

10.1 C. Fred Williams – A new social order: changing US agricultural practices in the Lower Mississippi River Valley, 1945-2000 Room 104

Chair: TBA

Technological innovations, new discoveries in chemistry and biology, and changing world needs in food and fibre consumption combined to revolutionise American agriculture in the half-century following World War II. These changes were well illustrated in the alluvial plain of the lower Mississippi River valley of the United States. Centuries-old practices of man-land interaction using animal power and limited soil or plant additives were transformed in a generation. The results may justifiably be characterised as a revolution.

While individual studies have focused on the use of technology, chemicals, and changing public policy in this region, much less attention has been given to the social impact the 'new agriculture' had on the lives of citizens in the area known locally as 'the delta.' Thousands of tenant farmers and sharecroppers along with the horses and mules they rented, sometimes owned, were displaced in a matter of decades. Thrown off the land, they, their parents, and grandparents had farmed since the nineteenth century; these rural people exchanged a patriarchal, plantation benevolence for a new system of public welfare.

This new social order forced rural decision makers to shift public policy in new directions. Beyond acreage controls, crop subsidies, and land use practices, community leaders now had to consider access to food supplies, housing, and new employment opportunities. These factors contributed to a new rural society that little resembled the pre-World War II model. Isolation and limited social mobility were replaced by crime, unemployment, and a drug culture that socially transformed the lower Mississippi River region. This paper will analyse the new order, the factors that created it, and the consequences associated with the new environment.

Dr. C. Fred Williams joined the faculty of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock in 1969 and holds a PhD from the University of Oklahoma. He served as Department Head (1973-1974), Department Chairperson (1974-1980), Associate Dean of Liberal Arts (1980-1983), and Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (1983-1988). He is the director of the Center for Arkansas Studies and serves as editor of the Ledbetter Monograph Series on Arkansas Culture. Since 2000 he has served as Executive Secretary/Treasurer of the Agricultural History Society.

Dr. Williams has served as president of the Arkansas Association of College History Teachers, the Little Rock Volunteers in Public Schools, the West Little Rock Rotary Club, and the UALR Assembly and Faculty Senate. He has received the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Faculty Excellence Award for Service and a Life-Time Achievement Award from the Arkansas Historical Association, and has been designated as Humanist of the Year by the Arkansas Humanities Council and the Malone Fellow for Study in Arabic Countries (Tunisa).