

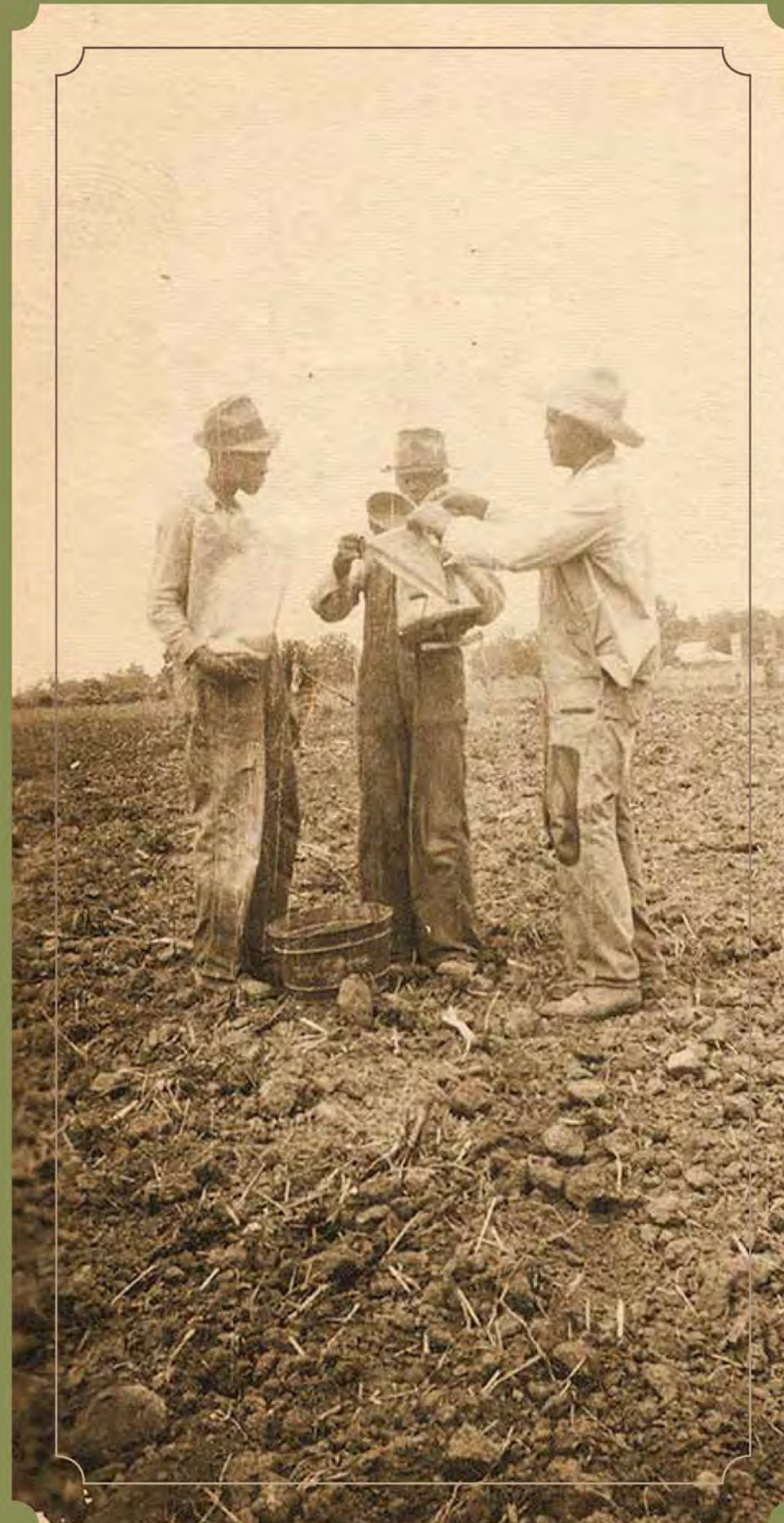
1. RESEARCHING MORGAN COUNTY'S AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

The seat of Morgan County, Decatur, is not only the county's largest and oldest city, but is also the core of its historic African American community. Known as River City, Decatur rests snug against the Tennessee River's south bank. Founded in 1820, what is now called Old Town formed the original boundaries of the city. With the coming of the railroad several years later, the city prospered and became a major industrial hub. The Louisville and Nashville Railroad, which still is in use, is the oldest railroad west of the Appalachians.

Due to the significance of the railroad in the mid-19th century, it was a strategic target for the North during the Civil War. The Battle of Decatur resulted in complete destruction of Old Town. In rebuilding the city, most of its original inhabitants moved southeast to the other side of the present day Bee Line Highway and dubbed the area, New Decatur. During Reconstruction, Old Town was redeveloped by the African American community, becoming the home to many prominent and well to do families. By the 1880s, many northern Reconstructionists had taken up residence in the New Decatur area. Today, Bee Line Highway divides Old Town from what was New Decatur.

The county archives are located within Old Town off Banks Street. There are physical remnants of the city's turn-of-the-century street

(Right) T.W. Bridges, Morgan County Agricultural Extension Agent at Work, Circa 1930s. (Morgan County Archives, Decatur, Alabama) **(Upper Right)** Early 20th-Century Postcard of the Tennessee Valley Bank (Morgan County Archives, Decatur, Alabama)



car line still visible down Banks Street. Bank Street retains several of the city's historic commercial buildings including the former Tennessee Valley Bank that now holds the Morgan County Archives. Walking up to the archives you can get a sense of the building's former use – the southwest façade has oddly high small windows above two bays that stick out from the wall; there are bas relief eagles and roses adorning the stately looking building. While the southwest side has visibly been remodeled and lacks the stone exterior of the other three faces, little has changed on this early 20th-century bank. The faint letters spelling "Tennessee Valley Bank" are still visible on the front and at the center of the building remains the enormous vault in situ.

Inside the old bank, the ceilings are high, and lit by hanging florescent lights illuminating the predictable rows and stacks of books and records, as well as display cases protecting donations from local residents. One exhibit shows off artifacts of the World War I, another the ever-present Civil War, and neatly placed in a small room about 15 by 20 feet is the story of the Scottsboro Boys, the result of passionate research by a local historian.

Presiding over the collections is John Allison, archivist and local River City resident. Mr. Allison and his volunteers are more than willing to help any researcher in finding that piece of history that fits their family story or enlightens their understanding of a person, place, or thing.