

Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection: Series 4, Subseries C, Box 4, Folder 17

"Five Cent Cotton" Booklet About Alabama in the Great Depression, 1982

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Names:

Five Cent Cotton

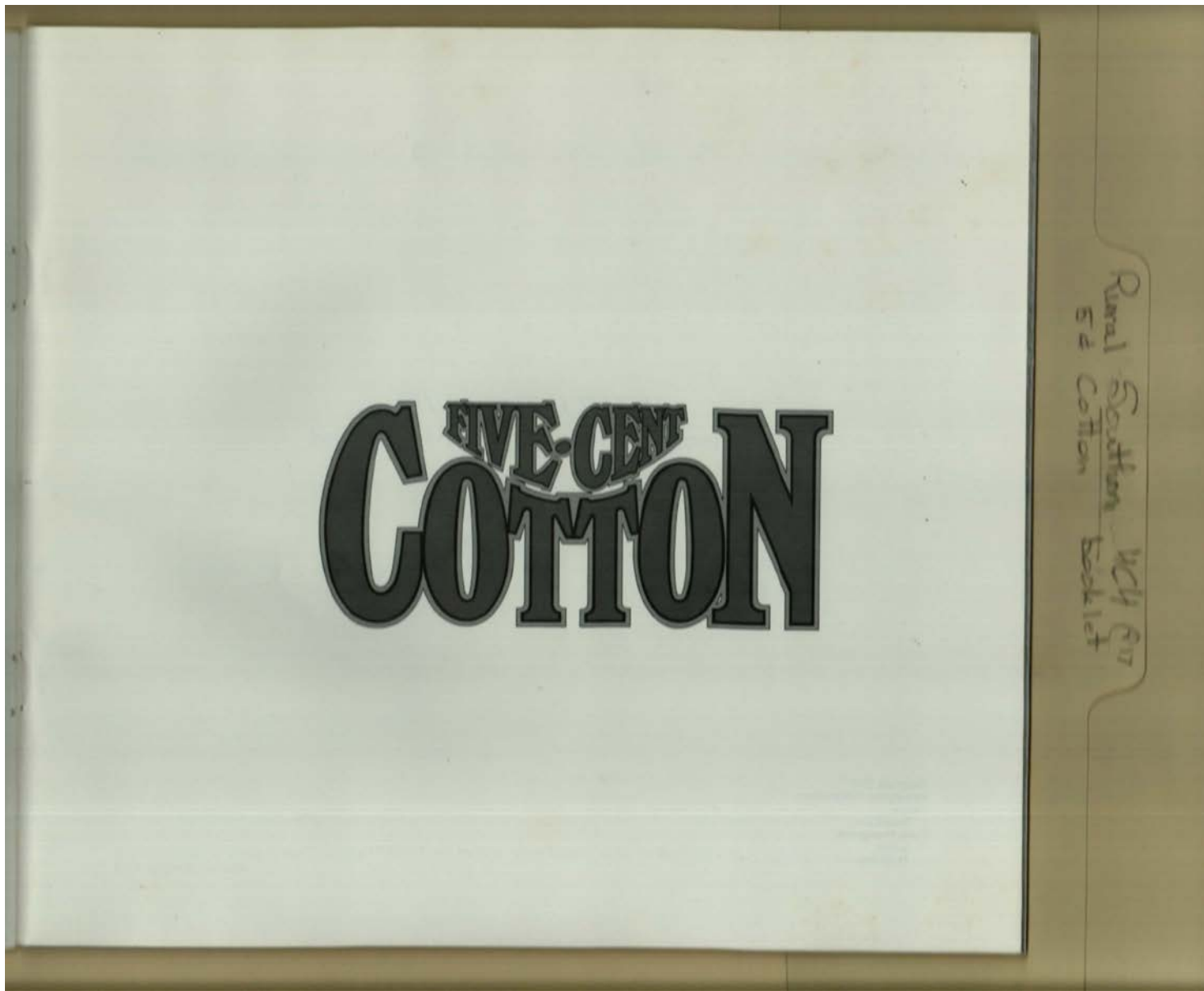
Types:

booklet

Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection: Series 4, Subseries C, Box 4, Folder 17

"Five Cent Cotton" Booklet About Alabama in the Great Depression, 1982

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Names:

Five Cent Cotton

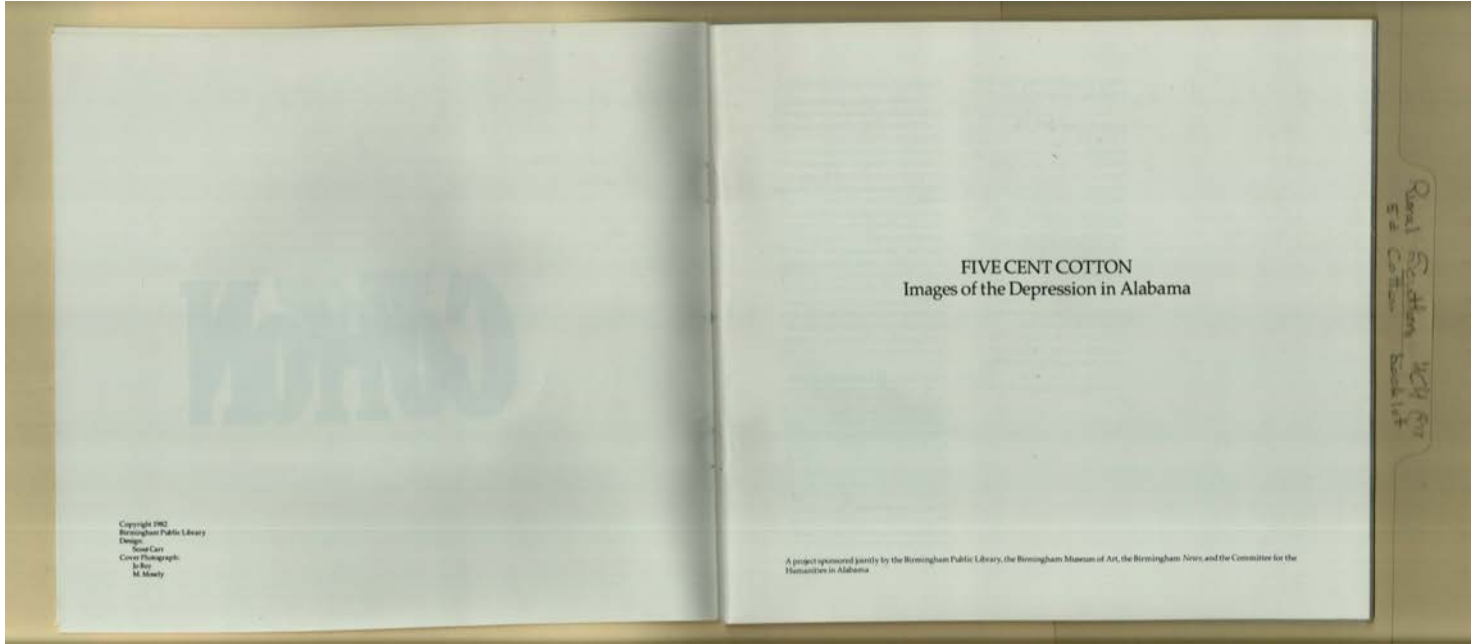
Types:

booklet

Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection: Series 4, Subseries C, Box 4, Folder 17

"Five Cent Cotton" Booklet About Alabama in the Great Depression, 1982

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Names:

Birmingham Public
Library

Carr, Scout
Mosely, M.

Roy, Jo

Images of Depression
in Alabama

Places:

Birmingham, AL

Types:

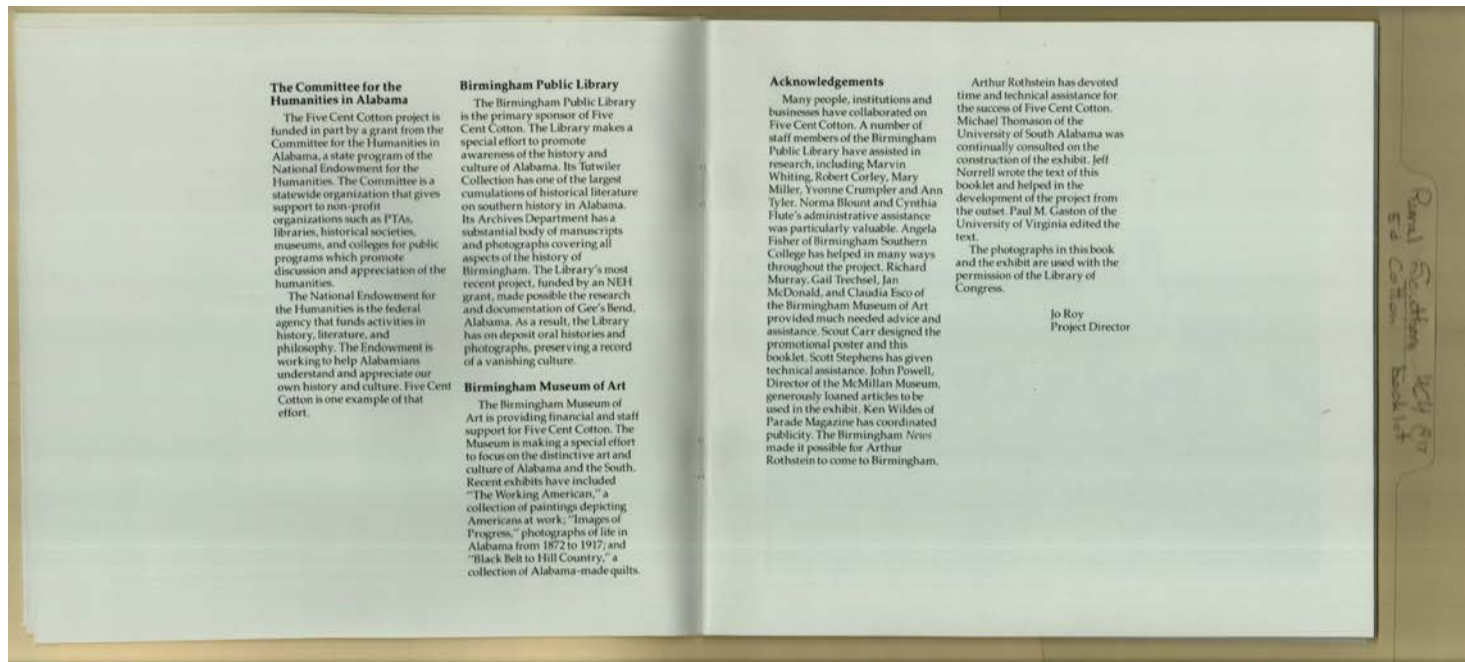
booklet

Dates:

1982

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Names:

Blount, Norma	Crumpler, Yvonne	Miller, Mary	Thomason, Michael
Carr, Scout	Esco, Claudia	Murray, Richard	Trechsel, Gail
Committee for Humanities in Alabama	Fisher, Angela	Powell, John	Tyler, Ann
Corley, Robert	Flute, Cynthia	Rothstein, Arthur	Whiting, Marvin
	Gaston, Paul M.	Roy, Jo	Wildes, Ken
	McDonald, Jan	Stephens, Scott	

Places:

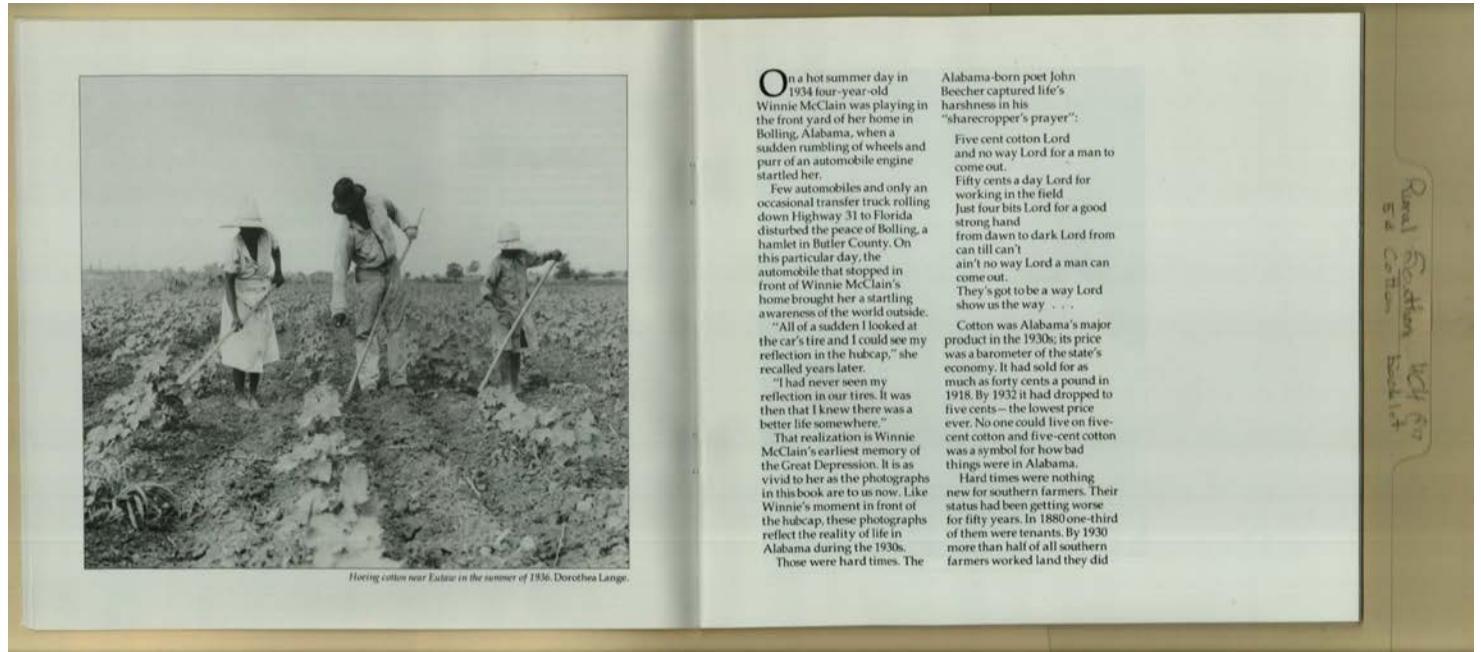
Birmingham, AL

Types:

booklet

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Names:

Beecher, John

Lange, Dorothea

McClain, Winnie

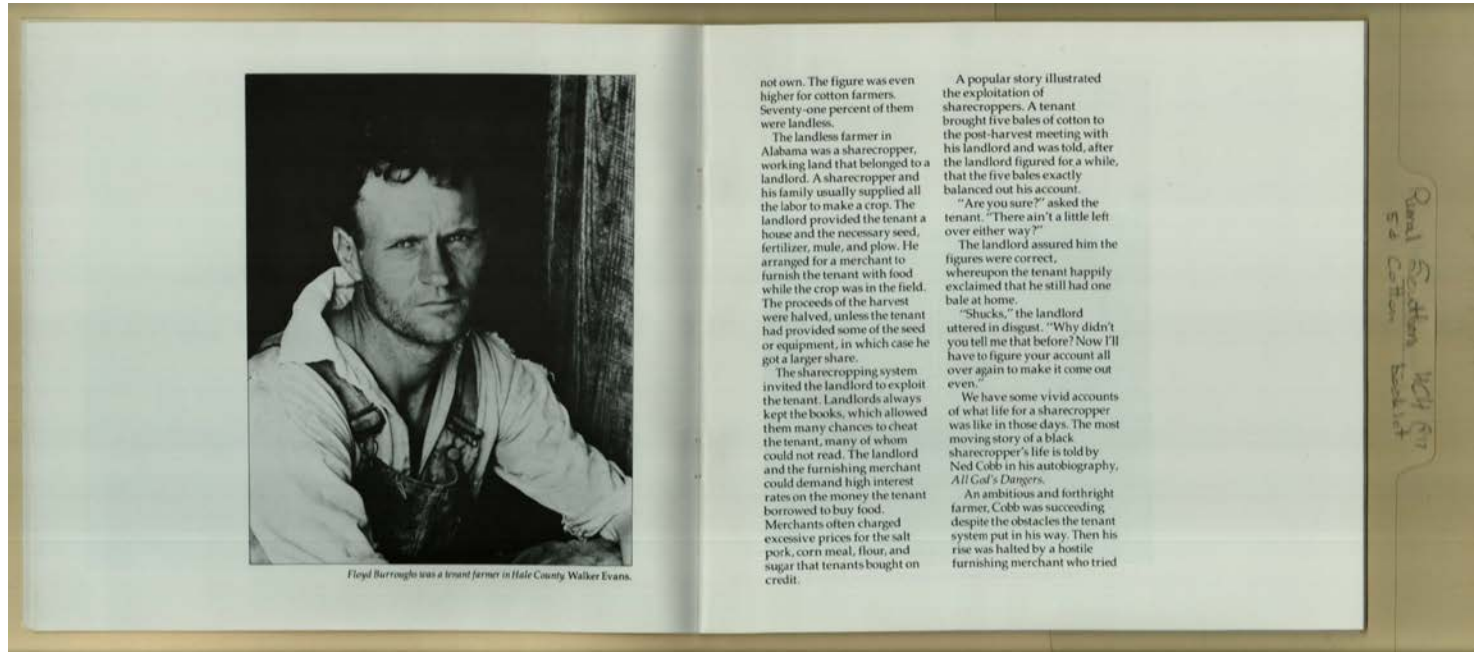
Places:

Eutaw, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



Names:

Burroughs, Floyd

Cobb, Ned

Evans, Walker

Places:

Hale County, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



A Montgomery County tenant plowing for the next crop. Arthur Rothstein.

to entrap him in credit contracts. Cobb was plain about the merchant's intentions: "He had it in for me. . . . He just aimed to use his power and break me down; he'd been doin' to people that way before then."

Cobb believed that there was nothing to keep the white merchant from exploiting black tenants. "They was his niggers and he could do with em like he wanted to and nobody else wouldn't fool with em. I figured this, and I might have been a fool to think it, me being a colored fellow and knowin the rules of the state of Alabama, partly, if I didn't know em all."

Cobb decided to act when the merchant foreclosed on a neighbor in December, 1932. After pleading unsuccessfully for mercy from a sheriff's deputy — asking that the neighbor not be left unable to feed his family — Cobb defied the deputy to take the man's property. "If you take it, I'll be damned if you don't take it over my dead body."

The deputy left but returned soon with the sheriff and a group of armed men. Alone, Cobb watched them silently until one of the men seized him.

When Cobb pushed the man away, another fired three times with a shotgun, hitting Cobb in the hips and legs. Cobb then blasted away with a pistol and the men fled.

His injuries not serious, Cobb hid out in Macon County until his family, under threat of death, told authorities where he was. They captured him and in the process killed his brother-in-law. Cobb later served twelve years in state prison on an assault charge stemming from the shootout.

Most whites blamed the violence on "communist agitation" for the sharecroppers' union. Cobb said simply that the local whites would do anything to maintain control over black farmers. He later explained why he acted in 1932.

"Somebody got to stand up. If we don't we niggers in this country are easy prey. Niggers had anything a white man wanted, the white man took it; made no difference how the cut might have come, he took it."

Ned Cobb, eloquent spokesman though he was, was only one of thousands of deprived black sharecroppers

Rural Southern
5¢ Cotton
Booklet

Names:

Cobb, Ned

Rothstein, Arthur

Places:

Montgomery County,
AL

Types:

booklet

photo



Names:

Agee, James

Cobb, Ned

Evans, Walker

Johnson, Charles S.

Places:

Hale County, AL

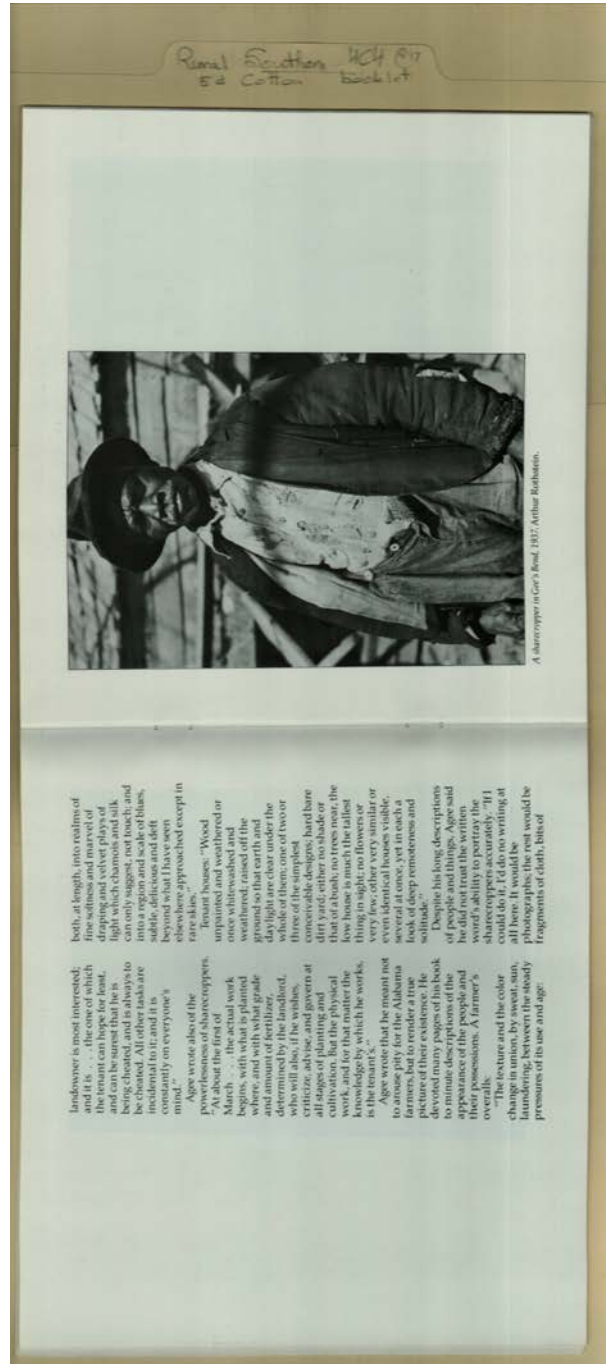
Types:

booklet

photo

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Names:

Agee,

Rothstein, Arthur

Places:

Gee's Bend, AL

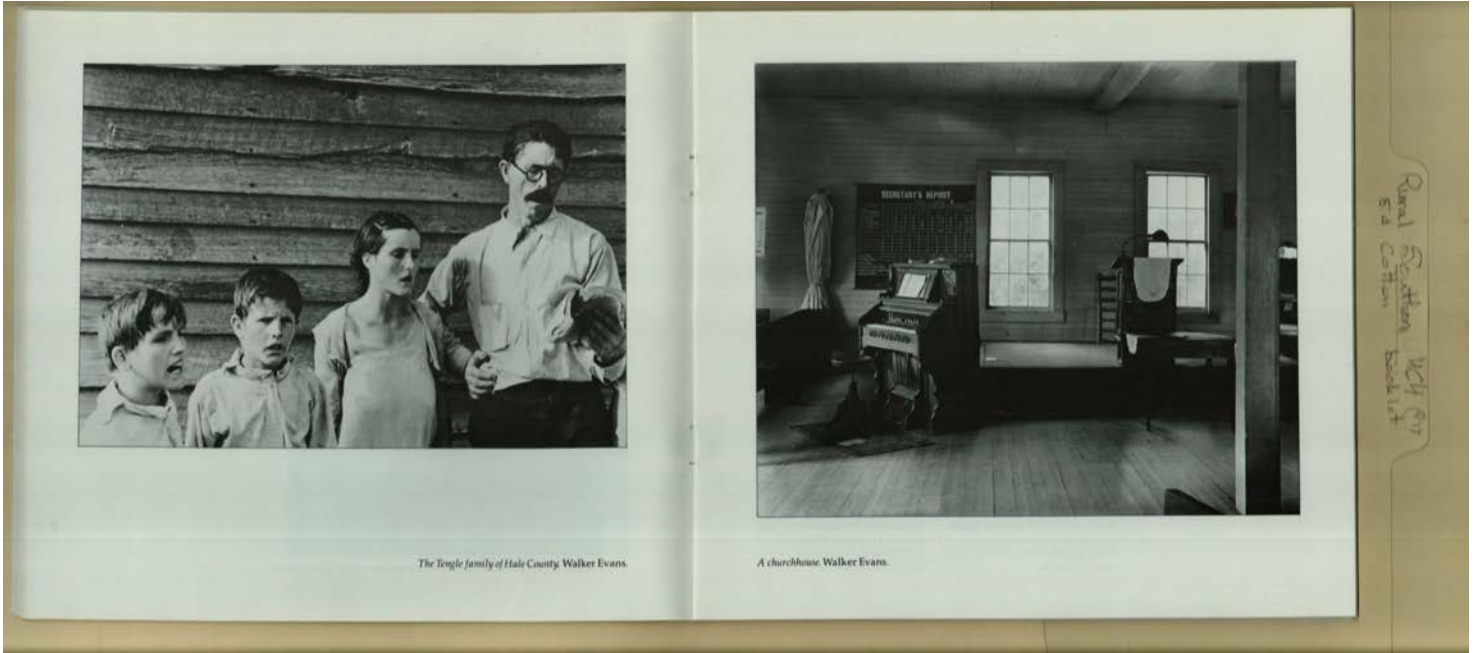
Types:

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Names:

Evans, Walker

Tenge Family

Tenge,

Places:

Hale County, AL

Types:

photo



Names:

Bud Fields Family

Evans, Walker

Fields, Bud

Roosevelt, Franklin

Places:

Hale County, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



A migrant camp near Birmingham. Arthur Rothstein.

Montgomery, the angry landlord sent word that he still lived too close to Macon County.

The reductions drove many sharecroppers off the farm, though five-cent cotton had forced many to leave before 1933. A new social crisis was now magnified. As early as 1929 landlords and merchants refused to shelter and furnish some tenants because the low price of cotton made repayment of tenant debts unlikely.

Soon hundreds of thousands of tenant families were homeless. Many simply roamed the countryside looking for shelter, food, and work. The "okies" and "arkies" of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* were portrayals of the many displaced tenants.

The worsening plight of the cotton tenants soon received fresh attention from the New Deal. In 1935 President Roosevelt established the Resettlement Administration to give loans to tenants for livestock, equipment, living expenses, and the purchase of land. It "resettled" some tenants in planned communities where they lived in new homes, farmed under the supervision

of agricultural scientists, and received regular medical attention.

The Resettlement Administration and its successor, the Farm Security Administration, ran several projects in Alabama, including ones at Palmydale, Trussville, Mt. Olive, and Bessemer in Jefferson County; Jasper in Walker County; Shorter in Macon County; and Gee's Bend in Wilcox County.

The Gee's Bend project was an example of federal help at its best. Lying inside a large bow in the Alabama River, Gee's Bend was fifteen square miles of isolated cotton land inhabited by black tenant farmers. A merchant in Camden furnished the Gee's Bend tenants for many years, but when he died in 1932 the administrators of his estate took away every mule, pig, chicken, and hoe in satisfaction of the debts owed the merchant. Only food from the Red Cross kept the Gee's Bend people from starving in the winter of 1932; relief agencies sustained them through the next two years.

Finally, the Resettlement Administration arrived in Gee's Bend. First, it gave the tenants

Rural Section
54 Cotton
1937

Names:

Roosevelt, President

Rothstein, Arthur

Steinbeck, John

Places:

Birmingham, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



Farm folks in town. Dorothea Lange.



Downtown Greensboro in Hale County. Walker Evans.

Rural Southern
Ed Cotton
booklet

Names:

Evans, Walker

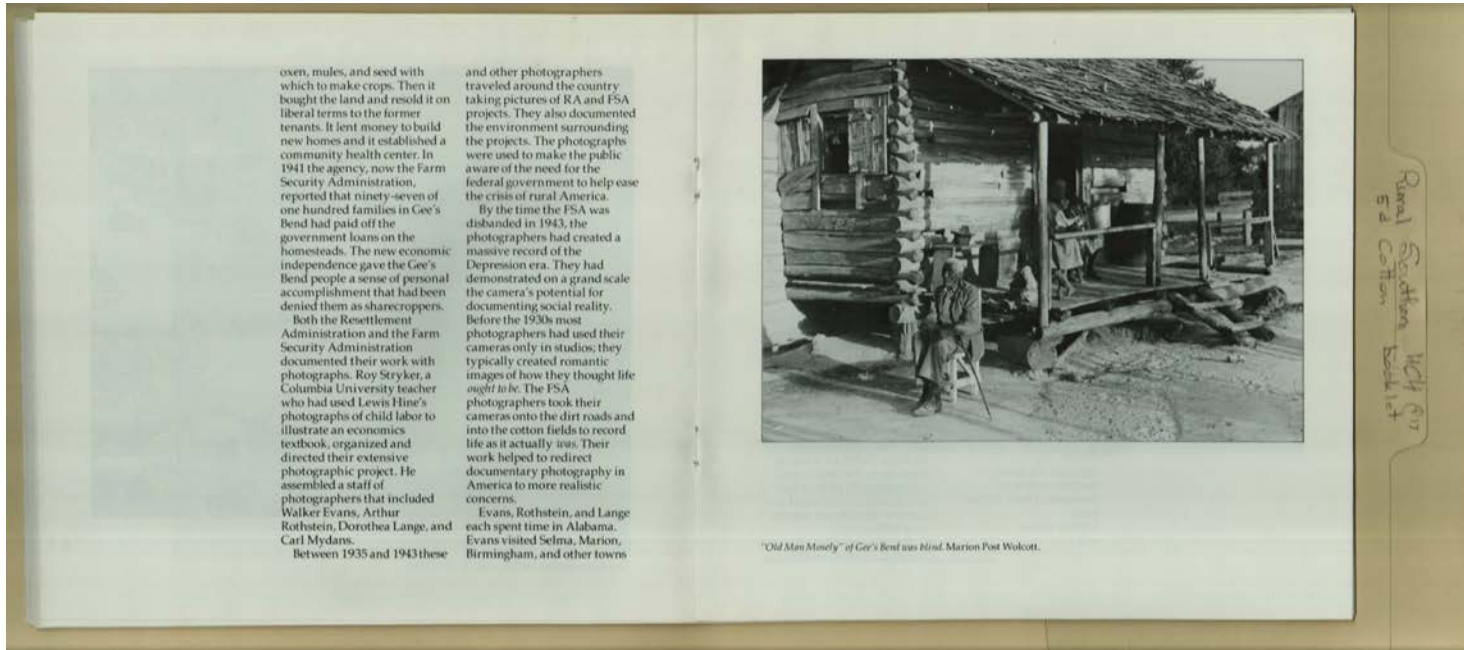
Lange, Dorothea

Places:

Greensboro, AL

Types:

photo



Names:

Evans, Walker
Hines, Lewis

Lange, Dorothea
Mosely, Old Man

Mydans, Carl
Rothstein, Arthur

Stryker, Roy
Wolcott, Marion Post

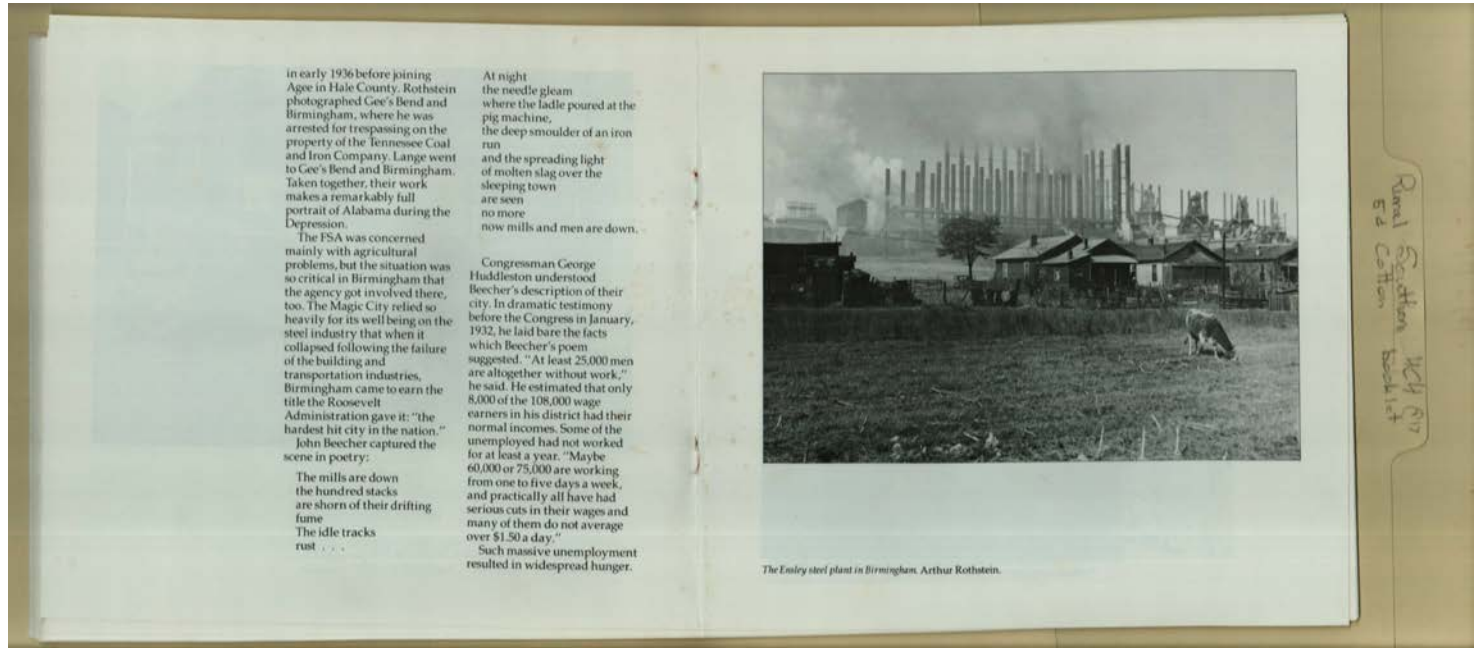
Places:

Gee's Bend, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



Names:

Beecher, John
Ensley Steel Plant

Huddleston, George,
Congressman

Lange,
Roosevelt,

Rothstein, Arthur

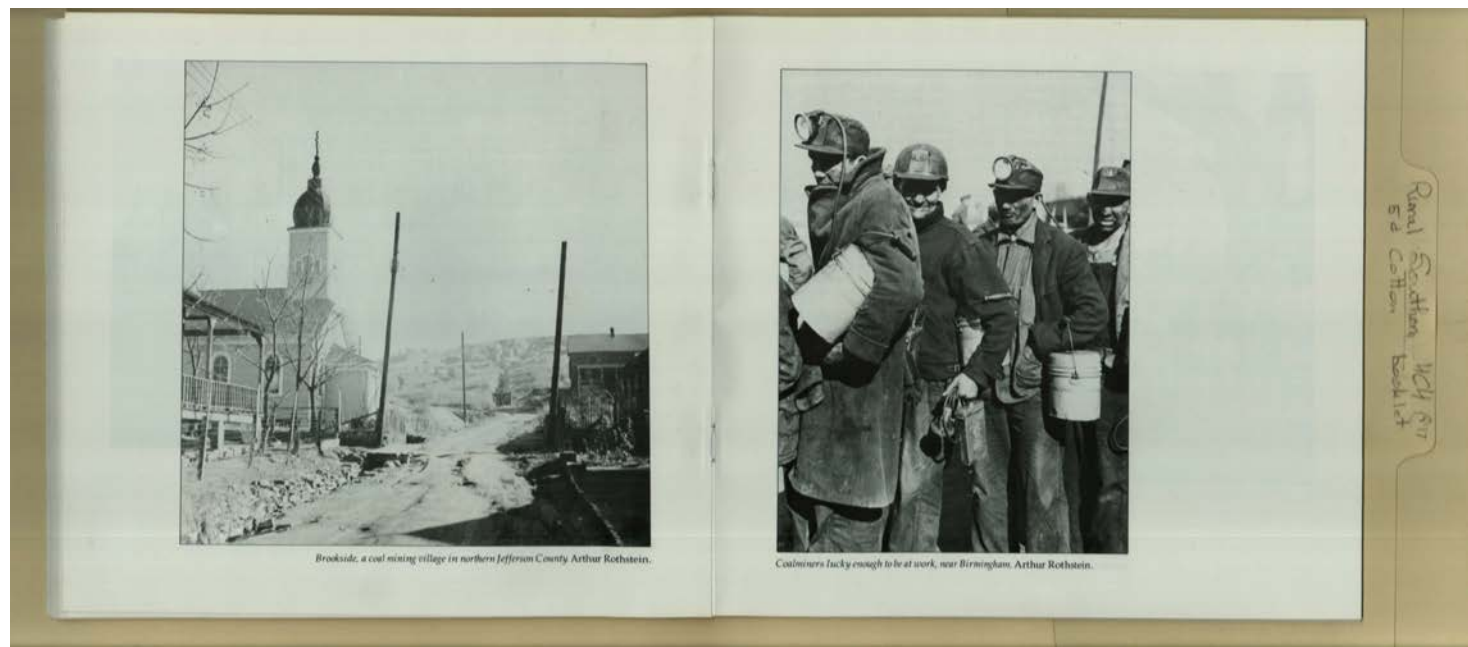
Places:

Birmingham, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



Names:

Brookside, AL

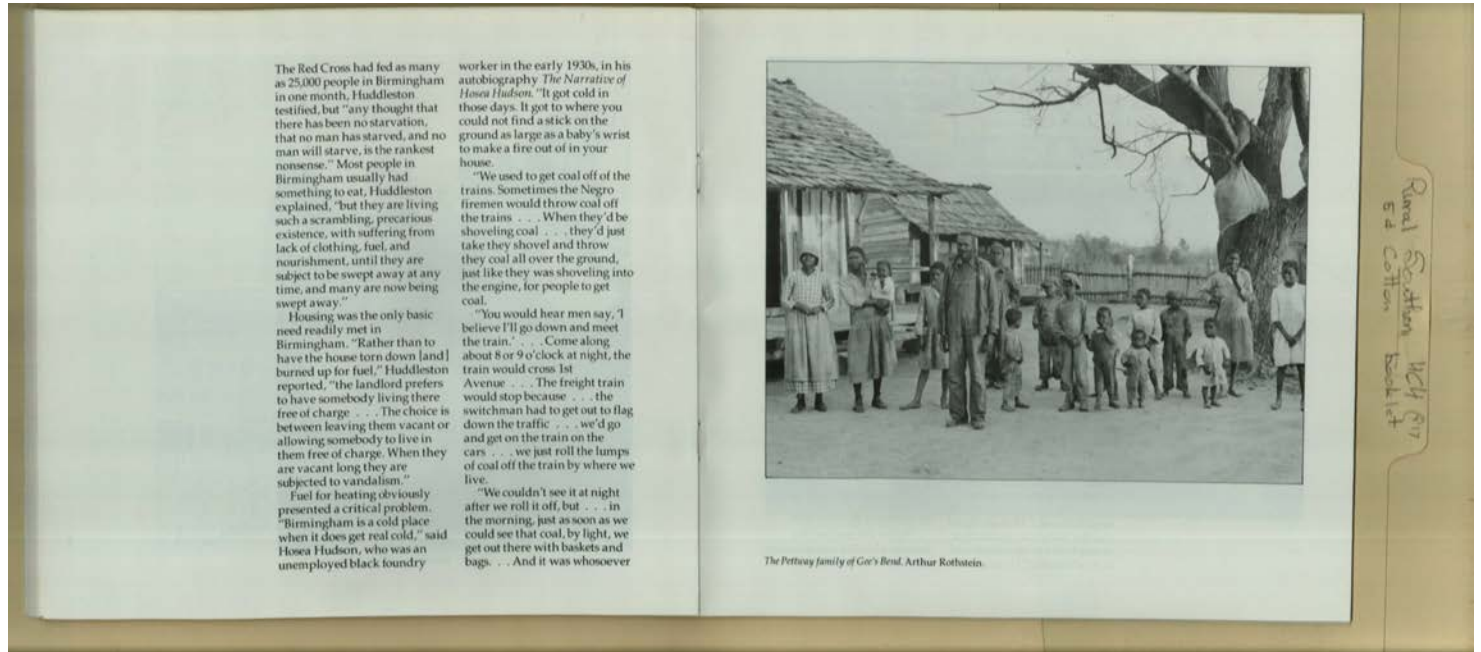
Rothstein, Arthur

Types:

photo

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Names:

Huddleston,

Hudson, Hosea

Pettway Family

Rothstein, Arthur

Places:

Gee's Bend, AL

Types:

booklet

photo

will, let him come. Nobody fighting over 'this coal is my coal' or nothing . . . It wasn't any jim crow line around that coal, and there wasn't any fights among the Negroes and whites."

The Depression devastated the poor, but in some ways it may have hit the middle class even harder. Journalist Lorena Hickok, investigating relief efforts in Alabama in 1934, found that unemployed professionals did not show anger over their plight. In fact, they had little to say. "They were very mild," she wrote. "Had few kicks to make. Generally I'd say they were dumb with misery."

Hickok wrote about the inadequacy of relief for white collar people. "We can provide overalls, but not tailored business suits," she lamented. "We can't keep those white shirts laundered." Unemployed professionals tried to hold on to their middle-class status. "To white collar people it's damned important to live in a decent house or apartment, in a decent neighborhood." Hickok argued that the particular problems of unemployed professionals had to be addressed: "I honestly

believe that, if we force them to give that up, we shall, in many, many instances, either break their morale completely or make Communist leaders out of them."

John Beecher observed the impact of the Depression on his father, an executive with the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company in Birmingham. "He lost most of his money in the stock market crash of '29. He had a hard time recovering from it, psychologically."

"I remember how, after dinner, he'd just lie on the couch in utter despair, night after night, for hours. A man who was interested in music, read all kinds of literature, novels, plays, history, economics and so on—there was this man so knocked out.

"We were afraid he was going to commit suicide. His close personal friend did take a header out of the fourteenth story window. He was still getting an excellent salary, but he felt . . . the measure of a man's success was the amount of money he accumulated.

"But he did recover. He became a kind of coolly critical intelligence. He was ready for



A roadside stand near Birmingham.

Rural Southern Way of
5d Cotton Booklet

Names:

Beecher, John

Hickok, Lorena

Types:

booklet



Sisters in Go's Bend, Arthur Rothstein.

any kind of change in the system—perhaps this system was not eternal, perhaps there should be a more cooperative society.”

The deprivation and the suffering inevitably kindled anger. “My people are desperate,” George Huddleston told the Congress. “They are not in a condition to reason about things. They are in agony of starvation and ruin and might turn on even the best friend they ever had.”

John Beecher worked as a relief administrator throughout the South but nowhere was the tension greater than his native Birmingham. He witnessed an incident in Ensley that demonstrated the intensity of the anger.

A woman argued violently with a relief administrator who would not give her a quart of real milk for her infant, whom Beecher described as “a real blue baby, dying of starvation.

“You should have seen the things they were giving babies instead of milk. I remember seeing them put salt-pork gravy in milk bottles and putting a nipple on, and the baby sucking this salt-pork gravy.

“This woman was determined to get real milk for her baby. She raised all the Cain she could, until the top supervisor agreed to let her have a quart. When they handed it to her, she got back as far as she could and threw it up against the wall—Pow!—and smashed it. This was the kind of spirit, you see.”

Some Alabamians channeled a similar anger into radical political movements. When millions of people are hungry, they reasoned, the economic system—capitalism—has obviously failed. A new system must be considered.

The American Communist Party established its southern headquarters in Birmingham in 1929. It recruited members among unemployed steelworkers, especially blacks. The Communist Party never gained a large membership in Birmingham, though about 250 people were active. Hosea Hudson, who joined in 1931 and became a local leader, explained part of its attraction to him:

“What the Party was doing was taking this lower class like myself and making people out

Rural Southern
5¢ Cotton
Booklet
WCH 8/17

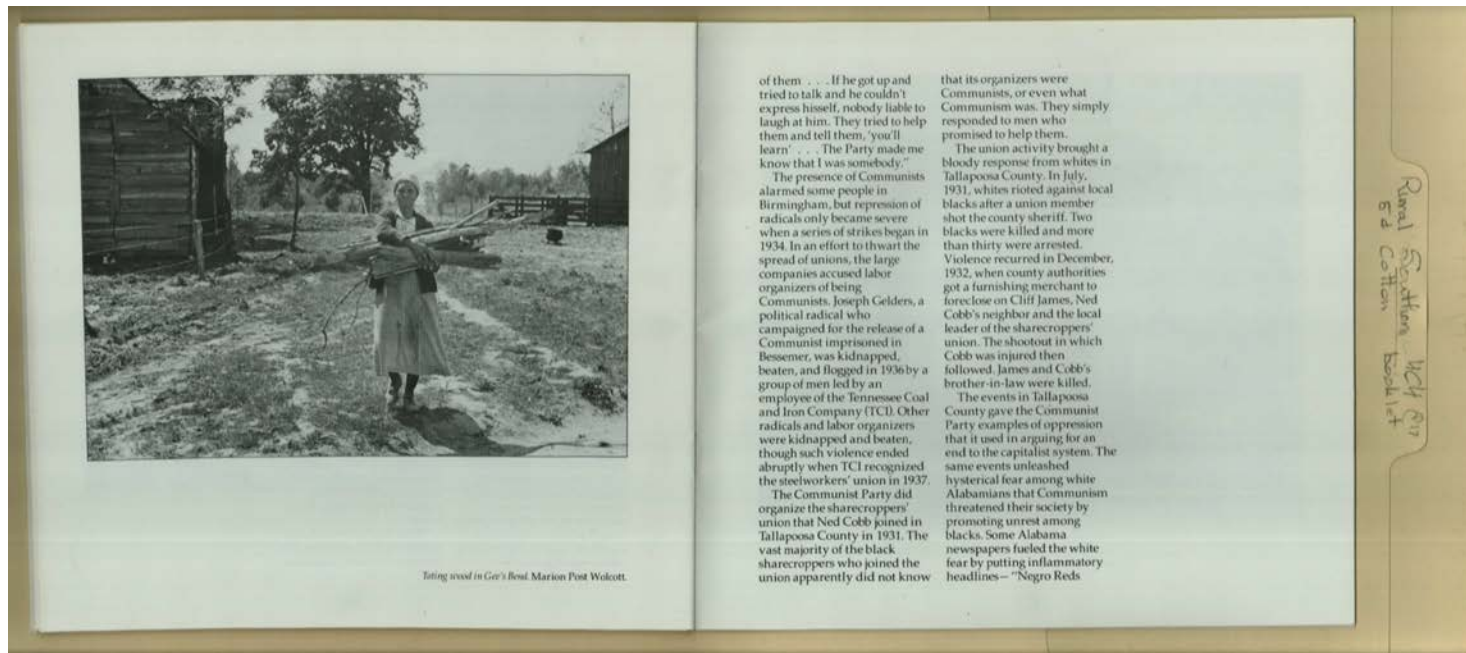
Names:

American Communist
Party

Beecher, John
Huddleston, George

Types:

booklet



Names:

Cobb, Ned

Gelders, Joseph

James, Cliff

Wolcott, Marion Post

Places:

Gee's Bend, AL

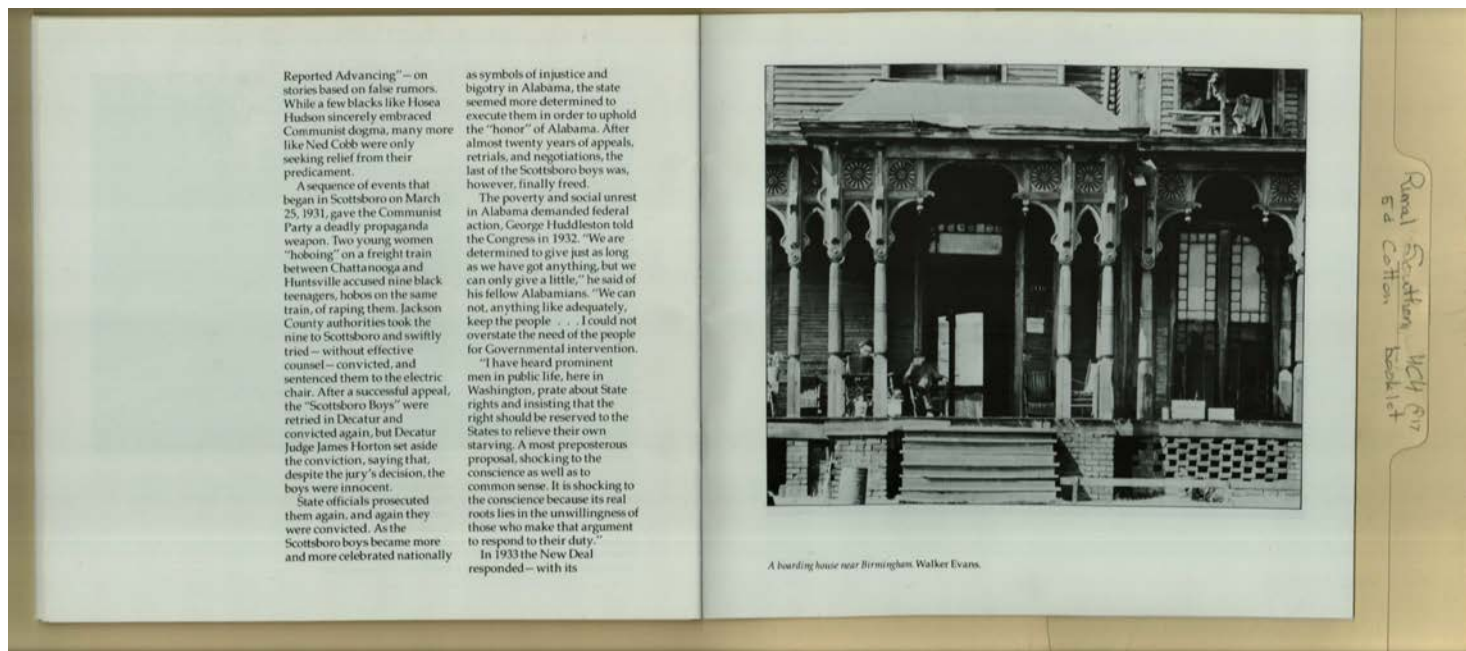
Types:

booklet

photo

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Names:

Cobb, Ned

Evans, Walker

Horton, James, Judge

Huddleston, George

Places:

Birmingham, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



A schoolhouse. Walker Evans.



The new school at Gee's Bend.

Rural Southern
Ed Cotton
Booklet
1982

Names:

Evans, Walker

Places:

Gee's Bend, AL

Types:

photo



Migrants near Birmingham, Arthur Rothstein.



Company housing near Birmingham, Walker Evans.

Rural Section
5-4
Cotton
Booklet
1/4 1/4

Names:

Evans, Walker

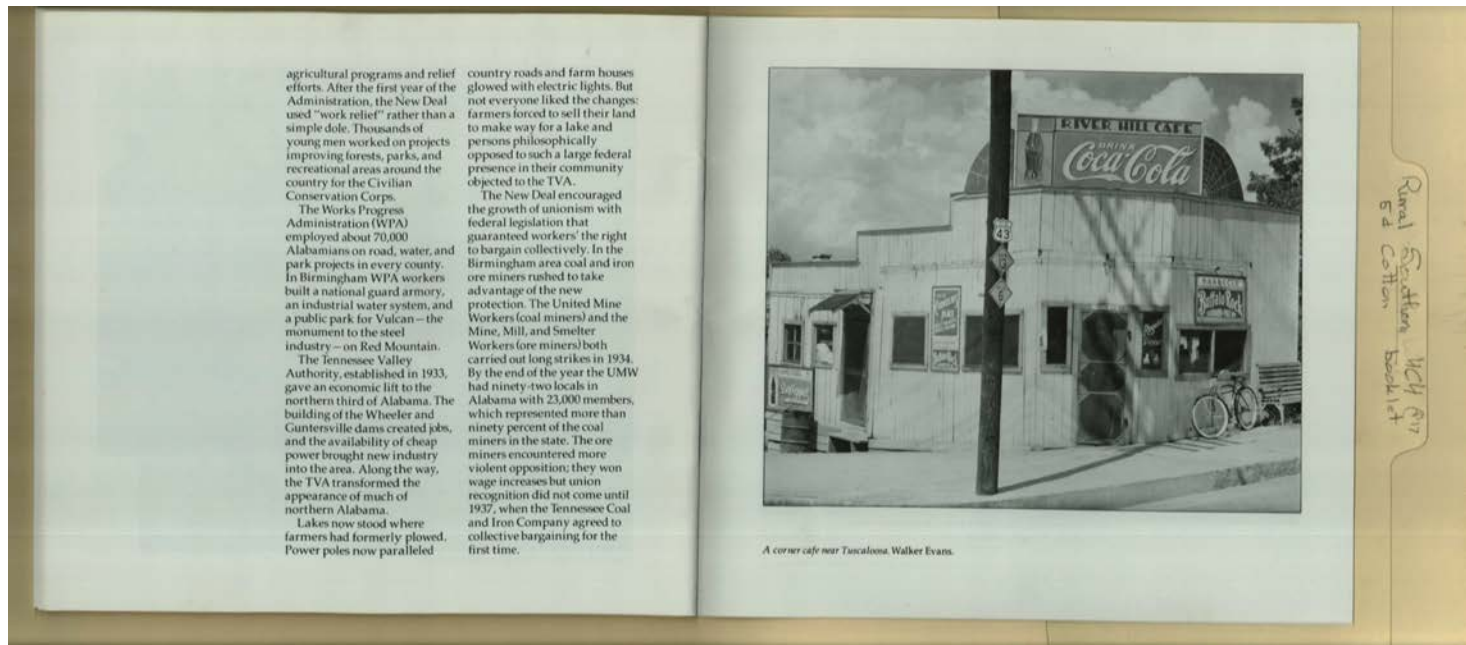
Rothstein, Arthur

Places:

Birmingham, AL

Types:

photo



Names:

Civilian Conservation Corps CCC

Evans, Walker
TVA

United Mine Workers

Places:

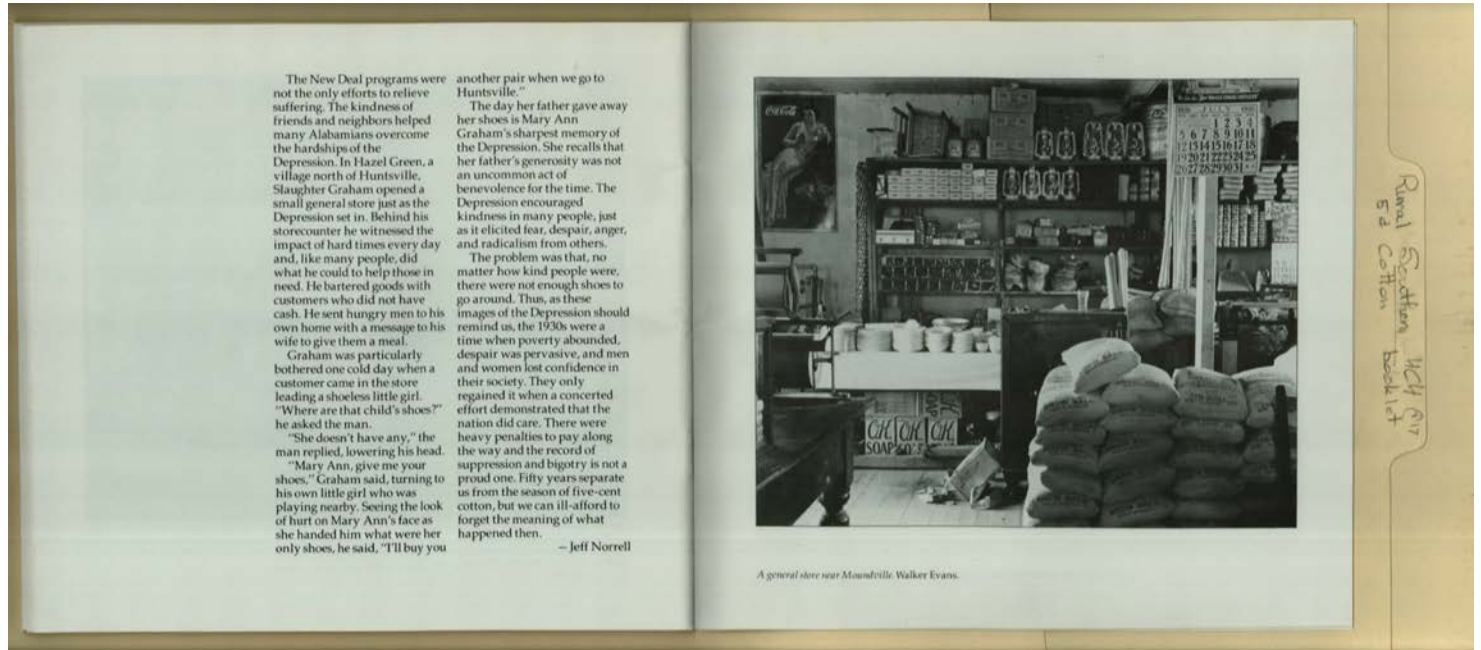
Birmingham, AL

Tuscaloosa, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



Names:

, Mary Ann

Evans, Walker

Graham, Slaughter

Norrell, Jeff

Places:

Moundville, AL

Types:

booklet

photo



A new home in the Resettlement Administration community of Palmerdale near Birmingham.



"Patting up" peps in Gee's Bend.

Rural Section
5d Cotton
Booklet
1/24/37

Places:

Palmerdale, AL

Types:

photo



A store near Moundville. Walker Evans.



Organized fun at the Friendship Church in Gee's Bend. Marion Post Wolcott.

Rural Southern
5 d Cotton
1934-1937

Names:

Evans, Walker

Friendship Church

Places:

Gee's Bend, AL

Types:

photo



A crossroads store and post office in Sprott, near Marion, Walker Evans.

Rural Southern
5¢ Cotton Booklet
1/24/82

Names:

Evans, Walker

Places:

Sprott, AL

Types:

photo

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Types:
photo

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Whiting, Marvin [4](#)
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Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection

Preferred Citation: Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection, Archives and Special Collections, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, AL.

Collection Scope and Content: The Collection of 114 Linear ft. includes a total of 156 Archival Boxes. The Frances Cabaniss Roberts collection covers the historical records of the Cabaniss Roberts family. This collection contains extensive correspondence records of the Cabaniss Roberts family circa 1830 to 1930.

Archives/Special Collections Access Restrictions: None

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