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Everyday Life:
RECONSTRUCTION
to 1900

WALTER A. HAZEN

 GOOD YEAR BOOKS

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Dedication

To Martha, Jordan, and Allison

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment to my editor, Laura Strom, who has guided me through several books in Good Year's "Everyday Life" series. Without her advice and support, this book would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank Roberta Dempsey, Acquisitions Manager at Good Year, for giving me the opportunity to be a part of such an exciting project. Her support and confidence in me is likewise appreciated.



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Design and Illustration: Sean O'Neill, Ronan Design

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59647-304-1

Previous ISBN: 0-673-58652-9

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CHAPTER I

Reconstruction

Shortly after 10 o'clock on the night of April 14, 1865, a shot rang out in Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. The shot was fired by John Wilkes Booth, a well-known actor and Southern sympathizer. Booth's target was President Abraham Lincoln. The President had gone with his wife to the theater to watch a presentation of the play "Our American Cousin."



John Wilkes Booth leaps to the stage of Ford's Theatre in Washington after shooting President Lincoln.

Shot in the back of the head at point-blank range, Lincoln died early the next morning. With his death, any hope the defeated South had of lenient treatment following the Civil War also died. Booth, thinking his cowardly act would somehow avenge the Confederacy, instead doomed the South to a decade of military occupation by federal troops.

Abraham Lincoln's plan for reconstructing, or admitting the Southern states back into the Union, was a simple one. When a state established a government and 10 percent of its voters swore an oath of loyalty to the United States, that state would be welcomed back into the fold. All former Confederates, except high-ranking officers and officials, would be pardoned and allowed to participate in public affairs. The matter of what would become of the four million slaves freed by the war was for the most part left to the states.

Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Lincoln as President, attempted to follow a similar plan. But the Radical Republicans who controlled Congress would have no part of it. Men like Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts wanted the South to pay for starting the war. They also felt that Reconstruction should be the business of Congress and not the President.

In the meantime, Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865 to help ex-slaves adjust to a life of freedom. The Bureau provided food, clothing, and other necessities to thousands of African Americans. It also established schools for black children and made sure ex-slaves received proper medical attention. Although the Bureau was condemned by Southerners as being a tool of a "foreign government," almost as many poor and hungry whites benefited from Bureau handouts as did blacks.

From 1865 to 1867, Southern state governments enacted special laws to deny full rights to blacks. These laws were known as Black Codes. Blacks were





forbidden to vote or serve on juries. They could not bear arms (own guns), attend schools with whites, or mingle with whites as equals. In states such as Florida, the codes stated that any black person who attempted to ride in a railroad car with whites or tried to associate with them in any way would be placed in the stocks (a wooden device used to bind the ankles and sometimes wrists) and given thirty-nine lashes on the bare back.

Radical Republicans in Congress were angry at what was taking place under President Johnson's policy of reconstruction. Determined to punish the South, they pushed the Reconstruction Act of 1867 through Congress. This law abolished the white-dominated governments set up after the war and laid down rules for the establishment of new ones. This time, each state had to guarantee blacks the right to vote. Then a new state legislature elected by all qualified voters had to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship to ex-slaves.

To enforce the Reconstruction Act, Congress divided ten of the eleven Confederate states into five military districts, each under the control of a major general. Only Tennessee, because it had already ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, was spared.

While people in the North enjoyed an economic boom after the Civil War, Southerners, both black and white, struggled just to survive. Soldiers returning after four long years of fighting often found their homes and fields destroyed or in shambles. Worse, some family members had died or simply vanished in their absence. Others were starving and had no idea where their next meal would come from.

Particularly hard hit were the owners of small farms. Even in the best of times, such farmers barely grew enough food to feed their families. Now, with the destruction caused by the war, they were reduced to virtual starvation. Poor diet and polluted drinking water also led to outbreaks of diseases such as smallpox and yellow fever.

Although planters who had been wealthy before the war usually had enough to eat, the freeing of the slaves had turned their world upside-down. Some admitted to Northern visitors that they had never done a day's work in their lives and did not know how to begin. In addition, their wives had never cooked, sewed, or cleaned house. In short, previously wealthy Southerners had no idea how to cope without the luxury of slave labor.



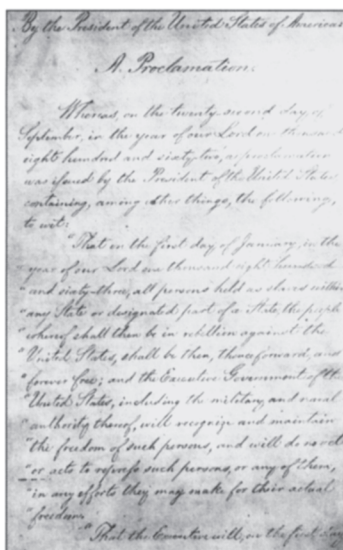
Ruins of the Gallego Flour Mill in Richmond, Virginia, immediately after the Civil War.





African Americans picking cotton for shares in Mississippi around 1880.

A copy of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which freed all slaves in states fighting against the Union.



The plight of planters was further complicated by the lack of credit. They had no money to buy seeds or to pay workers, and banks were reluctant to give them loans. With their plantations ruined, some abandoned the land and took any job they could find. Others fished and hunted for food.

Even Southerners who had held high positions in the Confederate government or the military shared the same fate. Braxton Bragg, an important Confederate general during the war, came home to Louisiana and found himself penniless. He and his wife, Elisha, lived in a former slave cabin while he managed the plantation of another owner. To escape complete poverty, he moved to Alabama and became the Commissioner of Public Works.

If times were hard for whites, they were doubly difficult for blacks. But at first, newly freed African Americans were too joyous to think of the future. They greeted the coming of freedom with tears, singing, and dancing. One young girl wrote later that her elderly father, upon hearing the news, let out a whoop and jumped neck-deep into a creek on the plantation where they lived. Then, while singing over and over again "I'm free! I'm free!," he happily dumped bucket after bucket of water over his head.

But then reality set in. What would the ex-slaves do? Where would they go? Few could read and write, and most knew no life other than that of the plantation. Those who could left the South and went North to find work in factories. Others went west to Kansas and became homesteaders.

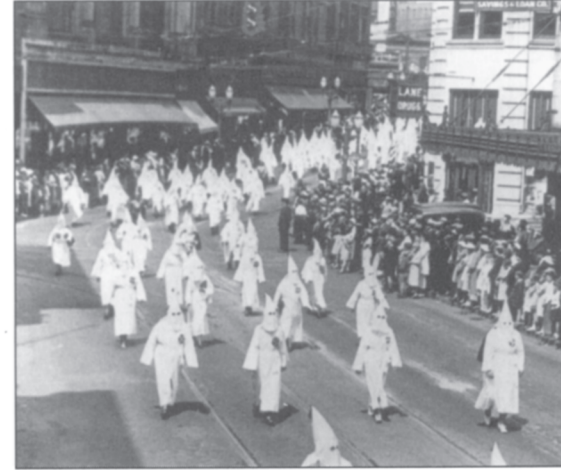
Most blacks, however, stayed where they were. Many signed contracts with owners to work on plantations for wages. Others became sharecroppers, where they received housing, seeds, and equipment in return for working the planter's land, supposedly being allowed to keep a share of the crop themselves. In many instances, ex-slaves lived in the same slave cabins they had occupied before emancipation.

Contracts between owners and blacks were subject to approval by the Freedmen's Bureau. Nevertheless, dishonest planters found ways to cheat their hired workers and to continue to treat them as though they were still slaves. The low wages received by most blacks became even lower when owners deducted for medical care and hours lost from work due to sickness.





But African Americans had more than earning a living to worry about: namely, their lives. When freed slaves, under the protection of federal troops, began to vote and to be elected to local and state offices, Southern white extremists reacted violently. They formed secret terror organizations to frighten blacks from the polls, or voting places. In Tennessee, Georgia, and the Carolinas, these “night riders” were known as the Ku Klux Klan. In Louisiana they went by the name of the Knights of the White Camelia. In Texas they were called the Knights of the Rising Sun, while in Mississippi they took the name the White Line.



Hundreds of Klanswomen march in a 1936 Memorial Day Parade in Atlanta, Georgia.

By whatever name these groups went, they terrorized both black and white Republicans during the Reconstruction years. Thousands of innocent people were shot, stabbed, and lynched by riders who always called in the night, dressed in masks and white robes. Even Northern women who came South to teach black children were not spared.

Republican governments lasted but a short time in the former Confederacy. As early as 1870, they were overthrown in some states and Southern Democrats returned to power. Gradually, Northerners, due in part to the deaths of Thaddeus Stevens and other Radical Republican leaders, lost interest in reconstructing the South and turned to their own problems.

How, you might ask, could the North just turn its back on African Americans in their time of need? The answer lies in the fact that many Northerners saw Reconstruction more as an attempt to punish the South than as a crusade to obtain equality for black people. In truth, the North was no more ready to grant equal rights to African Americans than was the South.

Federal troops were removed from the South in 1877, leaving white Democrats in firm control. And in spite of the Fifteenth Amendment, which in 1870 extended the right to vote to all black males, Southerners used literacy tests and the poll tax to keep blacks from exercising that right.

After twelve years of Reconstruction, African Americans were little better off than before. They were no longer slaves, but so-called Jim Crow Laws kept them from voting and enjoying the same rights as white citizens. Almost a hundred years would pass before African Americans achieved any measure of equality.





Name _____ Date _____

Research the Impeachment of Andrew Johnson

President Johnson's clash with Congress over Reconstruction led to his impeachment in 1868. Research the impeachment proceedings in an encyclopedia or other source and answer the questions below.

1. What does it mean to "impeach" a public official?

2. Which officials on the federal level are subject to impeachment?

3. Which house of Congress initiates impeachment proceedings? Which house acts as a jury?

4. Write a paragraph explaining what led to President Johnson's impeachment.

5. What was the outcome of President Johnson's impeachment trial?

6. *Bonus.* Which President resigned from office in 1974 to avoid being impeached?

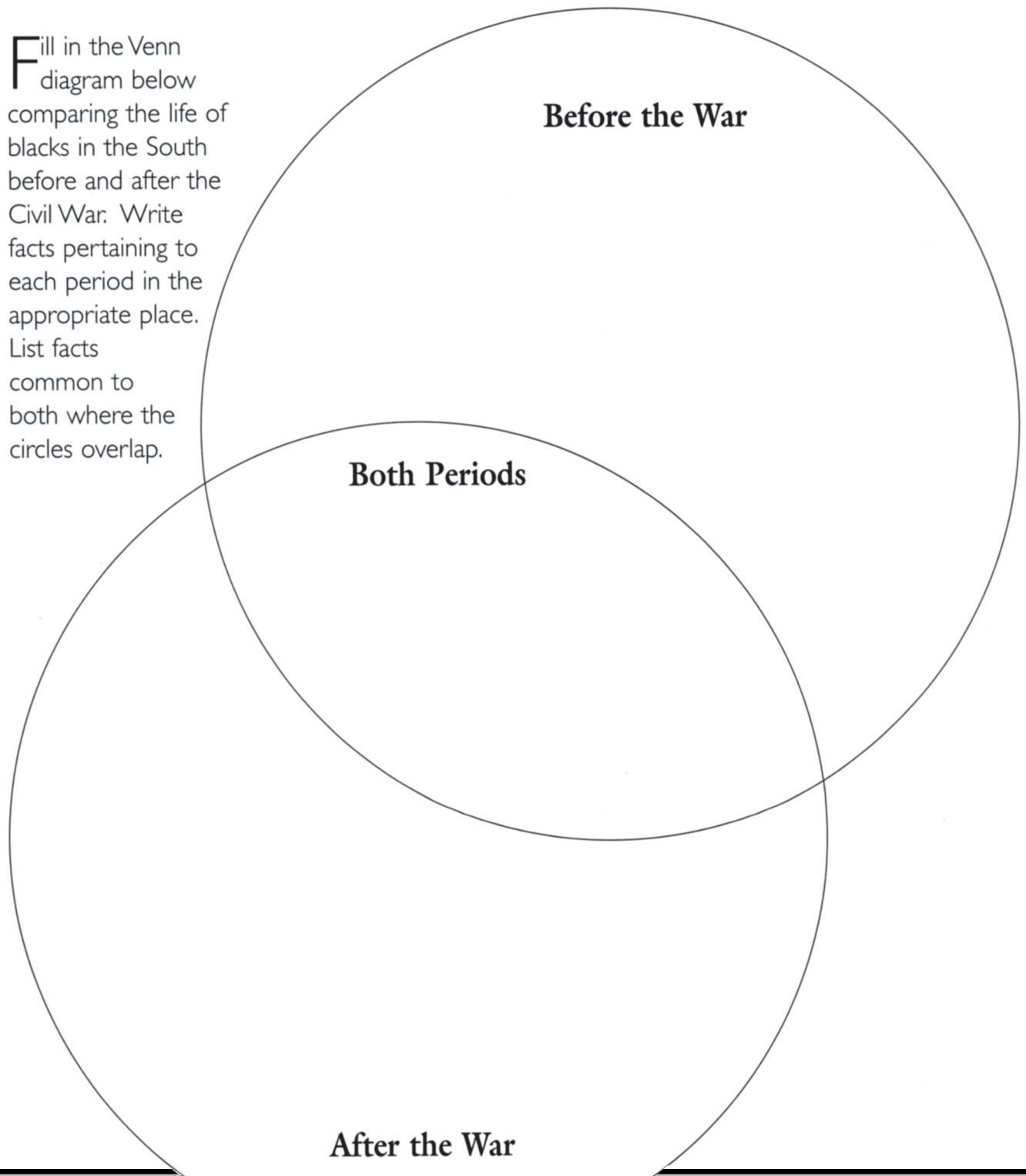




Name _____ Date _____

Complete a Venn Diagram

Fill in the Venn diagram below comparing the life of blacks in the South before and after the Civil War. Write facts pertaining to each period in the appropriate place. List facts common to both where the circles overlap.





Name _____ Date _____

Make False Statements True

All of the statements at right are false. Change the word(s) in *italics> to make them true. Write the replacement word(s) on the line following the statement.*

1. Abraham Lincoln's plan of Reconstruction required that a *majority* of the voters in each Southern state swear an oath of loyalty to the United States. _____
2. John Wilkes Booth, President Lincoln's assassin, was a famous *journalist*. _____
3. Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner believed that Reconstruction should be the responsibility of *the President*. _____
4. The Reconstruction Act of 1867 divided the South into *ten* military districts. _____
5. *Louisiana*, because it had ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, was the only Southern state not to be occupied by federal troops. _____
6. *Contracted workers* were allowed to keep a portion of the crop they grew for a planter. _____
7. The *Fourteenth* Amendment extended the right to vote to all black males. _____
8. All federal troops were removed from the South by *1870*. _____
9. *Scalawags* were Northerners who came South after the Civil War for personal gain. _____
10. Literacy tests and poll taxes were used by Southern states to keep blacks from *attending school with whites*. _____
11. Some freed slaves went west after the Civil War and became *factory workers*. _____





Name _____ Date _____

Finish a Story

Confederate soldiers returning home after the war found much of the South in ruins. All that remained of many buildings and houses were gutted walls and smokestacks. Railroad tracks and telegraph lines had been destroyed along with much fertile farmland.

At right is a story that has been started for you. On the lines provided, complete the story, giving it any ending you choose. Continue on a sheet of notebook paper if necessary.

Michael was anxious and worried as he made his way down the dusty road toward his small farm. He had not heard from his wife and two children in more than a year. Were they all right? Had they left? Was the house and farm intact? Such thoughts occupied his mind as he rounded the bend in the road that led to his farm.

Michael hurried as the dilapidated fence surrounding his land came into view. Then he caught a quick glimpse of his property. Emitting a loud yell, he dropped his few belongings and ran as fast as he could toward his house.

