

# GO SOUTH, YOUNG MAN!

Dennis Weeks



Eric Weinberger, June 4th, after 31-day hunger strike in Kilby, Alabama, prison, where he had been sent for participating in the William Moore Memorial Walk for integration.

THE "MID-SOUTH," an area comprising eastern Arkansas, extreme southeastern Missouri, northern Mississippi, and western Tennessee—centered geographically and economically around Memphis—is if possible more paradoxical than the South as a whole. While the rest of the South, for better or for worse, is industrializing ("No unions in Union County," they like to boast) the Mid-South remains a land of plantations, sharecroppers, and cotton cotton cotton. The Mid-South includes Wilson, Arkansas, which, I learned when I hitch-hiked through there, is the largest cotton plantation in the world; many plantations in the Delta regions of Arkansas and Mississippi cover 10,000 acres or more. (In Tennessee the large ones are closer to 5000 acres.)

But the cotton plantations in themselves are not the paradox. The people are the paradox. Modern Southern authors have sought to explain the people (Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County is a scant forty miles on the way from Memphis to Oxford, Mississippi); each has his own pet theory of ignorance or sexual guilt or what-have-you. But none of them can cope, for example, with the Negro who was dumped face down in West Tennessee's Hatchie River, in 1947, because he urged other Negroes to vote.

It boils down to this. On the one hand, there is the tradition which sees Negroes as cheap labor—possibly even cheaper as sharecroppers than they were as slaves. "The white man," says John McFerren, Negro rights leader in Fayette County, Tennessee, "wants the Negro's back at three dollars a day." This tradition pays the Negro less for harder work, encourages him to drop out of the separate—and unequal—school, keeps him in his place.

Even if he has owned a piece of land "since freedom" he doesn't get much from his cotton crop. The man at the gin gets everything except what the man at the bank gets for last year's crop loan. "A nigra's hand don't stink up a dollar bill none," they observe candidly.

On the other hand, the Negro sharecropper has become a luxury many whites can no longer afford. Nowhere in tradition is there room for the cotton picking machine. As Eric Weinberger, who has spent the last two years in Brownsville, Tennessee, helping Negro ladies produce and sell hand-made leather articles, told me, "The machine has a stronger back, eats less, and doesn't get uppity." The flat land of eastern Arkansas is most highly mechanized, about three fourths of this year's crop being picked by machine. On hilly land, as in west Tennessee, the machine is less efficient, but at least it doesn't claim half to two thirds of the crop as its share. Needless to say, the man who operates the cotton picker is 1) a college graduate with a degree in agriculture; 2) well paid; and 3) colorless. The sharecropper fits into this new scheme of things like the *Mayflower* in modern transatlantic shipping. It is advantageous—or at least not detrimental—to the white Southerner to see the Negroes educated and moving into other occupations. With the advent of the cotton chopper two or three years from now the need for cheap labor will be virtually gone in the cotton-growing South.

However, the Mid-South is trying to hang on to the traditional Negro-white relationship—and uses mechanization as an excuse to evict Negroes who step out of line. And here lies the paradox: the Negro in the Mid-South is damned if he knows his place, because his place

is being pre-empted by the machine; and he is damned if he doesn't, because tradition and economic custom have decreed that it be so.

For the past three years west Tennessee, and more recently the Mississippi Delta, have gained some measure of notoriety for their treatment of Negroes who registered to vote. Negroes who have been so presumptuous have been boycotted, evicted, arrested, beaten, shot at, lynched. Federal surplus food, distributed to the indigent by local authorities, has on occasion been denied to any who have registered.

This harassment tends to become utterly irrational; and a few weeks after it begins in an area, I doubt whether it really has that much to do with voting. True, Negroes in the areas where harassment is severest are in the majority, and electing a Negro sheriff or a Negro congressman is a theoretical possibility. But there are enough ways to invalidate ballots that if this were the only concern it could be disposed of without any mess.

Everybody and his brother, especially if he is a Northerner, has an idea of what should be done in Tennessee's Fayette and Haywood Counties, the most persistent trouble spots in the area and the sites of the now famous Tent Cities. Most of them think in terms of Federal troops to protect the registered Negroes, Federal action to forestall evictions and Federal surpluses to feed the swelling numbers on relief. Few think in more imaginative, original, terms.

However, there are some people—among them Northerners who have moved South—with very creative ideas as to what the Mid-South needs. They think not in terms of Federal troops, not even in terms of sit-ins and Freedom Rides, but rather in terms of constructive action and reconciliation. To get very specific, Eric Weinberger's work with the Haywood Handicrafters League is as creative as it is courageous: and the precedents it sets are bound to be important throughout the South.

Although Weinberger was first prompted to come to west Tennessee, in December 1961, by the evictions and boycotts which had then reached a peak of intensity, his efforts must be seen in the broader context of continued hardship, of a racial balance of payments always tilted in favor of the white landowner/businessman. Small wonder then that three hours after he first stepped off the bus in Brownsville, the police were looking for him. (He had asked for Odell Sanders, local civil rights leader, in the wrong grocery store.) Small wonder, too, that three months earlier Cincinnati pastor Maurice McCrackin had been arrested for "loitering with intent to peep" when he waited in front of Sanders' home to talk with him. While neither was courting arrest, as on a sit-in or a Freedom Ride, their purposes were just as destructive of the Jim Crow economy of rural Tennessee. Perhaps ultimately more so, because a sit-in may desegregate a lunch counter for only a day, but a crop loan to a boycotted farmer or a home industry project for his wife can have continuous, even accelerating benefits.

Home industry. I have finally come around to why Eric Weinberger came to Tennessee. It was a concept which the New England Committee for Nonviolent Action saw as a possible way to demonstrate that Gandhian non-violence was relevant to the situation in west Tennessee. After a year and a half of swimming out to Polaris submarines, New England C.N.V.A. wondered if their experience was in any way applicable to civil rights. If so, how? Should Negroes refuse to move out when they were evicted? Should they refuse to stay on the farms as sharecroppers? Or should they publicly drink the rusty water of Brownsville's WHITE ONLY drinking fountain?\*

As it turned out, none of these approaches was satisfactory, either from lack of Negroes willing to be involved or because the approach itself was just plain inadequate to deal with the situation. But Gandhi's ideas of home and village industry, symbolized by his own use of the spinning wheel, could be rephrased in terms of Tennessee sharecroppers. New England C.N.V.A. sensed the similarity of race-oriented and war-oriented economies, and sent Eric as a staff member on location with a very specific proposal: he would teach families of sharecroppers how to make suede leather "tote bags" (roomy shoulder bags) for sale by mail. And so would be born a home industry, a pilot project to point the way to economic remedies for racial or military economies. No matter if my family's meals depend on my killing someone or enslaving him or being enslaved, there is something wrong about the work I am doing—yet the men who build Polaris submarines in Connecticut are legitimately skeptical of someone who seems to say to them: "Quit being immoral; let your kids starve." Perhaps tote bags in Tennessee could help C.N.V.A. itself see the way to a better approach to this dilemma.

Eric went to New York first, to talk with CORE about the project. Although CORE, in the public mind, is more commonly associated with the drama of sit-ins it too was caught up in the quiet drama of striking at the root of the South's racial-economic segregation. Its suggestion was "Don't hitch-hike, here's a bus ticket," and in addition it offered to print up a circular to advertise the bags.

A year later I went to Brownsville to observe and assist the project. They were expanding, Eric had written me, and he could use me to help teach people to make hand-stitched billfolds. I would share his two-meal-a-day life, sleep on the floor like he did, and expose myself to the same kind of police harassment which got him twice thrown in jail and beaten. I would, in short, learn what it's really like.

\* In front of the court house on Washington Street in Brownsville stands a drinking fountain. It is, in fact, the only public drinking fountain in Haywood County. Neatly stenciled on it in large red letters, the "White Only" warning clearly refers not just to the fountain but to the fact that all of Brownsville is a Jim Crow town.

The Haywood Handicrafters League is a non-profit corporation duly chartered under Tennessee law. Seventy-five ladies work for the League; the same seventy-five comprise its membership. (This, in so far as a non-profit organization can practice profit-sharing, makes N.A.M./A.F.L.-C.I.O. steps in that direction look piddling.) Eric Weinberger is the only man employed by the League, its 76th voice in policy matters: for he is listened to and voted down, just like any other hapless male in the midst of threescore and fifteen housewives.

The League operates by virtue of a strange admixture of the impossible and the unlikely—anarchists supporting the right to vote, pacifists paying federal luxury taxes which support the war effort,\* vegetarians rounding up orders for leather goods, etc. Negro preachers preach unsophisticated hell-fire-and-damnation sermons on Sunday morning and on Sunday afternoon in private conversation astound you with their theological and practical grasp of the Haywood Handicrafters League's relation to the "social Gospel."

Perhaps it is this paradoxical quality which gives the League its peculiar appeal to me. My limited experience with intentional communities and cooperative endeavors indicates that differences far less than those mentioned are capable of shattering community spirit. But although the Haywood Handicrafters League is physically not a community at all, and philosophically far from the average intentional community (at most it is an "intentional community of need"), it outshines all American middle-class communitarian attempts to resolve differences, to blend incompatibles.

This is not to say that the League has escaped the throes of growing pains, or that its nature has remained static. Much has changed in a year's time. Membership grew from a dozen to more than six dozen; then it was decided not to accept more members because there was not enough work. Eric's role as a short-term helper to launch the project has expanded to that of a semi-permanent friend and adviser. The project, first seen as something of a stop-gap measure, has also become quite permanent.

I am, I think, the first white integrationist to stay in Brownsville for any length of time without being arrested. "If they didn't arrest you, that must mean we're really getting police protection," Eric told me after I was questioned by an officer who had been waiting for hours, perhaps days, at a corner where they knew I would have pass to go into town, if I was living where they thought I was living and doing what they thought I was doing. Actually, Eric was giving them the benefit of considerable doubt: since the Sheriff arrested a Justice Department investigator on a phony speeding charge, there has been a court injunction promising dire things for unwarranted arrests and police brutality; the police may not *wish* to be as restrained as they *have*

\* It is the League's non-pacifist officers who would be jailed if they did not pay the tax.

to be.\* In any case, the Brownsville police and the Haywood County Sheriff's Patrol seem for the present to be confining themselves to surveillance and intimidation. (The latter is the specialty of Deputy Sheriff Charles "Buddy" Sullivan, who has a 110-pound German police dog named Grief—"trained to attack and track," says the Jackson (Tennessee) *Sun*. And to threaten Northern integrationists. A bullet in the skull would be delightful in comparison to a full-fledged encounter with this animal.)

After a year, the Haywood Handicrafters League has already taught itself and its friends a number of lessons of importance to people interested in communities, race relations, and economic justice in a mechanized society. In random order, the following are worthy of note:

- *Viability*: Eric began with \$20, voted by the voter registration drive, to launch the project. The League grossed about twenty thousand dollars in 1962—of which over half went to its member-employees. The balance was used for materials, capital reserve, etc. Payments averaged ten or fifteen dollars a month per family—not much, but, with Federal surplus food, a help.

- *Skill*: Despite lack of formal education (in some cases illiteracy) the ladies in the League are all capable of mastering the techniques needed in leatherwork. Even middle-class intellectuals can learn how to make tote bags if they apply themselves.

- *Incentives*: Traditional capitalist/Soviet notions of financial rewards and punishments have been discarded, and with them all rumors that Negroes, either because they are Negroes or because they are poor, will do "just enough to get by." Payment is as if the ladies were self-employed—the rate per item is decided by majority vote. The rate has two minimum criteria: 1) that for an average worker, it should amount to about \$1.25 for every hour of labor; 2) that it not price the goods out of the market.

Some parts of the work involve techniques—such as using rulers—which are in fact beyond the capacities of some of the ladies; committees do this work at the same rough \$1.25-an-hour basis. No one is penalized for inferior work: no one, indeed, is allowed (let alone required) to buy an item which she has spoiled—if it is not up to minimum standards, it is simply not sold, no matter who wants to buy it for what reason. The League absorbs the cost of materials and labor. When I was visiting I learned that because it took so long to learn to make billfolds the ladies were getting double for the first one—despite the lower quality of the billfolds that they were learning on. Once they had learned and could work better and faster, they were paid the

\*Since this article was written Eric Weinberger was hospitalized as a result of a severe beating by Brownsville police, in the course of an integration demonstration. See Summer LIBERATION.

lower standard rate. Social pressure alone, the awareness that inferior quality damages the reputation of the whole group, is sufficient to get every member to do her best.

● *Race consciousness*: Eric had hoped to be treated as an equal by the Negroes of Haywood County, but this is easier said than done. He is seldom called "Eric," only by the half-dozen people who have had most contact with him. The others still say "Mr. Weinberger" or "Mr. Eric," despite his repeatedly expressed wishes to the contrary. League officers authorize all purchases and make all payments for work done, while Eric scrupulously avoids any implication that he is another white straw boss. But custom dies hard. When other people wish to join (a fairly common wish) they always come to Eric as though he were just a white man hiring cheap colored labor—"You takin' on any more people, Mr. Eric? I sure do need work." He patiently explains that he is not the boss, he hires or fires no one, but that League membership is closed for the present because the League decided by majority vote to freeze its membership at seventy-five. The same people may be back a week later, still wanting Mr. Eric to hire them.

● *Size*: For the present, optimum size would seem to be between thirty and forty—about half the present membership. Whether this number is peculiar to a leathercraft project, or indicates an approximate size for any home industry, is uncertain. In any case too many participants mean that there is not enough work for anyone. At the opposite extreme, some people have suggested that the League mechanize and begin mass production. This would, of course, destroy its very *raison d'être*—to provide meaningful work for many people.

● *Constructive program*: I have already alluded to the similarities to Gandhi's idea of village industry. The Haywood Handicrafters League represents a positive response to the evils of poverty and racial discrimination. It is not a totally adequate response—it is neither big enough to feed all the poor of Haywood County, nor strong enough to survive in completely amoral economic competition. (Gandhi too recognized that for village handicrafts to survive enlightened people must be willing to buy hand-made goods in preference to lower-priced machine-made articles.) But it is a start, and more than a token effort, in an area where token integration, justice in moderate amounts, is the watchword.

The League seems well established now. It has taken over the rent and heat of the Negro Masonic Hall which it occupies; formerly these expenses were paid by its parent organization, the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League. It will hopefully be the inspiration for more experiments in home industry with everyone from migrant workers to General Dynamics engineers.

The people of west Tennessee have almost a prophetic mission, not only embodied in the sale of leathercraft, but in other ways as well. An Iowa farmer, Art Emery, has moved to Somerville, Tennessee (Fayette County) with his family to implement their ideas of brotherhood and reconciliation. With experience in Midwestern

credit unions and producers' and consumers' cooperatives, Art is trying to introduce these ideas in rural Tennessee. "Civic and Welfare Leagues" in both counties are undertaking self-help efforts: adult education, house building, continued voter registration efforts, and more. One of the biggest projects in each county is the building of community centers, available on an integrated basis, to provide educational, medical, and recreational facilities. (Currently the nearest doctors for Negroes are in Memphis, an hour's drive away.) Cooperation and sharing are quietly becoming accepted practices; work camps for students make integration, brotherhood, a fact. "Operation Freedom's" experience in securing loans, surplus food, and used clothing for evicted and boycotted people is now being extended to the Delta, where if anything things are worse than in Tennessee.

All over the South it seems that more sophisticated urban areas—such as Nashville, Memphis, and Atlanta—yield most gracefully to pressures for integration, to the extent that last December the Jackson *Sun* reported a sit-in in Nashville where police arrested four hecklers and left the sitters untouched. Predominantly rural areas become Jim Crow's last stand, which in no way means that segregation is about over in the South, with its economy still based on agriculture and its politics still disproportionately weighted in favor of the rural areas. While Nashville students can talk hopefully about a completely "open" city, students in Lebanon, fourteen miles away, are arrested, harassed, and beaten by that small town's coalition of police and juvenile delinquents. And even in Illinois, with strong anti-discrimination laws, Negro kids in Cairo (population nine thousand) were clubbed and chain-whipped at a roller-rink "skate-in" while police looked on.

Looking to the future also involves looking at you who read this article. You should be looking south. If you believe in community, brotherhood, individual responsibility, here is your chance. Let your conscience be your Mississippi road map, not just your guide.

Most of you, of course, won't go down physically. You can't; a thousand and one mitigating factors militate against it. Just in case you are college age, Virgie Hortenstine, 5541 Hanley Road, Cincinnati 39, Ohio, coordinates periodic work camps in the area, and you have no excuse not to go. But if you really can't make it to Haywood County, you should at least buy a hand-made leather tote bag or billfold from them.

What you really ought to do, of course, is to get inspired by the Haywood Handicrafters League, and launch a similar project in some place like Greenville, Miss. (or Groton, Conn.) Perhaps handwoven cotton cloth could fill the same economic niche in the Delta that leathercraft fills in Brownsville. Be prepared, naturally, to have tough sledding at first, or maybe to get shot by a deputy or mauled by a dog. But if you can scrape together about \$20 and a lot of optimism, CORE might buy you a bus ticket (round trip, even) and in a year or so you may join Eric Weinberger in the ranks of the recipients of CORE's Gandhi Award. And I think Gandhi would approve.