

Freedom Information Service
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THE DELTA LEATHER WORKSHOP--A Transcription of a Tape Recording

Narrator: Mileston, Mississippi, October 20th, where a young Negro lady talks of her former life working the white man's cotton crop.

Miss Head: "I'm 22 years old now, and I started picking cotton when I was about eight or nine years old. Sometimes I picked 200 pounds of cotton and when they paid \$2.50 I could make \$5 a day. I picked 15 hours a day, and chopped cotton 10 hours a day at \$2 a day, sometimes \$5."

Narr: Miss Dorothy Jean Head has ended her 13 year career as a field hand on the white man's plantation. Today, this 22 year old native of Holmes County, Mississippi, is her own boss, along with five other Holmes County Negroes in the Delta Leather Workshop at Mileston, Mississippi. The leather workshop is a cooperative which produces hand-made leather goods such as belts, wallets, purses and carrying bags in all sizes and styles.

The Delta Leather Workshop is one of several small workshop cooperatives set up by Negroes with the aid of people interested in helping them create a source of income independent of the white boss man. Control of the economy--the almost total dependence of the Negro on the white boss man--is the most powerful weapon in segregation's arsenal.

Mr. Will Bacon: "I was living on a plantation called "Big Bonanza" and I'd been living there for 14 years, and I started participating in the civil rights movement. First, I had the whole plantation organized. We had decided to go to the courthouse and register to vote. And this school integration came up and we all signed the integration petition and somehow our boss got hold of it and he came out to talk with the people about it. He ordered everybody to go to the school board and withdraw their petitions or get off his plantation. So everybody on the plantation went and withdrew their names but me."

Narr: Important to the Mileston leather workers and other co-op efforts in the state is the Poor Peoples' Corporation. The P.P.C. was established by civil rights workers to provide financing for co-ops and other self-help programs. The P.P.C. raises funds which are loaned, interest free, to such efforts as the Delta Leather Workshop. The money is distributed at membership meetings four times a year. Membership in the corporation costs Mississippi poor people 25 cents a year. It was a \$400 loan from the Poor Peoples' Corporation that set the leather workers up in business.

Mr. Bacon: "Poor Peoples' Corporation came up and that gave us the idea of borrowing money and starting in the leather business. The leather business wasn't in sight at the time. We were talking about doing something; we didn't know exactly what. It was the ideal thing. And then we borrowed \$400 from the Poor Peoples' Corporation to buy machines and tools and we got started."

Narr: But the bulk of the work must of course be done by the people, for indeed the Poor Peoples' Corporation is poor. A volunteer worker from New York, an expert in leather work helping the Mileston co-op, tells some visiting ladies what they can expect if they should want to form a co-op.

Miss Barbara Schaum: "The loans that the Poor Peoples' Corporation gives you are limited so you really have to do an enormous amount yourselves. I mean it's not like Head Start and not like any of those other things. It's really up to you and if you seem to be serious and really can figure out some products or some particular plan, then maybe they will send somebody in to help you set up as well. And you don't have to pay the person at all. You might have to find a place for him to stay and feed him 'cause usually they don't have any money either. But you find your place and get your loan and pay your rent and get your basic materials and the rest of the things you buy have to come from what you sell."

Narr: So, with a \$400 loan and a lot of initiative, cotton choppers set out to become leather workers.

Mr. Bacon: "After I came back . . . I brought me a leather kit at a leather shop in Jackson and I toru up a pair of old baby shoes and made some baby shoes. My daughter had some old boots so I tore them up and made her some boots. I had never thought about this kind of leather work, but since I started working in it, it's a good trade I think. I learned a lot from the lady. Noe I believe I can make anything of leather if I can get a pattern."

Narr: The leather workers co-op in Mileston, like the sewing co-op in near-by Canton, the okra co-op in Panola county and other such efforts throughout the state, are felt to be important gains by the Negro community. In Mileston, a basically Negro community of under 1,000, everybody hopes the leather workshop will succeed and everybody pitches in to help.

Miss Schaum: "About a day after I got here, people began to turn up with lumber and with paint brushes. There must have been 20 people in here painting the work room. The carpenters in the community would stop by every morning to see what we needed and come and help build the benches and give us wood and nails. It just seemed that whatever we needed--we even found a blacksmithy that could make tools we couldn't get hold of--and whatever we needed suddenly appeared and was supplied."

Narr: In Jackson the Poor Peoples' Corporation has opened the Liberty Outlet House to market goods from the co-ops. This year Negroes can give Christmas presents made by other Negroes, spending money that will stay in the Negro communities. New Yorkers can buy co-op goods at the Poor Peoples' Corporation office at 5 Beekman Street.

The spirit is high in Mileston. The workers are busy filling some \$400 worth of orders from the Jackson outlet house and customers in the north. They have just purchased a shoe repair machine to service the community and are planning to start making shoes and boots themselves.

Old Mr. Carter, an 82 year old preacher and one-time blacksmith who duplicates tools for the leather workers, thinks the co-op is going to make it. "I've seen a lot of things come and go in my time," he says. "This leather company looks real good to me. The peoples' does real nice work when they gets a chance."

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