

# Newsletter

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## The Enduring Story of Tenant Farmers

Arkansas Department of  
Parks and Tourism

*(Note: The Southern Tenant Farmers Museum is one of the featured sites during the AHA Conference Explore-Your-Own Tours, Friday, April 16.)*

In an effort to bring an important part of history to light, the Southern Tenant Farmers Museum in Tyronza opened in October 2006 after four years of planning and development. The museum tells the story of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, which was formed in Tyronza in 1934 in an effort to, according to their mission statement, “secure better living conditions...and higher wages for farm labor and to help build a world where there is no poverty...for those who are willing to work.” The museum exhibits focus on the story of tenant farming and sharecropping and the movement to eliminate abuses from the widely used system. The museum is located in the building that housed H.L. Mitchell’s dry cleaners and the service station owned by Clay East, two of the original organizers of the Union. The building also served as the unofficial headquarters of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.



**Tenant farmer and family, Wilson, Arkansas, 1939.** *Courtesy Arkansas History Commission/Jack Pavao, photographer*

When 18 men came together on a steamy July day in 1934, they surely could not have realized the historical significance of that meeting. The group comprised black and white tenant farmers, which was a significant occurrence in itself during a time of racial inequalities. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union would break barriers throughout its existence, most notably the inclusion of women and blacks in the organization and administration of the union.

Tenant farming and sharecropping evolved in Arkansas following the Civil War and Reconstruction. With the end of slavery, landowners needed a new form of labor. Turning to former slaves and poor whites, the planters offered the use of their land to the farmer in return for payment from each acre harvested. Many of the tenant farmers had no capital and were forced to agree to the demands of the owners to ensure the survival of their families. The poorest of the farmers,

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who had no capital or equipment, turned to sharecropping. This arrangement meant that the farmer received a smaller portion of the crops they grew and harvested – in some instances the landowner would sell the entire crop without the knowledge or consent of the farmer. Consequently, many farmers were left indebted to landowners without means of repayment. The number of farmers involved in the tenant system was staggering. In the late 1800s, 25% of all farmers operated under the system; by the end of the 1930s, the ratio had grown to 40%. During the Great Depression, the Roosevelt administration created the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which restricted production by paying farmers to leave some of their land idle, thereby raising cotton prices. The law stated that landowners would share the payment with tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Instead, many landowners kept the entire payment and evicted the tenant farmers and sharecroppers because they were viewed as no longer necessary.

The continued unethical practices of landowners were the catalyst for the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. The goal of the original meeting was to discuss options for revising the tenant farming system. Earlier in 1934, a planter had evicted 23 families from his land, leaving them homeless and virtually destitute. Thus began a movement to take control for those who could not take control for themselves.

The members of the STFU – black and white, male and female – were committed to making life better for tenant farmers who had been exploited for over half a century. Although the union members often faced violence, they continued their work passionately and the STFU continued to grow throughout the 1930s – claiming over 30,000 members by 1938. The Union oversaw a major cotton pickers’ strike in 1935 that succeeded in bringing higher wages to the area, as well as supporting strikes in Missouri, Louisiana and California, which brought national attention to the circumstances workers faced.

In the late 1930s, the STFU joined with the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America, a group affiliated through the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The alliance caused conflict among the members of the STFU and eventually the two organizations split. The STFU changed its name to the National Farm Labor Union during the 1940s and, in 1946, became a part of the American Federation of Labor.

The museum weaves the story of the tenant farming and sharecropping systems with the history of the people who endured it. Using photographs, artifacts, oral histories and vintage 1930s news reels, visitors to the museum will get a true sense of what tenant farmers overcame in their quest for a better way of life for themselves and their families. The exhibits were developed in conjunction with the Arkansas State University Museum and the ASU Heritage Studies Ph.D. program.

The Southern Tenant Farmers Museum is located on Main Street at Chicago and Frisco Streets in downtown Tyronza. The museum, an Arkansas State University Delta Heritage site, will be open free of charge to AHA conference attendees on Friday, April 16. For more information, call 870 487-2909 or visit the STFU Museum website at <http://stfm.astate.edu/>.

## Arkansas Historical Association

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# First Arkansas Civil War Sesquicentennial Marker Dedicated

The Arkansas Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission and the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History recently dedicated the first Arkansas Civil War Sesquicentennial Historical Marker. (See related photo on page 4.)

“This is the first of many markers that will be placed around the state to tell the stories of how the Civil War impacted local communities,” according to ACWSC chairman Tom Dupree. “The Arkansas Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission hopes to have at least one marker in every county in the state.”

The 1861 arsenal crisis is the subject of the new marker, which reads: “The Civil War could have begun at this U.S. Arsenal. As other states seceded, rumors that reinforcements were heading for the Arsenal led around 1,000 militia from south and east Arkansas to demand the surrender of the garrison. On Feb. 12, 1861, Capt. James Totten, with no orders from his superiors, abandoned the Arsenal ‘to avoid the cause of Civil War.’ Little Rock’s ladies gave him a sword to show their appreciation of his action. Two months later, Ft. Sumter was attacked.”

The MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History, which operates under the City of Little Rock’s Parks and Recreation Department, is located in the 1840 building that housed the U.S. Arsenal in 1861.

Through the Arkansas Civil War Sesquicentennial Historical Marker program, which received initial funding from the National Park Service’s Preserve America program, the ACWSC will contribute up to \$1,000 toward the creation of historical markers. Commission historians will work with the local sponsors to ensure that all of the information on the markers is accurate.

Application forms are available by writing Arkansas Civil War Sesquicentennial Historical Marker Program, 1500 Tower Building, 323 Center Street, Little Rock, AR 72201 or sending an e-mail message to [acwsc@arkansasheritage.org](mailto:acwsc@arkansasheritage.org). They also can be downloaded at [www.arkansascivilwar150.com/historical-markers/](http://www.arkansascivilwar150.com/historical-markers/).

For more information on sesquicentennial plans, visit [www.arkansascivilwar150.com](http://www.arkansascivilwar150.com) or e-mail [acwsc@arkansasheritage.org](mailto:acwsc@arkansasheritage.org).

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## Join the Arkansas Historical Association

Membership includes four issues of the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* per year, as well as the Association’s newsletter.

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Department of Arkansas Heritage Director Cathie Matthews (from left), Arkansas Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission Chairman Tom Dupree and MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History Director Stephan McAteer unveil "The Arsenal Crisis" marker. See story on page 3.

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