

THE Commonweal

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Total Segregation

Black Belt, Alabama

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DALLAS COUNTY, Alabama. A Black Belt county, with Negroes in the majority though only a few registered to vote, and with no integrated facilities except the Trailways bus station. Birthplace of Alabama's White Citizens' Council and home of a unit of the National States' Rights Party. Target of four Justice Department civil suits against county and city officials and Citizens' Council leaders. Base of operations for a posse organized by the county sheriff which not only quells local demonstrations but ranges throughout the state in its activities.

Dallas County, Alabama, one of the most "Southern" of Southern counties. Circuit Judge James A. Hare summed up its creed last fall: "Any form of social or educational integration is not possible within the context of our society." And Chris Heinz, mayor of the county seat, Selma, said, "Selma does not intend to change its customs or way of life."

In fall of 1962, an organized attack on the county's customs of total segregation and discrimination began when the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) went into Selma to assist and encourage local leadership. The SNCC project itself began in February 1963 and continues this summer, though success is as slow coming as in the worst parts of Mississippi.

In June, the resumption of intensive voter registration activities immediately brought on increased arrests and intimidation. SNCC planned a Freedom Day—a period of heightened effort at registering Negro voters—for the week beginning July 6. Registration books would be open all that week, instead of the usual first and third Monday of each month. Then, with President Johnson's signing of the civil rights bill, came tests of its public accommodations section. Violence and arrests, and the resulting tension, climbed to new heights.

Accompanied by a photographer, I went to Selma the first weekend in July. We were followed and watched by police as we entered the town and went to the main hotel. We called the local FBI agent, so he would know we were in town. When asked, he said he knew nothing about recent arrests and violence growing out of theater integration. Then as we wandered to the sheriff's office, we saw crowds of whites in front of some stores, waiting, staring at us with hostility.

About 25 possemen—deputized local citizens—lilled around outside the county building. Others filled the offices and hallway inside. A few talked of "beating niggers." After emptying their office of possemen, Chief Deputy Sheriff L. C. Crocker and Circuit Solicitor Blanchard McLeod—both of whom have a number of Justice Department suits pending against them—conducted us inside. We introduced ourselves, and they refused to give us information of any kind. McLeod brought in a magazine with an article of mine which mentioned Selma and read and reread it, getting more upset each time. Crocker took down descriptive information on us. "So we can identify you, when we pull you out of the river in the morning." He had made the same comment to SNCC workers last spring when he asked them to fill out identification forms.

Crocker and McLeod said they knew nothing about Freedom Day and the voter registration drive. Two flyers announcing the drive were posted on their bulletin board and they had already begun a campaign of arresting all SNCC staff persons in town.

ON FRIDAY, July 3, Eric Farnum of SNCC spoke at the Catholic Mission about the literacy program. Head of the mission is Father Maurice Ouellet of the Society of St. Edmund. A friend of the movement, he often has visited civil rights workers in jail. Last fall, Sheriff Clark banned him from the county jail. The priest was also threatened with arrest and a warrant was made out but never served. Officials have asked the archbishop to remove him.

Farnum left the mission but before he could walk to the corner was picked up by police and arrested on charges of disturbing the peace. When an attorney

and SNCC project director John Love went to the jail, the jailer tried to attack Love. On Saturday, four members of the literacy project were arrested on trespassing charges when they tried to eat in a downtown restaurant. A girl who carried a broken chain medallion in her purse was charged with carrying a concealed weapon. Clark described it as a weighted chain. The car they had driven downtown was towed off by police. Later a sixth SNCC staff person, Alvery Williams, was arrested too.

Saturday afternoon, local Negroes went to the two theaters in Selma, the Walton and the Wilby. At the Wilby, where the balcony was filled, Negroes asked manager Roger Butler if they could sit downstairs. He said they could; the owner of the chain had told Butler to seat persons regardless of race. Despite the angry departure and verbal objections of some whites the group of thirteen sat on the main floor, but not for long. Sheriff Jim Clark and his possemen soon invaded the theater, chasing the Negroes out. Meanwhile a mob of whites assisted by Clark's posse attacked Negroes in line outside. At 6:40 Clark ordered the theater manager to close both box offices and not admit anyone, white or Negro.

That night two crosses were burned on the edge of town, and the Dallas County unit of the National States' Rights Party held another evening meeting. Fifty to 150 persons had been meeting nightly since civil rights activities increased.

On Sunday, police arrested Rev. Ben Tucker who had just returned from Memphis with a station wagon donated to the Selma project. That night, as a prelude to the next day's Freedom Day, a mass meeting was held at the AME Zion Hall.

Five local officials in street clothes—one identified by a local Negro as a Klan leader—attended the meeting. They watched the last thirty minutes from outside a window. Charles Robertson told of SNCC's plans: "We're not going to sit-in. We're going to go and eat at a public place. We're going to tell the police what we're going to do and ask them to protect us." One of the officials, leaning on the window sill, chewed a cigar, and smiled cynically.

Outside, these five were backed by over sixty men in brown uniforms and white helmets, who lined up elbow to elbow across the streets, night sticks in hand, pistols at their sides. This was the posse of deputized local citizens that Sheriff Clark had organized several years ago when racial demonstrations began in Montgomery, fifty miles away. Since that time, it has traveled with Clark to Birmingham, Tuscaloosa and Gadsden, helping quell racial demonstrations. The posse has often assisted Col. Al Lingo and his state troopers—Lingo is an old friend of Clark's—and Lingo in turn has frequently come to Selma to help Clark. Last February, Clark joined Lingo 100 miles away in Macon County where free-lance photographer Vernon Merritt III was beaten near the Notasulga High School. In Selma and Dallas County, the posse has been used not only against racial demonstrations but also to hinder union activity.

Chief Deputy Crocker told the local paper that he had forty possemen there, that there were 200 Negroes outside the hall, 300 Negroes in the hall and that John Lewis, SNCC chairman, "had them pretty worked up." But Lewis wasn't even there, let alone spoke; and the small hall (which was filled) held no more than 160 Negroes, while only twenty-five to fifty were outside.

Shortly after the meeting ended and the hall emptied I heard yelling and screaming from a crowd of Negroes to my right. Turning, I saw possemen charging through the crowd, night sticks swinging. Among the possemen's first targets were my photographer-companion and myself. He was beaten and shot at. I was clubbed over the head—seven stitches were required to close the gash—and struck and shoved with night sticks. Three separate times possemen smashed the photographer's camera. After threatening us, McLeod ordered us out of the state. Later, Crocker and a state investigator told newsmen and Justice Department officials that we had re-

ported being grabbed and beaten by Negroes. Clark informed the local newspaper he was proud of his possemen and of how they conducted themselves.

THEN CAME Freedom Day. Over 75 Negroes lined up at the courthouse to take the registration test. Each was given a number and made to wait in the alley behind the courthouse which would thus be entered through the back door. Possemen posted at the alley entrance kept away newsmen and anyone else not attempting to register. Even one Selma resident, James Austin, formerly on SNCC's staff, was not permitted to join the line.

Fifty-five Negroes, including SNCC chairman John Lewis, were arrested on orders from Clark. Newsmen were chased away from the arrested group, and two photographers were roughed up by officers. Six whites were also arrested for carrying an assortment of clubs in their car. The local paper printed their names and residences the next day; four were identified as residents of Selma, the other two from nearby Suttle. A newsman confirmed the fact that they were local youths. But an AP report in the *Montgomery Advertiser* stated: "The sheriff exhibited the clubs to newsmen and said the weapons were examples of what 'outside agitators' bring into the city. He said their car had an Alabama license tag fastened over a Virginia tag. Their identity was not released."

Only five Negroes were allowed to take the test that day. The remainder of the week, twelve persons were permitted to take the registration test each day, some of them, however, whites.

That night, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy spoke at the mass meeting. "I come to pledge the full support, full resources of Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," he told the 250 Negroes attending the meeting. "We are behind you, with you and even in front of you every step of the way."

Three officials sat inside, listening to his speech. Outside two school buses and ten cars deposited 150 city police, county deputies, possemen and state troopers. (Col. Al Lingo, in town Saturday and Sunday nights conferring with Clark, had brought his men into Selma on Monday.) Nonetheless, the meeting ended peacefully. But Clark told James Gildersleeve of the Dallas County Voters League that he would break up all mass meetings from then on.

Although leaders of the registration drive determined to hold more meetings, no location could be found because of threats. Even a meeting already set for Wednesday night had to be cancelled. Finally on Thursday a mass rally attended by almost 300 was held. In the meantime, more than twenty-seven additional arrests had been made, including the president of the Voters League, Rev. F. D. Reese, arrested while taking photos of demonstrators; white youths attacked Negro employees leaving work at the Plantation Inn restaurant; three SNCC workers were reportedly beaten in jail; police towed away another SNCC worker's car leaving the project carless; and ten fresh loads of state troopers arrived in town.

The next day, Friday, the county got an injunction prohibiting assemblies of three or more persons in any public place. Named in the injunction were fourteen organizations, including SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and forty-one individuals.

The combination of arrests, intimidation, violence and the injunction brought civil rights activities to a temporary halt in mid-July. But it did not bring to a halt the determination to create change in this old Southern city, although the past as well as the present in Selma has not created a situation in which change is easy.

SELMA was founded 40 years before the Civil War and became an important military depot during the war. Industries that manufactured arms and other war equipment were established then. The four noted gunboats—Tennessee, Selma, Morgan and Gaines—that formed Buchanan's fleet at Fort Morgan were built in Selma. And the county furnished the Confederate army with ten infantry, six cavalry and four artillery companies.

Dallas County has long had a plantation economy and even today the county is 49.9 percent rural. Two-thirds of the rural population is Negro. Though some industry has come to the area, population growth is almost static. In fact, the Negro population of the county is declining—in 1950, Negroes comprised 65 percent of the population, today only 57 percent.

Median family income in Dallas County is \$2846 (compared to \$3937 for the state), but median family income for Negroes is only \$1393. Median school years completed in the county is 8.8 (compared to 9.1 for the state), but median school years completed for Negroes is 5.8.

Only 1.7 percent of 14,509 voting-age Negroes (242 Negroes) were registered in the county as of September 1963 according to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights. (Fewer Dallas County Negroes could vote in 1963 than in 1956, when 275 Negroes were registered!) But 63 percent of the 14,400 voting age whites (or 8,953 whites) were registered. (In the two adjoining Black Belt counties, Wilcox and Lowndes, none of the 11,207 voting age Negroes were registered in 1962 according to the Civil Rights Commission.)

The first voting suit filed by the Kennedy Administration, in April 1961, was filed against the Dallas County registrar. "It sought an injunction against systematic discrimination against Negro registration applicants," according to Burke Marshall of the Justice Department. The district court denied the injunction, but did order the registrar to reduce from one year to sixty days the period an applicant who fails the registration test must wait before he can take the test again. Eventually, by direction from the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals an injunction was issued. But it has had little effect on registration. An enforcement proceeding has now been filed and a hearing on that has been set for October 5.

On June 26, 1963, the Justice Department filed the suit, *U.S. vs. Dallas County, et al.*, including Sheriff Clark. According to the Civil Rights Commission the charge was "intimidation of voter registration workers by sheriff and county prosecuting attorney by means of baseless arrests."

Then on November 12, the Justice Department filed two more suits—*U.S. vs. McLeod, et al.* (again including Sheriff Clark) and *U.S. vs. Dallas County Citizens Council*. At this time the department pointed out that from June 1954 to 1960 the Dallas County Board of Registrars registered more than 2,000 whites and only 14 Negroes. It said the board rejected many qualified Negroes, including school teachers with college and advanced degrees, and accused county officials of threatening, intimidating and coercing Negro citizens of voting age "for the purpose of interfering with the right to register and vote."

The Citizens' Council was accused of preventing Negroes from registering and attending voter registration meetings, of using economic sanctions against Negroes and of resisting federal attempts to enforce the civil rights acts of 1957 and 1960. Last March 19, the district judge ruled against the federal government in the second and third suits; they are now in the appeals court. The suit against the Citizens' Council has not gone to trial yet.

Selma is the birthplace and stronghold of the Citizens' Councils of Alabama. The Dallas County council was organized in 1954 by Attorney General Patterson of Mississippi and is partly subsidized by the state and large industries nearby. In April, 1960, Birmingham Police Commissioner Eugene Connor, who hails from Selma, told a Citizens' Council rally in Selma: "We are on the one yard line. Our backs are to the wall. Do we let Negroes go over for a touchdown, or do we raise the Confederate flag as did our forefathers and tell them, 'You shall not pass?'"

This last cry has been the attitude of the council and of county officials. In a full-page ad in the *Selma Times-Journal*, June of last year, the council said its "efforts are not thwarted by courts which give sit-in demonstrators legal immunity, prevent school boards from expelling students who participate in mob activities and would place federal referees at the board of voter registrars." The ad asked, "Is it worth four dollars to you to prevent sit-ins, mob marches and wholesale Negro voter registration efforts in Selma?" In October 1963, the Dallas County Citizens' Council was the largest in the state with 3,000 members. A lot of citizens must have thought the four dollars worthwhile.

Last summer, like this summer, there were increased voter registration and integration activities in Selma and Dallas County, leading a Citizens' Council spokesman to comment in October, "I never thought it would happen in Selma. But I tell you this. We are not going to give in. If we let them have an inch, they would want to go all the way."

Nine months have passed since that statement—nine months of determined and hard work by hundreds of Negroes in the face of threats, beatings and arrests—and Selma still has not yielded that inch.

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