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Firsthand -- Wayland Girl's Own Story Of Helping Negroes Win Vote In South

By LINDA LYNES

Hoeing cotton ten hours a day in the southern sun, eating meals with the field hands, singing with the choirs of small country Negro churches, and living daily life as the guest of a Negro farmer and his wife in West Tennessee, were elements of my introduction to the background and personalities involved in the civil rights movement.

Stares in grocery stores where we shopped with our hostesses, an order from the Sheriff to "Conclude your business and get out of the county," threats of being shot by local whites, and being treated with deference by adults purely because of the lack of color in our skin, were some local reactions we met in our integrated workcamp of northern students.

Greeting us as we drove into Brownsville, Haywood County seat, was the county courthouse, located in a square in the center of town. In front of the courthouse, as if proclaiming the justice to be found within, were two drinking fountains, one labelled "White," the other "Colored."

A hot dog party was given for us as a welcoming gesture. Among the receptionists were the 10 young people who were to be driven to Philadelphia as an exchange workcamp. In the dark, amid questions about the others' way of life, skin color was forgotten.

We went home that night with our Negro host families to what were to become truly homes for us. We had come in order to learn about the lives of the local people; as these people are farmers, we lived a farming life.

Early Monday morning our week began with a delicious large breakfast of fried ham, scrambled eggs, coffee, toast, and corn bread muffins. After breakfast we went to the fields at about 5:30 to learn to "chop cotton", which is to say, to weed and thin it with a hoe. The field hands with whom we worked were earning $2.50 a day and their three meals a day. After two weeks of chopping, ten of their 12 working hours, I was still not able to learn the accuracy and speed of one of my co-workers who said to me repeatedly, while she was helping me to finish my row:

"Now don't y'all worry if you cain't chop as good as me. I been choppin' fo'ty years now, I ain't never done nothin but chop. Look at y'all, readin' and writin' and all. I ain't never known nothin' but choppin' "

I, clumsily but truthfully added once that in spite of my schooling, I would be the ruination of my host if he depended on my ability as a field hand.

One of our first problems was determining how to address our host and hostess and how we wanted to be addressed. We quickly settled into the custom of calling adults by their first name prefixed with Mr. or Mrs. (pronounced "Miz".) We insisted that they drop the Miss for us, because of our age, but this was hard to establish, because they had never addressed a white man without the formality of Mr.-Mrs.-Miss.

My hostess spent her afternoons in the field but her mornings in the house. When we came to dinner the first day at noon, I concluded that she must have spent 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 potato casserole, and a homemade baked dessert for which I never learned a name.

When I said to my host one day in jest, "Miz Katherine must do nothing but cook to produce so much good food," well, that decided it. The next morning I stayed home to help Miz Katherine.

I was not really surprised to find that she did a wide variety of chores, the same chores 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 picked beans and squash for dinner, and I tried to help fix the squash.

"How much water do I put in?"

"Not too much. An a little sugar and salt"

"How much sugar?"

"Jes' a little"

"How long should it cook?"

"You kin tell if it's done"

So, that was the trick to her good cooking!

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

One day while we were there he had to call a repair man to work on it. He told the girl who was living with me in his home 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 willing to include a Negro's tractor among his jobs, (because as Mr. Tom put it, "A Negro's money is the same as a White Man's.") yet Mr. Tom said, "This man is mean, and he might not like it, you livin' with us."

One workcamper was told when he was shopping alone at a local store, that if he didn't leave, they would shoot into his hosts home.

When he told his hostess this and suggested he move, she said, "Don't you pay them no mind. They afraid we gonna get uppity.

Linda Lynes — Forward-Looking Girl

Linda, the 18-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Lynes, had a concern for the "problem" during her freshman year at Swarthmore College, but like most northerners, including her 12 fellow workcampers, she was unprepared for conditions as she found them in Haywood and Fayette County, Tenn.

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

Linda Lynes of Wayland spent three weeks there--first, 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.

I'll tell you what: I'm jes uppity enough that I gotta right to keep whatever guests in my home that I want!"

The workcamper stayed and no one shot into his home.

The boy who drives the tractor for Mr. Tom told me that when he finishes high school he's going to join the army.

"It's the cheapest way for us to get an education, and besides, we can earn more money in the army than working on a farm. I don't think I'll have to shoot anybody though. I couldn't never do that, cause it's not right to kill another man."

One girl among the hands had just finished high school and was planning to go to a state college in the fall to learn to be a secretary. In discussing her hopes for the future and mine, I learned that she wants a job in New York City. When I asked her why, she said:

"I know a Negro's not treated like a white man even in the north but at least he can talk to white men, and some will treat him right. You're the first white person I ever talked to who cared about my ideas,

"I know it's hard to find a job, but it's harder here. My sister lives there, and she writes me about it."

When I asked the same girl a few days later what effect, if any, she thought the workcampers were having, she said:

"Oh, y'all are havin' a real good effect! When other colored folks see us talkin' to y'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 u'all, well, maybe they'll have to think.

"Course, it won't really change no white man's ideas, cause people jes think the way they's been brought up."

One day when my southern family were all listening to the radio report of violence in civil rights demonstrations in Philadelphia, Cambridge, Md., and Jackson, Miss., my host said, "We want our rights here just like they do, but we don't want no violence in Haywood County."

Three years ago Mr. Tom had been forced to deal with mortgage foreclosure 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 grandparents and friends, and we saw the contrast between the life of our home-owning host families 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-and three-room houses, one board thick.

When the temperature was 95 and we had been working 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 wore 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 farm life in West Tennessee and the delta countys in Mississippi:

Would it be possible to unionize farm workers? Would it have any effect on wage 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 county 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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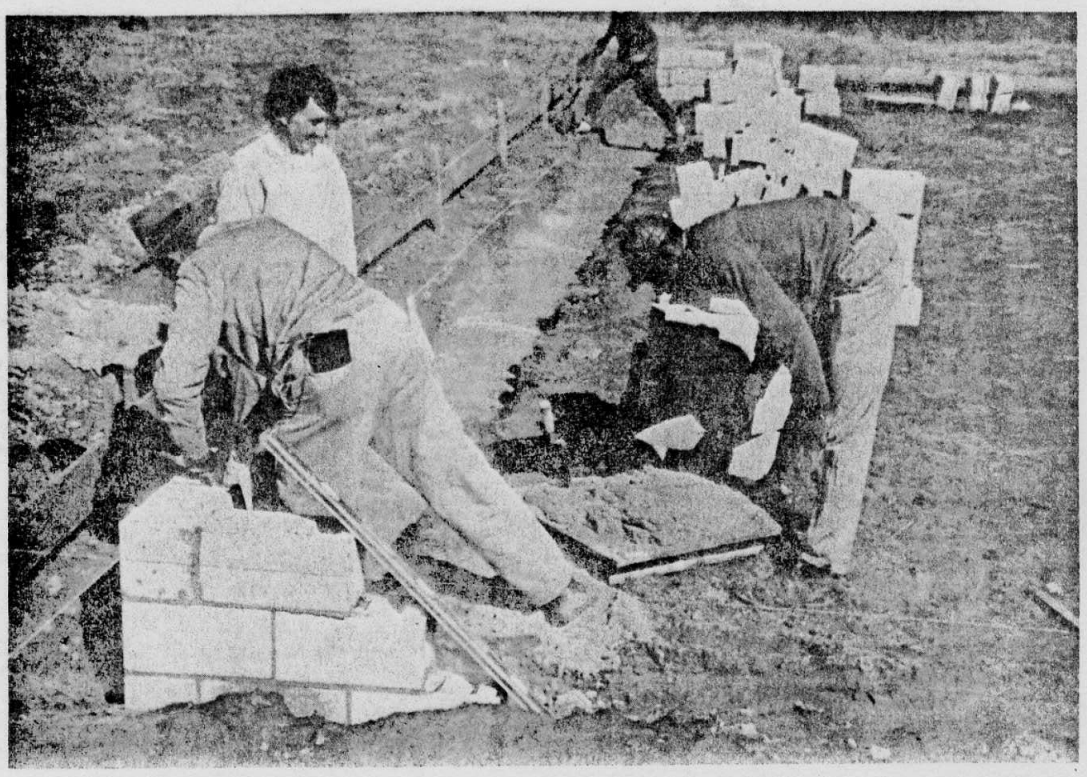

A group of college students observed the life of Tennessee sharecroppers by staying with Negro families and instructing them on voter registration. In the above photo a new community center is being constructed at Somerville, Tenn.

NEEDED - $1,000 For this community center that now stands Roof high . . . . . This was built by workcampers and local Negroes working for civil rights . . . . . See Flyer "IT NEEDS A ROOF"