



## **Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice**

*By David M. Oshinsky*

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In this sensitively told tale of suffering, brutality, and inhumanity, *Worse Than Slavery* is an epic history of race and punishment in the deepest South from emancipation to the civil rights era—and beyond.

Immortalized in blues songs and movies like *Cool Hand Luke* and *The Defiant Ones*, Mississippi's infamous Parchman State Penitentiary was, in the pre-civil rights south, synonymous with cruelty. Now, noted historian David Oshinsky gives us the true story of the notorious prison, drawing on police records, prison documents, folklore, blues songs, and oral history, from the days of cotton-field chain gangs to the 1960s, when Parchman was used to break the wills of civil rights workers who journeyed south on Freedom Rides.

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### **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### From Scientific American

Oshinsky's beautifully constructed narrative brings to vivid life one of the most shameful chapters in American history.

#### From [Booklist](#)

Historian Oshinsky uses Mississippi as a paradigm for the shameful history of black injustice in the South between the post-Civil War demise of slavery and the post-World War II rise of the civil rights movement. Since its admission to the Union, Mississippi had been a violent place, as the author relates; and brutality to blacks was simply a part of Mississippian culture. After the abolition of slavery, in most white Mississippians' minds, something else had to be arrived at for "keeping the ex-slaves in line." Thus laws were passed designed to maintain white supremacy, particularly when it came to controlling black labor. After a discussion of the deplorable practice of convict leasing, a system whereby people could "hire" prisoners for physical labor outside the walls of prison, the author turns his attention to Parchman Farm, the state penitentiary, "a sprawling 20,000-acre plantation in the rich cotton land of the Yazoo Delta." What transpired behind the fences of Parchman Farm since its founding in the early part of this century is a horror story told here through a rigorous study that should be accorded an important place on the U.S. history shelf.

*Brad Hooper*

#### From Kirkus Reviews

An absorbing tale of a Southern prison whose name is synonymous with brutality. Historian Oshinsky (*A Conspiracy So Immense*, 1983) draws on materials ranging from court records and blues lyrics of black women prisoners to the novels of William Faulkner for this thoroughgoing history of Parchman Farm, Miss., a 20,000-acre plantation notorious even among the most hardened criminals for its inhumane conditions. Oshinsky traces Parchman Farm's evolution during Mississippi's frontier days, when lawlessness and violence made the later Wild West seem tame by comparison, and after the Civil War, when civic society broke down and a fifth of the state budget went to the purchase of artificial limbs for broken--and desperate--veterans who too often wound up behind bars. A disproportionate number of Parchman's residents, however, were black, and Oshinsky is particularly good at tracing the decline of African-American fortunes in the late 19th century, when, as a contemporary observer noted, ``however these [white Mississippians] may have regarded the negro slave, they hated the negro freeman.'' White Mississippians reasserted their power through the courts, fostering a system of work farming whereby Parchman inmates (often mere children who had committed such crimes as stealing change from the counter of a dry-goods store) were rented out as near-slave labor for neighboring cotton plantations--a system that ended only in the mid-20th century. Oshinsky examines the culture of what he calls this ``American Siberia,'' drawing heavily on oral histories collected by federal workers in the New Deal era, to show how thoroughly that culture influenced the larger society of the Deep South. In a charged epilogue, Oshinsky notes that Parchman, now a ``scientifically run'' prison, is resisting pressures to institute chain-gang labor, setting something of a standard of humane treatment for the region. A well-paced, revealing history of hard times. -- *Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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