

SNCC Research
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AMERICUS AND BAKER COUNTY

Southwest Georgia is a tragic area, the stepchild of the New South. Its political influence rapidly undercut by Congressional and legislative reappointment, by relative population loss and by the crumbling of the state's "woolhat" faction (for decades the refuge of race-baiters), the region's backwardness is usually ignored by the ascendent "moderated" in state and national office.

The area has for years seen large-and small-scale attempts by Negroes to break down the barriers to voting, employment, and service in public places. The fact that mass demonstrations, court suits, voter registration have produced no significant changes in these basic problems may well explain why civil rights struggles in Americus and Baker County, Georgia, have in 1965 come as close to open warfare as they have.

It is not surprising that hundreds of Negroes would continue to march in Americus three times a day after four Negroes men were freed following ten days after their arrest for trying to stand in the "white" line at a polling place, even though this is the incident which touched off the recent demonstrations. Nor is it surprising that they ignored Governor Carl Sanders when he urged them to stop demonstrations after a white youth was killed near an all-night vigil. For their grievances are deeper and reach back much farther than yesterday's insult, and local, state and federal officials have consistently failed to take meaningful action despite many fine words. Sanders' promise to "dispatch as many state enforcement officers as would be required to maintain law and order", balanced against his pretended offense at the ideal that the State Elections Board "has not received a single protest involving registration or voting procedures in either Sumter or Baker counties"--are insulting to local Negroes in these counties.

Twice in 1964 state officials were notified by workers for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Americus that election officials had segregated polls on two occasions. Justice Department agents were also notified of these procedures, but despite promises of improvement the polls were again segregated in July, 1965. And Sanders' state troopers, the same men who had beaten students and adults with baseball bats and burned them with cattle-prods in 1963 demonstrations, were now half-heartedly "protecting" marchers (with their backs to mobs of white hecklers), but only during, and in the immediate path of demonstrations. Saturday, July 31, saw pickets at a supermarket punched and pistol-whipped for ten minutes in full view of some of the 138 state troopers then in the town. Despite the presence of 50 troopers on Wednesday, July 28, mobs of 500-600 whites were allowed to pelt passing Negro cars with stones--provocation which drove two Negro youth to shoot at the crowd, killing a white youth. Why, then, should Negroes in Americus respect the convenience of a pretentious and hypocritical governor, while small but powerful men goad white crowds at mass meetings of the local Citizens Council? The time for hopeful waiting on a state or federal savior has passed, and bitter determination has drawn as many as 1250 people (of the 7000 Negroes in Americus) into daily street marchers and dangerous night vigils for two weeks.

Much of the hatred among Negroes in Americus has been directed at Justice of the Peace J.W. Southwell and Sheriff Fred Chappell, who as partners in the county courthouse have fomented numerous acts of violence against Negroes for ten years. Southwell assaulted SNCC workers twice in 1964 in sight of his office in the county courthouse. Complaints were filed with the FBI by the victims and witnesses to the incidents, but there was no visible action. Minutes before the first incident, Chappell entered the "White women's" restroom and forcibly expelled three young Negro women who were waiting their turn to take a voter test. He posted a deputy near the door to prevent any further transgressions.

More decisive than the lawlessness of the sheriff and justice of the peace, however, is the influence of a small group of men who own most of the town and thus most of its politicians. The most prominent (economically) is Charles Wheatley, whose monopolistic interests are rarely disregarded. He owns, among things the land and buildings to the largest factory in town (Marhattan Shirt Company), four of Americus' five supermarkets, the local hospital and bus station; one of two construction companies (augmented by his official position as City Engineer), about thirty houses rented mostly to Negroes, and decisive control of one of three banks in town.

When in 1963 a Negro committee came to see the Mayor (T. Griffin Walker, owner of a nail factory), Wheatley reportedly motioned aside the Mayor and took charge of the meeting and refused adamantly to yield any concessions. He backed down temporarily on his rigid position, however, in February, 1964, when officials of Manhattan Shirts, feeling the threat that SNCC would publicize all white employment policy, insisted on accepting Negro applicants for assembly jobs. He apparently values his economic prosperity over his political strategy. Chain supermarkets which rent from him, however, still hire no Negroes as cashiers.

Two members of the local aristocracy played leading roles in the notorious "legal terror strategy" of 1963, which involved placing the capital charge of insurrection on four civil rights workers. Solicitor-general Stephen Pace, with remarkable disregard for legal ethics, justice and good public relations, justified his decision to use the insurrection charge by claiming that the four were responsible for all the racial tension in the city, and that holding them on a capital charge would allow him to deny bond, so that he could keep them in jail indefinitely.

Insurance man Tommy Hooks, who reportedly tape records all conversations on his phones and in his offices, was selected as foreman of the grand jury which affirmed the insurrection indictments. He had been quoted by reporters shortly after the arrests of the four as saying that he hoped local courts would convict "them on anything they can get them for." It is no wonder that the grand jury which he headed not only issued the indictments but also commended local police for their brutal attacks on the students who dared to demonstrate rather than demonstrate after the "outside agitators" were arrested.

- Chappell and Southwell in effect work for these men and others such as the two Crisps, father and son, who control the Bank of Commerce in Americus, and brothers-in-law Sam Hunter and Tom Marshall (judge of the Superior Court in Americus) who hold large chunks of the Citizen's Bank. Chappell is one member of a family whose near-monopoly of local official posts presents a classic case of nepotism. Various Chappells holds the following offices: home demonstration agent, sheriff, county court clerk (handles voter applications), public service commissioner, postmaster, county commissioner, and state highway patrolman (three brothers-in-law). Their base of power appears to be the western half of the county, where the family holds several thousand acres of farmland. Civil Rights workers have found when canvassing the shreccroppers who live on Chappell land that their workers nervously admit they can't afford to register to vote because the sheriff would, of course, find out, and they would lose their place in the county's economy.

The struggle in Americus does not involve complete resistance to Negro voter registration, lynchings, constant bombings and harrassment of civil rights workers rabid legislatures, or "nigger-hating" governors, as in Alabama and Mississippi. But otherwise it is hard to see the difference. And the more "moderate" the front presented by Georgia's leaders, the more bitter the struggle.

IMPERIALISM IN BAKER COUNTY, GEORGIA

On the surface, Baker County appears isolated from the modern world. Baker is one of the most rural and poorest counties in the state. Its county seat, Newton, has a population of only 529, and 50 per cent of all families have incomes under \$1660. Half of the adult population has not gone past the seventh grade. And 59 per cent of the population is Negro.

Along state highway 91, however, one sees evidence of the economic imperialism which characterizes Baker County. Vast fields stretch out behind the endless fences surrounding Nilo, Ichaway, Pineland, Blacketts and other plantations and black people bent the hoe dot rows of cotton and corn.

The owners, just as in 19th century Russia, are away in Atlanta and Pittsburgh and other urban centers of enlightenment. Robert W. Woodruff, for example, the owner of Ichaway, stays in Atlanta and is best known as a member (formerly chairman) of the Board of Directors of the Coca Cola Company, Southern Railway Co., Trust Co. of Georgia, Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., Morgan Guaranty Trust Co., and the Tuskegee Institute (Alabama). In other words, while he is nearly straving Negro laborers on the plantation down in Baker County, Woodruff is bribing their sons with temptation of educated (complacence) complacence down in Tuskegee, and all of this tends to preserve his position at the peak of the American corporate pyramid.

Another plantation, Pineland, is owned by the Mellon family of Pittsburgh. Rickard King Mellon, most prominent member of this old family, is a director of such corporate giants as Mellon National Bank & Trust Company, Alcoa, General Motors, Gulf Oil Company, and the Pennsylvania Railroad. Despite their undisputed financial power, these monopolists, tied to two of the very largest banks in the U.S. (Morgan Guaranty ranks 6th and Mellon is 14th in total assets),

can't seem to find more than three to six dollars a day for the men, women and children who cultivate and harvest their lucrative crops.

The sheriffs of counties such as Baker usually function as the henchmen of such men as Mellon and Woodruff. Sheriff L. Warren Johnson of Baker, with the assistance of his brother and son, whom he has deputized, has terrorized Negroes in the county, particularly those who dare to talk of voting. There are numerous examples of his organizing and gaining power to resist their conditions. He has shot Negroes, beaten them, talked them down, and generally represents a tangible threat to the safety of the discontented.

His predecessor, Claude Screws, led a lynch mob in 1943, during which the victim, who was accused of stealing an automobile tube, was tied on the back of a car and dragged through the town of Newton. In 1958 Screws was elected to the State Senate, as a reward for his services to the rulers of the county.

What will it take for the people of Baker County, that is the vast majority who are very poor, to gain independence from men like Woodruff and Mellon?