

Solution to Stalemate in Somerville Is Currently Under Consideration

(Editor's note: In recent months a new "crisis point" in southern race relations has arisen at Somerville, Tenn., a small town near Memphis. The issue is the exercise by Negroes of the right to register and vote—in a rural area where a Negro in a voting booth has been a rarity for generations. Negroes say that because they sought to exercise their voting rights, they are being evicted from tenant farms and subjected to economic boycott and pressure. Whites say the changing economic pattern of the community and the area is responsible. The federal government has stepped in, and a court bar against evictions because of voting is in effect. But the stalemate continues. A veteran UPI writer, who has covered southern racial developments and conflicts for many years, reports from the scene in the following dispatch.)

By AL KUETTNER
United Press International
Somerville, Tenn. — (UPI) — One day last month a bale of heavy, drab canvas was delivered to a Negro-owned farm on the highway between Somerville and Moscow, Tenn.

A small group of Negro men spread out the canvas, sharpened stakes from saplings hewn in nearby woods, and soon erected a tent—about 10 by 14 feet.

That was the beginning of what rapidly is becoming the most highly publicized campaign yet on behalf of full voting rights for Negroes in the South. It has led to claims of wholesale economic boycott against Negroes who broke the old local custom by registering to vote and charges that Negroes have been evicted from jobs on white-owned farms for voting.

It has resulted in widely publicized "relief" drives, caravans of clothing and food-stuffs and one "relief airlift" from Chicago.

It is just about impossible to separate fact from fiction.

Forced To Leave
Ostensibly, occupants of the tents are Negro farm families forced to leave farm tenant houses because they registered to vote.

The outward facts are these: There are 13 tents now, occupied by about 80 Negroes, most of whom are children. Only four or five families are represented, and virtually all of them came off three farms.

Reporters dubbed it "Tent City" but Negroes call it "Freedom Village."

John McFerren, local Negro leader, and Chicago school teacher James Forman run the village on a system that includes two press conferences daily—one in the morning to catch the afternoon newspaper headlines and one in the afternoon to catch the morning papers. No reporters are admitted without press cards, and none may question the tent dwellers too freely.

Federal District Judge Marion Boyd at Memphis, 41 miles to the west, said he would begin Jan. 16 deciding "one by one" whether 700 Negroes are being evicted by white landowners because they registered to vote.

Sporadic violence and vandalism have raised the danger signal for law enforcement officers. One Negro has been wounded in the arm—shot by unknown parties who sped past in a car. The tent in which the Negro said he was sleeping is only 75 feet from the road.

Scores of white persons have been brought into federal court to answer affidavits from Negroes who charged they were evicted for voting.

The NAACP telegraphed President Eisenhower: "Now that the crops are in, hundreds of the people are being driven from the lands."

White Arguments
The white leadership argues that:

1. Changes in the farm economy (mechanization) and transition from one crop agriculture; have decreased the need for farm labor.
2. There is no greater increase in tenants leaving farms this year than in recent years.
3. No one has been legally evicted from a farm—actually a technical point because most tenant contracts are made and broken orally. It is true that no legal eviction steps have been taken by the courts, however, showing that no Negroes actually have resisted being made to leave.
4. The thing that is happening now is standard for this time of year when farmers renew contracts for the new crop year.
5. Only a few adults are actually involved in the current "Tent City" incident.

Somerville is a typical southern rural town whose economy is governed by the crops produced on the rolling farms that begin a few hundred yards from the city limits.

Over the years, Negroes have been a vital part of the farm economy. Today Fayette county and its neighbor, Haywood county, have about three Negroes for every two white



INSTALL TENT — Unidentified Negroes put up a tent in "Freedom Village" in Somerville, Tenn., a small farming town. Thirteen tents are now on the site. Occupants are

Negro families who say they were required to leave tenant houses after they registered to vote. (UPI Telephoto)

persons. Most of the Negroes live along the rural roads. A great number occupy the little tenant houses that dot the farms.

A Rare Sight

On election days, until recently, only the white citizenry turned out. At the Fayette county polls, an occasional Negro was a rare sight. In Haywood, a Negro voter hadn't been seen since Reconstruction days.

Then came 1957 and the passage by Congress of the first Civil Rights Act. It contained an inconspicuous little sentence—specifying that no one could be discriminated against for voting. In Fayette and Haywood counties, things began to happen.

The Fayette County Civic and Welfare League sprang into existence. A similar group developed in Haywood. Their objective: campaign for registration of Negro voters.

Strange Sight
As the books opened later for registration, a strange sight occurred—long lines of Negro applicants. Today, an estimated 1,400 to 1,600 Negroes in Fayette alone are qualified to vote.

Has the privilege cost them anything? That's where you get many answers on the road from Somerville to Moscow.

On Somerville's courthouse you read on a historical plaque that this district was once represented in the legislature by Davy Crockett, the pioneer made famous in song for his bear-hunting prowess. A nearby highway markers says: "Moscow 13 miles."

Soon, the houses thin out and grow smaller. Two and one-half miles distant, your road forks to the right. You stop at a spot where there is heavy traffic and a large congregation of Negroes gathered around a store with two gas pumps out front. A sign overhead reads "McFerren's Grocery."

Over the door inside, a sign says: "Don't talk politics in here unless you are a registered voter."

Another, containing the pictures of two children, says: "We are too young to register. What's your excuse?"

Forefront of Drive
John McFerren is a tense and intense Negro of 36 who has lived in the county all his life. He has been in the forefront of the voting drive, even before the civil rights law was adopted.

"I know this country like a book," McFerren said. "I know the white people and some of the best folks I know are white. And I know the Negroes. I know how they have been treated. I know the county is run by three or four white families. I know there is only one cure for what's wrong in this county and that's the ballot box."

McFerren's words spill out fast. He is often interrupted by the jangling of a telephone that hangs on a wall in the front of the store. Callers ask for instructions or want to know when the next food shipment is expected.

Wait For Supplies

That's what the crowd is doing outside, waiting for supplies. Food and other articles are trucked in from far-away points. Word came during the afternoon that a truck was leaving Chicago with equipment including refrigerators.

James W. Hutchens Jr., director of the distribution branch of the Agriculture department, visited the county to determine whether the federal government should send

in surplus commodities to the Negroes. Hutchens said both white and Negro leaders told him there was no need—yet—for emergency supplies.

While McFerren talks, customers come and go in the store, making small purchases from limited stocks of staples and meats. The two gas pumps outside are idle.

McFerren says that when the Negro voter registration campaign started, he was one of the first to be hit in an economic boycott. Negroes around here call it "the squeeze."

McFerren says he now has to travel up to 75 miles to obtain supplies for his store and that it is impossible to obtain gasoline. He claims that one gas truck which attempted to deliver a supply to him was turned around by a deputy sheriff. Such stories are firmly denied by officials.

The scores of Negroes who line up each day for supplies at McFerren's warehouse are carefully checked by volunteers. A "clerk" stands at the warehouse entrance in front of piles of clothing and food packages.

Get Supplies
The attendant yells out "District Three" and the district chairman steps up with a list of those who are to get supplies. Soon, Negroes trudge off down the road toward their tents a mile away, lugging their bundles.

You tell McFerren about the contention of the people downtown that voting registration by Negroes had little or nothing to do with their departure from the farms—the argument by whites that it was an economic situation and not discrimination.

"Down in the county there is a farm with a creek running through it," McFerren answers. "Three families on one side of the creek had to move. They were registered to vote. On the other side, there were three families that didn't have to move. One of them was registered but didn't vote and the two others were not registered."

"You tell me what that is."

At the Tent City down the road, blue smoke from numerous small fires curls overhead. You hear the baying of hounds, the biting of an axe into firewood and the laughter of young children who seem not to know or care what's going on.

The earth under foot is soft and gooey-rich farm land ground into paste by many feet. The tents, without lights and with only the damp earth for flooring, are heated by small wood burners.

Efforts are now being made to get sufficient wood to build floors, and the local electric cooperative has been petitioned for electric service.

The management of the co-op says the application will be treated just like any other and that service will be provided if the applicant qualifies. The Negroes will not be allowed, however, to string extension lines into the tents because of danger of short circuiting the wires.

Group of Visitors

A fresh group of visitors has been added to the Tent City scenery in recent days, patient white men who watch and wait, talking with someone new and then. These are FBI agents, assigned to find out if the Justice Department has a right to enter the case on grounds of civil rights violations.

asked for FBI help in investigating the recent shooting.

The shooting occupies the main interest of the FBI and other authorities at present. They are looking for the bullet, still missing, that made the flesh wound in the arm of Early B. Williams Jr.

Williams pointed to the bed where he was sleeping, his head toward the entrance of his tent.

"The bullet went through the mattress but this isn't the one," he said. "The FBI came after that one."

Men Lie Awake

Williams and his companions said that only the women and children sleep at the camp now during the night. The men lie awake or sit up talking and waiting for daylight. When dawn comes, they sleep.

Williams said he has no plans for the future but will try to find another farm that will take him on as a tenant this year. He said he was asked to leave a farm where he and his family had lived for 10 years. He said that during his life he has lived on a number of farms, all in Fayette, going from one to the other as a tenant.

County authorities say they have requests from other counties for more than 200 tenant families. The local weekly newspaper has published numerous advertisements asking for such help. There have been no takers from Tent City.

While Negroes are being interviewed, Scott Franklin, head of the Civic and Welfare League, stands close by, coaching like an attorney.

When Wyatt Williams was asked whether he farmed with machinery, he was allowed to answer "with mules." But Franklin would not permit him to say how large an area he had farmed. The mechanization issue is a touchy subject with Franklin who feels it is being used as an excuse by whites.

Negroes, particularly those in Tent City, are sharply dis-

Articles Filed In Salem by Mortuary

Ashland-Articles of incorporation were filed this week in Salem for Litwiler Funeral Home Inc., Ashland, signed by Mr. and Mrs. C. M. Litwiler and their son, Gene R. Litwiler.

The firm has previously been a partnership, Litwiler said today. He explained that with the change, Bill Drew, who has been employed there since 1948, now has part ownership in the business.

Litwiler added that he and his wife have retained a controlling interest in the stock.

Former Local Man Receives Promotion

A former Medford man has been appointed manager of the Seattle branch of Parke, Davis and company, according to an announcement by Graydon L. Walker, Parke-Davis vice president.

The man is William F. Bauman, a graduate of St. Mary's High school, who was a salesman with the firm in the Medford area.

Bauman, who joined the company in 1948, previously was field manager in Los Angeles for Parke-Davis. He is a brother of Robert H. Bauman, 311 King st., Medford.

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