

Selma Revisited:

'The People Are Poorer, Hungrier, Sicker ... The Civil Rights Movement Didn't Deliver'

By WAYNE HURDER
of The Daily Tar Heel Staff

SELMA — It has been three years now since the first stage of the Civil Rights movement reached its peak. What happened during those three months of January, February and March of 1965 has since become a part of the South's political folklore.

The Rev. Martin Luther King was the man of the hour. An end to discrimination in general — and discrimination concerning voting rights in particular — was the goal.

There were the marches, like the famous one to Montgomery March 22, marches in which thousands of persons

took to the dusty roads of Alabama to get their message across.

And there was violence. Three civil rights workers were killed in one incident. In another, on March 7, police used clubs and tear gas to turn back an attempted Montgomery march. Seventeen Negroes were hospitalized, hundreds were less seriously injured, and the day became known as "Bloody Sunday."

Billy Clubs and cattle prods became the trademark of Alabama law enforcement officers, the stereotype of which was Sheriff Jim Clark of Dallas County.

Ten thousand people staged a sympathy march in Detroit and an integrated



A few years ago, Selma, Ala., was the capital of the Civil Rights Movement. What kind of changes did the marches, the sit-ins bring about? What's it like in Selma today? Daily Tar Heel Managing Editor Wayne Hurder, who worked for a summer as a reporter for The Southern Courier in Alabama, recently revisited Selma to find out. Here is this report.

crowd of 500 turned out for one in Montgomery, Ala.

Following the marches a bill to insure minority groups their voting rights was introduced into Congress, building up the hopes of Negroes in Selma and throughout the South — hopes that a change really was going to come.

The bill was passed in August following a stiff fight in the Senate. The President signed it into being the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

BUT HAS THE hoped-for change come?

No, it hasn't according to Selma Negroes and some people who work closely with them.

"There's been no real change," said white lawyer Don Jelinek, director of the Southern Rural Research Project in Selma.

"Sure, there's been some change — in things that are unimportant, like people are allowed to go in white restaurants when they don't have any money."

"They don't get their heads beat in as much by the police."

"They can vote, but when Negroes campaign, they are arrested and they are evicted from the land they farm," he said.

"The people are poorer, hungrier, sicker, and a bit more discouraged because the Civil Rights Movement hasn't delivered as they thought it would."

Clarence Williams, chairman of the Independent Dallas County Free Voters, an organization formed by Negroes, agrees with Jelinek.

"From the time the Negroes got the right to vote there hasn't been a visible sign of change," Williams said.

Negroes were successful, however, in getting Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark defeated in his try for re-election and this was "a big boost to morale," he said.

But no Negroes have been elected yet to any office in the county, which is 57.7 per cent Negro.

"This was because of a failure of communication among Negroes," Williams said.

This failure of communication, more explicitly, according to Williams, was a failure on the part of the established, middle-class Negro political organization, the Dallas County Voters League, to reach the poor Negroes, who form the bulk of the black population.

WHAT IS THE number one problem for Negroes in Selma and how do they plan to solve the problem?

The biggest problem is jobs. Jelinek and Williams, agree wholeheartedly on that. So does Alonzo West, a unemployed painter in his mid-forties.

The West family lives in the George Washington Carver Homes, the center of the civil rights activity in 1965. His home was one of the little centers where people came to talk.

Before Selma became a center of civil rights activity he was managing okay as a house painter, doing a lot of work for fairly well-off white Selmans.

As he gradually became more involved in the Civil Rights work the amount of painting he was asked to do gradually tapered off, finally reaching zero.

Since 1965 he has worked off and on as a painter at a nearby Air Force base. Now he's in one of those off periods, pinching pennies until the air base decides to hire on more painters temporarily.

"Before the Movement I was self-employed, doing well; 98 per cent of my work was for whites. When I started getting tied up in the Movement I started losing my jobs," he explains.

"Handouts? I don't want this."

"I didn't know what a handout was until 1965," he said. "If it hadn't been for the people that came down here (for the March to Montgomery) my family would have starved to death."

"THAT'S WHAT the local people were doing — trying to starve me out."

Things are particularly bad now, Williams says, because last year was a bad one for farmers.

This can be especially disastrous for a place like Selma, which is in the center of the richest farm land in the South, the "Black Belt."

Latest available figures for unemployment for Alabama are for 1966 and they show an unemployment rate of 7.3 per cent for Negroes — almost double that of whites.

However, these figures are inaccurate, according to Williams, and the real rate should be about five to six per cent higher because some Negroes get "los" in the census taking.

The unemployment problem is heightened by the shifting patterns in agriculture.

Mor and more of the large farms in the Black Belt are being mechanized or are shifting away from cotton production to cattle raising.

Because of the switchover, mans of the persons who have tenant farmed the land are having to leave and go to the city.

This particularly hurts the Negroes, who make up the bulk of tenant farmers.

"The people are being dumped, given a chance of starving in the rural areas or going to the ghettos," Jelinek explains.

"Four or five years ago there were many Negroes living on white people's plantations as sharecroppers," West says, "but today the whites have swapped the Negro for the Hereford."

THERE USED TO be a time when Negroes could get out and pick cotton so they could buy their children school clothes," he said.

"There used to be a time when a man and a woman could support a family by chopping cotton or digging a ditch."

"But today they got cotton pickers, they got corn pickers, they got ditch diggers, and they've got poison to put around cotton so you don't have to chop it."

Attempts are being made to alleviate conditions in the two problem areas — that of the urban poor, and that of the impoverished farmer.

In the first area, most of the attempts are being made as part of the War on Poverty. The action being undertaken to help the farmers is their own doing, however.

The War on Poverty isn't making a real big hit in Selma, anyway.

West explains bitterly that "instead of calling it a War on Poverty they should call it a war on poor people."

"The program itself is wonderful; it's needed, very much needed," he says.

However, he says, "very few of the poor people in Dallas County know about the poverty programs."

The problem, as West sees it, is that middle class persons represent the Negroes in the programs and they're unable to reach the poorer Negroes and get them to participate.

Also, West says, the programs are geared along the lines of what a middle class person might think would be best.

"RIGHT NOW IN Selma we have a beautification program, designed to beautify the city by having trees planted and street lights put up on the main thoroughfare," he explained.

"But planting trees and putting up street lights isn't doing anything for the poverty-stricken people."

"We still have hungry people in Selma, people who are out of work, that want jobs but are unable to get them, because there are no jobs," West said.

"Most people say, 'We aren't interested in those flowerpots, we're interested in learning a trade, in improving things for the community.'"

"The civil rights movement is what brought about the poverty program. We're the ones that suffered. And what do we get? Flowerpots."

"I think its more important," West said, "for a person who is hungry to have a meal than to live in a beautiful city."

"The way the poverty program money is being spent and the people that are in charge — that's what is wrong."

IN THE RURAL areas about Selma Negroes are trying to improve their economic status two ways, one by attempting to get Negroes elected to the Agricultural Stabilization and Control Services Committee and, two, by diversifying their crops and organizing a co-operative to help them market their products.

For a cotton farmer the ASCS committee can be the most important thing in his life, for it decides how big an acreage allotment he will get.

Members of the committees are supposed to be elected by the farmers.

However, no Negro farmer has ever served on a committee in any county, despite the fact that Negro farmers outnumber white farmers in the Black Belt counties, which produce most of the cotton.

Hale County, near Selma, is one example. Negro farmers outnumber white farmers two to one there, but have never had a representative on the committee.

Apparently their non-representation has made a difference, according to a study done in 1965. This study showed that the white farmers got an average cotton allotment of about 39 acres while the average Negro farmer got just under 9.

Negro farmers in the last several years have agitated to insure themselves the right to elect any committee, for two reasons?

WHITE FARMERS have shown a tendency to nominate a large number of Negroes for the positions, thus splitting the votes, while they nominate just a few whites, to insure that they get enough votes to win.

FARMERS ALSO HAVE been known to intimidate Negro candidates who stood a good chance of winning.

An example of this happened in Marengo County with a Negro farmer who had gone to Washington, D.C., to testify at hearings on the difficulties Negroes face in getting equal treatment from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The day he returned home a car drove by his house and the passengers fired a few shots in the air.

Someone spread the word that it wouldn't be too healthy for him to stick around. The next day he left to visit friends up North.

In the subsequent elections for committees, no Negroes were elected.

THE ONE OPTIMISTIC thing for black farmers has been the Southwest Alabama Farmers' Co-operative Association (SWAFCA), organized with federal help.

The members of SWAFCA have switched from growing cotton to growing vegetables, which SWAFCA then finds a market for.

Although one of the more beneficial things to come along for the Negro farmers, it too has its problems, the same recurring problem that the Negroes are facing, a split between the middle class which is used to leading and the poorer Negroes, who aren't benefitted by the middle class leadership.

"SWAFCA could be a real force in the community," according to Beth Wilcox, a reporter for the Southern Courier, a weekly paper which specializes in covering problems in race relations in Alabama and Mississippi.

"It's supposed to be for the people, but it didn't turn out the way it was dreamed it would," she said. "It's alienating a lot of people because of the treatment they get in the office."

SWAFCA is dependent on rich Negroes for the building and the land it is on, she says, and this shouldn't be.

This problem of a split among Negroes is the one thing that West, Jelinek, Williams, and Miss Wilcox talked about.

"The white collar group wants to lead, and the people—the no-collar group — want to lead themselves. They're basically are split on leadership, not on principles," Jelinek explains.

"We used to be together, back in 1965," says Mrs. West. "Now Negroes are split."

"That is the Negro's main problem," says Miss Wilcox. "They must get back together they can do anything."



—Photo by JIM PEPLER, The Southern Courier

Downtown Selma: It's Saturday Afternoon And People Come In To Shop ... Selma Bail Bond Co. was the busiest place in town during the 1965 demonstrations

The Daily Tar Heel

EMPHASIS

'Federal Aid Isn't Working Right'

By WAYNE HURDER
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SELMA—What can the federal government do to stop race riots in Northern Negro ghettos?

Stop the flight of southern Negroes to the North, answers a report of the Southern Rural Research Project (SRRP), based in Selma.

How? By using different tactics along the War on Poverty's southern battlefield, the report said.

The SRRP, headed by a white lawyer, Don Jelinek, was formed last year to study some of the problems faced by Negroes in the South and to attempt to alleviate these problems.

The organization, which is supported by two private foundations, came to this conclusion after interviewing 1,800 Negro farmers in Alabama and Mississippi. The report charged that "poverty in the Negro South is directly related to active discrimination by Southern federal employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture."

Because of the state of things, according to the report, Negro youths have to choose between fleeing to the Northern ghettos or staying on the farm and repeating the cycle of poverty.

The report found fault with federal programs in five areas:

MOST NEGRO farmers aren't aware of federal farm programs for which they are eligible.

NEGRO FARMERS who do apply for the programs are usually turned down by the USDA's local representatives.

MOST NEGROES who go to federal offices "are treated in a degrading and humiliating manner."

NEGRO FARMERS are given smaller acreage allotments and smaller projected yields (a figure which determines the amount of a government subsidy check.)

FOOD STAMP programs and surplus

commodity programs don't work, because poor usually don't have the money to buy stamps and the surplus food usually isn't sufficient.

However, rectifying this situation would mostly be of only short range. In the long range, what is needed is "some concept of land reform," according to Jelinek.

He doesn't consider industrialization as the answer to the problems of the South. He said he would like to have people stay on their land and farm it rather than leave it for the city.

Rather than plant the traditional cotton, farmers ought to plant food crops such as vegetables, which would require only six or seven acres of land, Jelinek said.

One of the main arguments that might be offered against keeping people on the farm is that there are already huge surpluses of food that are costing the government millions, according to Jelinek.

But, he says, "That is a fiction. There is no surplus."

"What they mean is that farmers aren't making enough money. The issue is that we don't want to hurt the market by pumping more food into it."

"If we were providing free food across the world and country, this wouldn't clash with the market," Jelinek explains.

SRRP has devised its own food program which it thinks would not harm the consumer food market, but would insure poor people a nutritious diet.

First, for the benefit of farmers, the government would allow them to plant their diverted land, which the government now pays them not to plant.

This land would be planted with food crops with the understanding that this extra crop would not be released onto the consumer market.

The government would then buy these crops at a price higher than the "subsidy for not planting but lower than the price of the non-diverted crop."

Second, for the benefit of the

merchant and poor, the poor would buy "food coupons" at the price of the usual grocery bill from the merchant.

With this "food coupon" the poor person could get his food at the normal retail price from the merchant, but he would also be entitled to a donation of extra food from the government, to supplement that which he bought.

Lastly, the government would benefit because it could get off the "expensive and inadequate food stamp program," according to the RRP.

The additional expense for the extra

food crops, storage, and distribution would be offset by the savings involved in not paying the "bonus" on each Food Stamp purchase, according to the SRRP proposal.

For example, in Alabama a family of seven with a monthly net income of \$35 (not unusual in Alabama) pays \$10 for Food Stamps and receives coupons valued at \$78. The government pays the bonus of \$68.

A land reform program is feasible, according to Jelinek, and "it is in everyone's interest."

Median Income: \$1,000

Average Meal: Cornbread

"A young child growing up in the Black Belt can scarcely hope to develop as normal American children are assumed to develop."

"In fact, his situation is closer to a child growing up in a poor underdeveloped nation than it is to an average American child."

That's the conclusion a graduate student of nursing here at UNC reached after spending several years in Mississippi and Alabama studying health problems of Negroes.

Miss Phyllis Cunningham, who is working towards her bachelor of science degree in the Public Health School here, found many things in her studies that she considers to have grave implications for the economic or educational potential of a person.

Lack of accessibility to doctors, lack of money for medical care, inadequate shelter, inadequate clothing, nutritional deficiencies, and inadequate services for children were the main problems she encountered in working in Hinds County, Miss., and Lowndes County, Ala.

Nutritional deficiencies represent a

major problem, according to a report co-authored by Miss Cunningham, because "poor nutrition... may give" a child "little energy to concentrate for optimum results from his schooling."

Eighty per cent of a sample of persons examined in Lowndes county she said, were found to be anemic for various reasons.

"The effects of this problem alone on the economic life of black people cannot be overestimated," according to the report.

"Many children are asleep in school by mid-morning and fatigue is a common adult problem."

"Adults are more often thought to be lazy or shiftless than ill by white employers," it explains.

A common meal in Lowndes County — where the median yearly income for a farm family is less than \$1,000 — might be corn bread or grits, according to Miss Cunningham.

One thing the people do to keep from feeling hungry is eat Argo starch, which swells in the stomach after it is eaten, she said.