

# Soul City—from wilderness to Camelot

*Will the vision become reality?*

You read the brochure and immediately visions of an ethereal, urban Camelot spring to the imagination.

You wonder what a dream is worth, a dream transplanted from past utopias, to be carved out of the empty, rolling hills that were once a plantation somewhere north of Henderson and south of the Virginia wilderness.

movements. Where one stream of the movement dammed up at black separatism and the establishment of a black identity, the other continued a slowed-down course of political and legal franchisement. But economic self-reliance is increasingly becoming the drive-shaft that makes both gears go.

As you travel along thickly forested back

creeds can live in harmony free of the economic inequality that crushes the spirit in traditionally stratified cities.

Past the railroad tracks you hit the first sign indicating the dream has not yet become reality; the red-clay road to Camelot isn't paved. And at the end of the road there is no gleaming city of hope, only the sign, "Welcome to Soul City: A Planned New Community" overlooking 5,000 acres of chopped-out, grassed-over wilderness.

According to plans, those acres will eventually contain Soultech, an industrial center; Healthco, a general purpose health care center to serve the needs of Vance and Warren Counties; a non-discriminatory school system and a planned residential area that will eliminate the clustering of neighborhoods into rich and poor.

Anyone can build or invest in Soul City but only under the standards imposed by the master plan. In the blueprints, at least, equality of opportunity means that some may actually no longer be more equal than others.

As you turn down another dirt road into what has become the Soul City compound, you begin to wonder whether the eroded hills will ever be anything more than monuments to another human dream.

roads, sign posts stoically proclaim that Soul City is just around the corner, just past the run-down corner grocery stores and railroad tracks that run into the distance.

The man who wants to change all this and maybe the world if he has time, is Floyd McKissick, former Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) director. The first black student admitted to UNC and author of *Three-Fifths of a Man*, McKissick envisions a 5,000-acre, free-standing community of 50,000—black-owned and operated by McKissick Enterprises and the Soul City Company. But McKissick claims Soul City will be a community in which all races and

The compound consists of an old red barn, restyled Foundation House, several trailers housing Healthco and Soultech offices, a learning lab, the executive suites of McKissick Enterprises, various project workers, a heavy equipment shed and a sheltered bulletin board neatly surrounded with gravel that honors one of Soul City's citizens for outstanding contributions to the community.

Inside Foundation House, the visitor sees an operations center resembling the nonchalance and ease of an old plantation parlor rather than the deliberate chaos of a major corporation on the verge of hitting the



Sign off I-85 directs motorists to Soul City, N.C.

**'Imagine,  
A city without prejudice.  
A city without poverty.  
A city without slums.  
A city tailor-made for industry.  
A city with a booming economy.  
A brand new shining city.'**

—Soul City brochure

You wonder about a place called Soul City and whether it has as much hard reality as it has the spirit its name implies.

And when you start driving off I-85 into Warren County, you begin to realize why the dream and the spirit chose to join battle in a desolate reality.

Warren County is 68 per cent black and 90 per cent poor. For those who slip out for another dream, it has the holding power of its own mud-slick roads. It seems to operate close to its former plantation economy without the plantations.

Soul City and the concept behind it are both products of the 1960 civil rights

market with a revolutionary idea.

While waiting to speak with the public affairs director, you browse along a table covered with pamphlets, press clippings and a mammoth study of Soul City's future political structure prepared by UNC's Institute of Government, in September 1971.

The offices themselves hardly fit the image of corporate affluence: windows covered with plastic to keep out the cold winds, prefabricated veneer walls that compartmentalize operations rather than divide the staff into hierarchies of labor and the functional cement floor that tells a visitor work is in a beginning stage.

At one end of the table is a clipping of an

editorial from the June 30, 1969 *Roxboro Courier-Times*: "How terribly tragic it would be should all civil rights roads cut in the last 20 years lead inevitably to Soul City—a Camelot built on racism."

Staff people, mostly black, wander in and out with a relaxed anxiety. They may be on the verge of owning the plantation their grandparents once worked for in servitude.

Then you meet Dorothy "Dar" Webb, director of public affairs. One can see she has obviously met reporters before from the number of press clippings tacked on the walls. Dorothy is white.

"All systems are go," she says. "We'll have our first housing going up in a couple of months, but we need jobs first, then people. So we'll begin building Soultech fairly soon."

Soultech, the million dollar industrial center, will be built primarily from a \$5 million bond issue recently floated with the aid of HUD (Housing and Urban Development), which has taken Soul City under its wing by providing financial backing, contacts and staff planning help. The rest of the labor is being done by private enterprise, sweat and leg work, mostly legs belonging to McKissick.

"The idea behind the project is to provide absolute equal opportunity for all," Dar continues. "At first we thought we'd have a black-white ratio of 90 to 10, but from the applications and inquiries we've gotten so far, it looks as if it will run more like 50 to 50."

Neatly tacked to her office wall, amid filing cabinets containing stacks of information concerning Soul City, is an engraved quotation from Frederick Douglass: "Those who profess to favor freedom, yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters."

And then you begin to realize what the mud and the plastic covered windows are all about.

Out of curiosity and a little knowledge of past utopian failures on the American plains, you ask about Soul City's political structure.

Once the factory managers and merchants move in, won't the city become just another void filled with the quiet desperation of economic competition?

"We have to find people of good will to move in," Dar says with a low, soft optimism which dispels any doubts that these people can be found. "Our social mandate is to work with low income people, but we are not a town for poor people or a company town. We have to have a full range of opportunities for all people."

The opportunities will come from on-the-job training offered by Soultech, and by such innovations as the learning lab where "students learn about all the facets of urban life as they develop from the ground up . . . and in the process acquire a sense of the interrelatedness of learning and work in the real world."

In other words, Soul City is spurring a new urban migration among rural people. These people are not forced to leave their farms to enjoy it.

Soul City now has \$27 million available from government and private sources, enough to move Camelot a little closer to the construction equipment parked in the open sheds. The Soul City Co. is a conglomerate of the National Housing Partnership of Washington, D.C., Madison-Madison International, Inc., and McKissick Enterprises, but, Dar adds, it will be owned primarily by those who live and work in it.

The city, Dar says, will not be reserved only for blacks or the urban and rural poor. It will consist of people who may have refocused but not forgotten the idealistic visions of youth.

You say good-bye and on the way out take one last look around wondering if anyone in Foundation House doubts the outcome of all this.

Then you stand outside near the wilderness. The only sound is the wind roaring across the fields, and you can't shake the pioneer spirit from your mind.

Walking back along the old rutted farm road, Soul City's main thoroughfare, you wonder how anyone, including yourself, could have ever doubted all this in the first place.

The Daily Tar Heel

## Insight

Stories by Bob Jasinkiewicz  
Photos by Bill Wrenn

### 5,180 acres for 50,000 folks

In the summer of 1968, Floyd McKissick quit his job as national director of the Congress of Racial Equality to pursue his long-held dream of providing a means to achieve black economic independence.

Today, McKissick is president of Floyd B. McKissick Enterprises, Inc. His brainchild is Soul City, a multi-million dollar, 5,180-acre community to be built on the site of an old plantation in rural Warren County, N.C., just south of the Virginia state line.

Soul City will become the largest black-owned, minority-controlled enterprise in the nation, planned to eventually contain 50,000 residents, each having a share in controlling the community through their own property investments.

The totally planned city is to include schools, an industrial center (Soultech), shopping centers, a health care center (HealthCo), and a variety of residential areas. Planners are insuring that an acre of land for parks and open spaces will be set aside for every acre used for homesites.

Unattached to an existing urban area, Soul City represents America's first privately developed new town. It is the first such major effort by a minority-owned company.

Soul City Co., recently formed as a conglomerate to oversee the actual construction of the project, estimates over the next 25 years it will spend well over \$100 million acquired from land sales.

Soul City's formative history has involved three major stages. In July, 1972, the city was given a \$14 million bond guarantee by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

On May 23, 1973, Soul City established itself as a sanitary district, a voter-controlled unit of local government with the power to build and operate sewerage and water treatment plants, handle garbage and solid wastes, maintain a fire department, levy taxes and issue bonds to meet its expenses.

The district is presently governed by three commissioners and will soon begin construction of a water system and sewerage plant.

On February 22, 1974, McKissick Enterprises formed the Soul City Company to handle the project's financing. Within a few weeks, the company built an equity of \$1.5 million and sold \$5 million worth of bonds backed by HUD.

In June of 1972, as an offer of

commitment to the new town, HUD guaranteed a \$14 million loan.

The last major financial arrangements prior to the start of construction were made on March 19, 1974. McKissick, as president of Soul City Co., announced that \$27 million had been made available by selling their HUD-backed bonds.

Most of the money will be used to build a regional water system serving Soul City and surrounding communities and to build utilities and service facilities within Soul City. Construction is scheduled to begin in 60 to 90 days.

At present, Soul City's administration and planning is divided among six principal agencies.

The Soul City Foundation conducts overall planning for community social activities, from the development of industry to the creation of cultural programs. Cultural arts, education and social advocacy programs are now in operation. Plans include ideas for legal services, drug abuse programs, industrial training programs, historic preservation and an Afro-American Park.

The Social Advocacy Project is developing programs and services to meet the needs of early residents, particularly the poor, in coordination with social and welfare programs of federal, state and local agencies.

The nucleus of Soul City's Future School System, the Learning Lab, conducts supplementary educational programs for students not achieving their full academic potential — "to compensate for past cultural and educational disadvantages of minority and low-income white youth."

Still in the planning stages, HealthCo, originally funded in June, 1972 by an Office of Economic Opportunity grant, will provide health care to the residents of Soul City, as well as of Vance and Warren Counties. HealthCo will eventually occupy a three-quarter million dollar facility scheduled to be completed by this summer.

Operating on the philosophy that "all inhabitants of the town should have a piece of the economic action," the Soul City Investment Corporation (SCIC) raises money and makes investments. SCIC now has over 50 stock-holding members and is implementing community-wide profit-sharing plans.

Finally, the Warren Regional Planning Corporation, a four-year old non-profit organization, is responsible for developing Soul City's industrial potential. It has primarily been working on general planning for the new town and studying its economic impact on the region as a whole.

Thus what started as only one man's idea to turn around and stop the economic stagnation of the nation's urban and rural poor has come close to achieving reality.

McKissick now owns the land. He has the financial resources. And the human resources working for him are laboring for an idea they apparently strongly believe in.

But whether Soul City will become only an interruption in the cycle of stagnation will depend on both the residents yet to come and on the nation's acceptance of new types of economic interaction.

"The development of black economic power," McKissick says, "is white America's last chance to save the Republic."



In the heart of the impoverished black belt of North Carolina are the beginnings of an envisioned community now boasting only few houses, trailers and unpaved roads.