

foreword

Physically and psychologically, Moscow, Tennessee, is worlds apart from its Soviet namesake. Yet the grim struggle now being waged just outside the small Tennessee community has deep implications for the great and ideological contest with the Moscow of the Kremlin.

The struggle in Tennessee came into focus when Tent City was established on the property of Shephard Towles, a Negro farmer. The 20 adults and 56 children who settled in Tent City last January are tenant farmers evicted from their homes because they dared to exercise their democratic right to vote.

The story of Tent City has stirred the imagination and conscience of thousands at home and abroad. Recognizing the significance of the struggle, Ralph Helstein, president of the United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers, caused an on-the-scene investigation to be made.

The story appearing on the pages of this pamphlet is the result of that investigation. If it is a sensitive story, it is because the Tennessee freedom fighters have risen to the great challenge placed before them by those who would deny their humanity.

Tent City dwellers have performed a great act of courage. Out of their deep belief in the worth of every man, they have set aside yesteryear's deeply-rooted fears and ranged themselves firmly on the side of democracy. Their faith and the dignity of their act are testament to the integrity of the American dream.

In the deepest sense, the men and women of Tent City are fighting for the civil rights of all Americans and they are writing a bold chapter in the continuing narrative of American democracy. How this nation responds to their struggle will be carefully measured across the world.

This battle cannot be lost because we dare not lose it. The legal struggle ahead will be long, but throughout it those at Tent City must know that they are not forgotten. All who treasure justice can do no less than to render moral and tangible support to these men and women who have found democracy worth even the sacrifice of their homes.

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Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO



TENT CITY

"HOME OF THE BRAVE"

This is not a story for the squeamish. Nor is it a report for the blithe of heart or for those who say it-can't-happen here.

For the Moscow of this chronicle is not the Moscow of the Kremlin. It is Moscow, Tennessee, right here in our own United States, specifically in Fayette County, Tennessee.

This is the story of Americans, fourth, fifth and sixth generation Americans. This is the story of the reprisals, repression and violence directed against these Americans because they are a trusting people—trusting enough to believe in the guarantee of our Constitution that American citizens have a right to register and vote.

This is the story of several hundred American families; sharecroppers, tenant farmers and day workers who have been driven from their homes or who face eviction because in Fayette County, Tennessee, they simply exercised their American right to register and vote.

"A ragged little girl has been found on the streets of Naples, Italy . . ." purred the unctuous tones of a radio announcer in Memphis. The little girl, he said, was cold, undernourished and without a home.

Hope and help for the Neopolitan waif, the announcer continued, might be extended through generous gifts to an overseas relief agency.

His voice carried clearly into Somerville, Tennessee, slightly more than forty miles from Memphis, and without a doubt many of Somerville's citizens were moved with compassion for the plight of this friendless Italian child.

But the good folk of Somerville need not have looked across the seas to find cold, hungry, homeless children. All they had to do was look down the road.

The sad fact is that Somerville's people *won't* look down the road except in scorn and ill-concealed fury.

Less than two miles from the center of Somerville, on the old Macon road at a point where three roads intersect and hence known locally as Three-Way, is John McFerren's grocery store.

Here in this store, small and understocked, where the "quality" of Somerville would never deign to trade, is the GHQ of the greatest social revolution to occur in the rural Deep South since Reconstruction days.

It is from this store that the plans for mobilizing the underadvantaged Negroes of Fayette County went out, it is here that these people come today for assistance and a lift to their morale, and it is this simple cross-roads grocery that has sent out the pleas that move the hearts of men and women of good will.

The gentle people of Somerville pretend to ignore John McFerren's store—but there are some in their number who keep it under surveillance around the clock. With deep, brooding eyes they sit in their cars a short distance away and note the license numbers of every car that stops at McFerren's. Then—if they can—they set in motion the machinery of reprisal; economic strangulation, threats, police harassment and sometimes even gunfire from their cowardly ambush.

This is Fayette County, Tennessee, today, in March, 1961.

Somerville is the seat of Fayette County's 700 square miles. It is indistinguishable from a hundred other small towns in the rural South. The skyline, as seen by the motorist, is dominated by a lofty water tank on which the town's name is emblazoned and which is topped by a huge cross, illuminated at night.

(If this symbol of faith and brotherhood seems paradoxical during Somerville's current behavior, it hasn't occurred to anyone to suggest that the lights be darkened for the present.)

The courthouse dominates the square around which most of Somerville's business establishments have their homes. A sign on the courthouse lawn informs those who tarry long enough to read that Fayette County was founded in 1824 and was represented in the Tennessee Legislature by Davy Crockett before he went on to fame and death at the Alamo and to his reincarnation by Walt Disney.

The homes of Somerville, the town proper, are modest in size and their grounds indifferently cared for. Signs on the roads approaching Somerville advise of the many churches in the town and their hours of worship.

(Yet it is impossible to come away from Somerville without the impression that there is a great abundance of understanding, charity, and brotherly love around John McFerren's humble store.)

The nearest town of any size to Somerville is Moscow, a pint-sized copy of the county seat but, if anything, more virulent in its hate against thousands of fellow Fayette County citizens. Moscow, of course, is closer to the Mississippi border, which makes it the logical location as the hotbed of the White Citizens Council and what is left of Klan activity in southwest Tennessee.

A handful of families dominate Fayette County. Their attitude is that they govern almost by divine right and that nothing really has changed much since Lincoln was "that man in the White House." Congresses might come and go, the Supreme Court might rule what it would; but their dominance over a feudal system has gone along almost unchallenged and unchanged.

A NEW WIND STIRS

But a new wind is stirring through the County. Its freshness and vigor can be felt in the near-tropic heat that envelops the area in summer when the cotton crop is ripening; it seems to offer warmth and hope when the fields lie stripped in the damp, biting cold of January.

This is the wind of social change, bearing with it a new era not alone for Fayette County but for all of the South and some day for all of the nation.

Against the wind, trying to stay its force, stand the big families of Fayette County and the others whom prejudice, convention and blind fear have compelled to stand by their sides.

Several small industries have moved into the County in the last few



Armed deputies stand by while scores of Negroes wait patiently in the broiling sun, the rain and the sleet for their chance to register at the courthouse.

years, most of them dodging from picket lines in the North to an area where they hope to find industrial peace at giveaway prices. The rest of the County is agricultural just as was in the *ante-bellum* days; a land where tenant farming, sharecropping and day working are the way of life for most of the people.

"Most of the people" here means Negroes. There are approximately 21,000 Negroes in Fayette County. The white population numbers about 7,500.

If these Negroes in their simple way hadn't believed what they read in school, this story might never have been written.

But the fact is that the Negroes in Fayette County, from among the youngest to the oldest, can read; they know that the Constitution and its subsequent amendments give them *too* the right to register and vote. And they believe to this day that the Constitution of the United States is bigger, stronger and more respected than the big families of Fayette County and the night riders of the White Citizens Council.

If they didn't, nearly 400 Negro families would not have been ordered from their homes of many years, pressured into near starvation, and forced to live on the alms of fellow Americans from far away who believe with them that the Constitution is for *everybody*.

Prior to 1959, only a handful, perhaps no more than ten of the County's more than 20,000 Negroes, had ever registered to vote. Even then, this tiny number did not always go to the polls on voting day. The insignificant number of Negro registered voters caused no concern to the white population, and perhaps even evoked a slight smug satisfaction that at least a token of equality existed in their area.

When registration began for Tennessee's 1959 primaries for state and local offices there was a marked increase in the number of Negroes who sought to enroll. Still, the number of applicants was under 100. It was enough, however, to cause real alarm among the white political leaders in Fayette County.

On Election Day in 1959, when eligible Negroes attempted to vote, they were turned away from the polls. Each man or woman was handed a printed slip informing him that this was an "all-white primary" and that Negro voting was illegal.

That was when things really began to happen in Fayette County. Twelve Negroes filed suit against the Democratic Committee in the County, charging that they had been barred illegally from exercising their franchise. They won their suit. The way was now clear, it would seem, for Negro voting.

THE LEAGUE IS FORMED

In times of crisis, leaders always appear. Thus it was in Fayette County when a scant dozen Negroes combined to form the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League.

The first stated purpose of the League on the articles of incorporation

filed at Nashville reads: "To promote civil and political and economic welfare for the community progress of Fayette County."

The founders of the League knew well that they were playing with social and political dynamite in their venture but they were determined to see it through. None of them, though, could have foreseen the scourge that was to be visited on them and those who joined their ranks.

The first job which the League assigned itself was to get more and more Negroes registered to vote. The leaders went up and down the rutted back roads seeking out sharecroppers, tenant farmers, day workers, all who would listen to their message.

And off the farms and plantations, from close by and from the remote districts of the County, the Negroes flocked to the courthouse in Somerville to register.

The sight was like a waking nightmare to the white political leaders. The Negroes' action was unprecedented there or anywhere else in the rural Deep South. White leaders moved swiftly and ruthlessly to meet the new threat.

The leaders of the League were kept under surveillance, their cars were followed; when the League members recruited, their talks were followed almost at once by reminders that "this is the South" and such conduct would never be tolerated.

The opponents of the League had their own organization, the White Citizens Council; dedicated to the propositions that all men *aren't* created equal and that white supremacy shall prevail. Adherents of the Council had time and experience on their side; generations of it, generations in which repression, prejudice and fear had set their stamp on the County and its people.

Still, the Negroes continued to flock to the courthouse to register.

The early moves by the Council and its supporters against the would-be registrants were diabolically cruel but were mild when judged by what was to come later. Registration was deliberately slowed so that far fewer Negroes got their names on the voting lists each day.

Long lines of patient Negroes waited outside the courthouse. One day, it was bitterly cold. Sleet and ice pelted the men and women who stood awaiting their turn. The sidewalk under them turned to a sheet of glare ice, making it almost impossible to keep one's footing. Yet the line of Negroes remained, awaiting a chance to register.

The weather improved. Every registration day the long line of Negroes stood at the courthouse. The painters arrived one morning and the Negroes were herded close to the building while overhead the workmen daubed and slobbered paint with such abandon that the drippings rained on the long-suffering Negroes.

Another day the sun beat down hot and fierce and the line moved slower than ever. Women, and men too, accustomed as they had been to the heat of the cotton and corn fields, collapsed on the blistering pavement. Their friends revived them, supported them as they kept the long vigil until their turn at the registration desk.

In the 1960 Tennessee Democratic primary, the Negroes voted solidly for United States Senator Estes Kefauver against his opponent, labeled an ardent segregationist.

By this time, the reign of terror had taken a firm grip on Fayette County. Land owners, merchants, leading citizens had taken many steps to head off the mass registration by the Negroes but none of them had proved effective.

They tried cajolery, they tried persuasion, they argued with the Negroes to perpetuate the *status quo*. There was no need, they declared, "to change things from the way they've always been."

When these methods didn't work, new ones were quickly found.

THE BLACKLIST

Shortly after the mass registration drive got under way, leaders of the League began to suspect the existence of a secret blacklist of their membership. One day the list was discovered, a list of those who had been registered, with a special "X" by the names of those who were the ringleaders in the movement.

Now, when Negroes went to stores where they had traded for years, the white owner or manager scanned the list under the counter. If the Negro's name appeared on the list, the manager refused to sell. Sometimes, depending on the temperament of the merchant or the Negro's degree of activity in the registration movement, the Negro was "cussed out" before being ordered out of the store.

Filling stations refused to sell gasoline to Negroes who were suspect.

Doctors and clinics in the County no longer would treat their Negro patients. It became necessary for the Negroes to travel forty miles or more to other areas when in need of medical care.



This is the dilapidated housing provided for day workers and others in Fayette County and this is "home sweet home" for all of those in the above photograph.

Crop production loans were withheld from many Negroes who had previously obtained them through the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

The atmosphere of Fayette County seemed to grow more charged with each passing day. Easy, informal relationships between the white and Negro populations gave way to suspicion and distrust on both sides.

The white population denounced the registration movement because the Negro was no longer "keeping his place." The Negroes retorted that the "whites want to keep us down forever."

Some, not many, of the white people in Fayette County were inclined to be charitable if not sympathetic with the Negro movement toward equality in voting rights. But any manifestation of this brought reprisal to them as swift and certain as it did to the Negroes.

("There's lots of white men in Fayette County who aren't free either," an elderly Negro clergyman said sadly. "He doesn't dare not conform when the (White) Citizens Council tells him to.")

Election Day, 1960, neared. Pressure on the Negro population, especially those who were now registered voters, grew heavier and more oppressive. Now they had to drive 100 miles back and forth to get gasoline and oil for their automobiles and tractors. Most Negroes found it impossible to purchase a gallon of gasoline in the County. Deliveries of bottled gas, fuel for their home heating and cooking, were halted. It was made clear to the Negroes on every side that they were in bold defiance of a long-established social order and that rebellion would bring new punishments.

November 8, 1960, came and the Negroes trooped to the polls. For the first time in their lives they were voting as free Americans, sharing a right with millions of other Americans in happier areas. No attempts were made to turn them away from the polls but the looks of hate and menace made it clear that retribution would follow quickly.

Fayette County has had a long record of landing safely in the Democratic column. When the ballots were counted, the County gave its vote to the Republicans. The Negroes, more than 1,200 of them, had far over-
swung the balance of power to the GOP.

"GET OFF THE LAND"

It should have surprised no one. The Democratic machinery of Fayette County meant many things to the Negroes: the White Citizens Council; its predecessor, the Klan; generations of being held voteless, and now more than a year of savage aggression for their temerity in believing what they learned in school about the guarantees of the Constitution.

("What was so bad about us registering to vote?" a veteran of the Seabees in the South Pacific asked. "They'd have come looking for us back in the woods if we hadn't registered for the draft.")

War was on. Retribution was not long in coming. On some of the huge plantations, on farms in the back districts of the county, summary notices to "get off my land" were given to Negroes even before all the



Their churches were the only meeting places available to Fayette County's newly registered voters and from sessions like this came their militant solidarity.

states had completed the tabulation of their votes. In almost every instance, the commands were verbal—because in Fayette County there are no written leases or contracts between the landlord and the Negroes who farm as tenants or who sharecrop.

Most of the eviction notices were peremptory, “get the hell off by Saturday.” But in Fayette County, as everywhere else, there are some slightly more charitable, who gave those whose family had been on the land for a generation or more some degree of clemency. The fortunate few were given until January 1 to find a new home, a new way to support themselves and their families in a hostile country.

Many of the landlords made no secret of their malice and bitterness. Others treated their longtime tenants in the manner of naughty children; handing down their irrevocable dictum with a “you were warned, now you must be punished” air of patient resignation.

The mournful trek started almost the next day. Families who had known no other home but the sharecropper's shack moved to double up with kinfolk, sharing a bed if it was available, taking space on the floor if it wasn't.

In all, 345 families were given eviction notices. Across Fayette County, the tragic uprooting of people was in progress. Treasured belongings had to be left behind; there was no room for them where the families were going, if indeed they knew where they were going and to what friendly face they might turn.

It was a moment of crisis for the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League. The men who led the League lacked the experience, the social

skills, to handle this latter-day exodus. The registration drive and the movement to claim the rights of every American had never been sparked or supported by the “Northern agitator” who is the usual whipping boy for those who oppose change in the South. This was their own creation. If the trusting Negroes of Fayette County were reaping the whirlwind, it was they who had sown its seed. Nor could they turn to many of their own race, for some of the most powerful and influential of these had turned aside, scorning the Fayette County movement for “trying to move too fast” or for not working within the framework of the established, well-financed groups.

The League leadership never faltered. With the courage of those who know their cause to be right, they moved on several fronts. They sought the aid of the federal courts to halt further evictions, they begged, wheedled and mortgaged their futures for temporary help for those evicted.

And they prayed. In their meetings and in the privacy of their homes they prayed together and alone with the deep fervor and faith of a people who have always known hardship and who find a large measure of comfort in their belief.

Now the leadership of the League took to the back roads again, this time to ask those who had not been disturbed to take in the families of those whose lives had been thrown into chaos. The response was magnificent; a lesson in brotherhood that was to further offend their tormentors.

TENT CITY IS BORN

There were some who for one reason or another could not find accommodations.

It was for these that “Tent City” was established.

Tent City has become the outward symbol of the struggle by the Negroes of Fayette County to attain justice. The world, or that part of it that cares about injustice and inhumanity and wants to see them eradicated, knows Tent City and has rallied to help the residents of this most temporary of quarters.

But the symbol should never be mistaken for the ideal lest the concept of the ideal be sacrificed to an overblown regard for the symbol. Relief for the inhabitants of Tent City has become a popular cause as well it should be; relief has come in from many quarters, as well it might.

But the recipients of this aid are not alone the people in Tent City: They are also the several thousand Negroes in Fayette County (and now in nearby Haywood County) who share the desperate needs of Tent City's residents because they shared the common danger and blame for belief in a sacred American right.

Tent City is a cluster of fourteen green canvas tents set up in a clearing off the old Macon Road. The tents are war surplus but even the name of the dealer who sold them to the League is kept secret because the arm of the White Citizens Council is long and its vindictiveness sure. The city stands on the property of Shephard Towles, a Negro farmer, who says:

"These people had nowhere to go. I decided to let them come in free, let them use the water from my deep well—as long as it lasts."

Eleven families were living in Tent City early in March, 1961, 20 adults and 56 children. The city was born December 14, 1960, and surely few settlements have achieved fame more swiftly than this primitive community.

It can get bitterly cold in January and February in Tennessee as the thermometer flirts with the zero mark and the raw, damp air penetrates to the bone. Yet the people who live in Tent City, glad of any shelter, say the tents are warmer than the shacks from which they were so rudely driven.

("You could see daylight through the walls of my place," one man reports. "The young ones are warmer in the tent than they ever were back home.")

Late in January the tents got wooden floors. Before that, the floor had been the bare ground or sheets of cardboard. Kerosene oil lamps furnished the scant illumination after sunset before the families huddled in bed to keep warm. Later an electric line was installed. Wood-burning stoves serve for heating and cooking. Outside, great black kettles stand over wood fires



The temperature was near zero when Mrs. Dock Holmes left her tent to bring firewood to make the family quarters as comfortable as conditions would permit.

for laundry purposes and the family wash is draped over convenient bushes to dry.

Children and dogs romp about the tent area while the adults go about the job of keeping body and soul and family together. Once a week, sometimes more often, they and hundreds of others go to McFerren's store for the distribution of food and clothing.

Some writers have called the place "Freedom Village" and for its symbolism it is as good a name as any. But to its residents and to the others in the County who share its fortunes, it remains Tent City.

Freedom, though, is what the Negroes of Fayette County believe they have achieved through their vote—nearly one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Surprisingly, there is little bitterness in Tent City.

Listen to Georgia May Turner, 58, resident on the same farm in the southeast corner of the County for 50 years, now a "pioneer" in Tent City.

"I've plowed with mules, I've chopped cotton, I've pulled fodder. I guess I can do anything on a farm except to drive a tractor. I raised my



John McFerren, dynamic leader in movement to win voting rights for Fayette County people, hears report on life in Tent City from Mrs. Georgia Mae Turner, who lived on the same farm for 50 years, then was evicted because she voted.

family on that farm. My oldest daughter picked 30 pounds of cotton when she was four years old.

"When the old Mr. M—— died, I fell to his son. After he died, I fell to his lady. I loved them and I thought they loved me. Then my daughter and my friends told me I should register so I could be a real citizen. Some of my white friends told me, 'Georgia, you register, you'll be in trouble.'

"But I registered because I want to be a citizen and I want my freedom, not just for me but for my children and those little ones you see here. After that I voted and the boss lady told my son, 'You and Georgia have to get off my land.' When he told me, I borrowed bus fare to go see her and ask her herself because I couldn't believe she would do that to us.

"She told me, 'Georgia, you voted and done wrong and now you have to get off my land but you can stay until the first of the year 'till you find a place.' I thanked her and that was all I could say 'cause I didn't want her to see me cry.

"I went home and I cried all night 'cause this was the only house I'd ever had for 38 years and I didn't know where to go. But I knew the Lord will always open the way for us and He led me here, praise His name.

"But I still loves my boss lady no matter what she done and I'll never say one bad word about her because she was good to me and it wasn't her fault I voted."

Six others share the tent with Mrs. Turner, a creature of implacable dignity in faded Army trousers, men's Army shoes and her graying hair swathed in a blue figured bandanna.

Willie Trotter, 36, moved into Tent City when it was only two days old after he and his wife and their six children had been thrust off their farm near Moscow.

Trotter registered and voted simply because as he put it: "I wanted to be a citizen. I wanted to get something of my own."

The tent where 25-year-old Early B. Williams and his family live faces the highway. An ugly rent in the fabric admits the bone-chilling cold. Williams and his family were sleeping last December 28 when a speeding car slowed as it neared Tent City and one of the occupants fired blindly into the community. One of the slugs ripped its way through Williams' arm as the car and its cowardly ambushers fled in the night.

Two nights later, three white youths fired into the tented community. Fortunately, they hit no one. Some of the Tent City residents fired on the intruders and gave chase. The young men were later caught but were released after a "lecture." An appeal that some of the Tent City men be deputized to protect themselves against new marauders was rejected by the Fayette County sheriff's office.

Not so well known is that there is a second Tent City. Its location is secret, "for security reasons." Some distance away from the original, the new Tent City lies at the end of a lane so rutted that it imperils every car that traverses its isolated length. Few of the Negroes in Fayette

County and even fewer white visitors have been escorted to this hidden spot.

Five families were already established here late in January, more were to be located there when additional supplies arrived.

It was here, January 25, that Mrs. Jamie Lee Mason, 28, was delivered of her seventh child. Friendly neighbors attended at the birth, drawing



Mrs. Jamie Lee Mason, 28, stays in bed to give warmth to her seventh child, born in a tent three weeks after the family was evicted as punishment for voting.

on their own meager store of supplies and fuel to have things in readiness for the new inheritor of the American dream. Outside the tent that night, unprotected against the icy wind, the family dog perished from the cold.

HELP COMES

Although the Negroes of Fayette County have few allies among their neighbors, they are not without friends and powerful help elsewhere in the nation.

Unions have already moved to send aid to the Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League, the only group dealing directly with the trouble-beset people. Other agencies and groups far removed from Tennessee have also given generous assistance in the form of food, clothing and money.

And things are moving on the legal front. The federal government began its investigation of Fayette County's reign of terror almost a year

ago. On September 13, 1960, the Department of Justice brought suit against 27 individual defendants and two banks.

The government's suit has been amended twice until there are now 155 defendants charged with threatening or punishing Negroes because they dared to march to the ballot box for the first time.

The defense of many of those charged in the government's suit is that increasing mechanization on their farms, a population decline, and a reduction in federal cotton crop allotments forced them to let their Negro farm help go.

These contentions are rebutted by those who have made investigations of the matter. For one thing, the County's terrain does not lend itself to extensive farm mechanization. "Although some of it is excellent bottom land, a whole lot more is either cut up by ditches or as hilly as the side of a house," one man reports.

Others contend that the tenant farmer or sharecropper system costs the large plantation owner far less than mechanization. They point to one plantation of 3,000 acres which is worked by 56 families and assert that under the peculiar economics of tenant farming and sharecropping human beings cost less to maintain than machinery.

Jesse Jones, 51, has a story that makes the landowners' "mechanization" claim look flimsy. Jones spent the last 35 years on one farm, a tract of about 700 acres which is divided almost in half by a creek. In 1959, he was the third Negro to register.

The three families living on the east side of the creek all registered, all voted in 1960. On the west side of the creek, only one family of the three living there registered, and then did not vote. All three families on the east side—those who voted—have been turned off the property.

"If this had happened in Mississippi, people might be shocked but they wouldn't be surprised," one man commented. "Somehow, you'd never expect this in Tennessee."

The real leader of Fayette County's Negroes is John McFerren who speaks softly but whose words carry conviction and authority. McFerren was born 36 years ago about a mile from his store which is now the nerve center for relief activity. He went through the ninth grade of the County training school and then worked as a farmer, cutting timber commercially as a sideline.

In 1943, he went into the Army and served in Europe with the Engineers. After his discharge he returned to farming and his log-cutting operations. He married in 1950. His wife, Viola, graduated from high school in her native Benton City, Mississippi, and later from a beauticians' school in Memphis.

"She never opened a shop, though," McFerren says, "because I got interested in civil rights and that's taken up all our time."

McFerren was one of the first Negroes in Fayette County to spur the registration movement and to fight for a measure of justice for his people. He is a charter member of the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League.

One day, a couple of years ago, McFerren's timbering operations took



Volunteers installed wooden flooring at Tent City two months after its establishment. Before that, the floor was the bare ground or straw or cardboard.

him to a remote spot in Mississippi about one hundred miles away from his home. Deep in the woods he'd been planning to cut over, he came upon a colony of Negroes operating three large illegal whiskey stills under the direction of a white family. The Negroes were quartered in mud huts and the children had never heard of a school. None of the Negroes was permitted to go to the nearest town—all their supplies were brought to them. They were, as McFerren puts it, "outright slaves."

McFerren refused to cut timber in the area, telling the land owners he couldn't work where his people were so exploited "if you gave me the logs."

His role in the League has quite naturally made him the particular target for abuse in Fayette County and at least twice he has been fired on from ambush. Several attempts have been made to force his car off the road late at night. Vicious rumors have been circulated against him, including charges that he has misappropriated money and supplies intended for the needy in the County or that he sold welfare packages.

The detailed books kept by Mr. and Mrs. McFerren of every dollar and every item donated to the movement and how it is distributed (and to whom) give the lie to these charges.

McFerren came to Washington early in 1960 to testify before the



New York and Cleveland newsmen talk to an employee of McFerren's store just before the gasoline tanks went dry and Negroes were unable to get any more.

Civil Rights Commission on the mistreatment of Negroes in Fayette County. Upon his return home next day he visited a hardware store in Somerville where he had traded for 20 years. He made a small purchase from a clerk and was about to leave the store when the manager assailed him for starting "that mess" in Washington.

"The people I borrow money from have told me they don't want you in here any more," the manager concluded.

Today, McFerren can't even buy a newspaper in Somerville.

The gasoline pumps in front of his store have been dry for months. An affidavit executed by McFerren in April 1960 recites his problem of trying to get gasoline from Gulf, Texaco, Esso and other suppliers. None of them could or would supply him.

When one major company pulled up its tanks at the store, McFerren put in his own and found a supplier a long distance away who furnished gasoline from August until October. Then the supplier was put out of business by State tax officials in Nashville.

No salesman calls at McFerren's store. A fish dealer who sold regularly to McFerren was warned that he would be tarred and feathered unless he stopped. He stopped.

McFerren now has to drive long distances to get the few supplies the store now sells. McFerren admits that he neglects his own business these days "because I'm going eighteen hours a day taking care of these poor people."

His hand moves in a gesture to the throng that is always at the store to keep warm, to unburden themselves of problems, to learn of new developments and to handle many of the details of the big relief operation involving several hundred families.

Committees of the League are in charge of receiving and distributing the food, clothing and other items that have been sent to Fayette County by generous individuals and groups. Distribution day is Saturday and hundreds line up for supplies to see them through the week. The gratitude of the people toward their unknown friends in distant places is almost boundless.

"The whole South is watching what we do in Fayette County," John McFerren says.

It isn't just the South that is watching, it is the nation and much of the world, for democracy is on trial today in Fayette County. Certainly men and women of good will are watching developments there with the certain knowledge that eventually right and justice will triumph over repression and reprisal.

President Kennedy indicated at his first press conference that the plight of these homeless, hounded Negro farm workers would receive his attention.



Vice Pres. Russell Lasley of United Packinghouse Workers (left), who made the on-the-scene investigation for his union, and Eugene A. Kelley, author of this report for UPWA and the Industrial Union Department, talk to Tent City children.

U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy has taken a personal interest in the Fayette County affair and has directed the Justice Department to make a searching effort to see if civil rights have been violated. The Secretary of Agriculture, Orville L. Freeman, discussed the situation with President Ralph Helstein of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, AFL-CIO, and has taken steps to insure that racial bias is not used as a reason for denying loans to otherwise eligible Negroes under the Farmers Home Administration program.

The AFL-CIO Executive Council voted \$2,000 to the Tennessee State Labor Council to aid the evictees. Numerous unions and their locals have sent assistance into the area. Many churches and private groups also have channeled sorely needed food, clothing and supplies into Fayette and adjacent Haywood Counties.

The National Baptist Convention U.S.A. has purchased a 400-acre farm, most of it in Fayette County but with corners in Haywood and Tipton Counties. Six homes on the farm are to be improved and others are to be erected. The original Tent City residents will be relocated here and more tents will be put up to house other Negro families driven from their land.

Those on the farm will plant cotton, corn and vegetables to become more self-sustaining. It is the hope of the National Baptist Convention that other farms in the area can be bought and additional families resettled.

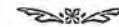
Meanwhile, a controversy developed among some of the leaders in the Fayette County group over the dismissal of an attorney. A small dissident group sided with the attorney but most of the corporation's directors and the overwhelming majority of Fayette County's Negroes are allied solidly with John McFerren and his group.

Investigation revealed a defect in the processing of the first group's charter from the State of Tennessee and this charter was turned in at Nashville. The group's name was taken in a new charter by the dissident faction.

As a result, the McFerren-led group which has the support of labor unions, churches and almost all other well-intentioned groups is now chartered as The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League, Inc.



Mrs. E. T. McFerren, active in caring for Tent City's unhappy residents, tells a visitor from Chicago that food, clothing and other aid is desperately needed.



A PROGRAM TO ASSIST THE HARASSED PEOPLE OF FAYETTE COUNTY:

Individuals and organizations should write to the Executive Branch of the federal government and the Department of Justice in Washington, D. C., urging all possible speed in safeguarding the voting rights and other rights of citizenship for the people of Fayette and Haywood Counties.

The federal government through its various agencies should move to smash the economic squeeze against those who registered and voted and see that these people are no longer denied farm-home loans, chattel mortgages and crop loans, gasoline and other commodity purchases.

The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League, Inc., and its board of directors should be recognized as the appropriate coordinating agency for the distribution of food, money and other goods to relieve the suffering of families in Fayette and Haywood Counties. Contributions and assistance should be channeled to the Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League, Inc., care of John McFerren, Route 4, Box 133A, Somerville, Tenn.

A program of cooperation should be developed to make technical personnel available to instruct in administrative techniques, and skills for adult men and women so that they may become more self-sustaining. Medical care should be made available, if necessary by doctors, dentists and nurses from such cities as Memphis and Nashville.

Cooperative programs to assist the residents of Fayette County should be maintained by unions, the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. and other religious organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Committee on Racial Equality (CORE), and the many other groups who are working locally and nationally to bring right and justice to an unhappy people.

We cannot glorify Little Rock, anti-Semitism, supremacy of the police, downgrading of education at home, and at the same time be strong abroad. We are the same people in Guinea as we are in Boston. We cannot be leaders of people abroad unless we honor at home the democratic ideal in race relations, in labor relations, in community development.

—Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas