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MADISON

[1965]

COUNTY SEWING FIRM



838 LUTZ ST.  
CANTON, MISS.

## MADISON COUNTY SEWING FIRM

The Madison County Sewing Firm began in a precinct meeting last winter when some Negro women brought up the question of jobs and the movement - first, what can people do who have lost their jobs because of participation in the movement, and second, what can people do to reduce the dependence of the Negro women on the power structure, specifically her "job" as a maid in white homes for \$10 or \$15 a week? This dependence, as the women pointed out, has been at least partly responsible for the failure of urban movements in the South, even in a city as small as Canton, Mississippi.

Some of the women involved in the meetings had had some sewing experience both at home and at the factories operated mostly by the county's worst racists. In the face of considerable derision and minimal support from most of the community, eight women and one man met regularly with civil rights workers. The women ran record hops and canvassed the Negro community for capital to get started, and made sample shirts to show potential buyers. Meanwhile, a group of Northern supporters raised \$1500 for operating capital. The women worked out a contract with the Child Development Group in Edwards, Mississippi to manufacture smocks and other clothes for the Mississippi Project Headstart. The Firm went into partnership, arranged a two-year lease with a sympathetic Negro businessman on a building just outside the city limits to avoid zoning and licensing problems, cleaned up the building, and installed bathrooms, lighting fixtures, fans and some machinery donated by the Headstart Program. There are now sixteen people on the payroll, and if markets can be opened up, the firm plans to expand and incorporate into a direct attack on the maid system.

This report makes it sound easy. As an example of some of the trials the Firm has been through, the installation of the sewer line is a good illustration. The building that is leased is thirty yards from the highway: before the women

could install bathrooms and running water, they had to have a sewer pipe running from the building to the main line under the highway. One of the partners of the firm runs a cafe and has had a number of business dealings with a Negro that we'll call Mr. N who in turn has done plumbing work for a white man in town who we will call Mr. W. Mr. W also runs a motel. The partner went to see Mr. X with \$20 for the permit to dig up the highway. Mr. X then went to see Mr. W and told him that the property was being leased by Mr. Y. Mr. W talked to some members of the Firm who said they were planning "maybe for a cafe or some business like that; whatever it is, it won't hurt your motel". Mr. W said it would cost \$575 to get it done within four or five days - more than it should have been, but it was the only way to get the job done. The next day a man from the state highway board came to look at the site; when he went to get the permit signed, someone told him that the land was owned by Clarence Chinn, brother of C.O. Chinn -- who is one of the main supporters of the movement in Canton, and is now COFO Project Director in Madison County.

At this point, the man from the highway commission went back to Mr. W and told him that he couldn't issue the permit because of Clarence Chinn. Mr. W gave him a fifth of whiskey, assured him that Clarence Chinn had no connection with his brother and that Mr. W had some money in the project; the only way he could get his money out would be to get the permit signed and the sewer dug. The man capitulated: "Since you're a friend....."

Mr. N called six companies in Canton and Jackson and met a barrage of excuses why none of them could dig the sewer. The earliest date he could get was three months away; one company said the earliest they could do it would be in six months time, and they might not be able to do it at all. Mr. N went back to Mr. W, who called the company that couldn't do it for six months, if at all. The sewer was installed the following day.

Throughout the transaction, it is interesting to note, that neither Mr. N or Mr. W knew that Mr. Y was one of a group or that the building was to be a



factory.

The Firm has been and is plagued by more conventional business problems. Capital is scarce, the machines they are using are inadequate and managing experience is limited. Marketing problems are also with the group, perhaps the most immediate necessity is the assurance that after the Headstart contract is over, there will be someone to buy what the Firm can manufacture.

In spite of these and other problems, the Madison County Sewing Firm has managed to retain the original purpose of the group. Four of the first six people hired the morning the factory opened were on their way to work in white homes. Today (June 21) eight more people are being hired from the waiting list of over fifty-three who had lost their jobs because of work in the movement; five were working in white kitchens. The 24 members of the Firm need the support of groups throughout the nation who can persuade stores and chains of stores to buy.....

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Following is the equipment that is needed to insure peak production.

1. 32 industrial sewing machines
  - a. 16 Union Specials (double stitch)
  - b. 16 Bar Tackers (single stitch)
  - c. attachments for making button holes, fastening buttons etc.
2. Electric fabric cutters
3. Fabric of all types
4. Thread, zippers and assorted sewing notions
5. Shears (32 pair)

With the proper equipment we can produce the following articles of clothing.

Mens and womens shirts - 800 per week  
womens dresses  
smocks  
mens and boys suits

Please mail all contributions and further questions to -

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