BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2021

Federal troops escort Black men on a road outside Elaine, Arkansas, in the fall of 1919. When whites attempted to disrupt a meeting of a new union of Black farmers, shots were fired, and a massacre ensued. Officials and newspapers pushed a false story that the farmers were plotting an insurrection. ARKANSAS HISTORY COMMISSION VIA AP

Black labor put lives on line to organize

Union drive by farmers met violent resistance

Heather Tirado Gilligan
Special to USA TODAY

Two hundred people — men, women, children — packed into a church in Hoop Spur, Arkansas, on Sept. 30, 1919, for a meeting of a newly formed, all-Black labor union, the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America.

Hoop Spur, just outside the town of Elaine, was a speck of land in a rich swath of topsoil, but the Black farmers who tended crops in that soil didn't reap those riches. Instead, wealth was siphoned off by white landowners.

The meeting led to racial bloodshed, known today as the Elaine massacre. A century later, the union's role in helping light the way for later labor unions and for the civil rights movement is usually overshadowed by the massacre.

"That's the part of the story that people almost always miss," said Cherisse Jones-Branch, the James and Wanda Lee Vaughn Endowed Professor of History at Arkansas State University.

Once-enslaved Blacks worked for white landowners as sharecroppers after the Civil War, often on the same plantations that were built with slave labor. Under sharecropping, Black farmers were given a plot of land to work and paid owners a share of their crops in return.

White landowners quickly instituted exploitative practices as part of the sharecropping system. They ran company stores that charged 33% to 40% markups, and they routinely shorted tenant farmers on their share of the profits. These practices kept the sharecroppers continually indebted to the landowners. And the landowners colluded to ensure farmers could not escape their debt by leaving to work for someone else.

"They and their families were as effectively held and immobilized on those farms in the 1890s into the early 1900s as their grandparents had been held as slaves in the same plantations before the Civil War," explained Douglas Blackman, author of "Slavery by Another Name," in a PBS documentary with the same title.

Even successful farmers like Ed Ware weren't safe from exploitation. Ware

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rented 120 acres outright rather than through a sharecropping arrangement and owned his own cotton gin. But he still had to sell to white merchants, who offered him half of what his cotton was worth in 1919.

"I refused to take it," he recalled years later, "and they said they were going to take the cotton at that price. ... They said they were going to mob me."

Ware joined the Progressive Household and Farmers Union, or PFHU, which was founded by sharecropper Robert Hill and three others in April 1919. Hill was in charge of recruitment.

"This union wants to know," Hill wrote in a 1919 recruitment circular, "why it is that the laborers cannot control their just earnings which they work for."

The question was dangerous for Hill and the members of PFHU.

Ware, who became secretary of the

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Eric Arnesen
labor historian

Hoop Spur branch of the union, was at the church meeting when a group of white men drove up. Armed union members were guarding the church. White men fired into the church, and Black men fired back. A white man was killed in the exchange, touching off a week of chaos as white mobs attacked Black people across the area.

The massacre lasted seven days. Five whites died. Exactly how many Black people were killed remains unknown, but estimates put it in the hundreds. White landowners and newspapers were quick to spread a different version of the story — that the Black farmers had attempted an insurrection. Gov. Charles Hillman Brough called in the National Guard to put down the so-called rebellion. The troops marched into town with machine guns to find posses of white men hunting down African Americans.

Both Hill and Ware survived. Hill escaped to Kansas, while Ware was one of 12 Black men convicted and sentenced to death for the murders of the five white men who died. Ware and five other condemned men were later freed by the Arkansas Supreme Court. The remaining six were freed by the U.S. Supreme Court. No whites were tried for their role in the massacre.

Black people knew they were risking their lives by organizing, Jones-Branch said. Black unions had a long history by 1919, starting in the years following the Civil War. Black rural agricultural unions dated back to the 1880s.

Black unions formed for the same reasons white unions formed, said Eric Arnesen, the James R. Hoffa Professor of Modern American Labor History at George Washington University: "Labor conditions are oppressive. Wages are abysmally low. Treatment on the job by managers is arbitrary or harsh."

But Black workers were typically excluded from white labor unions or forced into less-powerful all-Black branches of those unions. As Elaine demonstrated, their efforts to organize were met by a particular and brutal violence.

"The lesson that you might draw there is don't raise your head, don't ask for trouble, keep your head down, mind your own business and stay alive," Arnesen said.

After Elaine, Black sharecroppers joined with white tenant farmers to form another agricultural labor union in 1935, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, which began in Arkansas and spread across much of the South. The union successfully drew national attention to the plight of sharecroppers during the Great Depression. Descendants of the Elaine massacre helped to organize the new union, historian Nan Woodward noted in her book "American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta."

Other Black unions from the 1920s and '30s, such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, won concessions that helped Black people do better economically. Their increased wages meant a porter could "solidify his standing in the storied American middle class," Larry Tye pointed out in his book "Rising from the Rails."

Porters were also crucial to the civil rights movement, Tye noted, sharing organizing strategies and donating money. So were former organizers of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, who played a key role in forming the influential Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Woodward explained.

Rory Gamble, the first African-American president of the United Auto Workers union, notes that his union's historic involvement in the civil rights movement included raising the bail money for Martin Luther King Jr. when he was jailed in Birmingham in 1963.

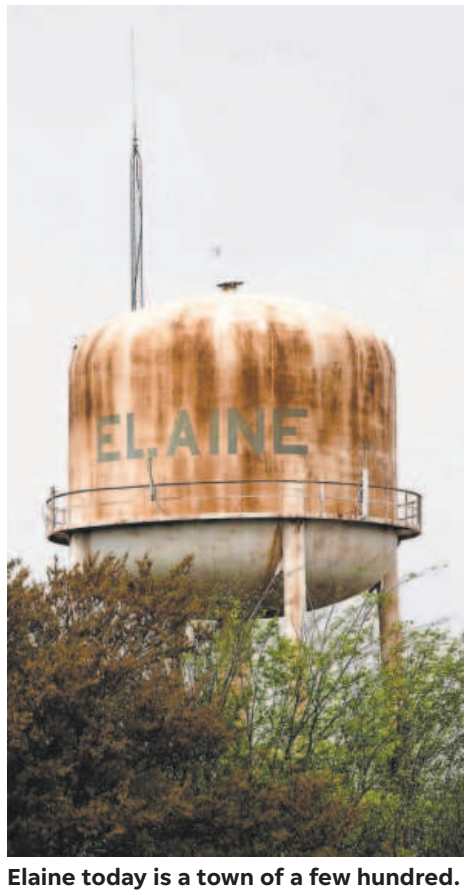
"The UAW integrated bowling alleys in America and pressed for an end to apartheid, culminating with Nelson Mandela's visit to Detroit" in 1990, Gamble said.

Today, Black workers are more likely to belong to unions than any other ethnic group, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Public-sector unionized positions such as U.S. Postal Service jobs have Black membership as high as 27%. Black union workers earn, on average, 16.4% higher wages than non-union Black workers and are far more likely to have employer-sponsored health and retirement plans, according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

Jones-Branch said understanding the long and ongoing legacy of Black organizing and resistance means learning stories like the forming of PHFU.

"People wanting to be able to take care of themselves and their families and make a fair living wage — there's nothing new about that."

Robert Hill co-founded the farmers' union. After the massacre, he fled to Kansas, where he is shown here in Topeka working for a railroad in 1943. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Elaine today is a town of a few hundred.
ALBERT CESARE/MONTGOMERY ADVERTISER