



# **SOUTHERN RURAL RESEARCH PROJECT**

SELMA, ALABAMA

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FIRST ANNUAL REPORT

MAY, 1968

# **SOUTHERN RURAL RESEARCH PROJECT, INC.**

## **STAFF**

**DONALD A. JELINEK,**  
Director

**KATHLEEN A. VEIT,**  
Associate Director

**DONDRA SIMMONS**

**U. Z. NUNNALLY**

**NANCY SCHEPER**

**ROBERT REMBERT**

**RIO L. BROOKS**

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**ARTHUR STEIER**

**AL ULMER**

**JAC WASSERMAN**

Organizations Listed for Identification  
Purposes Only

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**802 First Avenue**

**Selma, Alabama 36701**

**(205) 872-5562**

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Tax-deductible contributions for SRRP should be made out to: "Alabama Council on Human Relations—SRRP," and mailed to P. O. Box 956, Selma, Alabama.

## FOREWORD

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After Mississippi, Alabama is the poorest state in the nation. Yet very few people talk about Alabama or know much about it. It has captured neither the imagination nor the shame of the nation as Mississippi has; teams of doctors and civil rights workers have not poured into the state to help its black citizens. Yet black Alabamians have shared the same hardships as their brothers in Mississippi; they have lost as many or more men to the racial struggle.

While Mississippi has three full-time civil rights law offices with a dozen full-time lawyers to help needy persons, Alabama has not even one full-time civil rights law office. It has a dozen private lawyers who handle civil rights cases on a part-time basis and only one full time civil rights lawyer, the Director of the Southern Rural Research Project (SRRP). The Governor of Alabama even rejected and OEO legal services program (which Mississippi has) which would have provided some relief for the poor and cost the state nothing.

While all of Mississippi's 82 counties have pre-school Headstart Centers, only 20 of Alabama's 67 counties (30%) have Headstart Centers.

In the blackbelt counties of Alabama where Negroes make up as much as 80% of the population, black farmers had to set up their own organization (SWAFCA) in order to get the same benefits from the Federal farm programs that the white farmers receive.

"Civil rights," as it is popularly known, is secondary in importance to people who are starving; their main concern is survival. SRRP is **not** fighting for the right to vote, the right to go to the "white" school, restaurant or motel, nor for the right of the civil rights worker to demonstrate, etc. **SRRP IS FIGHTING ONLY FOR PEOPLE TO HAVE A LITTLE FOOD, MEDICAL HELP AND OTHER BASIC ESSENTIALS OF LIFE.**

The following report will give some idea of the projects engaged in by the SRRP staff during its first year; it will also outline its plans for the future. If they seem all-encompassing, it is because so much needs to be done and so little has been done in Alabama. We hope that we will be able to expand both our legal and field staff to ensure the success of our efforts.

Donald A. Jelinek

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# **SOUTHERN RURAL RESEARCH PROJECT**

## **Purpose**

The SOUTHERN RURAL RESEARCH PROJECT (SRRP) is a civil rights research and law organization which has been operating in Selma, Alabama since May of 1967 for the purpose of combating day-to-day racial discrimination by southern-born, southern-bred, and federally salaried employees. Its aim is to have a significant effect upon Federal and state regulatory agencies which dispense millions of Federal monies in the South and do more than their share to perpetuate the poverty that keeps the Negro in bondage.

The Federal government has poured billions of dollars into its "War on Poverty" but is financing massive and organized subversion of that "War" by its own agencies in the South. SRRP was created to collect data documenting such misuse of Federal funds and to deal with the information by litigation and other means.

## **Origins**

SRRP was formed to fill the vacuum created by the removal of the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC) from Alabama in 1966. In that year, LCDC brought suit in Washington, D.C. against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) charging discrimination by one of its agencies in Alabama.

While achieving a limited victory, LCDC earned the ire of the plantation owners, their attorneys and the state of Alabama, which led to its eventual ouster. Not only was its staff counsel arrested and prohibited from practicing in the state courts of Alabama, but one witness who testified at the hearing in Washington was shot at and others were evicted from their long-time homes on plantations. The need for some group to challenge economic discrimination in the state of Alabama was immediately apparent.

## **Staff**

The present director of SRRP is Donald A Jelinek, who was the arrested LCDC lawyer. Mr. Jelinek (white) is a 34-year-old former New York attorney who has lived and worked in the South since August of 1965. He is also legal counsel for the Southwest Alabama Farmers Co-operative Association (SWAFCA).

Kathleen A. Veit (white), Associate Director of SRRP, is a 24-year-old graduate of Western Washington State College. She has been in the South since December of 1966, originally employed by LCDC in Selma to investigate jury discrimination.

Dondra Simmons (black), 19, is a community worker who has been with the project since the summer of 1967 when she left Queens College in New York to work full time with SRRP.

U. Z. Nunnally (black) is a 22-year-old Mississippian who was with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964 and then the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Alabama before joining SRRP.

Nancy Scheper (white), 24 years old, was a Peace Corps worker in Brazil, is now a full-time field worker for SRRP.

Robert Rembert (black), 20, has been active in civil rights in his native Marengo County, Alabama, since 1965, marched with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) at the confrontation across the bridge in Selma, and is now full-time with SRRP.

Rio Lanette Brooks (black) is SRRP's secretary. She is a 17-year-old high school student, a native of Selma, Alabama.

Attorney Howard Thorkelson of the Center for Social Welfare, Policy and Law at Columbia University has been an active consultant for SRRP in the application of Federal programs.

### **Backing**

SRRP has the support of major civil rights organizations including the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Urban League. It also has the backing of such support agencies as the Southern Rural Action Project (Citizens Crusade Against Poverty), the American Friends Service Committee, the Southern Regional Council, the Alabama Council on Human Relations, the Georgia Council on Human Relations and the National Sharecroppers Fund.

# SRRP SINCE MAY, 1967

## 1967 Summer Program

As its first project, SRRP invited students from all over the United States to participate in a massive job of information-gathering in rural black areas of Alabama and Mississippi. Students, along with local persons, using a two-part, 23-page in-depth questionnaire dealing with agriculture programs and household conditions, interviewed over 1000 heads of households (representing over 5,000 persons).

The workers in each state received no more than \$5 per week for expenses while living and eating as guests of local black families. Students were evicted from plantations at pistol-point, threatened on numerous occasions, and had questionnaires confiscated by the local police. One student was arrested for trespassing, and another had his room shot into. Fortunately no injuries occurred.

Certain general conclusions were evident from the information gathered in Alabama and Mississippi.

1. The vast majority of black farmers fear the employees of Federal farm programs,\* a situation which results in a low level of eligible black participants in programs. The black farmer, conditioned by years of experience, views the farm program employee as the southerner who calls him "nigger," "boy," and "grandpa." The black farmer knows that if he goes to one of the agency offices, he will have to wait on a long line and watch while the white man is attended to as soon as he enters. He also knows that if he angers the local agent with his persistence, his credit with local merchants may be canceled.
2. The ASCS cotton allotments and subsidy checks for blacks are lower than those for whites. FHA loans for the purchase of land, equipment and the improvement of farm buildings are virtually unavailable for blacks, and the rejections are rarely recorded. The county agent of the Extension Service, whose job it is to pass on information acquired at the federally supported Land Grant Colleges, rarely does so for black farmers.
3. **Black farm families are hungry.** The vast majority of black farmers, whose limited income\*\* is used up before

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\*The farm programs involved here are: Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), Farmers Home Administration (FHA) and the Federal Extension Service (FES).

\*\*1967 was the worst cotton year since 1895 because of droughts and freezing weather. The poverty of black farmers in 1968 has never been worse.

winter, are typically forced to eat the following:

<b>Morning</b>	<b>Noon Meal</b>	<b>Evening Meal</b>
Grits	Vegetables	Vegetables
Biscuits	Cornbread	(sometimes with
Coffee	Kool-Aid	pork parts mixed in)
	(Usually no noon	Cornbread
	meal after the	Kool-Aid
	harvest season)	

Free Surplus Commodities, when available, provide a limited supplement to the few vegetables grown in the family garden, but when free food in a county is replaced by food stamps, many of the poorest families cannot afford to buy the food stamps and are left with no government help for food. Even those who have borrowing power fall into further debt in order to purchase the benefits of the food stamp program (See Food Suit, p. 8).

4. A typical home is an unpainted three-room wood frame shack housing 3-5 adults and 8-12 children—all of whom sleep in three or four double beds. The floors and ceilings remain in disrepair along with loosely fitting wood shutters for the windows, all of which accounts for continual dampness during the rainy season and severe cold during the winter. Cooking and very limited heat are provided by a small wood-burning, pot belly stove.

The experience of the staff indicates that poverty in the black South is directly related to active discrimination by southern Federal employees of the USDA and passive acquiescence of the national USDA. They also witnessed the fact that in Mississippi and Alabama, and probably elsewhere, a prosperous nation is not feeding starving and near-starving citizens.

The results of the two-part questionnaire were analyzed and processed by the Division of Behavioral Science Research, Carver Research Foundation at Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama. The statistical data of the Agriculture section will be ready shortly. The Household section was released in March, 1968; some of the results follow:

1. Nearly 25% of the black farm families interviewed eat no fresh meat of any kind at all. Another 25% eat meat only once a week.
2. Fresh milk is not used at all by 30.0% of the households.
3. Fresh fruit never appears in the diet of nearly half of the Negro farm families interviewed.



4. 18.5% never eat eggs at all.
5. Over one third of the children suffer from sores and scabs.
6. In 14.2% of the farm households visited, SRRP interviewers noted one or more children with very noticeably distended stomachs.
7. 12.7% of the women questioned who had had a pregnancy over the past 5 years had received no prenatal care. A third of the women had suffered at least one miscarriage. Two thirds of the rural Negro babies were born at home with the aid of a midwife.
8. One third of the mothers interviewed had lost one or more children; 68.0% of these children during their first year.
9. During the first year of life 20.4% of rural Negro babies received no medical attention whatsoever.

SRRP has prepared an analysis of the statistical results of the Household section: "BLACK FARM FAMILIES: Hunger and Malnutrition in Rural Alabama," released March, 1968.

### **Cotton Election Suit**

SRRP's Director-Attorney is representing a group of black farmers in Macon County, Alabama who lost representation in the 1967 ASCS election\* by 39 votes out of approximately 5,000 as a result of fraud by the white ASCS committee in power. By "packing" the ballot with "picked" blacks to confuse and split the black vote, by adding white voters beyond the deadline date, and by invalidating the ballots of legitimate black voters, the Macon County ASCS denied black farmers their rightful representation in making decisions vital to their own economic life.

### **Other Agricultural Litigation**

As a corollary to the cotton election suit, SRRP is supporting farmers in obtaining Farmers Home Administration (FHA) loans

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\*The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) operates the cotton program which determines the amount of cotton each farmer may plant (allotment), the amount of subsidy money each farmer receives (projected yield) and other decisions vital to the black farmer. ASCS elections are held once a year to elect the men who make these decisions. Even in counties with over 80 per cent eligible black majorities, no Negro has ever been elected. Discrimination has cost blacks the elections and has dramatically contributed to their poverty.

and in getting information and help from the Extension Service (FES).

In the near future, SRRP will represent farmers complaining about the abuses uncovered during the 1967 summer program, including the amount of the allotments and subsidy checks, the lack of FHA loans and a myriad of other USDA acts of economic discrimination.

### **The Food Suit**

**Peoples v. USDA**, Civil Action No. 544-68, U.S. District Court, Washington, D.C.

On March 23, 1968, SRRP staff accompanied 130 black Alabamians to Washington to offer evidence of starvation caused in large part by the misapplication of Federal food programs. The group ranged in age from 7 weeks to 75 years; one witness brought her 14 children.

Even before the people arrived, the USDA reacted to the first part of the suit and "forced" a food program into Elmore County, Alabama against the wishes of the local county government. This act, which occurred 12 days after the suit was filed, accomplished what the USDA had previously said it could not or would not do.

The law suit charged:

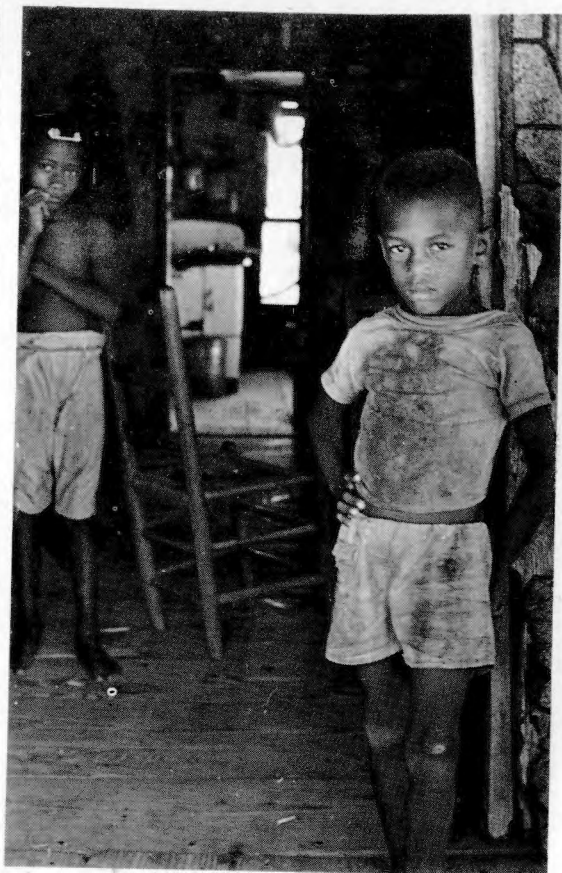
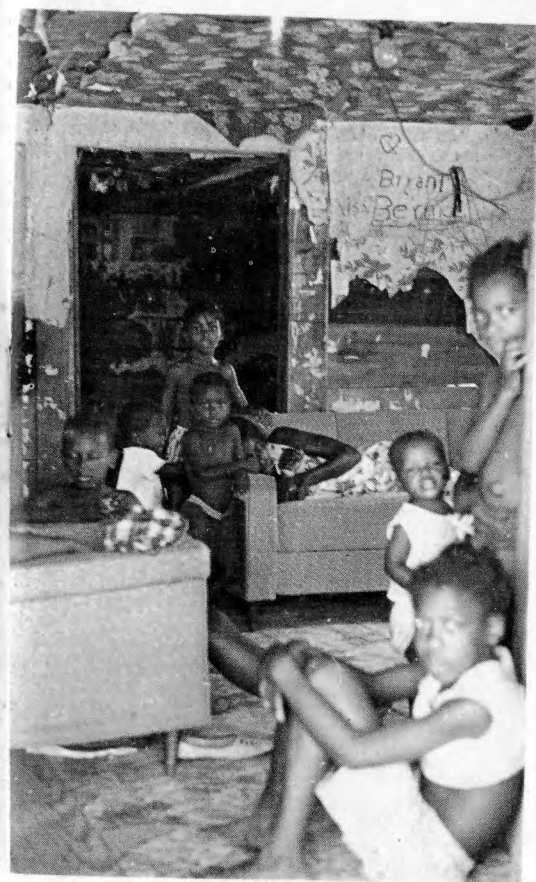
1. USDA permits the state of Alabama to offer food programs in some counties and not in others (besides Elmore, there are three other counties in Alabama without food programs).
2. USDA permits excessive charges for food stamps which (1) forces many recipients to borrow in order to pay for them, and (2) eliminates over 50% of the poor who cannot afford any stamps at all.
3. USDA, in its Surplus Commodities (Free Food) program, does not provide food which meets its own minimal nutritional standards for survival—to the detriment of those who depend entirely on the commodities for food.

The hearing was held on March 25, 1968, before Federal Judge George L. Hart, Jr. Among the potential witnesses, besides the 130 Alabamians, were three doctors who had previously testified about conditions in Mississippi before a U.S. Senate Committee: Dr. Joseph

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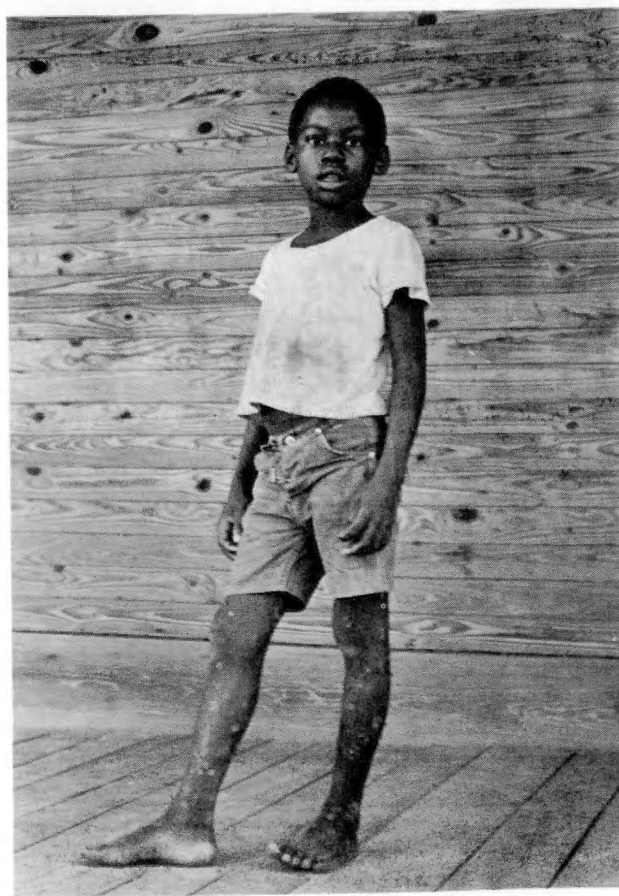
**Photographs by Joffrey Clark, for SRRP—  
Rural Alabama, Summer, 1967**

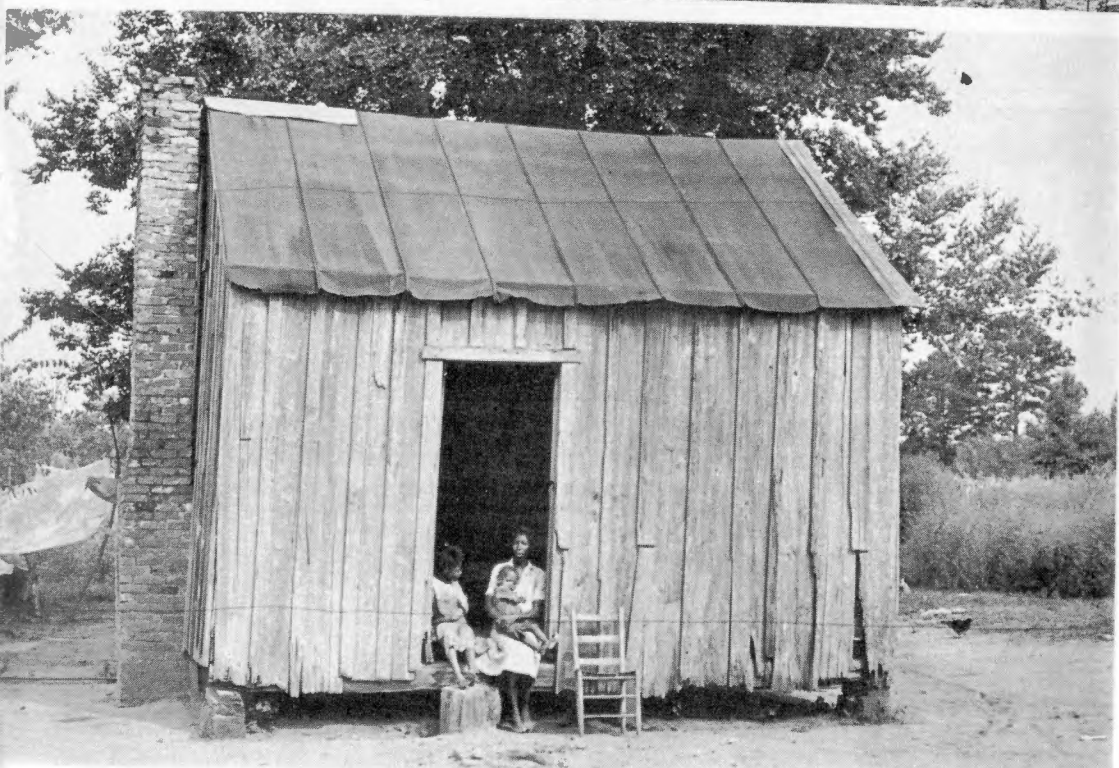
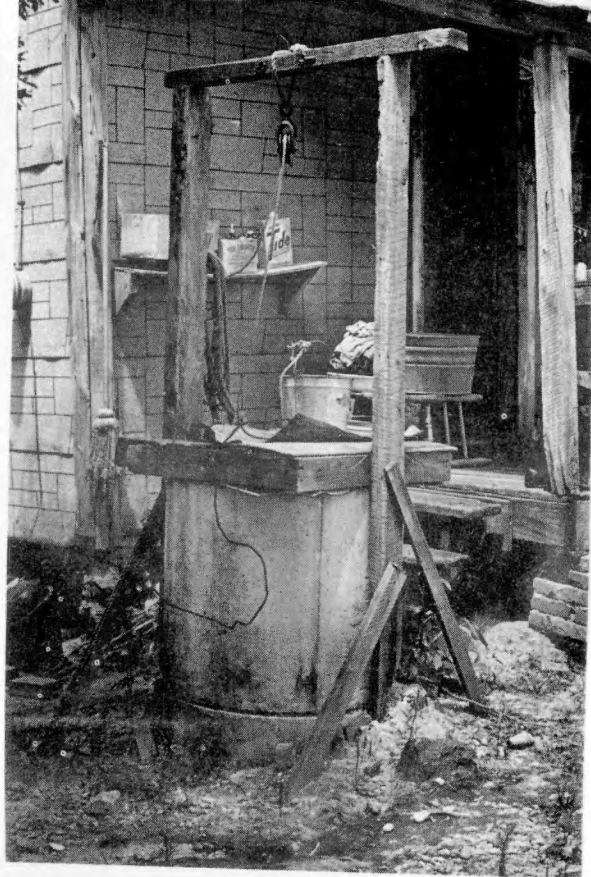
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Brenner, Dr. Alan Mermann, and Dr. Raymond Wheeler. All were prepared to testify to the hunger and malnutrition in Alabama and to the inadequacy of the food programs to meet human needs. (The suit charged the Secretary of Agriculture has the power to eliminate these conditions but will not exercise it.)

Judge Hart rejected any live testimony but accepted the basic points of the lawsuit, that Alabama blacks were suffering hunger and starvation by malnutrition and that as a result they suffered severe mental and physical diseases. The hearing thus concerned itself with the legal argument as to whether the Court could interfere with the actions of a Cabinet member. While it evinced sympathy for the plaintiffs and outright criticism for the food programs and its operation, the Court declined to interfere with the Secretary.

Counsel for the plaintiffs (Donald A. Jelinek, Howard Thorkelson of the Center on Social Welfare, Policy and Law of Columbia University, and Edgar S. Cahn of the Citizens Advocate Center, Washington, D.C.) filed an immediate emergency appeal in the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia which was heard a few days later. The three-judge panel denied both sides' motions but recommended a full-scale trial back in the district court to present more evidence; that trial will come up in the near future.

The *New York Times* (March 26, 1968) in an editorial on starvation in the U.S., and particularly Mississippi, referred to the suit as follows:

As a court suit concerning the administration of the food-stamp plan in Alabama has made plain, too many county and state officials outside Mississippi as well as in it are shockingly indifferent to the hunger and privation of their own neighbors. It may be as Secretary of Agriculture Freeman contends—and as a Federal judge ruled yesterday—that the laws governing the food-stamp plan and the distribution of surplus commodities provide Federal officials with no leeway to intervene on behalf of hungry people if local officials refuse to cooperate. If that contention is upheld by a higher Federal court, Congress should move promptly to establish uniform Federal standards for programs and make certain that they are available to all who need them everywhere in the nation.

### Other Food Litigation

On the local level, SRRP has been successful in reducing the price of food stamps for individuals by accompanying the complainants to the local food stamp office in Selma, Alabama. This effort will be expanded throughout the state (See p. 15).

## Publications

1. As a corollary to the 1967 summer's work, SRRP prepared two booklets, "Food and Health Programs" and "Farm Programs: FHA, FES, ASCS." These booklets were handed out to those answering the questionnaires in an attempt to fill in some of the gaps of knowledge about programs and services that are available to the poor.
2. SRRP's analysis of the statistical results of the Household section of the questionnaire: "BLACK FARM FAMILIES: Hunger and Malnutrition in Rural Alabama," March, 1968.



## **FUTURE PLANS OF SRRP**

### **Alabama 10-County Self-Help Legal Program**

For those who work a full year on a farm without profit (or who have been automated off the farm), the Federal and state economic programs (for food, medicine, welfare, and agriculture subsidies and loans) are the major factor between survival and forced migration to northern ghettos. Unfortunately, these programs in which white southern employees dispense Federal monies are the major sources of discrimination against needy black Alabamians.

The legal help needed to fight this situation is absent in Alabama (See Foreword). The few sympathetic black and white attorneys who have given years of service to provide aid on a part-time basis are hampered by their need to earn a living and, therefore, cannot handle many day-to-day problems. Yet the crying need for full-time legal assistance continues.

To attempt to meet this need, SRRP proposes to coordinate a self-help legal program for the 10 counties which make up the Southwest Alabama Farmers Co-operative Association (SWAFCA): Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, and Wilcox.

One or two former full-time farmers in each county will be paid salary plus gas allowance to drive around the county to visit every farm family, ask questions from a prepared survey sheet which will demonstrate eligibility (and previous failures) for various programs, and then arrange for group visits to the "agency" office in town to apply. (The aide will, of course, be trained by the SRRP staff in the mechanics of the programs.) If there is a "rejection," the aide will handle the first "administrative" appeal (e.g., fair hearing in Welfare) as a representative of the applicant (no lawyer is needed). After this stage, SRRP's attorney will continued the appeal into the Federal Courts.

### **Dallas County Survey**

SRRP has revised its 1967 questionnaire with the help of Tuskegee Institute and plans to interview every black farm family in Dallas County, Alabama (which includes the city of Selma). This survey will include: a detailed breakdown of the exact food eaten in every household, including the size of portions; a determination of the true financial picture of each family by analysis of income and expenses; and a record of those relatives of Dallas County residents who have migrated North, the reason for their migration, their present situation in the North, and the circumstances under which they would consider returning to their southern homes.\*

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\*Of course, questions dealing with the Federal agriculture and food programs will be continued in an improved form.

The survey will also indicate areas lacking in telephones, paved roads, sewage, water lines, and transportation to town where the government offices are. By means of a small-scale, 3-dimensional model of the county, the great contrast between services offered the black and white communities will be visible. Dallas County has been chosen to represent in depth the problems that exist in other rural counties of the state and throughout the South.

### 1968 Summer Program

Utilizing the information gathered in the 1967 Summer Program, SRRP is now ready to take action in the area of health, as well as food and agriculture. With USDA programs denying the black farmer a chance to earn a decent living and with food programs not reaching many of the impoverished, it is only natural that poor people are suffering physically and not receiving medical attention.

This summer, SRRP plans a direct action program to fight to obtain money for poor families to see a doctor and to buy medicine (in addition to obtaining monies under the agriculture programs).

The summer's project will enlist the help of doctors, lawyers, medical students, law students, college students, and young people in general.

#### 1. The Medical Aspect

There already exists in the South funds for doctors and medicine through state welfare offices which dispense Federal monies. Black families are unable to obtain these funds because white doctors (there are few black doctors in the South) refuse to certify their eligibility:

- (a) because of the doctors' ties with the local county welfare officials; and/or
- (b) because the doctors persist in believing that black people are inherently more capable of continuing to work with the same ailments that would incapacitate whites.

Medical experts will be brought down to provide the necessary information both to challenge the fairness and adequacy of the state health programs and to apply for OEO funds under a new law for rural medical aid.

## 2. The Legal Aspect

Lawyers and law students will analyze the applicable agricultural and welfare programs and apply the facts of each individual case to the laws and regulations as written. Then, they will make direct confrontations with county offices, appeal to the state and Washington offices and eventually move into the Federal courts. They will make appearances at hearings before the agencies to represent claimants, to present evidence and to argue issues of law. They will prepare applications for OEO funds to establish free medical centers and other medical service programs.

Lawyers and law students will also prepare "class" suits to seek injunctions and other broad relief aimed at the grievances uncovered and documented by the summer work.

Finally, they will assume the important function of explaining the various programs to the people and conducting meetings and workshops to train local persons to handle these problems within their own communities after the summer.

## 3. How the Summer Program Will Operate

With the approval and participation of the local community, field workers will gather information on eligibility, doctors will make examinations and evaluate eligibility, applications will be made for benefits and lawyers will handle rejection hearings, appeals and other litigation. The cooperation of sympathetic local physicians and hospitals will be solicited, and work with poor whites will be attempted. Most workers will live and eat with local black farmers.

In the course of their work, these volunteers will contribute information pertinent to that collected during the 1967 Summer Program, and legal action will be continued to work toward getting: money for poor families for food, doctors, and medicine; proper crop allotment and subsidy payments; loans for land, equipment and livestock; and expert agricultural advice.

### Litigation

SRRP will continue and expand on its efforts to obtain honest application of governmental programs, beginning with litigation challenging the discriminatory operation of the National School Lunch Program in Alabama.

## **Publications**

In the future SRRP will be publishing the following:

1. A newsletter written for local people in Alabama. It will explain governmental programs and keep people up-to-date on changes and additions in regulations and services. It will also provide news of specific interest to local communities.
2. A book for the lay-public describing the importance, legislative intent and actual operation of the Federal farm programs and their relation to black poverty in the South (and the resulting migration to the northern ghettos).
3. An analysis on the results of the 1967 Agriculture questionnaire.

## **Other Projects**

1. SRRP will continue to collect and maintain a library of related materials for the use of SRRP and others working on agricultural problems.
2. SRRP will continue to provide speakers to groups interested in its direct action projects and investigative material.



# **SOUTHERN RURAL RESEARCH PROJECT**

## **Financial Statement**

**May, 1967—April, 1968**

### **INCOME**

Rabinowitz Foundation	\$ 5,000
New York Foundation	5,000
Aaron E. Norman Fund	2,500
Rural Advancement Fund of National Sharecroppers Fund	900
Southern Regional Council	700
Fathers of St. Edmund, Selma, Alabama	600
Alabama Council on Human Relations	500
American Friends Service Committee	400
National Lawyers Guild, Detroit Chapter	300
Individual Contributions	604.69
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$16,504.69</b>

### **EXPENSES**

Salaries*	\$ 3,119.85
Office, rent, utilities & supplies	6,046.27
Automobiles (purchase, repairs & gas) and other travel expenses	6,498.22
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$15,664.34</b>

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\*Since SRRP began, salaries have been paid to 23 workers, including staff; the highest salary was \$20 a week.