Firsthand -- Wayland Girl's Own Story

Of Helping Negroes Win Vote In South

By LINDA LYNES

One of our first problems was how to address our boat and houses and how we wanted to be addressed. We quickly settled into the custom of calling adults by their first names prefixed with Mr. or Mrs. (pronounced "Mister/ Miss.") We insisted that they drop the Missus for the sake of our age, but this was hard to establish, because they had never addressed a white man without the formality of Mr. and Missus.

My hostess spent her afternoons in the cellar but her mornings in the house. When we came to dinner the first day at noon, I concluded that she must have rigged her entire morning cooking! We had meat in a sauce she had fixed, string beans and beet greens, two kinds of warm home-baked bread, a shapeless casserole, and, as usual, made baked dessert for which I never learned a name.

I said to my host one day in jest, "Mrs. Katherine must do nothing but cook to produce so much good food." Well, she decided it. The next morning I stayed at home to help Mrs. Katherine.

I was not really surprised to find that she had a wide variety of chores, the same I've done at home. Here they were made more difficult by lack of vacuum cleaner and hot water, but simplified by the simplicity of the four-room house. We had hot and cold water and squash for dinner, and I tried to help fix the squash.

"How much water do I put in?" "Not too much. An little sugar and salt?"

"How much sugar?"

"Just a little. How long should it cook?"

"You tell if it's cooked. So, that was the trick to get it cooking!"

Mr. Tom, my host, was very proud of his tractor, which saved him time and money.

Many a day when we were there, he had to call a repair man to work on it. He told the girl who was living with me, that she and I had better stay in doors.

He had called a white man to do the job, and while the white man was working to include a Negro's tractor and his jobs, (because as Mr. Tom put it, "A Negro's man isn't the same as a white man's") yet Mr. Tom said, "This man is mean, and he might not like you living with us."

One workcamp was told when he was shopping alone at a local store that if he did not get in quickly, they would shoot into his boxcar.

When he told his hostess this and suggested he move, she said: "Don't you pay them no mind, they afraid they gonna get uppity, and if any white folk's see us talkin' to all, they see it can happen, and ridin' in the back of a truck with us, and choppin'! And if any white folk's sees us 'all, well, they might have to think, "Courage, it won't really change anything."

What is it really like on the battlefield for civil rights in the South?

Linda Lynes of Wayland spent three weeks there, as part of a Quaker workcamp working in the cotton fields and living with sharecroppers and then in the "voter registration field," the hardest work of all.

Three years ago, Mr. Tom had been one of the farmers, but the mortgage foreclosed and the refusal of the white merchants to sell him food, clothing, or gasoline, because he had registered to vote.

Several times we went visiting on our own, and friends, and we saw the contrast between the life of our home and the life of the sharecroppers. Beds with homemade mattresses, straight-back chairs, bare electric light bulbs, and gay voices were all that cheered many of these two-room homes, one board thick.

When the temperature was 95 and we were in the fields, and we were offered water, we accepted with unusually deep gratitude, not only because of thirst but also because we knew that our hostess must have brought the water from a well at the next house.
Whenever we went visiting after introductions, there was always a time when we were trying to hide the awe we felt at the conditions we saw and trying to destroy the awe felt by the family at white men of good will. At this point we were introduced to the long line of children usually at least eight, often 15.

Knowing that white plantation owners, instead of paying their sharecroppers their share of income from the crop, gave them food and clothing, we could understand why the thin children were such shabby clothes. Then we would sit down on the porch and discuss local gossip: a friend's wedding, Sunday's sermon, the weather, the crop, the voter registration drive, where we northerners came from and in whose home we were living and how we liked chopping.

Once all of our bi-racial workcamp rode in the back of a pickup truck the 40 miles to Memphis to attend a meeting to discuss the economic difficulties of the farmer life in West Tennessee and the delta counties in Mississippi.

Would it be possible to unionize farm workers? Would it have any effect on wages rates? What could they do about mechanization? Where was it possible to get crop loans and loans for equipment? How can co-operative farming make use of everyone's small plots of unplanted land?

These and other questions were primary in areas where most of the land is owned by poor Negroes or white men with sharecroppers and day laborers.

At that meeting it became especially clear to us that the civil rights struggle is inspired not only by the desire of the Negro people to be recognized as individuals with human problems, but also by the desires of these individuals to solve these problems. Our friends in the south, just like us and all our friends anywhere, worry about their financial needs and how to feed, clothe, house, educate, and bring up their children.

While we were living in Fayette and Haywood Counties, and while our host families were going out of their way to make us feel welcome, the police were going out of their way to make us feel unwelcome. They followed us often and frequently stopped cars with northern plates. The driver was required to show his license, auto registration, and permission to drive the car if it did not belong to him. Then he was subjected to a questioning something like this:

"What are y'all doing down here?"
"Visiting some friends."
"Are you a Communist? That's why you're makin' all this trouble, ain't it?"
"No I'm not a Communist."

"Well we don't want no Communists like you down here stirrin' up trouble. These niggers ain't intendin' y'all no good. There ain't no tellin' what they'll do. And I'm warnin' you, you're not wanted and if you know what's good for you, you'll get out of this county."

One workcamper answered quietly, "You are the first man in this country who has not wanted me here."

Sundays we attended church with our hosts and hostesses and were invited to sing in the choir. We saw that religion is the dominant influence in these lives. Listening to their prayers for peace and love and justice, we could sense that, much as these people wanted justice, there was no hate in their hearts for the white men who inflicted injustice.

We will never forget the prayers, so often repeated, in which the minister or members of the congregation chanted in a beautiful voice words like these:

"Dear Lord, help us to show these guests that they are welcome here, and dear Lord, we know that there ain't no color in heaven, and dear Lord, help all men to live a life of peace and love on earth so we'll be ready for that other life when we leave this one."

NEXT -- Just who works against you on voter registration? Sometimes it's the Negroes. And what are the pressures in a small-town county?

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A group of college students observed the life of Tennessee sharecroppers by staying with Negro families and instructing them on voter registration. In the above photo a new community center is being constructed at Somerville, Tenn.

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