor and friend to the Lester family’s patriarch, Jeeter. Lov has come to complain to Jeeter about his

uncooperative new child-bride. The pre-pubescent girl was “Jeeter Lester’s youngest daughter, Pearl. She was only twelve years old the summer before when [Lov] had married her.”<sup>7</sup> Lov laments that he has tried every manner of coercion he can think of; “he kicked her, he poured water over her, he threw rocks and sticks at her” and yet Pearl still refused to sleep with him.<sup>8</sup> However, Jeeter is neither offended nor surprised. Instead, he is happy of the profit he made in trading his youngest daughter to his neighbor: Love gave Jeeter “some quilts and nearly a gallon of cylinder oil, besides giving him all of a week’s pay, which was seven dollars. The money was what Jeeter wanted more than anything else, but the other things were badly needed, too.”<sup>9</sup> When the middle-aged preacher, Bessie, asks to marry Jeeter’s teenage son, Jeeter and his wife Ada make only material demands for the proposed trade, asking for overalls and snuff in return for their child.<sup>10</sup> Caldwell showed sharecroppers and their wives as unconcerned by spousal abuse or child marriage; these abnormalities were presented as common occurrences in the rural South.

Caldwell compounded his depiction of the Lester family by making every character in *Tobacco Road* to be cursed by ignorance, debilitating disease, or a repulsive disfigurement. Jeeter’s wife Ada is affected by a severe nutritional deficiency, causing pellagra, which “was slowly squeezing the life from her emaciated body [in] a lingering death.”<sup>11</sup> While pellagra was in fact rampant at this time in the South, Ada was also portrayed as a nag who served only to insult her husband’s every effort. She scolds Jeeter: “You’re just lazy” and “I been listening to you talk about taking up farming again so long I don’t believe nothing you say now . . . All you men is like that.”<sup>12</sup> The oldest daughter, Ellie May, is disfigured by a

harelip that “was spread open across her upper teeth, making her mouth appear as though she had no upper lip at all.”<sup>13</sup> Preacher Bessie Rice is cursed with a lack of bone in her nose, leaving only two gaping holes in her face, so that “it was like looking down the end of a double-barrel shotgun.”<sup>14</sup>

When Bessie buys a new car to marry Jeeter’s son Dude, she is too ignorant to know how to properly care for the vehicle. Within days of the purchase

The mashed front fender and broken rear spring had softened everybody’s concern for the automobile. After their first accident, when Dude ran into the back end of the two-horse wagon near McCoy and killed the colored man, anything else that happened to the car would not matter so very much, anyway.<sup>15</sup>

Not only does the Lester family lack the knowledge of proper care for a modern investment such as a car, but they used it to demonstrate their caustically idle racism. As mentioned, though Dude hits a black man while driving Bessie’s new car, his family immediately dismisses it as “Niggers will get killed. Looks like there ain’t no way to stop it.”<sup>16</sup> For their ignorance is not only commonplace, but also deadly in its racist manifestations. The only Lester blessed with beauty and aptitude, rather than disfigurement and ignorance, is the young Pearl. Clearly arguing as proof of eugenics, Caldwell revealed Pearl as the daughter of a drifter who spent one night with Ada years before.<sup>17</sup> At the conclusion of the novel, the cycle of ignorance and depravity is begun again. After his parents are killed in a brush fire set by Jeeter, Dude decides to follow his failed father as a cotton sharecropper.<sup>18</sup> The Lesters and their ilk were intriguing, but ultimately disgusting and hopeless to Caldwell’s readers, experienced only at arm’s length.

The success of the novel was superseded only by the wildly popular stage adaptation by Jack Kirkland. The theater production of *Tobacco Road* opened on December 4, 1933 at

the Masque Theatre in New York and ran without interruption until May of 1941. A touring company began traveling across the country, concurrent with the Broadway production, from 1935 to 1942, so that the combined ticket sales made *Tobacco Road* “one of the most profitable plays that had ever been produced.”<sup>19</sup> The Broadway production ran a record 3,182 performances, a record held until the saccharine *Life with Father* surpassed it in 1947. It was promoted in advertisements as combining “a serious study of these people in their own environment” with “200 hearty laughs in the performance.”<sup>20</sup> One New York businessman, who wrote an article in the *New York Times* about the production, professed to have seen the play thirty-four times! Overall, an estimated 3.5 million people saw the play, whether on Broadway or on the road, which is a feat considering the relative lack of discretionary money available to viewing audiences during the Depression.<sup>21</sup> Though the play adaptation had minor differences in how the story ended, many still saw it as a documentary of rural Southern life. Even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt endorsed the production as “a play for sober-minded people interested in better social conditions.”<sup>22</sup> Only when Caldwell and Kirkland sold their rights in 1940 to the writer and director of the film adaptation of *Grapes of Wrath* did the American public seem to end its fascination with *Tobacco Road*, as the “most profitable play of the decade was a financial flop as a Hollywood film.”<sup>23</sup>

While *Tobacco Road*'s popularity was at its height, Caldwell kept up his momentum as an “American Realist” by publishing *You Have Seen Their Faces* in 1937. He chose to collaborate with *Life* magazine photographer Margaret Bourke-White to provide illustrations for his narrative. William Stott has noted that when the book appeared, it was hailed

instantly as the first book of its kind, combining documentary narrative and photography. Contemporary reviewers considered *You Have Seen Their Faces* to be “the first volume to be presented in a new genre,” signaling “a new art.”<sup>24</sup> Thirties literary authority Malcolm Cowley reviewed the new book as having “quotations printed beneath the photographs [that] are exactly right; the photographs themselves are almost beyond praise.”<sup>25</sup> Caldwell and Bourke-White could not have been better assured of having achieved the documentary style at a new level.

In a small author’s note Caldwell, as in his preface to *Tobacco Road*, clearly stated his intentions:

No person, place or episode in this book is fictitious, *but names and places have been changed to avoid unnecessary individualization*; for it is not the authors’ intention to criticize any individuals who are part of the system depicted. The legends [captions] under the pictures are intended to express the authors’ own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; *they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of those persons.*<sup>26</sup> [italics mine]

The final sentence is rather deceitful; by purporting to “not pretend” while in fact, they were pretending, by projecting their own thoughts or responses onto their photographed subjects, the authors were creating their own version of reality. The very placement of the small author’s note, with its scant likelihood of being read by the average reader, raised the question of whether or not the captions were *intended* as truth within a work of documentary.

Similar depictions of sharecropper life persist from *Tobacco Road*. One sharecropper, echoing Jeeter Lester, admits “I didn’t have the sense to know I was drunk on cotton. That’s the worst thing cotton does to a man. It makes him think he’s sitting on top of the world, and the first thing he knows he’s spending more . . . than cotton brings in.”<sup>27</sup> Caldwell, like Howard Odum, indicts the crippling effects of sectionalism while blaming the

South for “its self-imposed isolation” after “the conflict [Civil War].”<sup>28</sup> The poor white sharecropper remains the same as Jeeter Lester:

The white tenant farmer has not always been the lazy, slipshod, good-for-nothing person that he is frequently described as being. His shiftlessness, when apparent, is an occupational disease of which he is generally well aware. . . . There are times when he is even proud and boastful of his slothfulness.<sup>29</sup>

By weaving together quotes and narratives such as these, along with captions for the pictures, the authors combined documentary-style writing with photography, with more emphasis on the effect rather than the fact of their statements. Even the photographs’ authenticity were somewhat compromised when Bourke-White later admitted that she waited to take pictures of “faces that would express what we wanted to tell.”<sup>30</sup> With the meaning spoon-fed to the reader by the suggestive captions, the photographs were hardly allowed to stand alone as unbiased tools of documentary reportage. The emotional impact clearly took precedence over factual allegiance as presented by Caldwell and Bourke-White in *You Have Seen Their Faces*.

By contrast, Southern sociologists of the time were producing more factual and balanced reports, although less popular with more mainstream readers. Several works in the latter half of the 1930’s, in the wake of *Tobacco Road*, attempted to represent white tenant farmers in a more authentic way.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the best known of these studies was published by Arthur Raper in 1936: *Preface to Peasantry*. The only study before Margaret Hagood’s that would focus on the effects of the tenancy system upon white women was Nora Miller’s *The Girl in the Rural Family*, published in 1935. Another influential semi-sociological study was the collection of short non-fiction stories from the Federal Writers’ Project *These Are Our Lives* in 1939. The central link of authenticity for these works is suggested by the very fact

that all came from the University of North Carolina Press. While Raper and Miller were recognized sociologists, the Federal Writers' Project also attempted to employ writers who would become intimately familiar with their subjects, much like the participant observer within sociological research, to attain more realistic representation of their subjects.

Raper's *Preface to Peasantry* was a sociological study which he began during the summer of 1927 and continued for seven years, studying sharecroppers and tenant farmers in two counties of the Georgia Black Belt. His book began as a study of living conditions in a county that lost a considerable number of black farmers through migration to urban areas in the Northeast.<sup>32</sup> He then extended his study into a comparative study of two counties "to determine the meaning of the various New Deal activities to the population groups there," to show how "the farm people pictured in these two Georgia counties are typical of the cotton-growing sections of the old South,"<sup>33</sup> much like Hagood's later population study. Raper introduced his subjects realistically but not harshly as "Negroes and poor whites [who] live out the unenlightened years in the half stupor induced by malnutrition and neglect."<sup>34</sup> Raper concludes that rather than being hopeless, like the Lesters of *Tobacco Road*, most poor Southern tenants and sharecroppers are a result of malleable conditions. Through social documentary those same conditions may be improved. Raper blamed the diet and resources available to Southerners while Caldwell seems to blame heredity or the soil from which Southerners are raised. Raper explains how he lived "in each county for months at a time" as a participant observer, not as a passer-by or outsider, by going to church on Sundays and attending local carnivals and movie houses to gain the perspective of his subjects.<sup>35</sup>

Nora Miller's *The Girl in the Rural Family*, published by UNC Press in 1935, was more similar in scope to Hagood's forthcoming study. As described by noted women's historian Susan Ware, Miller's book provided "a complementary picture of rural white women, with special emphasis on young girls between school and marriage."<sup>36</sup> Miller's study began after a 1930 sociological survey showed that an increasing number of young women (too old for school yet not married) were overlooked by social workers and planners. The intent of her study was to provide planning for the future in addition to recording current conditions. Miller's final recommendation was to emphasize home economics education for older teenage girls so that they might become better mothers and household managers, avoiding the mistakes that led their mothers into poverty.<sup>37</sup>

Miller arranged her chapters according to each type of family studied. She covered families engaged in a wide range of trades and locales: a coal mining family, a mountain farm family, a fishing family, a potato farm family, and most similar to Hagood's study, cotton and tobacco farm families in the South. Each chapter varied across circumstance and location. Miller noted a lack of "some educational institution [which] can interest her in preparing for the job of homemaking [for] she can only copy the home she came from." Thrust into early marriages in their late teens, many girls often know "little about the biological facts of life." Miller blamed these factors for the "perpetuation of families below the poverty line [which] hinders the progress of any community."<sup>38</sup>

The chapters most similar in scope to Hagood's later study were those which focused upon the cotton farm family in northern Louisiana and the tobacco farm family in eastern North Carolina. The major difference was that both of these families owned their own land

while Hagood focused on those who were tenants or sharecroppers working on another's land. Yet similarities emerge between Miller's and Hagood's families. While Hagood focused more on the burdensome double duty of farmers' wives, each of Miller's wives "voluntarily works in the field four or five hours each afternoon during the crop season."<sup>39</sup> The idea of the field work being undertaken "voluntarily" is questionable at a time when all able-bodied workers, male or female, child or adult, were needed to care for the labor-intensive crops such as cotton and tobacco. Perhaps Miller implied a difference between sharecropping and landowning farmers' wives.

Miller's concluding estimation was that "the period of economic readjustment which began late in 1929 again changed the status of rural girls." When business declined after the stock market crash, the lack of employment opportunities "sent them back home" without the preparation necessary for readjustment to rural life on the family farm. Miller suggested that the "Agricultural and Home Economics Extension Service is probably the best qualified organization to carry out a program of transitional education for rural young people," particularly the unemployed young women who were out of school.<sup>40</sup>

Soon after the publication of Miller's *Girl in the Rural Family*, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) reached its peak employment and influence within the South. In 1936, almost 6,700 people were employed by the FWP throughout the country. According to intellectual historian Terry Cooney, the writers of the FWP would "both build on social reporting and turn it in a new direction" by becoming more insistent in their demand for and reliance upon gathering facts about their subjects.<sup>41</sup> The

FWP chose to concentrate its study within the upper Southeast in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia.<sup>42</sup>

The authors' introduction to *These Are Our Lives* made the documentary intent apparent. Noting that while "[s]ociology has furnished the basis of which this work has been shaped," the authors also sought to "get life histories which are readable and faithful representations of living persons" to "give a fair picture of the structure of working society." The stories were each "written after one or more interviews" with the subjects, with minimal editorial revisions. W.T. Couch from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill lent legitimacy to the entire effort, having authored the preface to the collection of stories.<sup>43</sup>

The stories, presented in more narrative fashion, related truths using the documentary style. One white tenant farmer's wife near Wilson, North Carolina explained, "If you know anything about tenant farming you know they do without everything all the year hoping to have something in the fall." Perhaps this desperate hope was the glaring difference between those who owned their own small farms when contrasted with those less fortunate sharecropping and tenant families. The FWP painted a picture of people undefeated by circumstance, as would Hagood in her study. "[E]ven if we don't have enough to eat all the time and nothing to wear but rags I am gladder of our health than money," one woman insisted.<sup>44</sup> Expressing the gratitude of many Southerners, another sharecropper's wife said, "It seems like that man in Washington [President Roosevelt] has got a real love for the poor people in his heart, and I believe it's due to him and his helpers that the poor renters are goin' to get a chance. We've got more hope now than we ever had before."<sup>45</sup> While biased support for the New Deal could be expected from the FWP, the overall picture was one of

survival, dignity and hope in sharp contrast to Caldwell's Lester family. *These Are Our Lives* presented sharecroppers and tenants as products of unfortunate circumstance, capable of transformation through proper governmental and sociological planning and intervention.

There existed a considerable body of work by the time of Hagood's *Mothers of the South* which attempted to inform the American public about life in the rural South as a sharecropper. Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* captured the attention of millions who read the novel and saw the play as realism and documentary. Yet the more realistic picture, hinted at in *You Have Seen Their Faces*, was presented by sociologists such as Raper and Miller, through the University of North Carolina Press, as well as in the stories of *These Are Our Lives*, prefaced by a professor of sociology from the University of North Carolina.

Altogether, Hagood would form her own unique response to preceding documentary forms about life as a Southern sharecropper. She would choose a unique focus: the white mother and wife of sharecroppers in the Southeast. She would be uniquely qualified as a woman and a sociologist, to be welcomed into the very homes of the women she wanted to study. And Hagood would then be capable of conducting a documentary study combining statistical and personal information to form a picture of the women she believed to be so important.

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 40. Quoted in Mark Fearnow, *The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> James Gray, "Review of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932)," reprinted in *On Second Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1946). Reprinted *The Critical Response to Erskine Caldwell* ed. Robert L. McDonald (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Daniels, "Poor Whites" *Saturday Review of Literature* March 5, 1932: 568. Reprinted in *The Critical Response to Erskine Caldwell* ed. Robert L. McDonald (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 25.

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- <sup>4</sup> Edward Dahlberg, "Raw Leaf," *New Republic* March 23, 1932: 159-160. Reprinted in *The Critical Response to Erskine Caldwell* ed. Robert L. McDonald (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 26.
- <sup>5</sup> Jack Conroy, "Passion and Pellagra," *New Masses* 7 (April 1932): 24-25. Reprinted in *The Critical Response to Erskine Caldwell* ed. Robert L. McDonald (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 28.
- <sup>6</sup> Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1932), vii.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.
- <sup>19</sup> Fearnow, 107-8.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-9.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, 108.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.
- <sup>24</sup> Stott, 211.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.
- <sup>26</sup> Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), 6.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>30</sup> Stott, 59.
- <sup>31</sup> Please note that the most well-known of the social documentaries of the era, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans was not published until 1941. As it was published after Hagood's study, she most likely would not have known about their work which was being conducted in roughly the same period in which she was completing her own research. Only antecedents of Hagood's work will be discussed in this section.
- <sup>32</sup> Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), v.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vi, viii.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.
- <sup>36</sup> Ware, 10.
- <sup>37</sup> Nora Miller, *The Girl in the Rural Family* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 4-5.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 23, 12.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 95, 107.
- <sup>41</sup> Cooney, 170-1.
- <sup>42</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *These Are Our Lives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939).
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, ix-x, xii-xiii.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 8.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 37.

### **Margaret Jarman Hagood's Unique Contribution**

“I hope you will forgive me if I am not very regular in writing about my work. It is hard to stop it long enough to write about it,” wrote Margaret Jarman Hagood to her mentor, Howard Odum. “Yet when I start I love to talk about it so much I can’t stop. Thank you again for making it possible for me to be here.” It was late June in 1938 and the thirty-one year old sociologist was traveling alone in Ozark, Alabama. She was fighting rough driving conditions, complicated by “dirty tank[s] of gasoline” and catching “nails probably turning around in back yards.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, over a two-year period, she persevered to visit more than two hundred and fifty homes across North Carolina, Georgia and Alabama, returning to many of those homes on more than one occasion.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to such perseverance, the University of North Carolina Press published her landmark social documentary, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* in 1939.

Hagood’s study combined the statistical analysis of her earlier dissertation with her use of the social documentary style to reveal the attitudes and experiences of the mothers of the South. Her earlier dissertation, “Mothers of the South: A Population Study of Native White Women of Childbearing Age of the Southeast,” established her proficiency in the burgeoning field of sociological statistics. Her thorough scientific approach laid the foundation for her more descriptive and qualitative study that she published in 1939 under a similar title. Her book continued the tradition of authenticity offered by the University of North Carolina Press, while following earlier sociological works, yet focusing upon a group not yet studied. *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman*

declared Hagood's ability to make sociological inquiry revealing and descriptive to the lay reader, yet methodologically and statistically sound for the academic reader.

Margaret Jarman's life began in Newton County, Georgia in 1907. She grew up in a family with a "father who combined farming with scholarship and who had a special interest in the education of women." From a background of farming and a love of learning, both Margaret and her sister went on to earn Ph.D.'s in each of their respective fields. By the age of thirty, Jarman had married Middleton Howard Hagood and had one daughter with him. She had also earned her doctorate in sociology under Howard Odum at the University of North Carolina. While studying, she also conducted research at Odum's Institute for Research in Social Science. Like Hagood, Odum was also a native to Newton County, Georgia's farm life. Like Odum, Hagood was interested in understanding the ramifications of and solutions to southern poverty through sociological investigation and planning. Hagood set out to write her doctoral dissertation by conducting "a detailed statistical analysis of the fertility patterns of native white women of childbearing age in the Southeast."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Hagood's own status as a native white woman and mother from the Southeast led to a personal interest in studying other women.

The statistical analysis, forming the inquiry presented in her 1937 dissertation, easily complemented her late 1939 publication, *Mothers of the South*. William Stott's interpretation of the struggle within social documentary stresses the effort to balance the "statistical approach to social reality." Sociologist Thomas Minehan in 1934 recognized this dichotomy as scientific and literary sociology, the second of which he valued as "the only acceptable method for ascertaining a complete and true picture in many fields."<sup>4</sup> Within Minehan's

dichotomy, Hagood's 1937 dissertation represents the scientific sociology, while her 1939 monograph *Mothers of the South* represents the literary sociology, firmly rooted in her earlier scientific findings. It is easy to understand why Hagood first wrote the statistical study and then "wanted to move on to the social context of the statistics" in her book.<sup>5</sup> The titles of the dissertation and the monograph are identical as *Mothers of the South*, but their subtitles differ. The 1937 dissertation was subtitled "A Population Study of Native White Women of Childbearing Age of the Southeast" while the more literary study in 1939 was subtitled *Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman*. Clearly, the former is more clinical in intent while the latter seeks to be more descriptive and humanistic in scope. Taken together, they form a fully complementary sociological study in both the scientific and literary purpose. In specific reference to studying the rural white mothers of the South, Hagood was uniquely qualified as a student of Odum to conduct the interviews for her social documentary. As a student of Odum, she had been trained at the foremost sociology department in the South and one of the top in the nation. Furthermore, as a mother and wife, she was able to approach the women she studied as more of an insider than a male sociologist might. Her status as a native-born white Southerner with a rural background surely gave her more credibility than would be afforded to any sociologist not from the Southeast.

The introduction to her dissertation clarified her background and intent for the scientific study. Hagood explicitly cited Odum as her mentor through his earlier publication of *Southern Regions of the United States*. She agreed with the "central finding" in Odum's work that "the South excels in human and natural wealth while it lags in the technological, artificial, and institutional categories" with a "necessary sequel" of "further study and

investigation in to the factors of the human wealth.” Hagood stated her second focus, her agreement that “the adjustment of the southern situation is our most critical problem.” Her pronouncement preceded the 1938 publication of *The Report on Economic Conditions of the South* and Roosevelt’s proclamation of the South as “the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem.” Hagood explained her reliance on statistics as “the keynote of the new realism of the modern day.”<sup>6</sup> Hagood would go on to write the first comprehensive textbook on statistics for sociologists in 1941. Such competency in working with and interpreting statistics as applied to sociology bolstered her credentials as a scientific sociologist. After publication of *Statistics for Sociologists*, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics within the U.S. Department of Agriculture hired Hagood in 1942 as a full-time statistician and planner.<sup>7</sup>

Hagood explained in the introduction to her dissertation why she chose native white women for the statistical study as the key to understanding Southern poverty. In her own words, she chose women because she understood gender as “the most fundamental cleavage in society” forming an “involuntary group” due to biological determination of those who would bear and raise children, while she included the influence of “culturally determined functions” of women, such as gendered division of labor. She focused upon native whites within the group of Southern women “due to a recognition that qualitative material, a necessary supplement to statistical data, could best be secured from Negro mothers by one of their own race,” and not from a white woman such as herself. The cultural conditioning of both race and gender provided “nearly similar occupations and patterns of life” for the women in her study as compared to the more widely “varied means of gainful employment for the corresponding age group of men.”<sup>8</sup> Hagood selected native white women due to their

relative homogeneity for statistical study as well as her own comfort in methodology, in anticipation of later qualitative interviews with the women.

Hagood also emphasized the statistical importance of this Southeastern group in relation to the rest of the nation. She noted that the 22.6 million native white women of childbearing age in the Southeast represented 47.6 percent of the overall total of native white women in the country. Having observed that those “rural women have a higher birth rate than urban,” she stated her belief that the “fate of the future population of America may be said to depend upon this age group.” She found the group to be important “also in a social and cultural sense because they exercise such a tremendous influence on these children during their formative years.”<sup>9</sup> Since the native white women of the Southeast were producing a disproportionately large percentage of the nation’s children, the key to planning for the nation’s future lay in understanding the societal and physical circumstances in which those Southern women reared their children.

Hagood was very careful, both in her dissertation and in her published book to address and dismiss the claims of eugenicists of her day. Eugenicists of the time claimed biology, not circumstances, determined the lot of the women and children who were so obviously inferior in one region when compared to the rest of the nation. Historian Nicole Hahn Rafter, in her book *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies: 1877-1919*, seeks to explain the prevalent theories of eugenics in America before the 1920’s. Eugenics, now dismissed as pseudo-science, attempted to combine Gregor Mendel’s theories of heredity with sociological inquiry, with each reinforcing the other’s findings. Eugenicists believed that those with inferior genes possessed “cacogeneity as a kind of core rot, a degeneration of

germ plasm which might manifest itself in any one of a number of forms.”<sup>10</sup> The forms of cacogeneity could include “licentiousness, criminality, pauperism, polygamy, [and] premature death,” among others.<sup>11</sup> Rafter cited historian Donald MacKenzie as concluding that the “eugenic theory of society is a way of reading the structure of social classes onto nature.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike Hagood and other sociologists, eugenicists patently ignored environmental factors and circumstances, such as mother or child malnutrition, lack of access to health care or education, and other factors which would lead to “inferior” traits. Eugenicists utilized family studies to justify their attempts to study genealogy, biology, and sociology. One of the best known of these studies conducted in the southeast was Henry H. Goddard’s 1923 best-seller, *The Kallikak Family*.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Rafter faults their dubious intentions and their even poorer methodology, noting that eugenicists often began “by assuming that which they then set out to prove.”<sup>14</sup> Hagood’s response was simply that “we are not justified in assuming that differential reproduction between classes or regions is leading to dysgenic results.”<sup>15</sup> Hagood instead determined a “shift of emphasis from the biological to the cultural factors in the determination of ‘quality.’”<sup>16</sup> With eugenicists still influential in planning efforts at this time, Hagood had to carefully dismiss their pseudo-science in favor of Odum’s style of sociological inquiry and planning. If eugenicists claimed that those within the tenancy system were trapped by fault of their own heredity, then Hagood set out to prove that it was their physical, economic, and societal circumstances, and *not heredity*, which kept sharecroppers trapped in a cycle of poverty.

Before she began her presentation of statistical analysis, Hagood offered her interpretation of the historical factors behind white farmwomen’s attitudes towards gender,

attitudes that shaped their place in the family and society. Hagood referenced Frederick Jackson Turner's influential frontier thesis, with particular attention given to his idea that the frontier served a necessarily emancipatory function for women. When a frontier woman was able to demonstrate hard work and independence, she received "recognition of equality" from her husband, "won by her hardihood and her share in the creation of a new society." Disproving the traditional definition of the female as the weaker sex, a frontier woman demonstrated her capacity for hard labor. By contrast, the native white woman of the Southeast was never emancipated or seen as equal. Since Turner's thesis, historian John Mack Farager has shown a more specific picture of mid-nineteenth century life in the Midwest, a picture very similar to the gendered division of labor in the 1930s Southeast. Farager found that "women's work outdistanced men's in the sheer variety of tasks performed," and that "one cannot avoid being struck by the enormousness of women's workload."<sup>17</sup> Yet despite this fact that wives contributed their half, if not more than half, to the overall production for the household, Faragher found that "[m]en's product was for male use; women's product was for the family," resulting in the overall devaluation of women's work, leading to a lack of respect afforded by husbands towards their wives' workload.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, "the logical conclusion of women's participation in production . . . was never realized in the South," lamented Hagood. The failure of Southern females to achieve equality through hard work, according to Hagood's understanding of Turner's thesis, was because lower-class farming women chose to imitate the ideology of non-working women of the comfortable class rather than choosing to identify with their hard-working counterparts on the frontier. The subsequent pattern of gender relations in the South had been further

compounded by tobacco and cotton farming practices, “eminently suitable to the utilization of child labor,” reinforcing the valuation of females as mothers over females as equal workers.<sup>19</sup> Hagood also realized that the gender ideology was representative of how rural life in the Southeast was “bound up with the time lag in education, technology, economic advancement, and general cultural aspects.”<sup>20</sup>

Hagood also explained why she chose to focus on wives of tenant farmers rather than land-owning farmers. She noted that the Census of 1930 lacked identification according to land-ownership status, overlooking the significance of the estimated “three-quarters of a million women of the Southeast [who] are mothers of tenant farm families.” To adequately understand the “economic, social, technological, educational, and general cultural lags of the region,” sociologists cannot study only men who are sharecroppers; they must also study their wives, the mothers of the South.<sup>21</sup> The present and future generations of those caught within the farm tenancy system were to be raised by the mothers of the South. The farm tenancy system and its economic and societal ramifications could not be fully understood without understanding Hagood’s group of women. Overall, the “Population Study” fulfilled her need for a scientific and statistical basis of inquiry for her later qualitative study, conducted in the summer of 1938, but not published until 1939.

Historian Anne Firor Scott’s scholarly introduction to the 1975 reprint of the 1939 work qualifies Hagood’s place within the genre of social documentary. Scott praised Hagood’s *Mothers of the South* as being on par with the highly esteemed and more widely known study of sharecropping families, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans. Although *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was not published until 1941, the

research for the book was completed in roughly the same time frame as Hagood's work, choosing only a different location in the Deep South rather than Hagood's study centered in North Carolina. Scott identified *Mothers of the South* as "a first rate source for the social historian." Hagood's work is important for offering "another view of poor southern rural families," in a different way from the stereotypes in Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Scott noted that Hagood was able to achieve this stunning social documentary because, as a woman, she entered "easily into the 'distinctly feminine culture . . . centered on mating, child care and homemaking.'"<sup>22</sup> Hagood's access to feminine culture allowed her to document the group from within their own surroundings, contributing to the documentary style of the work.

Hagood's access to the inner world of the rural women whom she interviewed allowed for her access to otherwise unmentionable topics. Hagood admitted that her interviews were as informal as possible. She allowed each interview to be shaped by the comfort level and surroundings of the interviewee. The interviews took place in "kitchens, bedrooms, porches, tobacco strip-houses, and cotton fields." Hagood also found that return visits "often led to increased confidence and to more intimate revelations."<sup>23</sup> Overall, her interviews were "kept as much as possible to a friendly, conversational, 'just visiting' tone."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Hagood was familiar with the participant observer technique of sociologists, given her emphasis on approaching the women from their own surroundings and letting them determine the flow of conversation. Making her subjects as comfortable as possible meant they were more likely to reveal to Hagood more of what they might reveal to friends rather than to a more clinically distant researcher.

Hagood's resulting body of work clearly focuses on establishing the women's underlying attitudes towards gender roles and how those attitudes influenced almost every aspect of their daily experience. Hagood teased out women's attitudes about wife and husband relationships, control of finances, preferences for fieldwork over housework, and most intimately, attitude towards contraception, pregnancies and childbirth. While Hagood could have chosen to merely observe and record the women's daily activities in the house and in the field, she chose instead to delve deeper into the women's attitudes towards their roles, illuminating how their circumstances were formed and maintained in the rural South.

Hagood's analysis of gender roles and attitudes depended upon her observation of "the heritage of patriarchal family organization."<sup>25</sup> She first made this conclusion in reference to family finances. When the money from the tobacco crop came in at the end of each year, many women professed to have little to no say in how that money was spent. However, many women were allotted a "patch" or small lot of land on which to grow their own cotton or tobacco and then were able to keep the money from the proceeds of their "patch." Hagood observed that for "most families this is the nearest [the wife] comes to any stage of comparative economic independence or autonomy over any part of the farm income."<sup>26</sup> Many of the women agreed that it was "not a woman's place to 'tote the pocketbook.'" Yet those same women expressed their own ideas about how their husbands could better utilize the family expenses, such as not buying overly expensive fertilizer or feed or paying better attention to the terms of credit offered.<sup>27</sup>

Finances and household economics controlled by the husbands rather than the wives was based upon the division of labor, which Hagood described as the "modal pattern." She

explained “the modal pattern is for the woman to do everything inside the house, for the man to occupy himself on the farm and for both to share the intermediate duties centering around the backyard and relating chiefly to the care of livestock.” The seemingly balanced division became lopsided once Hagood found that women were expected on tobacco and cotton farms to work about six months out of the year assisting in the fields in addition to their housework, which of course included raising children.<sup>28</sup> Surprisingly, especially to modern readers, Hagood found that many of the women expressed a definite preference for fieldwork over housework, although the fieldwork placed them with a heavier workload. It was common for women to express “a great deal of pride in the ability to work like a man, which is evidenced in a boast frequently heard, ‘My papa said he lost his best hand when I got married.’”<sup>29</sup> Yet, farm wives and husbands continued to teach and praise children for learning their appropriate gendered labor from an early age. Pre-pubescent boys “bragged that they could ‘plow like a man’” while their younger sisters often learned to clean house by age ten and prepare large family meals by thirteen.<sup>30</sup> One historical study of life in Southern mill towns, *Like a Family*, even points to this gendered division of labor within the family as the basis for gendered divisions within the mills. “Having purchased women’s labor as part of the family package, owners designed a system of job assignments based on hierarchies of sex and age that were familiar both on the farm and in many cotton mills elsewhere.”<sup>31</sup> In her entire study, Hagood noted only one exceptional marriage which she introduced in “*Farm Eight: A Prospective Tenant Purchaser*.” This unusual husband and wife had an “attitude of partnership and far more equalitarian relationship than is common [as shown by] their joint accounts of past

farming experiences and plans for the future.”<sup>32</sup> Every other wife studied, however, conformed to prevailing notions of conventionally “appropriate” gender behavior.

The disparity between wives who clearly worked longer hours than their husbands, completing both field work and house work, often while caring for young children, and the ideology which long held women as the weaker sex derived, many historians agree, from antebellum culture. D. Harland Hagler’s article, “The Ideal Woman in the Antebellum South: Lady or Farmwife?” dissects the differences between the ideal middle to upper class lady and the lower class farm wife of the nineteenth century. The underlying currents of “good manners, demureness, kindness, and gentleness” existed in conjunction with the common ideology that “women should be sensible and practical . . . perfect wives, and impeccable homemakers,” as well as “her husband’s helpmeet and loyal partner.”<sup>33</sup> While the logical priority for farm wives may have been motherhood and housekeeping, those wives were also expected to do any other necessary field work (man’s work) to ensure the financial success of their husbands. Most importantly, farmwives were idealized and defined by their relative productivity. In contrast, women who were not proper mothers and productive wives were not ladies at all because, according to the magazine *Southern Cultivator*, “They dress nobody, bless nobody, and save nobody.”<sup>34</sup> It is only through roles which fulfill the needs of their husbands or children that farmwives could define themselves as women; part of a family rather than as individuals.

The tradition of defining women through their productivity in the house and in the field continued through the 1930s in the rural South. Historian Pamela Tyler, by analyzing the content of the popular magazine *Progressive Farmer*, has shown how the ideally

industrious wife (at least for the middle-class readership) was to fulfill her duties in both deed and appearance. Chosen for its influentially wide readership (of over 900,000 copies per month through the 1930s), *Progressive Farmer* stressed wifedom and maternity in defining the gender role expectations for women.<sup>35</sup> *Progressive Farmer's* ideal woman was “a creature of such energy, endurance, and efficiency that she would use virtually every waking moment constructively,” to ensure the success of her husband, children, and household. Tyler summarizes this ideal in the “work horse-show horse” concept in which a woman should work constantly, yet not give the appearance of such. By embracing this paradox between constant activity and the appearance of leisure, the middle-class readers of *Progressive Farmer* did not view their industriousness as a necessary impediment to femininity. The particular construction of femininity in the Southeast, emphasizing productivity of the overall household, also subdued women’s expression of resentment towards the doubled workload for women.<sup>36</sup>

While Hagood’s women did not have the relative luxury or perhaps even the education to read *Progressive Farmer*, she noted at least one wife who attempted to emulate the middle-class ideal. Hagood introduced this particular wife as being “desirous of identifying herself with the ‘town’ women of a small village four miles away,” and expressed that “women should devote all their time to homemaking.” Yet Hagood saw the wife as having given “herself away a little later when another visitor arrived by saying that he would have caught her in the striphouse if the men hadn’t been measuring up corn today.”<sup>37</sup> While this particular woman sought to align herself with the middle-class antebellum Southern ideal as described by Hagler, she instead seemed more like the work-horse, show-horse wife

described by Tyler. In reality, she worked in the field as necessary to ensure the success of her husband, but to an outsider she wished to align herself with the middle-class, urbanized ideal of wifehood. Hagood agreed that the “culturally inherited ideology holds the mothers to their tasks and in their places with the sanction of God and the Southern tradition; and the ‘system’ [farm tenancy] offers no escape.”<sup>38</sup>

Hagood continued beyond discussion of divisions of labor and gender roles to discuss with these women what they would supposedly never discuss with an outsider: contraception, pregnancy, and labor. It was within this most intimate set of issues which Hagood’s position as a woman and mother allowed her access. She reported

It was often interesting to notice the immediate shifting to the biological and especially to the obstetrical features the moment a husband or child left the room and there was privacy. Older women took the precaution of inquiring about marital status. An affirmative reply to, “Air you a married woman?” assured them on this point and the relationship became more nearly one of equals in the discussion of this subject.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, it was also important that Hagood was not only a woman, but a *married* woman and therefore privy to discussions deemed inappropriate for the company of men, children, and unmarried women. Hagood’s own concluding chapter addresses the overall circumstances of the women she interviewed. She found “the burden of involuntary and over frequent childbearing is great for these mothers and often endangers the health and welfare of the children borne,” and that “until family limitation practices become far more universal than at present, Southern tenant farm mothers will continue to supply a disproportionate share of children who will be disadvantaged from birth.”<sup>40</sup>

Hagood found that the mothers wanted badly to limit the size of their families but had access to neither contraceptives nor adequate health care to minimize the health risks of repeated pregnancies and childbirths. Instead, the women often depended upon untrained

local “granny women” or midwives to help in their delivery. The mothers were gripped by superstitions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, without access to trained health practitioners and education. Women reported a litany of folk beliefs: “grannies” disliked yelling during labor because it could kill the child, crawling through a fence or tight place while pregnant could cause the umbilical cord to choke the baby, or staring at a disfigured child will cause your own child to be similarly disfigured.<sup>41</sup> More importantly, the “grannies” were often the only source of information about contraception. One couple, on advice from a midwife, had successfully practiced *coitus interruptus* for twenty years and had only two children, minimizing household expenses and work.<sup>42</sup> Hagood found that barely 12 percent of the North Carolina women admitted to using some form of contraception while 28 percent of the women from the Deep South group admitted to using contraception. Yet more women in both groups professed to approve of the idea of using contraception, 88 percent and 76 percent respectively.<sup>43</sup> The basic gap lay between access to and information about contraception devices. Another obstacle was of course the lack of money to consult health care providers who could give such access to contraception, rather than continuing to rely on superstition and folk medicine.<sup>44</sup>

The lack of access to contraception and family planning measures was not confined only to the rural farmwomen in Hagood’s study, although their financial situation and geographical location may have placed them at particular disadvantage. But in the 1920s and 1930s, access to contraception in the United States was nowhere near its widespread availability and use of today. In 1932, only 145 public clinics were in operation, but twenty-seven states were without a single clinic. Predictably, rural residents often were left without

access. Even by the early 1940s, less than six percent of working class families received contraceptive information from their family doctors.<sup>45</sup> Though companies, such as the wildly successful Dilex, sold contraceptives door-to-door during the 1930s, kits typically cost seven dollars for a diaphragm, spermicidal jelly, and douche.<sup>46</sup> Such spending would seem extravagantly out of the question for most sharecroppers' wives' budgets. Lu Ann Jones, in *Mama Learned Us to Work*, a history of these same rural farm wives, tells of women in Watauga County, North Carolina in the 1940s. These women had participated in the 1940s in "a pilot project that tested the efficacy of various birth control techniques." But when a rumor spread that the free condoms would no longer be available, at least one woman declared she would sell a chicken to "buy some Trojans," as she did not even have the fifty cents which would buy one package of three condoms.<sup>47</sup> Even if the women could have afforded a visit to the doctor for contraceptive advice, a 1944 survey of obstetric graduates of Johns Hopkins University found that "only 10 percent of graduates before 1920 had received training on contraception, but fully 73 percent of those who had graduated in 1935 or later had."<sup>48</sup> Inadequate finances, superstitions, and lack of access to knowledgeable health care providers all acted together to prevent many women from limiting their pregnancies. While not all women cited religious influences, Hagood mentioned when they did, such as one woman who cited the Bible's saying of "Be content with your lot." Hagood concluded that along "with many, many other tenant mothers, however, she fervently hopes that this one on the way will be the last [child]."<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, Hagood's conclusions on the constraints which held the mothers of the South in their state of hopeless poverty were best presented through her attention to detail

and description, keeping with the documentary approach. Instead of the more clinical research as presented in her statistical dissertation, “A Population Study,” *Mothers of the South* offered the portraiture which its subtitle promised. She told her readers that the “sketches of farms and their families” she would present would “serve to introduce the tenants themselves in their actual settings and to intimate what sort of people the Southern tenant farms create and sustain.”<sup>50</sup> Note that Hagood qualified the pictures she was going to present: pictures of people caught by environmental and economic circumstances, not people cursed by biology or hereditary defect, like those propounded by eugenicists or Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*. While Hagood did not name her families, she presented each family with careful descriptions of the farms and homes, with attention to small details which imparted to her readers aspects of life with which they were not familiar.

Hagood described the interior of homes, such as a log cabin where “[p]aper is tacked on parts of the walls, but crumbling mud spills from between the old logs of the exposed portion.”<sup>51</sup> Another family lived in a home “[w]ith only a bed and three straight chairs in the living room, the rain-stained wall paper peeling off and streaming down,” while in “the hall about half the plastering had fallen.”<sup>52</sup> Overall, Hagood concluded that the interiors of the homes she visited were “usually characterized by a lack of color and by drabness.”<sup>53</sup> For instance,

In one home a bright, talkative, four-year-old child insisted on showing his scant store of treasure – one of them a small Sears Roebuck sales catalogue. He liked best the page of it which contained a color chart for house paint. He asked the names of the colors and in a few minutes learned four or five of them. He proved his knowledge by locating the colors on the visitors’ [Hagood’s] dress which had flecks of various hues. Then, anxious to exhibit his newly acquired knowledge on broader fields, he began looking around the room for other colors to identify. He scanned all the clothes hanging around the wall, his mother’s dress, the two pieced quilts on the bed, but nowhere was there even a tiny spot one could still call color – only the faded near-gray which is the common fate of all colors. He shook his head sadly as he reported on his survey, “We ain’t got no colors.”<sup>54</sup>

Hagood's use of poignant details and quotes informed her readers' intellect and emotions, in true documentary style. She also described many women who used grossly outdated kitchens: "One mother cooks for nine on a small, high-legged, wood stove; another who cooks for twelve cuts her own wood as well as builds her fires; another cooks ninety biscuits twice a day and uses a barrel of flour every two weeks."<sup>55</sup> Hagood also described how the many women kept differing standards of cleanliness in such surroundings. In a home of a mother of four "[s]hoes, underwear, and an axe were on the kitchen table along with uncovered food left from dinner." By sharp contrast, "another women's front bedroom was so neat and dustless that it would have done credit to a New England Housewife."<sup>56</sup> Her evaluations were forthright and non-judgmental, sometimes tinged with humor.

Hagood described the women and children with similar attention to detail. To illustrate the indomitable spirit of one survivor of incest, she introduced the "seventeen-year-old mother [who] looks younger than she is with her round, childish, freckled face and a sunny smile."<sup>57</sup> Many families had children whom Hagood thought looked years younger due to malnourishment: "the twenty-one-year-old girl looked fourteen, the fourteen-year-old boy ten, the ten-year-old girl six, and so on all the way down."<sup>58</sup> The women themselves were similarly described. One mother had "no make-up on her face – only brownish snuff stains at the corners of her mouth;" another young mother spoke while her "cough breaks into each sentence but she doesn't know whether she has tuberculosis or not because she hasn't had money enough to go to a doctor in five years."<sup>59</sup> To illustrate the severity of these mothers' lack of access to health care, Hagood described one who had "suffered from piles [hemorrhoids] for twenty-one years since her first child" and another "older woman's womb

[which] fell when her tenth child was born nearly thirty years ago, but she has never wanted a doctor to examine her.”<sup>60</sup> Each of the homes, women, and children were presented in such detail that when combined with carefully culled statistics, *Mothers of the South* becomes a fully vivid documentary of the women she interviewed.

The scholarly response to Hagood’s *Mothers of the South* testified to her success. *The American Economic Review* in 1940 praised the book for its “vivid individual portraits of farm women.” The same review pointed to Hagood’s “portraits of individuals striving for security and ‘respectability’ against great odds [which] ring so true that the book should appeal to the general reader.”<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this review referred to stories such as the “frontier” couple (as termed by Hagood) who had cleared land and built a house after saving for ten years to make a down payment on the land or the “prospective tenant purchaser” who “lived at home,” feeding his family of thirteen children for less than fifty dollars a year.<sup>62</sup> The *American Sociological Review* in 1940 agreed that the interviews were “exceedingly intimate and the findings therefore exceptionally revealing of the inner psychology of tenant farm women.”<sup>63</sup> Despite what some sociologists saw as methodological regressions into psychology, *The American Journal of Sociology* still evaluated Hagood’s work as “an excellent book” with “deeper validity” as compared to strictly quantitative studies.<sup>64</sup> Other contemporary historians focused more on the work’s implications for class in America, citing “decay in democracy” due to the disappearance of “class fluidity” under the Southern farm tenancy system. They saw the mothers of the South as “[r]elegated to almost perennial poverty” while “their huge families have become their substitute for affluence.”<sup>65</sup> Those who

agreed with that review concurred with Hagood's statement that as goes the Southern white tenant farmwoman, so goes the nation.

Predictably, similar reviews and references appeared in the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, *Population Index*, and *The American Journal of Sociology* throughout the next decade.<sup>66</sup> More reviews have been written since the 1996 reprint edition from the University Press Virginia. Reviewer James Tice Moore in *Mississippi Quarterly* noted that Hagood's work indicted "a failed agricultural system" rather than blaming the people, as Erskine Caldwell did in *Tobacco Road*. Instead, says Moore, "Hagood's research revealed few 'tobacco road'-style degenerates." Rather, she showed the women to be "competent, conscientious individuals who took pride in their roles as mothers and as collaborators with their spouses in crop production."<sup>67</sup> Lu Ann Jones, author of *Mama Learned Us To Work*, declared *Mothers of the South* to be "a documentary classic," as "no systematic study of rural southern women has replaced" her work.<sup>68</sup> While Jones' 2002 book *Mama Learned Us to Work* attempts to historicize these same rural women in North Carolina, it is necessarily different as social history rather than sociological inquiry like Hagood's work. Jones' study is more concerned with the economic activity and contributions of rural women than was Hagood's *Mothers of the South*.

Hagood's seminal work, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* still stands as a superb example of social documentary. Her own training under Howard Odum at the progressive University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill equipped her with the necessary skills to approach the women she interviewed from their own perspective. She effectively bolstered her claim that if the South was indeed the nation's top economic

concern, then understanding the mothers who raised the majority of America's next generation was integral. Dismissing the harsh claims of eugenicists as unfounded and unscientific, she responded with her own statistical analysis coupled with descriptive documentary style. Whether intentional or not, her work also helped to dispel negative stereotypes presented in Caldwell's popular but perjorative *Tobacco Road*. Instead, Hagood presented her mothers of the South with dignity and conviction. While Roosevelt's *Report on the Economic Conditions of the South* and Odum's *Southern Regions* made the case for paying attention to the rampant poverty and "cultural lag" of Southern society, they did not personalize the experience of such in the way that Hagood did. Other sociologists published by the University of Chapel Hill had approached the wider population of those in the sharecropping and farm tenancy system, but no one focused on the white wives and mothers of the Southeast as Hagood did. Margaret Jarman Hagood's combination of scientific sociology and documentary style formed a distinctive and lasting record of a population not studied in the same way before or since.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Jarman Hagood, Ozark, Alabama, to Howard Odum, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, June 28, 1938, typewritten letter, Howard Washington Odum Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Firor Scott, introduction to Margaret Jarman Hagood, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939; Norton Library reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), v.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

<sup>4</sup> Stott, 153.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, v.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Jarman Hagood, "Mothers of the South: A Population Study of Native White Women of Childbearing Age of the Southeast" (Ph.D. dissertation, Chapel Hill: Institute for Research in Social Science, 1937), i-iv.

<sup>7</sup> Platt, 255-256.

<sup>8</sup> Hagood, "Population Study," iv-v.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3, 5. The higher fertility rate is specified as "the urban 60.5 percent of the women have only 46.2 percent of the children, while the rural 39.5 percent have 53.8 percent," 2.

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- <sup>10</sup> Nicole Hahn Rafter, ed., *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies: 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 5-6.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>15</sup> Hagood, "Population Study," 116.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.
- <sup>17</sup> John Mack Faragher, "The Midwestern Farming Family, 1850," from *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) as reprinted in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* eds. Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, third edition), 125, 128.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.
- <sup>19</sup> Hagood, "Population Study," 128-9, 145.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 250, 247.
- <sup>22</sup> Scott, iii, vii, v.
- <sup>23</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 64.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-9.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.
- <sup>31</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al., *Like a Family: the Making of Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 67.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, 47.
- <sup>33</sup> D. Harland Hagler, "The Ideal Woman in the Antebellum South: Lady or Farmwife?" *The Journal of Southern History* vol. 46, no. 3 (Fall 1981), 406.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.
- <sup>35</sup> Pamela Tyler, "The Ideal Rural Southern Woman As Seen By *Progressive Farmer* in the 1930s," *Southern Studies* vol. 20, no. 3, (Fall 1981), 278.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 286, 296.
- <sup>37</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 78.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-4.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
- <sup>45</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 152-4.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.
- <sup>47</sup> Lu Ann Jones *Mama Learned Us To Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.
- <sup>49</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 23.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 64-5.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>61</sup> "New Books," *The American Economic Review* vol. 30, no. 2 (June 1940), 435.

<sup>62</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 41, 43, 46.

<sup>63</sup> Carl C. Taylor, "Book Reviews," *American Sociological Review* vol. 5, no. 5 (Oct. 1940), 788.

<sup>64</sup> Leonard W. Doob, book review of *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman*, *The American Journal of Sociology* vol. 46, no. 3 (Nov. 1940), 408-9.

<sup>65</sup> Jeannette P. Nichols, "Book Reviews," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* vol. 27, no. 4 (March 1941), 643-4.

<sup>66</sup> Book review, *Journal of Educational Sociology* vol. 15, no. 6 (Feb. 1942): 380; book review of *All These People*, *Population Index* vol. 11, no. 3 (July 1945): 169; Rupert B. Vance, "Regional Family Patterns: The Southern Family," *The American Journal of Sociology* vol. 53, no. 6 (May 1948), 427.

<sup>67</sup> James Tice Moore, "Book Reviews," *Mississippi Quarterly* vol. 51, no. 2 (Spring 1998), 385-9.

<sup>68</sup> Lu Ann Jones, "Book Reviews," *Mississippi Quarterly* vol. 66, no. 3 (August 2000), 663.

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