

Race And Work in the South

The economic recovery of the South following the Civil War was based in part on industrialization in the southern "upcountry," where beginning in the 1880s textile mills attracted poor white farming families. Meanwhile, in other parts of the South, most African Americans continued as segregated sharecroppers (sharecropping is described in Chapter One).

Many children worked in the southern mills, some of whom simply followed other members of their families into the jobs. Progressive reformers sought to abolish child labor, but as the first interview shows, a practice that horrified reformers seemed quite natural to the children involved. In the second interview, Avery Downing, the son of a white landowner, explains how as a child he took the system of segregation for granted.

Question to Consider: These two interviews illustrate the value of retrospection in oral history. Neither Naomi Trammel nor Avery Downing thought to question their childhood experiences at the time, but looking back they draw clear contrasts between the circumstances of their youth and their present-day values. What can we learn from this process of historical contrast?

Child Labor: Naomi Trammel

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