



LIFE IN THE U.S.

Photo by Mary King

Progress in Poverty Capital, U.S.A.

By Jodey Bateman

Marks, Miss., is where the Poor People's Campaign mule train to Washington, D.C., started from in 1968. It is the county seat of Quitman County where blacks have the lowest median income, the third highest unemployment rate and one of the highest rates of out-migration of any county in Mississippi, the poorest state in the nation.

For a brief period Marks had nationwide publicity. Local merchants capitalized on it in traditional American style. They sold postcards that said "Marks: Poverty Capital of the Country" as some other towns pride themselves on things like producing the most broom corn.

After the publicity was over, the black community of Marks went back to the slow, patient organizing they had been doing for years in the civil rights movement. Lule Belle Weathersby, for instance, came back from Resurrection City to become chairwoman of the country's National Welfare Rights Organization.

"We kept hollering so long we annoyed them," she sums up her experience, "and they stuck this little piece of bread in our mouth so us couldn't holler so loud. Nixon tried to push us back some. Under Nixon we didn't gain nothing. We just had to hold on to what we got and wait for another President."

For generations, the black people of Marks and the area around it had lived in poverty doing manual labor on the plantations. Then, when cotton-picking machines, tractors and chemical weed killers replaced people who picked and hoed the cotton, about half the sharecroppers went north.

But many could find no room in the ghettos of Chicago and Detroit or were too old or lacked the education for a job there. So jobless rural blacks moved to county seat towns like Marks. While nearby rural areas declined, Marks has grown steadily.

►Give people some land.

"This farm where we used to have 40 families and now there ain't but two," Mrs. Weathersby says. "They tore down our houses and we started piling up in these

little towns. You know, I think that's what caused this recession. We used to be out there on farms raising our own food. Then we had to pile into town and live on commercial food. So now there's a shortage of this and that cause we'd spend on that commercially-grown food.

"If the government wanted to end the recession, they'd buy up some of these plantations and we could move out on them and raise gardens and hogs and cattle—all our own food. I know a lot of them who would like to do that."

Mrs. Weathersby's idea about the land is echoed by many poor people in Marks. Alec Dean, a Choctaw Indian married to a black woman, says, "The only way I can see to solve this problem is to put the land back in circulation. Let the people go out and work on it—raise their own food and get off welfare. I think the world is looking for something to do. They looking for it to change one way or another, white and colored."

Although no such basic change has been achieved, Mrs. Weathersby mentions the omnibus housing bill as one of the results of the Poor People's Campaign. She and a number of other black people in Marks have built bright colored low-cost frame houses with help provided under the Omnibus bill, though most blacks still live in sagging shacks.

"When we got ready to build this house we didn't have nothing but \$10," Mrs. Weathersby says. "I just shed a tear. But I looked up and here come a truck to get us out of the heat and the cold and the mosquitoes. I felt so proud. And I felt the same thing when I looked at the truck taking the lumber to other people's houses."

"All we had to pay was \$28 a month. The government was paying \$32 a month on each house. But the government loan run out and the housing loan run out and the housing project for low-income people done slowed down. Nixon slowed it down. But Congress appropriated it and Ford wouldn't sign it till they rewrote it, but now they got it. You can move in without any down payment whatsoever—just start your monthly payment."

"And all my life I been hearing 'You too poor' when I wanted a house that would keep us out of the weather."

►A new sewer.

Jessie Franklin, who spent a great deal of his life plowing with mules, was one of those who took care of the mules on the Poor People's Campaign. "On that mule train to Washington, some of these young people couldn't even put a collar on the mule," he says. "They tried to put it on upside down. They never would have got it on if it hadn't been for some of us older heads. My little boy two years old, he ain't never seen no mule. It would scare him if he seen one."

Franklin's home is in a low-lying area where once an open sewer emptied into a creek. This open sewer, which carried raw sewage from the white part of town, was the major feature of the black part of Marks. Some black homes could be reached only by planks over the sewer ditch. This stink was terrible. In rainy weather Franklin's house and others in the neighborhood were surrounded by a lake of sewage. People poled boats over it to get to their houses. Children in the sewer area were often thin and sickly.

Now the sewer runs underground in a concrete pipe. The area is still badly drained, with pools of stagnant water in many places, but the stench is gone and the children look healthier. Franklin and his brother made constant appeals to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare before the open sewer was covered.

Blacks now have a voting majority in the county. The first black official in the history of the county, a constable, was not elected until 1975, which means Marks is well behind many other black communities in Mississippi. But all local politicians now make serious efforts to please the black vote and blacks try to learn as much as they can to exercise this new power. (as late as 1965, only 5 percent of the blacks in Quitman County were registered to vote.)

With the vote, the fear that used to paralyze the black community has gone. The chief of police in Marks is black and so is half the police force. The candidates for sheriff go to NAACP meetings asking for votes and leaders of the local NAACP are called on by the city government to help solve the few racial incidents.

Not many years ago these incidents

were resolved by railroading blacks to prison. Leaders of the NAACP back then were threatened by prominent local whites with being tied up and thrown in the Coldwater River.

"Now it's no more fear," says Rev. Willie Malone, one of the founders of the local NAACP and current president of the Voters' League.

►School integration.

The change that the local whites fought most hysterically in the '60s was school integration. The parents of all four of the first black pupils to try to integrate the high school lost their jobs in 1964. Parents and children alike were threatened with death.

The first black children to actually enter the white school did so under the freedom of choice plan in 1966. Some of the children were beaten up by white pupils. Others were harassed for trivial reasons by teachers and principals.

Then a court order provided for complete merger of the black and white school systems. The white community set up a private school for its children. But lower income white children—about half the white children in the county—couldn't afford the private school; they went to school with the blacks. Like the black children, they now read textbooks with the writings of black authors like Martin Luther King, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes and Lorraine Hansberry. Many of their teachers are black.

Integration is having far-reaching effects, since these low income white youths were previously supposed to have been the whites most hostile to blacks. After ten years of integration, black youths in Marks already seem more genuinely friendly and open and frank with whites without the Tomming that was once common.

Mrs. Weathersby says, "It's a beautiful sight to go across town and see the black childrens and the white childrens walking the streets, playing with each other, just having a ball. The old folks kind of stare at them, but the kids enjoy each other. If

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How did Southern blacks win the vote?



Voter registration (and Woolworth boycotting) in the deep South in the '60s was a major offensive of the civil rights movement

Photo by Norris McNamara

BLACK BALLOTS: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969

By Steven F. Lawson
Columbia University Press, 1976

As the 1976 presidential election demonstrated, Southern blacks have achieved considerable political power that can, in fact, be decisive. Yet, as recently as 1940 less than 200,000 blacks were eligible to vote in the 11 states of the former Confederacy. How did such a transformation take place in one generation? *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* offers a partial explanation.

Steven F. Lawson's analysis of suffrage expansion is only partially enlightening because the focus of this book is more limited than its title would suggest. Lawson concentrates on the passage of three major pieces of legislation: the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Essentially, then, *Black Ballots* is an exhaustive history only of congressional and presidential initiatives to expand black suffrage following World War II.

What happened in Washington, however, may not have been nearly as significant as the struggle in the Mississippi Delta or Selma, Alabama, or the other battlefields of the civil rights movement in the South. Lawson clearly acknowledges the decisive importance of direct action in the South by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and others. But, he makes only passing reference to this most dramatic aspect of his story, which is a serious distortion.

Lawson explains the role of the federal government quite well, however. By 1940 Southern racists had virtually nullified the Fifteenth Amendment. The first official assault on this injustice was the Supreme Court decision in *Smith v. Allwright* outlawing the white primary in 1944. The white primary had long operated as the most effective means of denying blacks the right to vote. Twenty years later, in spite of the passage of two major civil rights acts, still only 38 percent of Southern Negroes were eligible to vote.

The Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 were only marginally successful, although they did reaffirm a national commitment to unrestricted suffrage. Lawson is most

effective in explaining the limitations of this legislation, and by extension, the liberal reform movement of post-World War II America.

The prospects for ending black disenfranchisement in the 1950s appeared good. The Supreme Court had spoken unequivocally; the enormously popular new president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, seemed to be genuinely horrified by the denial of the vote to any American; and accelerating northward migration of blacks greatly increased their power to influence Congress. Moreover, the cause of franchise expansion, unlike desegregation, was broadly appealing. Even Southern politicians had difficulty explaining why black men and women should not be able to vote.

Advocates of reform faced substantial obstacles, however. Most significantly, the federal system entrusted control of elections and law enforcement to local government officials. National lawmakers and executives, no matter how liberal, were reluctant to directly challenge that principle.

The Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 reflected numerous compromises dictated by cautious Republicans and Lyndon Johnson Democrats. Thus, the legislation relied primarily upon laborious court action and a national appeal to goodwill. Even the limited powers granted to the attorney general in these two bills were rarely invoked by the Eisenhower administration, which feared mob action like that at Little Rock.

Not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 authorized massive federal interference on a local level was the Southern strategy of delay overcome. But even the final, apparent victory must be qualified. As Lawson notes, the black and white liberals who fought so long to expand suffrage may have expected too much. Since the vote has not banished racism and economic injustice, many wonder if the struggle was worthwhile. None of us have enough historical perspective to make a final judgment. The next four to eight years, however, should be instructive. If this Georgian, President by grace of Southern black votes, does not deliver on his spoken and unspoken promises, then bitter frustration and anger will be justified.

—Bill Leary

Bill Leary lives and writes near Washington, D.C.

Poverty, USA

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we let these children alone, they going to make it.

"When they first integrated the school, you go by the schoolyard and you see the black kids over in a corner all by themselves. Negroes taught their children to be scared of white people. But now you go by you see them all mixed up, running and playing together.

"My boy had a white school friend. Some days at school they didn't like what was for lunch and they'd come over to my house to eat.

"The white children really don't like that private school. They coming back more every year. Some, it's because they can't afford it, but some, they just don't like it."

►Football.

Jimmie Le Franklin was one of the first black pupils to integrate the school. Then he was in the first grade. Now, at age 17, he is an all-conference football player.

"If we have a white boy on our team," he says, "it don't matter if he good, if he go over to the private school he be the star

of the whole school. They make him offers, they give him a scholarship or something to go over there.

"The private school ain't got much to choose from. They got too few kids coming there—about 150 or 200. We got some troops—about 800.

"You don't find too much football talent going to the private school. In the public school you get thousands of attitudes. On a team of 40 people you got 40 different attitudes. At the private school, they all supposed to believe the same thing, hating people.

"We got about five white players. All of them good. All us like brothers together. We ain't got nothing against each other. The white players wouldn't leave our school. They hate the private school like a

dog. We got one we lost to the private school, but he come back cause he didn't like the school. We got more white going to our school than we did."

Mrs. Weathersby sums up the attitude of blacks in Marks to the difficult changes of the past ten years: "Even with the recession, we're doing better than we was doing back yonder when we was slaving and didn't have enough to eat—and we worked hard. Course I don't have everything I would like to have. And it was a heap better before the recession. But it's still better than back in the '30s and the '40s. Better than all of my life. That don't mean I don't have problems."

Jodey Bateman lived and worked in Quitman County in the '60s and recently returned to chronicle the changes in the last decade.

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Labor columnist, *Chicago Tribune*

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