



Thad Snow: A Life of Social Reform in the Missouri Bootheel (MISSOURI BIOGRAPHY SERIES)

Bonnie Stepenoff

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Thad Snow (1881–1955) was an eccentric farmer and writer who was best known for his involvement in Missouri’s 1939 Sharecropper Protest—a mass highway demonstration in which approximately eleven hundred demonstrators marched to two federal highways to illustrate the plight of the cotton laborers. Snow struggled to make sense of the changing world, and his answers to questions regarding race, social justice, the environment, and international war placed him at odds with many. In *Thad Snow*, Bonnie Stepenoff explores the world of Snow, providing a full portrait of him.

Snow settled in the Missouri Bootheel in 1910—“Swampeast Missouri,” as he called it—when it was still largely an undeveloped region of hardwood and cypress swamps. He cleared and drained a thousand acres and became a prominent landowner, highway booster, and promoter of economic development—though he later questioned the wisdom of developing wild land.

In the early 1920s, “cotton fever” came to the region, and Snow started producing cotton in the rich southeast Missouri soil. Although he employed sharecroppers, he became a bitter critic of the system that exploited labor and fostered racism. In the 1930s, when a massive flood and the Great Depression heaped misery on the farmworkers, he rallied to their cause.

Defying the conventions of his class, he invited the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) to organize workers on his land. He became a friend and colleague of Owen Whitfield, an African American minister, who led the Sharecroppers’ Roadside Strike of 1939. The successes of this great demonstration convinced Snow that mankind could fight injustice by peaceful means. While America mobilized for World War II, he denounced all war as evil, remaining a committed pacifist until his death in 1955. Shortly before he died, Snow published an autobiographical memoir, *From Missouri*, in which he affirmed his optimistic belief that people could peacefully change the world.

This biography places Snow in the context of his place and time, revealing a unique individual who agonized over racial and economic oppression and environmental degradation. Snow lived, worked, and pondered the connections among these issues in a small rural corner of Missouri, but he thought in global terms. Well-crafted and highly readable, *Thad Snow* provides an astounding assessment of an agricultural entrepreneur transformed into a social critic and an activist.

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