

# but they strain toward the new day drawing near.

Robeson sang an annual open-air concert in Peekskill, New York. The local Klan and the press raised opposition to a fever pitch in August of 1949. As night fell, the park area was surrounded with burning crosses. When Robeson arrived on the train, friends hid him in the back of a car and whisked him away to safety. The mob rioted—beating other blacks and people who had come to the concert. Finally the police arrived but not a single arrest was made.

A second concert was announced for September 4th. A human wall of 2,500 formed to protect the 25,000 concert goers. Robeson sang under heavy guard. When the concert ended the mob and State Troopers joined in attacking the participants.

Robeson continued to sing where he was invited. "My weapons are peaceful, for it is only by peace that peace can be attained. The song of freedom must prevail."



Mob and police attack black concert goer at Peekskill, N. Y., 1949

Harassment and cancellation of concerts continued. A biographer wrote, "Few people in the United States remained neutral toward Robeson. They took their place for or against him. Among Negroes, certain businessmen and professionals turned against him. For them, as for their white counterparts, Robeson was a man to be marked down and hounded into submission by every means short of physical martyrdom, which appeared too dangerous since nobody knew what percentage of 16 million Negroes in America would rise in wrath if Robeson were arrested or mauled, but everything short of this was tried in the next few years."

An economic boycott followed. Robeson's records were removed from the stores; NBC-TV prohibited him from appearing in their studios. FBI surveillance became open; they followed him wherever he went. On July 28, 1950, the State Department demanded that he return his passport; he refused. His passport was cancelled.

For the next eight years Robeson was hounded by the FBI. Not a single concert hall or recording studio was available to him. His income dwindled, friends deserted and he became an outcast.

He sued for return of his passport, but its return took time. He accepted an engagement in Canada (no passport necessary) but was stopped at the border—U.S. border guards ordered to shoot on sight if necessary. He gave the concert from the U.S. side of the border to 40,000 people gathered on both sides of the border at the Peace Arch.

In 1956 Robeson was subpoenaed to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The session was long and stormy; the



Testifying before HUAC, 1956

Committee was shocked by Robeson's fearlessness and arrogance. He argued about who the real un-Americans were—the bigots and lynch mobs—and demanded protection for black people from violence. He refused to state whether he was a communist. "I stand here struggling for the rights of my people to be full citizens in this country and they are not. They are not in Mississippi and they are not... in Washington... You want to shut up every Negro who has the courage to stand up and fight for the rights of his people... That is why I am here today..."

Asked why he did not stay in Russia, he replied, "Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country and I am going to stay here and have a part in it just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?"

### Coming Home

In the fall of 1958, Robeson began a comeback. McCarthyism was becoming less popular. He had two successful concerts in Carnegie Hall, then went to London where he sang to thousands. After visiting the U.S.S.R. he returned to London and gave a historic concert in St. Paul's Cathedral—the first layman to take the lectern in the Cathedral.

In December of 1958 Robeson headed a Civil Rights Congress delegation presenting a petition to the United Nations charging that the U.S. was committing genocide against black people on the ground that "15 million black Americans are mostly subjected to conditions making for premature death, poverty and disease."

Returning to Moscow for New Years, 1959, Robeson fell ill. He spent some time in the hospital, then played as Othello in Stratford-on-Avon. Now 61, his health continued to fail.

Changes were taking place—freedom in Africa and the Caribbean. When Robeson announced a planned trip to Cuba the State Department pressure increased. In 1960 he took the last tour of his career, in Australia. In the spring of 1961 he entered the hospital in Moscow. He spent the next 2½ years in Moscow, East Berlin and London, in poor health.

In 1963 Robeson and his wife Essie returned home to New York. In August of 1964 he made his first public appearance at the first anniversary of the March on Washington.

In April of 1965, *Freedomways* Magazine sponsored a welcome home birthday salute in New York. His first major appearance since his return home he made a brief speech and closed with a rendition of "Old Man River."

His wife Essie died on December 12, 1965 of cancer. Robeson lived in seclusion until January 23rd, 1976, when he died at the age of 72.



With Prime Minister Nehru, 1957



Pioneer Camp, Moscow, 1958



Mary Fields

Born a slave in Tennessee about 1830, she emigrated to Cascade, Montana after the Civil War. Standing six feet tall, she hauled freight and did other heavy work for the Ussuline Nuns at St. Peter's Mission. While hauling freight one night, her wagon was attacked by wolves and was overturned. She kept the wolves away all night with her rifle and pistol.

Always heavily armed, she would take on any antagonist. When angered by a co-workers at the Mission, she challenged him to a shoot-out. The Bishop fired her for her aggressiveness. Undaunted, she tried but failed as a restaurateur. In 1895, over sixty years old, she became a mail deliverer and gained a reputation for dedication to her job in spite of the weather or roads. When Fields was 70, she ran a laundry. Her buddies were the men at the saloon in town, where she drank and smoked cigars with the best of them. While at the saloon one afternoon, she encountered a man who owed her for laundry, invited him outside, and knocked him down with one blow. Satisfied, his bill with her was now settled. She died in 1914 having mellowed a bit with the years.

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