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"All My Days"

by Wallace Roberts

There are slums here in Mississippi. Each little shack, although it may be miles from another house, is just as filthy and infested with as many rats and roaches as any ~~one~~ tenement in Harlem. Poverty and segregation have been combined to produce human beings so absolutely alienated that they are completely without hope. This is eloquently expressed by the phrase "All my days," which is the way they answer our question, "How long have you lived in Mississippi?" This phrase conveys all the suffering, terror and oppression that are continually encountered. Having lived under the conditions of poverty here for five weeks, I have gradually become numbed to it. My stomach no longer begins to retch everytime I encounter the filth and disease, it just does a small flip. A sketch of what we are enduring for a few weeks and what the Negroes here endure all their days can only hint at the debilitating effect on their spirit.

Shaw is a town with 2300 people, 1200 of which are Negroes. The contrasts in housing are the most stark. The whites live in either in two-story traditional or modern ranch houses; the Negroes all live in two or three-room, unpainted shacks. Exposed ~~one~~ sewage ditches run along both sides of every street in the Negro section of town. These are not just gutters but real sewers, carrying all forms of waste material. Occasionally the stench is unbearable, and when walking these unlighted streets at ~~a~~ night, it is a challenge to avoid stepping knee-deep into the vile muck. Mosquitoes breed by the tens of thousands in these ~~six~~ ditches and all of ~~us~~ us are ~~one~~ pock-marked from endless scratching. There is a truck which, in the five weeks we have been here, has sprayed the ditches once, with no apparent effect.

Virtually all the houses are infested with cockroaches, rats, mice and flies. One of the volunteers has trouble sleeping at night because the rats make so much noise. In some of the houses the cockroaches are so thick that they are found in the drinking water, stew, coffee, milk beans, beds, shoes, clothes, and even between the pages of books. They are also absolutely without fear and crawl all over us.

There are not more than six indoor flush toilets in the ~~one~~

entire town. Most families get their cooking, drinking, and wash water from taps in the back yard.

The usual diet of the poor Negro is black-eyed peas and pork fat. Those who can afford it eat chittlings (hog intestines), chicken and corn bread, but that's getting pretty middle class. During the winter when there is no work in the fields, most of the people have to go on relief, and because it is administered by whites, a Negro's status on the welfare rolls is precarious. Numerous cases are reported of welfare being cut off because an individual has participated in civil rights activity, and not a few Negroes are to be seen scavenging garbage cans behind markets during February and March.

The average annual income for the Negroes ~~is~~ here in the Delta is about \$606. Usual rent for a shack is \$25 per month. This leaves less than \$1.00 a day with which a man must feed his family and nothing for any other necessities. The Delta is Mississippi's best cotten producing area. The crop has to be chopped (weeded) from March ~~to~~ through August. This provides back-breaking labor for those Negroes who can do nothing else. It requires leaving town on a plantation bus at 5 A.M., chopping for 10 hours in the hot sun, and then getting home at 7 ~~PM~~ P.M. - all for \$.30 an hour or less. The harvesting season is even worse. A good worker can pick 300 pounds of cotten in a day, but the wage varies with the weight of the cotten, not with the number of bales picked. If there is a lot of sap and the cotten is heavy, the rate may go down to \$2.00 a hundred pounds. If there is little sap, it may go as high as \$4.00, but if it is ever that high, a worker can pick a row of cotten a mile long and still not get 100 pounds.

~~This~~ Low wages are bad enough, but here are two other factors which compound the gross injustice of the Mississippi economic system. Cotten is subsidized at 8½ cents above the world price by the federal government. But the benefits of this subsidization never filter down to the ~~the~~ field workers. Senator James Eastland, from neighboring Sunflower county is a good example of where the money stops. He owns 4000 acres of cotten fields. In 1961 he sold about 5000 bales of cotten for \$890,000. His profit was about \$324,000. The second point is that white landowners are making

a deliberate and desperate effort to mechanize ~~their~~ their farms, not just to make even more money but also to drive the Negroes north. This is their "solution" to the problem.

Equality in the narrowest sense - equal ~~xxxx~~ treatment under the law for all citizens - will not come about until the economic exploitation of the Negro, north and south, is ended. The riots in the Negro ghettos of cities will not cease from their periodic eruptions until a massive effort is made to eliminate the cause - poverty. The white Southerners realize the important relationship between poverty and segregation, andⁱⁿ their attempts to maintain the latter, they are not unconsciously attempting to preserve the economic status quo. Their ~~xxxx~~ incoherent rantings of racism and states rights are unimportant. The Southern whites know that, in areas such as the Delta, where the Negro comprises more than half of the population, if equal civil rights are granted, Negroes would hold every public office and the exploitation would end.

It's all very real and vast and horrible to me here, and even though my observations have hardly been scientific, I support Michael Harrington's contention in his study of poverty, The Other America, "Clearly, the Negroes cannot achieve their emancipation on their own... the fate of the lowest, the most dispossessed, depends on what the better off... will do." It is not enough for us to be well-meaning and inactive. Voices and money help, but if they alone are sufficient to ~~xxxx~~ relieve the guilt, then nothing much will be accomplished. What is desperately needed is for all Americans to give their time and skills and, if necessary, their lives.

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