

## Monday Mornin' Blues



During the period of Restoration following the Civil War, African Americans were given land of their own and the vote. They could now hold public office and, being in the majority, frequently did. Federal troops occupied the Southern states to ensure their fair treatment. The white residents there did not readily accept the fact that people who were once their slaves were now their equals. They had already seen their world change forever and were not prepared to share what was left of it with former slaves.

At the same time, industries across the south—railroads, steel mills, coal mines, the timber industry—were bereft of the slave labor which had powered them to prosperity during the war and the decades before. Hiring replacement workers at fair wage would have been prohibitively expensive. Furthermore, in many cases it was the freed slaves who had the technical knowledge to conduct their operations.

The perfect solution to both dilemmas soon became apparent: arrest and imprison black men and lease them to the railroads, the mines and the factories as a form of slave labor. While the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment freed the slaves, it specifically permitted involuntary servitude for “duly convicted” criminals. New laws were written which targeted the freed slaves, making criminal such acts as speaking loudly in the presence of a white woman, quitting a job without permission, or “vagrancy”, which could be construed to suit one’s pleasure. Some of the men imprisoned under this system were actually guilty

of crimes, but many more were arrested on minimal or fabricated charges. Once in the system they were defenseless; jail terms were extended indefinitely and records “lost”. Men were leased to industries in groups of hundreds, and entered a life which was, in every way but name, slavery.

In the prevalent white Southern view of the time, this was the right place for black men. Even sympathetic whites accepted the involuntary servitude of men they assumed must be criminals. The practice continued relatively unabated until World War II, when it became an embarrassment to the Federal government and was largely, but not wholly, stopped.

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*went and asked the judge, said what might be my fine  
get a pick and shovel boy and go down in the mines  
it's the only time I ever felt like cryin'.*

*Mississippi John Hurt*

Appreciation to Douglas A. Blackmon for his book, Slavery by Another Name.